New Media Art and a Contemporary Revision of the Term ‘Cultural Industry’ of Theodor Adorno

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ABSTRACT

This article examines some of the ideas that Theodor Adorno elucidated around the term “cultural industry”, compiling mainly the ideas published in the text “Aesthetic Theory” of 1970. The term “cultural industry” is also contextualized in the article with the reflections that Adorno previously exposed since 1947. Concerning the relation between art and autonomy the ideas of Adorno offer elements to understand contemporary art production. A dialog is created with the proposal of the North American theoretician and artist Martha Rosler to understand the chronological development of art before, during, and after Adorno. To conclude, the author also discusses contemporary new media art manifestations, which are analyzed through autonomy/cultural industry in relation to the proposals of the Brazilian theoretician Arlindo Machado.

Keywords: Adorno, Aesthetics, Art, Autonomy of Art, Commerce, Cultural Industry, New Media Art

INTRODUCTION

Since its mere emergency art has been asked about its autonomy in relation with its social role and with the industry. At the same time art has always been the deposit of romantic ideals and the dreamed place where to critic. Theodor Adorno was one of the pioneer authors who reflected about the relation of the art industry with communication media such as the TV, which in 1947, time of the first Adorno’s reflections, was getting consolidated¹. The time of Adorno appears similar to ours of the consolidation of the internet, making his reflections pertinent for a critique of the new media art of our time.

This way, the strongly contemporary Adorno’s ideas about the “hitlerian strategies” (Adorno, 1947, pp. 16-17) of the mass media help us to understand the idealism of Adorno’s art conceptions, through the approach to his historical moment and to his own personal life.

The present article describes briefly what Theodor Adorno reflected about the relation between art and the cultural industry in his posthumous and probably most influential publication “Aesthetic Theory” of 1970. Subsequently the term is contextualized with previous reflections of the author since 1947.

¹ The latter is the translation of the last line of the sentence but seems to be an error. It should be the first line of the paragraph that follows. The phrase “in 1947, time of the first Adorno’s reflections, was getting consolidated” should be the last line of the paragraph. The correct sentence should be “Since its mere emergency art has been asked about its autonomy in relation with its social role and with the industry. At the same time art has always been the deposit of romantic ideals and the dreamed place where to critic. Theodor Adorno was one of the pioneer authors who reflected about the relation of the art industry with communication media such as the TV, which in 1947, time of the first Adorno’s reflections, was getting consolidated.”
In conjunction with the research of the North American theoretician and artist Martha Rosler, the ideas of Adorno are shown in a parallel to the moments of art before, during and after Adorno’s time.

To conclude, contemporary new media art manifestations are analyzed in key of the couple autonomy/cultural industry, this time in relation to the proposals of the Brazilian theoretician Arlindo Machado.

“CULTURAL INDUSTRY” INSIDE THE “AESTHETIC THEORY” OF 1970

In this first section some of the different conceptions of the cultural industry will be brought together in order to create a compilation of the different ideas that illustrate the complexity of the term for Theodor Adorno.

Like this, at a first place it will be described the idea of cultural industry as a factor that made possible for art to become a consumer good, understanding art also like the catharsis it offers.

Cultural Industry and Consumer Goods

Theodor Adorno explains in “a Critic to the Cultural Industry”, section of the book “Aesthetic Theory” published in 1970, that as far as art corresponds to a social manifested necessity, it transforms itself mostly in a business governed by the profit, which persists as long as it is profitable. And by doing so, art makes itself aside, confirming being nothing but something already dead (Adorno, 1970, p. 34).

Adorno exposes the means used by the cultural industry in order to convert art pieces into merchandise when he makes clear that the ‘naive’ people of the cultural industry, avid of merchandise, locate themselves closer to art because they perceive how art is inadequate to accompany the process of social life. Adorno argues that the creation of this proximity with art only intensifies the profit of the cultural industry, as well as, here the idea of the immediatism of art to the society is planned to deceive (Adorno, 1970, p. 376). At the same time the cultural industry defends that art suffered a process in which it ceases being what it is and loses its specificity becoming consumer goods like art pieces and catharsis (Adorno, 1970, p. 34).

In the following paragraphs we will then explain how for Adorno the art and its catharsis become consumer goods.

Art Pieces as Consumer Goods

For Adorno indubitable symptoms of the tendency of the cultural industry are the passion for what is palpable, as well as for not letting any work be what it is, accommodating it, while diminishing the distance in relation with the spectator (Adorno, 1970, p. 32).

For the author considering art “vested interests” means to classify subjectively art inside the consumer goods. But he specifies the complexity in the relation with art as goods when he hopes that “at least” art was simply consumable, this way, the relation with art would be based on the relation with consumer goods. But in a time of super production the value of use of art is also problematic since it is submitted to the secondary delight of prestige, of fashion and then, finally, submitted to the own character of merchandise. Of the autonomy of art just remains the fetishistic character of merchandise, being this, a regression to the archaic fetishism in the origin of art (Adorno, 1970, p. 32).

The cultural industry’s praxis advocates for a servile respect for empirical details, this is, for the shape, allying this way the praxis of the cultural industry with the ideological manipulation (Adorno, 1970, p. 336). This makes believe that the importance of art lies on its technique, and on its final shape, which is equal to its fetishist character. For Adorno, the sublimation of the form is a vehicle of ideology.

For Adorno a type of art that prevails in the cultural industry establishes its significance on its “value of exposition”, instead of to its “auratical”, “cultuai”, value (Adorno, 1970, p. 73).
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