

ANALYSIS- Adorno & Horkheimer and *Vogue*

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Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer are noted for “The Dialectic of Enlightenment”¹, an essay on the culture industry and mass marketing. They explore how the commodity culture of America is just another totalitarian regime, like Nazi Germany. Adorno, originally from Germany, fled the country in search for freedom from dictatorship, but found himself surrounded by propaganda of a new sort; the mass media of America. Adorno and Horkheimer discuss marketing, entertainment, advertising, and aesthetics amongst other things to prove that no-one, as hard as they try, can escape the power of the media. *Vogue* magazine, a prominent artefact of visual culture, was established in 1892, and since then has become the most influential fashion commentary; the bible of fashion, art and photography. As Caroline Webber of The New York Times considers; we “take for granted the extent to which this trinity dominates consumer culture today, *Vogue*’s role in catalyzing its rise to pre-eminence cannot be underestimated.”² It is the king of its kind, dictating style, life and big business. This analysis will relate the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer to the prominence of *Vogue* in an attempt to strengthen the arguments explored in the ‘Dialectic of Enlightenment’.

In Ohmann’s review of Schneirov’s work, “The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America”, Ohmann reiterates how magazines were “the first dominant discursive medium of mass culture in American history”³. It was argued that “popular magazines ‘represent’ the society- they not only interpreted and debated the new social order of corporate capitalism, but helped to create it”⁴. Magazines were a celebration of progress, visions of the future, that changed over time but resisted

¹ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans, John Cumming, London: Verso, 1972

² Caroline Webber, *The New York Times*, December 2006

³ Ohmann Richard, “Magazine Culture, CA. 1900”, *Reviews in American History*, Vol.24, No. 1, The John Hopkins University Press, (Mar., 1996), p52

Ohmann reviews work; The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893-1914 by Matthew Schneirov

⁴ Ibid

enough to remain fusions of the old and the introduced. “The genesis of *the dream* and magazines’ cultural power stems back to a time before 1893”⁵, Schneirov claims, “they had a project of improving middle-class taste and promoting suitably Protestant high culture, but declined to separate it from their sometimes urgent social interventionism- or indeed, from their increasing canniness in producing and selling culture, surrounded by ever more advertisements”⁶. Adorno supports this in maintaining that the true “triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them”⁷. Adorno also thoroughly explored the idea of *the dream* and of the media’s “broken promise”. Adorno aimed to explore ‘the secret of aesthetic sublimation is its representation of fulfilment as a broken promise’⁸. “The culture industry does not sublimate; it represses. By repeatedly exposing the objects of desire... it only stimulates the unsublimated forepleasure which habitual deprivation has long since reduced to a masochistic semblance”⁹. *Vogue*, back to back, renders objects of immense desire. From the models, to the opulent haute couture, to the stimulated desire for the high life and wealth the magazine exudes, one could conclude that indeed it embodies the paradigm of repression and domination.

Adorno also explores the idea that no-one, as hard as they try, can escape the culture industry. It is near impossible to escape the mass media and in ones very attempt to escape it, they become part of it. Adorno points out that “even when the public does-exceptionally- rebel against the pleasure industry, all it can muster is that feeble resistance which that very industry has inculcated in it”¹⁰. “Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in. Once his particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, he belongs to it as does the land-reformer to capitalism”¹¹. A quote from the movie, *the Devil Wears Prada*, (a movie based on the editor in chief at *Vogue* USA), exemplifies this theory when it highlights the inescapable influence of *Vogue*, and magazines alike.

⁵ Ohmann Richard, “Magazine Culture, CA. 1900”, *Reviews in American History*, Vol.24, No. 1, The John Hopkins University Press, (Mar., 1996), p53

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans, John Cumming, London: Verso, 1972, (The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

“I see, you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out that lumpy blue sweater because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. You're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar De La Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of 8 different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic casual corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room, from a pile of stuff.”

Although factually (designers/dates) questionable, the principle behind this quote strongly supports the arguments set out by Adorno and Horkheimer. In one's attempt to exempt themselves from the mass culture industry, they become a part of it, even if they are unaware of it. The mass media, bankrolled by big business (advertising), create the very world (America) we live in. “The world that *Vogue* reflected and, often, shaped- the evolution not only of fashion but of women themselves, how they choose and wear clothes, interpret beauty, assume a changing role in society”¹². As *Vogue's* latest editor, Anna Wintour affirms, “*Vogue* is both a witness to the world of fashion and a protagonist in it. We reflect what we see, but we also help to create what we see.”

Vouge in its opulence and panache achieve a manipulating balance of the reflection of reality, and the unattainable beauty. Flicking through the pages of *Vouge* you enter a different realm of fashion and beauty. The weird, wacky and wonderful entice readers trying to escape their everyday mundane lives to revel in the spectacle that is *Vouge*. As much as it is an escape, it is a confirmation of the very life one aims to elude. This is a demonstration of Adorno's theory that “in front of the appetite stimulated by all those brilliant names and images there is finally set no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape”¹³. In the same way, “the girls in the audience (the reader/viewer) not only feel that they could be on the screen (in the

¹²Norberto Angeliotti and Olivia Alberto, *In Vouge- the Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine*, Rizzoli Publications, New York, 2004

¹³Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans, John Cumming, London: Verso, 1972, (The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception)

pages), but realize the great gulf separating them from it”¹⁴. Simply put, “whenever the culture industry still issues an invitation naively to identify, it is immediately withdrawn”¹⁵. This clever tactic in achieving the right balance of an identifiable quality and a large gulf of unattainability keeps the reader in a constant state of desire.

In analysing *Vogue* as a prominent artefact of visual culture, and in addition, of the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer’s theories can be significantly supported. “The Dialectic of Enlightenment” sheds great light on the real influence, dominance and dictatorship the mass media culture has on American life, much like the part propaganda played in Nazi Germany. The world that *Vogue* shapes marks the “evolution of not only of fashion, but of women themselves, how they choose and wear clothes, how they interpret beauty and assume a changing role in society”¹⁶. No woman can escape this influence, as hard as they try.

¹⁴ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans, John Cumming, London: Verso, 1972, (The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception)

¹⁵ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans, John Cumming, London: Verso, 1972, (The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception)

¹⁶ Norberto Angelietti and Olivia Alberto, *In Vouge- the Illustrated History of the World’s Most Famous Fashion Magazine*, Rizzoli Publications, New York, 2004