

Afterimages: ~~Liberation~~ Ideology in the Culture Industry

Anton Heinrich L. Rennesland

University of Santo Tomas | antrenn@yahoo.com

Abstract: I argue how one's afterimage of art has turned ideological due to technology's heavy influence in the reproduction of and to individuals' incessant consumption of artworks. Art has the capacity to be historicity's expression and its antithesis. Its reach has been enlarged due to technology's democratization of artworks. It should follow that mass production of artworks foster an emancipatory and critical standpoint, yet this fostered instead the reduction of priceless and fine artworks to commodities, easily downloadable and available for public consumption. Rather than being society's antithesis, the afterimage of emancipation has been fetishized into an ideological-image of fulfilling a fantasy (the promise of '*jouissance*'). The 20th century's dictum "They know very well it is false and [are] still doing it!" embodies the consequence – despite the empty promises – of capitalism: ~~liberation~~ ideology (a mistaken understanding of ideology as liberation).

Keywords: Adorno, Art, Afterimage, Culture Industry, Alienation, Ideology

AFTERIMAGES: ~~LIBERATION~~ IDEOLOGY IN THE CULTURE INDUSTRY¹

1

Against the backdrop of culture industry, facets of culture must be reconsidered. This short essay is concerned with the effect of art and the afterimage it produces: from an emancipatory-image to an ideological-image. My use of “~~Liberation~~” (the word *liberation* with a strikethrough) is intentional to stress the heavy importance of a mistaken idea that artworks project and promise. Instead of censorship, a strikethrough enables readers to see what has been deleted; epanorthosis as a figure of speech and way of writing reflects self-correction. What I intend to underscore is this self-correcting consciousness, dealing with mistaken liberation and outright ideology, through the two afterimages of art that serve as primal argument. Strikethroughs throughout this article garners evidence of how an

emancipatory idea brews within illusion’s confinement.

My main argument banks on art’s afterimage. I situate art in relation to the art-experiencer. This is a dialectical process: art supplies content while the experiencer² gives the form—be it emancipatory or ideological. The emancipatory-image serves as society’s antithesis, positing another state of things; the ideological-image strengthens commodity’s presentation and fetishizes a need to consume more. Rather than reflecting the present milieu or serving as an antithesis, art in the second respect makes consumers focus on specific parts of a piece and caters this fetishized taste. It is during the “art event” that the exchange of commodities takes place and that afterimages are formed. It becomes an oscillation of the afterimage to the after-image, reflecting liberation to ideology.³

2

Adorno presents art as an autonomous development “located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition.”⁴ He shows how art aims at

throughout this piece yet the specific usage is grounded on context.

³ Paintings, sculptures, film, and architectural works – among others – become photographs, graphic artworks, recordings, and even “icons” for locations. My use of the term “after-image” is a play of words and is separate from the afterimages of emancipatory- and ideological-image. After-images are literally images created *after* artworks. I would not like to classify them as derogated appearances of the opus, but that through the mediatory platform they have become something distinct from the artwork. This is aligned to my argument that technology and media fetishize our consumption and make artworks available for public consumption (e.g. printed on cards and apparel and bolstered through social media).

⁴ Theodore W. Adorno, “The Autonomy of Art,” *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E. B. Ashton, from the

¹ This is a revised version of the essay “Art and Alienation: ~~Liberation~~ Ideology in The Culture Industry”, which I presented during the Second Annual De La Salle Undergraduate Philosophy Conference last 4-5 August 2017 at the De La Salle University, Taft, Manila. My change in title stresses the importance of afterimages, a concept I have formulated but have not clearly laid out in my previous construction. This revision has given necessary importance to *afterimages*—albeit still languid in demonstration. Admittedly, I present my ideas in a rather sporadic manner than the previous delineated approach. I roughly group and number them accordingly. The transition therefore between ideas are less of my concern as compared to the exact demonstrations. Hence, groupings vary in length but are considerable substantial in content.

² I loosely use and interchange the terms “art-experiencer,” “individual,” and “art-consumer”

challenging its own definition. This is important because of the blindness that art assumes—blindness produces uncertainty, which gives art its critical feature: “the uncertainty over what purpose it serves. It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions.”⁵ What art engenders therefore against the emerging backdrop of the culture industry is rather a façade—the insecurities of art indeed is what draws consumers to consume more of it. Art affirms itself by being its own antithesis: “Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber.”⁶ In similar vein, Hegel comments: “But [external existence] is not what makes a work into a product of fine art; a work of art is such only because, originating from the spirit, it now belongs to the territory of the spirit.”⁷ Art’s classification as fine is precisely because of its reflective nature; the artwork *from Geist* is grounded on historicity as *Geist* develops *through* time.

The universal and absolute need from which art (on its formal side) springs has its origin in the fact that man is a *thinking* consciousness, i.e. that man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is and whatever else is. Things in nature are only *immediate* and *single*, while man as spirit *duplicates* himself, in that (i) he is as things in nature are, but (ii) he is just as much for himself; he sees

himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit.⁸

What art is as a product of human activity is therefore a representation of what individuals are at a particular milieu; art-experiencers see themselves in artworks as the latter engenders the *Zeitgeist*. Yet these works are antithetical by being thought-provoking, challenging individuals to see themselves in such works. As art struggles for its freedom, so do individuals.

3

There is a certain given-ness in oeuvres that people take for granted—the limits of artworks: ends of canvasses, borders of pictures, lenses of cameras, technicalities of music-making (composing, performing, etc.), duration of performances (of theatre arts), and even the entire landscape where architectural or sculptural works are displayed and/or crafted. Each individual approach these borders, and the art event commences. I rework Tia DeNora’s musical event for a more inclusive presentation of the encounter between the individual and the artwork as I seek to stress the impact and formation of the afterimage in individuals. DeNora presents three times:

TIME 1 – Before the Event (all prior history as meaningful to A)

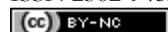
original, *Negative Dialektik* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 2.

⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, from the original *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), (London: Continuum Press, 1997), 1.

© TALISIK

Volume V, Issue no.1

ISSN 2362-9452



⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Introduction,” *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

1. Preconditions Conventions, biographical associations, previous programming practices

TIME 2 – During the Event (the event may be of any duration, seconds to years)

2. Features of the Event

A. Actor(s) Who is engaging with music? (e.g., analyst, audience, listener, performer, composer, programmer)

B. Music What music, and with what significance as imputed by Actor(s)?

C. Act of Engagement with music What is being done? (e.g., individual act of listening, responding to music, performing, composing)

D. Local conditions of C. (e.g., how came to engage with music in this way, at this time (i.e., at Time 2 – ‘During the Event’))

E. Environment In what setting does engagement with music take place? (material cultural features, interpretive frames provided on site (e.g., programme notes, comments of other listeners))

TIME 3 – After the Event

3. Outcome Has engagement with music afforded anything? What

if anything was changed or achieved or made possible by this engagement? And has this process altered any aspect of item 1 above?⁹

Time 1 is before the art encounter: all the education that artists and art-experiencers receive, the practices and drafts, the preparation of the venue, and akin. This establishes the boundaries of the artwork—the artists choose the locale, the art-experiencers learn about these artworks and is drawn. Time 2 is the exact encounter between artwork and art-experiencer with five features. Time 3 consists of the afterimages that are formed in the consciousness.

The art event in itself does not have determining characteristics. It does not prefigure alienation or a more authentic experience of the artwork. These valuations are appraised through the experiencer’s encounter—especially with emphasis on Time 1: the individual’s culture-formation, how art is understood, and the value ascribed to it. ~~Through this type of education, consumers understand the aesthetic value of art.~~ Against the backdrop of the culture industry and in association to my arguments, I prefigure consumers with a specific mindset gathered through their education and exact living: “[t]he listener is converted, along his line of least resistance, into the acquiescent purchaser.”¹⁰ Despite the conscious repulsions – if there are any – consumers are unconsciously held tighter by the industry. Thus, I argue that during this art event an exchange of commodity takes place and the afterimage formed. On part of

⁹ Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49.

¹⁰ Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 32.

the consumer, what is made available for exchange ranges from money in form of payment, pleasure with discs rather than watching in the cinema, time spent browsing for high-quality photographs of sculptures and architectural designs, upgrades from record players to online streaming, or even contentment with imitations or photographs rather than the actual experience of the artwork. What the artwork offers for exchange, regardless of specific branch of art, is the content of commodity fetishism. This exchange happens simultaneously and continues to nurture one another: the consumer ~~pays for freedom~~ pays for unlimited access for more commodities under the pretense that one is experiencing art and freedom. Furthermore, the afterimage is self-deceiving because of the consumer's illusion of understanding the artwork yet at the same time is blinded by art's demagogic essence. The culture industry is motivated by the entertainment it offers its patrons: ~~Entertainment promises freedom.~~ "Entertainment fosters the resignation which seeks to forget itself in entertainment."¹¹ The fact that it entertains forces the individual to think less and to focus on familiar leitmotifs. Ideology breeds further ideology. Instead of an emancipatory-image, the individual forms an ideological-image as one is drawn to further

consume more entertainment, more familiar themes, and more of the same.

4

Prior to the Enlightenment, many things (and activities) made sense in so far as it had to be made manually (*manus* [Lt. *hand*]). However, with the dawn of efficient and standardized processes, less use of the hands was needed and technology became the intermediate. Quite ironically, the root word finds difference in contemporary meaning: □□□□□□ (*technē*) would have conveyed a particular skill or ability of an individual, whilst the contemporary word (technology) portrays the skill of something artificial. The imprint of the human person is only through the production of something mechanical or artificial. This slow regression of human's direct imprint made possible ways of (re)producing art and branding it as a delicacy to be consumed: One can just look, to be more specific, how the internet has made available for download and consumption artworks that were previously restricted for museum- or concert hall-visits. This even made possible the use of these artworks to be printed on shirts and bags, up on posters, and as symbols of the places from where they originate. The entire idea of a (re)production of art is based on the accessibility to the consumer.¹²

¹¹ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. Edmund Jephcott, from the original *Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940–1950* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fishcher Verlag, 1987), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 113.

¹² This work presupposes technology's (re)production of art. An affinity that I can draw, albeit a rough comparison, would be to Plato's dichotomy of

worlds. "Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts, and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to answer, one to the visible and the other to the intelligible[.]" (Plato, *The Republic*, VII, trans. Benjamin Jowett, available from <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html>; Internet; accessed 24 September 2016) He posits an epistemological rift. MacIntyre follows this saying: "Plato supposed . . . that if there are objective standards for the use of such predicates, it must be the case that such predicates be used to refer to

The effect of a mass culture that is dissociated with those it identifies itself with becomes a pseudo-normative basis, replacing consciousness with a quasi-transcendental ideological image or cultures its taste for such a fetish. “The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness.”¹³ ~~Conformity enables further progresses in society through an oriented principle that diminishes ambiguity.~~ The underlying unifying principle, i.e. the culture industry, that consumers unknowingly cling to destroys peculiarities by subsuming them.¹⁴ “The concepts of order which [mass culture] hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo. They remain unquestioned, unanalysed and undialectically presupposed, even if they no longer have any substance for those who accept them.”¹⁵ Ideas that remain hovering over the entities they ought to

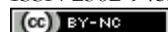
objects, and objects not belonging to the multifarious, changing world of sense but to another unchanging world apprehended by the intellect precisely through its dialectical ascent, whereby it grasps the meaning of abstract nouns, and of other general terms. These objects are the Forms, through the imitation of which or participation in which the objects of sense perception have the character that they have.” (Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* [Oxford: Routledge, 1998], 40-41)

I veer away, however, from such juxtaposition for several reasons: (1) the scope of this study is to see how technology severs the effect brought about by the arts notwithstanding the disparity between authentic and represented; Plato’s work takes into earnest consideration the ontological properties and that basically all things present in the Visible World are deemed imitations of the Pure Form. (2) Art’s prominence throughout history ties a strong link between the individual and the artwork, hence the dawning of the culture industry merely carried on this ideal by incorporating (and fetishizing) one’s consumptions of artworks; Plato’s theory merely lays down fundamental principles regarding a state of immediate cognition, not present therein is a spark of any emancipation—sans the escaped prisoner from his Myth of the Cave (as seen in *The Republic* (514a-517c)). (3)

© TALISIK

Volume V, Issue no.1

ISSN 2362-9452



identify with become oppressive as they alienate form from content, subscribers from ideas, while presenting them as basic presuppositions. What creeps into individuals is a consciousness “developed retrogressively”¹⁶ by organizing objects into fetishized products of society; they do not beg to be challenged; they pass off as something efficient and pleasing.

5

[I]deology [is] a set of representations which constitute social subjectivity. These representations exist in conjunction with communal rituals and an unconscious social fantasy which conditions the enjoyment of subjects’ participation in their political community. By regulating the relationship between the visible

This sees the vitality of – but does not question – what technology does to an artwork by presenting and bringing it closer to individuals through the internet. So, the question as to whether the artwork is merely reproduced, or an entirely new form *is* produced remains unanswered; Plato’s theory would provide an immediate solution in that they are reproductions of reproductions. In both ends, technology either reproduces or produces (anew) artworks: The former as it is gives in a digitalized format what one previously needed to venture to experience; the latter due to the question of the extent the work is reproduced in being digitalized, as something novel is entirely created. These new presentations however are not reflected in my use of after-images because the former stresses the novelty of the (re)produced work, while the latter merely reflects this gray region that technology creates.

¹³ Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 104.

¹⁴ This is labelled as “the objective spirit of an age in the single word ‘culture’.” It is seen as an all-reaching, all-encompassing objective idea that contains all therein. Cf. *Ibid.*, “Culture and Administration,” *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

and the invisible, ideology structures the social reality.¹⁷

Ideology becomes a performative basis qua social reality in which ideological practices mediate conscious and unconscious actions. “[W]ithin our practical interrelations’ — Marx locates the fetishistic illusion not in thinking, in how we misperceive what we do and are, but in our social practice itself.”¹⁸ Marx sees the social dimension: ideology does not breed in isolation; as social structures come about, there flourishes this corruptive practice of adhering to ideologies. Analyzing these ideologies form the bridge between the conscious and unconscious. With the shift of consciousness, Žižek speaks and even reforms the classic Marxist statement of „*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*“ into „*Sie wissen das, und doch tun sie es*.“¹⁹ The movement from *not knowing and doing* to *knowing yet still doing* signifies how mass culture has preconditioned consumers to simply accept whitewashed realities presented by the industry. The establishment of the ideological-image which strengthens this performative basis is the promise of *jouissance* or a fantasy that could be received.

For Žižek, every ideology attaches itself to some kernel of

jouissance, the regulation and organization of which is central to its functioning. Following Lacan, Žižek reads *jouissance* as a Real, the paradoxical emergence of pleasure through pain which is always constituted as a surplus. [...] Consequently, *jouissance* returns symptomatically in the form of distortions and disturbances, which can be read in the process of ideology critique.²⁰

The lack of critical assessment which the culture industry promulgates through amalgamizing what is entertaining and excluding what is contradictory builds the semblance of a well-functioning system. The inherently errors of this structure is something devoid of language because “[w]hat the official ideology cannot openly talk about may be revealed in the mute signs of a building.”²¹ Hence, the close connexion of ideology and fantasy or *jouissance* is revealed: fantasy ushers in a lust for another state of things. This is what the emancipatory-image is precisely about. The *lust for* is translatable to *a possibility for* another state of things. Yet there is but a thin line that differentiates a motivation and a self-referential idea—the latter is the illusion that ultimately

¹⁷ Samuel Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2016).

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 223, Quoting Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co.), 171-173; available from www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpA1.html; Internet; accessed 25 April 2017.

¹⁹ The first statement of „*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*“ is a well-known Marxist statement found in the *Kapital* (Karl Marx, , Erster Abschnitt: Ware und Geld’, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Buch 1: Der*

Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals; available from <https://archive.org/details/KarlMarxDasKapitalpdf>; Open source; accessed 25 April 2017). The second statement „*Sie wissen das, und sie tun es*“ is a creative rendition of the first following the thought of Raybone as he presents how Žižek recreates the Marxist dictum into that of the 20th century dictum of the adherence to ideology (Cf. Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology”). The German translation is mine for a better parallelism between the two statements.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 255.

can be coined as a “fragile ideological fantasy.”²²

Once more I return to the importance of the emancipatory-image as *jouissance*. “Its great task is to break the hold over us of the superego injunction to enjoy, that is, to help us include in the freedom to enjoy also the freedom not to enjoy, the freedom from enjoyment.”²³ The freedom that the emancipatory-image assures individuals is the freedom to indulge in such promising fantasies that engages one’s potentialities. In this respect, it is a freedom prior to actual freedom; “fantasy is not a hallucination or an illusion, or a potential avenue of escape from reality, but the very stuff of our social reality.”²⁴ In fantasy, in *jouissance*, an individual comes to terms with one’s social reality: another state of things, of how reality *could have* been.

6

In essence, culture is this form of an independent totality which embodies reality: “[something] higher and more pure, [untouchable] which cannot be tailored according to any tactical or technical considerations. [...] the manifestation of pure humanity without regard for its functional relationships within society.”²⁵ From this precise account of culture, it shifts to a “passive site onto and through which the phantasmic visions which bolster the status quo are projected and experienced.”²⁶ Amidst this,

what remains is a disposition and a personal encounter with culture, specifically with art. “Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience.”²⁷ Art can show otherwise—for this reason people are drawn to it: the harmony of songs, the strokes of paintings, the arrangements, shapes, and order of architectural designs. These drop inklings of the emancipatory-image. In an individual’s encounter with art, there still present is this *jouissance*, however the tendency for the ideological formation is ever strong, and unknowingly the consumer has embraced it. ~~It is a self-referential idea that convinces individuals to lust for what they see: a static way of living.~~ Instead of liberation, consumers embrace ideology through their fetishized tastes for after-images of art. A self-referential lusting must capacitate individuals for a dynamic understanding of reality. Hence, it is not the numerous experiences with the artworks but the quality of those that the emancipatory-image forms; “[w]hile the artwork’s sensual appeal seemingly brings it close to the consumer, it is alienated from him by being a commodity that he possesses and the loss of which he must constantly fear.”²⁸ It is in consuming commodified art that *jouissance*, this lust for the emancipatory-image, is relegated to the valley of ideology in the after-image of art.

²² *Ibid.*, 285.

²³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 74.

²⁴ Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology”.

²⁵ Adorno, “Culture and Administration,” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 108.

© TALISIK

Volume V, Issue no.1

ISSN 2362-9452



²⁶ Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology”.

²⁷ Adorno, “The Autonomy of Art,” *Negative Dialectics*, 4.

²⁸ Adorno, “The Autonomy of Art,” *Negative Dialectics*, 13.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodore W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, from the original *Asthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970). London: Continuum Press, 1997.
- _____. “The Autonomy of Art”. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton from the original, *Negative Dialektik* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966). New York: The Seabury Press, 1973.
- _____. “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991. 98-106.
- _____. “Culture and Administration.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991. 107-131.
- _____. “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991. 29-60.
- Adorno, Theodore and Max Horkheimer. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, from the original *Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940–1950* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fishcher Verlag, 1987). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. 94-136.
- DeNora, Tia. *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. “Introduction”. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *A Short History of Ethics*. Oxford: Routledge, 1998.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co. Available from www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpA1.html. Internet. Accessed 25 April 2017.

_____. *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Buch 1: Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals*. Available from <https://archive.org/details/KarlMarxDasKapitalpdf>. Open source. Accessed 25 April 2017.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Available from <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>. Internet. Accessed 24 September 2016.

Samuel Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3. 2016.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989.

_____. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso, 2010.