Essay: Mass Culture - Alienation through Imitation?
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Outline

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1 Introduction

"Kunst kommt von Können!". This well-known aphorism, which is happily quoted in advanced art courses, goes back to an etymologically correct core. At least since the 18th century, the broad understanding of artistic "ability" ("Können") has consisted in creating cultural artefacts through mental power in order to contrast people with wild, untamed nature (cf. Kluge 2015, 419). With the passage of time, however, the general conditions in which that ability was used changed. Was it before the advent of "mass culture", as described by Horkheimer / Adorno in their work "Dialectic of Enlightenment", the fine brushwork of the oil painter, the harmony of the composer's sounds or the heartyrecipe ideas of the cook, who evoke the admiration of the masses out of themselves, the ability in the "mass culture" according to Adorno & Horkheimer apparently consists purely in pleasing the largest possible part of the masses. The original purpose of culture has been diluted, the social view of its products distorted.

However, it is still unclear which mechanisms are actually hidden behind the scenes of the "mass culture" outlined by Adorno & Horkheimer. Is it the puppeteers who, out of the darkness, not only control their characters, but also the audience by skilfully pulling strings? Is it massive technical equipment that automatically assembles the stage design based on the wishes of the masses of viewers? Or is it possibly an invisible force whose actions completely innocently form a certain kind of culture? That power could possibly come from an original, archaic human drive, which made a functioning collective society possible in the first place: the drive to adapt one's own behavior to the perceived demands of society - and consequently to imitate one another. The aim of this essay is to elicit the role of imitation in mass culture. From this, according to the thesis, both a verification of the system of mass culture and a critical perspective on the terminology of this can result. Imitation in mass culture will be examined more closely in the present essay by first discussing the difference between two different functions of imitation: a potentially useful imitation in the framework of a high culture and a paralyzing imitation imposed by institutions (2.1). A possible loss of individuality will then be examined, which could result from the aforementioned institutionalized imitation and at the same time serve to maintain mass culture (2.2). Whether the mechanism of mutual imitation can result in an edifying boost in collective creative power, or whether it conceals the tendency to intoxicated heteronomy, which paralyzes the growth of cultural artefacts or even degenerates into a recurring pattern, is to be explored in the conclusion (2.3).

2 Main part

2.1 Mass culture as alienated culture

The understanding of culture that emerged before the beginning of the 18th century(cf. Kluge, 419) the derivation of art from ability points to a certain functioning of the culture of the time. The former does not dictate which cultural techniques can be transferred to its inventory, to its exemplary "Hall of Fame" and thus passed on across generations, not based on purely market-economy aspects, but primarily on the basis of the social allocation of benefits. In contrast to mass culture, the term "high culture", which sounds noble at first glance, can be applied to this type of culture which, however, allows for two critical interpretations that are similar to one another. For one, implied is, culture is not useful and accessible to the proletariat, but only to an elite at the pinnacle of culture. On the other hand suggested is, culture is also mainly determined by this elite, so that the majority of society strives in vain for control of cultural goods, since they envy the elite for their influence. What is meant, however, is not a "level of culture" that bows to a social hierarchy.Rather, what is meant is that high culture is destined to strive for a better form of society - in which such an elite does not necessarily exist.This happens inideal casethrough the cooperation of all members of society, who constantly critically examine, adapt and validate the value of cultural assets in a mutual reflection process. To put it in an idealized way, "pure" art in high culture works through constant negativityon of existence after aPatterns of critical theory (cf. Hindrichs 2017, 78). This not only applies to the degree of recognition of the aesthetics of certain art styles, but also has a benefit-oriented application reference: The culture also serves as a test instrument for proven culture techniques, such as the development of the art of brewing was originally required by the mass need for a durable, clean drink. Although the use of beer in particular is no longer the case due to the increasing hygiene of drinking wateressential because of its long-lasting provenance, it was given a special place in the culture, which can be seen in the tradition. The handing down of a cultural component thus gives it a special dignity, and even if it is used without any memory of its creators, it is a testimony to a completed process dhe edifying imitation of useful styles,which ideally drives society forward.

That urge for mutual imitation, which originally was able to help people to learn new cultural techniques, is now being played off against human development solely by a man-made institution:The institution of the capitalist economic order.The notion of imitation in relation to the culture industry must therefore be understood much more broadly than its mere meaning of "free-thinking imitation" as it was used in various art styles even before the influence of industrialization in the mid-19th century. For example,

while the architectural style of classicism at the time wanted to put a stop to the magnificent baroque architecture, which was characterized by symmetry and macrostructural simplicity, by creating an aesthetic contrast, the imitation of ancient Greek and Roman architecture, in industrial society imitation has become an automated structural dynamic. The latter effect of the imitation is discussed in more detail in the following part (2.2).

With the beginning of the influence of commercialization on culture is changingthe open-ended traditionfrom cultural assets to a commodification of these in a closed circuitmarket-oriented Reproduction. So are"[g]intellectual creations of a culture-industrial style [...] no longer also goods,but are it through and through" (Adorno 1997, 338).This can only happen if the cultural assets are uprooted from their mature role in society and transferred inconspicuously to an institution that serves the market. Due to this institutionalization, it is now the market that exercises control over the function of certain cultural components - the real style becomes artificial through its standardization (cf. Adorno / Horkheimer 1988, 137). It can be seen that it is not imitation as a free creative means of a critical cultural process that clouds the original effect of the culture.

2.2 Imitation as a driver for the loss of individuality in mass culture

It is therefore necessary to explore the form in which imitation prevails in relation to mass culture. The term "mass culture" initially sounds more accessible than that of "high culture". It suggests a democratization of culture, since at first glance it is the masses that determine the success of various cultural assets. However, the associated culture of the culture industry does not come from the masses, but from the culture industry itself, since the need for access to culture is stimulated by the culture industry in order to market the product "culture". As already described in the introduction, the person who masters the cultural technique of "ability" becomes an artist. What this ability has to consist of in the context of mass culture in order to be recognized as an artist was already indicated in the previous part: the market-oriented use of the existing culture as a resource for one's own artistic success. In addition to the "experts", those people who reproduce the styles designed by artists also occupy a further position in the struggle for the air sovereignty of mass culture: the consumers as "connoisseurs", who have internalized the unified rules and processes of culture and the resulting ones maintain the resulting styles and follow them precisely (cf. Hindrichs 2017, 65). Schemata designed by artists become cultivated feelings, which in turn shape the reactionary culture. It is therefore not primarily decided democratically, as the concept of mass culture initially suggests, but decides on its own.

Because even through the social creation of a common cultural catalog, this is transferred to a transcendent plateau, which influences people and thus reproduces and verifies itself through mutual imitation. It doesn't matter whether it was the artists or the consumers who set up the cultural system and got it rolling, analogous to the chicken-and-egg problem.The only decisive factor is that the closed cycle is kept alive by the imitation. EIt is hardly possible to break out of this, because while in the times of high culture there was a family discourse oriented towards factual arguments about the cultivation of culture, in the context of mass culture there is only an industrialized heart-lung machine to maintain a condition that does not need to be questioned. Of course, even before the beginning of mass culture, culture was not free from the influences of a social or economic order, which also made it an instrument of ecclesiastical, colonialist or sexist resentment at that time - as can be seen in magnificent baroque churches, racist ornamentation through the rough stylization of African natives or the depiction of a weak woman who corresponds to an ideal of beauty. In contrast to fluid high culture, however, mass culture can be viewed as a hermetically sealed cycle in which imitation does not take place as part of a specific order, but rather inhibits the development of a reflective, critical culture by solely forcing market-serving, artificial styles.The unpredictable style has become an obstacle due to the culture industry's claim to infallibility, which is why the industry develops the claim to construct the style in its own way – free from the arbitrariness of a social discourse (cf. Hindrichs 2017, 66f).

Because people are tied into such a predetermined culture that can only be changed superficially in terms of their leisure time, they lose their individuality. Similar to the domesticated pet in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, which is guided by the institutionalized instinct of the ruling predatory people and is thus subject to a higher authority (cf. Sommer 2019, 173), man in mass culture is theimmaturitydelivered. through commercialization advertising messages become cultivated feelings that sustain the social demand for cultural goods, but at the same time curb a discourse about the meaning and purpose of those goods. The consequences of the conjured up victory of commercial interests over the discourse-oriented culture sometimes try to resolve themselves through commercial arrangements: So seefor example The city of Venice proposes to counter the rampant mass tourism and the resulting environmental problems by introducing a tourist fee - apparently because it accepts the phenomenon of the mass rush of tourists as a given, since this is due to the associated income a fixedcultural componenthas become. It is true that the desire for individuality pushes through the masses like a quiet chuckleSurface, however, will also have that feeling ofIndependence into a commodity that needs to be marketed.

A large chain restaurant in the Bamberg island area, which is in great demand, symbolizes the longing for that pseudo-individuality. This advertises that it is a "punk restaurant", which is thus oriented towards a rebellious youth culture that rejects conformity. Seen from the point of view of mass culture, this business model does not exist because people have a natural need to eat their food in this way – or even because the food was prepared there in a particularly tasty way. Much morewill about the the supposedly exclusive, individualistic character of the restaurant in such a way that itrestaurant guests serves as a coping strategy for the loss of individuality that is unavoidable in mass society. As a result, overcoming the fear of loss of individuality becomes a competitive product, with more and more people adopting this behavior instead of weighing the quality of expensive food intake with loud pop music against, for example, getting together in small groups, which Epicurus used to recommend.

It can be stated that attempts to influence mass culture move within narrow limits. It is true that youe liberal self-portrayal of individuals on a micro level, for example in the context of fashion, has become an accepted and predictable part of the culture industry. However, it can be seen that the financially promising consumer incentives in the context of trends at macro level always follow the basic assumption of broad imitation of given, already existing cultural infrastructure. The social consequences of this dynamic will be examined in the following section.

2.3 Imitations as part of affirmative consciousness

Another process made possible by imitation in the context of mass culture is the adoption of certain heuristics that are represented and reproduced in the works of artists. In this way, the stage serves as a moral model for the high-profile media, allowing recipients to relate their own worldview to the culturally conveyed messages. This initially seems positive, since the confrontation with social conditions in the best case leads to a critical questioning of them. Due to the function of culture as a moral authority, however, the recipients tend to perceive the conditions presented as natural, with critical reflection giving way to the conception of a fateful, unchanging reality (cf. Hindrichs 2017, 73). Even films that are set in the distant future embody an alternative world in which we can find ourselves and into which we can immerse ourselves. The depiction of flying or self-driving cars suggests that motorized individual transport is a matter of course, and showing the familiar social inequality makes it appear natural and harmless - whereby climate change and the gap between rich and poor are dismissed as harmless conditions. At the same time, however,

certain trends are appropriated and stylized that respond to a changing agenda of the target group, such as the emancipation of the role of women or the representation of racialized people.

In the regularity of organized imitation, such an adaptation of individual grassroots styles can definitely prove to be useful (cf. Horkheimer / Adorno 1988: 138). However, the rebirth of those styles nurtured in the home of the culture industry is hardly tied to the intention of the original creators. Picking up a style that comes from the discourse can only be successful if it corresponds to mass taste and the subsequent social communication remains predictable. Dadaism taught its works to encourage reflection on the absurdity and arbitrariness of art in an abstract yet combative way. Raised by the demands of mass culture, those art styles end up in a state that proves conciliatory with its new adoptive parents. Today, the uprooted and gutted Dadaism is treading the path of satisfying people's thirst for sensation by confronting the bizarre and whimsical, like a disfigured showman in a "freak show". Even if the presentation of controversial topics leads to a critical debate, it can be assumed that this reaction will not endanger the existence of the culture industry. If the content were critically reflected in an unforeseen way, the culture industry would lose its stability, since proven schemes cannot be reproduced in society, even though mass culture is geared towards and specialized in them. As Adorno explains in his summary of the culture industry, the concept of industry does not refer to a totalitarian actor who influences public opinion with a specific intention. Rather, it is the standardization of cultural processes, which is continuously imitated as a structural dynamic practiced and internalized by society (cf. Adorno 1997, 339).

3 Summary and outlook

When it comes to advice literature, the question often arises as to who is ultimately responsible for the advice found there. Is it those who give advice or those who seek advice? According to the considerations presented in this essay, it is primarily the mechanism of mutual imitation that mediates in the culture industry between those who create and consume culture. It is less a reflective imitation, which arises from an open discourse, but rather an inherent human need to imitate cultural assets that are considered worth striving for. Contrary to what the concept of mass culture, later revised by Adorno (cf. Adorno 1997, 337), suggests, this does not fulfill any democratic or other socially useful function. Rather, due to the change from culture to commodity, it is becoming an instrument of power. It could be shown that imitation represents an essential dynamic in mass culture, which structures the processes taking place there and causes the original culture to stagnate. The

subject of further discussion could be the question to what extent imitation not only interferes with culture, but also with the democratic system - and whether this might give populist actors a boost. It is hoped that the present work will deepen at least some aspects of that discussion.

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