

**Literature, Culture and Media**  
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**Lecture – 27**  
**Adorno and Horkheimer on Culture**

Dear participants, welcome to the second module of the sixth week. In the previous module we had discussed certain critical considerations about the formation of ideology. In this current module and in the next one, we would take these discussions further and look at the works of Adorno and Horkheimer about the formation of identity. The work of Adorno and Horkheimer in association with other critics of the Frankfurt School had created various intellectual waves in the realms of theory, media, political science and philosophy.

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### Adorno and Horkheimer

- A deep anxiety and uneasiness with the nature of modern capitalist society.
- Inspired by the Marxist analysis, see capitalism as fundamentally unfair and exploitative
- Witnessed the rise of fascism, failure of socialism and dominance of monopoly capitalism
- Felt that critical theory must move beyond a traditional Marxist emphasis on the means and modes of production alone, which was no longer able to satisfactorily account for these developments.



In the works of Adorno and Horkheimer, we find that there is a deep anxiety and uneasiness with the nature of modern capitalist society. They were initially inspired by the Marxist analysis and they viewed capitalism as being fundamentally unfair to people and also exploitative to the interest of the common people. They were Jews who had to flee the Nazi Germany during the preceding era of the Second World War and they had sought shelter in the USA where they had seen the exploitative nature of contemporary capitalist forces also.

So, having witnessed the rise of fascism and the failure of socialism in the era preceding the Second World War Germany and the dominance of monopoly capitalism, we find that their work touches these contemporary trends in such a way that even in today's world, their significance can be realised. Adorno felt that we have to move beyond the Marxist analysis and the Marxist emphasis on the means and modes of production alone and felt that it was no longer able to account for various contemporary developments. He had been associated with the Frankfurt School these were the critical theorist of society who wanted to propagate further the Marxist ideals.

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- Associated with Frankfurt School (1923/1933)--critical theorists of society
- Critical of industrial and capitalist societies
- Focus on the connections between economy, culture, psychology, media and other factors vital for the functioning of capitalism
- Known for their influential book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written in 1944, published in 1947)
- Both were Jewish, had to flee to the US under Nazi regime
- Developed the notion of 'culture industry' to describe how culture and consequently minds are produced industrially.



It was established in Germany in the year of 1923 but by the time it was 1933, they had to move this Frankfurt School from Germany to the USA. They had been critical and they means people who had been associated with the Frankfurt School were critical of industrial and capitalist societies. But still they had to seek shelter in a capitalist society for survival. They had focused on the interconnections between culture, economy, psychology, media and other factors which they consider to be vital for the functioning of capitalist state. Adorno particularly known for his influential book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which was written and also published in 1944 but it was published in a reworked edition in 1947.

Adorno and Horkheimer had developed the notion of culture industry in this book to describe how culture and consequently, the minds of the people are also produced industrially.

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- Mass culture/popular culture as a means of social control and mass deception
- Culture industry: tool of mass deception; culture as industry
- Later philosophy is quite bleak
- Culture and society dominated by systems of power and control, stifling inquisitiveness and creativity, producing what Herbert Marcuse has called "one-dimensional man"
- Repressive regimes of capitalist economy and culture
- Lament the loss of human spontaneity and human elements in governance



Adorno and Horkheimer viewed mass culture or the popular culture as a means of social control and mass deception. They had given the title culture industry because they felt that it has been influenced by the contemporary developments of industrial forces. They also saw the culture industry as a tool of mass deception and they viewed culture primarily not as an evocative response of human beings but as an industry which is being managed in the same way as any other contemporary industry say in steel or in any other production house.

In the later philosophical writings of Adorno, a particularly bleak aspect towards human nature can be seen. In fact, he had suggested in his work that culture and society are dominated by systems of power and control and therefore, they stifle the inquisitiveness and curiosity of human beings and produce what has been termed as ‘one-dimensional man’ by Herbert Marcuse, another person associated with the Frankfurt School.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the repressive regimes of capitalist economy and culture result in uni-dimensional individuality and even the conscience of men is being produced in the same way in which industry produces any other commodity. So, his critique of commodification of individual sensitivity ultimately has resulted in his writing of culture as an industry in which he laments the loss of human spontaneity and human elements in governance also.

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## Culture Industry

- Thesis laid out in a chapter titled, “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- Product of late capitalism
- Refers to the process of the industrialization of mass produced culture
- Set of corporations which produced cultural products (films, music, magazines etc) for mass consumption
- Deliberately use the term ‘culture industry’ over ‘mass culture’—culture which emanates from the masses, which is collectively produced by the masses
- Culture industry produces cultural products for consumption by the masses
- Masses as consumers; Entertainment industry as producers



Adorno's understanding of culture industry has been discussed in a particular chapter of his book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the title of this chapter is “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”. We find that he viewed culture as a product of late capitalism and he refers to the process of the industrialisation of mass produced culture. Particularly, he refers to those cultural products which were being circulated in the contemporary USA in the forms of films, the music particularly, the music of films, the magazines and later on the TV serials. And his thesis is based on an analysis of the cultural products for mass consumption. He has deliberately use the word culture industry, highlighting the word industry instead of using any other term for example, mass culture. Because in his view, culture emanates from the masses whereas culture industry is being collectively produced for the masses. So culture industry has been producing cultural products for the conception of masses.

And the creativity of the masses is not at all involved in the production of this culture industry. On the other hand Adorno had viewed that the culture industry of his contemporary world, viewed people as consumers and therefore, entertainment industry has become a producer of certain goods which is being desired by the consumers.

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- Metaphor used to understand culture industry-- the industrial, assembly line model of production
- Entertainment and leisure emulates the capitalist method of production
- leisure has the same rhythms, pace, simplifications and illusions of work ( Dorland, 359)
- Easy pleasures render passivity and docility
- False needs which can be satisfied only by capitalist productions
- Mass culture is detrimental to art, which requires a better intellect and inquisitiveness



He has used the metaphor of industry to explain his idea of culture industry in a better manner and he has drawn comparisons with the assembly line model of production in which the individuality of goods, the individuality of the people who are producing a particular good is lost and there is an emphasis on a sequential production, the continuity of the production ensuring that a similar nature of good are being produced ultimately with the help of the assembly line.

So, in the same manner Adorno and Horkheimer feel that entertainment and leisure has ultimately been taken over by a capitalist method of production. In fact, a particular critic Dorland has suggested that in the views of Adorno and Horkheimer, leisure has a same rhythms, the same pace, the same simplification and illusions that of work. And therefore, we find that in Adorno's criticism, easy pleasures have been rendering passivity and docility.

In his opinion the entertainment which is being passed on to the individuals by the culture industry does not appeal to their intellect. It also does not inhibit any curiosity in their mind. On the other hand, it makes them passive viewers at the same time he suggest that the false needs are also being generated among the viewers by the culture industry, so that they can be satisfied by parallel productions of the capitalist world.

Mass culture according to Adorno and Horkheimer is a detriment to real art which requires a better intellect and also an inquisitiveness to produce and also to view and enjoy and understand.

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### The notion of enlightenment as mass deception in historical context

- Critique of industrial society:
  - Production and development no longer for general welfare
  - manipulation of working life
  - Profit maximization leads to exploitation
- Critique of bureaucracy:
  - Use of formal procedures of decision-making for legitimization of dehumanizing practices
  - Critique of anti-democracy: the appeal to regressive emotionality



If we look at the idea of enlightenment as mass deception in historical context, we find that Adorno and Horkheimer had responded to the failure of the notion of enlightenment, when they were talking about the culture industry. In their ideas we find that they have presented a significant criticism not only of the industrial society but also of the contemporary bureaucracy and of the contemporary forces which were basically anti-democracy.

In his critique of industrial society, Adorno says that the production and development is not there anymore for the general welfare rather it has sustaining itself on the manipulation of working life and the idea of production and development is linked with the maximisation of profit instead of ensuring a general welfare of the masses and therefore it leads to an exploitation only. In his critique of bureaucracy, he says that there is an undue emphasis on formal procedures of decision making which ultimately results in to dehumanizing practices, a situation in which human beings are not treated as human beings rather they become numbers in an increasing manner. At the same time in his works we find a very severe criticism of antidemocratic forces and he appeals to the regressive emotionality of the people.

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- Emergence of entertainment industry and new forms of mass media
- Developments seen as significant
- Adorno and Horkheimer argue that these developments and commercial marketing of culture, subsume the autonomous realm of art and culture into the logic of the market driven economy
- Culture industry--commodification of culture under monopoly capitalism
  - Cementing the status quo
  - Stunting the responses of the audience
  - Social control through deception
  - Proliferation of capitalist ethos and values



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Adorno and Horkheimer in their work view contemporary developments in the new forms of mass media as being highly significant and important. They also suggest that these contemporary developments particularly the commercial marketing of culture have been driven by the market economy and therefore their preference is not on the production of those art and those aspects of culture which may be related with the innate curiosity of human beings or for any enabling purpose.

Rather we find that there has been an intensive commodification of culture under monopoly criticism. Adorno and Horkheimer were particularly critical of the idea of the status quo and according to them, the idea of the enlightenment was not to retain the status quo. On the other hand he feels that the contemporary forces result in the cementing of the status quo which makes people satisfactory with their life and does not prove them into questioning the situations.

And therefore, he says that the culture industry has been used to stunt the responses of the audience because the basic appeal through the culture industry is not to the intellect of the people but to those senses which makes them done and receptive. And therefore, he says that it is a means of social control through deception and the culture industry through this deception ultimately aims at the proliferation of capitalist ethos and values which are nothing but a form of exploitation of the have-nots by the haves.

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- Thus, culture industry transforms culture into an ideological medium of domination
- Culture was not always a medium of ideological control
- Meaning, nature, scope and function of art has changed from time to time
- Adorno and Horkheimer contrast the products of culture industry with the emancipatory power of what they call genuine or authentic art.
- Commodification of art
- Its impact on society and human consciousness



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So, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry transforms culture into an ideological medium of domination but at the same time, they are aware that culture has not always been limited to this particular aim also. Culture has not always been a medium of ideological control only. In fact, over the passage of time in different historical periods, we find that the meaning, the nature, the scope and the functions of art have changed according to the needs of the contemporary society.

So, they contrast the products of culture industry with the emancipatory power of what they call genuine or authentic art. So in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer, we find that there is a clear contrast between a product of the culture industry and what they perceive to be as a genuine or authentic art, so in their criticism of the commodification of art which is being perpetuated by the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer are critical of its impact on human society and ultimately its impact on the human consciousness.

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- **Arguments**

- Products of cultural industry take on the appearance of artwork; in fact just means of earning profit, whereas authentic art does not have this aim. It fosters human growth by suggestions and possibilities
- Works of art have become commodified: Beethoven, Mozart and Wagner may be used in fragmentary forms when included in advertisement.
- Commodification of culture is commodification of consciousness as audience only receives; passive receptacles
- Amusement, distractions of entertainment industry replicate the ideology of capitalism, corrupted by commerce



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In order to support their idea, they have presented different arguments, a major argument which has been presented by them is about how the culture industry takes on the appearance of artwork through its different products. In fact, the idea of the culture industry is to earn only profit because it is a market driven industry like any other industry, so it has to thrive on earning profits. On the other hand, authentic art does not have this particular aim only.

It fosters human growth by suggestions and by possibilities and therefore, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the genuine art or authentic art has an enabling mission and it can be helpful for the people. And therefore, he has contrasted it with the products of the culture industry which only have the profit motive behind them. Another criticism which he presents in the context of the culture industry is that even the genuine art has become commodified in this contemporary culture not only the production of genuine and authentic art has been stunted, but at the same time whatever art had already existed, it has been commodified by the culture industry. And he analyses how the works of Beethoven and Mozart or Wagner may be used in fragmentary forms and may be included either in advertisements or in different other types of media to serve a particular purpose which has been dissociated by the context of the original art. So de-contextualisation of the art results into commodification in the contemporary culture industry.

So, commodification of culture is ultimately the commodification of consciousness as in the given world, audience are not participating in the production of the art, they are only receiving.

They have been turned into passive receptacles and therefore, the amusement and the distractions of entertainment industry replicate the ideology of capitalism and which has already been corrupted by commerce.

Adorno and Horkheimer feel that genuine art has been replaced by the culture industry and therefore it would have a corrupting influence not only on the way people spend their time but also it would have a negative impact on their consciousness.

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- Produces submissive and obedient creatures out of consumers
  - These distractions hide the real conditions under monopoly capitalism
  - Culture industry as the prism through which reality is filtered
- Amusement has become an extension of labour under late capitalism
  - Capitalist logic: create needs and desires to sell products
  - Fulfillment of desire brings no real happiness as desire is imposed upon (through advertisements)
  - Repeatedly supply formulaic products that are very similar,
  - Different only in minor ways
- Aimed to get a response with minimum mental and intellectual efforts
- Makes us fearful of innovative things



They also say that it also produces submissive and obedient creatures out of consumers because the distractions which are being provided by the culture industry hide the real conditions under monopoly capitalism and the real conditions under monopoly capitalism remained to be exploitative in nature. So culture industry works as a prism through which reality is filtered and the true reality is also being obscured.

They also feel that amusement under the culture industry has become an extension of labour and it does not provide any true entertainment. It aims at the cultivation of certain desires which may not be the genuine ones but which may be absolutely artificial and created but these needs and desires are created to promote the sales of certain products and fulfilment of these desires also brings no real happiness as desire has been imposed upon the people through advertisements.

For example, the desire for a bigger car may ultimately not provide a lasting happiness to people as it has been imposed upon the audience through advertisements. So they repeatedly supply formulaic products that are very similar to each other and the difference in these products occurs only in minor ways and fundamentally all these products remain the same, they remain more or less identical with certain cosmetic differences within.

So, the idea is that the culture industry aims to get a response with minimum mental and intellectual efforts and therefore ultimately in the long run, it also makes us fearful of innovative and genuine things, so it produces a climate in which the audience are receptive of commodified art and become fearful of the challenges of genuine art and thus it stunts the growth of human beings and produces submissive and obedient creatures out of the consumers of the culture industry.

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### Adorno and Horkheimer on autonomous art

- A central principle of Adorno's argument is the idea that under certain social conditions, art can provide an alternate vision of reality.
- Autonomous art has potential to highlight the inequalities and irrationality in society, challenge status quo
  - Create an ideal vision of humanity
  - Marked by an emancipatory vision
  - Radical character emerges from its form rather than content
- Art is autonomous and emancipatory when it is not subject to any specific demands
- Functionless--produced for its own sake



Adorno and Horkheimer have also written in detail about autonomous art which they have contrasted with the culture industry. A central argument in Adorno's writing is the idea that under certain social conditions, art can provide an alternative vision of reality. Autonomous art or the genuine art has the potential to highlight the inequalities and irrationalities in our societies by challenging the status quo.

It can create an ideal version of humanity; it can also provide a vision which is emancipatory for the people but they also feel that the radical character of autonomous art should emerge not through the content only but also from the form which it takes in the expression of individual creativity. So, according to Adorno art is autonomous and emancipatory only when it is not a subject of any specific demands, only when it is not being governed by any motive of profit seeking only.

On the other hand, he says that the products of art under culture industry are functionless, they do not have any emancipatory reason, they also do not perform any socially useful function and they are produced for their own sake, so that the capitalist idea of profit making can be completed.

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### How and why culture transforms into a tool of domination?

- Free proliferation of cultural products had come to an end under monopoly capitalism because of new techniques of production and distribution.
- Represented victory of instrumental reason over the role of culture.
- Thorough commodification of art connected to its ideological role
- Loss of autonomy, critical edge, freedom and individuality
- The subordination of art to the logic of monopoly capitalism turns culture into a tool of domination.



They have also written in detail about how and why culture can be transformed into a tool of domination. According to Adorno and Horkheimer free proliferation of cultural products had come to an end under monopoly capitalism because of new techniques of production and distribution and therefore, they represented victory of instrumental reason over the role of culture. So, according to them the commodification of art is a natural corollary to the contemporary world in which the industry was progressing and it has ultimately dealing art from its ideological role. So there has been a loss of autonomy, there has been a loss of the critical edge which in autonomous art used to possess. There also has been a loss of freedom and

individuality under the growing influence of contemporary capitalist and anti-democracy forces and the subordination of art to the logic of monopoly capitalism has turned culture into a tool of domination which is being produced to create a particular type of mind set among the people and to promote consumerism so that the basic aim of capitalist forces can be completed in the society.

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### Characteristics of culture industry products

- Standardization
  - Formulaic
  - Sameness and Repetition
- Mass produced
- Homogenization
- Pseudo-individuality
- Reification
- Artificial
- Lack of diversity
- Illusion of choice
- Interchangeability



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The characteristics of culture industry products have also been listed by Adorno and Horkheimer. There is a certain standardisation, there is this idea of formula based production in which things are same and the repetition of a particular action of assembling them also gives a quick pace to the production and therefore the production is quick and it is also a standardised because it is being produced at the level of a bulk. And therefore because of the sameness and repetition in the standardisation and mass production, we find that there is a homogenisation. Sometimes it may see that there is a claim to individuality of these products also but Adorno and Horkheimer feel that it is only a pseudo-individuality because basically, these products are the same.

So, they lacked diversity and the illusion of choice is also deliberately created, basically according to them these products are the same with minor differences, there is a sense of interchangeability also, if this product is not very good, it may be easily replaceable with a similar type of a product. So the choice does not become a genuine choice in fact, the consumers or the people are only given this illusion that they are capable of choosing something.

So, the artificiality of culture industry products ultimately leads to a particular type of psyche which also stops the appreciation of the creative and intellectual challenges of genuine art.

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### How is culture industry different from autonomous art?

Culture Industry	Autonomous art
Inauthentic or artificial	Authentic, original
Formulaic and identical	Unique, autonomous
Illusion of individuality	Individuality
Stunting of mass audience	Expression of human spontaneity
Co-option of subversive elements	Subversive
Replicates the ethos of capitalist economy	Alternative vision of reality
Preserves status quo	Often challenges status quo

The differences between culture industry and autonomous art can be easily explained with the help of this table. And we find that culture industry is inauthentic or artificial, whereas autonomous art is authentic and original. Whereas the culture industry is formulaic, identical, there is an illusion of individuality etc., we find that the autonomous art is just the opposite to it. So in these details, we can find out why the responses towards the culture industry and the responses towards autonomous art are basically different and how the appreciation of these two different productions related with art would also result in a particular type of different human psyche and approach towards things in general.

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## Effect of Standardization

- Rise of culture industry results in standardization and rationalization of cultural products
- It weakens, stunts and destroys the ability of the individual to think critically and independently.
- Producers of entertainment industry achieve standardization of taste and expectations to increase profitability
- Flood the market with products that cater to one and all
- Specialization goes hand in hand with standardization.
- Range of hierarchical goods and products meant to align with consumers expectations.



Adorno and Horkheimer also feel that the rise of culture industry results in the standardisation and rationalisation of cultural products because it weakens the ability of individuals to think critically and independently. The producers of entertainment industry achieve standardisation of taste and expectations to increase profitability and they flood the market with those products which cater to the needs of one and all.

So, specialisation goes hand in hand with the standardisation and range of hierarchical goods and products meant to align with consumers' expectations. So the idea of standardisation is basically linked with the mass production of the products of this entertainment industry as well as the culture industry. And because of the sameness of things, we find that the critical ability of the individual is not allowed to flourish further.

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- Adorno and Horkheimer noted that Hollywood entertainment industry was an exemplar of this phenomenon.
  - Produces tons of films
  - Caters to all kinds of viewers
  - Motivated by profit
  - The technological developments in film, especially the sound film was the zenith of standardization
  - Films approximate reality; blur the divide between reality and illusion
  - Draw the audience into the spectacle completely
  - Designed to ensure that the audience consumes the films uncritically. Eg: The Musicals of the 1950s



Adorno and Horkheimer have been particularly critical of the Hollywood entertainment industry which was almost established during the time of their writings and they suggest that the Hollywood entertainment industry is an exemplar of the phenomena they have covered under their idea of culture industry. According to them, this entertainment industry produces tons of films and caters to different types of viewers.

Its basic motivation is profit and money, it does not have any other motivation at all. So the motivation towards the creation of art in the context of a genuine and autonomous art which we had earlier has been missing in this industry altogether. They have also said that the continuity of technological developments in the medium of films particularly, when there was the transition from the silent movies to the sound films. So, according to them it represents a zenith of a standardisation. Because with the production of sound movies, they feel that films are able to approximate reality but at the same time, they blur the divide between the reality and the illusion. Because these sound movies and the other related technological developments have enabled the filmmakers to create a particular product to produce a particular film in which the audience can be drawn immediately into this practical and that the audience also consumes the films without any critical view of them. The pace, the dialogues, the music which creates a particular movie draws the audience into it, so that the audience has to be attentive to make a sense out of the movie, but at the same time, it does not require any criticality on their part. So it becomes a passive yet an engrossed viewership which ultimately results into a passive consumerism.



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- Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film . . . leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality

-- "The Culture Industry"

- Coleridge, "Willing suspension of disbelief"



In this particular quote from Adorno, we find that this particular idea has been presented in detail and I quote, "Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies, the sound film leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality".

So, the idea which Adorno wants to present over here, highlights the way of film has to be viewed by an audience. The audience is unable to respond within the structure of the film yet the pace of the movie forces him to keep on viewing it continually and therefore, the basic nature of the culture industry is in juxtaposition with the basic nature of true art forms. It also can be compares with the idea of the willing suspension of disbelief which has been presented by Coleridge for the appreciation of any literary work.

In the ideas of Coleridge, we find that even though a sense of acceptance of fantasy and fancy is there but at the same time, the critical faculty of the audience or the readers are fully involved in the process of reading and appreciating. On the other hand we find that in the products of culture industry, this critical involvement of the audience has been removed absolutely and it results into a passivity on the part of the audience.

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- Leads to stunting of the powers of imagination and spontaneity
- This loss is not an effect of any psychological mechanisms; but an effect of the nature of products itself (especially the sound film).
- They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts (“The Culture Industry”)



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And it is this passivity on the part of the viewers which leads to a stunting of the powers of imagination and spontaneity. It results into a particular climate which is not an effect of any psychological mechanism but it is an effect of the nature of the product itself. So we find that the audience become passive not because they are suffering from any psychological factors but because it is the effect of the nature of the product itself.

They are so designed and I quote that “quickness, power of observation and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all, yet sustained thought is out of the question, if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts”. So we find that the nature of the product itself ultimately stunts the power of imagination, spontaneity and the criticality in the audience.

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## Culture Industry and Mass deception

- Whereas today in material production the mechanism of supply and demand is disintegrating, in the superstructure it still operates as a check in the rulers' favour. 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.

- "The Culture Industry"



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According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the system generates consumers as far as the context of culture industry is concerned. These are the workers and employees, the farmers and the lower middle class and the cultural production by this industry which ultimately is a capitalist production has confined them all together, body and soul that they have become absolutely victimised by them.

And I quote from their article "as naturally as the rule 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". So, we find that Adorno and Horkheimer want to suggest that the culture industry is a product of a particular ideology.

It enslaves the people but people somehow have been goaded into thinking that it is not their enslavement but it is the independent choice. In their further discussions on the film industry and music as well as advertisement, we find that Adorno and Horkheimer have continued with the same ideas. These ideas will be discussed in the next module, thank you.