

## **The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception: A Critical Analysis**

Ravi Kumar Sinha  
Department of English  
R. N. College, Hajipur

‘Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ is a chapter in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s book ‘Dialectic of Enlightenment’, which unravels the process through which the institution of culture operates as an industry. The phrase culture industry refers to mass production of homogenous and standardized cultural goods for their mass consumption without requiring application of discerning ability.

The central thesis of these Frankfurt School theorists is that culture industry perpetuates the exploitation of the mass by the capitalist system. According to them, the capitalist society, in an imperceptible but decisive way, seeks to transform culture into a veritable industry. This industry manufactures consumer products in the name of cultural products, which are standardized and homogenous in nature. Thus painting, literature and cinema largely make use of hackneyed and stock materials and as such become commodified. They do not intend to promote creativity, inquisitive tendency and imaginative independence of an individual. Their basic motive is to transform individuals into passive consumers so as to manipulate their consciousness.

Culture industry provides easy entertainment which diverts the mass from the wrong and unjust activities of the ruling capitalist class. The cheap amusement being served in the name of culture maintains the illusion of a comfortable retreat from the agony of the exploitative social order. In this way, the mass is unsuspectingly lured away to a make-believe world. Ironically, the only freedom available to them is a freedom from creative and independent thinking. This naturally facilitates perpetuation of the capitalist ethos. In such a situation, the capitalist society manages to marginalize, and then negate, all alternatives to it. The artists in order to survive are compelled to work within the framework of culture industry. A vicious cycle, thus, begins to operate, in which mass culture emerges as the only medium of fulfilling those desires that capitalist lifestyles promote.

It is true that as per the law of demand and supply, consumers’ needs and taste do influence the availability of goods. But in an industry driven society, ready-made products seek to establish their legitimacy by ‘creating’ desires and demands for them. The network of companies, corporations, industries and institutions strive to control and even dilute our genuine needs, desires and demands. Thus, art objects are designed to be profitable while their marketing is designed to generate desire and demand for these objects. The use of mass media further strengthens the network of the capitalist order.

Adorno illustrates the subtle process through which the culture industry operates by referring to the popular music. Composing a hit song is an instance of genuine literary talent, a manifestation of genuine cultural sensibility. Popular music, on the other hand, remains industrial in terms of its production, promotion and distribution. Its standardization is a prerequisite condition for its mass consumption. The popular music creates ‘desires’ in the listeners for drawing their attention by way of compromising with the ‘quality and material’ of pure or natural music. This compromise then facilitates the untrained listener to like the popular music in the name of natural music. Thus Adorno and Horkheimer observe:

“Popular music either promotes the thoughtlessness of the masses or else provides the content of their thought.....fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, have their 'non-productive' correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all. Thus, distraction is a presupposition of popular music. It is also a product of that music- the tunes lull the listener to inattention.”

In the same way, all films and TV shows that appear different, in fact, follow the same recycled formulas as in other types of consumer goods. As in case of consumers goods, it creates the illusion that ‘there is something for everyone’ However, the fact is that these are all variations of the same thing. Despite uniformity of ‘materiality, the ‘value’ or ‘significance ‘of cultural products is artificially created and sustained with the help of mass media and advertisement. This is the distinctive aspect of the culture industry. The fact that all cultural artifacts are produced under the same scheme allows them to be consumed without the least suspicion. In this way, culture industry enforces conformity- with the help of the products that appear different but, in reality, are variations of the same thing. Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that people in a capitalist society are also doomed to the same fate as that of art under the culture industry. They lose their independence and individuality and get transformed into homogenized consumers having no intrinsic or unique traits as the Enlightenment dreamed.

----- 0000 -----