

The Frankfurt School's Neo-Marxian Critiques of Capitalism and Consumer Culture

Dustin Garlitz
University of South Florida
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In this study, I move to make the point that the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, in their reinterpretation and extension of social philosopher Karl Marx, were responsible for the entry of two "key-terms" in the realm of cultural theory: "The Culture Industry" and "Aura". The term "The Culture Industry" first appeared in the West-Coast collaboration of Institute members Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The romantic notion of "Aura" first appeared in an essay by affiliate-member Walter Benjamin titled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Although the critical writings of the Frankfurt School are incredibly diverse and span the range of multiple traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, I want to examine the social commentary of the Institute for Social Research from an interdisciplinary perspective, spanning cultural sociology to continental philosophy to psychoanalytic thought. This examination will place special emphasis on the Institute's legacy to the interdisciplinary field of contemporary cultural studies.

I would like to pay a great deal of interest on the Institute's critiques of ideology, specifically capitalism and political economy. "The Culture Industry" and "Aura" are important terms to consider in such a study¹ because they are the very cultural consequences of unrestrained, stringent American capitalism: it is the capitalist marketplace which fetishizes "aura" and standardizes art. Since a capitalist line of inquiry will be taken, it only makes sense to examine the Frankfurt School's writings on consumer culture as well (consumer culture being derivative of the dominant ideology that we call "capitalism"). I hope to persuade the reader in believing that the writings of

¹ I will place more emphasis on "The Culture Industry" than "Aura".

the Frankfurt School (with their strong Neo-Marxist stance) are essential in the forming the idea of an “educated”, if not “skeptical”², consumer.

The most persuasive, or at least the most clearly described, definition of "The Culture Industry" I have been able to locate is the description brought forth by the editorial staff at Routledge: “[Adorno] argued that the culture industry commodified and standardized all art. In turn this suffocated individuality and destroyed critical thinking” (Adorno 2001, back cover). Commodification of art (that once had an aesthetic value that was appreciated by all members of a community) may very well have been a development of late³ capitalism. However, social philosopher Karl Marx wrote about the fetishism of commodities very early in the development of the modern capitalist enterprise. What in part made the Frankfurt School unique was that the members of the Institute for Social Research were witnessing the very predictions Karl Marx wrote about a generation or two prior.

The Frankfurt School's social commentary was in fact a critical assessment aimed at reforming the capitalist enterprise. Social philosopher Herbert Marcuse became one of the public faces of the "New Left" in 1960s America, and Erich Fromm became a bestselling author that incorporated Marxist positions in his popular works. The Frankfurt School wanted to change capitalism, not by revolution (as proposed by Karl Marx), but by making the proletariat cognizant of the market's standardizing capabilities.

² In the Routledge commentary (which remains authorless, although J.M. Bernstein is the editor of the publication itself) of Theodor W. Adorno's *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (2001), skepticism at the marketplace is presented in the following way: “In today's world, where even the least cynical of consumers is aware of the influence of the media, Adorno's work takes on a more immediate significance” (back cover). Adorno may have been the most skeptical thinker of the Frankfurt School (whereas Herbert Marcuse would be deemed much more conservative), yet all of the members of the Institute for Social Research were indeed critical of capitalist culture.

³ Late, in this context, he refers to twentieth century, postmodern scholars such as Frederic Jameson who have written about "the cultural logic of late capitalism", which is considered a development of the last few decades of the twentieth century. My scope is not that narrow.

The members of the Institute had lived to see fascism implemented, fearing that freedom at the marketplace entailed vast hierarchies; by creating terms such as "The Culture Industry", Theodor W. Adorno and company could warn the rest of the world of the cultural dangers implicit in such a political-economic regime.⁴

I would like to take this opportunity to draw a noteworthy comparison between Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School. Karl Marx writes in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that, "Money is the *pimp* between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also *mediates* the existence of other people for me. For me, [money] is the *other* person" (Tucker 1978, pg. 102). It is only logical to assume that money has a valorizing effect on the things which it mediates. Money valorizes everything in its path, it is a "silent language" that assigns every commodity a certain value⁵. The Frankfurt School lived to see the maturation of such an effect.

Such a process of commodification started with "traditional" capital. Items such as homes and land were given exchange value during the days of the classical political economists⁶. By the time the members of the Frankfurt School were writing commentary⁷, the consumer products which occupied these very homes were in fact commodities themselves. The wide-spread permeation of the commodification-like tendencies of the capitalist marketplace is what made the Frankfurt School proponents of a new type of "cultural" critique.

⁴ It is unfortunate that Theodor W. Adorno was considered a "deranged" hysteric (Adorno, 2001, back cover); J.M. Bernstein has made the claim that his paranoia was legitimate and justified, considering the events that took place in Europe during his lifetime (the most significant being World War II).

⁵ Modern day Bureaus of Commerce actually approximate the value of commodities, but the market has its own internal logic that can lead to massive price fluctuations beyond the control of the State.

⁶ Karl Marx being the last member of this school. Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill were some of the earlier figures.

⁷ As Martin Jay estimates, as early as 1923.

Karl Marx was a cultural critic and social theorist at the most grandiose level. His scope was ideological. Marx wanted to change the entire socioeconomic system. The Frankfurt School was more concerned with the banality of mass culture and the way the capitalist system affected our everyday lives (a contemporary micro-sociological sort of an approach). The Marxian claim "that history repeats itself the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce"⁸, is not quite accurate in the case of the Frankfurt School. Although banal, which cultural commentators could say is characteristic of the Marxian historical farce, the capitalist tendencies that the Frankfurt School were critically analyzing were actually the outgrowth of a new, transnational marketplace (a much larger arena for consumption that had ever been conceptualized before⁹). Therefore, the members of the Institute for Social Research were not living the repetitive Marxian paradigm, they were actually critiquing a new fringe¹⁰ movement of the high-capitalist enterprise. The socioeconomic and cultural conditions implicit in such an enterprise could be described somewhere between the realms of replication and adaptation. There was a certain degree of freshness and ingenuity in the writings of the Institute for Social Research's members, which rendered "farce" an inaccurate word to describe the era's cultural commentary.

⁸ This is the opening line of Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." (Tucker, 1978, pg. 594)

⁹ Karl Marx thought the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat would be brought about by exploitative labor at the national level, yet it was only when capitalism became a global phenomenon did we see threats to the economic system (via terrorism and protesting).

¹⁰ Globalization was a relatively new phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century. The Bretton Woods conference occurred in 1944, paving the way for three global administrative economic-financial institutions: The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and The International Monetary Fund.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer equate the culture of modernity with a new form of “barbarism”¹¹. The authors attempt to point out that the enlightenment originally symbolized progress and reason (the type of progressive¹² quality we usually associate with Enlightenment figures such as philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant), yet modernity’s capitalist culture is in fact bombarded with fragments of *kitsch* that bear a banal stamp of the marketplace. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer believed that modern society had in fact sunk to a new low in the propagating of a new mass culture centered on television programming and popular music. Instead of the consumer being empowered by the marketplace, he was actually corrupted by such “low” culture medium and phenomena. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer saw a certain 'new' type of “barbarity” (1998, pg. 132) associated with a "cultural lag", not of America, but of Europe. Its market was out of control (unrestrained) in a certain sense, and classificatory mechanisms such as “low” and “high” brow were established to makes sense (culturally) of the high-capitalist enterprise.

In the famous chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, Adorno and Horkheimer are most concerned with criticizing entertainment¹³ and advertising. The latter is of greater importance to me, considering I am taking a consumer approach to the Frankfurt School in this paper. In order for the capitalist marketplace to function properly, the messages that advertising contain need to be disseminated throughout the totality of mass culture. This, in turn, creates "effective

¹¹ Douglas Kellner, 2000.

¹² Echoing the infinitive possibilities associated with the pursuit of reason.

¹³ As communication graduate student Lindsey Smith remarked in September 2005 during a presentation on this chapter, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer are most caught up in equating "The Culture Industry" with “entertainment”. The two terms may very well be exchangeable for one another.

demand" for the industrial sphere's scads of products. "Advertising today is a negative principle, a blocking device: everything that does not bear its stamp is economically suspect" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998, pg. 162). The issue of legitimating approval is brought up by such a pessimistic statement. The skeptical, educated consumer is very well expected to actively verify the soundness of a product with advertising messages broadcasted to the masses.

Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer saw a strange interplay between advertising and entertainment that resulted in a vicious cycle: the advertising sector made a commodity out of entertainment, which in turn made it "fashionable" to advertise. The line between entertainment and advertising only became increasingly blurred: "today every monster close-up of a star is an advertisement for her name, and every hit song a plug for its tune. Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically (ibid., pg.163)¹⁴. Late capitalism has the tendency to accelerate and codify the human phenomena in its path. This may be evident today when reading Adorno and Horkheimer, but it took a second generation of cultural commentators at the Frankfurt School (one by the name of Jurgen Habermas) to directly state such a fact (as he did in his theory of the "life world" and "media steered" systems).

Adorno writes that, "It would be romanticizing to assume that formerly art was entirely pure, that the creative artist thought only in terms of the inner consistency of the artifact and not also of its effect upon the spectators" (2001, pg. 159). From this frank statement by Adorno, we find that the standardization and commercialization of art and culture may not have been a twentieth century development. However, we should make a

¹⁴ Musicologist Maria Cizmic has brought up the contemporary example of product placement in Hollywood, which I agree is something Theodor W. Adorno would have been ultra-critical of.

distinction between commercializing art (in terms of its marketability), and the act of the artist simply acknowledging his or her audience. We can very well deem the commodification of art a twentieth century, late capitalist phenomenon. Entertainment, on the other hand, has a long history as a commodity. Even before the emergence of capitalism, feudalist and mercantilist accounts of entertainment involved purchasable public displays. Theater and music were presented in venues that operated under the profit motive. What upset social philosopher Theodor W. Adorno about twentieth century entertainment was that the market had interfered with the creative license of the artists. One had talented film directors, for example, who were forced by Hollywood executives to make movies that would appeal to a certain audience. Instead of allowing the director to choose what film to make, these Hollywood executives created a Marxian compulsory labor situation (see my pages 10-12).

Adorno and Horkheimer theorized that “The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises” (1998, pg. 139). The average consumer learns to accept the mediocrity and standardization inherent in the commodification of art and entertainment. In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer believed that this mediocrity penetrated all realms of the cultural. These two cultural theorists even thought the consumer would have to grow to accept mediocre meals at restaurants (pg. 139). With the "McDonaldization" of America, as formulated by sociologist and social theorist George Ritzer, social philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's standardized meal is no longer a theory but a fact. Adorno theorized about an all encompassing consumer society driven by Fordism, but mass production techniques were not applied to cultural phenomena as common as restaurants until the years following his

death (the 1970s and 1980s). This is when corporate America, with its mass production techniques, invaded the periphery of the continental U.S. (the areas outside urban centers). In the 1970s we had McDonald's establishments spreading throughout the suburbs and rural areas, and in the 1980s we had the emergence of Wal-Mart's in almost every sizable town. Adorno would have been ultra-critical of such developments, and he possibly would have broadened his definition of "The Culture Industry" in light of such a shift (towards "the practice of everyday life"¹⁵) in the standardized consumer society.

Historian of ideas Martin Jay writes in *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* that, "In addition to his work on cultural matters, Adorno maintained his theoretical interests leading to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*...he also spent time trying to employ American empirical techniques" (1973 pg. 196). Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had co-authored "The Culture Industry" chapter during their stay in California towards the end of the Second World War, and Martin Jay believed Theodor W. Adorno's American excursion was "very productive", in terms of producing literature. I make the claim that it was only after observing such a stringent, intense American breed of capitalism at work, that Adorno was fully able to realize the totalizing conception of a "Culture Industry" in the 1940s.

There was an immense privatized consumer society at work in America during the Second World War, one which was not present in the European nation-states at the time. Advertising had already penetrated the American periphery, advertisements were in fact essential components of the radio and television programming (providing corporations an easy entry into households across the continental U.S.) When Theodor W. Adorno

¹⁵ In the words of cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (2001).

returned to European, Martin Jay writes that he was instantly conferred public intellectual status. His critical inquiry into "The Culture Industry" was viewed as American-based qualitative fieldwork by the European public. Theodor W. Adorno had decoded and demystified the irrationality of American capitalism. He was analyzing a cultural irregularity which simply did not exist in continental Europe at the time, hence the European public's infatuation with the originality of his cultural critique.

Martin Jay finds that "*Dialectic of Enlightenment*... presented so radical and sweeping a critique of Western society and thought that anything that followed could be only in the nature of further clarification" (1973 pg. 256). Jay believed as the Frankfurt School's theories became more radical, it became increasingly difficult to align such theories with *praxis*¹⁶. However, as European economies became more liberalized, the social commentary of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* became further relevant. In postwar Europe there was a nascent and inchoate culture industry that became increasingly visible as the reparations of the 1940s progressed into the rebuilding and expansion of the 1950s. Soon thereafter, market forces collided with culture, with commodification and standardization of the arts and entertainment to soon follow.

"Aura" was a cultural concept that was coined by Walter Benjamin before Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer theorized about "The culture Industry". Although the two critical ideas complement one another, "aura" clearly involves more activity on behalf of the modern consumer (since it is the market, and its consumers' actions, that fetishize the "aura" of art, driving up their economic value). A clear description of the situation is that, "original works of art, such as paintings, gained much

¹⁶ In ancient Greek (as found in the writings of Aristotle), *praxis* refers to actual activity, **not** theoretical action. It involves the most primary and basic of human motions and pursuits.

of their prestige from the fact they were usually produced in editions of one...aura” (Ward 2003, pg. 82). Commentator Glenn Ward is right by describing "aura" as unnecessary. The great classical political economists that preceded Karl Marx wrote about successful ways of efficiently allocating scarce goods. Walter Benjamin’s fetishizing of "aura" may have been a predecessor to the 1990s economy's perpetuated by “irrational exuberance¹⁷”. However, there is still something very romantic about aura (as opposed to kitsch), hence the reasoning behind its extreme valorization (the assigning of such a high price tag to a one-of-a-kind piece of art).

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin writes that, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced (Richter, 1998, pg. 1108). We can there view the market as a dehumanizing force, depleting aura through simulation and replication. The synthetic quality of kitsch is ever present in our hypercapitalist marketplace. Famous works of art are used in everything from advertising to interior design. The banality of the marketplace can "strip" the aura away from an authentic piece. By placing an artwork on a postcard and distributing copies of it all over the continental U.S., the prestige of the original is indeed compromised.

In *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*, Eugene Lunn examines the commonalities of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin's cultural theories. He writes that “Both Benjamin and Adorno sought to interpret the unintentional social meanings of their contrasting modernisms with the

¹⁷ A term coined by an economist Robert Schiller in the 1990s, and famously used by U.S. economic policymaker Alan Greenspan, to describe the domestic economy.

aid of selective Marxian (or other) historical insights” (1982 pg. 264). One Marxian-type of commonality involved applying exploitative labor in the marketplace for public consumption. Karl Marx believed that the wage worker could never enjoy compulsory labor, it was only through the freedom to choose or pursue a task that one could properly enjoy the process of laboring.

We can take such a historical social theory and apply it to Theodor W. Adorno's contemporary cultural theory by imagining a world where we are bombarded with standardized entertainment. We are coerced, by advertising, to watch a certain television program or see a particular film. There is evidence of false interest in such acts. It is only when the consumer is free to pursue his own interests that he could fully appreciate the cultural sphere. Instead, today we are burdened with what economist Thorstein Veblen called “conspicuous consumption”: the wage worker’s entertainment is not only standardized, but the wage worker himself becomes self-conscious of his class status by its media.

Social philosopher Herbert Marcuse explores the micro-psychosocial aspects of allowing the marketplace to standardize entertainment and fetishize original works of art. We in effect become servants of a wayward consumer society. In “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man” (from *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, Utopia*), he finds that our family life has been comprised by the capitalist enterprise. Instead of one hegemonic father figure, that authority has been fragmented by a barrage of societal institutions. We grow up today, not on the feudal farm¹⁸ where we work under our father all day long, but rather in capitalist urban areas where we leave home at an early

¹⁸ Social philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The German Ideology*, thought of this as one particular era in the historical transformation of the social division of labor.

age to go to school, where teachers, bullies (and later in life) landlords and bosses, replace the emphasis on that one single hegemonic father figure. Capitalism has penetrated the structure of the family and our personal lives in such a situation. Once again, this is a very micro-psychosocial (and interpersonal) approach. Other writings of Herbert Marcuse, however, focus on a more orthodox form of cultural Marxism.

Further examining the Frankfurt School's capitalist inspired journey into the personal dimension, in *The Art of Loving* psychoanalyst Erich Fromm subtly attempts to ground Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories in staunch Marxist materialism. He writes that "Freud was largely influenced in his thinking by the type of materialism prevalent in the nineteenth century" (1956 pg. 83). We can view the wide spread emergence of psychoanalysis as a bourgeois phenomenon. Imagine the Upper-East Side of Manhattan in New York City, one of the highest concentrations of wealth in the U.S. I daresay that there are more offices of practicing psychoanalysts per square mile in this neighborhood than any other neighborhood in the U.S. Is this a coincidence? I make the claim that the majority of those who feel that they need the aid of a psychoanalyst and his bourgeois Freudian theories have excess wealth themselves¹⁹.

Returning to traditional mass culture, the social theorist Jurgen Habermas²⁰ has a more optimistic outlook on media in our consumer society than Theodor W. Adorno. Habermas writes in his *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, that "In so far as mass media one-sidedly channel communication flows in a centralized network...they considerably strengthen the

¹⁹ In this situation, excess could be considered anything above U.S. per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

²⁰ Event though sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas is a second generation member of the Institute for Social Research, I chose to include him in my study.

efficacy of social controls” (1987 pg. 390). Capitalist firms must sell the products they manufacture, media can aid the capitalistic firm while bringing like minded individuals together. Consumers with common interests seem to congregate today in online chat rooms, and influence each others future spending habits. Jurgen Habermas has lived to see the emergence of the internet, and although he has not published on such technology, he would say that it is another form of media that can foster social "solidarity"²¹. He would also warn international corporate marketing agencies of its "totalizing"²² capabilities and its conceivable abuse.

The six critical theorists of the Frankfurt School examined in this paper (Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Marcuse, Fromm, and Habermas), are considered pioneers in Neo-Marxian cultural and social criticism. However, there are other important proponents of such criticisms. Four other path breaking scholars from this twentieth century field, possibly the four most important outside of the Frankfurt School's brand of Neo-Marxian cultural theory, are Georg Lukacs, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. The one scholar that contrasted most harshly with the Frankfurt School would have been political philosopher Georg Lukacs. The controversy over Lukacs' discontent with the Frankfurt School's theorists' brand of Neo-Marxist criticism primarily involved Theodor W. Adorno's place in society as someone theorizing about the damaged cultural sphere. Such a controversy is noted by various popular on-line media sources: *Wikipedia* interprets the argument this way: “Lukacs associated Adorno with a dated proto-Marxism, that indulged in despair, despite a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle” (October 2005 entry on Theodor W. Adorno). However, in Georg Lukacs' major work,

²¹ In the Durkheimian sense.

²² Similar to Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

History and Class Consciousness: A Study in Marxist Dialectics, I find his allegiance to orthodox Marxism to be complementary of The Frankfurt School in general. Lukacs writes that, “by far the largest part of society is still under the sway of purely capitalist forms of production. And on the few islands where the proletariat has established its rule it can do no more than laboriously force capitalism to retreat step by step” (1968, pg. 253). We can draw a parallel between Lukacs’ first sentence, and Adorno’s all encompassing "Culture Industry". I believe that Lukacs would have included the aesthetic dimension in "the largest part of society". As far as activity (in the form of discontent), Georg Lukacs’ wage worker may have indeed been more successful in fending off the banal outgrowth of the capitalist enterprise.

Theodor W. Adorno’s conception of the modern consumer identity involves accepting market standardization whereas Lukacs finds that the proletariat is at least cognizant (and voices some dissent, in the orthodox Marxian sense) of the far reaches of capitalism (into the personal dimension). Contrary to the on-line *Wikipedia* framing of the situation, I find the commentary of Lukacs to be more committed to orthodox Marxian social resistance than to Adorno’s Frankfurt-style cultural critique. We see the development of a new type of apathy on the part of the consumer, an acceptance of the commodification brought about by the capitalist marketplace. In the critic writings of Theodor W. Adorno that comparably seems unimaginable in Georg Lukacs' canonical Marxist literature. Karl Marx found that it was through exploitative, compulsory labor that the proletariat would become aware of his revolutionary purpose. Theodor W. Adorno (rather than Georg Lukacs) thought the wage worker would actually become a clueless consumer, superficially amused by the shallow marketplace. Adorno was

providing the arena of Marxian thought with a new cultural theory (during the mid-twentieth century), it was actually Lukacs who was the proponent of “dated” Marxism.

There were in fact parallel academic institutions in the U.S. for the scholars of the Institute for Social Research to seek asylum at during World War II. The Institute relocated, as Martin Jay comments, to Columbia University during this era. The New School for Social Research, co-founded by social philosopher John Dewey in New York during 1919 (four years before Max Horkheimer was able to arrange the appropriate German funding to fully establish the Frankfurt School as an academic Institute for Social Research) was another academic institution of higher education that funded the American research of the Institute’s critical theorists (Erich Fromm was made a Professor of Psychology there and extended his residency after the war ended, penning popular self-help publications which further extended the Frankfurt School’s reach into middle America). Continental U.S. lecture tours were arranged for the members of the Frankfurt School that included stops at a number of leftist colleges and universities. Five of the six members written about in this study had an American presence. It was only Walter Benjamin that did not relocate to the U.S. during the rise of National Socialism in Germany²³.

The two landmark books of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advance Industrial Society*, were both written in America and were inspired by its stringent breed of capitalism. Herbert Marcuse chose to stay in the U.S. after the war, claiming his throne as king of the 1960s "New Left". Jurgen Habermas has held several recurring professorships at America universities, including

²³ He committed suicide before being captured by Nazi German officials in 1940.

The New School for Social Research (although he was and still is very committed to rebuilding Germany, and has always kept his primary residence there²⁴). Theodor W. Adorno, disgusted with American consumerism, returned to the reestablished Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt shortly after the Second World War, along with his less irritated co-author Max Horkheimer.

In today's world of hypercapitalist globalization and mass consumption, the Frankfurt School's strain of Neo-Marxian cultural criticism has become increasingly relevant and practical to a wide range of consumers. British cultural studies scholar Don Slater, in his book *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, writes that "consumer culture is, for Adorno, just one aspect of that 'identity thinking' which pervades modern consciousness." (1997, pg. 122) A sociologist of consumer culture, Don Slater is referring to the Hegelian informed notion that economist Leo Lowenthal (a member of the Frankfurt School not considered in this short study) described as "psychoanalysis in reverse"- or seeking to assuage the unhappiness inherent in "the human condition"²⁵ by indulging oneself in the seemingly endless, substandard world of cultural commodities. Marcuse wrote of the one-dimensionality associate with American post-industrial thought, and we can use his critical writings to engage in a pursuit to broaden our horizons and to look for meaning outside the world of the capitalist marketplace.

In the motion picture *Fight Club*, Brad Pitt remarks that "the things you own end up owning you". An integral part of the modern identity involves seeking meaning and purpose through an arrangement of commodities. We say, "I want to succeed in life", by graduating college or being promoted at work, "so I can buy a new car". But, first of all,

²⁴ As is brought up in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (which also features comments by Jacques Derrida).

²⁵ Hannah Arendt (1958): *The Human Condition*. (see "On Action")

we never think about the Marxian “congealed²⁶” labor that went into mass producing that line of automobiles we find interested in. We just fetishize the commodity, and the status²⁷ involved by the ownership of that "congealed" piece of labor. Much social criticism of the modern consumer society has its origin in this early Marxian tenet. Second of all, we are clueless to the aesthetic excellence and innovation involved in producing an automobile (the "aura" of the original handcrafted German V12 engine). We simply wanted the fastest mass-produced car money can buy us. This may be a stretch when considering that Walter Benjamin wrote about mass-produced art and film, and Theodor W. Adorno of standardized art and entertainment, but when we consider this commodity's purpose in a greater “system of commodities²⁸”, the mass produced car will transport us to the theatre of standardized motion pictures or gallery featuring the commodification of artworks on display, the Frankfurt School's concept of "culture as (a new) barbarism²⁹" becomes ever the more visible. The various elements of the modern cultural sphere have become increasingly, and dangerously, interconnected, resulting in the paradox of an organic unity to the falseness, if you will.

"The Culture Industry" and "Aura" are two of the earliest conceived terms in the interdisciplinary fields of critical and critical theory. My primary aim in this study was to examine how the Frankfurt School's aesthetic dimension found itself penetrated by unruly capitalist market conditions in the mid-twentieth century. I wanted to outline publications from six key member of the Institute for Social Research, some analyzed to

²⁶ Karl Marx's “Paris” or "1844 Manuscripts".

²⁷ I am building on Max Weber's classical social theory of “Status Honor” as well as Pierre Bourdieu's cultural theory of tastes and preferences from *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984).

²⁸ Don Slater, pg. 122.

²⁹ Douglass Kellner, 2000.

a greater extent than others, and draw connections to the early cultural theories of Walter Benjamin, and particularly, Theodor W. Adorno. Since the end of World War II, capitalism and consumer culture have become increasingly global phenomena. As twenty-first century economies in the South become increasingly liberalized (and made, by international economic policymakers, similar to unforgiving mid-twentieth century form of American capitalism), I hope the Institute's commentary will be translated into the appropriate nations' languages. The Frankfurt School's writings may be those cultures' last line of defense from becoming spellbound by the ever so seductive, yet banal, capitalist marketplace designed for mass consumption.

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³⁰ British style; the format Professor Don Slater (University of London) uses in his *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997, Cambridge: Polity)

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