

The survival of the aesthetic and epistemic principles of the cultural industry in the era of networked communication

A sobrevivência dos princípios estéticos e epistêmicos da indústria cultural na era da comunicação em rede

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ABSTRACT: This article will discuss the relevance of the concept of the culture industry as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer. In this conceptual review, questions related to aesthetics and epistemology will be central, as they will connect to the contemporary crisis denounced by Byung-Chul Han when identifying the degeneration of democracy into an infocracy. To update this debate, we will examine Jenkins' diagnosis of the culture of connection and the new guise adopted by the culture industry within a new logic of content production and dissemination. This will provide a clear understanding of the lack of a critical perspective on contemporary communication theory and the importance of problematizing the modes of aesthetic and epistemic construction in contemporary times and how they explain the current concept of brain rot.

Keywords: *cultural industry; aesthetics; epistemology; cyberculture.*

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RESUMO: Neste artigo, discutir-se-á a atualidade do conceito de indústria cultural teorizada por Adorno e Horkheimer. Nesta retomada conceitual, as questões relacionadas à estética e à epistemologia serão centrais, pois farão a ponte com a crise contemporânea denunciada por Byung-Chul Han ao identificar a degeneração da democracia em uma infocracia. Para atualizarmos tal debate, iremos nos debruçar sobre o diagnóstico de Jenkins sobre a cultura da conexão e a nova roupagem vestida pela indústria cultural em meio a uma nova lógica de produção e disseminação de conteúdo. Assim, poder-se-á ter uma clara noção sobre a falta que a perspectiva crítica teve sobre a teoria da comunicação contemporânea e a importância de problematizar os modos de construção estética e epistêmica na contemporaneidade e como elas explicam o atual conceito de *brain rot*.

Palavras-chave: *indústria cultural; estética; epistemologia; cibercultura.*

Introduction

It is widely known and accepted within the field of communication theory that, in its early stages, two major theoretical currents vied for space, pointing to distinct paths: on one side, the functionalist school of Chicago and, on the other, the Marxist school of Frankfurt. The confrontation became popularized in academia by the name given by Umberto Eco (2015, p. 7), who identified these sides as the apocalyptic and the integrated, alluding to the degree of adherence that these two schools had regarding the role that mass media played within society.

It is noteworthy that, since these clashes, many distinct currents have developed throughout the 1960s to the present day, and the world of communication has also been profoundly transformed by new technologies, which have constantly appeared and changed the social dynamics of information construction and absorption. The academic field, as usual, adapted its critique to the new social and informational dynamics, demanding new theorists and new theories for this purpose.

However, many of these new interpretations ended up burying or ignoring previous theories, such as that of the culture industry, considering it outdated, since its critique was linked to media that were popular in the 1940s and are very different from those of today. It is evident that criticism must be updated and academic plurality must be encouraged; however, discrediting previous theories as “outdated” forms ignores not only their synchronic considerations but also their diachronic philosophical premises — this is the problem this article intends to address. The concept of the culture industry must be revisited in its philosophical premises to assess to what extent the new networked media manage to dismantle the ideological domination of the past, built upon an alienating cultural massification, and to what extent it is emancipatory for the thinking individual.

The concept of the culture industry

Fundamentally, it is necessary to understand the concept of the culture industry as part of a broader conceptual constellation than a simple media

diagnosis. It is important to highlight this, since this concept is sometimes considered separately from the rest of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the work from which it originated. The relationship between the first chapter of the book, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” and the famous chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” is essential for a proper conceptual understanding of the culture industry. After all, what does it mean for enlightenment to be the deception of the masses?

The concept of enlightenment occupies a central place in both the joint and individual works of Adorno and Horkheimer. It is possible to observe that the core of the question of enlightenment is expressed in one of the titles of one of Horkheimer’s works: *Eclipse of Reason* (2015). Here is the essence of the concept of enlightenment or Enlightenment (as some prefer to translate the German term *Aufklärung*): for the pair of German thinkers, this concept is dialectical in nature, therefore there is an internal contradiction that substantially defines it; namely, on the one hand there is reflective reason that demystifies the world and, on the other hand, technical reason that instrumentalizes it. In this way, when technology alienates reflection, we have the eclipse announced by Max Horkheimer (2015).

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (2014) seek to define enlightenment by revisiting prehistoric times to study humanity’s earliest modes of mystification and demystification of the world; that is, how humankind constructed a rational mediation with its surrounding environment, first using myths and then gradually realizing their meaninglessness and demystifying them. The act of mystifying the world is mediated by technical and dogmatic practices that are self-sufficient but aim at pragmatic objectives, such as the “rain dance” to induce rain, for example. The act of critique and demystification, on the other hand, aligns with reflective reason, which sought analysis of rational action itself. The German thinkers draw a clear relationship between myth and enlightenment:

But the myths that fall victim to enlightenment were already a product of enlightenment itself. In the scientific calculation of events, the account

that thought once gave, in myths, of events is annulled. Myth sought to recount, dominate, tell the origin, but also to expose, fix, explain. With the recording and collection of myths, this tendency was reinforced. Very early on they ceased to be a narrative, becoming doctrine. Every ritual includes a representation of events as well as the process to be influenced by magic. This theoretical element of ritual became autonomous in the first epics of peoples. The myths, as the tragic poets found them, are already under the sign of that discipline and power that Bacon extols as the object to be achieved (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2014, p. 20).

It is fundamental that Adorno and Horkheimer (2014) conceptualize myth as a valid form of enlightenment, even if completely fictional and alienating from concrete reality, because for them the next dialectical movement of rationality will occur precisely with scientific knowledge — which, for them, ceases to be understood from an emancipatory conception according to common sense and becomes a mystifying tool of domination that eclipses critical rationality. It is worthwhile to bring, once again, the voices of these two authors to enrich this issue:

Thought becomes reified in an automatic and autonomous process, emulating the machine it itself produces so that it can ultimately replace it. The Enlightenment set aside the classical requirement of thinking about thought. [...] The mathematical procedure has become, so to speak, the ritual of thought. Despite its axiomatic self-limitation, it establishes itself as necessary and objective: it transforms thought into a thing, into an instrument as it itself calls it. But, with this mimesis, in which thought is equated with the world, the factual has now become to such an extent the only reference point that even the negation of God succumbs to judgment on metaphysics. For positivism, which has assumed the magistracy of enlightened reason, wandering into intelligible worlds is not only forbidden, but is considered meaningless verbiage. It doesn't need — fortunately for it — to be atheist, because reified thought cannot even raise the question (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2014, p. 36).

Here, the great concern of Frankfurt School thinkers is that the categories of ethics become alien to the scientific worldview that reifies everything in order to manipulate it. Science does not need a meaning

to exist; it only needs technique to achieve its goal. It does not need a justification to create an atomic bomb; it only needs enriched uranium and a detonator. It is in this sense of the impossibility of a reflection that thinks about itself, of a reason that thinks about its own action, that we have the crisis of reflective thought, which ends up being eclipsed by positivist pragmatism. When all relationships become reified and reflection becomes banal, lacking practical meaning in an overly technical society, we have the emergence of the culture industry, the mass fabrication of subjectivity.

The concept of the culture industry is far too broad; naturally, we cannot dissect it in all its complexity in this article. Therefore, we will focus on the two pillars that will guide our critique of contemporary networked communication: its aesthetic construction and its epistemic consequences for its users. In principle, it is fundamental to understand that for Adorno and Horkheimer (2014), although the culture industry plays a very specific role in ideological construction, aiding the maintenance of power by dominant economic elites, in its material essence it does not differ from other technical apparatuses that assist the coercive actions of power. For them, the bomb, the automobile, and cinema stem from the same principle:

What is not said is that the terrain on which technology gains power over society is the power that the economically strongest exert over society. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination itself. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and cinema hold the whole together, and the moment arrives when its leveling element shows its strength in the very injustice it served (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2014, p. 100).

Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of ideology (2014, p. 165) is not simply limited to a false consciousness about the world, as we sometimes find in common sense, because for them ideology had a direct link with concrete material experiences that permeate and mediate our social relations. Because of this, weapons of war, public transport, and

mass media are in the same category, as they condition our subjectivity to adapt to the technologies and modes of living and operating of society, making us part of a larger machine that uses these same mechanisms to maintain the static status quo. Ideology becomes social habits themselves. Listening to Bach on the radio is imbued with ideology, since the medium overrides the message by conditioning the receiver and the dissemination of the message.

From this denunciation of ideology, as a material objectification that conditions the individual to use technological devices to mediate their relationship with society, we can extract the first of the two fundamental pillars that will guide our critique of networked media. The aesthetics of the culture industry are intimately linked to its materiality, since it uses cutting-edge technologies to construct a spectacular form for its cultural products, always betting on sensory intoxication to seduce its consumers.

It is in this sense that the culture industry appears to us as a great filter of the world, that is, a prior reading that imposes itself between subject and reality. Before the subject can produce an authentic (but not necessarily fair) reading of the reality that surrounds them, mass culture appears as a filter that captures sensitive elements of reality through its communication technologies and articulates these signs in ideological media discourses. In this way, the worker's free time is converted into ideological surplus value (SILVA, 2013; ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2014, p. 135).

The ideological role of mass media does not end with banal entertainment, which aims to alienate critical thinking by not stimulating it; attempting to lull consciences with intoxicating and empty spectacle, they also have a pedagogical function of instructing society. That is, industrialized culture is not limited to leisure time entertainment; it also has a pedagogical purpose of symbolic indoctrination of its audience. In this way, society is instructed to forge its values from the examples transmitted by the culture industry, copying its way of acting and thinking, replicating its style and behavior (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER,

2014, p. 166). It is not difficult to find examples from everyday life in which sectors of society (the target audience of a particular cultural product) begin to emulate the behaviors and fads of a particular work or public figure.

Here it becomes clear that the purpose of the culture industry is not limited to an aesthetic function of spectacularizing the world for entertainment purposes, but also to the ideological instruction of society. This is where we find the second pillar of our discussion: epistemology. This means that when we watch a film produced by Hollywood, we are not only exposed to its most superficial layer concerning the film narrative, but also to a series of values that are transmitted and assimilated by the audience watching it.

In this sense, the term “cultural,” from this famous Frankfurt School concept, does not only refer to the production of mass culture for everyday consumption, but really to a reconstitution of culture in its deepest sense. The culture industry becomes a compass of moral and behavioral values for society as a whole. It becomes a great normative reference that complements other institutions of power such as the school and the church. However, it is worth noting that it ends up playing its role in an even more profound way, both through the degree of immersion in the spectacle and also through the standardization of its cultural commodities, in which all individuals are exposed to the same discourse, in a meticulously calculated manner; all incorporate the same dramatic clichés, which hide ideological intentions beneath the surface. Subjectivity begins to be forged on an industrial scale, just like automobiles and cans of tomato soup.

The epistemic crisis occurs when all the technical rationality in favor of maintaining the myths that sustain the status quo works to produce a very well-finished and perfected industrialized culture capable of hypnotizing the average spectator, making it impossible for them to think, not only through the intoxication of the hyper-reality of communication technologies, but also through the infiltration of ideological ideas and values into the popular imagination that are

not recognized as such, ending up being naturalized. This is the eclipse of reason.

When narrative and spectacularization elements of the culture industry become critical categories of the world that begin to guide ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and politics, it is the moment when we can observe the decline of critical-reflective thought in modernity and the victory of massification over the possibilities of a true enlightened emancipation. The culture industry conditions the act of abstracting the pre-determined forms that are within its ideological agenda, whether in terms of ideas or ways of expression conditioned by the materiality of the social media linked to mass culture. Collective imbecilization is a symptom of the crisis of philosophical thought resulting from cultural massification.

Observing a certain survival in contemporary times of elements described above by Adorno and Horkheimer (2014), we will begin our conceptual update from their critical “survival” in Byung-Chul Han (2022), before focusing on communicational phenomena.

Networked communication and mass dumbing down

On the one hand, we had great optimism in the 1990s and 2000s regarding networked communication, which seemed to be aligned with the postmodern neoliberal world that appeared to be triumphing over the Soviet corpse, heralding the end of a history where Western democratic enlightenment seemed to be on the verge of becoming hegemonic; we must also look at the phenomenon of networked communication from the perspective of the wear and tear of the 2010s and 2020s, which recognizes in social networks the totalitarian path due to the turbulent events that marked recent politics and the type of bellicose and superficial rhetoric that made far-right candidates gain prominence among voters. In this article, we bring the book *Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy* by Byung-Chul Han (2022) as a source that well describes this state of the art.

In principle, it is important to point out that Han (2022) is aligned with the critical tradition of European philosophical thought. It is well known that his work engages in dialogue with authors such as Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Nietzsche (SEGURADO, 2022, p. 353). Thus, it becomes clear that the Korean philosopher focuses his attention on social contradictions that are sometimes ignored by the prevailing ideological discourse. Unlike the approach taken by Pierre Lévy (2000, p. 67), who addressed network communication as the materialization (or virtualization) of abstract ideal principles of Western democracy, Han (2022, p. 7) takes the opposite path, starting from the capitalist infrastructure to understand the *modus operandi* of networks that are much more concerned with transforming the informational sector into a business than using information to transform the world.

Han's central thesis in this work (2022, p. 25) is that democracy ends up degenerating into an infocracy, that is, a regime in which, in its embryo, there is a need for the debate of ideas to arrive at the best solution for the collective, but which ends up degenerating into a political form of complete emptying of ideas. Everything is transformed into information to be disseminated and consumed on the networks, everything is trivialized and annihilated in the cybercultural dromocracy (regime of speed) of virtual technologies that mediate our social communication. Infocracy is the impossibility of thinking and debating, because there is not the necessary time for the construction of reflection, nor the seriousness of it, since everything is reduced to a post that deserves a like or a dislike.

The Korean thinker further emphasizes that this new "regime" is not the result of the pure and simple randomness of posts that wander aimlessly through various networks, but that, in fact, there is a logic of algorithms that intentionally direct posts to manipulate and addict its users, seeking to incite their passionate side much more than their rational side, valuing their emotional impulses more than their rational ones. From this perspective, the smartphone becomes a tool of subjugation in contemporary society (HAN, 2022, p. 48).

We can relate the consequences of this infocracy announced by Byung-Chul Han (2022) to the contemporary intellectual crisis denounced by the Oxford Dictionary when it chose the term “brain rot” as the most important word of 2024. According to the Oxford Dictionary’s definition (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024), this term applies not only to the collective imbecilization that we perceive in the face of poor public debate and epidemic alienation, but also to the low-quality digital content responsible for fostering such brain atrophy. It is at this point that we see a direct relationship with the aesthetic and epistemological principles defined by Adorno and Horkheimer (2014) when theorizing about the culture industry.

In principle, it is fundamental to recognize the similarities between Han’s criticisms (2022) and those of the two Frankfurt School thinkers regarding the materiality of the media as the very manifestation of ideology itself. Just as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* denounces radio and cinema as expressions of an ideological conception of mass and spectacular consumption of culture, in *Infocracy*, the smartphone itself is understood as a mechanism of domination; its *modus operandi* is already part of the exercise of power: the portability of the cell phone allows us to be available to cyberspace at all times, its ability to send and receive information keeps us constantly connected, and the fact that they collect sound, visual, and other information about us makes it clear that their objective is not to serve their users properly, but rather the big tech companies that sell our data and instrumentalize it for their own benefit.

Beyond this material characteristic, it is also possible to address the mechanisms of content consumption internal to social media software, which in a way also makes up the materiality of this new “cultural industry.” One of the most prominent characteristics within contemporary networks is “infinite scrolling,” that is, the fact that the subject can use the verticality of the device to their advantage when acquiring information. The user of the networks uses their fingers to “swipe” the current content “up” while another “below” enters their screen immediately afterward; this applies to both posts and videos.

This tool gives the sensation of infinity to entertainment. Unlike traditional mass media where programming had a very well-defined limitation, in the era of social networks all fragments of videos and posts form a large, inexhaustible mosaic.

In addition to this fundamental principle that demonstrates the philosophical relevance of Adorno and Horkheimer's thought (2014) from this approach with Han (2022), we can also move on to a content analysis regarding what stands out within the massive production of social networks. As the Oxford Dictionary points out, the content consumed on social media, especially TikTok and its imitators on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, is completely empty and dumbs down its users, as it is frenetic, random, discontinuous, fragmented, and nonsensical (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024). In seconds, we can go from a small clip of an interview that splits the screen with someone cooking a dish, scrolling to a girl dancing to the hit song of the moment, scrolling to a mechanical hammer crushing fruit, scrolling to some meme of the moment with obscene music in the background.

This randomness of videos makes use of various technical and technological resources to capture the interest of its audience and captivate them; here there is an ostentatious use of audiovisual editing, as if everything were allowed to generate the maximum possible stimuli without necessarily delivering much relevant content. At this point we find the survival of the aesthetics of the culture industry in terms of its spectacularization as a filter of reality based on the mechanisms that record it. The objective of the culture industry of the 1940s and the content disseminated in network communication today remains the same: to produce anti-intellectual entertainment. Even if the content carries a political charge in its intentionality, the way it is constructed and the medium in which it is inserted neutralize any possibility of stimulating critical thinking due to entertainment and trivialization.

Thus, when the tools of language are powerless to produce a reflective and critical aesthetic experience, which demands the time of reflection to construct a complex judgment about reality, we have as a result the

epistemic crisis announced by Adorno and Horkheimer (2014). There is again, or a continuation of, an eclipse of reason. When language is instrumentalized to produce entertainment and alienation, immobility of reflective action occurs, which adheres only to technical and pragmatic reason; in this way, reason loses its primary philosophical function of monitoring reason itself (HORKHEIMER, 2015, p. 204). Thus, networked communication in the age of infocracy ends up continuing the same aesthetic and epistemological crisis of the 20th-century culture industry, which means that, in its essence, social communication continues to follow a logic of ideological domination that permeates both its creative and material aspects.

Beyond this philosophical conception that persists, it is also important to consider the Marxist sociological principles of the theory of the culture industry, which see in the media world a reflection of the class struggle that dictates the dialectical tone of the functioning of bourgeois society (DROGUETT; MIRANDA, 2021, p. 190). Therefore, under this paradigm, the media will only change its nature once there is a structural change in society; otherwise, the elites will continue their semiotic manipulation to construct an aesthetic that corrupts the episteme.

The convergence of the cultural industry with networked communication

Defending the continued relevance of the critique constructed by Adorno and Horkheimer (2014) inevitably encounters the numerous changes that the world of communication and culture has undergone over the decades since the creation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; however, it is undeniable that the cultural industry, as a film and recording industry, still holds great weight in contemporary society, but with a different guise, one that blends with networked media. Henry Jenkins, Green and Ford's work (2014, p. 63) focuses precisely on this issue by exploring how media converge and connect in an era marked by access to social networks and the encouragement of users to participate in this new cultural world that decentralizes the creative control of

communication and entertainment companies.

In their 2014 work, *Culture of Connection*, along with Joshua Green and Sam Ford, which follows the same line of thought as *Convergence Culture* but updates some data from their research, the authors defend the pragmatic idea that what does not spread through the media is dead (JENKINS; GREEN; FORD, 2014, p. 23). That is, their evaluative criteria are not based on any aesthetic premise of cultural production, but rather on whether or not it is consumed. Even though their approach is not as critical as that of the Frankfurt School authors, Jenkins, Green, and Ford (2014) still reveal the new logic governing the dissemination strategy of the contemporary cultural industry. Unlike in the past, when it was based on a commodity logic, in which its products were consumed until they went out of circulation, only to return sporadically — if they returned at all —, now the products are designed to stimulate a culture of giving, where the focus of production is on network users who appropriate the products of the cultural industry to give them new meaning and put them back into circulation. As the authors argue:

When material is disseminated, it is remade: either literally, by being subjected to various remixing and sampling procedures, or figuratively, through its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms. This continuous process of transforming the original purpose and recirculating it is eroding the perceived boundaries between production and consumption (JENKINS; GREEN; FORD, 2014, p. 53-54).

From this reading, it becomes clear that the culture industry has not been replaced by networked communication, but rather merged with it by new cultural, market, and technological circumstances. The culture industry remains alive as a form of mass mystification, but not in the same way it was constituted in the 1940s. Now, the Hollywood industry, for example, makes its films aware of the need to insert moments that will feed the economy of the gift and culminate in its propagation. Like the scene in the film *Spider-Man: No Going Home*, where the three Spider-Men from Marvel franchises come together in an iconic scene where

they fly with their webs and land on the Statue of Liberty; this moment was widely publicized and filmed by people inside the cinema itself with their cell phones. Therefore, we are not facing the end of the culture industry, but rather its metamorphosis. It uses this type of dissemination to propagate the original material.

This type of narrative “interference” is nothing new in Hollywood. In blockbuster films from the 1970s onward, scripts were modified to insert products that would be marketed beyond the film’s atmosphere, causing commercial imperatives to dictate the work beyond narrative imperatives (MASCARELLO, 2015, p. 454). We can observe this in films like *Star Wars*, which exaggerates the number of characters and accessories to later transform them into toys; or in *Batman Forever*, when Bruce Wayne, shortly before getting into the Batmobile, tells his butler that he doesn’t need to prepare dinner because he’ll be going through the drive-thru — something that makes no sense beyond the need to advertise fast food. Currently, it is the imperative of sharing that is guiding films to invite the consumer audience to spread their ideas and continue their ideological dissemination.

This imperative of sharing is the link between the cultural industry and networked communication. It is no longer possible to produce content without the awareness that there is a potential disseminator of your product. Not surprisingly, large communication and entertainment companies are betting on marketing campaigns with trends and hashtags that aim to stimulate this type of participation, such as Disney Pixar’s recent campaign to encourage people to use artificial intelligence to create a version of themselves and famous personas as characters from the Pixar universe.

The recording industry is also heavily impacted by this new imperative that governs the cultural industry in the age of the culture of connection. Music is designed to generate quick and striking effects to captivate listeners in the first few seconds, aiming to serve as soundtracks for short videos that will spread easily. According to the study by Fachini, Machado and Siedschlag (2023) on how TikTok is used by the music industry:

With the platform's strength proving itself every day, new forms of sharing are gaining prominence on the app, as are new forms of distribution, such as remixed or sped-up songs — a new trend that is constantly growing in the music industry. According to Issaaf Karhawi, speaking to *Diário do Nordeste*, “TikTok is crucial in this process of music going viral because it facilitates remixing, appropriation, and the use of this audio.” Many of these remixed or sped-up audios are created by users who use them in their videos, and which are then used by thousands of other people for challenges that become trends. This generates engagement with the modified work, which automatically ends up benefiting the original work by bringing in new listeners (Fachini; Machado; Siedschlag, 2023, p. 22).

It is curious to consider how this need to generate effects, without much more than that, was already present in a critique of the massification of culture even before the Frankfurt School, as in Nietzsche's work (2016, p. 30, §10), which accuses Wagner of trying to please the masses through exaggerated effects, without managing to produce something truly sublime for his listeners: a composer who used music as a means to transmit moralistic ideas and cheap emotions, nothing truly challenging nor profoundly aesthetic. We present this brief bibliographical account as a way of demonstrating that even in the 19th century, when mass media had not yet been effectively developed, there was already a spirit of banalization of culture due to the need to cater to a mass driven by the modern project.

Here is the central thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer (2014), which places them among the classics of philosophy: beyond a momentary diagnosis of the communication market, the two German philosophers seek to express the essence of cultural production in modernity, perceiving the dialectical contradiction between an extremely advanced and enlightened society in the positivist sense, but which uses precisely this technical rationality to reify the spirit and mystify society by constructing the culture industry whose objective is anti-intellectualism, alienation, spectacle, and ideological propagation — something that goes directly against the enlightenment that would be expected in a supposedly

enlightened society. The authors understand that modern social engineering foresees a control of bodies and minds that must subordinate themselves to the objectives of the ruling elites without critically questioning, merely executing orders and functions.

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2014), the issue constitutes a broader problem, as it is not a simple media analysis, but rather a diagnosis of the structural contradictions of modernity. Instead of this modern world directing its immense productive and technical force towards helping society and reducing social tensions, its objectives are focused on the accumulation of capital and power, reducing the vast majority of individuals to a mass to be manipulated to achieve these goals. Although the “culture industry” is one of the earliest theories of communication, it is the product of a much broader philosophical architecture, as demonstrated in the first part of this article. Therefore, this diagnosis of how culture is produced and propagated in modernity ends up being the result of a study of the contradictions of rationality and Western philosophy, which ultimately gave birth to the modern secular world that instrumentalizes culture in an aesthetic and epistemic way.

Thus, the way the culture industry and social networks merge in the culture of connection, based on an imperative of sharing aimed at producing iconic and memorable moments to be disseminated and remixed, is nothing more than a continuation of the ideological discourse denounced by the German authors. After all, there is no substantial aesthetic change in the production of the culture industry for its sharing; perhaps the ephemerality and randomness of the productions further hinder any possibility of more complex aesthetic production. We continue with spectacular and superficial productions. And, on the other hand, the epistemic crisis seems to advance even further if we consider the energy expended by users to produce and reproduce a discourse very similar to that of the culture industry in a different media context.

The proof of this aesthetic and epistemic decline lies in how a large portion of internet users address truly serious issues, such as politics, economics, wars, and even everyday life, among others, using approaches

similar to those of the culture industry: producing memes as soundtracks, comedic edits, and shallow, ephemeral ideas. The aesthetic and epistemic filter that was once exercised solely by the culture industry, which converted reality into mass culture, is now widespread and disseminated throughout society. With new technologies for capturing, editing, and disseminating information, everything gains a media narrative that hijacks its complexity and trivializes it, aiming for cheap emotional effects that bury analytical rationality. Increasingly, critical subjectivity gives way to autonomous employees of the culture industry who convert themselves and everything around them into images that reify and caricature the world in an alienating way.

Final Considerations

In this article, we sought to highlight the diachronic philosophical validity of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical critique for the present day (2014), and to avoid the recurring mistake of classifying their theory as outdated because it is linked to a very specific communication dynamic of the 1940s. Here, we tried to show how the essence of their analysis ends up becoming relevant not only for the present day, but also for the logic of social communication in a capitalist modernity.

In this debate, we saw the fundamental link between aesthetics and epistemology within the reflective construction, since the act of thinking demands a very different experience from that offered by the culture industry, which ends up causing an epistemic crisis. In this way, we realize that contemporary cognitive poverty is linked to an aesthetic experience of the media that mediates our perception of reality, committed to the principles of spectacularization of the culture industry of yesteryear, which end up gaining a new guise in the culture of connection. This, in turn, ultimately leads to an infocracy that corrodes the Enlightenment principles of democracy by favoring the aesthetic and epistemic decay of the critical subject, whose brain ends up "rotting" and turning into a tool for manipulation amidst modern contradictions.

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