

**Transcending Tradition:  
America and the Philosophers of  
Communication**

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In their 2004 compilation of canonical texts in American communications research the editors of *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919-1968*<sup>1</sup> represented the 1940's work of the Frankfurt school with three essays – Max Horkheimer's "Art and Mass Culture", Theodor Adorno's "A Social Critique of Radio Music", and a short excerpt from their jointly attributed work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These selections stand in sharp relief to the communications research of this period which Peters and Simonson juxtapose with these pieces. This contrast is unsurprising considering that both Horkheimer and Adorno had recently immigrated to America fleeing the stark circumstances of Nazi Germany, and were drawing on a vastly different intellectual tradition than their American counterparts.

Horkheimer and Adorno's pieces are distinguished by a denser philosophical style whose substance contends with a different set of questions and assumptions than the contemporary American scholarship. They grapple with normative and metaphysical issues concerning the roles of science, art, and rationality and their relationship and responsibilities towards the development of a just and humane society. The organizing principles and motivations for their work are also more radical than most of the scholarly communications research of the time. Their development of a "Critical Theory" was conceived as form of active resistance intended to fully engage and shape the object of their inquiry (i.e. society itself). Adorno's essay and the excerpt from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* both smoothly complement Horkheimer's essay, taking up similar themes in a similar tone. For the purposes of Peters and Simonson's compilation, these pieces also demonstrate these prominent thinker's overlapping yet distinct voices. However, for the purposes of this essay I focus primarily on Horkheimer's essay since it is the most substantive and nuanced of the three.

Max Horkheimer's essay "Art and Mass Culture" was first published in 1941 in the journal *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*,<sup>2</sup> and was reprinted in an anthology of Horkheimer's work in 1968 called *Kritische Theorie (Critical Essays)*.<sup>3</sup> The anthology provides an important contextual backdrop for unlocking the key themes within this piece, situating it within a broader progression of thought and revealing Horkheimer's theoretical orientation and goals. *Critical* includes articles discussing Marxism, science, materialism, metaphysics, authority, family, and religion. He strongly criticizes the application of society's knowledge and capital towards utilitarian ends, and argues that this wealth needs to be directed towards social justice and the development of a better world. For Horkheimer, Critical Theory "is not just a research hypothesis which shows its value in the ongoing business of men. It is an essential element in the historical effort to create a world which satisfies the needs and the powers of men... the theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery."<sup>4</sup>

Horkheimer's formulation of Critical Theory also helps us understand Adorno's critique of the "administrative research" programs typified by Lazarsfeld's investigations. At its worst, administrative research is exploitive, serving the

interests of power by honing their ability to manipulate the masses. Even at its best, Adorno objects to this perspective since it ignores foundational conceptual questions that challenge the nature and value of the ideas being communicated and their impact on the audience. Adorno believes that “one should not study the attitude of listeners without considering how far these attitudes reflect broader social behavior patterns and, even more, how far they are conditioned by the structure of society as a whole.”<sup>5</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno’s intellectual stance was interested and subjective which did not conform to the research paradigms dominating communication research in America at the time. Like psychologists and sociologists, American communications scholars in the 1940’s were envious of the credibility and authority that empirical methods conferred on their discipline, and they distanced themselves from speculative and subjective debates over value and meaning. Furthermore, Horkheimer and Adorno’s application of philosophy to the social sciences did not mesh with the logical positivism and analytical philosophy of language and science dominating Anglo-American philosophy during this period. In many respects these continental philosophers of communication were academically homeless – displaced and alienated. These circumstances are reflected in the fragmentary nature of their work and the themes they gravitate towards.

In his short essay “Art and Mass Culture” Horkheimer references Kant, Aristotle, Plato, Kierkegaard, Hobbs, Husserl, and Dewey, rarely spending more than a few sentences to unpack the relations between their ideas and his arguments. He jumps from topic to topic quite hastily, barely attempting to construct segues between the disjoint arguments he attempts to weave into a cohesive whole. Horkheimer engages many important themes in this essay, including the cleavage between the private and the social, the leveling force of the economic system, and the disappearance of a significant inner mental life. Within the context we have just introduced, we can reconstruct Horkheimer’s primary argument and demonstrate its continued relevance to the core concerns of communications research.

Horkheimer’s piece was provoked by Mortimer Adler’s book *Art and Prudence*, which Peters and Simonson omit from this collection. Adler was a classical philosopher with a strong interest in educational reform, but he was not primarily engaged in the discourse around mass communication.<sup>6</sup> *Art and Prudence* was published in 1937 and was motivated by the debate around the causal relationship between cinema and crime. Adler applies Aristotle’s normative and esthetic principles to film in an attempt to evaluate the behavioral influence and artistic potential of the media.

Horkheimer is deeply offended by Adler’s analysis, and argues that the logical extension of Adler’s line of absolute reasoning is equivalent to “perfect relativism”<sup>7</sup>, and worse, provides a moral justification for fascism. For Horkheimer, the question of moral authority is not an academic one – its

practical implications are vivid and urgent. He draws a direct line of equivalence between the Adler's moral and aesthetic prescriptions and fascist totalitarianism.

Horkheimer rapidly jumps back and forth between discussions of moral and aesthetic judgments. These kinds of judgments share many characteristics and there is a longstanding philosophical tradition exploring their similarities through analogy. Horkheimer's comparisons and argumentative leaps are sometimes ambiguous or imprecise, but these finer distinctions are not essential to the general form of his argument.

When it comes to both aesthetic and moral authority, Horkheimer refuses to accept the dichotomy of relativism and absolutism. By *reductio ad absurdum*, the fact that both moral absolutism and relativism can lead to a logical justification for fascism means that these positions are both untenable. Horkheimer sketches an illustration of this *reductio* argument by asking us to entertain the absolute principle that a just society is one that prepares individuals for their role as a member of the masses. He makes the case that this problem is "brutally solved"<sup>8</sup> by fascism, illustrating how reliance on a universal principle could lead to a self-evidently immoral outcome. Likewise, he condemns relativism by arguing if "what is moral is determined by the positive content of existing custom and habits, and morality consists in formulating and approving what is accepted by the prevailing social order... it still does not follow that its judgment is true. Error has no less often united men than truth."<sup>9</sup>

Horkheimer outright rejects any rigid, supra-temporal principles in deciding questions of value and meaning. For him, these binaries necessarily lead to belief systems which are intrinsically corruptible. Without the flexibility to apply human judgment and reason, universal values can be warped and bent away from their original intention. Likewise, free-form esthetic and moral relativism is without roots or constraints, also allowing for the distortion of value and meaning. Instead he proposes a hybrid approach towards reconciling objectivity with subjectivity in both of these domains. He claims that "knowledge really concerned with values does not look to higher realms. It rather tries to penetrate the cultural practices of its time, in order to distinguish the features of a frustrated humanity. Values are to be disclosed by uncovering the historical practice that destroys them"<sup>10</sup>

We can gain a deeper appreciation of Horkheimer's position, as well as his debate with Adler by situating this conversation within the context of an essay discussing the place of the classical canon in education. In "Who Controls the Cannon? A Classicist in Conversation with Cultural Conservatives"<sup>11</sup> Frank Moretti argues that the fundamental message of classical philosophy has always been that "tradition, for creative and authentic minds was something to be transcended, whether collective cultural traditions or personal histories."<sup>12</sup> Moretti puzzles over readers of the classical tradition who have somehow managed to "have read the tradition but have succeeded in keeping it at such a distance that they remain untouched by its key conception – that an authentic journey must be made with

full admission of one's ignorance, and an awareness that the embrace of momentary visions of order can become endless tyrannies."<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer, whose educational training included a strong foundation in classical philosophy,<sup>14</sup> exhibits the perspective of someone who has deeply internalized the lessons of this tradition. He reacts with a similar vehemence as Moretti's interlocutor against those who perversely invoke the cannon to support oppression and subjugation.

Before getting swept away by Horkheimer's vilification of Adler, we should consider that *Art and Prudence* argued against demonizing popular culture as the cause of all of society's evils. Both Horkheimer and Adorno have also been taken to task in modern times for their elitist preference for avant-garde high-art over popular mass culture. Their tendency to conflate the cultural industries with the underlying media<sup>15</sup> undermines the credibility of their analysis of these forms of expression, and their prejudicial bias towards textual literacy and print culture over visual and cinematic culture<sup>16</sup> is another weakness in their critique.

However, we may be able to bracket the specifics of their aesthetic judgments and continue to embrace the broader contours of their research agenda. We can fairly jettison the elements of Horkheimer and Adorno that need to be transcended as we continue to develop a modern critical theory situated within the current historical circumstance. Their momentary vision should not become an endless tyranny. Their project still stands as a model for what communications research can aspire towards – scholars recognizing their revolutionary role as active participants in the co-construction of reality and the deliberate shaping of better society.

- <sup>1</sup> Peters, John Durham and Peter Simonson (eds.). (2004). *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919-1968*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.
- <sup>2</sup> Horkheimer, Max. (1941). "Art and Mass Culture." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9/2:290-304.
- <sup>3</sup> Horkheimer, Max. (1968). *Kritische Theorie*. 2 Vols. Ed. Alfred Schmidt. Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1968. The anthology was translated and published in English in 1972 -- Horkheimer, Max. (1972). *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, et al. New York: Herder and Herder.
- <sup>4</sup> Horkheimer (1972), p. 246.
- <sup>5</sup> Adorno, Theodor, (Spring 1945). "A Social Critique of Radio Music" *Kenyon Review* 7.2, 208-17.
- <sup>6</sup> Adler Archive: Mortimer J. Adler – A Biography. Retrieved November 3, 2007 from <http://radicalacademy.com/adlerbio.htm>.
- <sup>7</sup> "but perfect loyalty to principles in isolation from the concrete situation makes them turn into their very opposite and finally results in perfect relativism." Horkheimer (1972), p. 281.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- <sup>11</sup> Moretti, Frank A. (1993) "Who controls the canon? A classicist in conversation with cultural conservatives," *Teachers College Record*, 95, pp. 113-126.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- <sup>14</sup> Horkheimer's training in classical philosophy is evident from his work in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, though a more detailed biographical study would need to be undertaken to establish the specific validity of this claim.
- <sup>15</sup> "Movies and radio no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries. ...Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their leveling element shows its strength in the very wrong that is furthered." p. 31, from Adorno, T.W. & Horkheimer, M. (1972/1945) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Seabury.
- <sup>16</sup> Film is faced with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a more documentary mode. The obvious answer today, as forty years ago, is that of montage which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to that of writing." p. 203, from Adorno, T.W. (1981-2). *Transparencies on film*. *New German Critique*, 24-25, 198-216.