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Creative Industries as Mass Deception

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The chapter from Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* on the culture industry was entitled "Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug" – "Culture Industry. Enlightenment as Mass Deception". When Horkheimer and Adorno wrote their essay in the early 1940s, they were objecting to the growing influence of the entertainment industries, to the commodification of art, and to the totalizing uniformity of "culture", especially in the country of their emigration, the USA. Their skeptical attitude toward the new media of radio and film moved the two authors to cover, in an eloquent style with cultural pessimistic undertones, a broad range of the cultural field with a concept that could hardly appear more alien in cultural spheres: they named culture as an industry.

For almost two decades, even after their return to Europe, Horkheimer and Adorno's theses remained more of an insider tip discussed only among the affiliates of the Institute for Social Research. Over the course of the 1960s, however, their effect began to develop, finally becoming fully established in the updated media critique of the 1970s: the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* became a cornerstone of the literature not only on the ambivalence of the

Enlightenment, but also and especially on the rigorous rejection of an “economization of culture”. And in the cultural field, where the myths of genius, originality and autonomy are still significant factors, the term "industry" is still regarded today, sixty years after the late publication of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, as not much more than a dirty word. Thus the question arises as to how could it happen that with only a small shift from singular to plural, from *culture industry* to *creative* and *cultural industries*, this conceptual brand has now been reinterpreted as something like a promise of universal salvation not only for politicians[1], but also for many actors in the field itself.

One possible explanation for this paradox arises from a closer look at the modes of subjectivation in the fields, structures and institutions that were and are described with the terms culture industry and creative industries. I will discuss these conditions of modes of subjectivation and the specific institutions in the field by analysing four components of the concept of culture industry and then comparing them in reverse order from four to one with their updated counterparts within the creative industries today.

1. Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry chapter was mainly about the growing film and media industries, especially Hollywood cinema and private radio stations in the US. In clear contrast to the writings of their colleague Walter Benjamin and also of Bertolt Brecht, who both had a more ambivalent idea of the opportunities and the problems engendered by mechanical reproduction, mass media and the manifold aspects of production and reception under new conditions, Adorno and Horkheimer took a thoroughly negative view of the culture industry: as an increasingly totalizing spiral of systematic manipulation and the “retroactive need” to adapt more and more to this system, “films, radio and magazines

make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."[2] In the interpretation of the Institute for Social Research, this unified form of culture industry is the institutional structure for modes of subjectivation that subjugate the individual under the power and the totality of capital.

The first component of the concept of culture industry, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is that it totalizes its audience, exposing this audience to a permanently repeated, yet ever unfulfilled promise: "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises."[3] It is this eternal cycle of promise generating a desire and continually suspending this desire in an unproductive way that is at the core of the idea of culture industry as an instrument of mass deception. For Horkheimer and Adorno the products of culture industry are all designed in a way that they deny or even prevent imagination, spontaneity, fantasy and any active thinking on the part of the spectators. This ultrapassive form of consumption correlates to the tendency on the part of the culture industry to meticulously register and statistically process its audience: "Consumers appear as statistics on research organisation charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda."[4]

The consumers appear as marionettes of capital, counted, analysed, captured in the striated space of the culture industry. "The consumers are the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class. Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them. As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which

enslaves them."[5] What is evident, of course, in the image of the consumers that have succumbed to the anonymous culture industry apparatus of seduction, is both the culmination and simultaneously the limitation of Horkheimer and Adorno's approach: the figure of the "deceived masses" victimizes them as passive, externally determined, betrayed, and enslaved.

2. As a second component in Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of culture industry we also find a specific image of production: whereas the authors present the positions of producers and consumers as being clearly separated, this separation is not thought of as a dualistic figure of passive and active subjects of culture industry. Like the consumers, the producers also appear as subjugated, passive functions of the system. Whereas in Benjamin's theories of authorship and new media, authors are able to turn into producers by changing the production apparatus, and in Brecht's *Lehrstück* theory and practice of the early 1930s, in which there are inherently only authors and producers, instead of a consuming audience, Horkheimer/Adorno's rigid image shows only strangely passive producers trapped in the totality of the culture industry. Social subordination remains the only imaginable mode of subjectivation, even on the side of production. The most striking example in the chapter on culture industry shows the actors in radio broadcasts who are "denied any freedom" as functions of the business: "They confine themselves to the apocryphal field of the 'amateur,' organised from above. But any trace of spontaneity from the public in official broadcasting is controlled and absorbed by talent scouts, studio competitions and official programs of every kind selected by professionals. Talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them; otherwise they would not be so eager to fit in."[6] In light of its updated version in Reality TV,

docu-soaps and casting shows, in fact the image of extras that only appear to be protagonists seems more plausible today than ever. Looking at a broader idea of producers producing and presenting not only materialised goods, but also affects and communication, we see the picture of a totalizing system determining every move and every mood of the subject growing even darker. Horkheimer and Adorno anticipated this darkening, but in a strangely feminised form: "The way in which a girl accepts and keeps the obligatory date, the inflection on the telephone or in the most intimate situation, the choice of words in conversation, and the whole inner life [...], bear witness to people's attempt to make themselves a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry."[7] The human-apparatuses correlate to the apparatus of the culture industry. Both consumers and producers appear as slaves of a totality and ideology, shaped and moved by an abstract system. As apparatuses they are cogs in a bigger apparatus; part of an institution called culture industry.

3. As an effect of this relationship between the apparatus and its cogs, the third component of the culture industry concept is that the actors, the cultural producers, are prisoners as employees of the institution(s of) culture industry. The institutional form, into which the culture industry developed according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is that of a gigantic music, entertainment or media corporation. The creative find themselves enclosed within an institutional structure, in which their creativity is suppressed by the very form of dependent work. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this connection between creativity-constraining employment and social subordination is generally described in this way: "It is about the self-derision of man. The possibility to become an economic subject, entrepreneur, owner, is dissolved completely. [...] the

independent enterprise turns hopelessly dependent [...] Everyone becomes an employee [...]"[8]

Just as hopeless dependency and social control generally predominate in the world of employees, even the last resort of autonomy (and here there is an early echo of the romanticism of artistic autonomy in Adorno's later work, *Aesthetic Theory*[9]), the production of creativity is described as striated, structured and stratified, and the majority of its actors originally regarded as resistive are finally civilized as employees. According to the anthropological definition of institution, in return the institution is said to provide the employees with security and to promise a certain degree of control over irresolvable contradictions. Even if the specific institutions of the culture industry do not last forever, their apparatuses are intended to create this impression specifically because of their apparatus nature and to exonerate the subjects in this way. For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, even this notion itself is due solely to the effect that "the managerial cultivation of comradeship [...] brings even the last private impulse under social control".[10]

4. As the fourth and final component, according to Horkheimer and Adorno the development of the culture industry as a whole is to be seen as a *delayed* transformation of the cultural field catching up with the processes that had led to Fordism in agriculture or what is conventionally called industry. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno regard culture monopolies as weak and dependent in comparison to the most powerful sectors of industry – steel, petroleum, electricity, and chemicals. Even the last remainders of resistance against Fordism – and here again there is an echo of the formerly heroic function of autonomous art – are regarded as having finally become factories. The new factories of creativity

(publishing, cinema, radio and television) conformed to the criteria of the Fordist factory. The assembly line character of culture industry consequently structured the culture industry production of creativity in a way similar to agriculture and metal processing before: through serialization, standardization, and the total domination of creativity. “But at the same time mechanization has such power over a man’s leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself.”[11] Thus according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the function of the factories of creativity is the mechanized manufacture of amusement goods on the one hand, and on the other – beyond conventional areas of production – the control and determination of reproduction, whereby reproduction increasingly becomes like working in a factory.

4. Instead of regarding culture industry as something which replaced bourgeois art and the avant-gardes in the cultural field and translated a Fordist model that was developed elsewhere, outside culture, into the cultural field, the post-Operaist philosopher Paolo Virno asks about the role that the culture industry assumed with relation to *overcoming* Fordism and Taylorism. According to his reflections in *Grammar of the Multitude*, “it fine-tuned the paradigm of post-Fordist production on the whole. I believe therefore, that the mode of action of the culture industry became, from a certain point on, exemplary and pervasive. Within the culture industry, even in its archaic incarnation examined by Benjamin and Adorno, one can grasp early signs of a mode of production which later, in the post-Fordist era, becomes generalized and elevated to the rank of *canon*.“[12] Here we find a fruitful inversion of the interpretation of culture industry as an

industrialized field robbed of its freedom, as conceptualized by Critical Theory: whereas Horkheimer and Adorno call culture industry an obstinate latecomer in the Fordist transformation, Virno sees it as an anticipation and paradigm of post-Fordist production.

For Horkheimer and Adorno the institutions of culture industry formed modern culture monopolies, but also at the same time the economic area in which some part of the sphere of liberal circulation is able to survive, along with the corresponding entrepreneurial types, despite the process of disintegration elsewhere. Although some small space of difference and resistance still emerge within the purported totality of the culture industry, of course this difference is quickly reintegrated in the totality of culture industry, as Horkheimer and Adorno do not hesitate to explain: "What resists can only survive by fitting in. Once its particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, it belongs to it as does the land-reformer to capitalism."[13]

In this description, difference serving to achieve new levels of productivity is nothing but a vestige of the past, which is cast off in the general Fordization of the culture industry as a remnant. From Virno's perspective, "it is not difficult to recognize that these purported remnants (with a certain space granted to the informal, to the unexpected, to the 'unplanned') were, after all, loaded with future possibilities. These were not remnants, but anticipatory omens. The informality of communicative behavior, the competitive interaction typical of a meeting, the abrupt diversion that can enliven a television program (in general, everything which it would have been dysfunctional to rigidify and regulate beyond a certain threshold), has become now, in the post-Fordist era, a typical trait of the *entire* realm of social production. This is true

not only for our contemporary culture industry, but also for Fiat in Melfi."[14] From the view of post-Operaist theory, the old culture industry is not only a weak and late-coming industry in the process of Fordization, but also a future model and anticipation of the wide-spread post-Fordist production modes: informal, non-programmed spaces, open to the unforeseen, communicative improvisations that are less a remnant than the core, less margin than centre.

3. The culture industry media and entertainment corporations, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, prove to be an institutional structure for subjugating the individual to the control of capital. Hence they are sites of pure social subjugation. Even if we accept this one-sided structuralist view for early forms of the culture industry, it seems that something has changed here since the mid-20th century. On the one hand, this change may be grasped with terms developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1970s: the point here was primarily the insight, further explained below, that a second line develops beyond social subjection, which emphasizes active involvement and modes of subjectivation in addition to structural factors. In contradistinction to social subjection [*assujettissement social*], Deleuze and Guattari call this second line "machinic enslavement" [*asservissement machinique*].[15] In addition to this problematization at the terminological level, the question can also be raised with regards to today's phenomena about which modes of subjectivation are arising in the new institutional forms of the creative industry. For what is now called "creative industries", not only by neoliberal cultural politics and urban development, differs substantially in form and function from the old-school culture industry.

Turning to the third component that involves the institutional form, in particular, it is obvious that the arrangements labeled as *creative industries* are no longer structured in the form of huge media corporations, but mainly as micro-enterprises of self-employed cultural entrepreneurs in the fields of new media, fashion, graphics, design, pop, conceptualized at best in clusters of these micro-enterprises. So if we ask about the institutions of the creative industries, it seems more appropriate to speak of *non*-institutions or *pseudo*-institutions. Whereas the model institutions of culture industry were huge, long-term corporations, the pseudo-institutions of creative industries prove to be temporary, ephemeral, project based.

These "project institutions"[16] seem to have the advantage of being grounded in self-determination and the rejection of the rigid order of Fordist regimes. In the last two sections of this article, I will question how convincing this argument is. At this point, however, and in reference to the previously described function of the institution as a manager of contradictions with an exonerating effect, I want to stress that the project institutions of the creative industries conversely promote precarization and insecurity. In fact, it is clear that a glaring contradiction is evident in the idea of "project institutions": on the one hand the desire for long-term exoneration that the concept of the institution implies, and on the other a distinct time-limit implicit to the concept of the project. Following again from another motif from Paolo Virno's *Grammar of the Multitude* and relating to the phenomenon of the "project institution", the contradictoriness of the institution as a project inevitably leads, as Virno described, to the complete overlapping of fear and anguish, relative and absolute dread, and ultimately to a total diffusion of this concern throughout all the areas of life.[17]

When Horkheimer and Adorno still lamented the fact that the subjects of culture industry as employees lost their opportunities to become freelance entrepreneurs, it seems that in the present situation this problem has been completely reversed. The freelance entrepreneur has become mainstream, no matter whether s/he is floating as a part-time worker from project to project or building up one micro-enterprise after another. And even the successors of the 20th century culture industry, the major media corporations, conduct a policy of outsourcing and contracting sub-companies under the banner of entrepreneurship. In these newer media corporations with their convergence from the field of print to audiovisual media all the way to the Internet, all that remains for permanently employed workers in many cases – and this applies even to public service media – are only a few core functions of administration. In contrast, most of the people labelled as creatives, work freelance and/or as self-employed entrepreneurs with or without limited contracts. Somewhat cynically one could say that Adorno's melancholy over the loss of autonomy has now been perversely realized in the working conditions of the creative industries: the creatives are released into a specific sphere of freedom, of independence and self-government. Here flexibility becomes a despotic norm, precarity of work becomes the rule, the dividing lines between work and leisure time blur just like those between work and unemployment, and precarity flows from work into life as a whole.

2. But where does this universal precarization come from? Is the creative industry, like the culture industry, a system that enslaves its subjects, or is there a specific form of involvement of the actors within this process of precarization? To discuss this second component, the contemporary modes of subjectivation in the

cultural field, I would like to take up Isabell Lorey's discussion of "biopolitical governmentality and self-precarization"[18]. Lorey speaks of precarization as a force line in liberal governmentality and biopolitical societies. This force line that reaches far back into early modern times was actualized in a specific way by the living and working conditions that emerged in the context of the new social movements in the 1970s and the principles of the post-1968-generations: deciding for yourself, what and with whom and when you want to work; freedom, autonomy, self-determination, and in this context consciously choosing precarious living and working conditions. Here Lorey develops the term of self-chosen precarization, or *self-precarization*: people already had to learn to develop a creative and productive relationship to the self under liberal governmentality as well; this practice of creativity and the ability to shape one's self has been a part of governmental self-techniques since the 18th century. But what is changing here, according to Isabell Lorey's argument, is the *function* of precarization: from an immanent contradiction in liberal governmentality to a function of normalization in neoliberal governmentality, from an inclusive exclusion at the margins of society to a mainstream process. In the course of these developments, which also explain the transformation of the phenomena described by Horkheimer and Adorno into the current forms of the creative industries, the experiments of the 1970s to develop self-determined forms of living and working as alternatives to the normalized and regulated regime of work were especially influential. With the sovereignly imagined emancipation from spatially and temporally rigidly ordered everyday life, there was also a reinforcement of the line that allows subjectivation beyond social subjugation to be imagined no longer only in an emancipatory way: "... it is precisely these alternative living and working conditions that have become increasingly more economically utilizable in

recent years because they favor the flexibility that the labor market demands. Thus, practices and discourses of social movements in the past thirty to forty years were not only dissident and directed against normalization, but also at the same time, a part of the transformation toward a neoliberal form of governmentality."[19]

So here we are in the present: at a time when the old ideas and ideologies of the autonomy and freedom of the individual (especially the individual as genius artist) plus specific aspects of post-1968 politics have turned into hegemonic neoliberal modes of subjectivation. Self-precarization means saying yes to exploiting every aspect of creativity and of life.

This is the paradox of creativity as self-government: “Governing, controlling, disciplining, and regulating one’s self means, at the same time, fashioning and forming one’s self, empowering one’s self, which in this sense, is what it means to be free.”[20] Here there is perhaps also an echo of the conceptual difference defining the distinction between the branding of the culture industry and the creative industries: whereas the culture industry still seemed to emphasize the abstract collective component of culture, a constant appeal to the productivity of the individual occurs in the creative industries. A distinction of this kind between the collective and the individual, however, only exists at the level of this appeal. What distinguishes the industries of creativity is that they traverse these dualisms.

1. Recalling now in conclusion the first component in Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the culture industry, which totalizes the individual and completely subjugates consumers under the power of capital, an expansion of the horizon should become possible in conjunction with Isabell Lorey's theses: a shift of focus from the

promotion of reductionist totality and heteronomy concepts in the direction of a focus on the specific involvement of practices of resistance against the totalization of creativity, which have in turn led to the present modes of subjectivation.

The culture industry generates "role models for people who are to turn themselves into what the system needs"[21]. Even though it is logically contradictory, an ambivalence is suggested here – as in other places in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* – which, if it does not quite conjoin self-active enslavement and externally determined subjugation through a totalizing system, at least places them next to one another on an equal level. For Deleuze and Guattari, enslavement and subjugation are simultaneously existing poles that are actualized in the same things and in the same events. In the regime of social subjugation, a higher entity constitutes the human being as subject, which refers to an object that has become external. In the modus of machinic enslavement, human beings are not subjects, but are, like tools or animals, parts of a machine that overcodes the whole. The interplay of the two regimes is particularly evident in the phenomenon of the creative industries, two poles that perpetually reinforce one another, whereby the components of machinic enslavement grow in significance due to a surplus of subjectivation. "Should we then speak of a voluntary servitude?" ask Deleuze and Guattari, and their answer is no: "There is a machinic enslavement, about which it could be said that it appears as reaccomplished; this machinic enslavement is no more 'voluntary' than it is 'forced'."[22]

From this perspective of the double movement of the subjugation to a social unity and the enslavement within a machine, we cannot adhere to Adorno/Horkheimer's idea of a system that works as a totality on the one side and the actors as passive objects of the system on the other side. Rather, the modes of subjectivation

reconstruct totality over and over again; their involvement in the processes of social subjugation and machinic enslavement is neither voluntary nor forced. And here we also finally find an answer to the question raised at the beginning: How could it happen that this small shift from *culture industry* to *creative* and *cultural industries* became a brand of universal salvation not only for politicians, but also for many actors in the field? It happened precisely because the modes of subjectivation of machinic enslavement are conjoined with both desire and conformity, and the actors in creative industries interpret the appeal as meaning that they have at least chosen self-precarization themselves.

In this sense, and to return to the title of this text, in light of the involvement of the actors in the mode of machinic enslavement it is hardly appropriate to speak of "mass deception" – and I would doubt that it was meaningful at any time. In the context of the creative industry it would thus be more apt to speak of a "massive self-deception" as an aspect of self-precarization. And we could also add to this "self-deception" the possibility of resistance, which is actualized in the plane of immanence of what is still labeled as creative industries today.

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[1]In the cultural political context, the most likely interpretation seems to be that in the course of establishing the term creative industries throughout Europe in the programs of cultural policies, the aim has increasingly been to shift state funding for art from support for critical/deviant positions to support for commercial enterprises.

[2] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm

[3] Ibid. „Immerwährend betrügt die Kulturindustrie ihre Konsumenten um das, was sie immerwährend verspricht.“ (German original, 148)

[4]Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., translation slightly changed by the author

[7] Ibid., translation slightly changed by the author

[8] Ibid., translation slightly changed by the author

[9]Counter to Adorno’s substantialization of the autonomy of bourgeois art, however, it has long been asserted that specifically this has the effect of a total, heteronomizing and hierarchizing praxis, striating both the space of production and of reception: the four-stage production apparatus of bourgeois theatre, for instance, or the extreme discipline in classical orchestras correlates to the habits of reception in both fields.

[10]Ibid.

[11]ibid.

[12] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Los Angeles/New York: Semiotext(e) 2004, 58

[13] Horkheimer/Adorno, op.cit., translation slightly changed by the author

[14] Virno, op.cit., 59

[15]Cf. Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*, London/New York: Continuum 1987, 456-460

[16]Cf. Stefan Nowotny's text in this issue: /transversal/0207/nowotny/en.

[17]Cf. Virno, op.cit., 32f.

[18]Isabell Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization: On the Normalization of Cultural Producers", in Simon Sheikh (Ed.), *Capital. It Fails Us Now*, Berlin: b-_books 2006, 117-139, online at: /transversal/1106/lorey/en

[19] Ibid., 131

[20] Ibid., 127

[21]Horkheimer/Adorno, op.cit.

[22]Deleuze/Guattari, op.cit., 460