

What do the frankfurt school contribute to our understanding of popular culture

[Art & Culture](#), [Music](#)



The independent institute Frankfurt School was founded by Jewish intellectuals, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse within a Nazi empowered Germany in 1923. After relocating to various parts of America, gaining exposure from Los Angeles and Hollywood lifestyle, the school returned. They took a great concern in the analysis of popular culture and the Culture Industry that had affected Germany in the 1940s. Although these changes reshaped a nation over 70 years ago, Frankfurt School's interpretation of popular culture still relates to our own understanding today.

The question is why, Adorno in particular, criticised this new behaviour in Germany's society. The Enlightenment was introduced, which expressed individualism instead of tradition but ultimately led the way to modern capitalism and the culture industry. "Frankfurt School perspective is an obvious variant of Marxism." (Strinati, 2004) Despite disagreeing with the Enlightenment, Adorno and Frankfurt School agreed on the Marxist theory. According to Dominic Strinati, to understand Frankfurt's views "the school can be seen as trying to fill in a part of the picture of capitalism Marx did not deal with. (2004, 48) This provides a reappraisal of popular culture which Marx did not comment on, which we will acknowledge and see how far that it is understood by society today. Interestingly, the school focuses on the culture, not the economy or political aspects of society. However Adorno has also been criticised for his unclear and inaccurate analysis of the topic, which will also be discussed and questioned upon. To begin, we will establish how Capitalism is the foundations of the development of popular culture.

Capitalism is the political and economic system which is controlled by the individual, and not by state.

Frankfurt School considered Capitalism as their opposition due to their left-wing beliefs. Though it is noticeable that the Frankfurt School believed Capitalism was more stable than what it really is. Adorno fails to mention that capitalism also has its faults and popular culture was not formed on this system alone. Despite this, it certainly aided it effectively. Adorno declares that the working class accept this system unforced is because businesses, advertisers and other consumers make the product that is being retailed more appealing.

It doesn't take much effort from the consumer to submit to these influences and purchase the product. This makes them feel better about themselves because they now own said product and are part of the majority that does. He introduces the term "commodity fetishism" which "is the basis... of how cultural forms such as popular music can secure the continuing economic, political and ideological domination of capitalism." (Strinati, 2004) He shows us that consumers in the capitalist society value money more than appreciating what was purchased.

This "defines and dominates social relations" (Strinati, 2004, 50) The same is true today - many of us would much prefer to spend a colossal amount of money on an well-known brand commodity, say a new car or handbag, than an affordable and sensible priced one. This presents ourselves to others as a much wealthier individual, which essentially makes us feel better about

ourselves. Adorno quotes this well “ the real secret of success... is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. (Strinati, 2004, 49) This superficial attitude expressed most of us can relate to today because we all live in a capitalist society and have experienced this need for a certain commodity. Therefore Frankfurt School has successfully helped us be aware of the root of popular culture. According to the Frankfurt school, “ the culture industry reflects the consolidation of commodity fetishism. ” (Strinati, 2004, 54) When the public are satisfied, capitalism will continue to work and therefore other political systems will be unsuccessful.

It's only when a system does not work does the mass culture look for new power. With the simplicity and effectiveness of the Culture Industry, the Working Class will remain content consuming. “ It is so effective in doing this that the working class is no longer likely to pose a threat to the stability and continuity of capitalism. ” (Strinati, 2004, 55) The industry successfully moulds and alters the tastes of the masses to suit the industry's needs. However, the Frankfurt School do not consider that the notion of popular culture has any radical potential at this time.

Instead, Adorno found that popular culture was ‘ imposed’ on the people, and warned that they should only welcome it insofar as they do not get imposed. (Strinati, 2004, 55) Of course, this working class at the time was not going to take notice of the school's negative response when they find something so welcoming and appealing. Perhaps Frankfurt did not appreciate how diverse and hybrid popular culture was. One way of looking at this would be to see Adorno's criticism as a warning to us about the

effects of the powerful culture industry, something the masses of 1940s would not understand.

We are able to understand and relate to this because we all know from experience of this captivating affect that popular culture has on our lives. The school's theory discusses that by capitalism and the culture industry working together produces 'false needs' for the masses, which means "people can be reconciled to capitalism, guaranteeing its stability and continuity." (Strinati, 2004, 52) In the pursuit of profit, the industry will be ruthless to promote consumerism - to make consumers buy things they essentially do not need.

These goods are advertised so effectively to the mass culture, they are tricked to believe that they genuinely need it. Think of the example from earlier with the expensive car or handbag. These false needs are created and sustained through advertisements in magazines, television, the media and from other consumers' opinions. Therefore the consumer purchases the item: increasing the success of the industry and fulfilling the false need. The customer buys what they think they need, however remain unsatisfied and wants more. Strinati puts it very well: The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us to believe, but its object. " This is a disturbing truth that needs to be dealt with, but it appears that nobody is bothered by it, so why should it be changed? The school successfully makes it clear to us how this lifestyle is influencing us so powerfully. We are aware of this feeling of 'false needs' from time to time, yet we share the same attitude as the society in the 20th century and continue in bad habit. In particular, the

school criticises the culture industry's popular music, accusing it of two processes: standardisation and pseudo-individualisation.

The customer is being fooled through the use of standardisation “ popular songs are becoming more alike” (Strinati, 2004, 58) Traditional music at such as Beethoven or Mozart requires an attentive listen and expression of the imagination to hear every detail that has been put into the musical piece. Meanwhile, popular music, as described by Storey: “ operates in a kind of blurred dialectic: to consume it demands inattention and distraction” (2009) which means that it requires little attention - which suits perfectly for customers with busy lives, who after a stressful day prefer to listen to something which requires less concentration.

Popular music is ideal here and “ satisfies the craving. ” The pseudo-individualisation element of the song disguises it making it appear more unique and distinctive, often by adding a catchy chorus or beat. Frankfurt School makes us aware of this process, which still is regular in many pop songs today. Adorno compares the characteristics of both music styles and criticises the simplicity of the one dimension popular music. Here it is felt that he must be condemned for criticising with a lack of evidence or experience to prove his theory.

This makes it extremely difficult for us to relate to the school because they fail to relate with us. On the other hand, it could be argued that he was writing in 1941, a time where popular music would be very different to listen to. The music industry has changed drastically in the past 70 years and the

sound of 'pop' has been reshaped too. It has to be acknowledged that despite Adorno's criticisms of the culture industry's popular music, it indisputably proves to us that if we reflect on the music we listen to today we will see evidence of standardisation and pseudo-individualisation used.

To conclude, it must be asked why the mass culture both then and now continues to give into the power of capitalism and the culture industry. Adorno's idea is "that most capitalist societies live limited, impoverished and unhappy lives" (Strinati, 2004, 61) and the reason for this is the submission from the power of commodity fetishism, escape from the real world and tragically, laziness. Strinati presses that "popular culture does not necessarily hide reality from people" but that it's realised how difficult it is to change the world from this mindset so it becomes a matter of acceptance.

It is surely "killing the desire that might let us imagine a better world." (Storey, 2009) The Frankfurt brings to us an interesting outlook of how we could change our lives and prevent the power of capitalism and the culture industry from absolute control. Bibliography Strinati, Dominic (2004) An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture London: Routledge Storey, John (2009) Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction Harlow, England