

Mass Culture Theory

- Concepts of Mass Culture and Mass Society based on divisions into:
- 1. High Art – not for commercial gain (supposedly). Beethoven, etc.
- 2. Folk Art- from below as an expression of the people
- 3. Mass Media/Mass Culture
- Mass culture theory holds that through 'atomisation' individuals can only relate to each other like atoms in a chemical compound. Individuals are vulnerable to exploitation by core institutions of mass media and pop culture. (example of rise of Nazism in 1930s and Orwell's 1984)

Mass Culture Theory continued

- 1. Mass culture is popular culture produced by mass production industrial techniques and is marketed for a profit to a mass public of consumers.
- 2. The main determinant of mass culture is the profit that production and marketing can make from the potential mass market.
- 3. Standardised, formulaic and repetitive products of mass culture are then sold to a passive audience, prone to manipulation by mass media
- 4. To sell the product must be bland and standardised to a formula.
- 5. Both folk and high art at risk from mass culture
- 6. However an artistic avant-garde can play a defensive role, as by definition, it is outside the market place, and can maintain standards.

Critique of Mass Culture Theory

- 1. The 'view from below' is quite different. Working class use elements of mass culture to strike a pose. Does not result in greater cultural uniformity. All can interpret the American myth as they wish.
- 2. Consumers are not passive. But use different elements of Americanisation and European culture to construct an authentic identity.
- 3. Pop culture is diverse because it is open to diverse uses and interpretations by different groups.
- 4. Use as defence against middle class/upper class elitist culture. Defense against their subordination.

Critique continued....

- 5. Why should the superiority of elitist values and aesthetics be taken as valid without question? What gives them the right to pass cultural judgment?
- 6. The idea of an idealised past fated to be ruined by the rise of mass culture and of folk culture is a myth.
- 7. Audiences and consuming public are not passive. They may construct their identity from different elements in a creative way.

Frankfurt School – 1923 School of Social Research

- 1. Full of leftwing Jewish intellectuals. To a backdrop of the rise of Nazi party in 1930s. Most fled Europe for America. Turned against America and returned to Germany.
- 2. Set terms of debate and analysis of mass culture theory. Heavily based on reaction to pre-war popular music in Germany and post-war American popular music.
- 3. Main members – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin.
- 4. Were reacting against: 1/Enlightenment – idea of scientific rational progress. Saw uses of science as a threat to human freedom. Against America with its use of the culture industry to control the minds and actions of people. 2/ Marxism – unlike Marx they put the spotlight on cultural institutions in society. Filled in bits Marx missed out. Reason for no global revolution was that people were given the sop of mass culture – no keep them pacified.

Commodity Fetishism

- 1. Building on Marxist ideas of use value and exchange value. We venerate the price we pay for a commodity (concert ticket?) rather than the concert itself.
- 2. Adorno took the ideas of commodity fetishism into the sphere of cultural goods with his `concept of musical fetishism'. With music its `use value' and its `exchange value' become one.
- 3. `False Needs' – which work to deny and suppress true needs. People do not realise that real needs (freedom/expression/love) remain unsatisfied. Stimulation and fulfillment of false needs gives people what they think they want.
- 4. The freedom in capitalist societies is just the freedom to chose between more and different brands of the same.

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- 5. Culture Industry – serves to consolidate commodity fetishism. It is highly dangerous and not just harmless entertainment.
- 6. The more cultural products are actually standardised the more they appear to be individualised.
- 7. To ignore the culture industry as Adorno describes it is to succumb to its ideology. It is corrupting, manipulative, conformist and numbing.

Adorno and Popular Music

- 1. Diachronic Standardisation – the necessary correlate of musical standardisation is pseudo-individualisation.
- 2. Two processes. A/Standardisation – substantial similarities in the core. B/Pseudo-individualism – incidental difference at the periphery.
- 3. Core is hidden by the frills. It changes little and slowly over time while parts are constantly interchangeable. In a dialectic dance over time.

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- 4. Squeezes out authenticity and originality. The pseudo-individual elements provide the hook for the consumer. People are taken in by the veneer of individual effect.
- 5. The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression in listening. Popular music offers relaxation and respite from the rigors of mechanical labour because it is not demanding or difficult. It becomes the social cement in unhappy lives. Cathartic role.

Critique of Adorno on Popular Music

- 1. It is in the nature of popular music to be the same but different each time. Once you have a recording by an artist you do not it again, though you know you want more of it. You buy the next recording or the nearest thing.
- 2. Classical music focuses on the melody and harmony. Popular music on timbre and connotation – elements ignored in Adorno's methods of analysis.
- 3. The standardisation of core elements has been exploded by the sheer rate of change in popular music – shifts of technology, fashion and genre.
- 4. Adorno is elitist and never substantiates his claims. He has no inside understanding of popular music.
- 5. Audiences of popular music are discriminating and critical. They actively interpret what they consume as music and creatively give themselves nuances of identity by doing so.