



**ADORNO ON POPULAR CULTURE**  
**ROBERT W. WITKIN**

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## ADORNO ON POPULAR CULTURE

In the decades since his death, Adorno's thinking has lost none of its capacity to unsettle the settled, and has proved hugely influential in social and cultural thought. To most people, the entertainment provided by television, radio, film, newspapers, astrology charts and CD players seems harmless enough. For Adorno, however, the culture industry that produces them is ultimately toxic in its effect on the social process. He argues that modern mass entertainment is manufactured under conditions that reflect the interests of producers and the market, both of which demand the domination and manipulation of mass consciousness.

Here Robert W. Witkin unpacks Adorno's notoriously difficult critique of popular culture in an engaging and accessible style. Looking first at its grounding in a wider theory of the totalitarian tendencies of late capitalist society, he then goes on to examine, in some detail, Adorno's writing on specific aspects of popular culture such as astrology, radio, film, television, popular music and jazz. He concludes with his own critical reflections on Adorno's cultural theory.

This book will be essential reading for students of the sociology of culture, of cultural studies, and of critical theory more generally.

**Robert W. Witkin** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter and is the author of *Adorno on Music* (1998) and *Art and Social Structure* (1995).

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# ADORNO ON POPULAR CULTURE

*Robert W. Witkin*

First published 2003

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

**This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.**

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Witkin, Robert W. (Robert Winston)

Adorno on popular culture / Robert W. Witkin.

p. cm. – (International library of sociology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Adorno, Theodor W., 1903–1969. 2. Popular culture.

I. Title. II. Series.

B3199.A34 W58 2002

306'.092–dc21

2002069895

ISBN 0-203-16606-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-26067-8 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0-415-26824-9 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-26825-7 (pbk)

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## PREFACE

*Adorno on Popular Culture* completes a critical review of Adorno's writings on culture that began with the publication of my earlier book *Adorno on Music*. I would like to express my thanks to my good friend, Chris Rojek for his encouragement to me personally and his enthusiasm for the writings of Adorno. I am grateful to Mari Shullaw, the senior sociology editor at Routledge who agreed to take the project on and to find a space for the new volume in the ILS. Finally, I wish to express my thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for the award of a Major Research Fellowship (2001–3) which has provided me with a period of sustained research and writing time.

Most of the chapters of the present text centre themselves around a reading of an article – sometimes more than one – or a chapter of a book by Adorno. This was also the method of *Adorno on Music*. In both volumes, I opted to undertake a close reading of primary texts and to preserve, for the reader, so far as is possible, the sustained theoretical tension of Adorno's argumentation in the specific writings chosen for discussion. There is inevitably a certain degree of thematic overlap among topics but that, too, is a feature of Adorno's own writings which, like the music he admires, develop a great many variations from a very few basic themes.

It would be wrong, however, to see this book as a straightforward exposition of Adorno's ideas. Notwithstanding the care I have taken to capture his line of argumentation, I have always had an agenda of my own that drives my interest in his writings. It will be apparent to the reader at key points in the text; for example, where I juxtapose Adorno's ideas with those of others – none of them, with the exception of Benjamin, is selected from the pantheon of theorists with whom he is usually associated. Some of these juxtapositions reveal the wider associations of Adorno's cultural critique with the work of American critics, for example, David Riesman. Adorno is also confronted with himself in other guises as in the chapter in which a connection is drawn between the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Wagner's *Ring* cycle. In the chapter on Popular Music Adorno's arguments are brought up against the very different and in many ways opposed views of Winthrop

Sargeant, the jazz critic that Adorno himself repeatedly cited in support of his ideas. Adorno is also confronted with the very different ideas of Benjamin concerning the work of art in the modern age, ideas that open the way to a critique of Adorno's theory of popular culture. It is in the last two chapters, however, that I have taken the most theoretical licence, developing a critical approach to Adorno's thesis concerning popular culture through pursuing my own agenda in the sociology of art. In Chapter 10 I have brought Adorno's work on radio and film into relationship with two 'movies' that deal with popular culture of the period in which Adorno was writing, Woody Allen's *Radio Days* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. In the final chapter, I have drawn even more directly on my own theorizing in order to put Adorno's ideas under a degree of critical pressure and to complete the process of 'walking a critical line' that I began in the final chapter of the previous volume.

There are other secondary works, many of them excellent, that discuss Adorno's ideas on popular culture and music. There are books, too, that locate his ideas in the discourse universes of Marxism and Critical Theory to which he clearly belongs. If I have chosen a different approach to his work, it is largely because my method has been to narrow my focus in the exposition to a fresh reading of primary texts. Nevertheless, the secondary literature on Adorno has most certainly helped to shape my understanding of his work. In this regard, no-one will be surprised to see me name the following as those whose books have personally influenced me the most: Rose Subotnik (1990, 1996), Max Halle Paddison (1993), Martin Jay (1973), Susan Buck-Morss (1977), Gillian Rose (1978), Jay Bernstein (1993). There are other excellent secondary sources in addition to these (see Deborah Cook 1996).

Notwithstanding the critical agenda that is carried both implicitly throughout and explicitly in the latter part of this book – and the disagreements I have with Adorno, which are significant, perhaps fundamental – it will not escape the reader that this book, like its predecessor, is a critical appreciation of Adorno's ideas with the accent on 'appreciation'. I have learned too much from him for it to be otherwise.

Robert Witkin  
Exeter, January 2002

## CULTURAL NEMESIS

In the decades since his death, Adorno's thinking has lost none of its capacity to unsettle the settled, to discomfort those who believe, implicitly or explicitly, that the world can be mastered, or even that they have a secure home in it. Adorno struck out against modern popular culture in all its forms. He spared nothing in his relentless critique. To most people, the comforts at the heart of modern living, the entertainment provided by television, radio, film, newspapers, astrology charts and CD players seem harmless enough. The 'media' give pleasure, put people in touch with the wider world, provide amusement, excitement and entertainment, improve the access of all social classes to what were hitherto the cultural goods of the rich, relieve the boredom and loneliness of living alone and so forth. The best of their contents are genuinely 'popular'. For Adorno, however, this popularity becomes part of the object of criticism. He challenges the notion that the elements of popular culture are harmless. He insists on treating popular culture as a deadly serious business, as something that is ultimately toxic in its effects on the social process. If the defenders of popular culture have not been persuaded by Adorno, they have often been discomforted by him, and his thesis, like a bone in the throat, still commands their attention.

To appreciate the force of Adorno's critique of popular culture, however, it is necessary to set on one side all those easy judgements to the effect that his is a snobbish reaction to the vulgarity of popular art advanced by a devotee of so-called high art. What Adorno offers is not a judgement of taste but a theory concerning the moral and political projects inhering in both 'serious' and 'popular' art. It is not even true to say that he was incapable of appreciating any popular culture. He was certainly responsive to the films of Chaplin and to the anarchistic humour of the Marx Brothers. And it is clear from his writings that he kept abreast of developments in the major media – films, radio, television and advertising. The odd comment betrays certain implicit preferences – for the screen personality of Greta Garbo, for example. Nor did Adorno fail to recognize that there were highly skilled and talented

artists and musicians working in the culture industries. However, it was not skill or talent that mattered to him, here, but the interests it served and the uses to which it was put.

Adorno took all art – and that includes the art produced by the culture industries – very seriously. Many of his critics regard them less seriously than he does and, to them, his judgements are more likely to seem extreme or unwarranted. He preferred the term ‘culture industry’ and even ‘mass culture’ to that of ‘popular art’ or ‘popular culture’. The latter terms carried a connotation of ‘coming from the people’. The products of the culture industry, in Adorno’s view, did not come from the people, were not an expression of the life-process of individuals or communities but were manufactured and disseminated under conditions that reflected the interests of the producers and the exigencies of the market, both of which demanded the domination and manipulation of mass consciousness. The disparity in power between the individual and the rational-technical monolith of modern capitalism that dominated every waking and sleeping moment was at the heart of his preoccupations. The machinery of this administered world operated to disempower those whom it organized. This was true for the individual at work, where the advances of the micro-division of labour were making each individual into a more or less de-skilled and disempowered cog in the machine; it was true, too, for the individual in his leisure time, where the Hollywood dream machine, radio and television, Tin Pan Alley and the music industry, were disempowering him further, rendering him even more conformist and dependent. The entertainment industry directed its appeal to the more regressive features of a collective narcissism. Adorno did not deny that people desired the products of the culture industry. He simply saw that desire as an index of the pathology of modern society, as capitulation to the domination of a total machinery. For the individual to resist this process is difficult. It requires both an appreciation of the fact that it is actually happening and some understanding of how it all works. Today, as Martin Jay has argued, we should perhaps view Adorno’s writings on popular culture as prototypical deconstructions (Jay 1984).

The theoretical roots of Adorno’s thesis concerning popular culture are as wide as they are deep. He was a sophisticated philosopher, steeped in German idealist philosophy, writing critically about the philosophies of Hegel, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Husserl, etc. He was a serious musician and composer, a pupil of Alban Berg and a member of the circle of composers and musicians surrounding Arnold Schoenberg. He was a Marxist sociologist (albeit an unorthodox one) and together with Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt Institute, developed the critical theory of modern culture along Marxist lines. He was also a student of psychology and a Freudian thinker (again, an unorthodox one) who developed a Freudian analysis of modern character. The strength of his theoretical contribution owes a great deal to the originality with which he traced pathways between

the central themes of German idealist philosophy, Marxist sociology and Freudian psychopathology.

Those persistent themes of Adorno's critique of modern culture – the commodification, fetishization and standardization of its products, together with the authoritarian submissiveness, irrationality, conformity, ego-weakness and dependency behaviour of its recipients – are developed by him in ways that forge tacit links among diverse theoretical sources, making, for example, the theory of 'commodity fetishism' from a Marxist point of view continuous with ideas about authoritarianism in a Freudian context. Adorno does not attempt to unify theories, to create some kind of master system that subsumes them all. That would be a betrayal of his version of dialectical method. If we liken theoretical systems to an archipelago, then Adorno's links are the pathways traced by the movement of his thinking as it charts its own course between the separate islands. Nevertheless, his restless theoretical work in charting this course effectively develops, albeit tacitly, a unified theory of art and social formation; one that maps the ground between the structuration of social, political and economic relations and their psychic correlates in the consciousness of individuals.

### Alienation

In so-called simple societies, where goods are produced by families and communities in the process of providing for known local needs and for realizing and sustaining a traditional way of life, an individual could see the life-process of his or her community reflected in the goods produced. A pot or a spear in such a society would not appear to consciousness as a thing detached from the social relations involved in its production; those relations – aesthetic, political and religious as well as instrumental – would fill out such objects as their spiritual core.

In Marx's analysis of capitalism, the objects 'manufactured' are *commodities*. They are not the outcome of any such 'organic' social process; they are not the expression or realization of the life-process of genuine 'communities' nor of the life-process of the individual labourers whose labour power is utilized for their manufacture (Marx 1986: 31–78). The development of capitalism demands, in the interests of a relentless pursuit of economic efficiency, a progressive de-sociation and de-skilling of labour. The process of production comes to be initiated, ordered and controlled not by the direct producers but by the production system that keeps them employed. Workers become 'appendages' to this system, estranged from the product of their labour. They do not choose it, nor does it express their social being. Work is progressively de-skilled and each individual performs routinized, atomized and meaningless tasks at a pace and under conditions s/he does not control. These atomized performances become the elementary particles of a system of production, external to the subject that has garnered to itself all power of initiative,

design and control. Finally, workers are estranged from their fellow workers. The organic ties that should bind workers in a genuine process of social cooperation have been destroyed and with them the basis of mutual respect and a spirit of 'community'.

### Fetish-consciousness

It is this radical disjunction between the subject and the objects that are made through him but not by him that is the key factor in the alienation of man from the world of commodities. Marx's depiction of alienated consciousness can be referred to Vico's epistemological principle advanced a century earlier, which proclaimed that the only things of which one can be said to have true knowledge or understanding are those things which one has made oneself. Capitalism is portrayed by Marx as a system that progressively destroys the individual's sense of himself as participating in ordering, shaping and making his world. To that extent, the world is opaque to the subject. What stands apart from us in our consciousness – what is 'alien' – appears self-possessed and *sui generis* and ceases, as a consequence, to be 'historical'; it becomes a fetish-object. Its qualities and powers are projected onto it by individuals who then submit to them as though they truly were powers originating outside themselves. The desire of the individual registers as the power of the object over him, his dependency upon it. From here it is easy to move into the Freudian realm of psychopathology and to see, from Adorno's perspective, that psychoses and even illnesses such as schizophrenia can be assimilated to a discourse of capitalist economic relations and alienation.

The system of consumption is no less authoritarian than the system of production. It, too, is not answerable to the subjects whose lives it shapes. Submissiveness and dependency is demanded of individuals both at work and in leisure. The appeal of the (desociated) fetish-object is always to the de-sociated consumer. It reinforces the narcissism of the individual whose ego-weakness and dependency is a manifestation of the loss of any formative or constructive power in relation to commodities. The consumer submits to the 'appeal' of commodities, to the effects they can work upon him as a de-sociated body, but lacks power over them; lacks the power, that is, to express or realize his life-process in them. The object's gain in power here is the subject's loss. The subject responds rigidly to fetish-objects (stimulus-response fashion) and every response becomes a more or less reliable and predictable reflex.

The psychological correlates of fetish-consciousness are the counterpart of the socio-economic form of capitalist social relations. Products are standardized; the response of the consumer to the product is presupposed in the design of the product. It could not be otherwise unless the recipients were to be freely involved in the creation of the product and they are not. Marketization does not encourage self-expression but is its antithesis; it

maximizes predictability and repeatability. The system of production thus manipulates and controls the psyches of those who must make it work both as producers and as consumers; as a consequence, the individual ends up disempowered in both domains.

In the modern world, the entertainment industry, radio, television, jazz and popular music as well as film, variety, etc., had become central to everyday life. Adorno believed that all these media helped to reinforce the regressive and dependent personality. Show business was taken seriously by the masses and its stars fetishized and 'hero-worshipped'. The repetitive and formulaic character of cultural goods, their utter standardization, makes them more 'cosy' and predictable and capable of answering to the individual's need for security and for meeting the producer's need for predicatability in the market.

### Domination

While Adorno subscribed to Marxist ideas about the economy and about the exploitative relations of capitalism, exploitation in the more limited economic sense is less a key concept for Adorno than is the broader notion of 'domination'. In his major writings, and especially (with Horkheimer) in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979), he subsumes the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of man by man in the concept of *domination*. The latter is not restricted in its application to descriptions of modern capitalist societies but is used to categorize social relationships in societies that are neither modern nor capitalist. The formula Adorno resorts to is simple enough. Nature is experienced as overwhelmingly powerful and humankind as weak. In an effort to turn the tables and to dominate nature, society organizes itself as an instrument of domination. It achieves this by taking the principle of domination into its internal relations – man's domination of man. These antagonistic relations manifest at an ideological level in mythology and in art. Domination takes root in the psyche as fetishized authority; it is built into the psychology – the intra-psychoic constitution – of the individual. In its efforts to free itself from the domination of nature, mankind ends up as the victim of its own pursuit of self-mastery.

With the development of science and technology and the disenchantment of the world, the principle of domination becomes more or less total. It becomes possible to dream of a purely rational and technical organization of society purged of all non-rational factors. Even subjective desires and needs can be gratified, but only when assimilated to a means–end rationality and brought within a totally instrumental order. At the extreme, conformity is demanded of all and each individual is rendered maximally dependent and submissive. Intelligence, skill, initiative and control drain from the life-process of the subject and reappear, transmuted, in the sterile operations of the vast administrative machinery that commands both the working day and the leisured night.

Adorno's Marxism was unorthodox, even heretical. Antagonistic relations were seen as characteristic of all societies; they were not restricted to capitalist societies but embraced state-socialist and communist societies. Like Weber, Adorno places the emphasis on the development of administrative machineries through which societies seek to exercise their wills. In the age of communist revolutions he had no faith in the view that 'communist' societies were anything other than tyrannies; nor did he believe that a working-class revolution was even likely, let alone inevitable, nor that such a revolution, if it occurred, would liberate the world from the totalitarian threat. The development of the so-called free world led, in his view, in the very opposite direction to that indicated by its ideology. In reality, liberal democracies were subject to an inherent totalizing tendency that was antithetical to the ideal of a social order driven from below; an order that is susceptible to its constitutive members who, in turn, are susceptible to each other and to the social whole which they, together, are in the process of forming.

### Adorno's structuration model

At the heart of Adorno's critique of radio, film, jazz, variety theatre and popular culture of all kinds is what he and so many modernist writers and artists of his generation perceived as a crisis of the 'subject' and of 'subjectivity' in the modern world; the sense, widespread among contemporary intellectuals, of a subjectivity increasingly overwhelmed and absorbed by the all-powerful machinery of the 'totally administered' society. Anxiety and doubt about the spiritual well-being of the subject extended to all modern societies, no matter how politically benign they might appear to be. That spark of personal initiative, of spontaneity and expressivity in social life and relations, was being crushed, in the view of these critics, by a monolithic capitalism rushing headlong towards a totalitarian future. In the totally administered society, the system is master and each individual member is a manipulated cog; every response is programmed by the machine, all is calculated and prefigured, including pleasure. The direction of determination and force in such a system is from above, from the totality or collectivity and not from below, from the free movement of the elements or individuals themselves. Huxley, Orwell and others had already imaginatively explored variants of such a future in their famous dystopias. The stark choice confronting those individuals who were still considered to have a choice in late capitalist society was either to resist being assimilated (thereby securing, through critical force, the continued existence of the subject), or to throw in one's lot with the collective 'machine', thereby sacrificing one's life as an expressive subject in the delusion that identification with the machine would permit one both to escape the threat to oneself that it posed and, vicariously, to share in its power.

Adorno takes it for granted that the arts, both 'serious' and popular, are constitutive elements in the formation of mind and spirit. Such a claim had been a pillar of the German Romantic reaction to the French Enlightenment from the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth. It was a pivotal element in Adorno's intellectual heritage and it is key to both his aesthetic theory and his critique of popular culture. The equating of art with knowledge is not meant to suggest that art provides a propositional knowledge of the world. The implication is, rather, that works of art inscribe the condition and experience of the human subject; they constitute an understanding that is at once sensuous, affective and spiritual. To know, in this sense, is to 'form' a 'being', to become, and is thus equivalent to the self-understanding and self-development of the subject. His theory effectively polarizes art works, indeed cultural forms generally, by dividing them between two categories, those that speak to the self-formation of the subject and those that undermine any such process. The latter displace the social process of self-formation with a 'sensationism' that impacts upon and 'manipulates' the consciousness of the subject, thereby reinforcing egoism and narcissism in modern society.

Notwithstanding his style of writing, his dialectical thinking and his sometimes surprising turns of argument, Adorno was profoundly structured and 'structural' in his thinking. There is a basic formulation of part-whole relations, a set of fundamental conditions, that recurs in all his discussions of forms and structures, from social systems to musical structures such as the sonata-allegro or the rondo. The state of part-whole relations that Adorno viewed as healthy, was one in which the whole structure – for example, a society or a work of art – develops out of the interactions among its elements. The elements in such a structuration are all open and responsive to each other, changing each other and being changed by each other, thereby giving rise to the totality that is the outcome of these relations and which remains responsive to them. While Adorno's ideal of freedom rests upon the free and spontaneous movement of the parts – the individuals in a social system or the musical motives in a sonata – it also rests on the responsiveness of the parts or elements to each other, their mutual susceptibility.

These two aspects are inseparable in his approach to structuration. Freedom, in Adorno's theoretic, is grounded in the sociation of individuals. It is in and through relations with others that the individual develops a substance, a solidity or plenitude. The individual in the sense of an isolated and dissociated monad lacks all substance, all power of self-determination and self-understanding, and can only be conceived of as a kind of emptiness. A genuine sociality (this is something differing from and opposed to certain forms of what might be called false sociality or even pseudo-sociality such as 'joining-in', 'fashion-following' or 'social conformity') is the defining characteristic of Adorno's 'individual'.

Because Adorno's ideal individual is formed in and through social relations in which s/he changes others as others change her, the idea of individuation is inseparable from the notion of the historical. At any given point in time, the individual is the precipitate of all the social relations in the past that have gone into its making. Each individual or element carries within – in its very constitution – a congealed history that is undergoing further development in the present; that is through answering to problems in the present. Congealed history – as an inner 'suspense' within each individual – has its own kinetic force, lending direction and tendency, a reflexive project, to the movements and actions of the individual. However, that very same social and historical development may itself bring about new social conditions which effectively undermine the liberty of the individual to develop freely in relations with others and which thus make it impossible for him to express his historically constituted subjectivity. It is this latter impediment, conceived of as central to modernity, to which Adorno's critical theory is addressed.

Adorno therefore has a structural standard or ideal by which to measure the truth-value and moral integrity of social structures and of cultural forms. We can define his ideal as that of a social system constituted from below by the mutual susceptibility of individuals to one another in interactional relations from which a social whole is continuously emergent and in which there is a mutual and reflexive susceptibility between this emergent whole and the individuals who constitute it. All such relations are *historical* in character and carry within them the precipitates of past relations that make their claim on the present. To the extent that these conditions are met, the consciousness of the world to which they give rise has truth-value and is not distorted because all the constitutive relations of the system as a whole enter into the formation of that consciousness and mediate all knowledge and all cultural forms. This ideal (utopian) social system has integrity. Its relations are non-antagonistic and non-dominating, a product of autonomy. (Domination and antagonism, in Adorno's philosophy, are the product of heteronomy, of the imposition of an external force that is not susceptible to those subject to it.)

### Taylorism

The antithesis of Adorno's utopian structuration is the model of productive relations offered by Taylor's principles of scientific management (Taylor 1947). The ideal here is that of a system that imposes order on its constituent members from above. Individual workers are de-skilled and the labour process atomized to the point where individuals are no longer connected through meaningful interactions with others in producing goods but are, in the extreme, co-actional units performing operations that are mechanically sequenced and ordered from above. Mutual susceptibility of the individuals who make up the discrete units is minimized. They are not

involved in an interactional project through which each changes and is changed by others. Nor is the organization as a whole the outcome of the actions and interactions of its constituent members. Authority is heteronomous, imposed from above. Skill and intelligence of the individual worker has been carefully designed out of this ideal system together with all autonomy, organic interaction and the historical element that such interaction carries within it. To the extent that Taylor's principles of scientific management are actually met in practice, they give rise to a consciousness, which, in Adorno's terms, lacks truth-value. Consciousness is distorted to the extent that the constitutive relations of the system as a whole do not enter into its formation and thus do not mediate experience of the system. The system lacks moral integrity, in Adorno's terms, for the same reasons. Its relations are the product of heteronomy, of the imposition of an external force that is not susceptible to being changed from below.

Works of art and culture are the products of social praxis. Insofar as such forms provide a medium of reflection on social praxis and on the human condition, they do so only to the extent that they incorporate the principles of structuration governing social action generally, in their formation. This will always be the case whether such cultural developments are progressive or reactionary. What is of critical importance to Adorno is the matter of how the principles of structuration governing the social order are inscribed in cultural artifacts. Depending upon the orientation of the artist, their inscription may serve either to reinforce the lack of moral integrity and truth-value that inheres in the social order or they may, on the contrary, provide a true understanding of both social praxis and the human condition. In the age of administration and scientific management, the only art that could possess truth-value would be one that took this atomizing process into itself and used it as a coded language of suffering; as a vehicle for expressing the life-process that had been mutilated by it.

### Music and society

It is hardly possible to understand Adorno's critique of modern culture and of popular culture, especially, without taking into account the extent of his commitment to this formal model of structuration. When he attacks jazz or films or variety entertainment he is always deploying it, albeit sometimes in a tacit rather than explicitly formulated way. Adorno's commitment in his writing and rhetoric to an anti-system philosophy, to a 'musique informelle' ought not to deceive the reader into believing that structuration and formation, in the sense of an ideal systematics, is not central to his thinking and analyses of culture. On the contrary, it is from this structural underpinning that he generates the model of freedom and spontaneity on which his anti-system philosophy is built. There is some real value, therefore, in making the structuration model that Adorno privileged, throughout four

decades of academic writing, our point of entry into his texts, not simply because it allows us to set aside, for the present, the labyrinthine complexities of the originating discourses, but because it is Adorno's way of thinking structural relations that is the key to all his work. It provides a link between his papers on the theory of pseudo-culture, the culture industry, popular culture and jazz as well as his papers on television, radio, film, comedy and music in the classical tradition. Through exploring the homology that he establishes between part-whole relations in society, on the one hand, and part-whole relations in musical structures, on the other, we can gain an understanding of Adorno's treatment of culture generally.

The central antinomy of a bourgeois society, in Adorno's philosophy, is the conflict between individual freedom and societal constraint. Corresponding to individuals, in his musicology are the basic elements of a composition, the musical 'motives' or, at the extreme, the individual tones that make up a composition; corresponding to the society is the developed composition, the musical totality which is formed by relations among these elements. Just as individuals, as social subjects in relations with others, undergo development (biography) and in their mutual relations bring about the development of society (history), so, too, in a nineteenth-century classical musical composition such as a Beethoven symphony, the basic elements – the musical 'motives' – undergo development through being repeated, varied and juxtaposed, and contribute to the development of the composition as a whole. In both society and music (considered *ideally*), the process described is a fully temporal and historical one. In each case there is a dialectical unfolding of relations in which consequents and antecedents are *necessarily* connected – develop out of one another, push one another – and are not merely co-incidental.

The parallel between music and society should not be seen as an unmediated one, however. Music is not of a different order but is part of social praxis. Its material has been socially formed. Social relations and social organization are congealed in it. When Adorno attacks Jazz (Witkin 2000), for example, or the music of Stravinsky (Adorno 1980, 1992), he is not merely making a judgement of taste; he is condemning these musics because, in their inner cells, in their motivic elements and notes, the principle of a dialectical working out of relations in which consequents develop out of antecedents (that is, of a fully historical or temporal process), has been replaced by one in which relations among elements are co-incidental, their co-presence reflecting only their instrumental value, the effects they bring about in the body of the recipient. An art that aims to transform itself into an instrument for the construction of *effects* has turned its back on history, on the living process of life. Such an art no longer serves the self-development of the subject. It is an art that has lost all distance and autonomy in relation to collective forces; it has become their instrument. It does not bring its order out of itself but orders itself in complete conformity with the effects it is 'impelled' to bring about,

extinguishing everything within itself that is not in conformity with these effects.

For Adorno, art is not a moral good simply because people are entertained or diverted by it or because they obtain excitement or pleasure from it, but because it sustains the subject and, therefore, the spiritual element in life. Conversely, in his view, an art that extinguishes the subject, and with it the spiritual, is a moral evil. Adorno draws the contrast as starkly as that. The transmuting of the living process of life into an instrument for the construction of 'effects' that are produced within individuals through working upon them is equivalent to the perfection of a machinery of domination, of exploitation. An agency that aims at the total domination of its objects only achieves its aims through dominating itself, through extinguishing everything within itself that does not serve an instrumental purpose. It thus becomes its own victim; the would-be liberator ends up enslaving itself. It is the living subject that is overcome, annihilated in the securing of a totalitarian command of the world. This theme runs throughout Adorno's work like an iron seam.

This ideal of a structuration from below informs all of Adorno's music studies. At an ideological level its exemplification is classical sonata-form as perfected in the music of Beethoven. The musical motives and themes that constitute the elements of the sonata-allegro, as a form, are introduced, at the outset of the composition, like the characters in a play. They undergo variation in the development section and finally return in the recapitulation that reflects the development undergone, restoring the equilibrium disturbed by that development. The thrust of Adorno's critique of music and of popular culture is directed towards finding, in the very structuration of art works as texts, analogues of both the process of becoming, that is, of (social) self-formation, and of its antithesis. The use of sonata-form in classical music then becomes an object of special theoretical attention, for example, as does the use of rondo-form in jazz. The structural relations among elements – part–part and part–whole relations – become charged, in Adorno's theory with epistemological and semiotic significance and are integrated into a theory of social formation. The sonata-allegro thus models an historical process in which the elements, themselves historically grounded, developing through their mutual relations, give rise to the larger whole with which each is identified. It, too, is a form of bourgeois ideology.

Adorno never relinquished the concept of identity at an ideological level. The longing for identity between part and whole was something he held onto as a driving force in the development of his negative dialectics (Adorno 1973: 149). The longing for such an identity was to be distinguished altogether from the presumption or claim that such an identity exists. Adorno rejected as false and ideological the claims of an identity or reconciliation between individual and society, while preserving the ideal of identity as a principle governing the sociality of individuals; in the same way, he

rejected as false and ideological the claims of the sonata-allegro to bring about a reconciliation between parts and whole, while preserving the ideal of such a reconciliatory process. This is fundamental in Adorno's thinking; the longing for a reconciliation between part and whole, subject and object, individual and society, concept and thing – the longing, that is, for identity – is brought to confront the reality of the world and the experience of the pain of non-identity. The pain of non-identity is the truth about identity as surely as dissonance is the truth about harmony.

### The draining of dialectical relations

The cultural commodities of modern times, be they films, radio or television programmes or pop songs are governed by a model of formation that is the antithesis of Adorno's ideal of dialectical structuration. Whether he was analysing popular music (most noticeably, jazz) or Hollywood movies, radio, television or astrology columns, he applied the same structural logic. All of them were instances of the draining of dialectical relations from cultural forms. They corresponded to the draining of dialectical relations in the increasingly mechanized work process and in the totally administered society generally. The elements of pop songs or jazz or the Hollywood movie did not form a coherent developmental movement; they did not follow from each other as antecedents and consequents; as co-incidentals they were brought together to engender and maximize *effects* upon the psyche of the individual. The force ordering and controlling these effects was the capitalist market; it secured its own operations through disempowering both producers and consumers. Whatever aspect Adorno chooses as his point of entry in his analysis of a cultural form, you can discern his structuration model working away beneath it. Thus in his discussion of *variété*, he remarks on the fact that an apparent preparedness for something, an apparent suspense (e.g. in the act of a juggler or trapeze artist) that leaves an audience waiting for something, ends up cheating the audience of all but the waiting, the anticipation, which finally turns out to be the real object of the performance. In effect, he argues *variété* stills time and he equates it with an industrial model of production emphasizing sameness, standardization and repetition. The first audiences to attend Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* may have experienced something of this. The model that he is drawing upon to make sense of this is the structuration model concerning part-whole and part-part relations described above. When Adorno argues, in his paper 'The Radio Symphony' (see Chapter 8), that the playing of a classical symphony on the radio, effectively degrades it into a series of 'quotations' from the symphony (e.g. the tunes that the individual commits to memory and whistles) and that the symphony as such is progressively lost through this process of decay, he is again appealing to the same structuration model concerning part-whole relations and asking us to see how the culture industry inevitably destroys the

structural richness of cultural forms and replaces structural integrity with an emphasis on isolated details and sensuous features and highlights.

### Late Romantic art

There were developments in so-called serious art that Adorno saw in the same terms, and it is useful to observe the parallel. From the middle of the nineteenth century, European literature, music, theatre and art underwent a formal revolution that culminated in the varieties of avant-garde and modernist art. However, there were many creative artists, from every branch of the different arts, who did not take this direction but continued to use traditional formal means or classical 'languages' in making and composing works of art. In music, for example, there were composers who continued composing 'tonal' music that observed the strictures of the key system. In general, these artists have been a great deal more popular with the public than were avant-garde artists. Their art, music and writings appeared to be comprehensible and to *communicate*. There was a sensuous and emotional warmth to be had from art of this kind that was withheld from the typical work of avant-garde art. This was particularly true of neo-Romantic music such as that of Tchaikovsky, Elgar, or Rachmaninov. Adorno, always critical of neo-Romantic art in any of its forms, rejected as false any music that was not structurally equal to the demands made by modern times. If tonal or diatonic music had some relevance to the heroic phase of nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalism, it was because it could speak in a relevant way to the social ideals and conditions of that time. The principle governing the ideal construction of social relations was reproduced in the inner cells of the work of art. That same model, however, could not speak to the conditions of twentieth-century monopoly capitalism and the totalitarian tendencies of the administered society. Modern composers who composed in these earlier styles dealt in untruths. To Adorno, art that had truth-value had to reflect the social conditions of its time and to do so in its inner cells, in its structural relations.

Neo-Romantic art, which formally subscribes to traditional means of aesthetic construction is, in fact, significantly different from its classical forebears. Adorno argued that the differences are not superficial; they were fundamental. The structural perfection that Adorno reads into the great sonatas and symphonies of Beethoven's second-period compositions does not really have any equivalent in the music of Tchaikovsky who, nevertheless, continued to write symphonies in the grand manner and in diatonic form. Adorno argues that such music is structurally degraded. At the same time, what neo-Romantic music loses at the level of structural relations and development it seeks to compensate for at the level of distinctive features and details. It is music that, in Adorno's perspective, is structure-poor and feature-rich. Formerly the themes in music were unimportant in and of

themselves; they derived their value from the contribution they made to the development of the work as a whole. In neo-Romantic music, by contrast, there is an extreme assertion of the themes themselves for which structural relations exist merely to set them off and to set them up as well as to ornament them. This change is much more than stylistic. The emotional import of the classical Beethovenian symphony derives from the total movement of the elements and what Adorno calls the 'nothingness of the parts'. The classical experience of Romantic feeling, therefore, is produced by the dialectical and historical process that constitutes the work as a whole and not by the impression of any of its isolated moments. In the transition to neo-Romantic art, the assertion of the detail, the feature or part, leads to the latter taking upon itself the affective import that formerly belonged to the total structure. In the music of such different composers as Wagner and Rachmaninov, distinctive features and details are asserted ever more loudly, forcefully, with more posturing and acclamation and ornamentation as though the detail had not only become indistinguishable from the whole but had actually replaced it. In Adorno's analysis, an art that is devoted to the production of sensuous *effects* reduces the romantic element to pure sentimentality or sensationism. It becomes manipulative. (Films are said to be 'tear-jerkers' when they manipulate sentiment in this way.)

Adorno viewed late Romantic art as a decaying of the classical tradition and as a way-station to the culture industry. It was itself part of the culture industry. Popular art had much in common with it. It was manufactured, gift-wrapped with a hard sheen to it; its contents consisted of the sentimental residues of a defunct romanticism. The power of the culture industry to manipulate affect and subjectivity was something to be truly feared. Adorno was not claiming that it had some crude propagandist end in mind. Rather, the threat lay in the very exercise of this manipulative power and the associated dependency and conformity of the masses. It is the power of capitalism to transform the population into dependent and conformist consumers that undermines all responsibility and autonomy, and with it any formative role the subject might have in the shaping of the social world. Instead, that world increasingly approximates to a machinery and all its citizens to trained operators, prevented from ever becoming innovators. What is done to subjectivity through the medium of popular culture is seen by Adorno as an index of what is done to subjects within modern society. The decay of the organic work of art to the level of its details and features had its counterpart in the de-sociation of the individual to the level of the isolated ego. Both processes were inextricably bound up with the development of late capitalism in which the machineries of modern production, administration and consumption annihilated the expressive subject, replacing it with an existence altogether more docile, conformist and 'fit for business'.

### Concentration versus distraction

The decay of serious art and the rise of the culture industry are also associated with changes in the mode of reception. Consumers relate to cultural goods in a way that contrasts with the mode of appreciation characteristic, for example, of the devotee of classical music. The ideal-typical work of serious art can be appreciated only through entering imaginatively into the work, into the formation of its internal relations. To bring off such an entry into the formative process of a work demands concentration and absorption, whether in the reading of a novel, the watching of a play or in the concentrative listening of an audience at a philharmonic concert. This type of concentrative awareness was an attitude that Adorno identified with serious art or art that had truth-value. Popular art, on the other hand, was attended to in a deconcentrative (distractive) way – Adorno termed the listening habits associated with popular music ‘regressive listening’ (see Chapter 4) – and he viewed it as the mark of the shallowness and banality of the goods produced by the culture industry that they stimulated and reinforced a distractive absorption that made attention itself the victim of the authoritarian stimulus.

Ultimately, Adorno takes his place among the major theorists who have interpreted modernity as the expropriation of the subject – of freedom, autonomy, community and spirit – by the very ‘machineries’ that have been developed to master nature and to maximize control over material resources. As a Marxist, he believed that the economic machinery of capitalism was fundamental in this expropriation of the subject. The culture industry was part of that. In all of the texts that are discussed in this book, Adorno seeks repeatedly to analyse the ways in which the subject, and subjectivity itself, is undermined by the rising tide of popular culture and popular entertainment. To those key questions, How shall we live? What shall we do next? Adorno’s answer was to resist, to refuse identity with oppressive totalitarian forces. However, Adorno was not an activist in the crude sense. His revolutionary drive was centered on the readying of the spirit, on a strengthening of the subject, of its self-development and self-understanding, through realizing its non-identity with an antagonistic world. It was to a critical deconstruction of culture rather than an attack on economic or political institutions *per se* that he turned in his personal ‘revolution’. Adorno mistrusted action that was not in itself an expression of the life-process of the subject, a manifestation of freedom and autonomy; revolutions could also be tyrannies. Adorno’s refusal to identify with the student activists in the 1968 troubles at Frankfurt University led, shortly before his death, to the mounting of a personal and humiliating ‘demonstration’ against him, during his last lecture course, by a group of student activists.

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