

ADORNO'S CULTURE INDUSTRY: An Anthropological Critique

David Wilmington

This paper is an attempt to examine and to assess Adorno's theory of the "culture industry" as it pertains to his underlying anthropology or account of human life. Ultimately, I believe this is of critical importance to any evaluation of Adorno's relevance and helpfulness for contemporary Christian theological ethics. The expository concern of this essay, contained in Part I, is to summarize Adorno's claims about the culture industry and to show its role within his project. Part II contains the twofold critical concern of this essay: 1) to describe the anthropological assumptions necessary for Adorno to assert that the culture industry can accomplish its vicious task, and 2) to survey Adorno's analysis of jazz as a representative example of how his anthropology distorts his ability to hear one of the "most characteristic forms of mass culture."¹ The concluding, constructive section will present, as a counter-analysis, a theologically informed "Jazz Anthropology" that both refutes Adorno's reading of jazz and offers a better model for understanding key aspects of human life.

¹ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, J.M. Bernstein, ed., (London: Routledge, 1991), 60.

My ultimate goal in this paper is to argue that, as we see in his analysis of jazz, the anthropological assumptions and commitments underlying Adorno's sweeping theory of the culture industry cause him to mis-hear, misunderstand, and mis-diagnose critical aspects of the society he hopes to free.

I. ADORNO'S DIABOLUS EX MACHINA: THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Theodor Adorno's account of the "culture industry" is, arguably, the most influential diagnosis, analysis, and critique of modern capitalist society and culture of the 20th century. His key assertions concerning the systemic effects of capitalist theory (exchange value, commodification fetish) in societies based upon capitalism are regularly echoed in both academic and popular opinion on the current state of affairs in western society. Although the basic elements of his assertion seem to have been in place as early as the late 1930s,² the core of his account of the culture industry comes in 1944 and 1947, in writing that either appears in or builds off of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Adorno's chapter on the culture industry serves as a kind of case study within the larger argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Where the preceding chapters dealt primarily with a broadly historical or genealogical statement about the dialectic between myth and enlightenment, a statement which was itself based on broad sociological claims and categories, Adorno presents his culture industry thesis in an attempt to describe the particularly modern apparatus responsible for enforcing a frozen moment of the dialectic. As J.M. Bernstein points out, Adorno and Horkheimer, though still solidly Marxists, had already found it necessary to diverge from the traditional Marxist claims about the inevitable "progress"

² J.M. Bernstein, "Introduction," in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, J.M. Bernstein, ed., (London: Routledge, 1991), 2 and 4.

beyond the crisis created by industrial capitalism.³ The basic dynamic of the relationship between myth and enlightenment, though rooted in the antagonistic relationship between human thinking and nature, seems to have been captured and re-inscribed in a much tighter “loop” in the society Adorno observes and attempts to diagnose in the 1940s.

Where the history of enlightenment, whose pre-history is seen already in *The Odyssey*, stretched over more than two thousand years, the modern capitalist industrial system has somehow managed to harness the dynamic of the dialectic for its own purposes, and, like a biological or digital virus, to reproduce its own genetic code in such rapid cycles that one can no longer speak of, or even discern, the actual stages of the dialectic. Every stage is now doomed to exhibit and to reproduce the self-perpetuating characteristics of the virus. Under the conditions of the modern industrial state, enlightenment and myth roll into each other so quickly, in a tightly orchestrated parody of all preceding human history, that the dialectic now issues in a new form of mastery—a tyrannical twisting of desire and the destruction of thought; power that eclipses even the previous mechanisms of economic and political systems.

The question arises then—what accounts for the success and hegemonic stability of the modern, pathological variant of the dialectic that Adorno and Horkheimer describe in the preceding chapters? What kinds of creatures does the culture industry control? In the thesis of the culture industry, Adorno finds a multi-layered mechanism capable of imposing a system so unified and unrelentingly unifying that unity must be both its ontological basis and its telos. However, as I will discuss below, the theory of the culture industry itself proceeds from and is guided by certain anthropological assumptions. Although this section of the study is broadly “expository,” it may better be described as a

³ Bernstein, 3.

“guided close reading” of the chapter on the culture industry: the driving question concerning anthropology informs and guides my attempt to draw out the stages and bases of Adorno’s presentation of the culture industry thesis.

A. The Superstructure

Dialectic of Enlightenment puts forward a theory of enlightenment as a cyclical dynamic initiated by the necessity for humans to separate themselves from nature.⁴ This drive for separation leads to efforts to master nature, which in turn opens up the possibility for (or perhaps guarantees) alienation from nature. Paradoxically, perhaps, this ties enlightenment precisely to nature in that the whole concept of enlightenment *as such* is forever defined by its distance from key aspects of natural life. Because of the role of myth in earlier engagements with nature, in which humans attempted to influence nature without claims to absolute control and mastery—by shamanistic imitation, for example—the modern enlightenment intentionally set itself against myth in an attempt to sever ties with anything that kept humanity linked to nature. Reason, reduced to instrumental thinking that grasps at control and mastery, became a self-protecting totality, and enlightenment came to be defined by whatever functions of reason ensured the separation from myth and the progress of control.⁵

⁴ For more thorough summaries of the broad argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and of the introductory assertions of the chapter “The Concept of Enlightenment” in particular, see Lambert Zuidervaart, “Alienated Masterpiece: Adorno’s Contribution to a Transformative Social Theory,” in *After Modernity: Secularity, Globalization & the Re-Enchantment of the World*, Ed. James K. A. Smith, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 106-114.

⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Transl. Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). The first sections of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (abbreviated in footnotes hereafter as *DE*) go on to discuss how this only serves to link enlightenment to nature even further, wrapping back around again to myth - but this aspect of the analysis goes beyond my focus here.

With this historical and conceptual understanding of enlightenment's dialectic in mind, we may observe that Adorno spends most of his time discussing the higher levels of the entire structure. In these regions, he observes the effects on people—the occupants of cities, consumers, watchers of film and TV, radio listeners—caused by the products of the culture industry, while occasionally descending to touch (briefly) on the underlying cause of the culture industry. It is a deeper structure, then, which actually provides the various but interlocking cogs visible in the machinery of the culture industry.

J.M. Bernstein notes that the chapter on the culture industry is “even more fragmentary” than the already fragmented whole that makes up *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁶ While this is true—Adorno's rejection of a linear argument moving through necessary steps of assertion and proof is never clearer—it is still illuminating to place side-by-side the elements he chose as building blocks for his own fragmentary thesis. The first major section establishes unity as the chief characteristic and goal of the culture industry. The apparent chaos of culture in the late 1940s was in fact merely the superficial symptom of a virus that infects everything with sameness. Technology is simultaneously the excuse for and the means of producing a hegemony of re-production. This is an important key to the success of a system that enforces sameness via the appearance of offering a multitude of differences in the form of choices.

In a brief reference to the “schematism” of Kantian epistemology, Adorno notes that the culture industry is not the root of the problem—it is

⁶ J.M. Bernstein, “Introduction,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, J.M. Bernstein (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1991), 7. Bernstein is quoting introductory material from the 1973 Cumming translation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Throughout my exposition of *DE* in Part I of this paper, I have summarized Adorno's argument in sections corresponding to the one-line breaks supplied in the Noerr/Jephcott edition. For example, pp. 94-98 present the opening claims regarding false distinctions and difference, pp. 120-124 present claims concerning the destruction of tragedy via social control, and so on. Obviously, there are many areas of overlap between these sections, but, as I hope is clear, the editors have presented the text in a way that allows us to see the major focal areas of Adorno's account.

merely operating via the rules of an even more fundamental schema. In the next section I will return to Adorno's crucial invocation of Kant, but it is sufficient for this overview to note that when Adorno locates the culture industry within his broadest view, he understands it in epistemological terms: "The whole world passes through the filter of the culture industry."⁷ This filter enforces sameness even via the material artifacts of culture; the products themselves, by virtue of their own reproducibility, stamp everyday existence, including language, with the imprint of the fundamental schema and call it "natural."⁸ Since Adorno defines artistic transcendence as moments of "discrepancy"—seeing harmony as a "questionable unity of form and content" and a "passionate striving for identity"—the regularity of the false art of the culture industry is no different than any other mechanically reproduced product.⁹ Whatever the language of style, genre, technique, and idiom may once have contributed to the understanding of real art, those categories now serve only to help with the administration and control of a unified culture of non-culture.

He next turns his attention to the ways in which the capitalist production and market mechanisms can be seen working throughout the systems of control operative within the "superstructure" of style and technology. All so-called entertainment offers only the repetition and prolongation of work. It is in this context that Adorno offers his famous invective against the parody of laughter, for only a parody of reconciliation or joy is capable under the conditions of capitalism. Even "pure amusement" and "mindless artistry" are forced to justify themselves according to "organizational reason": even the purposeless and

⁷ *DE*, 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103. Here, as in most other cases where Adorno discusses "identity," he has in mind the attempt to dissolve differences into a single (false) identity. Concerning his comments on harmony, I address this strange misunderstanding below.

meaningless must either be eradicated or intellectualized into a form or context that reproduces the untruth of the product called "meaning."¹⁰

Adorno next addresses the dynamics of entertainment and amusement as actually oriented to agreement and powerlessness. Because the culture industry claims to concern itself with what people want while simultaneously seeking to annul people as thinking subjects, life within the culture industry is a life spent under the thrall of total deception.¹¹ Once they cease to be thinking subjects, human beings function almost like commodified objects—even to the extent that, as in Adorno's interpretation of exchange value, "everyone amounts only to those qualities by which he or she can replace everyone else . . . [a]s individuals they are absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness."¹²

Perverse Coincidences of Opposites

With this presupposition about total commodification in mind, Adorno's assertions about the destructive influence of the culture industry grow even more dire. He identifies several possible objections which might seem to undercut his description of an already-dominant, all-encompassing system, and, one by one, asserts that any seemingly contradictory characteristic of modern life is in fact already absorbed by, and made to serve, the system. "Chance and planning become identical" because "those in control" can raise up any of the interchangeable masses to, for example, win a competition or to become an engineer. The illusion of spontaneity and contingency serves to disguise "the web of transactions and measures into which life has been transformed," but

¹⁰ Ibid., 114-115.

¹¹ *DE*, 115-116.

¹² Ibid., 117.

actual existence is inscribed in a formula which accounts for all variables.¹³ Accordingly, even the invocation of nature over against the industrial serves merely to underwrite the industry: “Nature, in being presented by society’s control mechanism as the healing antithesis of society, is itself absorbed into that incurable society and sold off.”¹⁴

So complete is the deception that Adorno, in one of his most provocative assertions, finds that the merely formal freedom of the present (i.e., “late capitalism”) is a prison, anticipated by the concentration camp, but now guarded by “a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other relationships which amount to the most sensitive instrument of social control.”¹⁵ This is one of the highest levels of the superstructure of society—a realm in which even social welfare and caregiving are merely masks for a system concerned only with increasing production and with bringing “the last private impulse under social control.”

Even tragedies cannot provide the jolt necessary to disrupt the control of such a society. The tragic is recognized, but rather than allowing it to challenge the totalizing claims of the culture industry, the system appropriates tragedy as either an unavoidable anomaly (and proof that the truth is not glossed over) or as a childish version of just punishment for non-conformity.¹⁶ In fact, by naming a category of routine events “tragic,” or rather by inscribing tragic events into the routine, the culture industry disguises the evidence of its own failure by inscribing it as yet another variable in the formula: “Even the worst outcome . . . still confirms the established order and corrupts tragedy.”¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *DE*, 119.

¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶ Ibid., 121-122.

¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

Where the substance of tragedy was once made up of “the antithesis between individual and society,” such that it (quoting Nietzsche here) “glorified ‘courage and freedom of feeling in face of a mighty foe, sublime adversity,’” modern tragedy is diluted “in the void of the false identity of society and subject”—a demonic and fascist integration forced upon the subjects of “those in command,” that is, the subject victims of capitalist monopoly.¹⁸ The image of this void in which the subject and society are flattened together in a false identity sets the scene for the final two sections of the chapter on the culture industry, in which Adorno presents the effects on the notions of the self, individuality, and—ultimately and most insidiously—language.

One false individualism for all

Returning explicitly to the notion of commodification as the tool for the manipulative twisting of otherwise legitimate goods, Adorno next addresses “pseudoindividuality” as the primary mode of selfhood promoted by the culture industry. Blaming the “class-determined form of self-preservation” for limiting individuation to “the level of mere species being,” Adorno lashes out at a pseudoindividuality founded upon a “socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural.” Superficial effects and gimmick-based caricatures are the substance of such “individuality,” and it could never have been otherwise given the essential sameness enforced at the deepest structure of society. In a sentence typical of his most damning assertions, Adorno diagnoses a closed system, impenetrable because of its overreaching economic theory: “Every bourgeois character expressed the same thing, even and especially when deviating from it: the harshness of competitive society.” When the competitiveness of the market reduces individuation to mere self-serving

¹⁸ *DE*, 124. Adorno replaced “monopoly” with “those in command” in the 1947 revision.

individualism, otherwise positive developments like technology are forced to serve the machines of the culture industry and its underlying schema.¹⁹

Adorno's subsequent equation (or close approximation) of the typical citizens in western capitalist society with Nazis—they “are virtually already Nazis”—touches upon a key assertion.²⁰ For Adorno, fascism and western democratic industrial capitalism are in their essences the same. The genocidal, openly militaristic imperialism of Germany under National Socialism is only superficially different from—and essentially no worse than—the subtly manipulative systems of the seemingly free and democratic west.²¹ As Stephen Crook puts it, Adorno's analysis leads him to conclude that “the rantings of a [anti-Semitic preacher] Martin Luther Thomas or a Hitler play on the same regressed character structure as do soap operas and astrology columns. The rhetoric of fascist propaganda is simply a less censored version of the ubiquitous rhetoric of the culture industry.”²² Once again, we see that the culture industry itself merely serves to package, distribute, and endlessly recreate the poison produced in the heart of the society.

Pseudoindividuality promises individuation via individuality, but the true message, the elevation of imitation—of the film hero himself and of the mode of production that supplies him to the public—helps to accomplish the destruction

¹⁹ *DE*, 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ This claim, which today is ubiquitous in many academic and political circles, may have been first articulated by Adorno here in 1944 – at least in the context of a politico-philosophical analysis of culture. In 1950, Adorno suggested and described a psychological basis for this phenomenon in *The Authoritarian Personality*. More recent commentators, such as Slavoj Žižek, for example, continue to echo Adorno's thesis about violent atrocities being representative, rather than anomalous, of the underlying character of both fascism and western democratic capitalism.

²² Stephen Crook, “Introduction,” *Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 14. See his summary of Adorno's explanation of the relationship between fascism and violence (9).

of human thought, and of any hope that the system might be beaten. “[T]he fact that the concept of human life ever existed is already forgotten,” Adorno claims, in “the synthetically manufactured physiognomies of today.”²³ Advertising and the commodification of beauty and art stamp the dominance of imitation on everything because of the underlying schema—the economic substructure which governs absolutely and absolutely governs every aspect of the superstructures of society—such that it rules culture, politics, and even the potential for human thought.

This concluding section of the chapter on the culture industry builds in intensity precisely as it returns again and again to a parallel critiques of, and equivocating comparisons between, life under Hitler’s Reich and life under western capitalism. The medium is the message: the radio broadcast of a symphony is not substantively different from the broadcast of a Hitler speech. As art is destroyed, so too does culture-as-commodity impose the evil of the law of exchange even into language, so that no formulation of thought—even that directed toward resistance—can escape serving the system.²⁴ Like the special effects, tricks, and “montage character” of film and the culture industry as a whole, language is only allowed “to designate something and not to mean it.” Words are reduced to their exchange value, just as the cinematic representation of time and action passing in a montage are merely correlations to an event or events.²⁵ Language becomes mere data that is either suspicious or useless when it attempts to provide anything more than mere data.

Since this anemic version of language is easily manipulated by means of propagandistic usage or fashionable semantic fads (perhaps like the current “memes”), distributed by “advertising bosses” or by German fascists, both

²³ *DE*, 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁵ *DE*, 132-133.

totalitarians, Adorno finds that “countless people” essentially speak, and therefore think, in the linguistic equivalents of brand names. The language and gestures common to society are “more deeply permeated by the patterns of the culture industry than ever before, in nuances still beyond the reach of experimentation.”²⁶ Freedom is “freedom to be the same,” and the self becomes “an apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry.”²⁷

B. The Ground(ing) Floor: The Schema

How does this invincible system work and ensure its unwavering power? Recall my earlier comments about Adorno’s invocation of the Kantian “schema,” which categorizes raw data for processing by human reason. In this key passage, Adorno identifies the germ of the culture industry’s enforced sameness as that which has taken the place of Kant’s “secret mechanism within the psyche” that preforms “immediate data to fit them into the system of pure reason.”²⁸ Where this Kantian notion of an inner schematization is still active, in that the subject itself relates the data to concepts, the influence of the culture industry preempts all classification by the consumer herself by pre-classifying everything. This is not merely a question of broadcasting or enforcing a *system* of classification. In some way, “the schematicism of production” itself pre-classifies all products of the culture industry. The schema, the classification, somehow *inheres* in the products because they have been created under the material conditions of industrial capitalism. This manipulated and manipulating schema is a modern

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁸ *DE*, 98.

mechanism which preempts the work of the relatively active mechanism posited by Kantian epistemology.²⁹

Here Adorno makes a key claim which reveals his most basic diagnosis: the planning of this mechanism “is in fact imposed on the industry by the inertia of a society irrational . . . and this calamitous tendency, in passing through the agencies of business [monopolistic agencies] takes on the shrewd intentionality peculiar to them.”³⁰ The suppliers or producers of the culture industry and the culture industry itself are merely effects of a deeper structure. For this tighter focus on Adorno's use of the Kantian “schema,” we may look not only to the sections of *Dialectic* in which he addresses it directly, but also to an essay written as “a continuation of the ‘Culture Industry’ chapter” of the *Dialectic*. Entitled “The Schema of Mass Culture,” the essay pushes even further Adorno's claims about the extent to which all experience, thought, and behavior is preformed, and therefore controlled, by the epistemological schema underlying the culture industry.³¹

The primary characteristic operative in the “pre-digestive” function of the schema is a commercial commodification of all experience—intelligible and sensory. Since this structure is at the foundation of all society, deeper than the culture industry itself, Adorno claims that even the qualities and tendencies which seem to contradict his diagnostic analysis are actually part of the system. For example, the virtue of adaptation, trumpeted as a hallmark of freedom in industrial society, in fact serves to destroy all traces of real conflict. Via the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ In “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, J.M. Bernstein (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1991), 85, Adorno explains that “mass culture” was the word used in the original drafts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He and Horkheimer changed this to “culture industry” in order to deny aid to the supporters of mass culture who claimed that their “culture” arose from the “masses” themselves.

“adaptive character” of the epistemological schema itself, mass culture has a “monopolistic filter which protects it from any external rays of influence which have not already been safely accommodated within its reified schema.”³² This claim requires serious attention, for a similar logic underlies one of Adorno’s most frequently deployed, and most influential, argumentative tactics: the enlistment of seemingly contradictory phenomena as evidence in support of his claims.

In this first example, Adorno describes adaptation, normally understood as a process of recognition and change in response to difference, as a tool for ensuring sameness which obviates the possibility of all real conflict. He describes a hegemonic, reflexive drive to force a synthesis or reconciliation that undercuts the potentially truth-serving function of real contradiction.³³ It is a “false reconciliation, the absorption of every negative counter-instance by an omnipotent reality, the elimination of dissonance in the bad totality.”³⁴ Accordingly, those living in mass culture suffer from the delusion that they are involved in constant engagement with, and enlightened accommodation to, difference—while both the terms of engagement and accommodation are actually predetermined by the schema. Characteristically, Adorno points to the realm of art in order to demonstrate these dynamics: the experience of art, an activity reliant upon the recognition of real difference and conflict,³⁵ has been supplanted by the evaluation of art in the form of information.

Of course, the culture industry is the natural conduit through which information flows, and the qualities of each department—whether music, film,

³² “The Schema of Mass Culture,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, J.M. Bernstein (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1991), 53-84. 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴ “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

education, et. al.—serve to add an additional layer of manipulation via the kind of sameness and repetition peculiar to each. At its root in the schema, however, it is the preformation of epistemology into easily commodifiable units. Here is the fundamental for which the culture industry is a faithful overtone: thought is starved of anything not reduced to the quanta of the marketplace. The character of this data is governed by “the iron law that the information in question shall never touch the essential, shall never degenerate into thought.”³⁶

(Pseudo) Knowledge Is (Enslaving) Power

Adorno's explanation of the enforcement of this law reveals that the schema itself originates in the rule of the monopoly—his choice of epithets in 1944 for industrial capitalism.³⁷ Where the supply and promotion of traditional commodities might delude people into assuming that value inhered in an object, the system Adorno attempts to diagnose limits people to finding value *only* in the pre-commodified information, whose standards of “accuracy” (itself a category imposed for the purposes of control) can be manipulated to oppose any thought.³⁸ The information allowed by the system informs us only about mass culture itself: it is “a system of signals that signals itself.”³⁹ Since the system holding the reins of every aspect of society is the system of industrial capitalism, it is no surprise to find an endless desire for information—spurred on even at the self-identified “popular level” by the social need to be in-the-know, to gain the prestige of being “well-informed.”

³⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁷ See Editor's notes at end of *DE* for list of and explanation of changes between 1944 and 1947 editions.

³⁸ “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

This endless desire expresses itself in a kind of frantic curiosity, a link for which Adorno finds qualified support in Heidegger. Although agreeing with him that this kind of curiosity is the “cement of mass activity” and reflects a fundamental “fallenness,” Adorno rejects forcefully Heidegger’s assertion that it is a quality of man as such. This assertion is “an injustice” that virtually makes “the victim responsible rather than the jail-keeper.”⁴⁰ In Adorno’s metaphor, the system of industrial capitalism is the jail-keeper, responsible for the imprisoning “anthropological sediment of that monopolistic compulsion to handle, to manipulate, to absorb everything, the inability to leave anything beyond itself untouched.”⁴¹ Via the tool of the culture industry, the underlying schema enforced by capitalism corrupts curiosity, infecting it with a blindly passionate intensity, a fetish that destroys what value there may be in having more information. The actual data, so anxiously craved, becomes irrelevant for anything essential—for thought—because the consumer of information is nothing more than a well-informed buyer, scouring the market for a good deal.⁴²

Adorno also offers an account of the mechanism by which the schema of mass culture invalidates, and therefore renders impotent, any information that might allow for thought. Once information is defined solely as data, as “facts” that can be easily arranged in order to be grasped quickly, as that which can be “recognized, subsumed and verified,” everything in tension with that schema must—by definition—be rejected “as idiocy or ideology, as subjective in the derogatory sense.”⁴³ This is consistent with one of the introductory assessments of enlightenment itself from *Dialectic*. Adorno—here as secondary author and editor to Horkheimer—stresses the effects of the “mathematized world” created

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Ibid. This reading of curiosity would, no doubt, benefit from a comparison and contrast with Augustine’s comments on *curiositas* in, among other places, *Confessions*.

⁴² “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

⁴³ Ibid., 73-74.

by enlightenment. Just as “mathematics made thought into a thing—a tool,” so the schema that harnesses mathematical reasoning for the purpose of twisting every aspect of life into a market exchange “makes souls into things.”⁴⁴

II. THE UNDERLYING ANTHROPOLOGY?

In light of what Adorno claims about the culture industry—the reasons for its irresistible effectiveness and suffocating results—what kind of people must these be that they can be so utterly enslaved by the culture industry? What standard lies behind Adorno’s diagnosis of a truly vicious people—those of the masses who love the bad generally and love precisely that which is bad for human life? What account of human life or anthropology supports such an explanation?

Adorno’s characterization of the *people* who make up “the masses” is consistent throughout his analysis of the culture industry. For the most part, “plain persons” appear in a light similar to the following: “Capitalist production hems [the masses] them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them. However, just as the ruled have always taken the morality dispensed to them by the rulers more seriously than the rulers themselves, the defrauded masses today cling to the myth of success still more ardently than the successful.” To Adorno, it is precisely in and because of their debased and pathetic condition as the ceaselessly abused that the victims of the culture industry have learned to *love* Big Culture. Just as Winston Smith learns to love Big Brother via merciless torture, Adorno claims that the “pernicious love of the common people for the harm done to them outstrips even the cunning of the authorities.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *DE*, 19, 21.

⁴⁵ *DE*, 106.

Humans subjected to the culture industry are slaves who cannot even think without reinforcing their slavery; they are virtually Nazis already; they are victims of torture who love their tormenters *because of* the harm done to them; they are individuals whose individuality is an enslaving illusion forced upon them by a homogenizing machine; they take pride in that which debases them; they, especially Americans, know themselves as, and judge themselves by, nothing but their own market value and “find out who they are from how they fare in the capitalist economy.”⁴⁶ Even—or maybe especially!—those who attempt to dissent or rebel merely underwrite the system by playing within its rules.

At the core of Adorno’s account of the human is a highly nuanced deployment of a species of Marxian materialism in every context. Whether criticizing theology or positivism or the film industry, Adorno examines everything in terms of its attentiveness to, or mediation of, material historical conditions. For the effect this has on his account of human life, we may consider Adorno and Horkheimer’s defense of the dialectic of Hegel’s “determinate negation” in the chapter “The Concept of Enlightenment.” Determinate negation

does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth. Language thereby becomes more than a system of signs.⁴⁷

Rescued from Hegel’s absolutizing and totalizing error, therefore, true dialectic is its own check on its own power, and the result is truth. However, we must ask which truth will necessarily wind up as the recipient of dialectic’s power. It seems that the material conditions out of which this dialectic emerges

⁴⁶ *DE*, 175. The number of possible counter-examples here is so staggering that one must wonder whether Adorno was at all serious with this claim.

⁴⁷ *DE*, 18.

would, in fact, predetermine what it recognizes as the truth to which it would hand over power. Despite the claim that no absolute idea stands behind his critique of the culture industry's representations, Adorno's definitions (of human flourishing and *telos*, especially) and understanding of human dynamics (epistemology, for example) are clearly guided by standards or ideals supplied to him by his own fundamental commitments: the definitions and dynamics of Marxist thought. The nature of Adorno's "truth" is such that it is simply not a part of, nor can it be recognized in or engage with, the capitalist society of the modern west.

Of course, Freud also plays an enormous role in Adorno's reading of a socio-politico-economic pathology which seizes control of the most basic psychological processes and structures. While I cannot fully address Adorno's debts either to Freud or to Marx, one need only consider the fascinating overlap between the description of the schema of the culture industry and the theories of false consciousness, sublimation, sadism and masochism, and projection (among many others) in order to realize the importance of both theorists. Although Freud is crucial to understanding the psychological dynamics at work, Marx looms largest in the discussion of the culture industry because of his influence on Adorno's claims about the schema controlling the superstructures at the societal level. Christopher Craig Brittain, in his very sympathetic reading in *Adorno and Theology*, is right to suggest that for Adorno, the goal of all critique—even a critique of Marxian materialism itself—is to serve a focus on “concrete social reality and the emancipatory goals of Marxism” even while emphasizing “how difficult it is to get to the bottom of this social ‘concreteness.’”⁴⁸

So historical materialism, the primacy of the socio-economic/political material conditions, is the given standard. While this does not cause a problem

⁴⁸ Christopher Craig Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 31.

in itself—every critique must have its normative standpoints—Adorno applies his standard in such a way that only something completely outside the industrial capitalist “current conditions” could even allow the possibility of true thought and freedom. In effect, Adorno surreptitiously advocates for his ideal—as much as he rejects the charge of utopianism—by “pathologizing” the alternative that was already winning the day by the mid-1940s.

Mere Shades: Life as death

The anthropology underlying Adorno’s analysis and critique provides him with mere shades as humans: the non-incarnate and bloodthirsty simulacra of humans Odysseus encounters in the Land of the Dead. Homer imagined this as the state of the masses of the dead; Adorno accepts this half- or non-life as the state of the masses of the living. Without a conceptually coherent account of transcendence, Adorno is trapped in a hermeneutical spiral—an infernal vision where even genuinely utopic hopes cannot escape, on the one hand, the potential for evil (seen in whichever genius demons assembled and maintain the conditions for capitalism), and on the other hand, the soulless, *imago*-less sheep that make up the vast masses of humanity.

The reason for his entrapment helps us see the most important limitation in Adorno’s critique: because of his definition of humanity and of truth, and his commitment to a brand of materialism as the standard against which he judges everything, he must see key elements of human flourishing, and even of human thought, as completely contingent upon a social order. This is not a question of identifying better or worse social orders—for Adorno, the material conditions under capitalism create a system under which human flourishing and life itself are not possible. Although he refuses to adequately describe an alternative social order, the standards against which he judges and condemns “current conditions” adhere within rigid parameters.

Where he rightly diagnoses a strain of anti-mythological enlightenment thinking that reduces truth to the quanta of mathematics, he cannot escape the quanta of his own preordered formulae—a system of categories and dynamics in which human life is utterly bound to the material realities of economic and political power. Himself afraid of the “myth” of the non-material transcendent, Adorno binds truth to the earth and explains away any account of genuinely transcendent truth as another system-underwriting cog in the machine. Although more of the truth may one day be revealed under the right (economic/political) conditions, it is already—and has always been—present, susceptible to discovery in material reality. The materialist schema at the core of his epistemology and anthropology is at least as effective a jail-keeper as industrial capitalism: it makes humans entirely responsible for freeing up the truth (or at least more of it) because there is no truth that is beyond humanity.

Ultimately, Adorno cannot trust the human because he cannot give an account of human life that includes anything other than the already-present. All that can possibly change (within Adorno's anti-transcendent materialist cosmology) is only what already is within humanity. Thus the boundaries to Adorno's undefined eschaton are purely human: capitalism, industry, class, etc. In the absence of something like the Christian claim of Incarnational transcendence—something that is both materially present in history and really transcendent of all human experience and language—he is left with a notion of life enslaved to the materially present. He must hinge his critique of the closed system of the culture industry upon a standard of truth, excellence, freedom, etc., that exists in a place Totally Other than anything within the system.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ On this topic, see a fascinating article by Rudolf J. Siebert, “The Critical Theory of Society: The Longing for the Totally Other,” *Critical Sociology*, 2005, 31: 57-113. Siebert tracks, approvingly, the need for transcendence as such (i.e. whatever gives the mere possibility of transcendence) in critical theory over against Hegel's appropriation of Christianity as “the religion of freedom” (82). In doing so, I believe Siebert provides an excellent resource for a

But since even this Totally Other must already be entirely (and paradoxically) contained within the human, the Other must be merely the unrealized potential of the human. In other words, Adorno's "Totally Other" is merely a future and developed part of the "Same." When the Apostle Paul can cry out from within his own "closed system" of doing what he does not want to do and failing to do what he wants, he can give an account of why the standard against which he judges himself is good: the standard is not human. Similarly, when he cries out, much as Adorno tries to cry out, "Who can deliver me from this body of death?" Paul does so with both real despair and real hope—the question is, after all, "rhetorical" and directed at the transcendent source of the standard. By limiting himself to the merely material, Adorno destroys the human by limiting it to the merely human. By limiting himself to the merely human, Adorno destroys the hope he seeks to stimulate.

III. WHY THEODOR CAN'T SWING: A JAZZ CRITIQUE OF ADORNO'S ANTHROPOLOGY⁵⁰

In this final section, I offer a tentative analysis of what I believe could have been an opportunity for Adorno to encounter a cultural phenomenon capable of guiding him to a more fruitful analysis of culture. I suggest that the underlying anthropology explored above predetermined Adorno's inability to hear jazz music as anything but a typical product of the culture industry. It is

larger critique of Adorno's so-called turn to "negative theology" as a desperate, but ultimately incoherent, grasping at something outside his own totalizing system. Needless to say, this critique goes far beyond the scope of the current study.

⁵⁰ I do not treat here Adorno's characterization of jazz as, quoting Nietzsche, "stylized barbarism" (*DE*, 101), nor his theories about the significance of jazz as dance music ("On Jazz," 170-171), nor his some of his wilder assertions about the socially unconformed element of jazz, i.e. the androgynous or bisexual voices of the instruments: "In undermining genital sexuality, the mechanism of mutilation and integration undermines the primary gender differences" ("On Jazz," 173.) See "On Jazz," in *Night Music*, Rolf Tiedemann, Ed., (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 118-176.

important to recognize that jazz was the target of special scorn from Adorno. In essays and books that span his entire career, he attacks jazz, calling it, as noted above, one of the two most characteristic products of the culture industry. For Adorno, then, jazz is an exemplary representative of that which destroys even the possibility of human thought, freedom, and progress. As James Buhler noted in a substantial 2006 essay, many, if not most, of Adorno's supporters have grown increasingly nervous, confused, and apologetic about this topic. Although I am in agreement with Buhler that these supporters have apologized for or defended Adorno for the wrong reasons, I disagree with Buhler's defense of Adorno's position as ideologically consistent in its demand that jazz should perform critique (as defined by Adorno).⁵¹

In the first place, Adorno offers a bad musical analysis in which he associates jazz with the superficial effects and false uniqueness characteristic of the products of the culture industry. Thus, when he hears the rhythmic innovation of jazz, which he treats as mere syncopation, he hears it as a superficial variation which seeks only to distract us from the unrelenting unity of the "underlying beat." Lost here is any kind of awareness that the "underlying beat" is itself dynamic—at the very least, it swings, and all great jazz musicians swing differently—regardless of whether one associates the underlying beat with drummers or bass players.⁵² But to Adorno, "the underlying beat" is a stand-in for the unifying sameness of industrial production methods. He writes about jazz rhythm as if an electronic metronome could fulfill the same function.

⁵¹ James Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz," in *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, Berthold Hoeckner, ed., (New York: Routledge, 2006), 131-150. "Jazz, his critique tells us, cannot be redeemed through facile appeals to syncopation, improvisation, spontaneity, and so forth; we must listen instead for the ironic sound of critique, for the blue note that mourns the loss of the individual to the collective" (150).

⁵² Consider the vast differences among the "underlying beats" of drummers Zutty Singleton, Jo Jones, Max Roach, Elvin Jones, and Tony Williams, or of bass players Jimmy Blanton, Charles Mingus, Ray Brown, and Christian McBride.

Furthermore, when Adorno does address the phenomenon of swing, the basic rhythmic propulsion of all jazz, in the lead voice or melody as the mere effect of “syncopation,” he theorizes it into something unrecognizable to the actual practice of performing (or listening to) jazz music. According to Adorno, syncopation “mocks the act of stumbling while elevating it to the norm,” an assessment in line with his claim that jazz “[f]undamentally. . . present[s] the self-mockery of man.” From this analysis he concludes that jazz aids the culture industry’s goal of forcing everyone to “show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power that beats them.”⁵³

Aside from his incredibly reductionist account of swing as mere syncopation, it is hard to determine just what Adorno is talking about. Swing, as much as it can be defined in the terms and notation of Western tradition, is much closer to a series of eighth-note triplets, in which the first two notes are tied together, than it is to basic syncopation. Furthermore, Adorno is deaf to the complex, multi-layered and subtle cross-rhythms that result from the interplay of these implied triple meters within “normal,” 4/4 time. These are far from superficial “effects.” Other than badly performed jazz or novelty pieces from the 1920s or 1930s, the comparison of the varied rhythmic fluidity of swing to stumbling is simply absurd—any knowledgeable jazz fan could rattle off a list of names that prove Adorno wrong (Louis Armstrong, Ben Webster, Stan Getz, Miles Davis, etc.).

⁵³ *DE*, 123-124.

*Freedom in the Groove*⁵⁴

There is much more to be said about the deafness to the purely musical components of jazz, but I will move now to some of the more theoretical aspects of Adorno's critique. He rejects entirely the notion that jazz improvisation is an expression of real individuality—or even real improvisation itself. Comparing it to the false individuality of the carefully groomed and presented film star, Adorno refers to the “*standardized* improvisation in jazz,” in which “pseudoindividuality reigns.”⁵⁵ Similarly, he rejects the notion that the improvisational character of all jazz, or the importance of improvised solos, negates his claim that all jazz reiterates a merciless drive to unity and conformity. Since some of jazz is written down, and since the solos continue to use the repeated harmonic framework of the composition, Adorno sees improvisation as yet another distracting and superficial effect that disguises the commodifying sameness of every industrial product.

As Robert Witkin notes, Adorno finds that the mere presence of a somewhat fixed harmonic framework underlying improvisation is proof that jazz provides “the quintessential examples of pseudo-individualization,” pseudo-spontaneity, pseudo-safety, and pseudo-freedom.⁵⁶ To Adorno, entirely new melodies, rhythmic sub- and superstructures, tonalities, and the frequent use of alternate harmonic relationships are merely superficial distractions—momentary substitutions “for the underlying schema that can always be perceived behind

⁵⁴ My analysis in this section is deeply indebted to Jeremy Begbie's *Theology, Music and Time*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000). My gestures toward a competing “Jazz Anthropology” are inspired by reading Begbie's chapter “Liberating Constraint” through the writing of Albert Murray. See *Stompin' the Blues*, (New York: Da Capo, 1976), *The Omni-Americans*, (New York: Da Capo, 1970), and *The Blue Devils of Nada*, (New York: Vintage, 1997).

⁵⁵ *DE*, 124-125.

⁵⁶ Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 105. In all of my citations to Witkin, he is drawing from Adorno's essays “On Jazz,” and “On Popular Music.”

them.”⁵⁷ However, both here and in his strange misunderstanding of harmony—as false identity that displaces moments of possibly transcendent discrepancy—we find another weakness of Adorno’s account of human life.

Harmony, even at the level of mere musical tones, always relies on both relation and individuality in a cooperative performance. A chord is the sound of relationship; relationality is the actual substance of harmony: an F, an A, a B, and an E-flat must maintain their F-ness, A-ness, B-ness, and E-flat-ness in order to have the relationship that creates harmony. If any of those notes stop being thoroughly and identifiably “themselves,” the resulting chord (a characteristic F dominant chord with a “flat-5th” or augmented 4th)—the material reality of the relationship—is destroyed. In fact, when Adorno criticizes the “blue notes” of jazz (which he derisively labeled “‘dirty,’ ‘false’ or ‘worried’”) or the dissonance of Wagner, he undermines the very notion of dissonance in order to oppose a totalizing, unifying underlying norm, “the naked scheme,” against which a note sounds dissonant.⁵⁸ Apparently, only the utterly autonomous and rootless sound—one that relies on no normative sonic environment whatsoever, much less a tradition of tonality—can be judged as true and free of a commodifying schema.⁵⁹

If we do not follow Adorno in his rejection of all musical tradition on this topic, we can hear other possibilities for the same issues with which he is concerned. Where mere individuality cannot destroy harmony, however much it ignores or tries to deny it, relationality that denies the absolute necessity of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Witkin, 105-106.

⁵⁹ Though I cannot discuss it in detail here, Adorno’s advocacy for such notions is clearly rooted in one strand of mid-20th century 12-tone dogma – a school of musical thought infused with an ideological fervor for rejecting much of the western musical tradition. His writing on Schoenberg, though not blindly adoring, identifies Adorno as deeply sympathetic with the movement.

individual identity does destroy harmony. So, on a larger and unbelievably more complex scale, jazz improvisation offers a model of relational, cooperative individuality (or of individuated relationality) and freedom. Obviously, human musicians are capable of being aware of their individuality-in-relation and their relationality-as-individuals. As Jeremy Begbie has shown, music allows us a different experience and concept of relationality and time.⁶⁰ When people are making music together, thereby inscribing their human relating within the dynamics of musical identity and relation, we can see an alternative *way of being* that transcends the limits of other modes of human relating—all the while remaining rooted in materiality (via the bodily involvement of music-making and the physical components of hearing and making sounds).

Just as Adorno misses the implications for individuality and relation in basic harmony, he misses the further implications for freedom and social structure in the improvisational notion of “freedom in the groove”—where the artistic creation is the actual sound of negotiation, concerning a common good, not market economics (as his reductionist account argues): the negotiation among individuals in relation and every musician’s negotiation with freedom and structure, creation, and tradition. This aspect of jazz aesthetics would require a separate essay to explain, but the relevant point here is the relationship of the artist to the tradition and to the immediate, relational conditions of creation. For Adorno, to be “in a groove” is to be stuck in the service of some preordered and ordering system (hence his theorizing of the “underlying beat” as a tyrannical force for unifying sameness). For jazz musicians, even being “*locked* into the groove” brings freedom *precisely because* it is an experience of altered temporality and relationality among the musicians in which the freedom of creation and

⁶⁰ Obviously, throughout this section, I draw from Begbie’s writing, especially from *Theology, Music and Time*, 85-97, but also from his many lectures and musical demonstrations of theological concepts and possibilities.

expression is simultaneously individualistic and communal. Tradition and innovation, freedom and structure, virtuosity and emotion, theory and practice, are all performed—they are played, in play, at play, and played with.

There is much more to be said on this topic, but in order to conclude this whirlwind, selective presentation of Adorno's critique of jazz, we can observe how Adorno responded to his critics, who defended jazz as an art form autonomous from the culture industry that tries to exploit it. Buhler points to multiple essays in which Adorno simply accuses these defenders of jazz of "forgetting the origin in commerce" or of ignoring "the historical circumstances of production."⁶¹ Furthermore, any attempt to develop a terminology that disproves Adorno's assessment merely proves Adorno right, since developed terminologies merely prove the existence of an "expert class" devoted to obscuring the insidious standardization of jazz's pseudo-individuality and pseudo-freedom.⁶² The fundamentally ideological analysis is fully displayed in a response that manages to butcher both history and aesthetic judgment in its assertion of systemic intentionality: Jazz "asserted itself as the upper bourgeois form of contemporary vulgar music" *in order to* fulfill an ideological function of the culture industry. "[T]o conceal the commodity character and alienated manner of production. . . Jazz was to evoke the appearance of improvisational freedom and immediacy in the sphere of light music."⁶³

⁶¹ Buhler, 119-120, quoting from "On the Social Situation of Music," and "Perennial Fashion – Jazz."

⁶² Witkin, 105.

⁶³ Quoted in Buhler, 119-120, from "On the Social Situation of Music."

CONCLUSION

Regardless of one's sympathy (or lack thereof) for Adorno's commitments or judgment of his musical literacy or aesthetic sensibilities, it seems hard to deny that ideology predetermined Adorno's reaction to jazz. Were I to present, via Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison, the best counterarguments about the social significance of jazz, its aesthetic enactment of heroic action in the face of adversity, its insistence on artistic sophistication as a response to existential questions, and so on, Adorno's rebuttal is already prefabricated: any justification or defense of jazz cannot rescue it, because it was created, or at least easily appropriated, under material conditions ruled by industrial capitalism. This deafness is a *result* of the anthropological foundations underlying Adorno's hermeneutic, according to which humans under these conditions could not create something that escapes the demonic domination of a system rooted in a schema ruled by commodification and exchange value. Nevertheless, I submit that where no life should be found—the supposedly salted brimstone field of industrial capitalist America—a hybrid musical style emerged that embodies, and performs in new modes, artistic excellence and freedom, and provides a rich social model of individuality in community.

I believe that jazz confronts Adorno's anthropology with a unique moment of cognitive dissonance—or perhaps a decisive intervention. The question becomes, “Why does Adorno launch, and then sustain over the course of 30 years, such a strangely wrongheaded attack?”⁶⁴ Consider his anthropological hermeneutic: where humans are so susceptible to a cultural/societal system run from beneath by an economic principle, and where the culture industry is such a closed system

⁶⁴ At a certain point (the late 1940s, perhaps), it may be fair to say that Adorno simply focused on shooting down critics of his positions on jazz. Instead of engaging any new developments in the music over the next 20 years, he was content to point out the inconsistencies or errors of his critics.

that thought is not even possible, he allows these theoretical “givens” to predetermine his actual experience of jazz. In turn, his distortion of jazz aids his feedback loop of cultural analysis and conceptual theorizing. Rather than an actual encounter with jazz, Adorno arrives—aural filters in place—bent on finding nourishment for his theory, a totalizing monster which does not cease to be totalizing (as many Adorno apologists claim) simply because it does not explicitly offer an alternative ideal toward which synthesis might progress.

What does this failure with regard to the specific details of Adorno’s engagement with jazz (one of the two “most characteristic forms of mass culture”) suggest about his overall analysis of the culture industry? Although I believe that my final assessment here holds true for non-Christians, too, I will limit my focus to Christians in order to contrast specific anthropologies. For Christian theologians or philosophers hoping to sound the alarm about aspects of the Enlightenment project and its associated economic or political systems, Adorno is a highly problematic source for diagnostic description. Remember, for Adorno, churches—all churches and *the* Church, not merely “bad” churches—are part of the culture industry. By turning to Adorno, either explicitly or by accepting and repeating his assertions, diagnoses, and conclusions, Christian scholars import his anthropological assumptions in the form of implicit definitions, limitations, and standards.

Where Christians must begin an anthropology from the recognition of a transcendent Creator in whose image humanity was created, Adorno cannot allow for any real transcendence at any point. It is therefore ironic that the only theology Adorno wants (eventually) is an empty “transcendence” that he must have to get out of the closed system he serves (the mere possibility of which is denied by his own presuppositions) —a moment of the possibly-other that comes from nowhere (a filthy past which should preclude its existence), arises in a cesspool (in which it could never be recognized) and points to nowhere and no-

One that is not already materially present in humans and their material social conditions.⁶⁵

By pronouncing such a judgment on Adorno's anthropology, I do not proscribe the usefulness of some of his observations or analysis. This is not an argument that Jerusalem may have no dealings with Athens, nor is it to demand that Christian theologians choose only orthodox Christians as allies. However, I would like to suggest that some philosophy (and economic and political theory) offers at best a parallel alternative to a Christian analysis and critique—an alternative that may seem sympathetic or helpful for critiquing common enemies, but which eventually import categories and presuppositions in direct opposition to Christian thought. Openness to non-Christian philosophy, whether spoils of Egypt or of 19th and 20th century Europe, does not demand blindness to the dangers of philosophies or political theories grounded in and subject to closed systems antagonistic to Christian categories and definitions. As much as Adorno's approach to critical theory or his negative dialectics may seem to be promising methods, perhaps capable of a partial or cautious use, they are in fact content-rich philosophical positions—positions that inevitably impose their own theological or anti-theological commitments *even at the diagnostic or descriptive stage*. After all, if one has a faulty account of the creature being diagnosed, the diagnosis as well as the prescription will be flawed. The Christian tradition, at its best, has used even Greek philosophy in a highly selective, discriminating manner—and Frankfurt is no Athens.

⁶⁵ Again, see Siebert for a treatment of Adorno's "longing" for a totally Other.