

## A CRITIQUE OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

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### Abstract

This paper will examine the concept of ‘culture industry’ as it appears in the work of the Frankfurt School theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and the critique of the modern ‘*One- Dimensional Man*’ in the work of the Herbert Marcuse. While Walter Benjamin, another theorist associated with the Frankfurt School, celebrated the arrival of mechanical reproduction in the arts as revolutionary in bringing arts to the masses, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse are in agreement that the new industrial processes to which the arts are subjected have created a ‘culture industry’ that controls individuals. Cultural artefacts have become tools of political subjection. The paper will conclude with a brief study of contemporary radio stations in Delhi to demonstrate the validity of the arguments of these theorists of culture.

The term “culture industry” was coined by the Frankfurt School theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their collaborative book, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Culture industry implies the culture that is mass produced in the technological, capitalist society. For example, literature is sold in paperbacks, e-book versions, pamphlets, magazines, e-journals, etc. The cultural products are alike the factory produced goods since all the soap operas, movies, novels, magazines, radio stations, buildings, etc., are formulaic, repetitive, and appear as clones of other cultural products, and lack spontaneity. The culture industry has realised the Wagnerian concept of ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*,’ that is, the dissolution of all the cultural artefacts into a single work of art. Technological rationality integrates all opposition of culture and reality; it absorbs all alternatives available to the consumers, and thus, achieves social containment of the individuals. Culture in the technological society is no longer about art, it is chiefly an industry that reaps economic benefits by providing consumers with entertainment in the form of mass art. Mass art is cyclical, has recurrent features, and is formulaic. Adorno and Horkheimer note that mass art lays emphasis on the technical detail of the work, instead of the idea that informs the work. Mass art is concerned primarily on the effects, on advertising and publicity. There is no antithesis of the ideas, the consumers are made to identify the fictions of art with real life, as for example, in the contemporary fascination with reality television. Thus, art appears to be no different from the reality. This implies the annihilation of the artistic alienation, the death of the

high culture, the defeat of the libidinal power of negation, and consequently the loss of the ability to create an alternate reality in the form of culture.

Herbert Marcuse, who was a colleague of Adorno and Horkheimer in the Frankfurt School, argues in his book, *One dimensional man* (1964), that the technological culture imposes uniformity on all the aesthetic activities. It controls the individual consciousness. The libidinal energies which are the life force of an individual are channeled into the narrower, sexual urges which are instantly gratified in the taboo-free, apparently all accepting, high capitalist society. The libidinal power of negation, the desire for the unacceptable, which earlier found expression in the arts, is now fulfilled in the narrow form of sexual gratification. Thus, the artist finds no form of sublimation in his work, his urge to negate and rebel against the reality principle is rendered impotent because of the dissolution of the distinction between high culture and reality. High culture opposes and transcends the everyday reality. The artist is alienated from society, and carries a subversive force in his works that has the seeds of transforming the present order of the social reality. However, the technological society harmonises the opposition between high culture and reality. The contemporary man has the resources and the ability to achieve more than the ideal established in the high culture. For instance, a soldier armed with rifles, bombs and nuclear weapons wields more power of destruction than the legendary Greek warrior Achilles, or the Aeneas. In fact, physical prowess is of little value in a technologically advanced form of warfare. I will give another example of how reality has transcended culture - today an average individual can enjoy all the material comforts and experiences that were once only accessible to the upper classes alone - like literature. Thus culture has become de-exoticised. Art which was once a privilege, an illusion, has now entered the marketplace. Marcuse further suggests that art should symbolize ‘the great refusal’ - a protest against the existing reality. Thus, art refutes, ruptures, and forms a different level of reality. But in the modern technological social universe, art doesn’t transcend the reality, it merely confirms with the everyday reality. In the one dimensional society, labour and art, both occupy a single sphere. Sex is combined with work, for example workers whether construction labourers or an MNC worker indulges in sexual fantasies during work hours, it seems to liberate him from the boredom the same, mundane, work routine. The fantasies or engaging in explicit digital or written conversation seem to rescue him from feeling like ‘a cog in the machine.’<sup>1</sup> However, this shows how the private space of the individual is completely invaded by the demands of the workplace. What should have been an after work, private experience, has now integrated with work. Thus work possesses the entire man. The new media, like cell phones, Facebook, Twitter allow the individual to indulge in all forms of social intimacy and antagonism while sitting at the work desk. Thus the worker feels all too satisfied with a technological cultural experience. The individual undergoes ‘mimesis,’ that is, “an immediate identification of the individual with his society.”<sup>2</sup> The technological society blunts the individual’s critical power of reason, the necessary dissent in each one of us, the force which maintains individuality and the refusal to be part of an amorphous social whole. In order to keep the worker subservient to the technological regime, there is the creation of false needs in the

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1. <sup>1</sup> from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Continuum, 1993). (Originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

2. From *One Dimensional Man*, London: Routledge, 1964. Herbert Marcuse

society. The individual works to achieve the alien needs that appear to him necessary for satisfaction and a good living. The mass media, advertising, the big mall culture providing luxury items from around the world, the celebrities endorsing products like the Swiss watches, German cars, American phones, etc., create an insatiable desire in the ordinary individual to possess these items in order to 'live it up.' For example a student wearing a Nike jacket feels himself superior than another wearing a home spun sweater or a cheap replica of branded clothes. The obsession with the price tags, prevents any natural, happy bonding, or even a genuine disdain, or conflict of interests among people. The need to classify people according to their social status reflected by their material possession is an order created by an advanced form of capitalism and is sustained by the mass media. Individuals, governed by their dreams of possessing a particular car or watch someday, are thus caught in the web of the totalitarian forces within capitalism, for the rest of their productive lives.

In the first chapter of *One Dimensional Man*, 'The new forms of control', Marcuse explains that the 'advanced industrial civilization' has the 'capacity to increase and spread comforts, to turn waste into need, and destruction into construction'. The object world becomes an extension of the human self, that is, individuals identify themselves with their material possessions. Individuals thus indentify themselves with their car, villa or flat. In a romantic novel, one finds himself in his true love, or the aim of his life, or a place where he feels that he has found the meaning of his life in. Whereas in the contemporary, 'technological- testosterone driven society' (emphasis my own), he finds himself in the various mass culture advertised selves. Society controls the individual through the production and maintenance of the false needs. And the individual who is all too satisfied in labouring to procure the alien needs exhausts all the necessary instinctual dissent to fight against his subjection to this totalitarian social control. In the political realm, democracy, which as taught in the school text books, is government of the people, constituted by the people and works for the benefit of the people, is in praxis an agent of the capitalist forces. Democracy panders to the demands of the M.N.C's in the garb of economic advancement and modernisation.

In India we see how the tribal land is handed out to the multinational corporations in turn for the heavy funds that help the State parties during electioneering, and in other activities. The opposition in the political realm is a farce as the forces of negation are necessarily absorbed by the society. The world in the wake of Wikileaks shows how in Indian politics – whether it is the U.P.A or the N.D.A - are not divided in their ideology and both, are subservient to the demands of the American state. In the second chapter of *One Dimensional Man*, 'The closing of the political universe', Marcuse claims that in the advanced industrial society, the welfare state seems to serve the same functions as the 'Warfare State'. A central element of the democratic welfare state is 'the concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations.'<sup>3</sup>The modern state economy relies on military pacts (buying nuclear weapons from the advanced countries), the Wall Street stock exchange vis-a-vis the world markets, technological sharing (the Japanese assistance in building the Delhi metro system).

Thus technology over-rides the State powers. The human element and the culture is trapped in the nexus of State and technology. This leads to the absorption of the contraries like 'organised and spontaneous behaviour,' 'preconditioned and free thought'<sup>4</sup> Individuals are

<sup>3</sup> . From *One Dimensional Man*, London: Routledge, 1964. Herbert Marcuse

<sup>4</sup> . Ibid

preconditioned, that is, mentally manipulated to desire whatever the cultural industry produces. Technology seeps into the thoughts, aims, and the innermost being of the individual, until a person is reduced to being ‘a cog in the machine.’<sup>5</sup> Democracy manipulates the needs of the citizens just as the cultural industry controls and manipulates the needs of the consumers. The satisfaction of the industrially generated needs leads to submission of the instinctual need to rebel and refute against the existing order. Flexible social sanctions hinder the struggle of the libido to attain the repressed, the unpermitted, the tabooed. Hence any form of individual or cultural sublimation is impossible in the industrially advanced society where the libido is spent on unnecessary needs and achieves instant sexual gratification.

The radio forms an important part of the culture industry. It contributes to the daily life experience of millions of listeners across the globe who tune into the radio every working day. Primarily, the radio plays songs of various genres which are intended to trigger the emotions of pleasure, excitement, happiness or melancholy, romance, anger, pain, etc., in the listeners. Now, this industry assumes what the listeners may want to hear, and it decides for the audience. Adorno and Horkheimer in their study of “the culture industry” reflect that radio as a democratic medium, authoritatively subjects the listeners to the broadcast programs.

When I listen to the radio, I too feel the absence of any personal control on the kind of entertainment that the radio industry provides me. I will take the example of the radio industry in Delhi. It has 11 radio stations of the frequency- 91.1mhz, 92.7mhz, 93.5mhz, 94.3mhz,95mhz, 98.3mhz, 102.6mhz, 104mhz, 104.8mhz,105.6mhz and 106.4mhz. Each of these stations have names like 98.3 mhz station is called Radio Mirchi, 102.6 is called All India Radio, 104mhz is called Fever, 104.8 is Oye, while the rest are named Red FM, Masala FM , and other synonyms of the words - red and fever. Each station has hour long programs, like A.I.R plays western rock in the afternoons, Hindi ghazals after midnight, and world and national news after every program. The radio channel also airs commercials – usually government campaigns of tax deposition, polio day information, dengue and malaria prevention methods, the need for contraceptives, etc. The other stations mostly air hour long audio of advertisement for private firms- like builders (Ansals, Unitech), insurance policies, car companies, cosmetic brands, latest Bollywood movies, liquor and lingerie brands.

These radio stations have a standardised theme- religious bhajans(hymns) in the morning; fast- paced, mainstream Bollywood music with racy lyrics for the work hours; slow, romantic, yesteryears Hindi tracks in the evening for individuals returning from work, and even slower, soothing ghazals for the post-midnight hours to lull the tired individuals to sleep and to console the lonely, broken-hearted listeners in the quiet of their home space. Thus, the radio industry prepares programs aiming to possess all the time of the listeners. It is easily accessible on the mobile phone, or a car stereo, etc., and needs no monthly subscription. These twenty four hour radio stations pelt out non-stop music, and in between the songs, a radio jockey engages in a one-sided conversation with the listeners, assuming to know their need of the hour, providing them with the latest celebrity gossip, cracking jokes, and sending his/her undying love for the avid listeners, and even giving them relationship advice without being asked for it. As a listener, one has to bear the usually distasteful humour of the radio jockeys, tolerate their puns which border on the vulgar, while waiting patiently for the next track. The song playlist is also selected by the jockeys, and thus the listener is subjected to dictates of the providers and producers of the

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<sup>5</sup> . from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Continuum,1993). (Originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklarung*, 1944). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer

culture industry.

The diversity and number of the radio stations does not guarantee different ways of being entertained, since all too often the rival stations play the same songs, so each station appears as a clone of all the other stations. During the time of cricket tournaments, there are cricket updates after every ten minutes. These stations seek to fulfill the musical, informational, social demands of the listeners. They make the decision for the listeners. Thus, the human agency to decide for oneself, seek answers on one's own is marred. The individual consciousness is controlled by the agents of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer rightly state that 'the man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him.' The individual is a passive consumer who resists nothing, has to do with the available forms of pleasure, and be satisfied. Adorno and Horkheimer also remark that "movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just forms of business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce they call themselves industries." And as a listener and consumer of the radio industry, I cannot agree less with these thinkers.

Thus, the culture industry churns out recurrent, formulaic artefacts which narrow the horizon of individual's struggle to obtain pleasure while giving him the illusion of satisfaction. The industry is all pervasive and has achieved the potency of a God-head in the society. It turns the individuals into passive receptors of its products. The individuals are remote controlled into consuming the unstimulating mass culture. I believe that the first step to emerge out of its dictates is by being aware of its nature. The second step is to be dis-satisfied by its forms of entertainment. And the third and the final step to overcome and defeat the culture industry is to renounce it. Since the culture industry thrives on the T.R.Ps (television rating points) and on mass consumption, it will cripple if the consumers reject it. Thus we can try to give up watching the latest hollywood/ bollywood thriller, abstain from the social networking sites, refuse to work in the M.N.C's, and thus escape from being turned into human machines, and finally overthrow democracy (just as the Arab world, for example, Egypt has overthrown the monarchy in the recent times) since democracy allows this exploitative culture industry to survive and flourish besides causing other evils.

### **Bibliography-**

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