

ADORNO ON “CULTURE INDUSTRY:” CRITICAL THEORY OF ART AS SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Theodor W. Adorno has been best known for his scathing critique of “culture industry.” What is usually missed is that Adorno’s critique of 20th Century cultural forms was dialectical, concerned with their critical potential for both emancipation and domination, and sought to comprehend modern practices of both “hermetic” art and “popular” culture, implicating reflexively the categories and concerns of his own cultural criticism, and thus anticipating issues in “post”-modernism. For Adorno, reflecting critically upon the significance of modern aesthetic forms such as those of the media of cinema, radio, television (and now, the internet) involves the critical theory of the viewer/listener/subject, common to both “high” art and “culture industry.” In this course we address the Frankfurt School critical theory of the historical transformations of experience and aesthetic subjectivity in modern social life in context, reading works of the 1920s-30s by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, and then focusing on works by Adorno in considering the analytical and explanatory as well as critical power of certain enduring if problematic and contested categories such as “commodification” and “democratization” for a dialectic of modern forms of art and culture as forms of social subjectivity.

(School of the Art Institute of Chicago: Spring '04, '05, '06, '07, '08, '09, '10)

BENJAMIN AND HISTORY: THE FUTURE OF THE SUBJECT

Walter Benjamin's cultural criticism sought to grasp the nature of the dramatic social upheavals and transformations of his time (1892-1940). His work tried to discern emancipatory possibilities in contemporary social developments and the emergence of new cultural forms such as photography and cinema, but it was nonetheless preoccupied by problems of recovering past social and cultural history. His stated goal was to grasp the nature of modern forms of being and consciousness and their transformations of subjectivity and experience. In readings from Benjamin’s major essays, this course seeks the critical intention of his cryptic utterances on problems of modern subjectivity in social history, which have provoked musings on presence, temporality, memory, and the sense of history in modern and present-day social and cultural criticism. Other readings include works from among Benjamin’s sources in criticism, literature and philosophy such as Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Bergson, Proust, Kafka, Brecht, and Breton.

(SAIC: Fall '04, '06, '07, '08, '09)

CRITICAL ART: THE PHILOSOPHY OF MODERNISM

Several questions are paradigmatic for the study of 19th and 20th (and now 21st) Century art, including: How might we understand and explain modern art's increasingly radical practices? How does subjectivity become the critical object of diverse artistic practices? How does “art” itself emerge as a specifically modern and critical category of aesthetics? Readings range from late 18th - early 19th Century philosophers Kant, Schiller and Hegel, through Nietzsche’s criticism of the values of social and aesthetic modernity (for which the opposition of Bizet’s *Carmen* to Wagner’s *Parsifal* reveals the crisis and bad faith), to 20th Century critics of modern art and society Lukács, Marcuse and Adorno, as attempts to grasp the emergence of modernism in art, the peculiarities of modern artistic practices and the critical possibilities of their subjectivity to the present. Poetry by Wordsworth and Celan provide framing and contrasting (early 19th and late 20th Century) examples for considering the subjectivity for modern art.

(SAIC: Fall '05, '06, '07, '08, Spring '10)

CRITICAL SOCIETY: PHILOSOPHY AND MODERNITY: MARX AND MARXISM

The issues of modern philosophy have been inseparable from critical aspects of social modernity. From the 18th Century Enlightenment and 1789 French Revolution to the social revolutions of the 19th and 20th Centuries, philosophers have radically interrogated problems of consciousness and subjectivity in terms of modern society, and have been concerned with possibilities for social transformation and emancipation. This course proceeds from early liberal political and economic critiques by Rousseau and Smith to philosophies of social modernity by Kant and Hegel, and the critique and attempt to get beyond the problems of modern society by Marx and his followers Lukács, Korsch and Adorno.

(SAIC: Spring '07, '09)

INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

Through the close reading of key texts in the history of Critical Theory, focusing on writers in and around the Frankfurt School, this course traces the development of the theory of the critical social concerns of modern (and so-called “post”-modern) art to the present. Critical theorists of modern art and society we read include Marx, Trotsky, Lukács, Kracauer, Benjamin, Marcuse, Adorno, Greenberg, Barthes, and Foucault; and our consideration of the history of the critical theory of modern art is framed by recent writings by Susan Buck-Morss and Robert Pippin, the historic debate on the nature and character of (post)modernism by Habermas and Lyotard, and a case study of the founding of the art journal *October*. (SAIC: Summer '05 6w2, '09 6w2)

MEDIA AND MODERNITY: SPECTACLE AND SOCIETY

With the advent in the 19th Century of modern media (newspapers, photography, etc.) and the social-political emergence of “the masses,” a set of problems developed concerning the structuring role of media in society. Through the development of various forms of culture industry in the 20th Century — the bestseller, tabloid journalism, recorded music, cinema, radio, television, the internet, etc. — we have arrived at the “spectacular” culture of the present. How does “mass”/“popular” culture in modern media inform our lives — even the most intimate of our relations? What do these cultural forms say about our social reality? This course investigates these questions through viewing and reading about art of modern media: seminal works of early cinema; works by media artists such as Ruttmann, Eisenstein, Vertov, Buñuel, Hitchcock, Deren, Brakhage, Schneemann, Resnais, Godard, Marker, et al.; and writings by Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno, Debord, Baudrillard, et al. (SAIC: Fall '05)

THE MUSEUM OF ART: POSTMODERNISM AND CRITIQUE

The institution of art is a distinctly modern phenomenon whose meaning and importance have been in contention since its emergence in the late 18th - early 19th Centuries: in the wake of the Enlightenment and the 1789 French Revolution. Through the close reading of arguments and texts in the critical theory of modern art, this course traces a history of the institution of art and its critique to the present, focusing on Marxian critical social theories of art, poststructuralist critiques of art as ideology, and the postmodernist critique of the modern institution of art by the *October* group: Benjamin and Adorno; Barthes and Foucault; and Crimp, Foster, Krauss, Owens, et al. (SAIC: Fall '06)

ORIGINS OF MODERN ART AND SOCIETY, FRANCE 1848-71: PAINTING, POETICS, POLITICS

This course investigates 1848-71 in France as a period critical in the emergence and development of modern artistic practices, evincing fundamental transformations in social and aesthetic subjectivity. The course investigates and reflects upon questions and problems of the social history of art through the topics of Romanticism and Baudelaire’s aesthetic, Courbet and “Realism,” Manet and “Modernism,” and “Impressionism.” Critical issues in the historiography of modern art are presented through readings from monographs on Courbet and Manet by T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, framed by their debate on the nature and character of modernism. Discussions include works by other artists of this period and milieu, Delacroix, Daumier, Millet, Caillebotte, Degas, Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, Seurat, et al.; and writings by contemporaries such as Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Heinrich Heine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Karl Marx and Théophile Thoré, and by subsequent, 20th Century and present-day art critics and historians such as Walter Benjamin, Clement Greenberg, Arnold Hauser, Meyer Schapiro, Albert Boime and Linda Nochlin. (SAIC: Spring '04, Fall '05, Spring '08, Summer '09, '10)

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIETY: FREUD AND AFTER

Freud's psychotherapeutic practice and analytic theory of the complex nature of the human psyche, for instance his "discovery" of unconscious mental processes, were profoundly influential for a variety of thinkers and practitioners, including Frantz Fanon, and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor W. Adorno. In this course, we read widely from Freud's writings and those he influenced, including the above authors, with attention to the societal implications of Freud's approach to subjectivity. (SAIC: Fall '07)

Statement of teaching philosophy

The institutional academic distinction of the study of the history and criticism — the theory — of cultural objects from the instruction of their production contributes to obscuring the reciprocal relationship of the two disciplines. Cultural studies approaches, emphasizing communication and the production of meaning in reception, consider art-making practices as matters of degree and not of kind. The category of art faces challenges in terms of its relative cultural values. Susan Buck-Morss, responding to the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” in *October 77* (1996), protests that

a discourse of visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we have known it. There is no way within such a discourse for art to sustain a separate existence, not as a practice, not as a phenomenon, not as an experience, not as a discipline.

“Art” is a problematic and contested category for modern production and subjectivity. “Culture industry” is the primary context for all aesthetic education and artistic practice in “post”-modern society. Art work in the context of “culture industry” is constantly vulnerable to liquidation in terms of the greater culture, within which the critical values of art might survive only covertly. Buck-Morss points out that, in such a context, “Tomorrow’s artists may opt to go underground,”

They may choose to do their work esoterically, while employed as producers of visual culture. . . . The producers of the visual culture of tomorrow are the camerawomen, video/film editors, city planners, set designers for rock stars, tourism packagers, marketing consultants, television producers, commodity designers, layout persons, and cosmetic surgeons. They are the students who sit in our classes today.

Instilling the meaningful distinction between “art” and “culture” is a principal task for instructing “post”-modern students of art. Max Horkheimer wrote under the title “After the Movies” (1955) that

Mindful of art . . . we reject the film. But even after we have seen one which does not affront our demand too seriously . . . we easily feel a familiar grief. Either . . . that the meaning of the situation does not square with our existence — or . . . that our existence is at odds with life as it really is. In either case, the absolute hope in which to confirm us [that] is the most certain sign of the work of art, is stifled. We do not feel it but its remoteness, and a sense of abandonment penetrates us even more profoundly than before.

Such feelings have motivated my own art work, recognizing the ambiguous position of working as an individual artist in the cultural-industrial medium of video. Why work in media? Theodor W. Adorno addressed mass culture and society in “Transparencies on Film” (1967) as follows:

That, among its functions, film provides models for collective behavior is not just an additional imposition of ideology. Such collectivity, rather, inheres in the innermost elements of film. . . . [T]he constitutive subject of film [is] a “we” in which the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the medium converge.

The social collectivity in the production of meaning presents specific problems for artistic practice in the context of “culture industry.” Adorno wrote in “The Social Situation of Music” (1932) that modern art expresses the same problems of subjectivity as those of critical social theory, to provoke recognition. Modern art is not only cultural, but *critically reflexive* cultural practice. Buck-Morss writes that “[Artists’] work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience. Our work as critics is to recognize it.” Such a reflexive, reciprocal definition of the roles of the artist and the critic/historian/theorist demonstrates that education in the tasks of either requires instruction towards both, engaging the struggle to articulate reception and production, practice and theory, as a constant problem of the tensions between them and their emergent possibilities.