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ENG 473Q - Literary Theory

Paper 1

**Comparison of Analysis of Culture in the Writings of Horkheimer/Adorno and Hebdige**

Horkheimer and Adorno’s “The Culture Industry as Mass Deception” and Hebdige’s “Subculture: The Meaning of Style” approach their analyses of culture from very different angles but ultimately come to many of the same conclusions. The main points that the two readings both make are that cultural transformation evolves from suffering, and that inevitability any form of culture will become uniform and standardized. Horkheimer makes these points mainly by looking at the culture as an industry and at factors such as technology and medium that serve to standardize it, and only touches briefly on how unique styles emerge. Hebdige focuses on the emergence of new stylistic trends (subculture) and towards the end of his writing touches on the forces that eventually standardize these styles. The readings also differ in tone; It is very easy to pick up on Horkheimer’s stance on the issue, while Hebdige is much more neutral. As a whole, the readings come full circle and in a way complete each other. Statements made in one can be elaborated on or explained by passages in the other, giving a full image of how culture evolves.

The beginning of the Horkheimer reading provides the beginning of the “circle” of how culture evolves. In the first seven paragraphs, the authors introduce the idea of a culture industry that is highly uniform and follows not the demands of the public, but pre established formulas. This phenomena is perpetuated by both technological demands for uniformity, and the available popular mediums such as film which is “Exclusive to none but is shared by all alike”. In this stage, where a uniform culture is established for a period of time, the culture serves as a means for creating uniformity among the population. It isn’t until the 8th paragraph that Horkheimer begins defining the process through which stylistic change occurs. Two significant quotes are “The great artists were never those who embodied a wholly flawless and perfect style, but those who used style as a way of hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth” and “ However only in this confrontation with tradition of which style is the record can art express suffering”. Both these quotes define suffering as the primary mechanism which influences artists to deviate from accepted styles and to create their own. However, the reader is left without clear examples of this assertion as Horkheimer returns to talking about the uniformity of the culture industry in his final paragraph.

After Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertion in the 8th paragraph of “The Culture Industry…” that suffering is the source of stylistic and cultural change, Hebdige provides a clear example of this phenomena by writing about subculture, particularly the punk movement. In the case of this movement, suffering occurs as a result of economic and social inequalities. This form of suffering causes discontent with the existing culture and as a result, the subculture movement attempts to reject the accepted culture in every facet of society. This rejection is manifested in various stylistic symbols, whether that be clothing, naming, musical content, performance content, and press. Where the Hebdige reading comes full circle with Horkheimer and Adorno’s writing is when the subculture movement itself starts to become uniform and exhibiting many of the characteristics that Horkheimer’s “culture industry” exhibits. In the 4th paragraph, Hebdige describes how sexual fetishism was used to a “predictable effect” and in the 6th paragraph, the punk musical style is “uniformly basic”. In paragraph 11, the content of punk fanzines is referred to as “propaganda” by the author, just as in paragraph 4 of the Horkheimer “Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts...the technique is that used for any type of propaganda”. By reading these two passages one after the other, it can be seen that while on the surface the “culture industry” and “subculture” seem to be polar opposites, they both serve as a means of creating uniformity among different demographics.

While the two readings compliment each other in many ways, the tone of the two is very different. Horkheimer and Adorno’s use of the word “Deception” in the title states their opinion immediately, as the word implies that the culture industry is serving as a means to lie to and manipulate the general public. Their arguments are often defined in absolutes, stating that “Under monopoly capitalism all mass culture is identical” and in the second paragraph, claiming that that in all cases, standards are based only on convenience of production and not actual consumer demand. In paragraph 5, Horkheimer claims that uniformity is disguised as differentiated products and throughout the entire reading, paints uniformity as extremely detrimental to society and counterproductive to artistic expression. When discussing culture, the Horkheimer reading refers more to the concept of “uniformity” and the Hebdige promotes more the idea of “unity”. Both are essentially the same phenomena, it is only the supposed consequences that differ. While “uniformity” in “The Culture Industry...” supposedly leads to deception, brainwashing, and prevention of artistic expression, “unity” in “Subculture…” is a serves to bring members of a large cultural movement under a common language with common ideals. In general, the tone of “Subculture…” passes much less judgement in its analysis of culture and style. It is difficult to determine if Hebdige approves of the punk movement and subculture or disapproves. At times, he seems to pass judgement on the absurdities of the movement, as well as the paradox of a movement that preaches chaos and is very much standardized. At other times though he seems to show reverence for the rejections of cultural norms that the movement made and how they adopted these symbols of rejection as their own style, and also for bringing a group of social and economic rejects together under a common cause. For the most part, it was much easier to extract a neutral analysis from the Hebdige, while there were many words with strong connotations, absolutes, and commentary that had to be filtered in the Horkheimer/Adorno.

While the two readings together present a cyclical picture of cultural development, both of them present the culture they examine as anomalies that deviate from the standard progression of culture. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the emergence of mass consumer culture completely prevents any sort of artistic creations that are not controlled by capital or the interests of corporations. The consumer industry makes it so that culture is no longer controlled by the demands of the population, but by what will turn the highest profit by corporations. Under this analysis, it is impossible for any artistic work to be created which is not created for profit by the interests of corporations. If this analysis held true, then it should therefore be impossible for the process described in paragraph 8, going against accepted artistic style as a means of expressing suffering, to occur once the culture industry framework is set in place. However, “Subculture…” documents a phenomena that does just that, the punk movement, over 30 years after “The Culture Industry…” was written. The punk movement emerged not due to its potential profitability to corporations, but due to expression of human suffering over social and economic disparity. However, the punk movement is not a movement completely independent of normal cultural development. Hebdige’s analysis says that punk’s purpose to reject anything that is culturally acceptable, which ultimately includes itself, making it a very elusive phenomena to analyze. Horkheimer’s analysis of culture would ultimately classify the punk movement not as a defiance of culture, but just as a separate demographic within the culture industry. His writing claims that it is impossible to escape the influence of corporations and that any differentiation between products is illusionary and only a means of appealing to all possible demographics to maximize profit. Even though punk appears to reject everything about popular culture, under Horkheimer’s analysis, it is merely offering an alternate set of products to be consumed. While the two readings help support many of their main points, they also serve to keep each other in check. The more radical and absolutely stated claims of the Horkheimer are disproved by the Hebdige and the assertion that punk defies culture is countered by Horkheimer’s analysis.

While the Horkheimer/Adorno and Hebdige passages examine contrasting cultural phenomena, when read together they create a picture of how culture functions. Both the readings have two main assertions, that culture evolves and changes due to human suffering, and that eventually any style and culture will become increasingly uniform. The tone of the two passages contrast greatly, with the Horkheimer painting a very cynical and suspicious picture of a sinister culture industry and particularly uniformity the Hebdige providing a much more neutral analysis that even praises culture’s effect of introducing unity among disjointed groups of people. Horkheimer’s and Hebridge’s analyses also disprove several of each other’s claims, filtering the radical and absolute from each other. At the end of analyzing both passages together, it can be concluded that culture evolves cyclically, with cultural evolution occurring due to human suffering over disparity, and eventual uniformity of a culture bringing these disparate peoples together.