

Critical Media Theory

Leif Dahlberg (CSC/KTH)

“Isolation by communication”

“Modern communication media have an isolating effect; this is not a mere intellectual paradox. The lying words of the radio announcer become firmly imprinted on the brain and prevent men from speaking to each other; the advertising slogans for Pepsi-Cola sound out above the collapse of continents; [...]. Progress literally keeps men apart. [...] But means of communication also isolate men physically. Railroads have given way to private automobiles, which reduce acquaintanceship made during journeys to contacts with hitchhikers – which may even be dangerous. Men travel on rubber tires in complete isolation from each other. The conversations in their vehicles are always identical and regulated by practical interests. The families in specific income brackets spend the same percentage on housing, movies, and cigarettes as the statistics prescribe; the themes of conversation vary with the category of vehicle. When visitors meet on Sundays or holidays in restaurants whose menus and rooms are identical at the different price levels, they find that they have become increasingly similar with their increasing isolation. Communication establishes uniformity among men by isolating them.”

(Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 221-222)

Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)

Theodore Adorno
Max Horkheimer
Walter Benjamin
Herbert Marcuse
Erich Fromm
Jürgen Habermas
et al.

“Critical philosophy”?

Examining and judging the possibilities of knowledge before advancing to knowledge itself (from the Greek *kritike* (*techne*), “art of judgment”).

Examines conditions of knowing: what does it mean “to know”?

Critical theory seeks “to liberate human beings
from the circumstances that enslave them.”
(Horkheimer)

Critique of Mass Media I

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reducing culture to stupefying products of mass consumption

(such as recorded music, radio, film, television, advertising), but also serving to indoctrinate people, as a form of manipulative social propaganda, manufacturing consent

both in totalitarian societies and liberal democracies.
(Adorno & Horkheimer)

Critique of Mass Media 2

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Mass media have a great potential to liberate people from traditional, conservative values; enlightening them of social conditions, other people and nations; to stimulate and support political discussion; to introduce people to art and culture; mass media have a potential to create new forms of art and culture, more democratic and egalitarian (Benjamin, Habermas)

Background I

Marxist analysis of capitalist society (class conflict)
Democratic political systems (revisionism & populism)
Modern mass media - media industries
(print, photography, cinema, radio, television)
Culture and education
Fascism & National Socialism (Germany, Italy)

Background 2

The Enlightenment

- What is the Enlightenment?

The Age of Enlightenment was a cultural movement beginning in the late 17th and 18th century Europe emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition and received opinion. Its purpose was to reform society using reason, challenge ideas grounded in tradition and faith, and advance knowledge through the scientific method. It promoted scientific thought, skepticism, and intellectual interchange. The Enlightenment opposed superstition and intolerance, with the Catholic Church a favorite target.

(Wikipedia)

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed tutelage. Tutelage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This tutelage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. *Dare to know! (Sapere aude)* ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”

(Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”)

“In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”

(Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 3)

Why is this so?

Is it an historical accident or is there some internal defect in the “modern project”?

Adorno & Horkheimer’s answer is that there is an internal contradiction (“dialectic”) in the Enlightenment, a contradiction that is found long before the historical period called the Enlightenment. In fact, it is found already in one of the “founding” text of European civilization, Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Homer's *Odyssey* as cultural “source code”

Epic and myth

Apollonian and Dionysian

Domination and exploitation (Song 12)

“Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself.” (P. 48)

Cunning, artificer; eloquence, rhetoric

“For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect.” (P. 6)

“its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows” (P. 7)

“Formal logic was the major school of unified science. It provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world.” (P. 7)

“The creative god and the systematic spirit are alike as rulers of nature. Man’s likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the countenance of the lord and master, and in command.

“Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them.”

(P. 9)

Pages 24-25

“The task of cognition does not consist in mere apprehension, classification, and calculation, but in the determinate negation of each in im-mediacy. Mathematical formalism, however, whose medium is number, the most abstract form of the immediate, instead holds thinking firmly to mere immediacy. Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude.” (P. 27)

Pages 32-35

“Measures such as those taken on Odysseus’ ship in regard to the Sirens form prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment. Just as the capacity of representation is the measure of domination, and domination is the most powerful thing that can be represented in most performances, so the capacity of representation is the vehicle of progress and regression at one and the same time.” (P. 34-35)

“Through the mediation of the total society which embraces all relations and emotions, men are once again made to be that against which the evolutionary law of society, the principle of self, had turned: mere species of being, exactly like one another through **isolation** in the forcibly united collectivity. The oarsmen, who cannot speak to one another, are each of them yoked in the same rythm as the modern worker in the factory, movie theatre, and collective.” (P. 36-37)

Cultural chaos

&

Culture industries

Fear of “mass culture”,
fear of “Americanization” of society
(p. 132-134)

Pages 145-147

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of
Technical Reproducibility" (1936)

“Advertising”

Theme 2

- Lecture (Mon): Critical Media Studies, Leif Dahlberg.

In the lecture on critical media theory I present a classical text in critical theory, Adorno och Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) (http://www.revalvaatio.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/horkheimer_et_adorno-the_dialectics_of_enlightenment_philosophical_fragments.pdf). I will summarize the main ideas in the text and also situate this in the history of media studies.

- Seminar (Wed): Critical Media Studies, Leif Dahlberg.

Seminar assignment: For the seminar, you should read the following chapters in Dialectic of Enlightenment: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "The Concept of Enlightenment"; (3) "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment"; (4) "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception". Please prepare answers to the following questions:

1. What is Enlightenment?
2. What is the meaning and function of "myth" in Adorno and Horkheimer's argument?
3. What are the "old" and "new" media that are discussed in the Dialectic of Enlightenment?
4. What is meant by "culture industry"?
5. What is the relationship between mass media and "mass deception", according Adorno and Horkheimer?
6. Please identify one or two concepts/terms that you find particularly interesting. Motivate your choice.

Publish your reflections before and after the theme is completed in your individual learning portfolio (blog). See the course guide for further instructions.

