

Anything and Everything Sells: The Dialectic of the Creator and the Consumer

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Abstract

This critical paper examines the persuasive effect of capitalism in the culture industry and critiques production in all domains of the 21st century. Central to the analysis is the seminal work of Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," putting forth the argument that capitalist imperatives are easily traced in the commodification of culture, using Jazz as a case study. This paper also examines Barthes' "The Death of the Author" to highlight how it becomes a capitalist incentive in the literary domain, concomitantly reducing the authorial authority and pertaining it to the consumers. These critiques, emanating from Poststructuralism and Postmodernism paradigms, illuminate capitalism's deep-seated impact on cultural and intellectual spheres, influencing the dialect of creator and consumer discourse. Despite deconstructing and resisting established norms, these movements often inadvertently reinforce capitalist paradigms by framing cultural consumption within commercial contexts. This paper underscores the complex interplay between capitalism and cultural production, highlighting the ongoing debate over how economic imperatives shape artistic expression and societal values in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Capitalism, Consumerism, Cultural Industry, Commodification, Postmodernism.

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INTRODUCTION

The discourse on capitalism has made its presence colloquial in all aspects of production in the 21st century. The debate has encroached on the subject of philosophy, economy, sociology, and literature. The veracity of the thesis and antithesis on the discourse of capitalism has become the subjective *reductio ad absurdum*. Critics from all disciplines have tested the waters and given their take on the matter. Whereas it is easy to claim that critics detest capitalism, it becomes a hard practice to identify how capitalism has influenced their criticism. The notion of the ‘culture industry’ is deplored in Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” which can be an example of criticism that openly detests capitalism. However, the literary movements of the 21st century have obscure features of capitalism in their criticism and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno and Horkheimer claim the prevalence of capitalist production in the domains of arts. The essay's main argument revolves around how the notion of enlightenment has been deterred through instrumental and manufactured logic. Humans have lost control over their social lives, and the easy entertainment hinders their mindset from paying attention to the estrangements of the capitalist society. The distinction between ‘mass culture’ and ‘culture industry’ is also made on the basis of how the consumer has become a passive consumer of the product (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2022, p. 104). In another essay, “Perennial Fashion - Jazz,” Adorno gives an example of how the culture industry has circumscribed the growth of art. As a critical text on the notion of ‘culture industry,’ “Perennial Fashion - Jazz” is a relentless attack on the entertainment industry and gives a negative reading of

popular culture. Taking Jazz as an example, Adorno discusses how music has become a commodity. Specific structures are introduced to the songwriting and are often masked as the audience's demand. These structures are the product of commercialisation, and the standards are introduced. The standards are constructed following the convenience of the radio and advertisement industry. Adorno refers to the saturation of standardisation in music as a sport through a system of tricks (Adorno, 1997, p. 131).

Adorno and Horkheimer concern themselves with the psychosis of society and show concerns regarding the commodification of the culture. For them, human consciousness has become a commodification through the commodification of culture. People are made to watch, read, and listen to things that are easy to digest and easy to internalise. The concept of freedom translates into the culture industry as a low art; the entertainment consumers consume becomes a means of leisure time. Through this generated entertainment, consumers are given the impression of scarcity in their lives, and the only way to fulfil this is through the products of the capitalist market. The materialisation of peoples' demands has flourished in the culture industry as all products in the culture industry are produced with the agenda of profit. It raises the question of whether the demand of the people is being fulfilled or whether it is a way to manufacture the demand itself. Adorno and Horkheimer create the distinction on the same concern. They justified the coining of the term 'culture industry.' The culture industry suggests that culture is created with the interplay of economics. The products are designed to target the audience to give them a benevolent picture of reality. In other words, the consumers are given false satisfaction. What happens is that the product of the culture becomes the product of capitalism through capitalist rationality. What sells the best is what is produced the most.

The entire process starts with the concept of easy entertainment that suggests scarcity through commercialism, and this commercialisation becomes a means through which capitalism works and operates. The vicious cycle has trapped human consciousness; therefore, the consumers will never be able to get rid of the shadows of the creator. Adorno takes Jazz as an example of commercialisation. Jazz has become a commodity, and people are made into thinking that overplaying staccato, vibrato, and schema will entertain jazz enthusiasts the most. Consumers buy jazz music thinking of the artistic improvisation that Jazz promises, but the commercialisation has reduced the process of improvisation to a selling point. Adorno detests such a taste in music. He suggests that different agendas proliferate through music, and the consumers have lost the true essence of entertainment.

For him, entertainment in itself is the product of benevolence. It should not be produced catering to the demands. This debate does not circumscribe itself to the music or film industry. If one observes the literary domain, one finds a similar pattern there. The 20th-century literary and social critics have proliferated the idea of how the world wars caused havoc to the race of humankind. Whereas it is true, the movements that emanate from the notion further manifest such chaos. Poststructuralism and Postmodernism have suggested art as the notion of an abstract. Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" suggests that the creator has no authority over its creation, and the consumers hold sovereignty over the product (Barthes, 1997, p. 148). In other words, the reader/consumer gives meaning to the text/creation. Whereas it is a plausible argument, it suggests the same commodification reflected in the music and film industry in the bigger picture. These literary movements are often referred to as post-war movements, emanating from and depicting the chaos of that time. People were

eager to search for new understandings and rationality after losing their definite sense of reality. Such hysteria gives rise to movements like Poststructuralism and Postmodernism. Many texts from that period capture society's same sense of chaos and destruction. Psychological fragmentation is prevalent throughout the late 20th century. Barthes argues that “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (p. 146), making it evident that the text is embedded in the culture. If the text is a product of culture, then the possibility of commodifying the text becomes quite foreboding.

There is an understanding from the argument by Barthes that the text should stand for itself. The consumer/reader should be able to decipher the meaning of those words written on the paper. It renders contextualising an old practice because the text without the flag of authorship does not have a time stamp. Readers/consumers get full autonomy over the meaning, and the narrative is lost. Barthes finds it sufficient that this practice of killing the author will put an end to the proliferation of meaning with intentions. Barthes has presented an innovative idea regarding the univocal approach to the text. Still, it is also a sparkling dressing to the notion of giving consumers a benevolent picture of their authority and making them a god figure. This gives rise to the curiosity in the cynical consumers and the god complex in the uncritical consumers - the product/creation sells nevertheless.

DISCUSSION

By taking an example of a literary text, *Waiting for Godot*, it becomes quite evident that the practice of killing the author renders the text meaningless. If the counterargument is that the text still provides sufficient meaning for its consumer and Beckett is not relevant to its interpretation, imagine understanding the play without contextualising it. The meaning of the play is embedded in its time,

the time that produced Beckett. The author is a product of its culture, and as long as the culture is relevant to the text, the death of the author cannot be achieved. However, Barthes argues that the author confines the meaning. However, it should be understandable without a doubt that the reader/consumer is also a product of the culture, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, and hence, the meaning of the text should be confined.

A close survey of the texts produced in the 20th century gives enough evidence that there is hardly any aberration in the narrative. The abundant use of ellipses, fragmented language, non-linear narratives, and a psychological gap in the literary pieces of that time suggest that authors were producing the narrative that was selling at that time. Hysterical by the world wars, the consumers were robbed into thinking the fragmented narratives were the depiction of their actual reality. It can be observed that these literary movements have eradicated autonomous thinking in the same fashion the entertainment industry eradicates the rationale in the capitalist society. The promise of distraction has made consumers fall into the rabbit hole with no intrinsic product evaluation. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue in their essay, “Disconnected from the mainstream, he [anyone who does not conform] is easily convicted of inadequacy” (p. 106). Any trend in the literary circle suggests that the fear of being convicted of inadequacy is the sole reason for producing identical ideas and giving rise to literary movements. Whereas these literary movements bear an intellectual understanding of art, the vigilance shown by the genius of these movements is the selling point for the readers. Old traditions are outdated, and you need to deplore such values and become apprehensive about new trends. Such ideas are implanted in the consumers’ minds regardless of whether the consumer is critical or uncritical.

The debate has come to the point of two questions: what is an author, and is the killing of the author an antithesis of the culture industry? These questions also clarify whether readers are critical consumers or fall in the same category as Adorno places Jazz enthusiasts. Foucault is one of the critical thinkers who have touched on the debate of the author's significance and given his rationale for the author's figure. He argues that the author is an ideological figure "by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning," for in seeking the univocal, "one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (Siegel, 1983, p. 127). If his argument regarding the figure of the author is to be considered, then the author is a mere part of cultural tissues wrapped in the discourse of metanarratives. This also makes the reader a part of the same matrix. It clarifies that authors have an abundant influence over the text through the discourse system. The author and reader are an extension of the mass culture. Barthes criticises the author for the same reason, which is that the author impacts the meaning of the text, but Foucault attributes meaning to the text. It suggests the interplay of the proliferation of intentional ideas. Hence, killing the author is not an antithesis of the culture industry. It hardly makes any difference in the discourse. The discourse has the actual power generated in a manner that consumers are tangled up in an inextricable system without knowing it.

Poststructuralism and Postmodernism, with or without the author, remain a part of cultural tissue, enunciating the effects of mass corporeal manipulation. Barthes is feeding into the same narrative he is criticising. Even if he kills the author, he is still building a narrative for the consumers/readers to rely on instead of making an independent product evaluation. Adorno and Horkheimer do not see it happening anytime soon, given how our minds have

been wired in with a disingenuous system. Let's take an example of the Democratic system, where authority is given to the public through votes, but rigorous and elaborate campaigns have already implanted the manufactured narrative in their minds. It is safe to assume that the elections are rigged from the beginning. Voters are given the false satisfaction of being critical, but they are made to think that way. Their choice is never for them to make; the system has already decided it is for them.

CONCLUSION

The idea of the culture industry is not limited to the entertainment industry, and it impacts every aspect of life. Adorno and Horkheimer are not far off the point, suggesting that the public has become a passive consumer. They are conditioned in a way that commercialism and capitalism have become a blueprint for them. Foucault brands the author as not the originator of the text but the “initiator of discursive practices,” giving the examples of Marx and Freud (Wilson, 2004, p. 342). These discursive practices are embedded in cultural layers and contribute to the existing narratives. These practices give rise to various literary and social movements, stripping the public of its independent thinking in the same manner that cultural industry makes the public its passive consumers. Therefore, capital tendencies in the literary movements become pertinent to the discourse initiated for the public, making them the same puppets as Adorno’s jazz enthusiasts.

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