

ADORNO'S CULTURE INDUSTRY AND ESTHETIC THEORY

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PREAMBLE

Adorno's writing always maintained a sensitivity to language and communicative form that few sociologists today are prepared to appreciate. For Adorno, the essay was more than a means to communicate. It was a form that admitted the vitality of dialectical thought and reason. In keeping with that theoretical concern, this paper is written in the true essay format. Moreover, the bibliography contains sources of inspiration and reaction, and not references.

CRITICAL THEORY

The early 1970's represented an important historical period in the relationship between American social science and that vast body of scholarship known as "critical theory." The previous academic attitude towards critical theory was characterized by an ambiguous hostile-indifference. Frequently rejected as a dogmatic (neo) Marxist philosophy of scant "scientific value", or condemned as an ideology of popular student movements, critical theory was seldom accorded the status of a worthy academic subject. When the perspective was considered, it was often misunderstood or shrouded in a damaging ignorance. Remarkably, this attitude prevailed despite the obvious and mounting inadequacies and failures of the more conventional positivistic approaches in the social sciences. Critical theory did not gain in legitimacy as orthodox social science experienced its own crisis in legitimacy. As a regrettable consequence, moreover, few scholars undertook systematically to comprehend what a critical program might entail. There was little interest in conducting indepth inquiries into the works of the intellectual figures frequently associated with the critical perspective.

Beginning in the seventies, however, critical theory started to emerge as an intellectual orientation capable of commanding the attention of scholars. It was no longer possible to dismiss the entire critical program simply by claiming it to be non-scientific or to malign its potential value on the basis of its alleged sympathies with "anti-establishment" cultural and

political movements. Critical theory was raising fundamental theoretical questions as to the viability of conventional social science at a time when orthodox social science was struggling to maintain its own credibility.

A small group of critical theorists including Fromm, Lowenthal, and Marcuse had already achieved some visibility in American academic circles. There also existed a few select translated essays, reviews, and monographs by other critical theorists. These scholars, and the few existing written materials, were serving to provoke dialogue on the merits of the critical perspective. During this time significant quantities of critical works were translated and began to appear. The 1972 publication of Max Horkheimers' important programmatic essay "Tradition and Critical Theory" is a significant case in point. For with this and other essays, critical theory began to assume a more coherent nature in the minds of American scholars. A year later, Martin Jay (1973) published his much acclaimed text, *The Dialectical Imagination*, which was to furnish both American and European readers with an historical framework from which to comprehend and assess critical theory. This point represented a watershed movement, for from then on translations of Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas, Horkheimer, Neumann, Pollack and many others in the critical tradition began to appear. They were increasingly employed as source materials for intellectual discussions on contemporary culture and the social sciences. As these works gained visibility, if not credibility, interest was generated in comprehending the whole of the critical tradition including its philosophical and metatheoretical foundations. American scholars were thus led to (re)examine Freud, Hegel, Kant, and Nietzsche as well as Brecht, Lukacs, and Korsch. By the mid-seventies, critical theory was enjoying articulation in most of the social science disciplines. Its advocates, programs, theoretical concerns, philosophical foundations, and steering concepts were approaching legitimacy in American social science.

Today, critical theory has not achieved anything like paradigmatic status in American so-

cial science, and is unlikely that it ever will. As Held (1980:14) writes: "Critical theory . . . does not form a unity; it does not mean the same thing to all adherents." Yet, despite the diversity within the critical tradition, it has managed to become an active and vital orientation within the social sciences. It is important to observe, however, that considerable selectivity has been exercised regarding the critical materials appropriated into social science discourse. The writing of Habermas, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm have been widely employed, but this is decidedly not the case with Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht. In addition to selective consideration of the critical theorists themselves, there appears to operate an analogous screening process when it comes to a single theorist.

ADORNO'S AESTHETIC THEORY

Adorno's sociology of artistic (cultural) production and aesthetic theory is one of the most original and important theoretical contributions of the critical tradition. Regrettably, it is also one of those contributions neglected by American social scientists. Despite the recent publication of two excellent volumes on Adorno (Buck-Morse 1977; Rose 1978), his aesthetic theory, a central component of his program, remains largely ignored. As always, there are many available explanations for this 'oversight.' But the most plausible reason(s) for a theory's neglect is going to be grounded in the theory itself.

"It wasn't that Adorno favored transforming philosophy from a scientific inquiry into an art form. Rather, he rejected the dichotomy between science and art, which he considered not necessary, but the product of a particular historical era." (Buck-Morse, 1977: 122).

The aesthetic experience is, perhaps first and foremost, knowledge. As knowledge, it is both fundamental and, in a primary sense, a critical mediating force. Historically, this approach to knowledge has been subject to the prejudicial devaluation by scholars dating back to the 17th century scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. When not denigrated as a mystical non-scientific and irrational subjectivism, it has been naively celebrated as an ultimate form of truth (Buck-Morse, 1977). In its objective form, replete with bloated truth claims, it promised much but was impotent to

deliver. In its prejudged subjectivist form, it was hailed as promising nothing and more than capable of mystifying the world instead of rendering it comprehensible.

To view the aesthetic experience as either unbridled subjectivism or an ultimate form of truth is to misunderstand both its nature and potential. Moreover, it is to accept implicitly as viable the subject-object dichotomy upon which positivism and romanticism alike share a common philosophical ground. If there is a crisis in Western thought, and there is much to suggest that there is, then perhaps it is attributable to this commonly shared bifurcation between subject and object, and its numerous manifestations such as rationality and irrationality; scientific and magic; system and class; individual and society; philosophy and criticism.

The aesthetic experience, when freed of the debilitating influences of subjectivism and objectivism, emerges as a vital model of knowledge while encompassing both subjective and objective aspects. The experience displays these as a unity unencumbered by the domination of either. Moreover, the aesthetic experience unites both understanding and interpretation while simultaneously representing the world. Within its confines, creativity, the activity of human production, merges with criticism, the activity of actively grasping the world. Rather than reducing the world to apriori categories of cognition and foisting upon reality a prefigured order, purpose, and character, the aesthetic experience is intimately predicated upon that which it endeavors to render meaningful. Shunning the temptation to make the approach the object of truth and thereby disregard even passing reference to the world, the aesthetic experience engages both world and being in an intentional act of critical production. The aesthetic experience is, beyond all else, an edifying activity. It produces through involvement. It instructs through criticism. And it does this without exempting itself from either creativity or critique.

There are however, important issues in need of resolve prior to the aesthetic experience being accepted as a tenable source/kind of knowledge. For example, aesthetics is grounded in the "art object." And it has been suggested by more reflective scholars, that a serious question can be raised as to whether

art exists or can exist in the modern world. Should it be in the case that art cannot exist in the modern world, then most assuredly we cannot speak of an art object. Without an art object or the potential for one to exist, then perhaps the positivist's objections to the aesthetic experience must be entertained. Yet, if art can exist then the employment of the aesthetic experience as a model of knowledge remains an alternative open to exploration.

To avoid over-simplification, the issue of arts' existence must be approached historically. It must be presupposed that the existence of an art object entails a relationship with a particular society. This relationship is not self-evident or transparent. Moreover, the stance, the object, and society are not without a dynamic interplay. That is, the object is not simply an inflexible reflection of society, nor is society a reflection of the object. The stance is transformed when the conditions of its existence are changed. This leads to the observation that art must function differently as its context of existence changes since its stance and the conditions of that stance change. The question of meaning is not raised here.

It is from the vantage of *stance* that the question of art's existence in the modern world can now be addressed. The autonomy of art, is ultimately a matter of both its function and meaning. To the extent that artistic creation is merged with ritual and ceremony, and thereby made indistinguishable from a use content, it can be said to lack autonomy. Under these conditions, art exists only as an instrument for expressing culture and is thereby firmly wed to a principle of use. Art achieves at least a potential for autonomy only under those socio-historical conditions where upon the art-object is freed from an exclusive use context and, in conjunction with use, develops a value dimension. This value, must not be overdetermined by use if the object is to remain autonomous and/or an object in itself.

The conditions for autonomous art are best met under a capitalist mode of production. With capitalism, the art object is transformed into a commodity and thus develops a concrete exchange value. The art object can now truly stand as object. Moreover, capitalism, unlike previous modes of social organization, universalizes culture thereby imbuing the art object with a potential for knowledge generat-

ion beyond that of other objects under conditions where use determines function and meaning.

Here again, however, it would be unwise to suggest that art is singularly circumscribed by the social context of its origin. Art objects are not to be thought of as distorted in the sense that they merely reflect dominant economic and/or political forms. Perhaps this becomes clearer if the discussion is framed in a distinction between "forces of production" and "relations of production."

FORCES OF PRODUCTION

As regards the art object, the forces of production are the sum of the composition activity. These forces include the skill of the artistic community, the technical and "technological" underpinnings of the artistic activity, and the totality of other inputs, regardless of purpose, that go into the creation of the object. The relations of production refer to the life-style and patterns of consumption and consciousness which form the receptive aspect of the object. Under capitalism, art is managed by certain forces of production which give rise to certain relations of production that are based upon the exchange character of the art object. Simply stated, a sociological dynamic is generated between 1) the organization of composition and 2) the concomitant organization of reception (consumption).

While capitalism provides art with certain favorable conditions, it also places restraints upon art that tend to be counter-productive to arts' newly discovered potential. Recall here that art, freed from the artificiality of an exclusive use function, is capable of both presenting and representing the social context of its origins. This dynamic of function and significance is the fundamental knowledge component of art. Historically, this has been a component characterized more by its potential than its objective expression. yet, capitalism assaults, in a most direct manner, the very potential it imbues in art by positing composition, the critical-creative component, against the culture industry which is an authoritarian mode of exchange between composition and consumption. Art under these circumstances becomes entangled in an abstract process prefigured by the force of its production. Moreover, these "forces are themselves grounded in a newly acquired

abstract commodity character which, per definition, negates critical potential vis a vis a hyperbolic celebration of presentation form. A preoccupation with production exists. *From function as art, to art as potential, to art as function, this is the history of the aesthetic experience.*

Under the influence of modern capitalist culture art is horizontalized and made indistinguishable from real life. It is subjugated to identity thinking. There emerges a power of assertion which renders even the pretense of art's creative-critical function unnecessary and, improbably. The movie, film, radio, and musical score succumb. Each outwardly becomes a feature of commodity production. No apology is proffered. What is gained is the standardization of form and function. Here, then, each culture consumer is all but guaranteed the ability to appropriate each artistic product. Art is naturalized. It becomes the equivalent of everyday life and knowable through everyday language. The "obligations of the natural idiom" are swiftly fulfilled. Efficiency is the order of the day. What is lost through the mass media is only the art of the consumers' power of imagination, creativity, and critique. The consumer must also suffer a loss of spontaneity, through spontaneity itself is saved through its ascription to the objective nature of the products themselves. This is the irony of the modern aesthetic experience.

There is no longer a need to speak of authentic art opposing pseudo-art. It is non-sensical to differentiate high from low culture. The counter and contra cultures can rest easy in the company of the dominant culture which it once ostensibly opposed. Art is art. The principle of "unity" is pervasive. It is hegemonic. Productive rules, structural obligations and forms predetermine formats. Each instance of artistic production is assured to be received as art. What remains is for connoisseurs and critics to hazzard evaluations. "Does the product please?"; "Does the art-object articulate contemporary standards?"; "Does the finance company's jingle blend at the appropriate moments with Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*?"

Style is not an issue. The culture industry exists as the negation of style. To raise stylistic considerations is to disregard the facts. Art is life and cannot be reduced. Art is pure and should not be corrupted. This is what the cul-

ture industry proclaims as truth. Thus, to raise the issue of style is to do more than challenge the culture industry; it is to raise challenges to the integrity of life as we know it.

The objection is occasionally voiced that within the modern aesthetic experience there are, however infrequent, true instances of creativity. Yet these moments of "realistics dis-sidence", which seem to imply radical breaks with the normative order, generally receive rapid reconciliation with the prevailing forms of production. Permitting analogy, monopoly markets find few threats in innovation when it is easily assimilated or viewed as an aberration of diminutive significance to the industry as a whole. Innovation which is tolerated does not embrace a powerful critical capability. It is with this understanding that it can be said that true innovation in the culture industry is best characterized by its complete lack of existence.

Critical thinking is a burden. It is a labor requiring considerable effort. Art in the capitalist mode should, therefore, be praised as a relief from a burden. Art today is fraught with pleasure precisely because it exempts consumers from thought.

There is no need to expect that the consumers of artistic production will be enticed by independent thought. This will not be their predilection. Moreover, to anticipate that they will is to mystify what has become of the aesthetic experience. Through the culture industry, reactions of consumers can be known in advance. They are predictable. This is far from remarkable, however, since their reactions (*these* reactions) are in fact prescribed. This is the playful outcome of the capitalist semiotic. The whole is meaningless. Each segment of the artistic-object is vivified by its predecessor. meaning is elicited by signs. Signs are conjoined to form sequences. Sequences are arbitrary. Meaning for the consumer is thereby assured throughout; it cannot be lost or misapprehended since it does not exist.

It would be inappropriate to presuppose a state of complete and total passivity on the part of consumers. There is demand as well as supply. Both are essential considerations of the culture industry. Both are carefully calculated. The consumer has his tastes. The producer his standardized product. Taken together, the consumer is "free" to feast at the

trough of standardized products. This, then, is the supply and demand of contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

All systems have open points. All points represent contradictions to systems predicated upon closure. If the aesthetic experience has been standardized through repetition and abstraction, and if it has been drafted in the service of identity thinking, it also expresses oppositions to these positions. The same mechanization which ruthlessly advocates and imposes pseudo-individuation in the aesthetic experience also suggests its own negation. If an art-object can function to perpetuate an abstract commodity exchange system, it can function against such a system. Art can confront or comfort. The viability of the aesthetic experience as a model of knowledge is possible only if these contradictions and potentials are made explicit. The focus must be upon the relationship between the subject and the social-object which structures it.

To judge art and the aesthetic experience on the basis of the degree to which it assumes a critical posture is to necessarily separate potential from production. It is to reverse the emphasis away from production by taking it up as a primary point of analysis. This is not to suggest a return to examination of artists' intentionality, the immanent structure of the art-object, nor the art object's social meaning. It is, however, to approach the entirety of the aesthetic experience with the fore-knowledge of its potential and to examine that potential from the historical vantage of both function and significance. Here significance and function must be viewed as relational properties located between subjectivity and social objectivity. To grasp this fact is to prevent the illusion of reality and intelligibility from replacing understanding, and to negate the tendency to transform the aesthetic experience into an entertainment value or abstract exchange value.

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