Chapter 1
Culture Industry: A Contemporary Revision of the Term of Theodor Adorno

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines some of the ideas that Theodor Adorno elucidated around the term culture industry, compiling mainly the ideas published in the text Aesthetic Theory of 1970. The term culture industry is also contextualized in the chapter with the reflections that Adorno previously exposed in 1947. 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. Regarding the relation between art and autonomy, the ideas of Adorno offer elements to understand contemporary art production. This way, the author also discusses contemporary new media art manifestations, which are analyzed in key terms such as autonomy/culture industry in relation to the proposals of the Brazilian theoretician Arlindo Machado. Lastly, the chapter offers an approach to the artistic institution analyzing the museum in relation with Adorno’s ideas.

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 from where society is criticized. Theodor Adorno was one of the pioneer authors who reflected about the relation of art industry
with communication media such as the TV, which in 1947, time of Adorno’s first reflections, was getting consolidated. The time of Adorno appears similar to ours of the consolidation of the internet, making his reflexions pertinent for a critique of the media art of our time.

This way, strongly contemporary Adorno’s ideas about the Hitlerian strategies (Adorno, 1947, p. 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 his own personal life.

The present article briefly describes what Theodor Adorno reflected about the relation between art and the culture 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.

Together 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. At the same time that contemporary new media art manifestations are analyzed in the article in key of the couple autonomy/culture industry, this time in relation to the proposals of the Brazilian theoretician Arlindo Machado.

Lastly, the article offers an approach to the artistic institution analyzing the museum in relation with Adorno’s ideas.

CULTURE INDUSTRY INSIDE THE AESTHETIC THEORY OF 1970

In the first section some of the historical conceptions of the culture industry will be brought together in order to create a compilation of the ideas that illustrate the complexity of the term proposed by Theodor Adorno.

This way, the idea of culture industry will be described as a factor that made possible for art to become a consumer good, understanding this process also in key of a commercialization of the catharsis in the reception of an art piece.

Culture Industry and Consumer Goods

Theodor Adorno explains in A Critic to the Culture 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. By doing so, art makes itself aside, confirming being nothing but something already dead (Adorno, 1970, p. 34).
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