

**ENCATC Glossary – Culture industry**  
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Living Lexicon

Today cultural managers are a focal point for business/societal attention.

They are switching, according to German media expert Norbert Bolz (2005), from the ivory tower to the control tower. Culture is no longer an unproductive marginal area, but rather an essential driver of economic growth. The culture industry, culture economy or creative economy is spoken of in a naturally approving sense and one that refers to the future. The critical starting point at the origin of the concept of the culture industry has been lost to a great degree.

**History**

The concept of the culture industry became known as the title and theme of one chapter of the book “Dialektik der Aufklärung” (Dialectic of Enlightenment in English). Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno wrote it in 1944 in exile in the United States. It was published for the first time in 1947 in Amsterdam. Then it was out of print for a long time, and was again issued in 1969. In the pocketbook edition it became a bestseller and a key book for the student movement in Germany.

By culture industry Horkheimer/Adorno do not mean, as is usual today, a special form of production that can be distinguished in its production resources, production sites and products from traditional industry products. Culture industry is introduced by the authors not as an ordering concept but as a critical category: in late capitalism art is losing its autonomy more and more and becoming merchandise. These two central concepts should be briefly explained. Horkheimer and Adorno are important representatives of Critical Theory, which originated in the 1920s, also called the Frankfurt School. For them the theory of commodities developed by Karl Marx is a foundation for the understanding of the capitalist production method. Marx distinguishes between use value and exchange value. Use value is based on the concrete possibility for using the object; it is intrinsic to the object. Exchange value, in contrast, arises through the exchange of objects, and through this they become commodities. One characteristic of the capitalist production method is the expansion of exchange value production. The dynamic released by this is celebrated in the Communist Manifesto (Marx/Engels 1848). The other side of this development is that the value of objects, of ideas and also of human relationships are eclipsed by the interests of exploitation. The question of how products, thoughts and services can be profitably exchanged moves into the foreground. So that exchange relationships can unfold without hindrance, standards of administration (bureaucracy), infrastructure and law must be created. In this way the capitalist production of goods, freed from traditions, personal and spatial-social bonds, can unfold worldwide.

Horkheimer/Adorno distinguish between two phases of capitalism: In the bourgeois age from the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, art was given a relatively autonomous status. It was, as least in part, not integrated into commercial exploitation and therefore was able to develop its own meaning. Citizens committed to their businesses created a compensation for themselves in art, which could make it possible to experience realities reaching beyond profit interests. It was in fact an art in the interests of the middle classes, which excluded the lower classes, but scope was also created for thinking and feeling beyond the middle class order. This function of art as an adversary, as lighting up another life, is increasingly being lost in late capitalism.

Horkheimer/Adorno refer to two opposing expressions of capitalism. On the one hand Fascism (by which they were driven out of Germany), which systematically made use of the new technical possibilities of mass culture, in order to construct a “folk community”. Radio, film and mass productions became means of manipulation and exclusion.

The second experience is the development of mass culture in the USA. In their American exile Horkheimer/Adorno analysed the massive and economically driven distribution of cultural products. They foresaw that quantitative criteria and economic calculations would increasingly eclipse the culture areas: viewer numbers, revenue, sales numbers, viewing figures, external effects and the generation of attention become the criteria for success.

### **The current significance**

In the current contributions on the culture industry the critical position from the “Dialektik der Aufklärung” hardly occurs, or is dismissed as obsolete. There are a few arguments for this:

- Horkheimer/Adorno themselves did not develop their analysis from the year 1944 further.
- Therefore it remained at a strict opposition between autonomous art and culture industry. Bourgeois society as a guarantor for an autonomous art gave way more and more to a functionally differentiated society (especially dramatically in Germany through the annihilation of the Jewish bourgeoisie), with dynamic constellations of roles and lifestyles. Therefore the cultural criticism of Critical Theory, to state it in an exaggerated fashion, lost its positive field of reference and could only continue to be upheld negatively.
- For the spread of mass culture correctly predicted by Horkheimer/ Adorno, among other things through the reproducibility in any number and the worldwide distribution of cultural goods, new analytical instruments are necessary in order to be able to understand and organise the complexity and the contradictions. The reference to autonomous art does not help us here, because in the process we end up in protected niche cultures (as Adorno’s reference to Schönberg, in dissociation to popular music forms, shows).

In spite of these weaknesses the critical attitude toward the culture industry is still relevant. From the business management point of view the culture industry is a form of production in which aesthetic, sensual, symbolic and knowledge-based products are generated and made use of. The task of cultural management is to steer the utilisation processes. Cultural managers become agents of economic growth, because for this the activation of the creative areas is indispensable.

It is claimed that in the process art remains free and can continue to play its role as adversary. An assumption that is similar to a religious creed and is useful for cultural managers who see themselves as advocates of art. As a result of this a critical, distanced look at one’s own practice is thwarted. The critical position of Horkheimer/Adorno opens up an opportunity for this.

In conclusion an example of this: the imperatives of exploitation and goods formation, according to Horkheimer/Adorno, flow into our thinking, as well as the producers’ and the recipients’ attitudes toward the products. With this thesis the type of programme presentation in the German-French cultural broadcaster ARTE becomes comprehensible and understandable: in the trailer for a broadcast there is already massive advertising for the following broadcasts.

This procedure comes from private television and is meant to bring the viewers not to interrupt the act of consumption. “Stay tuned”, i.e. do not change to another offering, and

above all continue to consume. The prerequisite for this is that the broadcasts are easily digestible, therefore no pauses for recuperation or processing are required.

The programme for ARTE on the other hand is outstanding for many demanding, emotionally moving and also disturbing broadcasts, which are worth producing a lasting effect. Therefore one would have to allow the trailer of the broadcast, as in the cinema, to run out without disruption and offer a brief pause until the next broadcast. In this way the viewers would be given time to switch off. In everyday broadcasting, on the other hand, after a documentary on the genocide in Rwanda there is advertising for a marvellous comedy with Sophia Loren. The demanding content is trivialised by the logic of marketing.

## Sources

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