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Culture Industry and Mass Deception: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Concerns about Soft Power in China

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Abstract: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno′s concept of the culture industry remains a powerful description of the fate of art literature and other cultural products in an era where media and information technology have made culture more industrial and reifying than ever before. We revisit this concept tracing it forward from Walter Benjamin′s initial contributions and proceeding onward the work of Herbert Marcuse against the backdrop of Marx′s theory of commodity fetishism. We provide a brief description of historical origins with David Hawkes′ works on the emergence of commodity fetishism in 16th-century England and carry this forward to Joseph S. Nye′s discussions of the more contemporary phenomenon of soft power. Returning to Horkheimer and Marcuse′s concerns for the logic underlying capitalist reification as well as Adorno′s longstanding concern that a culture industry could not produce a socialist consciousness (contrary to Benjamin′s optimism) and recalling Marx′s admonition that capitalism and nationalism are essentially the same road we question whether there has ever been a socialist art or literature in China or anywhere else whether one is possible and whether we should concern ourselves firstly with products (e. g. soft power media censorship propaganda) or the mode of production that produces them.

Keywords: culture industry; commodity fetishism; reification; mass deception; ideology

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In the Beginning

When speaking of new eras they should be distinguished from but historicized with the old and to note when appropriate continuities can be observed from one moment to the next. A suitable starting point here is David Hawkes' *Idols of the Marketplace*: *Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature 1580-1680* (2001) which reveals the emergence in the earliest days of capitalist and nationalist development that Marx would later describe in *Capital* as "commodity fetishism." As Hawkes shows this new phenomenon was recognized in its own time and labeled appropriately enough "idolatry." We should recall here the Jewish prohibition against idolatry—the practice of worshiping objects as god and Moses' famous response—which had tremendously influenced Christianity and guided Western art including that in England until that point in time. Under the old religious regime artistic genius was inseparable from its spiritual value and what Walter Benjamin might recognize as its "aura" where the spirit of God had moved the artist and thus remained the creator of all. Conversely idolatrous transformation that took place according to Hawkes was one in which the object itself became sacred while a cult of sorts might form around the artist himself.

Such developments should not be surprising to us because they still resonate strongly with our experiences today in the form of commodity fetishism celebrity worship and so on. We should also note as Hawkes does that artists like William Shakespeare (who was incidentally Marx's favorite) chronicled these changes with a critical and even humorous eye creating the new national language of bourgeois expression along the way (which Hawkes has elaborated in *Shakespeare and Economic Theory* 2015). At the same time Shakespeare and others like him were in the vanguard of artistic commodification bringing and selling their products to those new masses then

experiencing what Marx would describe in the *Manifesto* as the "socialization of labor." In other words these are moments and products the when and what of the twin pillars of a capitalism and nationalism that became the bedrock of British reified consciousness and to a significant extent the same for most of us.

The Era of Critical Theory

Although Marx's work provided the foundation for much of the critical theory that would later emerge four authors from the Frankfurt School play such a standout role that their work is sometimes definitively labelled Critical Theory. The first of these is the erstwhile member of this group Walter Benjamin and his oft-cited essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1936/2008) which in addition to his notes on a "theory of distraction" are now the starting points in the theory of this sort.

First what Benjamin accomplishes already in his title is an expression that situates art in our age that is to say in the industrial if not post-industrial age (in fact the *same* age) something we might take for granted but was certainly noticed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their formulation of the concept of "culture industry." Second Benjamin notes the losses and gains associated with art in this age and especially that of film. On the one hand works of art now can be easily manipulated to present a particular version of "reality" and can be politicized in ways that extend the values of commodity production and consumption insomuch as the film itself in most cases is produced by and for the same. On the other hand Benjamin argues optimistically that this also means that such media can be politicized as a socialist critique and likewise be propagated to the masses. This optimism has drawn many detractors including his close friend Theodor Adorno who doubted the capacity of art to function in such a way insomuch as it would ultimately project the underpinnings of

industrialism itself（Wolin　193-94）.

Second　Benjamin theorizes that art today loses what he called the "aura" of the original　including the conditions and circumstances under which the original was produced. Instead　he argues　these have been hidden　amounting to a type of distraction and even　destruction. As indicated above　aura as Benjamin describes has what might be described as a type of spiritual quality to it. It is in this context that we might advance now to Horkheimer and Adorno's essay　on the culture industry　where they note again　that the industrially produced work of art gains a new type of aura　that of the commodity fetish（Horkheimer and Adorno 158）　the basic mechanism that produces and reproduces alienation and advances exploitation and mass deception. Horkheimer would further underscore the seriousness of this in his critical essay on instrumental reason（1974 / 2012）. Above all　Herbert Marcuse would discuss similar developments qua the capitalist reification of consciousness（Marcuse　*Reason and Revolution*　279）and the reduction of people to what he described as one-dimensionality（ibid.　*One-Dimensional Man passim*）. Such works might seem a little quaint to us now　especially that of Marcuse given the developments of post-structuralism and discussions of biopower　but I suspect they have not yet been surpassed.

The New Era of Now

In the new era we can speak of a bevy of new concerns　including Joseph Nye's oft-mentioned "soft power" as a type of cultural hegemony in the global information age（Nye　"Get Smart"　*Power Soft Power*）. Understandably　many have a visceral fear of being manipulated by others　especially when framed in nationalistic terms　and recalling colonialism　imperialism and new imperialism　but in fact such threats run much deeper and strike much closer to home than they appear.

As Marx himself well-understood and warned both capitalism and nationalism are products of the

same ontology. They emerge together historically in England but both are products of an epistemological shift that normalized what Horkheimer described as a radical turn towards "instrumental reason." This reason had its roots in Aristotelian logic and as I have written elsewhere　is probably prefigured linguistically in the Indo-European family of languages　as its central law — the law of non-contradiction — finds its first explicit expressions in the Hindu Vedic tradition and separately　in Aristotle's articulation of the same（Mahoney　"Can the Oriental Know Justice?"）. It might be tempting to equate this with Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben's concerns with biopower and bare life　but I suspect as James Gordon Finlayson argues that this might require misreading Aristotle（Finlayson）. Nevertheless　as the post-Aquinas developments that sparked Renaissance and Enlightenment produced new art and philosophy（and capitalism and nationalism）　the reifying effects on consciousness were clear　as Marx　Freud　and Nietzsche and the various Nietzschean schools of Heidegger　Foucault and others would note. Indeed　strikingly　this new modern Western man — defined firstly by his egocentric "*cogito*-consciousness" they largely describe as a tragic development　a critical insight that　owes　much　in　Heidegger's　case　to unacknowledged influences of Chinese philosophy （Tomonobu　Parkes）. However　these developments have been described as a vital step forward by others（e. g.　Edmund Husserl　Slavoj Žižek）　less normatively but still critically as the bedrock of the capitalist unconscious（e. g.　Georg Lukács　Fredric Jameson　Jacques Lacan and Samo Tomšič）　and following Marx　might in turn provide the foundation for fostering a critical socialist consciousness in its place.

Such developments have both longstanding and immediate relevancies. For example　the new era of now in China is one in which an incredible generation gap has emerged　starting with the 90s generation — the first to grow up in China's fast advancing market society. I have　again　detailed

these developments elsewhere and their relationship to the economic base and the influence of soft power media technology and so on（Mahoney "Can the Oriental Know Justice?"） and more recently discussed some of the darker consequences of the same（ibid. "May Fourth Protests"）.

Today we can describe three "forces" that have propelled China forward out of its dynastic tradition and into modernity as having all been the products of a similar shift towards the same logic and its associated forms of being. The first two have already been noted — capitalism and nationalism — but the third is the new culture of technology fetishism. This development was most famously elaborated as a concern of critical theory by Heidegger in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology"（1954） but for our purposes it has been better developed by others. If we take for example Gibert Simondon's book *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*（1958 2017） and read it through the lens of Heidegger but also Marx and Hawkes then we find that one of the primary anxieties is how the modern era through an inversion of Greek regard for techne has established objects of technology as the key fetishes or idols of the cult of capitalist modernity.

As Yuk Hui（2016） Jing Tsu Benjamin A. Ellman（2014）and Peter J. Golas（2015）in their various ways have illustrated notably in the wake of Joseph Needham's monumental history of science and technology China prior to modernity was in fact a highly scientific and technological society but one in which the human ideal was not crystalized as the production of consumption of technology by and for itself. And yet the pressures brought to bear on China in the 19th century and that continue today have established this techno-fetish as such a fundamental component of national and cultural being in and as China today that it is arguably only surpassed by some estimates but on much smaller scales by the same in Japan and South Korea （which in their own ways responded to the same provocations and from a similar cultural

foundation）.

Today we can speak of China being in the forefront of AI development of the generation and exploitation of big data and increasingly for both governance and marketing which are increasingly hard to distinguish the inclusion of so-called "thick data" with the aim of "building emotional connections with customers"（Wang Wright）and citizens with global tech-information giants like Huawei Samsung Apple and Netflix in the absolute vanguard but closely followed by their competitors. While nation states worry over soft and hard power and the new AI arms race in tandem with access to if not to gain control over markets and minds（or minds-as-markets） critical thinkers including cautious hopefuls like Jamie Suskind in *Future Politics*: *Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*（2018） and extreme pessimists like Jairus Victor Grove in *Savage Ecology*: *War and Geopolitics at the End of the World*（2019）and James Bridle in *New Dark Age*: *Technology and the End of the Future*（2018） discuss the onrush of a barely understood post-politics and post-humanity and the increasing need for a solution to the growing dangers of ecological and economic collapse.

These are the more dramatic possibilities and they deserve first mention. But what is absolutely true already is the extent to which efforts like those associated with big and thick data aim to understand and manipulate emotional needs in the production and dissemination of popular media be film music games social media and so on which are the art and literature of today. What this suggests is the total objectification of consciousness which from a critical Marxian point of view indicates extreme manifestations of alienation and exploitation. With this understanding in hand such media products along with the technology that supports them and is part and parcel of the same logic are also developed with the critical insights of the "arcade" as Walter Benjamin first noted in his *Arcades Project*（1999） extended as shopping malls and casinos with the rise of consumer society and now deepened with the

online economies that have carried forward their techniques but in ever more totalizing and technological ways.

Culture as Ideology or Ideology as Culture: The Problem of Immanent Critique

Clifford Geertz's well-worn essay "Ideology as a Cultural System" from *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) made popular the argument that culture should be viewed as as an ideological system. This is of course a reversal of Geertz's expression but such a popular reductive rendering is not surprising particularly given the rise of postmodern theory shortly thereafter e. g. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979 / 1984) among others which was keen to critique and normalize micropolitics contra metanarratives.

Whereas Geertz's essay had tried to solve the so-called Mannheim Paradox where critiques of ideology were inherently ideological themselves; generally the postmoderns were more content with simply acknowledging everything as ideological and imagining if not creating an idealized liberal political space particularly for minority positions so that authentic expressions of being contrary to the majority or mainstream could be expressed and included. In Lyotard's case this was aimed particularly at supporting a new ethos of inclusion in Canada given shifting demographics resulting from a growing number of non-European immigrants and the need to address longstanding social injustices against Canada's indigenous First Nations — injustices that were of course at the heart of the modern nation-building project but that were coming into conflict with the growing desire to rectify historical wrongs and attract much needed foreign immigration and to better situate both in a more inclusive Canadian narrative of being.

However Geertz's goal is to take aim at what he views as two related issues: first the extent to which one should view science itself as ideology and second by an indirect extension how Marxist critiques of ideology merely supplant one form with another. Geertz's argument is that science does in fact have quite a bit in common with ideology but unlike like more radical postmodernists who would argue that "science" should be regarded generally as one among many competing true claims all of which are founded ontologically on their own brands of metaphysics Geertz concedes important differences exist. He does this largely to contribute to an argument that was dear to his paid profession namely that anthropology should be recognized legitimately as a social science and not merely a rehash of ideologies.

This of course presents quite a pickle that can be best understood materialistically as one of the key differences separating Geertz and Marx i. e. the former enjoyed fame and privilege at Princeton while the latter labored through exile in public spaces under conditions that might best be described as "unemployed." This distinction would not have been lost on Marx and it should be foremost in the mind of a Marxist that Geertz as one of America's leading intellectuals during the Cold War was above all a preeminent don of the same. The implication here should be clear: either Geertz licked the hand that fed him even if we conclude that it was his own hand.

Nevertheless Geertz was far too sophisticated to be considered naïve and he cannot be held responsible for all the liberal tendencies of the various forms of postmodern theory that came after him even though many consider him to be the father of postmodern anthropology and rightly so. To be fair his criticism of Claude Levi-Strauss' ambition to find the authentic pristine other particularly in remote fieldwork in Brazil as one in which he always found himself instead (*a la* wherever he went there he was) remains a devastating critique. Geertz's rejection of Marxism and his overly-narrow identification of Levi-Strauss with the same which despite Geertz's thick intellectualism appears to be little more than a personal political polemic neglects one of the most crucial elements of

Marxist thinking: recognizing and addressing the problem of immanent critique.

It should be noted that Geertz became known as a leading Indonesianist by way of his fieldwork in what was already becoming the tourist trap known as Bali where the performance of culture was already being recast in commodity forms for a global marketplace. In an increasingly globalized world one might conclude that the increasingly totalizing hegemony of capitalism had reached such an extent that immanent critique if it was even ever possible was now meaningless and passé. Such a stance was convenient and perhaps reasonable in an increasingly postmodern world but it is hard to reconcile with Geertz's major "blind spot" as Ben White noted critically i. e. his failure to acknowledge what was happening throughout Indonesia namely homicidal pogroms against people of Chinese descent Communists minorities and those among the lower economic classes who were regarded as threats or merely potential threats to powerful elites. Furthermore as White makes clear Geertz valorized what he termed "local knowledge" it became impossible for him to acknowledge larger developments even when it was clear that the local was quickly becoming global and vice versa.

The problematic of immanent critique in Marx is easy to miss given the convolutions of later Marxisms. Consequently it's understandable that Geertz missed it because only a serious scholar of Marx would have known it and among those even fewer would have properly understood it although Geertz's contemporaries in the Frankfurt School could have taught him a thing or two about such matters for sure. In short the problem of immanent critique and its solution is best addressed in the "Afterward of the Second German Edition" of the first volume of *Capital* where Marx discusses his dialectical method and how it differs from Hegel's. These passages are well known of course but they are rarely understood in part because doing so requires modifying substantially Marx's comments on material foundations of consciousness found in *The German Ideology* comments which so many Marxists even today still take as a fundamental expression of the mature "scientific" Marx.

We can say it is best addressed by Marx in the "Afterword" but unfortunately the comments are highly condensed and interestingly figurative. What they offer to the careful reader who hasn't sworn allegiance to *The German Ideology* however is a double movement. The first is the recognition that Hegel discovered the dialectic through its absence through his histories of philosophy or idea. This is to say that Hegel discovers and expresses dialectics from an idealistic perspective. Marx contrarily discovers the dialectic from his studies of economic i. e. the material base. And what he discovers is that capitalism emerges and appears sensible due significantly to the absence of dialectical thought. This of course erodes the rather totalizing and deterministic position accorded the material base in *The German Ideology* but on the whole this dialectical materialism still privileges that base.

The reason "bourgeois economists" as Marx describes them are unable to criticize capitalism is because their field of study "economics" is predicated on the same logic as capitalism and it's the same logic that underpins the various other super-structural concepts that define being including individualism nationalism rationality Protestantism and so on. The solution that Marx reaches as his late notebooks circa 1859 indicate and initially very reluctantly is to resort to that logic — the dialectic — that resides outside that logic that is absent and has made these various -isms seem sensible amid their contradictions and for workers particularly debilitating features. This is what bourgeois economists are unable to address effectively and generally ignore and the same is true for bourgeois anthropologists like Geertz.

Conclusion

The basic arguments advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno appear to have been strengthened over

the course the advancement of the the culture industry up to and including the present-day. The appearance of a major generational gap in China starting with the 90s generation and accelerating still with the 00s suggests that accelerated economic changes in tandem with fast moving highly accessible media and associated technologies have established in these younger Chinese generations the sort of reified market consciousness that rife with alienation would not be alien to Marx or the Frankfurt School.

These developments should not surprise us. But they should cause us to evaluate more carefully causes versus symptoms including origins and whether solutions can be imagined at this stage.

It is clear that many in China worry about media and focus especially on problems associated with soft power. It is also clear there is a tradition one that is not fundamentally at odds with Benjamin's optimism and that extends back to Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature" (1942) which held that art and literature could and must be used to foster socialist consciousness among the masses. We have seen the great efforts that were invested in creating such art and literature reaching an apotheosis of sorts during the Cultural Revolution. And yet if Horkheimer and Adorno are right and further if Marx is right such developments including as they transpired in China would have been counterproductive for two basic reasons.

First as Horkheimer and Adorno argued these industrialized forms of art and the propaganda art of that era of Chinese history was certainly industrialized and mass produced carry internally the logic of such industry — a logic that is the same one underpinning capitalism. Second these developments in China were part and parcel with nationalism — indeed Mao's revolution and inclusion of the peasants provided the solution to the so-called national problem that had eluded both the Qing and the Kuomintang. But again as Marx understood nationalism is also based on the same

logic of capitalism. To say this another way and the obvious provocation is intended — the nationalist road is the capitalist road. Indeed I suggest that it is in this context that we might recall Wu Yiching's equally provocative description of the Cultural Revolution as the mid-wife of Chinese capitalism (Wu 238) and that we might also reread the first chapter of Wu Guanjun's *The Great Dragon Fantasy* (2014) where he details in part the new nationalism that accelerated with and through pop culture in the early days of reform and opening up (which none seems to recall was started by Mao in 1968 moments after declaring the Cultural Revolution finished but not really gathering momentum until 1971 when Henry Kissinger first visited).

There are many other matters to consider here but they cannot be exhausted in a brief essay. For example since China has been faced with the totalizing advances well-known to market forces it is not surprising to find such forces at work at the margins of Chinese society. And when these margins are literally at the margins of the nation-state both culturally and politically at the frontiers of the borderlands the push-pull aspects can become acute offering case studies illustrating every concern discussed thus far. For example one can point as Wu Mei and Ong Thao (2019) do to the case of the Poya-songbook from the Zhuang community near Funing County Yunnan near the border with Vietnam and the various efforts under the rubric of cataloguing and protecting "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) while promoting inauthentic products of the same in the name of commercialization tourism intellectual property rights national-market assimilation and so on.

Often ICH efforts in China such as these are framed as trying to undo in part damage done during the Cultural Revolution to traditional cultural practices art and so on. This can be a politically convenient and even a valid point as the damage done during that period was tremendous and has been acknowledged. But too often such narratives

miss or intentionally obscure a more complicated reality.

First they play into the common mistake of representing the movement from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping as a major rupture between opposing values. This neglects of course the great number of continuities between them and above all it neglects the fact that the biggest continuity between them is the Party's nation-building project of which Mao is the primary architect and upon which Deng builds. Indeed recalling Marx's understanding that nationalism is itself predicated on the same logic as capitalism it should not be surprising to find Deng moving "logically" to a "socialist market" economy as the next phase of national development. It is through this critical perspective that the second point can be discerned.

Secondly while the Cultural Revolution did produce cultural destruction in fact this had a legacy going back to the Kuomintang and it is uncertain now to whom a lot of the evidence that is held up today should be traced. To complicate matters further the Cultural Revolution also *produced* culture and quite a bit of it which is still valued today by many of that generation. Finally many minorities in ethnographic research indicate a nostalgia for the Mao years. While they acknowledge positively the material advances they and the country have achieved they also decry the increasing totality of a market-oriented materialist culture. By extension ICH and related schemes as well as other forms of commodified culture are susceptible to the same criticism insomuch as they amount to a market based approach that commodifies culture and ethnic being in ways that positively reinforce the national polis and economy. As some have become culture workers consigned to produce cultural products within the market we should not be surprised that they have found these experiences to be somewhat alienating and inauthentic in other words quite the opposite what such performances generally promise their consumers. Does this raise the possibility that such activities are even more destructive than those that came before or merely advancing the same but ever more deeply?

Quite separately in the United States we might recall a similar concern has preoccupied Paul Gilroy who noted that African American civil rights movements were fueled in large measure by progressive popular music but that these have in turn degenerated into an exploitative culture industry in which musical forms like hip hop have become in many examples the loudest if not most vulgar manifestos for consumer culture (Gilroy). One must wonder if this was not always already a problem and whether civil rights were always to be defined in terms consistent with property rights.

One of the most trenchant criticisms of Marxism is whether it valorizes proletarianization and whether this normalizes the creation of a class that ultimately serves as a flytrap of capitalist reification. Of course for Marx writing in England in the nineteenth century the working class was already a reality and the aim was to foster a critical class consciousness that could in turn lead to global revolution. Whether or not we have reached such a threshold yet or that we should encourage one is a matter of considerable concern especially in the age of deepening technology fetishes post-humanity and ecological ruin. And whether art and literature can and should have anything to do with fostering a critical consciousness that might improve versus worsen conditions deserves extreme caution bordering on Adorno-like pessimism that the metaphysics of capitalism is not so easily exorcised. The legions of transfixed faces illuminated by clutched screens are already compelling testimony.

Notes

① This paper grew out of "The Culture Industry Revisited: Soft Power and the Metaphysics of Capitalism" a conference paper presented at the International Conference on Art Literature and Politics in a New Era at East China Normal University Shanghai May 12 2019.

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Title: Narrative Reliability and Literary Authenticity

Abstract: Narrative reliability focuses on specific textual strategies while literary authenticity highlights the overall effect of presentation. In terms of rhetoric the former reflects the rhetorical strategy of the implied author through the narrator so that the latter can be guaranteed on the narrative level. In terms of cognition narrative reliability relies on the reader´s perspective mechanism for which literary authenticity serves as the potential basis. Considering the factor of the real author new situations regarding the narrative reliability of the implicit author´s rhetoric and the reader´s cognition will arise which leads to the diversification of literary authenticity. Given that the focus of narrative reliability and that of literary authenticity differ a complexity between narrative reliability and literary authenticity emerges: the narration is either reliable but unrealistic or unreliable but realistic. On top of that narrative reliability and literary authenticity are subject to the change of receptive context.

Keywords: narrative reliability; literary authenticity; rhetoric; cognition

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