

# Pseudo individualism

Science



Basing your discussion on an analysis of at least 2 contemporary artists or bands, consider the ways that Theodore Adorno's notions of 'standardisation' and 'pseudo-individualism' might be applied to contemporary popmusic. Do you see any problems or shortcomings from this approach?

Popular Culture has enticed much research; with the increase of media studies there are a number of minds picking apart what they see. With icons filling up and saturating mediums such as television, magazines, radio stations to name a few, the celebrity filled industry is undoubtedly causing a stir amongst the masses.

Theodore Adorno (1903-69) emigrated to England in 1934 to escape Nazism. He lived in the United States of America for 10 years, (1938-48) before returning to Frankfurt, where he was a member at the 'Frankfurt Institute of Social Research'. Theodore Adorno was a key figure in the study of popular music and had intrinsic Marxist view on the capital nature of society. Adorno believed that the culture industry "is the central agency in contemporary capitalism for the production and satisfaction of false needs". (Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M. 1977, p349).

He argues that popular music is a mass-produced and shallow standardised part of the culture industry. This would suggest that all aspects of popular music including types of songs, song lyrics and parts of songs e. g. chorus, are all standardised. (Longhurst, B. 1995, p5).

Popular music is therefore divided into particular categories or genres of music such as rock, pop, rap, heavy metal and reggae etc, however according to Adorno, all popular music is standardised consisting of verse,

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chorus, bridge, that are interchangeable from one song to another. The effects of standardisation are often hidden by what the industry calls pseudo-individualisation. These are incidental differences, also known as 'frills' that are put within a song to disguise that it sounds the same.

Adorno distinguishes sharply between pop music and serious music between high culture and low cultures. Serious music, which he regards as classical, Beethoven or Mozart for example, plays to the pleasures of the imagination offering an engagement with the world, as it should be.

Especially due to this separation his theories were often attacked for being elitist. The comparison of pop music and serious music was a main topic for him. Adorno describes individuals who enjoy popular music "corrupt by immersion and open to the domination of industrialised capitalist systems." (Longhurst, B. 1995, p8). This view accounts for the emotional needs that popular music may fulfil as 'false and immature, rather than deep and/or penetrating. " Adorno continued to equate the form with Tin Pan Alley and jazz orientated variations of it, ignoring the rise of rock and roll in the early 1950's. This undermined his critique and resulted in his views generally being strongly rejected by more contemporary rock analysts." (Shuker, R. 1994; 23).

Adorno claims that Popular music is churned into a production line where everything sounds similar, it's an industry that exploits us for profit and social control, to accept certain conditions about the world in which we live through a capitalist society. It would be fair to say that to some extent this is true. We do live in a capitalist society and in the music industry the process

of absorption is achieved by capitalism through advertising and marketing of a product with a pop star or pop band. Everything about them becomes a commodity, their clothes, image, likes and dislikes etc, transcends its immediate functional use to become a key symbol of a whole lifestyle. The argument implies that the rise of the popular music to mass status is a consequence of the symbolic strategies invested in it rather than the actual quality of the music.

This essentially means that although the products of the culture industry are alike in most cases, some 'individuality' is consciously added to make it different from the rest even though essentially it is the same product. This is pseudo individualism. Adorno uses the Hollywood star system as an example, " the more dehumanised its method of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities, and operates with heart throbs." (Adorn, T. 1991, p87).

A modern day example can be seen in boy bands such as 'Westlife', 'Nsync', 'Backstreet boys' and the most recent 'One true voice' derived from 'Popstars the rivals', a spin of show produced originally as 'Popstars' in January 2001. Although the music is very similar in structure, tonality and content, the customer can choose between several versions of these boy bands.

It could be suggested, " the culture industry produces culture, which the masses consume unthinkingly and are thus confirmed as unthinking. It is a culture which produces satisfaction in the here and now, depoliticising the working class, limiting its horizon to political and economic goalsthat can be

achieved within the oppressive and exploitive framework of capitalist society". (Storey, J. 1998 p188).

The audience, through a selection process selected the new boy band, One True Voice over a number of weeks. A group of 5 males aged between 17 and 22, they do fit into a typical boy band category. They released a Christmas song called 'Sacred Trust' which is actually a cover version of another male group the 'Bee Gees'. Adorno would claim that we as masses consume everything the business churns out and on a personal level I would agree as this appears to be both standardised and contains pseudo individualism as it is sung by a new group with added frills however this has been apparent in popular music for generations and manufactured groups will continue to use this method in order to generate more sales. We live in a consumerist society where these manufactured groups are providing a service for their audience. A major critique of this is that Adorno does not look at the emotional response of the audience and how standardisation is also a form of pleasure. By this it means that standardisation is a form of security for the audience and this predictability is often welcoming.

Adorno and other writers of the Frankfurt school, especially Herbert Marcuse (1898-1978) sees the process of the culture industry as a means of capitalist society to stabilize itself.

Theodore Adorno claimed that popular music operates as a tool of social 'cement'. Although his writings was published in 1941, his accounts on popular music does not account for the complexities of recent popular music and popular culture. He is heavily criticised due to his unchanging elitist

views and it would be fair to say that popular music is not as monolithic as Adorno claims.

The perspectives offer a relevant but quite pessimistic and what can be considered as narrow minded views of popular music. They have offered foundations for interpretation and understanding of music however many theories since have built on how audiences' contextualise and use the products of mass culture rather than what the culture industry does to the audience.

Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) work on Hegemony opened many doors for thought, including ideas that 'members of society negotiate with the products of the culture'. (Fiske, J. 1992, p309). Hegemony helps identify that popular culture is not simply imposed on the subordinates by the bourgeoisie and that people are not simply " passive and helpless mass incapable of discrimination and thus at the economic, cultural and political mercy of the barons of the industry". (Fiske, J. 1987, p309)

Fiske suggests that audiences draw contrasting ideas from different text. Madonna is a fine example where pleasure of the audience is in the " power of a severely subordinated subculture to make their own statements and own meaning". (Fiske, J. 1987, p233)

These theories have their strengths and differences in helping unpack the tapestry of music. One element they all share is the acknowledgement that pop music has important social effects. Who are the main consumers of popular music? Youth are highest consuming marketing within pop music accounting for the highest percent of single sales. Bradley (1992) accounted <https://assignbuster.com/pseudo-individualism/>

the significance with youths and music as reaction to post war teenager with an increase in disposable income and new position in society. James Coleman (1961) highlighted the separateness of youth culture from adult society and its closeness to the market through consumption of popular music. Consumption has been linked to youth culture as far back as the 50's, where growing western markets created specific products and goods for the teenager. (Wulff, H. and Talia, A. 1995).

An example of success in popular music is Madonna. She is a key figure in the pop industry as a pioneer for breaking conventions within gender and sexuality, and has been around for 3 decades, now in her 50's still appealing to the youth, However much debate on Madonna has taken place focusing on her image rather than her music. She has been perceived as 'the lowest form of irresponsible culture a social disease' and 'an inauthentic product of the culture industry who was involved of the exploitation of others of the gain of that industry'. (Bryman, A. 2001).

In relation to Adorno he may have perceived Madonna to be a cultural product, taking pseudo individualism to an extreme, which in turn made her very popular. Madonna moves from various genres of music and blends them together; she had a hit record with 'Don't cry for me Argentina' a more operatic song very different to what is considered mainstream music. I feel that Adorno would have critiqued this as popular classical as she took something that can be considered elitist and brought it into popular culture.

This view is contrasted with her comparison as an 'organic feminist who 'allows girls to see that the meaning of feminine sexuality can be in their

control, can be made in their interests, and that their subjectivity's are not necessarily totally determined by the dominant patriarchy'. (McClary, S. 1991.)

McClary in her analysis of Madonna has found her to be exceptional as a musician who has endured maintained an incredible amount of power as a successful female artist over three decades. A simple look at her back catalogue and it is apparent that she uses sexual power as a commodity alike many women throughout western history. Including seventeenth century composer Barbara Strozzi, who was one of a few women who broke through the elite circle of classical music, by posing bare breasted for publicity. It would be very interesting to know what Adorno would account for that. (Rosand, E. 1986).

Madonna however 'brings hypocrisy to the surface and problematizes it'. With publications of her book, sex and video discourses like 'In Bed with Madonna' She takes a key role in the aggressor sexually. She connects the notions of power and sex and projects it back outwards into the main stream hands on hips Gautier bust pointy and proud. Her intentions never simplistic, it is possible her representations aim to detach stigmas and notions of taboo to certain sexual matters. 'This may lead to greater tolerance for those engaged in these 'perverted' practices' and a layered stream of meanings depictable from her messages.

Irony has been depicted as a key strategy in her possible master plan. In 'Like a Virgin' her little girl voice and play with signs of famous temptresses, her pouts, her coquettish nature and using "" traditional music signs of



childish vulnerability projecting her knowledge that this is what patriarchy expects of her and also her awareness that this fantasy is ludicrous". (McClary, S. 1991, p153).

A principal factor in the understanding of Madonna messages is the language of cultural experiences and perceptions that she speaks to her audience with. Madonna gives her audience standardisation in the sense that some of her music can be chopped and changed however she also gives her audience challenging and contrasting views about being a woman in today's society, that could be argued against Adorno as being engaging, testing and also plays to the pleasures of the imagination offering engagement to the world as it is now.

Her audience within popular music are aimed specifically at the mass (for financial and wider broadcast of her messages) and 'as evidence in that she plays for the lowest common denominator-that she prostitutes her art an extension of her self'. Prostitution is a service never the less, and it evident that she uses her role to play with traditional boundaries and identities. Madonna uses the tool of fantasy a mode typical of the culture industry, however she here compliance to the powers stop, as she twist notions within them. Her fantasies have been seen as ambiguous and unsuccessful for men and she has been compared to a genuine 'Boy Toy' as male interpretations and reactions to a majority are often that of anxiety and unease rather than appease. (Rolling stone 508 March 28th 1989). On the other hand, the power of Madonna is undoubtedly clear, her vast empire of her Production Company, her own music label and a net value of 600 Million speaks volumes about her nature as a business women as well as an artist and social figure.

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It is fair to say that although popular music in today's generation can be considered as standardized, and to a great extent, manufactured music will always be so, Adorno's views are out of date and biased as he had a very low opinion of popular music. Being a musician himself, his opinions were based on his own assumptions of high and low culture and although he did make some substantial claims about standardization and pseudo individualization, popular music today has more important factors to be dealt with such as the messages it is portraying. One being that we do live in a consumerist society where essentially everything is a product, even classical music today, which Adorno would have considered high art is now commercialized and used as a commodity to sell through advertising. Through it all music captures a moment or feeling that Adorno does not account for. Music is another form of expressing an emotion whether it is classical or pop music and it is there for enjoyment, to provide a service and an option to listen to whatever pleases the ear.