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The Frankfurt School and the culture industry

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THOSE FAMILIAR WITH THE intellectual analysis of popular culture might well ask whether it is worth bothering any longer with the Frankfurt School. Surely its time has passed. Even if it still has something relevant to contribute, we now have better ways of recognising this. To persist with the Frankfurt School perspective is to stay with an approach which is both narrow and outmoded. This view is not quite so prevalent as it would have been a few years ago.¹ But works which are critical of elitist perspectives on popular culture often use the writings of Theodor Adorno, one of the key figures associated with the theories developed by the School, as a leading example of what they are opposed to. This stance is reinforced when it is realised how much common ground the School shares with mass culture theory.

The debate between the Frankfurt School and its subsequent theoretical heritage, which has moved from structuralism and semiology, through Althusserian and Gramscian Marxism, up to feminism and postmodernism, is itself indicative of the continuing significance of the School's ideas. These ideas can still serve as a bench-mark against which other theories of popular culture can measure themselves. Moreover, together with mass culture theory, the work of the Frankfurt School has set the terms of debate and analysis for the subsequent study of popular culture. As we shall see, the contemporary analysis of popular music still commences, however critically, on the basis of Adorno's theory, while his name is sometimes invoked as a symbol of a whole way of thinking about theory and culture. In any event, it is very difficult to understand the analysis of popular culture without understanding the work of the Frankfurt School.

In this chapter I shall, first of all, try to place the School in some kind of context, since this may help us understand some of its ideas. This context is not always relevant to the concerns of this book, so I shall confine my discussion to what I think is relevant

to the School's analysis of popular culture. Next, I shall look briefly at the School's general theory, going into more detail on its cultural theory and analysis. In doing this I shall, in the main, restrict myself to Adorno's work, although other representatives of the School, like Herbert Marcuse, will also be considered. The specific examples I shall use to illustrate and clarify the School's ideas, and to begin to develop a critique, will be Hollywood cinema and popular music, particularly the latter. I shall conclude with an evaluation of the School's contribution to the study of popular culture by looking at some of the arguments presented by Walter Benjamin, another member of the School but not one whose work is that representative of its approach.

The origins of the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School for Social Research was set up in 1923. Its founders tended to be left-wing German, Jewish intellectuals drawn from the upper and middle classes of German society. Amongst its functions was the development of critical theory and research. This involved intellectual work which aimed to reveal the social contradictions underlying the emergent capitalist societies of the time and their typical ideological frameworks in order to construct a theoretical critique of modern capitalism. Of the many prominent intellectuals who have been, at one time or another, associated with the School, amongst the most important are Adorno (1903–1970), Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Marcuse (1898–1978). An equally important figure, but one who, as I have said, is more marginal to the major tenets of the theory elaborated by the leading representatives of the School, is Benjamin (1892–1940), who will be considered more fully at the end of this chapter.

The rise of the Nazi party to power in Germany in the 1930s and its racist oppression of Jews together with its totalitarian repression of the left meant that members of the School were forced to flee to other parts of western Europe and North America.² The School was temporarily situated in New York in the early 1940s (although some members spent time in Los Angeles,

including Hollywood), and it eventually returned to Germany in the late 1940s, along with some of its leading figures like Adorno and Horkheimer. Some members stayed on in America after the war and renounced the School's theoretical and political perspectives, turning to liberalism and empirical social science instead. In contrast, others – Marcuse in particular – extended the School's analysis of modern society to post-war American capitalism. Thus in the fascist state of Nazi Germany and American monopoly, consumer capitalism formed crucial features of the context in which the Frankfurt School's analysis of popular culture and the mass media emerged and developed. In the eyes of the Frankfurt School, as Craib has identified these influences, 'it seemed as though the possibility of radical social change had been smashed between the twin cudgels of concentration camps and television for the masses' (Craib: 1984; p. 184).

In relation to these points, there are now a number of books which present a detailed history of the School and its work.³ Here it is merely useful to make a few general points which should allow us to appreciate the School's relevance to the study of popular culture. First of all, it is helpful to identify what the School was reacting against in developing its own theories. For a start, the School was engaged in a critique of the enlightenment. It thought that the promise of the enlightenment, the belief in scientific and rational progress and the extension of human freedom, had turned into a nightmare, the use of science and rationality to stamp out human freedom. This point has been effectively made by Adorno himself:

the total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer and I have noted, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means of fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves . . . while obstructing the emancipation for which human beings are as ripe as the productive forces of the epoch permit.

(Adorno: 1991; p. 92)

This critique of the enlightenment is obviously dependent upon the theory of modern capitalism and the culture industry that intellectuals like Adorno began to develop in the 1930s and 1940s.

This theory not only rejects the false hope of rational emancipation offered by the enlightenment but also involves a critique of Marxism. This critique is more complex because the School put forward an analysis which clearly draws extensively upon, while also criticising, Marxist theory. It is best viewed as a particular version of Marxism no matter how unorthodox it may appear to be. To put it simply, the School's distance from orthodox Marxism can be gauged by its attempt both to get away from the emphasis placed upon the economy as the major way of explaining how and why societies work as they do, and to elaborate and refine a theory of the cultural institutions associated with the emergence and maturation of capitalist societies. The very concept of 'the culture industry' captures the continuing adherence to Marxism (industry as the fundamental productive power of capitalism) and the innovative and original character of the School's contribution (culture as a basic causal factor in its own right). The School can be seen as trying to fill in an important part of the picture of capitalism Marx did not get round to, namely the position and importance of culture and ideology. However, in doing this it made a break with some of the major tenets of classical Marxism. In particular, the School seemed increasingly less optimistic about the prospects for a working-class, socialist revolution in the west as the twentieth century progressed. An important objective of their analysis has been to explain why such a revolution has not occurred and is unlikely to occur in the future.

In this, the critique of Marxism coincided with the critique of the enlightenment. The potential for massive and wide-ranging social control afforded by scientific rationality, which the critique of the enlightenment identified, came to be seen as undermining the political optimism formerly associated with Marxism. Historically, the School was confronted with a situation in which the erosion of the revolutionary momentum of the working class was accompanied by the rise of fascism. Fascism represented the political logic of rational domination unleashed by the enlightenment. The

historical and political context for the work of the School thus led to a concern with the decline of socialism and working-class radicalism which resulted from the increased possibility for centralised control to be exercised over increasing numbers of people by the expanded 'totalitarian' power of the modern capitalist state.

We can already begin to see how the School's understanding of popular culture is dependent upon its theory of modern capitalism and its conception of the control the 'culture industry' can exert over the minds and actions of people. Before turning to this, however, the School's indebtedness to a particular aspect of Marx's work has to be noted.

The theory of commodity fetishism

Adorno once wrote that 'the real secret of success . . . is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert' (1991; p. 34). Few statements could more graphically summarise the implications of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism for Adorno's own understanding of modern popular culture. Marx's theory lies behind Adorno's theory of the culture industry. Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism is, for Adorno and the Frankfurt School, the basis of a theory of how cultural forms like popular music can function to secure the continuing economic, political and ideological domination of capital.⁴

The immediate inspiration for Adorno's notion that money – the price of commodities or goods, including a ticket to a concert – defines and dominates social relations in capitalist societies is Marx's famous statement on the origins of commodity fetishism:

The mystery of the commodity form, therefore, consists in the fact that in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective characteristic, a social natural quality of the labour product itself, and that consequently the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is pre-

sented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. Through this transference the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. . . . It is simply a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. . . . This I call the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

(Marx: 1963; p. 183)

According to Adorno, 'this is the real secret of success', since it can show how 'exchange value exerts its power in a special way in the realm of cultural goods' (1991; p. 34). Marx had made a distinction between the exchange value and use value of the commodities circulating in capitalist societies. Exchange value refers to the money that a commodity can command on the market, the price it can be bought and sold for, while use value refers to the usefulness of the good for the consumer, its practical value or utility as a commodity. With capitalism, according to Marx, exchange value will always dominate use value since the capitalist economic cycle involving the production, marketing and consumption of commodities will always dominate people's real needs. This idea is central to Adorno's theory of capitalist culture. It links commodity fetishism with the predominance of exchange value in that money is both the exemplar of how social relations between people can assume the fantastic form of a relation defined by a 'thing', that is money, and the basic means by which the value of commodities is defined for people living in capitalist societies. This is why we are supposed to venerate the price we pay for the ticket to the concert rather than the concert itself.

What Adorno has in fact done has been to extend Marx's analyses of commodity fetishism and exchange to the sphere of cultural goods or commodities. In the example cited, this concerns the market for music, and he accordingly elaborates a 'concept of musical fetishism'. Adorno argues that 'all contemporary musical

life is dominated by the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated' (ibid.; p. 33). This means that what Marx said about commodities in general also applies, for Adorno, to cultural commodities: they 'fall completely into the world of commodities, are produced for the market, and are aimed at the market' (ibid.; p. 34). They become tainted by commodity fetishism, and dominated by their exchange value, as both are defined and realised by the medium of money. What is, however, unique to cultural commodities is that 'exchange value deceptively takes over the functions of use value. The specific fetish character of music lies in this *quid pro quo*' (ibid.). With other commodities, exchange value both obscures and dominates use value. Exchange values not use values determine the production and circulation of these commodities. However, with cultural commodities like music, because they bring us into an 'immediate' relation with what we buy – the musical experience – their use value becomes their exchange value such that the latter can 'disguise itself as the object of enjoyment' (ibid.).

So we come back to the statement we started with, hopefully now more aware of its rationale. We are said to worship the price we pay for the ticket for the concert, rather than the performance itself, because we are victims of commodity fetishism whereby social relations and cultural appreciation are objectified in terms of money. This, in turn, means that exchange value or the price of the ticket becomes the use value as opposed to the musical performance, its real underlying use value. This is only part of a more general analysis of popular music to which I shall return below. What I have been concerned to show here is how the School's theory has been based on some of Marx's ideas despite its divergence from certain fundamental principles of classical Marxism. These ideas have played their part in the School's interpretation of the development of modern capitalism, and in Adorno's formulation of the concept of the culture industry.

The Frankfurt School's theory of modern capitalism

The School's theory of modern capitalism basically argues that it has managed to overcome many of the contradictions and crises it

once faced, and has thereby acquired new and unprecedented powers of stability and continuity. This theory has been very much a feature of the writings of the philosopher Marcuse, a member of the School who stayed in America after the Second World War, and witnessed its economic growth, affluence and consumerism, as well as its problems – continued inequality, poverty and racism.⁵ It also indicates the intellectual and political distance between the School and Marx's analyses of capitalism which usually defined it as a crisis-ridden and unstable system. The School obviously does not deny that capitalism contains internal contradictions – identifying these contradictions is for Adorno part of the art of dialectical thinking. But insofar as capitalist societies are capable of generating higher and higher levels of economic well-being for large sections of their populations, including their working classes, their eventual overthrow and the rise of socialism appear less and less likely to occur. The School sees a durability in capitalism many others have doubted, and argues that this rests upon affluence and consumerism, and the more rational and pervasive forms of social control afforded by the modern state, mass media and popular culture.

Capitalist productive forces are capable, according to the School, of producing such vast amounts of wealth through waste production like military expenditure that 'false needs' can be created and met. People can therefore be unconsciously reconciled to the capitalist system, guaranteeing its stability and continuity. The rise of monopoly capitalist corporations, and the rational and efficient state management of economy and society, have served to entrench this process further. For example, monopoly has allowed corporations greater control over their markets and prices and thus their waste production, while state intervention could prevent the periodic eruption of economic crises and further extend the power of rational organisation over capitalist societies. Moreover, possible contradictions – and hence possible reasons for conflict – between abundance (the productive potential of the economic forces of capitalism) and waste (consumer and military expenditure which could otherwise be used to alleviate poverty and inequality) are no longer integral to the capitalist system and the

struggle between capital and labour, but instead become focused upon marginal groups (like ethnic minorities) or societies (like so-called 'third world' countries) lying outside the system. The affluence and consumerism generated by the economies of capitalist societies, and the levels of ideological control possessed by their culture industries, have ensured that the working class has been thoroughly incorporated into the system. Its members are more financially secure, can buy many of the things they desire, or think they desire, and no longer have any conscious reasons for wanting to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a classless and stateless society.

The idea that the working class has been pacified into accepting capitalism is central to the theory of the Frankfurt School and its analyses of popular culture. It links up with the critique of the enlightenment in that rational domination is the domination of the masses in modern capitalist societies. Its debt to the theory of commodity fetishism is also evident in that commodities of all kinds become more available and therefore more capable of dominating people's consciousness. This fetishism is accentuated by the domination of money which regulates the relationships between commodities. In keeping with these ideas is the School's concept of false needs, which connects what has been said so far with the concept of the culture industry.

The concept of false needs is identified particularly with the work of Marcuse, but is derived from the general theoretical framework of the School, and is implicit in the writings of some of its other members (Marcuse: 1972; p. 5). It is based upon the assumption that people have true or real needs to be creative, independent and autonomous, in control of their own destinies, fully participating members of meaningful and democratic collectivities and able to live free and relatively unconstrained lives and to think for themselves. It therefore rests upon the claim that these true needs cannot be realised in modern capitalism because the false needs, which this system has to foster in order to survive, come to be superimposed or laid over them. False needs work to deny and suppress true or real needs. The false needs which are created and sustained can in fact be fulfilled, like the desires elicited by

consumerism, but only at the expense of the true needs which remain unsatisfied.

This occurs because people do not realise their real needs remain unsatisfied. As a result of the stimulation and fulfilment of false needs, they have what they think they want. Take the example of freedom. People who live in capitalist societies think they are free but they are deluding themselves. They are not free in the sense that the Frankfurt School would use the term. They are not free, autonomous, independent human beings, consciously thinking for themselves. Rather their freedom is restricted to the freedom to choose between different consumer goods or different brands of the same good, or between political parties who look and sound the same. The false needs of consumer and voter choice offered by advertising and parliamentary democracy suppress the real needs for useful products and genuine political freedom. The cultivation of false needs is bound up with the role of the culture industry. The Frankfurt School sees the culture industry ensuring the creation and satisfaction of false needs, and the suppression of true needs. It is so effective in doing this that the working class is no longer likely to pose a threat to the stability and continuity of capitalism.

The culture industry

According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry reflects the consolidation of commodity fetishism, the domination of exchange value and the ascendancy of state monopoly capitalism. It shapes the tastes and preferences of the masses, thereby moulding their consciousness by inculcating the desire for false needs. It therefore works to exclude real or true needs, alternative and radical concepts or theories, and politically oppositional ways of thinking and acting. It is so effective in doing this that the people do not realise what is going on.

In a reconsideration of the concept of the culture industry first published in 1975, Adorno reiterated his endorsement of these ideas. He clearly distinguished the idea of the culture industry from

mass culture, since the latter concept assumes that the masses bear some genuine responsibility for the culture they consume, that it is determined by the preferences of the masses themselves. More than the theorists of mass culture, Adorno saw this culture as something which has been imposed upon the masses, and which makes them prepared to welcome it given they do not realise it is an imposition.

Looking back to the book he and Horkheimer wrote entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (originally published in 1944), Adorno defined what he meant by the concept of the culture industry:

In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in the speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary but secondary, they are an object of calculation, an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.

(Adorno: 1991; p. 85)

The commodities produced by the culture industry are governed by the need to realise their value on the market. The profit motive determines the nature of cultural forms. Industrially, cultural production is a process of standardisation whereby the products

acquire the form common to all commodities – like ‘the Western, familiar to every movie-goer’. But it also confers a sense of individuality in that each product ‘affects an individual air’. This attribution of individuality to each product, and therefore to each consumer, serves to obscure the standardisation and manipulation of consciousness practised by the culture industry (ibid.; pp. 86–87). This means that the more cultural products are actually standardised the more they appear to be individualised. Individualisation is an ideological process which hides the process of standardisation. The Hollywood star system is cited as an example: ‘The more dehumanised its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart throbs’ (ibid.; p. 87).

In response to the claims that modern mass culture is a relatively harmless form of entertainment, and a democratic response to consumer demand, and that critics like himself adopt elitist intellectual positions, Adorno stresses the vacuity, banality and conformity fostered by the culture industry. He sees it as a highly destructive force. As he puts it: ‘the colour film demolishes the genial old tavern to a greater extent than bombs ever could. . . . No homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness’ (ibid.; p. 89). To ignore the nature of the culture industry, as Adorno defines it, is to succumb to its ideology.

This ideology is corrupting and manipulative, underpinning the dominance of the market and commodity fetishism. It is equally conformist and mind numbing, enforcing the general acceptance of the capitalist order. For Adorno, ‘the concepts of order which it [the culture industry] hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo’ (ibid.; p. 90). Its effects are profound and far-reaching: ‘the power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness’ (ibid.). This drive to conformity tolerates no deviation from, or opposition to, nor an alternative vision of, the existing social order. Deviant, oppositional and alternative ways of thinking and

acting become increasingly impossible to envisage as the power of the culture industry is extended over people's minds. The culture industry deals in falsehoods not truths, in false needs and false solutions, rather than real needs and real solutions. It solves problems 'only in appearance', not as they should be resolved in the real world. It offers the semblance not the substance of resolving problems, the false satisfaction of false needs as a substitute for the real solution of real problems. In doing this, it takes over the consciousness of the masses.

These masses, in Adorno's eyes, become completely powerless. Power lies with the culture industry. Its products encourage conformity and consensus which ensure obedience to authority, and the stability of the capitalist system. The ability of the culture industry to 'replace' the consciousnesses of the masses with automatic conformity is more or less complete. Its effectiveness, according to Adorno:

lies in the promotion and exploitation of the ego-weakness to which the powerless members of contemporary society, with its concentration of power, are condemned. Their consciousness is further developed retrogressively. It is no coincidence that cynical American film producers are heard to say that their pictures must take into consideration the level of eleven-year-olds. In doing so they would very much like to make adults into eleven-year-olds.

(*ibid.*; p. 91)

The power of the culture industry to secure the dominance and continuity of capitalism resides, for Adorno, in its capacity to shape and perpetuate a 'regressive' audience, a dependent, passive, and servile consuming public. I now want to illustrate some of these ideas further by looking at the example of popular music.

The culture industry and popular music

Adorno's theory of popular music is perhaps the most well-known aspect of his analysis of the culture industry. It is bound up with

the theories of commodity fetishism and the culture industry. A trained musician, practising composer, music theory expert and champion of avant-garde and non-commercial music himself, Adorno had little time for the music produced by monopoly corporations and consumed by the mass public, except as a way of illustrating the power of the culture industry and the alienation to be found among the masses in capitalist societies.

According to Adorno, the popular music produced by the culture industry is dominated by two processes: standardisation and pseudo-individualisation. The idea here is that popular songs come to sound more and more like each other. They are increasingly characterised by a core structure, the parts of which are interchangeable with each other. However, this core is hidden by the peripheral frills, novelties or stylistic variations which are attached to the songs as signs of their putative uniqueness. Standardisation refers to the substantial similarities between popular songs; pseudo-individualisation to their incidental differences. Standardisation defines the way the culture industry squeezes out any kind of challenge, originality, authenticity or intellectual stimulation from the music it produces, while pseudo-individualisation provides the 'hook', the apparent novelty or uniqueness of the song for the consumer. Standardisation means that popular songs are becoming more alike and their parts, verses and choruses more interchangeable, while pseudo-individualisation disguises this process by making the songs appear more varied and distinct from each other.

The contrasts which Adorno draws between classical and avant-garde music on the one hand, and popular music on the other, allow him to extend this argument. According to Adorno, with serious music like classical or avant-garde music, every detail acquires its musical sense from the totality of the piece, and its place within that totality. This is not true of popular or light music. In popular music, 'the beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses . . . every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine' (1991; p. 303; originally published 1941). The difference is not so much between complexity and simplicity as such, for the key distinction

in Adorno's view, which establishes the superiority of serious over popular music, is that between standardisation and non-standardisation. An important reason for this is that 'structural standardisation aims at standardised reactions'. These features are not characteristic of serious music: 'To sum up the difference: in Beethoven and in good serious music in general . . . the detail virtually contains the whole and leads to the exposition of the whole, while at the same time it is produced out of the conception of the whole. In popular music the relationship is fortuitous. The detail has no bearing on a whole, which appears as an extraneous framework' (ibid.; p. 304). In Adorno's view, one of the few possible challenges to the culture industry and commodity fetishism comes from serious music which renounces the commodity form because it cannot be contained by standardised production or consumption.

One reason for this is that those who listen to popular music are taken in by 'the veneer of individual "effects"' (ibid.; p. 302), which masks the standardisation of the music, and makes the listeners think they are hearing something new and different. Adorno distinguishes between the framework and the details of a piece of music. The framework entails standardisation which elicits 'a system of response-mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society' (ibid.; p. 305). This means that the details must confer on the listener a sense of this suppressed individuality. People would not necessarily put up with musical standardisation for very long, so the sense of individualism within the process of musical consumption must be maintained. Hence, 'the necessary correlate of musical standardization is *pseudo-individualization*' (ibid.; p. 308). This involves 'endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them or "pre-digested"' (ibid.). Examples of pseudo-individualisation include improvisation like that to be found with certain forms of jazz, and the 'hook' line of a song, the slight

variation from the norm which makes the song catchy and attractive, and gives it the semblance of novelty.

It is clear from this that Adorno does not have too high an opinion of popular music, and his views on its audience are consistent with his general theory. He argues: 'the counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening' (1991; p. 40). The listeners drawn to popular music are conceived of in terms of their infantile or childlike characteristics: they are 'arrested at the infantile stage . . . they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded . . . the regression is really from . . . the possibility of a different and oppositional music' (ibid.; p. 41). Listeners really need this latter type of music, but due to their infantile mentality they continue to listen to popular music: 'regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have once been served' (ibid.; p. 45). Accordingly, they suffer from the delusion that they are exercising some degree of control and choice in their leisure pursuits. Adorno cites the example of the 'jitterbugs', groups

from the mass of the retarded who differentiate themselves by pseudoactivity and nevertheless make the regression more strikingly visible. . . . They call themselves jitterbugs, as if they simultaneously wanted to affirm and mock their loss of individuality, their transformation into beetles whirring around in fascination. Their only excuse is that the term jitterbugs, like all those in the unreal edifice of films and jazz, is hammered into them by the entrepreneurs to make them think they are on the inside. Their ecstasy is without content. . . . It is stylized like the ecstasies savages go into in beating the war drums. It has convulsive aspects reminiscent of St. Vitus' dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals.

(ibid.; p. 46)

According to Adorno, regressive listening, 'the frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention. Listeners are distracted from the demands of

reality by entertainment which does not demand attention either' (1991; pp. 309–310). The capitalist mode of production conditions regressive listening. Higher pursuits like classical music can only be appreciated by those whose work or social position means that they do not need to escape from boredom and effort in their leisure time. Popular music offers relaxation and respite from the rigours of 'mechanised labour' precisely because it is not demanding or difficult, because it can be listened to in a distracted and inattentive manner. People desire popular music, partly because capitalists 'hammer' it into their minds and make it appear desirable. But their desire is also fuelled by the symmetry between production and consumption which characterises their lives in a capitalist society.

People desire popular music because their consumption of standardised products mirrors the standardised, repetitive and boring nature of their work in production. 'The power of the process of production', for Adorno:

extends over the time intervals which on the surface appear to be 'free.' They want standardized goods and pseudo-individualization, because their leisure is an escape from work and at the same time is moulded after those psychological attitudes to which their workaday world exclusively habituates them. Popular music is for the masses a perpetual busman's holiday. Thus, there is justification for speaking of a pre-established harmony today between production and consumption of popular music. The people clamour for what they are going to get anyway.

(*ibid.*; p. 310)

For these people, standardised production goes hand in hand with standardised consumption. Pseudo-individualisation saves them the effort of attending to the genuinely novel or original in their precious leisure-time. Both of these processes comprise the distraction and inattention which define regressive listening.

The last aspect of Adorno's theory that we need to look at concerns his claim that cultural phenomena like popular music act as a form of 'social cement', adjusting people to the reality of the

lives they lead. It seems to be Adorno's opinion that most people in capitalist societies live limited, impoverished and unhappy lives. They become aware of this, or are made to become aware of it, from time to time. Popular music and film do not actually function to deny this awareness, but they do act to reconcile people to their fate. The fantasies and happiness, the resolutions and reconciliations, offered by popular music and film make people realise how much their real lives lack these qualities, how much they remain unfulfilled and unsatisfied. However, people continue to be adjusted to their conditions of life since

the actual function of sentimental music lies rather in the temporary release given to the awareness that one has missed fulfilment. . . . Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, 'Come and weep, my child.' It is catharsis for the masses, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line. . . . Music that permits its listeners the confession of their unhappiness reconciles them, by means of this 'release,' to their social dependence.

(*ibid.*; pp. 313–314)

We might wonder whether people are still distracted and inattentive when they are made to recognise the unhappiness of their lives by the medium of popular music, and we might want to question someone who judges the emotional and cultural quality of other people's lives in this way, but we can at least see how Adorno conceives of popular music as a kind of 'social cement'. Its comforts and catharsism enable people to resign themselves to the harsh and unfulfilling reality of living in a capitalist society. The popular song or Hollywood film dissuades people from resisting the capitalist system, and from trying to construct an alternative society in which individuals could be free, happy and fulfilled.

***Adorno's theory of popular music,
Cadillacs and Doo-Wop***

In an extremely useful article entitled 'Theodor Adorno meets the Cadillacs' (1986), Gendron has tried to assess Adorno's theory of

popular music by applying it to the example of Doo-Wop music. In doing this, he introduces a critical assessment of Adorno's theory. The Cadillacs mentioned in the title of the article is a reference to both the car and a Doo-Wop group.

Gendron in fact uses the example of car production in order to clarify what Adorno means when he argues that capitalism functions to standardise commodities. Standardisation involves the interchangeability of parts together with pseudo-individualisation. The parts of one kind of car can be interchanged with those from another due to standardisation, while the use of style or pseudo-individualisation – like the addition of a tail-fin to a Cadillac – distinguishes cars from each other, and hides the fact that standardisation is occurring. According to Gendron, Adorno argues that what is true of cars is also true of popular music. Both are distinguished by a core and a periphery, the core being subject to standardisation, the periphery to pseudo-individualisation. The process of standardisation is bound up with the lives that people have to live in capitalist societies and the inferior status of popular music when compared with classical and avant-garde music. Gendron also makes the point that the standardisation of popular music, in Adorno's view, occurs diachronically (that is to say, over time as popular musical standards are set) as well as synchronically (the standards which apply at any particular point in time).

Gendron uses the example of Doo-Wop,⁶ as well as other styles of pop music, to critically assess Adorno's theory. He is not totally dismissive of Adorno's work. For example, he suggests that 'industrial standardization is an important feature of popular music, and must be taken seriously in any political assessment of the form' (1986; p. 25). He also argues that Adorno's theory has the potential both to combine political economy and semiological perspectives, and to provide a critique of the argument that consumers can draw from popular culture any meanings and interpretations they wish (ibid.; pp. 34–35). However, he equally feels that Adorno takes his claims about standardisation too far. And he uses the example of Doo-Wop to develop his critique. Doo-Wop is defined by Gendron as:

a vocal group style, rooted in the black gospel quartet tradition, that emerged on inner city street corners in the mid-fifties and established a major presence on the popular music charts between 1955 and 1959. Its most distinctive feature is the use of background vocals to take on the role of instrumental accompaniment for, and response to, the high tenor or falsetto calls of the lead singer. Typically, the backup vocalists create a harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal sub-structure by voicing phonetic or nonsense syllables such as 'shoo-doo-be-doo-be-doo,' 'ooh-wah, ooh-wah,' 'sha-na-na,' and so on.

(ibid.; p. 24)

Gendron suggests this music was standardised both diachronically and synchronically, the former because it relied on the long-established song patterns of either Tin Pan Alley or rhythm and blues, the latter because of the close resemblance between Doo-Wop songs and the interchangeability of their parts, for example the swapping of the shoo-be-dos of one song with the dum-dum-de-dums of another.

One of the major difficulties with Adorno's work, according to Gendron, lies in its failure to distinguish between functional artefacts such as cars and Cadillacs, and textual artefacts such as pop music and a Doo-Wop group like the Cadillacs. The use of technological innovations in the production of functional artefacts usually furthers the process of standardisation since it can increase the extent to which the parts of, say, one type of car can be interchanged with those of another. However, with textual artefacts technological innovations can differentiate between, say, pop groups or music styles – for example, the use by The Beatles of experimental tape techniques – rather than making them more alike (ibid.; p. 26). The production of textual artefacts is also distinguished by the fact that what is initially produced is a single 'universal' statement, the song or a series of songs, and not a commodity which can be reproduced in large quantities by assembly-line techniques. What is produced is a particular or unique song in a recording studio by a group of singers, musicians, engineers, etc.

It only becomes a functional artefact when it is produced or reproduced in large numbers as a record. Functional and textual artefacts are the result of distinct processes of production. Thus music, like most popular culture, cannot be treated as if it were like any other commercial product.

Functional and textual artefacts, as Gendron goes on to note, are equally the object of different kinds of consumption. If functional artefacts are purchased and found to be useful, then they will be purchased again when required. This would even be true of commodities, like cars, which are only bought relatively infrequently. But if a textual artefact like a record is bought and liked, this doesn't mean that the very same one will be bought again. No matter how impressed you are with this book, you are unlikely to go out and buy a second copy. What you might do, however, is buy a similar kind of book (if you could find one). If you like Doo-Wop you might buy different examples of the style, but not the same record twice. This is one of the reasons for the emergence of 'genres' in popular culture, and for their importance in the organisation of pleasure. This means that, despite what Adorno argues, popular songs advertise both their individuality (it is this song, this example of Doo-Wop and not any other) and their interchangeability (if you like this song, this example of Doo-Wop then you might well like others in the same style or genre). In this sense, 'we might consider standardization not only as an expression of rigidity but also as a source of pleasure' (ibid.; p. 29). The pleasure people derive from popular music arises as much from their awareness of standardisation as it does from any perceived difference or individuality they attach to any particular song.

Gendron is equally critical of Adorno's notion of diachronic standardisation for its implication that popular musical styles never change. He suggests, of course, that they do change. Going back to the distinction between core and periphery he makes the following point: 'Adorno approached popular music from the point of view of western "classical" music; if we view popular music in terms of its own conventions, the line between core and periphery will be drawn quite differently' (ibid.; p. 30). For western classical music, songs share the same musical core if they

share the same melodies, harmonies and chord progressions, while the sound, 'feel' and connotations of the song form its periphery. However, there is no reason to suppose that this hierarchy has universal relevance. Nor need it be closed to changes. 'Western classical music focused on melody and harmony, whereas contemporary pop music focuses on timbre and connotation', the connotation of Doo-Wop being 'fifties teen pop culture' and 'urban street corners' (ibid.; p. 31). It is by no means obvious what constitutes the core and periphery of textual artefacts; they may differ radically between different types of music.

This may be taken a step further since Gendron questions the extent to which the terms of core and periphery can be applied to pop music. He does this on the basis of the rapidity with which popular music styles change:

the constant shifts in musical genres constitute at least *prima facie* evidence that important transformations occur in the history of popular music. Before rock 'n' roll, people listened to ragtime, dixieland, swing, crooning, be-bop, rhythm and blues, among others. Whatever their harmonic and melodic similarities, these styles differed quite substantially in timbre, evocation, connotation, and expressiveness. With the coming of rock 'n' roll, the pace of change has accelerated. The thirty years of the rock era have seen the coming and going of Doo-Wop, rockabilly, the girl group sound, surf music, the British invasion, psychedelic rock, folk rock, heavy metal, and punk, to name just a few. While it might be argued that these have only been fashion changes, and hence merely surface changes, this sort of response simply fails to attend to the important differences noted earlier between textual and functional artefacts. In the latter the fashion can change while the mechanism remains the same; fashion is at the periphery, the mechanism at the centre. In the text, there is no mechanism to distinguish from the fashion, since a text is all style or all fashion.

(ibid.; p. 32)

Adorno's notion of diachronic standardisation has difficulties handling evidence of this kind. As Gendron indicates, for Adorno

it would probably be regarded as evidence of continuity rather than change, of how the inevitable standardisation of popular music has been neatly masked by the transient novelty of style. But as Gendron goes on to note, this response fails to appreciate how difficult it is to define the standardised core of popular music independently of its shifting fashions and genres. To introduce the latter into the analysis raises considerations of sound, context, pleasure, use and history.

The Frankfurt School: a critical assessment

As I indicated in my introduction to this chapter, I have tried to confine my discussion to those aspects of the Frankfurt School's work which appear relevant to the study of popular culture. Moreover, I can hardly claim my account is exhaustive. These qualifications apply equally to this critical assessment. While it is clearly rooted in a distinct theoretical tradition, the School shares much the same kind of view of popular culture and its audience as the mass culture critics. This may mean that certain points already made will be returned to in the following comments.

The Frankfurt School has commonly been singled out for two particular failings: its failure to provide empirical proof for its theories; and the obscure and inaccessible language in which its ideas have been expressed.⁷ From what I have outlined of his arguments, it is clear that Adorno makes few attempts to substantiate empirically the claims he makes. For example, his discussion of regressive listening makes no reference to real listeners. Rather it relies on an inferred subject defined by his theory. Therefore his ideas are confirmed by his analysis since there is no way in which they could be contradicted by empirical evidence. It would probably be Adorno's case that real listeners have regressed so far, have become so 'infantile', that their views are not worth bothering with. However, even his analysis of the culture industry is drawn from the features of its products as he conceives of them, and is not based on an empirical analysis of it as an historical type of industrial production (cf. Murdock and Golding: 1977; pp. 18-19). Of course,

if the society we live in is as Adorno envisages it, then non-fetishised, non-ideological forms of empirical knowledge and proof are not possible.

The same kind of defence can be mounted against the criticism that the ideas of the School are conveyed in an obscure and inaccessible language. A society dominated by commodity fetishism, exchange value and the culture industry, in which the language in common use is similarly tainted, can only be described by a language which resists fetishism, ideology and the market. For this task, only an obscure and inaccessible language will do. It is thus impossible to describe popular culture in its own terms. It has to be described by the language of a theory which protects itself against contamination by its obscurity. This is also why Adorno supports the cause of avant-garde music because, in rejecting popularity, standardisation and accessibility, it is rejecting commodity fetishism, exchange value and the culture industry. In fact, not all of the Frankfurt School's work is that difficult or obscure. Certainly, Adorno's famous essay on popular music (1991) is not that hard to read, except where it discusses musical theory. But the almost impenetrable nature of much of the School's writings must put off most apart from the expert or the foolhardy.

This rejection of stylistic clarity is linked to the School's idea of the role of theory. Sometimes termed critical theory, the ideas of the Frankfurt School stress that theory is a form of resistance to the commercial impulses of capitalist production and the ideological hold of commodity fetishism. But it can only function in the way that avant-garde music does if it rejects the empiricism which demands that theories be based upon some kind of evidence, and protects itself behind an obscure and inaccessible language. The School's theory and language allow it to stand outside and criticise the 'one-dimensional' world of capitalist thought and culture. However, this stance is only possible if its theory is correct. But is it?

We could, of course, question the wisdom of trying to communicate if most people are thought to be incapable of understanding what is being communicated. The defences which can be made of the School's views of theory and language have a specious

intellectual air about them. Critically assessing the School's theory can bring this out. Looking at empirical evidence can pin-point weaknesses in the School's analysis of popular culture as Gendron's article has shown.

To develop a critique of the School's theories, we can return first to the problem of elitism which was raised in the last chapter. Bearing in mind what was said there, elitism describes the role Adorno assigns to critical theory and avant-garde music. The select and enlightened few, by undertaking their intellectual and cultural practices, can cut themselves off from the mundane activities of the masses and thereby resist the power of the culture industry. Elitism describes the way Adorno assumes that other kinds of music can be judged and found wanting by the standards of western classical music. It is evident throughout his characterisation of the regressive listener. The standards which Adorno uses to discriminate between cultures are exemplified by his conception of the universal values of classical and avant-garde music. They derive from the position of the elite intellectual. Consider, in this respect, his following comment: 'a fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously' (1990; p. 310). Art can only be appreciated properly by a privileged elite, an elite which is privileged either because its members don't have to work, or because their work is constantly stimulating and interesting, but never too physically strenuous. Elitism always encounters problems when it engages in social and cultural analysis because the standards upon which it bases itself turn out to be arbitrary not objective, a reflection of the social position of particular groups not universal values (cf. Bourdieu: 1984; pp. 11-57).

The School's analysis of capitalism appears to conceive of a society which has discovered the secret of eternal stability. Capitalism has found, in the culture industry, the means by which it can effectively contain the threats posed to it by radical and alternative social forces. This degree of stability and consensus is hardly consistent with the sociology and history of capitalist societies. Admittedly, these societies have not had to face a revo-

lutionary proletariat, but there is little evidence that this was ever on the cards in the first place. On the one hand, it is arguable that capitalism is less stable than the Frankfurt School thought it would be. On the other hand, it has not been continually confronted by the implicit or explicit threat of a revolutionary working-class movement. If this reasoning is plausible, then popular culture cannot be understood in terms of its functional role in ensuring the continued stability of capitalism. In short, just how extensive and effective is the ideological domination exercised by the culture industry (cf. Abercrombie *et al.*: 1990)?

As we have seen, Adorno argues that the production and consumption of culture in capitalist societies are inevitably standardised. However, this not only ignores the differences between functional and textual artefacts, as Gendron suggests, but fails to recognise how much culture is standardised, including types of elite culture like classical music as well as pre-industrial forms like traditional folk music. Some element of standardisation is required for communication to take place at all. The emergence of popular cultural standards, like music or film genres, are not necessarily an outcome of the functions of the culture industry but arise out of the unequal relationship between the producers and consumers of popular culture. If the culture industry is so powerful why does it find it so difficult to determine where the next hit record or block buster film is coming from?

Popular culture may well be popular because of the pleasures its consumers derive from its standardisation. The existence of genres, for example, is as likely to be due to audience expectations about the organisation of pleasure as to the power of the culture industry. Genres are produced according to the criteria of profitability and marketability, and provide what audiences are familiar with, although not in ways which are completely predictable. The profitable market for genres is met by a product which balances standardisation and surprise, not standardisation and pseudo-individualisation. An historical analysis might reveal that changes in audience tastes have been a major cause of changes in film genres. Although, as Gendron suggests, it may not be possible to apply the core-periphery distinction to popular music,

the core of film genres consists of a mixture of predictability and surprise which is realised by the style of the film. In any event, genres help audiences sort out what they want to see or hear from what they do not. Individual genres, and these include such forms as art-house films, are popular with their audiences to the extent to which standard themes and iconography are combined with variations and surprises within a recognisable narrative. If this outline of genres is at all plausible it suggests that genres are more prone to change than Adorno implies since they arise out of, and deal with, specific historical conditions.⁸

One of the major points of contention raised by Adorno's theory is his view of the audience which consumes the products of the culture industry. Studies have shown how audiences for popular culture are more discriminating and critical in terms of what they consume than the theories of mass culture or the culture industry allow.⁹ Indeed, this is true of other theories discussed in this book, and the critical reaction to this dismissive portrayal of the audience is particularly emphasised in chapter 5 below, on feminism. Audiences appear to be able to engage in active interpretations of what they consume which are not adequately described by Adorno's notion of the regressive listener. Obviously, audiences are by no means as powerful as the industries which produce popular culture, but this is no reason to conceive of them, in the way Adorno does, as 'cultural dopes'.

This problem is clearly one compounded by Adorno's elitism. In the last chapter I used Modleski's argument about the gendered character of the distinction between mass and high culture in my critical assessment of mass culture theory. The argument there made the point that the socially constructed inequalities between masculinity and femininity are reproduced by the distinction between high culture and mass culture, which associates the former with activity, production and the intellectual, and the latter with passivity, consumption and the emotional. Something similar can be found in Adorno's work. Witness his references to the consumer as 'the girl behind the counter', or 'the girl whose satisfaction consists solely in the fact that she and her boyfriend "look good"' (1991; p. 35). However, it is also possible to find in Adorno's work

a similar kind of hierarchical distinction whereby adults are turned into children by the culture industry. This is evident in his use of the metaphor of infantilism to characterise the regressive listener and regressive listening. It is his case that infantilism results from consuming the products of the culture industry. But not only does the notion of infantilism fail to convey adequately what adults do when they consume popular culture, it does not even describe the popular cultural consumption of children.¹⁰ This metaphor, it could be argued, functions as a form of conceptual fetishism which hides the fact that the concept of regressive listening lacks any empirical foundation.

These difficulties are likewise to be found in the Frankfurt School's attempt to maintain a distinction between false and true needs, between the false needs for popular cultural goods which are imposed and met by the culture industry, and the true or real needs for freedom, happiness and utopia which are suppressed by the culture industry. This argument is most closely associated with the writings of Marcuse but, as we have seen, Adorno argues that 'the substitute gratification which it [the culture industry] prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects . . . it impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves' (1991; p. 92).

There are two related problems with this: how is it possible to distinguish between false and true needs?; and how can true needs be recognised? Why should the need for a consumer good like a washing machine be defined as a false need? In principle, a washing machine makes a household chore that much easier to perform. It may therefore be meeting a very real need. People may need intellectual self-fulfilment, but they also need clean clothes. Equally, consumer goods are being invested with more importance than they may actually possess. What may appear to be a sign of cultural decline from one point of view, may, from another, be merely a more efficient way of doing something necessary. As Goldthorpe *et al.* have insisted, 'perhaps Marcuse and like thinkers . . . need to be reminded that "a washing machine is a washing machine is a washing machine"' (1969; p. 184). They continue in the same vein:

it is not to us self-evident why one should regard our respondents' concern for decent, comfortable houses, for labour-saving devices, and even for such leisure goods as television sets and cars, as manifesting the force of false needs; of needs, that is, which are 'superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression' [Marcuse: 1972; p. 5]. It would be equally possible to consider the amenities and possessions for which the couples in our sample were striving as representing something like the minimum material basis on which they and their children might be able to develop a more individuated style of life, with a wider range of choices, than has hitherto been possible for the mass of the manual labour force.

(*ibid.*; pp. 183–184)

The identification and criticism of false needs also seems to rest on the assumption that if people were not engrossed in satisfying these false needs, say watching television (for which they will have more time if they own washing machines), they would be doing something more worthwhile, satisfying their real needs. But what would this entail? What would the fulfilment of real needs consist of? Would it necessarily exclude owning washing machines and watching television? It is as if Frankfurt School theorists know what people should and should not be doing, but tell them so in a language they can't understand.

Similar criticisms can be made of the School's definition of real needs. This definition is as much the result of the School's ideological preferences as it is the outcome of a serious social analysis. It seems to imply a knowledge of what people should be doing and what they should really want. Although couched in vague and abstract terms, it assumes a particular model of cultural activity, one influenced by the example of art (e.g. classical music) and the social position of the elite intellectual, to which all people should aspire.

This argument can be extended to the School's understanding of the fate of the working class in western capitalist societies. For the School, this class's real need lay in the revolutionary over-

throw of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. The fact that this revolution failed to materialise did not lead the Frankfurt School theorists to question the grounds upon which its predicted emergence had been based. What they did was to assume that it should have happened, and then tried to work out why it hadn't, a trait characteristic of much Marxist thinking in the twentieth century. They appeared to accept that a specifically working-class revolution was no longer possible, and accounted for this by means of the distinction between false and true needs, although the latter came to be necessarily expressed in more abstract and universal terms. They thus argued that it has been the dominance of false needs for the products of the culture industry which has securely incorporated the working class into the major institutions of capitalist societies.

In this scenario, true needs are seen as abstract, ahistorical and utopian aspects of human nature, and yet are located in specific, historical and social circumstances. This means that the attempt to distinguish between false and true needs in a way which has empirical relevance is never considered. Similarly, the difficulties involved in trying to define true needs in ahistorical terms are rarely raised. How can needs be defined without reference to their social definition, historical transformation and practical fulfilment (or non-fulfilment)? It would appear to be extremely difficult to define needs in ways which did not refer to their historical, social and cultural characteristics. Even if needs may be generally determined in some manner, they have to be socially constructed in order to be fulfilled or for their non-fulfilment to be recognised. For these and other reasons, it is difficult to find, in the work of the Frankfurt School, the conceptual foundations upon which to build a sociological analysis of popular culture.

Benjamin and the critique of the Frankfurt School

Another way of critically assessing the Frankfurt School's ideas is to look at the writings of Walter Benjamin who for a time was involved in the intellectual activities of the School, but whose cultural analyses appear to differ from those offered by Adorno.¹¹

For a while before the Frankfurt School was exiled from Germany in the 1930s by the Nazis' seizure of power, Benjamin was a member of the Institute, although one of its more marginal intellectual participants. In the mid-1930s he wrote what some regard as one of the most seminal essays on the popular arts in the twentieth century, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1973; originally published in 1936).

In this essay, Benjamin aims to assess the effects of mass production and consumption, and of modern technology, upon the status of the work of art, as well as their implications for contemporary forms of the popular arts or popular culture. Benjamin argues that the work of art, due to its original immersion in religious rituals and ceremonies, acquired a kind of 'aura' which attested to its authority and uniqueness, its singularity in time and space. Since the work of art was placed at the centre of religious practices which culturally legitimated and socially integrated the prevailing order, it gained, through this ritual function, the aura associated with religion.

Once embedded in this fabric of tradition, art can retain its aura independently of its ritual role in religious ceremonies. This process was hastened by the changes associated with the Renaissance which extended the secularisation of the work of art and its subject matter. The focus of artistic attention began to shift from religious to secular subjects. The Renaissance initiated the struggle for artistic autonomy. This struggle concerned the notions that the work of art was unique in its own right, irrespective of any religious considerations, and that being an artist was a unique vocation, guided by a privileged insight into the truths of human existence, a kind of transcendent knowledge founded in the aura of the work of art.

These notions attained their most extreme manifestation in the 'art for art's sake' movement in the mid- to late nineteenth century. This was a reaction to the emergence of capitalist industrialisation and the commercialisation of culture, and the threats they posed to the aura of the work of art. It is these effects of 'the age of mechanical reproduction' with which Benjamin is most concerned.

The example of photography may help us understand Benjamin's argument. He writes:

for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense.

(1973; p. 226)

This is part of a general process which also includes another crucial modern development, foreshadowed by photography – the sound film:

that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art . . . the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition . . . their most powerful agent is the film.

(*ibid.*; p. 223)

In effect, art, as visualised by Adorno, has now 'left the realm of the "beautiful semblance"' (*ibid.*; p. 232).

The point, however, for Benjamin, is that this should not be viewed in a negative manner. The work of art which is reproducible has not only lost its aura and autonomy, but it has become more available to more people. The ritual value of the work of art is replaced by its exhibition value. Not only do film and photography show us things we may never have seen before or realised existed (*ibid.*; p. 239), they also change the conditions in which they are received. 'Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art' (*ibid.*; p. 236) by allowing them to participate in its reception and appreciation. This is so because

the new popular arts are more accessible to more people and afford them a role in their critical evaluation. For example:

painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, and for the movie today. Although this circumstance in itself should not lead one to conclusions about the social role of painting, it does constitute a serious threat as soon as painting . . . is confronted directly by the masses. In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages and at the princely courts up to the end of the eighteenth century, a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously, but by graduated and hierarchized mediation. The change that has come about is an expression of the particular conflict in which painting was implicated by the mechanical reproducibility of paintings. Although painting began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception. Thus the same public which responds in a progressive manner towards a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.

(ibid.; p. 237)

In contrast to painting, the sound film is 'superior' in 'capturing reality', and in giving the masses the opportunity to consider what it has captured. Accordingly, Benjamin notes:

behaviour items shown in a movie can be analysed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage . . . the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action . . . with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. . . . Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself

to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. . . . The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behaviour towards works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation.

(ibid.; pp. 237-238, 240, 241)

Therefore Benjamin stresses the democratic and participatory rather than the authoritarian and repressive potential of contemporary popular culture. This position, despite its striking originality, is, of course, not without problems of its own, which include the relationship between power and the new popular arts as well as an exaggerated technological optimism.¹² But my concern here is not with a detailed assessment of Benjamin's essay. Instead I wish to present it as a critical footnote to the work of the Frankfurt School so as to bring out the critical edge of his analysis of 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'.

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