

The Avatars of Culture as Commodity

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The word “culture” is derived from the Latin *colere*, which means to till, to farm, to cultivate. The first person to use the word in the sense of spiritual cultivation, of improving one’s intellectual and moral faculties, was Cicero. It has been suggested that the Romans may have invented this concept to translate the Greek word, *padeia*. According to Hannah Arendt, the Romans conceived of culture in relation to nature and associated it with paying homage to and respecting the works of the past. “Worship” [in Spanish, *culto*—translator’s note] has the same etymological root as culture. Even today, when we speak of culture, we commonly associate it with such notions of nature transformed by labor and monuments of the past, although the reality of culture has not had anything to do with such notions for a long time.

Culture understood as a separate sphere of society where creation is freely exercised, as an activity which is its own justification, is an idealized image. This kind of autonomy has one weak spot. Culture passed through the royal courts, it was lodged in monasteries and churches, it was sponsored by the Maecenases of the palaces and the salons. When the latter abandoned it, it was purchased by the bourgeoisie. The enjoyment of culture has been the privilege of the leisure class, those who are free of the compulsion to labor. Until the 18th century culture was the patrimony of the aristocracy; afterwards, it became part of the heritage of the bourgeoisie. Writers and artists have tried to preserve their freedom by guarding the independence of the process of creation and living on the margins of social convention, but in the final accounting it is the bourgeoisie who pay for the final result, i.e., for the work.

The bourgeoisie sets the price, whether the work of art gives them pleasure or provokes and shocks them. Whether it is useful or perfectly useless. For the bourgeoisie, culture is an object of prestige; whoever possesses it rises on the social scale. Ruling class demand therefore determines the formation of a market for culture. For the bourgeoisie, culture is value just like everything else, exchange value, a commodity. Even the works that reject their commodity status, question commodified culture, and impose their own rules, are also commodities. Their value consists precisely in their ability to break with the past, since they stimulate innovation, which is essential for the market. Culture in conflict with the bourgeoisie is the bourgeois culture of the future.

Culture under bourgeois rule failed because it walled itself off as a special sphere of production of the human spirit and remained aloof from the transformation of society. The vanguards of the early 20th century—futurists, Dadaists, constructivists, expressionists, surrealists—tried to correct this error by inventing and disseminating new subversive values, new corrosive ways

of life, but the bourgeoisie knew how to trivialize and expropriate them. Its secret consisted in preventing the formation of a general point of view. The best discoveries were sterilized by being separated from a comprehensive context of experimentation and critique. Market mechanisms and specialization raised a wall between the creators and the revolutionary workers movement, which could have provided a basis for the accentuation of all the subversive aspects of their works. Artists then renounced any attempt to change the world and accepted their jobs as fragmented disciplines, which can produce only degraded and inoffensive works.

Of signal importance is the fact that when ordinary people are proletarianized, popular culture disappears. The capitalist system subjects the people to wage slavery and the cultured bourgeoisie discovers and appropriates its folklore. The first specifically bourgeois culture was romanticism. As it coincided with a revolutionary period, it is simultaneously apologetic and critical; it both praises and questions bourgeois values. Its critical aspect influenced the working class. When the proletariat conceived of the project of appropriating social wealth in order to put it at everybody's disposal it became aware of its cultural isolation and laid claim to culture—at first its romantic variety—as an indispensable instrument for its emancipation. Its libraries, cultural centers, rationalist schools and educational publications reveal the will of the workers to have their own culture, seized from the bourgeoisie and removed from the market so as to benefit everyone. It devolved upon the cultural vanguard, a movement that made a clean slate with the past, to ensure that the workers' *detournement* of bourgeois culture did not introduce the latter's ideological defects into the proletarian milieu, but would instead lead to really new and revolutionary values. Should this have taken place, one would have been able to speak of an authentic proletarian culture. It was not to be. The workers' own victories, especially those that led to a shorter working day, were used against them. Leisure was proletarianized and the daily life of millions of workers was opened up to capitalism. Domination availed itself of two powerful weapons created by the rationalization of the productive process: the state educational system and the mass media of cinema, radio and television. On the one hand there was a bureaucratic culture, dedicated to transmitting the ideas of the ruling class, and on the other, an unprecedented expansion of the culture market that led to the creation of a culture industry. The creator and the intellectual could choose between the desk of the functionary or the dressing room of the entertainer. "The preliminary condition required for propelling workers to the status of 'free' producers and consumers of commodity time was the violent expropriation of their own time" (Debord). The spectacle began to become a reality with this dispossession initiated by the culture industry. By way of a technological trick of domination, the abolition of bourgeois privilege did not introduce the working masses into culture, it introduced them into the spectacle. Leisure did not free them but only put the finishing touches on their slavery.

"Free" time is free only in name. No one can freely dispose of their time if they do not possess the tools needed to construct their everyday lives. So-called free time exists in social conditions lacking in freedom. The relations of production absolutely determine individuals' existence and the degree of freedom they must possess. This freedom is exercised within the market. In his leisure time the individual desires the supply imposed upon him by the market. The more freedom, the greater the imposition, that is, more slavery. Free time is constant activity; it is thus a prolongation of labor time and takes on the characteristics of labor: routine, fatigue, boredom, brutalization. For the individual, recreation is no longer imposed upon him for the purpose of allowing him to restore the forces used up in labor, but in order to further employ those same forces in consumption. "Amusement under late capitalism is the *prolongation* of work" (Adorno).

Culture enters the domain of leisure and becomes mass culture. If bourgeois class society employed cultural products as commodities, mass society consumes them. They no longer serve the purpose of self-improvement or social climbing; their function is entertainment and killing time. The new culture is entertainment and entertainment is now culture. It involves amusement, killing time, rather than educating, much less liberating the spirit. To be diverted is to evade, not to think, and therefore to accommodate oneself to existing conditions. In this way the misery of everyday life becomes endurable. Industrial and bureaucratic culture does not confront the individual with the society that represses his desires, but with the society that domesticates his instincts, obstructs his initiative and exacerbates his intellectual poverty. It seeks to standardize the individual by turning him into a stereotype that corresponds to the subject of domination, that is, the spectator. Industrial culture transforms the entire world into a “public”. The public is by definition passive, its behavior is based on psychological identification with the television hero, with the actress, with the leader. These are the models of false self-realization that belong to an alienated life. The image is predominant over every other form of expression. The spectator never intervenes, he passes the buck; he never protests, he is instead the background of the protest. Furthermore, if rebel behavior is becoming a cultural fashion this is because protest has become a commodity. Recent examples include the Madrid “Movida” [a cultural movement that originated in Madrid during the post-Franco transition to democracy between 1975 and 1982 that sought to capitalize on the new environment of political and cultural freedom by introducing innovative films, fashions and art onto the market—translator’s note] or its counterpart, the Barcelona counterculture of the seventies. The real purpose of the spectacle of contestation is to integrate revolt, revealing the degree of domestication or the level of idiocy of the participants. The spectacle endeavors to generalize the vulgar moments of life as much as possible by disguising them as heroic and unique. Amidst the utter prostration of egalitarian and libertarian ideas, the spectacle stands alone in constructing situations, the kind of situations in which individuals ignore everything that is not entertaining. This is how the spectator is incubated, a dispersed being whom the everyday regime of images “has deprived of his world, cut off from all relationships and rendered incapable of any focus” (Anders).

Besides being frivolous, the products of industrial culture are ephemeral, as their supply must constantly be renewed since the regime of everyday life follows the whims of fashion, and in fashion constant change rules. Fashion only exists in the present. Even the past acquires a contemporaneous quality: marketing can present *El Quijote* as a book that is hot off the press and Goya as a trendy new painter. The flood of information that bombards the spectator is decontextualized, stripped of historical perspective, and directed at minds that are prepared to receive it, minds that are malleable, without memory, and therefore indifferent to history. Spectators live only in the now. Submerged in a perpetual present, they are childlike beings, incapable of distinguishing between banal entertainment and public activity. They do not want to grow up; they want to tarry eternally in adolescence. They believe that silly make-believe is the most fitting sort of behavior for public affairs, as it is the only kind that arises spontaneously from their puerile existence. This spectacular positive appraisal of playful parody generalizes the world of infancy, where the adults must be confined. Infantilization definitively separates the spectator public from the real actors, the leaders. The reality is more than perverse: protest can barely survive the manipulations of infiltrated recuperators, but it will never survive comic portrayal. Ludic ideology is the good conscience of minds that have been infantilized by the spectacle.

The integrated spectacle reigns where state culture and industrial culture have merged. Both follow the same rules. The increasing importance of leisure in modern production was one of the driving forces of the process of economic tertiarization that is characteristic of globalization. Culture, as an object to be consumed during leisure time, has been developed as a productive force. It creates jobs, stimulates consumption, and attracts tourists. Cultural tourism is common everywhere now that the supply of culture is a high priority in the cities. The culture industry has diversified and now the culture market is global. Culture is exported and imported like chicken. Technological advances in the transport sector favor this globalization; garbage, as the communications media demonstrate, is the same for everybody. In the remotest corner of the world one hears “Macarena”. The new technologies—internet, video, DVD, fiber optics, cable television, cell phones—have accelerated the globalizing process of bureaucratic-industrial culture; they have also provided a new territory: virtual space. In this new dimension the spectacle makes a qualitative leap. Here, all the characteristics of the above-mentioned culture, i.e., banalization, one-dimensionality, frivolity, superficiality, the ideology of play, eclecticism, fragmentation, etc., reach unprecedented heights. Computer culture exactly fulfills the program of the colonization of everyday life by projecting the realization of desires into the null space of virtuality. The “interactive” quality allowed by the new technologies breaks some of the spectacle’s rules in the electromagnetic aether, such as passivity or one-way transmission, and as a result the spectator can communicate with others and actively participate, but only as a ghost. The virtual alter-ego can be anything it wants within the technological matrix, especially anything the real being will never be in real space-time, and by way of this doubling of the self the individual contributes to his own imbecility and therefore to his own annihilation. Modern alienation is manifested through the new mechanisms of evasion as a kind of schizophrenia.

In the current historical phase, and insofar as a project opposed to the dominant system is conceivable, the recovery of culture as a Ciceronian *cultura animi* does not imply patient dedication to learning, or a craftsman-like cultivation of skill, or a militant restitution of memory. It is above all a practice of cultural sabotage inseparable from a total critique of domination. Culture died long ago and has been replaced by a bureaucratic and industrial substitute. This is why anyone who speaks of culture—or art, or the recovery of historical memory—without reference to the revolutionary transformation of social life, speaks with a corpse in his mouth. All activity in this domain must be inscribed within a unitary project of total subversion; all creation must as a result be fundamentally destructive. One must not take flight from conflict; one must think seriously about it and remain within it.

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