

*Critical pedagogy and the disciplines*

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.