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Redeeming contradictions: from critical theory to cultural studies

Adorno, culture, and film

The reification of a great work of art is not just loss, any more than the reification of the cinema is all loss ... Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change ... Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.

Theodor Adorno wrote these words from London to Walter Benjamin in a letter dated March 18, 1936.[1] They articulate the promise of a unified culture that expresses "integral freedom" although they dismiss the possibility of realizing this promise as the simple addition of the two halves of culture, high and popular or mass culture, in a capitalist society. Some years later, in the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society," written in the United States before his return to Germany at the end of the forties,[2] Adorno expressed his reservations about the concept of culture itself, by which he means, in this context, high culture. He suggests that cultural criticism makes culture into a fetish by isolating it from larger social processes. Neither art nor philosophy, when they are true, are ever complete in and of themselves. They always stand "in relation to the actual life-process of society from which they distinguish themselves." They present themselves as independent and autonomous through their "rejection of the guilt of life which blindly and callously reproduces itself." Yet this

[1] E. Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 123.
[2] P. U. Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 22.

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rejection of the realm of purposes and interests carries within it "the promise of a condition in which freedom were realized. This remains an equivocal promise of culture as long as its existence depends on a bewitched reality and, ultimately, on control over the work of others."[3]

In these comments, Adorno virtually identifies autonomous art and philosophy with a "bewitched reality," the very reality that Horkheimer and Adorno described as a form of mass deception in the essay on the culture industry written in the forties. The paradoxical and ambivalent nature of Adorno's dialectical thought displays itself in these formulations. For the work of art is authentic and the philosophy true only insofar as they are able to make visible their fundamental inauthenticity and untruth, insofar as they implicate themselves in the "guilt of life" by their very insistence that they are separate from the society that produces that guilt. They "blindly and callously" insist on their own integral autonomy, or being-in-itself, as the promise of freedom; but this promise contains the essence of their being-for-something else, for that bewitched reality that makes such authenticity and truth possible through the production of its other. Adorno has frequently been criticized for his horror at the inauthentic spectacle of mass culture and for his belated defense of the autonomous work of art associated primarily with modernism and the avant-garde. But the most unrelenting critic of Adorno was always Adorno himself. In the same essay, he describes modern bourgeois cultural criticism in terms general enough to include his own. He refers to the comfort such criticism takes in the division between high and low culture, which results from both "an uncompromising opposition to being-for-something else" and "an ideology which in its hybris enthrones itself as being-in-itself." Adorno did not have to wait for the student movements of the sixties and the New Left to learn that his work was a form of modern bourgeois cultural criticism. The self-subversive moments in his work make this judgment implicitly and consistently, from the period of his debate with Benjamin to the end of his life. "Cultural criticism," he concludes, "shares the blindness of its object."[4]

From the perspective of Adorno's version of critical theory, in other words, culture is a lived contradiction. There is no question

[3] T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. S. and S. Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1981), p. 23. [4] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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but that Adorno himself, as so many of his critics have pointed out, was élitist in his aesthetic predispositions. As he wrote in *Minima Moralia*, near the time he and Horkheimer were writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse."[5] Many critics of the Frankfurt school have tried to explain this élitism as a response to the different historical contexts and events that shaped the life and work of Adorno and the other members of the school. The events which initially inspired this cultural formation were the collapse of working-class movements and organizations in Western Europe after World War I, the transformation of German leftwing parties with a mass base into reformist movements dominated by Moscow, and the rise of Stalinism, fascism, and Nazism after the promise of the Russian Revolution had failed. Adorno witnessed first-hand what the Nazis were able to accomplish through the manipulation of mass culture; and when he went to the United States, he was shocked by the extent to which mass culture had already become what Fredric Jameson would now call the *dominant cultural logic*.[6] He surely feared that such a powerful mass culture would achieve exactly what Jameson believes postmodernism has achieved: an erasure of the difference between high and popular culture in a way that would force the two to add up to something monstrous in its implicit enforcement of standardization and normality. Such a homogenization of culture would be a parody of the integral freedom that was the true promise of cultural division itself. As Diane Waldman argues, the division between autonomous art and popular art articulates and participates in the class divisions of capitalist society. "Thus Adorno's critique of the culture industry," she concludes, "is based on its attempt to reconcile the contradiction by absorbing light into serious art and hence mystify class antagonisms."[7]

It serves no purpose to excuse or rationalize Adorno's élitist predispositions, especially as they took shape in his categorical

[5] T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), p. 25.

[6] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 6.

[7] D. Waldman, "Critical Theory and Film: Adorno and 'The Culture Industry' Revisited," *New German Critique* 12 (Fall 1977), 52. For a related defense of Adorno's critique of the culture industry, see A. Huyssen, "Introduction to Adorno," *New German Critique* 6 (Fall 1975), 7.

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rejection of jazz as an inferior, regressive form of musical art[8] and of film as an art-form completely determined by its economic and technological conditions of production. When he says that he felt "stupider and worse" everytime he went to the cinema, he responds to what Benjamin described as "reception in a state of distraction," which "finds in the film its true means of exercise." But Benjamin's response to this aspect of cinematic experience was not completely negative. Because film causes the aura or cult value of the traditional work of art to recede, it has the effect of "putting the public in the position of the critic"; but, at the same time, it eliminates, or at least makes very difficult, the act of critical concentration as a form of reception. In the cinema, according to Benjamin, "The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one."[9]

To employ a popular figure of speech that Adorno uses himself, we should not throw out the baby with the bath-water in analyzing Adorno's response to Benjamin and to film as a form of mass culture. If any form of culture, high or low, is to have a positive political effect, it requires an engaged and critically active form of consumption that does not necessarily accept the cultural product or commodity strictly on its own terms. As the quotation from Adorno with which I began suggests, every form of culture in late capitalist society undergoes reification; but no cultural object is ever totally identical with its own status as a commodity. In the section of *Minima Moralia* which bears the heading "Baby with the bath-water," Adorno challenges the notion that any form of culture can ever be reduced completely to its function as ideology. He concludes that "To identify culture solely with lies is more fateful than ever, now that the former is really becoming totally absorbed by the latter, and eagerly invites such identification in order to compromise every opposing thought."[10] In other words, it would be a misreading of Adorno's own extremely negative critique of the culture industry to assume that a cultural object,

[8] For a contextual explanation of Adorno's negative view of jazz, see M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp. 186–87, and S. Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 109–10.

[9] W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 240–41.

[10] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 44.

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even an object of mass culture, can be completely contained by the culture industry. In the forties, Adorno thought that culture as a way of life was becoming totally absorbed by the culture industry as a business. For this reason, mass-cultural objects no longer pretended to be art, and the fact that they were just business had become the ideological justification of their status as cultural things that need not be analyzed critically.[11] This ideology of the complete identity of mass culture with the culture industry is promoted not by Adorno but by the culture industry itself. If one accepts that ideology, then one has thrown out the baby with the bath-water by refusing to analyze the mass-cultural object from a perspective that foregrounds its contradictory relationship to its own status as a commodity of the culture industry.

As Adorno continues the passage from *Minima Moralia*,

> If material reality is called the world of exchange value, and culture whatever refuses to accept the domination of that world, then it is true that such refusal is illusory as long as the existent exists. Since, however, free and honest exchange is itself a lie, to deny it is at the same time to speak for truth: in face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces it becomes correct.[12]

Adorno suggests that exchange value is the material reality that underlies capitalist culture. It is not the economic system *per se* but the system of commensurable values that has almost totally absorbed culture as a way of life. In effect, the world of exchange value claims to be the totality of culture. Yet Adorno suggests that there is something in culture that refuses the domination of exchange value, that posits a world beyond exchange value. This world is a false one insofar as it belies the reality of the world of exchange value and, as Marcuse suggested, affirms a freedom from exchange value within capitalist culture. The truth is that even our ability to imagine such a utopia is contaminated by the world of exchange value, whether that utopia is expressed through a work of art that proclaims itself autonomous or through a product of the culture industry that advertises itself as a commodity. But the world of exchange value is also a fiction that derives from the overall effect of commodity fetishism; and the concept of free enterprise as a "free and honest exchange" is the

11 M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 121.
12 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 44.

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centerpiece of this ideological construction. Therefore, the cultural lie or illusion that calls into question the lie of the commodity world speaks the truth through its negation of the other that is its own condition of existence. This truth is precisely what refuses the domination of exchange value. If the latter is the commensurable in capitalist culture, then it can only be opposed by the incommensurable.

For Adorno, the incommensurable in any cultural object, including those that we call works of art, is the moment of its self-contradiction. This moment does not emerge from the attempt to eliminate the division between high and low culture or from the enforcement of a false equality between all cultural objects. The contradiction lies *within* cultural division which every cultural object absorbs and expresses as the ideology of its form. In the canonized work of art, it is the contradiction between its claim to aesthetic autonomy and its revelation of the social content of aesthetic form. In the product of the culture industry, it is the contradiction between the object's self-advertisement as a commodity and its revelation of the illusory nature of the commodity world. For Adorno, the tendency toward aesthetic judgment, a tendency which Adorno himself exemplifies in his constant effort to distinguish between true and false works of art, derives from the incommensurable in art itself: "Even someone believing himself convinced of the non-comparability of works of art will find himself repeatedly involved in debates where works of art, and precisely those of highest and therefore incommensurable rank, are compared and evaluated one against the other." This self-contradictory remark, which almost begs the question it poses, is autobiographical, since Adorno believes both that art is incommensurable and that this quality is the distinguishing mark of works of the highest rank. Adorno must evaluate that which cannot be evaluated because "This compulsion to evaluate is located ... in the works of art themselves."[13]

Despite Adorno's best efforts to classify film as a pure product of the culture industry without any redeeming value as art, his own insistence on the incommensurability of true art makes it impossible to enforce such a distinction absolutely. As long as it is possible to produce an analysis, or immanent reading, of the

[13] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 75.

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cultural object, a reading that must necessarily contradict the ideology of the culture industry that tries to undermine such a critical reception, then it is possible to locate a redeeming contradiction in the mass-cultural object. This redeeming contradiction is the baby that should not be thrown out with the bath-water which signifies the culture industry itself. Throughout his career, Adorno showed little sympathy with reception studies; and though we should not align ourselves with this viewpoint, we should understand why he insisted on the value of immanent criticism. In recent years, sociological methods of literary scholarship have made it possible to demonstrate that the public reception of mass-cultural objects can be more critical and oppositional than Adorno was willing to concede. Still, reception remains a field of contention, a field in which there are political stakes as to what constitutes the meaning of the cultural object. Though the intervention of the critic or theorist in that field should not claim an authority that supersedes all forms of popular reception, it does play a role in foregrounding or making visible the incommensurable in the cultural object as the moment of its self-contradiction. Adorno's insistence on the necessity of immanent criticism should not be read as an argument *against* reception studies but as an argument *for* a particular kind of reception. Such a reception "takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality. Immanent criticism of intellectual and artistic phenomena seeks to grasp, through the analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension."[14] I will try to demonstrate how this process works through the consideration of a film that Adorno would surely have considered an exemplary product of the culture industry.

Analyzing *It's a Wonderful Life*

Frank Capra's 1946 movie classic contains at its center one of the most bizarre scenes of a marriage proposal in film history. George Bailey, the hero of *It's a Wonderful Life*, is undergoing a crisis, not his first or his last, as he learns that his brother Harry has a wife and no real intention of coming back to Bedford Falls to take over

[14] Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 32.

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the Bailey Bros. Building and Loan Association. George has already given up a trip to Europe and a college education for the family business, and once again he can see no way out of his dilemma. He is torn between the family commitment to a concept of social responsibility within the capitalist system and his own desire for adventure and self-gratification. George wants to leave Bedford Falls, see the world, get his degree in engineering, and build things. At the same time, he feels obligated to keep the Building and Loan alive and out of the hands of Mr. Potter, the richest man in town, who would destroy any form of economic activity that does not contribute to his own accumulation of wealth. On the surface, this conflict looks like the classical opposition between the good capitalist, George, and the bad one, Potter. Though the film does posit such a distinction (the good capitalist is a minor character, George's high school friend, Sam Wainwright), it also suggests a conflict within George Bailey that complicates his relation to capitalist culture altogether.

As Potter says in the segment of the film in which George has to take over the Association, "Peter Bailey [George's father] was not a businessman; that's what killed him." George accepts the view that neither he nor his father fully subscribes to the rules of capitalist culture, though he does not realize that such an implicit refusal to participate in the system carries a certain risk. As far as George is concerned, the people who "do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community" deserve the credit that will give them "a couple of decent rooms and a bath," that is, some degree of personal comfort so that they can enjoy life. Potter, on the other hand, wants to liquidate the Building and Loan and criticizes its social function as producing "a discontented lazy rabble instead of a thrifty working class." Ultimately, George and Potter embody two different forms of economic desire under capitalism: the desire for expenditure and the desire for accumulation, or, from a psychoanalytic perspective, desire under the rule of the pleasure principle and desire under the rule of the death drive. For Potter, the aim and justification of life is accumulation that produces interest through its submission to the death principle; for George, the aim of life is expenditure that redeems the deathly interest of accumulation by transforming its exchange value into use-value – its abstract value into concrete joys and pleasures.

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But in order to guarantee the community's desire for the good life, George must sacrifice the object of his own desire. On the night of his brother's return from college, George wanders away from the homecoming party. Though his mother urges him to visit Mary Hatch, his future wife, he walks off in the opposite direction toward the main street of Bedford Falls. He encounters Violet, a young woman who functions as a sexual magnet in the community. (Notice the difference in the names of the women. "Mary Hatch" suggests a maternal figure whose primary function is to nurture things to life. Violet's name contains the root *viol*, which suggests that she attracts violence, violation, or rape.) When George half-ironically invites her to join him for an adventure on Mount Bedford and suggests they take their shoes off and go swimming in the dark, Violet looks horrified and rejects his proposal. George may not be serious, but he toys with the idea of sexual gratification without social responsibility. Some years before, on the night he and Mary fell into the swimming pool at the high school dance, George walked Mary home when all she had to wear was a bathrobe. As he started to kiss her, Mary ran and inadvertently slipped out of her robe. Ironic as ever, George circled the hydrangea bush she hid in and mused over this "very interesting situation." The scene typifies the culture industry's "pornographic and prudish" representation of sexuality[15] but still articulates the dialectic of desire in capitalist culture. As George approaches the naked woman in the hydrangea bush, he is prohibited from enjoying her by the call of social responsibility. He abruptly learns from a passing car that his father has had a stroke.

After leaving Violet on the night of the marriage proposal, George ends up at Mary's house in an angry mood. To the question "What do you want?" repeated by Mary and her mother, George replies irritably that he does not want anything; but when Sam Wainwright calls to court Mary himself and to offer George a future in plastics, George clarifies the aim, though not the object, of his desire. He says to Mary, "I don't want any plastics and I don't want any ground floors and I don't want to get married ever to anyone. I want to do what I want to do." In the next shot, he is walking down the aisle with his new bride. The story of George's life is that he always wants *what he wants* but always does *what*

[15] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, p. 140.

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others want. He never really proposes to Mary on the screen; he merely protests against the contradictions of his own desire. George wants to leave the small town and see the world; but instead, after his wedding, he ends up saving the Building and Loan from bankruptcy and moves into the old Granville house that he said he would not live in even as a ghost (though, in the end, George becomes a sort of ghost who wants nothing more than to return to his house). Mary, on the other hand, has dreamed of living there all her life. He saves the Building and Loan by convincing the depositors not to think of the institution as a place where their money is kept but as a means by which they are able to invest in, and realize, one another's dreams. "We have to have faith in each other," he concludes.

Ironically, the only person who really understands George is his nemesis, Potter, who finally tries to buy him off. The money he offers is not as important as his attempt to manipulate George's desire. As Potter astutely asserts, George "hates his job, hates the Building and Loan almost as much as I do." In a sense, Potter knows George better than George knows himself; for if, as Potter recognizes, George "never makes a dime" out of the Building and Loan, Potter himself rarely *spends* a dime out of the capital he has accumulated. They are mirror images of one another. Potter has been made immobile by his confinement to a wheelchair, and George is paralyzed and permanently entrapped by the community of Bedford Falls. If Potter, as his name suggests, is the one who gives shape to the emptiness at the center of capitalist culture, George is the one who fills the emptiness – that is, who makes the system work by redeeming the death drive as the destructive tendency of capitalism to subordinate all forms of individual desire to the accumulation of capital itself. George's final crisis comes in response to the revelation of the truth about the capitalist accumulation of wealth. When Potter fails to return the eight thousand dollars he inadvertently takes from Uncle Billy, he clarifies his true identity by showing that capitalist accumulation is really a form of theft. George does not know and never learns the truth about what happened to the money, but he knows the truth about his own desire – that it will never be realized, that it is the hole in his being. With the decision to commit suicide, George is ready to surrender that desire to death – to reduce himself to capital as the net worth of his life insurance.

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