

Adorno's maimed man

**And how America's culture
industry was of influence on
Adorno**

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Fine Art 3

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How society effects an individual has always been an interesting topic for me, it seems psychological conflict has been a recurring theme for my essays ever since I've been introduced to Nietzsche, Foucault, Freud and other philosophers. I wanted to write an essay about Adorno, specifically relating to his theory of how the human kind betrays and abnegates itself and the inevitable internal rip which is caused by such betrayals. Much of Adorno's philosophy is influenced by America's 'culture industry'¹, and this essay I have strived to give insight in how this came to be.

Adorno's paradoxes of society can be applied to every human society, however, he studied the Western culture industry in particular, with America as his grand flagship. Adorno wrote a lot about America. Being a German Second World War exile, Adorno spent over a decade in the United States, completely submerging himself within the American culture. Those years not only proved to be quite fruitful, they would form Adorno's ideology and be the foundation for every text he would write since².

I believed writing this essay was going to be easy, but what I came to find as I descended into, I think you could rightfully say, the world of Adorno, is that his texts are not so easily nor swiftly explained. His works are so intricate and complicated that they cannot be limited to a simple summary if you want to do them justice. They are so delicately written, that if they are to be understood fully, one must view (and read) them as a whole. His texts are not to be compartmentalized, as it would impair the constellation. He tends to slightly brush the surface of something, and take it away, claim something, and then disown it³. And he has very wilfully done so. As he says himself, "Philosophy is considered to say concretely what it can not say."⁴ He therefore refuses to define his terms and concepts as he compares it to learning a language. One learns the definition of a word much more thoroughly in diverse contexts of everyday life, then looking up the definition in a dictionary.⁵ The constellation of Adorno's work comes together to create an idea and attempting to explain these intricate concepts within the limitations of my own vocabulary (amongst other

¹ Adorno, Theodor W. and Horkheimer, Max.(1944). Term used in 'Dialectiek van de Verlichting'. ISBN 9789085063629

² Jenemann, David (2007). Adorno in America. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p.XVII

³ vander Veire, Frank (2002). Als in een donkere spiegel, chapter 8; De belofte van het negatieve. Nijmegen: Sun, Nijmegen

⁴ Offermans, Cyrille/Prior, Frits (1977). De estetiese theorie van Adorno en Benjamin. Nijmegen: Sun, Nijmegen (ISBN: 90 6168118 9), p. 14

⁵ Offermans, Cyrille/Prior, Frits (1977). De estetiese theorie van Adorno en Benjamin. Nijmegen: Sun, Nijmegen (ISBN: 90 6168118 9), p. 12

is ineffective. Therefore it is inevitable that this essay will fall short of being lucid the way Adorno meant it to be. None the less, after this introduction, I will make a fair attempt since Adorno would probably say that you come closest to the real thing when you drop the pretences of the conviction that it is the real thing. And I did just that.

What I love (and hate) about the philosophy of Adorno, is that it exist of many paradoxes; to which the existence of his own texts might be a paradox in and of itself, if while thinking in the lines of Adorno. The question if something can be seen as completely objective, will never be answered.

Although opinions differ, Adorno considers us perpetually bound by the limitations of our human nature. There is no way to be sure that the way we see things, are the way they actually are. Convincing ourselves of the contrary is the construction of our arrogance, as such is our human thinking. Subsequently, trying to quantify about how we think, and trying to be objective about the human mind, through the human mind, is of course, a failed effort. We will always be flawed and confined to thinking (for example: memories) or forms of expression (for example: language) that will alter the original feeling. We can still experience something, but even trying to recover this feeling for ourselves will only be a shadow of the original event, in the form of a memory. To realise this is a momentary glimpse of the seeming truth, although this is a deceptive false. Though, this imitation is the closest we will ever consciously come to nature, it should be perceived as positive, as it refers to something more than just an illusion. It might not be the answer, but the mirage should be our comfort as it reflects ways in which we could be better.

According to Adorno, the 'Enlightenment' period was the most significant period for human kind. The individual could finally break free from religion and myth that had characterized their society in the decades before. Man had the freedom of space to think and act for himself, and to take control over his own life. The loss of this magic, or 'disenchantment', made way for science to take its place. This made humans' relationship with nature a cold and bleak one. Nature became an object to exploit in man's favour. A 'thing', a tool for survival. With our quest for truth, by breaking free from nature, we broke our bond with our nature within. The more we try and look for it, the more we are turning our back on nature, by doing exactly the wrong thing; trying to grasp it. Thus; the harder we look, the farther we stray, and the part that makes us immerse in nature, extinguishes. This does not imply that we lived in reconciliation with nature before, though. Religion and myths were merely mirages, illusions of unity with nature. It was only the emotional and psychological imitation, a mimicry.⁶ We treat nature within ourselves as something inhuman. It is strange, incomprehensible and impenetrable and therefore this creates fear. Anything that changes, what we cannot control is shunned. Before the Enlightenment, humans

⁶ Adorno, Theodor W. and Horkheimer, Max (1944). *Dialectiek van de Verlichting*. ISBN 9789085063629

have attempted to restrain nature within ourselves, by means of religion and myth. We constructed them as an explanation for all that we could not comprehend; natural events such as weather, death or the purpose of life. Only now, after the Enlightenment Age, we obsessively categorize and systemize everything. The urges of man are incomprehensible and therefore, he turns his back to it. Mimicry becomes a taboo, as we try and rip this part out of ourselves, we create a gaping hole. Herewith, we betray ourselves.

We have lost the ability to acknowledge our alienation. The more we think we are in control, all the more violence this causes within, albeit subconsciously. This violence of nature that we try to shackle, by being acceptable to social standards, must unfold one way or another. As an example, Adorno talks about fascism. Nothing has truly changed in our culture since fascism, anti-Semitism and the holocaust were created. This violence is essentially raging fear and is projected on exterminating the falsely-justified 'cause'. This cause for fear needs to be neutralized in order to give the idea of a sense of safety.

This violence makes that our civilization lives at the costs of ourselves. We have lost the purpose of life, in search of it. A metaphor Adorno used is, "grey is to philosophy as colour is to life".⁷ We will never find life when we keep busy looking. We fool ourselves, and we are arrogant. The safety of 'truth in knowledge' gives us false comfort. We compartmentalize everything and think we know truth, and believe we grasp the concept of what nature is. The more we are convinced of ourselves, the farther away we drift from nature and all our hope to ever identify with nature, is deceiving.

Any relief from this inner conflict is futile, for very conscious individual mind bears the weight of the history of society, in whatever way it has marked you. There is no escape from it, nor anyway around it. Even if you decide to live in the wilderness, far away from any sign of human civilisation, the foundation in your mind is still based on, and scarred by, the culture you were once from. The only thing philosophy can do is reflect upon this.⁸

The most common criticism on Adorno's theory of sociology is that a practical aspect is missing. Adorno, however, would say that the comfort of thinking there is a solution, whether it be actions or not, would be a false one. What comes closest to a true sense of comfort is art, for it does not lie, but only shows the broken promise of reconciliation with nature. Modern art abides its fate, and its irrelevance in society is exactly why it is not pointless, and can therefore be used as a cold comfort, a mediator between man and nature.

⁷ Steyerl, Hito (2012). Adorno's Grey. Film, 14 m 20 s

⁸ vander Veire, Frank (2002). Als in een donkere spiegel, chapter 8, third page; De belofte van het negatieve. Nijmegen: Sun, Nijmegen

Adorno thinks that the culture industry is the leading cause of stultification of the western civilisation. The space for the individual to be his own person which the Enlightenment Age provided, could be filled with many things to define ones new distinctiveness. The masses don't just have a need to consume which requires satisfaction (like food), but there are needs that are (partly) created by industries and advertisements whom offer the consumers their products, thereby consistently generating a cycle of dependence on these industries. It is not about the quality of the product, but about who has the most money. For example music; the song with the greatest popularity is worth the most. The demand for products is created and by consuming, only increases its popularity in society, which creates a higher demand with an ever expanding rate of consumers. Adorno lived in Los Angeles and was a witness to the developments of Hollywood's ideologically-adjusted images of the cinema as it spread worldwide, 'enforcing' culture everywhere.⁹

It is widely known that Adorno did not find his stay in America very pleasurable. Understandably, since it wasn't a choice. Yet he still seemed to seize the opportunity to acquire knowledge. The objectivity to look at the American culture that came with his foreign roots allowed him to notice the grasp that the culture industry had on the nation. He did not feel for the culture much as it was fetishizing individuality. The industry was focused on developing an image of being unique in such a way that, subsequently, all people were essentially the same. Individuality as a conformism, created by industry. Adorno calls this a 'slavish' mentality. Conformism suborned into non-conformism, or the other way around? The United States are an illustration of how structures for freedom are created. Structures to express how free we are, but a structure makes us more confined per definition.

⁹ Jenemann, David (2007). Adorno in America. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. XVII

Americans are obsessed with their freedom, while Adorno seemed to think the place was too cramped. Freedom in spaces of land and away from war to be consumed by entertainment and advertisement.¹⁰

A dream that Adorno once had, was published in an exile journal by Horkheimer:

"[The dream].. ends with Adorno trapped in the basement of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's headquarters, unable to make it back to the ground floor, and surrounded by crocodiles that "had the heads of extraordinarily beautiful women." What one of the crocodile women tells Adorno could stand as a motto for the whole exile experience, the seductions of American culture and the threat of total incorporation: "She told me it didn't hurt to be devoured. To make it easier for me she promised me first the most wonderful things."¹¹ [...] In Adorno's dreams, as in America itself, there wasn't a check for which there were no strings attached"¹².

Many more dreams of Adorno can be viewed as allegorical and are published by Horkheimer. Adorno on dreams: "Even the loveliest dream bears like a blemish it's difference from reality, the awareness that what it grants is mere illusion."¹³. What about the American dream? The more America is neurotically conveying freedom, the more incarcerated the culture becomes. In the United States, people are bombarded with the notion of freedom, it is on the dollar coins and on passports and other official government documents. And this while passports and, of course, the economy is nothing more than a bunch of rules and restrictions.

'The land of the free and the home of the brave'. Needless to say the western culture was, in Adorno's time and not unimportantly; still is today, ubiquitously dominated by industry. Adorno's view on America might as well seem a precognition. With the occurrence of NSA-leaker Edward Snowden alone, and America's frantic response with tracking him down in effort to punish him, the U.S. dropped 13 places on the world's freedom of speech list putting America in 46th place out of 180, claims the Daily News.¹⁴ Therewithal the quality of life in

¹⁰ Jenemann, David (2007). Adorno in America. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. XXVI

¹¹ Adorno, Theodor W. date unknown. Published in 1942. "Träume in Amerika: Drei Protokole", in the Max Horkheimer Archiv (VI, 1B, 5-7)

¹² Jenemann, David (2007). Adorno in America. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. XXVI

¹³ Adorno, Theodor W. (1951). Minima Moralia. Nijmegen: Vantilt Nijmegen p. 111

¹⁴ U.S. drops in press freedom ranking, to #46 out of 180 countries measured. - New York Daily News. nydailynews.com/news/politics/u-s-drops-state-free-press-ranking-report-article-1.1611299

America has seen dramatic decrease, 17th place, making neighbouring countries, Canada and Mexico, classified as being "happier" countries.¹⁵

Now, what I wanted to refrain from doing was writing a loose, emotional essay about Adorno's lonely years in America. However, the story of his experiences in America does shed light upon his theories and may even provide more insight. If, after this, you are even more interested in an easy-to-read, 'behind the scene's in Adorno's life' story, I can recommend David Jenemann's 'Adorno in America' as an enjoyable read. David Jenemann is (amongst other things) a professor of critical theory, at the University of Vermont. He seems to think that Americans generally have a tougher time reading and understanding Adorno because of their lack of an outsiders view (a position which he then, very carefully¹⁶, recommends to his fellow nationals).¹⁷

Americans can be defensive about critique on their country and what struck me, funnily enough, during the writings of this essay is that the most extensive research about Adorno and his concept of America's culture industry is done in majority by American citizens. You can practically taste the culture in the texts. The way it was researched and written, almost compels to say it shows clichés of American culture. The emotional, dramatic tendencies in these texts to as if seemingly stunned by Adorno's ferocity, and wanting to be understanding, maybe even empathic, about his exile situation is often depicted as heartfelt as possible, as could be seen as characteristic to American culture.¹⁸

Is the observation that much of the research in this area has been done by Americans, a coincidence? I would like to think not. It might be because not all of the Americans are as Adorno would expect; in denial. Then again, it might be that Adorno's fierce opinion about America does not gnaw at us non-Americans as it might gnaw on the minds of Americans; namely as Adorno takes away the one monolithic aspect of their country about their country, what they believe to be true: liberty. Then again, I am no sociologist.

¹⁵ The happiest countries in the world. - USA Today. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2014/05/10/happiest-countries-in-world/8912123/>

¹⁶ As not to step on anyone's toes by downplaying the severity of the life of exiles during the Second World War.

¹⁷ Jenemann, David (2007). Adorno in America. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, c. Coda p. 188

¹⁸ Inter alia based on lecture, "Frankfurt School of Critical Theory" at Yale University by Paul H. Fry. [youtube.com/watch?v=FFpGf7aPXNA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFpGf7aPXNA)