

## **The Cultural Industry between Authentic Art and Kitsch in Theodor Adorno: A Critical Study**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper seeks to analyse Theodor Adorno's position on the cultural industry that arose from instrumental reason, which transformed human beings, art, and culture into calculative and utilitarian operations. Adorno's focus was on the effect of the cultural industry in transforming art from an aesthetic value into a commercial process subject to the logic of the market and commodification within modern capitalist societies, since it incorporated both art and culture into the commercial process and caused the authentic to be mixed with the counterfeit within the prevailing cultural system. The cultural industry led to the anaesthetisation of the masses through the formation of public taste and the integration of the recipient into the system such that it became difficult for him to distinguish between what was purely aesthetic and what was artificial. Within this context,

kitsch appears as an expression of forms of aesthetic falsity, whose features include similarity and the offering of superficial pleasures that mislead the critical consciousness of the audience, unlike autonomous art, which searches into the contradictions of reality without immersing itself in it. For Adorno, this art is the art capable of rescuing society from the illusion of capitalism because it bears a negative dimension that negates everything that exists by preserving its authenticity. It is a field of disturbance rather than a field of entertainment and pleasure and a critical resistance that awakens the audience and prevents it from smooth integration into the world of kitsch and false beauty. Adorno's aim in this critique was to restore consideration to art and to distinguish between what is authentic and what is kitsch, not by way of taste but by way of critique and the

disclosure of the truth behind falsity and consumption.

**Keywords:** Theodor Adorno; the cultural industry; authentic art; kitsch; instrumental reason; enlightenment; media; aesthetics.

## Introduction

The Enlightenment era was known as an age of critique, beginning with the struggle against everything mythical and metaphysical that dulled the mind of the European human being and with the move from stagnation towards a more humane and elevated condition. This was achieved through the liberation of reason and the adoption of a comprehensive approach to the critique of phenomena and things that do not submit to the logic of reason, thereby making reason a means of delivering the human being from everything traditional and of moving toward progress and advancement. However, the gains of the Enlightenment soon turned into failures within European society, as was clarified by the leading figures of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, such as Adorno<sup>1</sup> and

Horkheimer, who considered that reason had exceeded its limits and had become instrumental and a means of oppression. Moreover, the dominance of positivist discourse touched on all aspects, including the cultural aspect. Adorno considered the twentieth century to be a time in which reason was demolished and in which human beings lived in a manufactured culture. All this was caused by scientific development and the spread of the media, which enabled individuals to gain easy access to various forms of culture and consequently increased and diversified cultural content. This concept was formulated in light of several rigorous and, at the same time, slippery fields of knowledge owing to the fragmented approach to Theodor Adorno's intellectual project, which was in conformity with the school itself. Adorno was concerned with rejecting the planning of culture and cultural production by industrial patrons and those possessing powerful economic interests. He was particularly concerned with the destruction wrought by the mechanisms of capitalism and with what happens when the

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was a German philosopher and musician affiliated with the Frankfurt School. He was born in Frankfurt am Main on 11 September 1903 into a well-to-do Jewish family. After obtaining the Habilitation qualifying him for teaching in 1931, he was appointed lecturer at the University of Frankfurt. He was appointed director of music in the administration of the Princeton Radio Research Project from 1938 to 1941, then became second director of the research project on social discrimination at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1941 to 1948. In collaboration with Horkheimer, he published *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947, and with the American psychologist Nevitt Sanford he wrote *The*

*Authoritarian Personality* in 1950. After his death, he left two books that he had not published during his lifetime: *Aesthetic Theory* and a study of Beethoven. Among his works are *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), *Philosophy of New Music* (1948), *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), *Notes to Literature*, three parts (1961), *Negative Dialectics* (1966), and *Aesthetic Theory* (1969). See Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Supplement to the Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (Lebanon: Arab Institution for Studies and Publishing, 1986), 12-13.

profit motive prevails over the cultural life of society, reaching its culmination in what he and Horkheimer called “the culture industry”. This signifies that culture had lost its authenticity in both heart and mind, while art came at a moment when critique had lost its power to control reified reality and its discourses because art is characterised by the autonomy that enables it to negate that bitter reality. Art always expresses the history of societies and is independent of them. Accordingly, we pose the following problem: How did the cultural industry lead to confusion in the distinction between authentic art and kitsch, as well as in the transformation of art from autonomous art into a consumer product? How can the autonomy of art represent a force of protest and critique against the hegemony of the cultural industry?

## **1. Theoretical Roots of the Cultural Industry in Adorno**

Culture and society are closely related, and cultures differ from one society to another. Every society has its own culture that distinguishes it. It is not possible to imagine a culture without society or a society without culture because culture is the mirror and the title of people. Cultures differ and diversify from one era to another according to differences in the paths of knowledge and in the means of scientific and technological progress. Among the manifestations of contemporary culture, for

example, are the spread of social media, the proliferation of printed materials such as newspapers and magazines, the spread of media programs, and other phenomena. Contemporary culture is therefore considered diverse and multifaceted and includes a wide range of fields, such as art, music, literature, and cinema.

The culture of the age of modernity occupied a large place among the concerns of the critical school, which is concerned with critique in its constructive sense: the critique of contemporary societies that have been subjected to the domination of systems of government and technocracy, as well as to the tyranny of the market economy. Society has become a mechanical society driven by media communications. The dialectic of enlightenment, written by Adorno and Horkheimer, is among the most creative and controversial works in the study of culture in modern societies. Its analysis of the culture industry points to the standardisation of products and the standardisation of the arts and culture, since the pursuit of freedom in society is inseparable from the pursuit of enlightenment in culture.

### **1.1. From Enlightenment to Instrumental Reason**

The Enlightenment is considered a renewed intellectual movement founded in Europe. There is an idea according to which the Enlightenment

is deliverance from the darkness of the Middle Ages and from their contempt for the human mind and the illumination of reason and culture alike, together with providing the imagination with the support of knowledge and liberating it from the myths of the churches that had prevailed for centuries and had restricted free thought. Thus, “the Age of Enlightenment is viewed as that period that began in Europe with the departure from the supposed superstitions and irrationality of the Middle Ages up to the eighteenth century, and the Enlightenment is often called the ‘Age of Reason’”.<sup>2</sup> This is because it symbolises an important transformation in human thought and the emergence of new ideas and developments in multiple fields that dominated the world of ideas on the European continent. The Age of Enlightenment was called the Age of Reason because it liberates reason from ignorance and intellectual stagnation.

Enlightenment is concerned with dispelling superstitions and unjust laws established by corrupt men by using God for their justifications. There is a common narrative between Kant and Adorno concerning enlightenment. Kantian enlightenment refers to humanity’s emergence from immaturity. After the human species had believed in myth and doctrines and had been

immature, it was now guided by reason. For Adorno, however, Enlightenment shares something with myth. Neglected theological myths were replaced by a new myth whose foundation is the natural sciences and whose embodiment is technology. After reason emerged from the enchantment of myth, it entered into an obscure enchantment that was more severe than the first: the enchantment of science and technology. This opposition between myth and enlightenment leads us to what Adorno and Horkheimer mean by the “dialectic of Enlightenment”. Reason in itself, which bore its opposite within itself, itself became instrumental and was based on utility and technology. The world is presumed to be enlightened, yet fear still prevails: this is the problem with which the dialectic of enlightenment begins.

Adorno and Horkheimer share a catastrophic vision of the twentieth century when speaking about Enlightenment in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, asking “Why does humanity sink into a new kind of barbarism instead of entering into a truly human condition?”<sup>3</sup> In view of difficult situations and harsh circumstances, individuals may be driven to behave in a barbaric manner to survive or to change their reality. According to Adorno, myth was transformed

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<sup>2</sup> Ross Wilson, *Theodor Adorno* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2007; Taylor & Francis e-Library edition), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, trans. Majid Maurice Ibrahim, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2008), 71.

into enlightenment and enlightenment into mythology. The meaning of this is that the transformation from myth to enlightenment refers to the transformation of people and the reliance on stories and myths to explain phenomena and interpret the world and to the encouragement of critical thinking and rational inference. The transformation of enlightenment into mythology refers to the return of some people to the use of stories, narratives, and mythical symbols to interpret the world, partly to fill the spiritual void in a society lacking values.

In some manner, enlightenment in its essence complies with myths. After the purpose of enlightenment had been to liberate the human being from the illusion of nature and myth, it became a new kind of myth. Adorno states in this regard, “Just as myths have already accomplished enlightenment, so enlightenment becomes more and more entangled in mythology. It draws the whole of its material from myths in order to destroy them, and even as judge it comes under their spell”.<sup>4</sup> Neglected theological myths were replaced by other myths whose foundation is the natural sciences. The domination of knowledge over nature did not spare the human being himself, who was also

transformed into a machine capable of organisation and codification. Human beings believe that they have been liberated from mythical fear, yet they are driven towards exploitation. The human desire to liberate one’s condition from myths and negative beliefs requires the condemnation of what is known as reason, since liberation from these ideas is liberation from all fear and the provision of the greatest possible service to reason.

What we see today of the reality of enlightenment and rationality almost departs from its proper course and tends towards the irrational. This has made individual consciousness objectified, remote from itself and from its society. This prompted Adorno and the leading figures of the Frankfurt School of critical theory to criticise the corruption that appeared as a result of the misunderstanding of enlightenment and reason and their irrational and inhuman abyss in the shadow of industrial capitalist societies whose sole concern was productivity in exchange for the enslavement of the human being. “With the transformation of people into strangers who pay the surplus of their strength, Enlightenment behaves toward things as the dictator behaves, knowing them to the extent that he manipulates them; the man of

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<sup>4</sup> Kamal Boumounir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 1st ed. (Dar al-Aman and Manshuraf al-Ikhtilaf, 2010), 17.

science knows things to the extent that he can work with them”.<sup>5</sup> Science thereby became confined to the wealthy class in society, and its miserable individuals were transformed into strangers. Enlightenment, or science, behaves dictatorially toward the various classes of society, manipulating and controlling them, while the man of science knows that his knowledge is useless if it is not used in a practical way and applied.

The erroneous use of reason led to the emergence of a cultural industry, a literal translation of the German expression *Kulturindustrie*. It was first used in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written by Adorno and Horkheimer, where the term “mass culture” was replaced by “cultural industry because Adorno considers the culture that arises spontaneously from the masses to be, as he calls it “mass deception”. Adorno says in an article on the cultural industry, “We abandoned the latter expression and replaced it with the cultural industry, that culture which springs from the masses themselves”.<sup>6</sup> The cultural industry appeared in industrial capitalist society and became a purely industrial matter based on production and investment. All popular cultures

within the cultural industry were also excluded. It is not possible to speak of an independent popular culture in an industrial culture because all were swallowed by this industry and became one thing; the only thing that resisted it was autonomous art.

The term “cultural industry” has certain echoes, the first of which is industrialisation. Adorno criticised industrialisation in Western industrial capitalism when capitalists began producing cultural artefacts according to a standardised plan carefully designed to be as programmed as possible. Enlightenment was transformed into ideology under the cultural industry, and this ideology dissolved into the illusion of existence and into the power that undertook the surveillance of technology. The ideological opinions of the dominant class strengthened false consciousness among the working class through what they called the “cultural industry”. There is one thing with which ideology can never jest: social security, that is, “no one should go hungry or cold; anyone who causes this will end up in concentration camps”.<sup>7</sup> This joke coming from Hitler’s Germany is nothing but an announcement at all the entrances of the institutions of the cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. George Kattoura, 1st ed. (Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid al-Muttahida, 2006), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor Adorno, “*Industrie culturelle*”, trans. from German by Hans Hildenbrand and Alex Linderberg, *Communications*, no. 3 (1964): 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 174-75.

industry, where naivety meets deception. This is what characterised postmodern societies. In the cultural industry, the human being feels active only in his or her animal functions, such as eating, drinking, and procreation, while human functions are rigid and unmoving. Culture was not, as in the past, free of any authority or ideology; rather, as Adorno says, it now suckles from the economic structure.<sup>8</sup> In late capitalist societies, everyone is involved, everyone is complicit, and everyone is a victim, whether capitalist or noncapitalist, in an unconscious and automatic manner. They consider the cultural industry to be merely a profitable sector whose aim is profit and utility. It is ideology in itself, without the producer having aims or purposes behind that thing. Obscene singing and pornographic films are intended not to corrupt society but merely to achieve profits. Adorno says in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Culture is a commodity capable of contradiction; it is entirely subject to the law of exchange. . . the motives are, at the bottom, economic”.<sup>9</sup> It is clear from this statement that the sole aim of the cultural industry is to market products in large quantities for profit. There is no other human aim to which producers aspire. Similarly, art did not escape the grasp of the cultural industry. It

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<sup>8</sup> Kahhal Abu Bakr, “The Crisis of Culture in the Age of Modernity: When Culture Becomes a Commodity”, *Al-Tadwin Journal*, no. 10 (2018), University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, 116.

was integrated into the reality of media and advertising and took on the character of profit and consumption. The commercial and utilitarian character predominated over it, and it was transformed into an ideologised commodity placed by producers in its aesthetic form with the aim of exerting cultural and psychological influence on the consumer. In this situation, we discern a procrastination of the capitalist idea of making culture something sold and consumed. “The capitalist system oriented itself from the outset towards the market: it produces in order to sell”.<sup>10</sup> The capitalist’s sole concern is to increase profits, and this occurs through the duality of commodities: they are used first for their utilitarian function and, second, as a function for the cultural change and industrialisation of the consumer in order to entice him.

## **1.2. The Commodification of Culture and the Standardisation of Products**

The term “cultural industry” primarily addressed capitalist entertainment industries, including exhibitions, books, music, television, fashion, and others, as products designed for consumption by the masses. The products of the cultural industry were not wholly subject to the

<sup>9</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Perrault, Caroline Andréani, et al., *Le livre noir du capitalisme* (Pantin, France: Le Temps des Cerises, 1998), 14.

capitalist system in the nineteenth century for the purpose of increasing profit. With entry into the twentieth century, however, the matter worsened, and the principle of profit became dominant over cultural production. Cultural works came to be measured by what they were worth financially, not by what they were worth artistically.<sup>11</sup> This resulted in the profit motive prevailing completely over the cultural life of society. The value of cultural works is also measured by a combination of artistic quality and commercial power. A work acknowledged for artistic distinction may receive greater appreciation and a higher financial valuation, while the law of supply and demand is the dominant law behind determining the value of cultural works.

Adorno strongly criticises mass culture and considers that it misleads the masses. After merely entering the masses, the images and news broadcast by the media have political purposes and economic needs. This idea somewhat resembles Karl Marx's idea concerning the alienation of the worker within the capitalist system. The worker produces in the first place and, in return, receives the lowest wage and the smallest portion of rest, feeling as although he were a machine in the hands of capitalists

without objecting to the situation in which he finds himself. Adorno agrees with his colleague Herbert Marcuse in that freedom and creativity are repressed within modern industrial society. The products of the cultural industry have become subject to the ideology of domination. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art, but as commercial works used as ideologies to legitimise the rubbish they intentionally produce, "Cinema and radio no longer need to turn themselves into art; they are only practical activity (business)".<sup>12</sup> Both cinema and radio are powerful means of communication that can provide cultural, artistic, and enjoyable content to the masses. However, reducing their artistic and cultural value and considering them only as practical activity negatively affects the quality of the content produced before the audience. For Adorno, the focus of domination shifted from culture to economy, and art no longer knows itself; it fell into the field of goods through the transformation of artistic, literary, and musical works into commodities that are bought and sold. "That beautiful naked body adopted as an example, or the melodious tone of musical voices, may be vulgar and without artistic

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<sup>11</sup> David Inglis and John Hughson, *Introduction to the Sociology of Culture*, trans. Lama Nasir, rev. Faye al-Sayyagh, 1st ed. (Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), 74.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142.

feeling (kitsch), and yet be an essential moment of aesthetic quality”.<sup>13</sup>

Adorno considers what the media broadcast makes society into a passive society reduced to a consumer of something displayed before it. Consequently, the masses forget their true reality and immerse themselves in the bitter ideal reality displayed before them. This recalls Gustave Le Bon’s statement about crowds: “The inability of crowds to think rationally deprives them of any critical spirit, that is, of any ability to distinguish between truth and error and therefore to form an accurate judgement about matters”.<sup>14</sup> Every product in the cultural industry becomes an advertisement for it and benefits from the weaker classes by combining high culture and low culture and removing the boundaries between them. For example, ordinary readers have become writers, just as they can communicate with writers through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

What Adorno attributed to manufactured culture applies first and foremost to music. Adorno gives great attention to the musical field and to the decline of listening, to the point that the products of the culture industry were not

works of art but commodities from the beginning.<sup>15</sup> What the cultural industry produces is not necessarily works of art but rather commodities marketed to the public. Adorno argues in this regard that the music industry transformed music into a commodity and a means of profit, not a means of artistic expression. Adorno presents the ideal of artistic beauty, namely, Mahlerian musical expression, as an ideal model of multidimensional aesthetic technique that all the arts should take as an example in terms of specificity and diversity. Adorno was influenced by Mahler’s music and saw that its tonal formation addresses people’s feelings and emotions. He was also influenced by Schopenhauer, who held that art alleviates the illness of life. “If we asked a musician whether music pleases and delights him, he would most often prefer to say, as in the American joke about the violinist: ‘I simply hate music’”.<sup>16</sup> Adorno described popular music in Hollywood as rubbish devoid of intellectual expression and mere nonsense. He strongly criticises jazz and pop music, considering that jazz has become merchandise and transforms individual fantasy into a social fantasy that appears democratic. “According to Adorno, people who attend

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Naji al-Awnali, 1st ed. (Beirut, Lebanon: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2017), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Taher Haso al-Zibari, *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Beirut: Dar al-Biruni for Publishing and Distribution, 2016), 481.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, trans. Sara Adel, rev. Mustafa Muhammad Fuad, 1st ed. (Cairo, 2016), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.

musical concerts are victims, even if they do not realise it, for they are immersed in hollow rituals when meagre layers of low musical taste are presented to them”.<sup>17</sup> For Adorno, entertainment music is condemned to fail from the beginning. He saw that sentimental music is unbearable because it uses unconventional musical techniques and innovative vocal arrangements to achieve personal artistic expression and is used to manipulate people and distract them from the problems of society. It therefore distorts art and makes it lose the capacity for critical thought.

Adorno points out that cinema is the daughter of modernity and the counterpart of the capitalist system and is fit to be a two-faced ideology. Radio, film, and television are industrial arts; politics, news, and entertainment are all broadcast through the same channels of the cultural industry. Listeners are transformed into addressees who submit to this authoritarian subjection to single radio programmes and a single aim, namely, to make everyone proceed under the systems of the cultural industry. Employees are reminded of rational organisation in the cultural industry, while customers are reminded by the screen or the press and by exploits from private life. They possess freedom

of choice, but in all cases, they remain objects and topics.<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, attaching any film that is relatively similar to previous films of the same plot, type, and content can make everyone produce and act. It thus becomes difficult to distinguish between popular culture and high art. The speed of the images, the structure of the film, and its content can be predicted. As soon as the film begins, we know when it will end and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten. The whole matter is based on ready-made clichés that do not change. In this way, the masses adapt to the cultural industry such that smooth adaptation is required by monopoly capitalism.<sup>19</sup> Adorno offers his critique of cinema by saying, “Every visit to the cinema makes me, despite my complete vigilance, more stupid and worse off”.<sup>20</sup> If Enlightenment ended in myth, music became empty, reified, and formal.

Adorno and his colleague Horkheimer criticise both radio and television as means of promotion and propaganda that exert pressure on minds and strip them of every freedom. These means play a role in domesticating individuals, standardising tastes, and determining possible

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<sup>17</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Criticism: A Preliminary Introduction to Key Concepts*, trans. Wafa Ibrahim and Ramadan Bastawisi, 1st ed. (Cairo, 2003), 84.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Alan How, *Critical Theory*, trans. Thaer Deeb, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ayn for Publishing, 2010), 63.

<sup>20</sup> Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 86.

orientations. People thereby become victims of excessive propaganda.<sup>21</sup> Radio and television make it possible to target particular categories of the audience by means of their directive programs and the stirring of their interests. Repeated negative news can affect the feelings and negative thinking of people, while positive news and educational information can provide added value. In the complete absorption of cultural products into the sphere of commodities, the radio does not attempt to promote its products as commodities. In America, for example, it imposes no fees on the public and thus takes the deceptive form of honest and impartial authority, which suits fascism. In fascism, the radio becomes a loudspeaker on the street; its voice merges with the howling of alarm sirens that announce panic.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno asks, “What do people do in their free time?” For him, free time is an expansion of our knowledge, while others see it as leisure time for watching television through the media. Adorno considered this a great distraction encouraged by the entertainment industry. This distracts viewers in silence, with their inertia, from causing any real change. Watching television, for example, makes us preoccupied with the problems and issues of what we see on

television without paying attention to our bitter reality and to those around us. The same applies to music: as soon as we become immersed in a musical passage, whether calm music that stirs feelings or jazz music, it makes us wander into another world entirely different from the world in which we are, and it affects people either with sadness or with joy. People become accustomed to going to music for amusement, and consequently, consciousness is emptied and replaced with the unconscious. However, modern music, as well as the visual arts and literature, stands on the edge of what may be called art because it makes chance or incident one of its essential elements.

## **2. The Dialectic of Culture and Art**

Art and culture are among the concepts affected by modernity and by social and cultural development. Art is considered part of culture and reflects its values and spirit. Artists express themselves and their societies through art, whether through painting, sculpture, literature, cinema, music, or other means of artistic expression. The effects of culture and art on daily life can be observed, and people may differ in their appreciation of artistic works and of different cultural values.

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Zibari, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, 479.

<sup>22</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (California, 2002), 129.

A dialectical relationship emerges between culture and art. To understand this relationship, we should define culture as the enlightenment of the mind and the development of the faculty of critique and judgement. It includes beliefs, art, ethics, and all the capacities through which the individual contributes to his society, and it has practical, intellectual, and spiritual methods and models.<sup>23</sup> Art, in the expression of Leo Tolstoy, is “an emotional activity or a language”; he sees that art is not merely expression but the communication of emotions.<sup>24</sup> That is, art is an expression of the spiritual and human side, and it has a role in improving the psychological life of individuals and in moving the public on social and cultural issues.

Adorno may have changed his intellectual path from the critique of philosophy to the critique of aesthetics, especially during his exile in the United States of America. The study of artistic beauty was formed from the cultural situation within European societies. He also criticised artificial, that is, false, art, and directed his critique toward the cultural industry.

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<sup>23</sup> Jamila bint Ayada al-Shammari, *The Concept of Culture in Arab Thought and Western Thought*, MA in Islamic Culture, Faculty of Sharia, Department of Islamic Culture, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, n.d., 7.

## **2.1. Modernity as a Criterion for Distinguishing the Authentic from Kitsch**

The factors that make modernity distinguish between the authentic and kitsch in contemporary art are affected by the specific cultural and artistic context. Modernity can be referred to as a symbol of renewal and modernisation in art and of encouraging artists to express diverse social and political issues. While kitsch refers to ready-made and banal ideas that include the world of media, modernity, as an intellectual movement, seeks to renew societies and raise them to a higher level of development and civilisation through the adoption of the authentic and the total gazing at the false.<sup>25</sup> Modernity seeks to create new economic, social, and political structures and to encompass old structures through the adoption of true cultures and the avoidance of deviation toward falsity and imitation.

Adorno strongly criticises the cultural industry for imposing an ideology that serves capitalist systems; this is a fundamentally negative view. In contrast, Walter Benjamin establishes discussions concerning cultural manipulation, or what he calls mechanical reproduction, questioning the fate of

<sup>24</sup> Jerome Stolnitz, *Art Criticism: Aesthetic and Philosophical Study*, trans. Dr Fuad Zakariyya (Alexandria: Dar al-Wafa' li-Dunya al-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, n.d.), 20.

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contemporary art in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. He thereby arrived at the idea that the work of art is stripped of its authenticity because of the influence of technical means on the work of art, especially when it is subjected to the logic of profit and consumption. Authentic art bears an aura that arises from its uniqueness in time and place and from the subjectivity of the artist himself. However, with the emergence of the technical development known to contemporary societies, such as cinema, photography, and audiovisual media, the production of the work of art changed, and the artistic painting was transformed into art capable of reproduction and identical to its original. Although artistic images are reproduced, they lack the aura that distinguishes them, and they lose their halo. In this regard, Benjamin says, “What withers in the age of technical reproduction is the aura of the work of art”.<sup>26</sup> With the multiplication of images of art, whether painting or music, the true value of art is lost in terms of its uniqueness and its aura as authentic art. This reproduction did not change art; rather, it changed the mode of its presence and its meaning.

Mechanical reproduction helped the work of art become widespread among the masses and the original mixed with the nonoriginal. Art was

transformed into a commercial, consumer process according to the value of the work of art, and it was integrated into what was called the cultural industry. In modern and contemporary societies, a single art has begun to take several similar and reproduced forms. For example, we find a single artistic painting reproduced into several identical paintings, which causes it to lose its authenticity and artistic aura, all in exchange for a commercial, consumer process created by the cultural industry, according to Adorno. The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, located in the Louvre Museum in Paris, can, with the emergence of mechanical reproduction, be photographed into several similar copies, and art thus becomes repeatable. What is different in art is the possibility of mechanical multiplication, and advertising has replaced the aura. Benjamin’s idea serves Adorno’s idea in that the culture industry gives the masses several similar products that work to entertain them instead of unsettling the status quo.

Unlike mass culture, which expresses the commodified world of capitalism, autonomous art represents a challenge to the reality that exists, unlike false art, which is directed by political and economic standards. Adorno says in one of his books on aesthetic theory, “There is doubt as to whether works of art have political

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<sup>26</sup> Boumounir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 74.

effects. If they do, this is usually marginal in relation to the works concerned; if they struggle to act, they usually limit themselves to attaining their own concept. In fact, their real social effect or impact is indirect”.<sup>27</sup> Autonomous art is art that is conscious of reality and conscious of the cultural context in which it is, and it expresses its age while being on guard against it. Works of art such as literature, painting, and music are protests against existing reality, and their reality is emancipatory: it criticises false art and criticises reality.

Adorno proceeds from the view that the work of art and the aesthetic experience in the age of modernity and advanced industrial society live in a state of crisis because they are subject to invisible techniques determined and directed by capitalist society. He considers “kitsch” a kind of popular art used to achieve fame and commercial success, whose features include repetition and the superficial imitation of ideas in a fragmented manner that strips art of its authenticity. It is “the malignant substance of all art, and separation from it is today one of art’s desperate efforts”.<sup>28</sup> However, Adorno directed his critique against false art, in which he sees one

of the greatest causes of the reification of Western reason, its fettering towards the worse, and its reduction to a condition without identity within its society. Accordingly, we see today that the human being has become incapable of presenting original arts worthy of him and capable of taking him out of what he is in, as the human being was in previous ages.

## 2.2. The Critical Significance of Autonomy

Adorno became aware of the necessity of undermining the rationality of domination and replacing it with critical rationality, and this can be made available only through aesthetics.<sup>29</sup> Adorno called for a negative culture to liberate the human being through his negative aesthetic method. His spirit of critical thinking is the dialectic of negation as a destructive and transcendental philosophical method, since negative culture is a critical enlightenment culture. The thread of critique extends from negative dialectics to aesthetic theory, linking art to the radical critique of contemporary society. For him, art is a critical theory that calls for changing reality by creating an imaginary world completely different from and opposed to reality.<sup>30</sup> Aesthetics and art are models of

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<sup>27</sup> Boumounir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 369.

<sup>29</sup> Aesthetics is taken from the Greek word *Aisthētikos*, which means sensory perception. It was then applied to the perception specific to beauty. The German philosopher Baumgarten (1714-

1762) was the first to formulate this term in his book *Reflections on Poetry* in 1735. See Walter Stace, *The Meaning of Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics*, trans. Imam Abd al-Fattah Imam (Egypt: National Translation Project, 2000), 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ramadan Bastawisi Muhammad, *Aesthetics in the Frankfurt School: Adorno as a Model*, 1st ed. (Cairo, 1993), 62.

change for Theodor Adorno. Artistic and aesthetic works, especially avant-garde works that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Kafka's works in the literature, Schoenberg's music, and the emergence of Dadaism and Surrealism in painting, are a rebellion against the existing tragic situation. Adorno admired Schoenberg's twelve-tone music because his use of dissonant tones that produce disturbance is an expression of the suffering of contemporary human beings. He says in this regard, "Dissonant tones may disturb listeners, and this is because these tones are in fact an expression of their own situation".<sup>31</sup> The beginning of rejection of the tragic situation proceeds from unusual art that bears an internal tension and distributes it toward the masses to unsettle their feeling toward their bitter reality. Samuel Beckett's plays also represented for Adorno the true face of our age and a sense of the absurdity of life and the collapse of values. Beckett expressed this prevailing absurdity within a theatrical framework, as embodied in his famous play *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>32</sup> Adorno believed that his plays represented a form of resistance against modern society. This is what

radical modernity called for: reaching negative art and autonomous beauty.

According to the German philosopher Adorno, art represents the only manifestation of nature that is not distorted by the hegemony of reason. Adorno's view of the cultural industry was as precise as possible, and this drove him to know the way in which art is connected to social, cultural, and economic conditions, all in the hope of a better world bearing a real truth whose foundation is autonomous art. Authentic art preserves its autonomy as art, and it adopts this position only insofar as it exists in itself. To describe it as "socially useful" means that it criticises society by its mere existence.<sup>33</sup> For art to be a critical force, according to Adorno, it must reformulate reality in a different manner on the condition that it proceeds from it. Adorno therefore considers authentic art to bear a revolutionary theory: it imitates repressed nature and draws it in its details as an expression of it. From the side of reason, it reappears in art, which tries to make it speak in its own way. For Adorno, art diagnoses the diseases of contemporary civilisation and offers a remedy for them because art is the force of human

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<sup>31</sup> Kamal Boumounir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 1st ed. (Dar al-Aman and Mansurat al-Ikhtilaf, 2010), 100.

<sup>32</sup> Boumounir, *The Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Honneth*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Naji al-Awnali, 1st ed. (Beirut, Lebanon: Mansurat al-Jamal, 2017), 349.

protest against the repression of the institutions that represent authoritarian domination.<sup>34</sup>

Adorno considered aesthetics to be the only dimension capable of transferring society to a new human condition. Thus, art is not an escape from reality or a withdrawal into the despairing self; rather, the human will change reality and transcend what exists. In this sense, aesthetics includes a political dimension as long as art represents a force of protest and critique.<sup>35</sup> That is, art reflects what occurs in reality as although it were like a mirror by presenting a negative dialectical view bearing a new consciousness. Brecht expressed this by considering that art reflects life with its own social mirror. Similarly, Pablo Picasso, through his painting *Guernica*, expressed the horror of the bombing of the Spanish city during the Civil War through a symbolic construction and an expressive condensation that went beyond the direct transmission of the event.<sup>36</sup> In the same context, Adorno adopted a critical position toward false art and toward the culture industry, because both, in his view, contributed to emptying the work of art of its autonomy and transform it into an instrument of integration and consumption instead of making it a field of refusal and a disclosure of the alienation of society.

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<sup>34</sup> Muhammad, *Aesthetics in the Frankfurt School*, 76.

<sup>35</sup> Boumounir, *The Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Honneth*, 84.

## Conclusion

Through what we have addressed, we can arrive at a conclusion whose purpose is that Theodor Adorno deepened his astonishing vision in his resistance to the crisis of technology. His critical orientation had aesthetic and artistic dimensions. His work on literary, musical, and artistic forms, his accusation of modern society, and his profound awareness of Western culture made him one of the best figures in the twentieth century thought through his critique of Enlightenment and its deviation from its proper place and through his undermining of the use of the rationality of domination responsible for the decline of high culture and the rise of popular culture. He sought to replace it with critical rationality by eliminating everything that threatens the autonomy of individuals and by restoring consideration to the human self dispossessed in totalitarian thought. In sum, Adorno tried to conclude that it is necessary to humanise the technical aspect and to deal with the wonders of technology in a reasonable way, not to immerse themselves in them to the point of the loss of the human being and to expose what advanced capitalist societies have become. Adorno does not doubt the role of aesthetics in liberating the human being from all

<sup>36</sup> Kamal Boumounir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 1st ed. (Dar al-Aman and Mansurat al-Ikhtilaf, 2010), 95.

ideologised social and cultural constraints and in liberating him from capitalist domination by enabling the human being in a different, not backwards, manner in his dealings with his world.

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