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# Armed with an Easel: Understanding Artistic Political Praxis Through the Works of Theodor Adorno and Chantal Mouffe

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# Armed with an Easel:
# Understanding Artistic Political Praxis Through the Works of Theodor Adorno and Chantal Mouffe

An Independent Study Thesis

By Evelyn Yu Yu Swe

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of Senior Independent Study

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The College of Wooster
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**Abstract**

This Independent Study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter examines the role of capitalism in the formation of our culture. The argument presented here is that culture plays an important role in reinforcing modern neoliberal capitalism and that neoliberal capitalism has massive control over the dissemination of culture and the arts. The chapter concludes that it is necessary to utilize socio-cultural means in combating the influence of capitalism, and there does indeed exist emancipatory potential in artistic political praxis.

The second chapter focuses on Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory in articulating his conception of the emancipatory potential of art. This chapter explicates on Adorno's idea of a sovereign and autonomous artistic praxis and looks at his objections to the politicization of art. Finally, the chapter looks at what Adorno considers legitimate artistic political praxis and attempts at an understanding of Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity in relation to artistic political praxis.

The third chapter focuses on the political theory of Chantal Mouffe; specifically, it is an explication of her theory of agonistics as a democratic political praxis. The chapter will explore Mouffe's concept of hegemony in relation to how she conceives of agonistics. It will also explain how Mouffe understands public spaces as battlegrounds for agonistic struggle. The fourth chapter focuses on how Mouffe conceives of the role of art in agonistic political praxis.

The fourth and final chapter of this study evaluates the two different conceptions of artistic political praxis presented by Adorno and Mouffe on their respective merits and deficiencies. It will attempt to adjudicate the differences between the respective theories and try to formulate some kind of practical frame for how artistic political praxis ought to be conducted.

# Acknowledgements

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# Chapter I: The Culture Industry

**Introduction**

In this project, I wish to answer the question, what is the role of art or artistic practices in political resistance against neoliberal capitalism. To do this, I engage with the works of theorists Theodor Adorno and Chantal Mouffe, both of whom wrote about the role that art could play in politics. Both Adorno and Mouffe are concerned with the mechanisms of systems of domination and the ways in which we can resist and subvert them. However, they come to widely divergent prescriptions on how to engage in artistic political praxis. To understand their place for art in political praxis, we must first understand how they saw the cultural and social landscape in which art was operating as well as the forces that act upon artistic enterprise.

To do this, I will engage with the concept of the culture industry that is utilized by both Adorno and Mouffe in their works. Adorno and Max Horkheimer first articulated the culture industry in the essay "The Culture Industry," which is an evaluation of the role that culture plays in reinforcing modern neoliberal capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). In their essay, Adorno and Horkheimer develop the idea of the culture industry, which is supposed to be the seemingly monolithic view of culture's place in modern neoliberal capitalism. While Marxists before them were concerned with the economic dimensions of capitalism, Horkheimer and Adorno use this essay to show us the socio-cultural and political features of capitalism. Then, I will touch on Chantal Mouffe's conception of a post-Fordist culture industry and examine what that means for artistic praxis.

In this chapter, I will examine the account of the culture industry and consider the

implications of this perspective on culture for artistic political praxis. Both Adorno and Mouffe ultimately believe that, despite the power of the culture industry in shaping individuals and in controlling the arts, art has emancipatory potential that can be harnessed to liberate us in some way. In the rest of this thesis, I will examine the place for art in political praxis as outlined by Adorno and Mouffe and what aesthetic resistance should look like for them. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I will evaluate their respective theories with regard to how capitalism operates today and see which of their theories is better suited to a theory of artistic political praxis that can resist against neoliberal capitalism as we know it today.

### What is the Culture Industry?

Adorno and Horkheimer's essay on the culture industry can be read as a response to the Marxists of their time who suggested a linear progression to history that would lead inevitably to communism. According to Karl Marx, the end point of capitalism is its eventual and inevitable replacement by full communism. The focus of his analysis was primarily the economic structures that governed capitalism, and once those economic powers collapsed due to their unsustainability, we would eventually achieve the full communist state. For Marx, the progression of history was clearly linear and the progression of his materialist dialectic pointed eventually to a classless communist society. One of many criticisms that are levied against Marx is addressed briefly by Adorno and Horkheimer in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Adorno and Horkheimer believe that Marx underestimated the power of cultural forces in the political sphere, and Marx's claim that history would lead us inevitably to communism was impossible because of the pervasive

influence of capitalism on our culture.

  Marx was an economic determinist who believed that all social and political relationships are built on economic ones.[1] His idea is that we can change our current social and cultural realities by changing our economic realities; though the influence of capitalism impacts the social and cultural realms, the only real way to change anything is by changing economic realities. Adorno and Horkheimer disagree with Marx on this. According to them, the ways for us to change capitalism are not limited to the economic spheres or the market like Marx postulated. Rather, capitalist commodification pervades our culture and our lives in ways that are not immediately apparent, and consequently our methods for combatting capitalism cannot be limited to the economics of it. Marxist analysis holds that a redistribution of the forces of production can overthrow capitalism and lead to the communist revolution; Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that commodification and capitalism are so pervasive in so many aspects of our lives that simply changing the immediate economic reality may not be enough to change the reality of capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 94). Similarly, Marx also believed that capitalism had an influence on the way culture is structured. However, Marx was fixated on finding a solution to the problem of capitalist commodification through economic means, and did not see the potential for change through culture itself. If we think about this in terms of Marx's base and superstructure model, art and culture act as part of the superstructure, reflecting the economic relationships and ideology, and maintaining and shaping the means and relations of production, while being dominated by the base

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[1] Economic determinism is the theory that social and political relationships are built on economic ones. See: Marx and Engel's *The German Ideology*.

structure.[2] The thought here is that if we change the base structure, then everything else will change as well, and that is why Marx focused on economic relationships.

Adorno and Horkheimer's disagreement with Marx lies in the thought that Marx understated the influence of art and culture on capitalism; they believe that Marx did not understand the staying power of capitalism because he underestimated the extent to which art and other aspects of the superstructure really function to stabilize capitalist society. This is because capitalism is concerned not just with control of the marketplace but also the creation and control of mass culture. The Fordism and technological reproducibility of capitalism seeps into our culture and results in a culture under capitalism that is uniform and mass produced, much like any other manufactured good. Regarding the uniformity of mass culture as we experience it today, Adorno and Horkheimer write: "All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 95). Marx failed to understand how commodification and capitalism operated on the cultural level, and that is where Adorno and Horkheimer's critique becomes apparent. The inevitable progression of history that Marx saw was not quite so inevitable to Adorno and Horkheimer, who wrote, "In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly … Any need which might escape the central control is repressed by that of individual consciousness" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 95). Their argument against Marx is that capitalism, through the culture industry, has subjugated our consciousnesses through standardized and technologically centralized media. As a result, the individual becomes the democratic

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[2] The base structure is the economic and material reality and the superstructure is the ideology that upholds this reality.

consumer, and the consumer does not want to resist capitalism because capitalism has created the consumer. Adorno and Horkheimer believe, however, that because the influence of art and culture on capitalism is actually greater than Marx was willing to admit, influencing capitalism through changing the superstructure through changing culture may in fact be a viable way of weakening the base structure of capitalist production. Thus, if we can achieve liberation from cultural commodification, then we can effectively combat capitalist production. So, the culture industry is the invasion of capitalism into the production and dissemination of art and culture.

### Needs under Capitalism

Modern capitalism no longer limits itself to the market; rather it pervades our culture and our lives through standardization and commodification of art and other artifacts of culture. Adorno and Horkheimer point out that modern culture is characterized by a standardization of production with "few production centers and widely dispersed reception [of goods produced]" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 95). With such a system, there can be production of cultural goods that provides for essentially everyone's apparent needs – "Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 97). Production is clearly marked, and the differences between the individual manufactured cultural goods are also clearly marked, but ultimately completely artificial. That is to say, the goods that are manufactured have surface diversity, and may in fact be produced in seemingly different ways, but in the end are essentially the same thing – for example, our having to choose between Netflix and Hulu and Amazon Instant Video and HBOGo makes it seem as if there is diversity and we have a choice, but upon further examination, these services are not so different after

all.

One thought is that there are needs that are generated by capitalism, and capitalist commodification depends on the satisfaction of these kinds of needs.[3] According to Espen Hammer, the culture industry is geared towards maximization of profit and is dependent on generating new demands that must be satisfied (Hammer 2005, 82). One may ask, if capitalism is satisfying our desires successfully, then why is it a problem and why should we balk against it? The problem is that capitalism does not in fact satisfy our genuine desires – rather, it substitutes our desires with something that is close, but ultimately unsatisfactory. For example, the culture industry may appear to satiate our need for intellectually engaging art that offers genuine critique by substituting it with a piece that gestures at critique while still falling entirely into the trappings of capitalism. The satisfaction of needs under capitalism is unsatisfactory and the choices that are offered to us by capitalism are artificial.

One good example of this is given by Edward Bernays, who is widely considered the father of modern public relations and advertising. Bernays, in his 1929 book *Propaganda*, wrote, "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country … We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of" (Bernays 2004, 9-10). This passage suggests that our tastes and opinions are formed under a commodified society through the creation of artificial desires and needs in us that we did not previously have.

Espen Hammer's analysis goes beyond the artificiality of the choices offered by capitalism; he goes further and suggests that even the needs which we have and that may

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[3] For Mouffe's take on this, see: (Martin 2013, 212).

appear 'natural' are mediated by society. According to Hammer, there are no such things as 'natural needs,' and any distinction between surface-level needs that are created by the culture industry and our apparent deep, natural needs, like hunger and thirst, is arbitrary (Hammer 2005, 82). The thought here is that even our most fundamental needs like hunger and thirst are mediated by cultural expectations of what is tasty or healthy, or which foods are good to eat and which are not. Hammer writes: "Man, as it were, is nature all the way up and interpretation all the way down" (Hammer 2005, 82). We may have needs, which arise naturally, but the ways we satisfy such needs is open to interpretation, and can be and are influenced by the culture industry. That is, natural needs are indeterminate and are shaped by our own self-interpretation of how to fulfill them. We may be hungry, for example, but how we must satisfy that hunger is determined by our interpretations, which are mediated by a system of exchange (in the case of the culture industry, a capitalist system of exchange). The needs that are generated and satisfied by the culture industry are also 'false' in a sense because they arise out of a system that aims at profit rather than the happiness and integrity of its members.

An example of this need creation is the idea that American women ought to remove body hair. Christine Hope, in her article "Caucasian Female Body Hair and American Culture," outlined the history of shaving for women in the United States. Before 1915, the removal of women's body hair was not a need that existed in American popular culture. According to Hope, the call for the removal of unsightly body hair on women began with the publication of an article in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1915, which featured a woman wearing a sleeveless dress, with her arms, raised, "revealing perfectly

clear armpits" (Hope 1982, 93). Before this campaign, the need for clean-shaven underarms did not exist – the term 'underarm' did not even exist. This is an example of a need created by the culture industry that it satisfies. The only apparent way to remove ourselves from this system of need satisfaction is, according to Hammer and Adorno, through enlightening ourselves through an endless process of critique and negation (Hammer 2005, 82).

Adorno and Horkheimer think that in the culture industry, the consumer's choice exists only in choosing what cultural product to consume. So capitalism standardizes and commodifies culture, makes uniform the forces of production, and then takes away the choice of the individual on whether or not to consume said culture. The standardization and commodification of culture has political implications, as the decisions we make about whether to consume, or what it is that we should consume, is done by the dissemination of information onto the public. The point that Adorno and Horkheimer wish to emphasize here is that the direct result of this standardization of culture is that citizens are manipulated into being passive consumers that do not engage meaningfully or actively in the political process (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 98). The culture industry, with its power to trap consumers in its cycle of consumption, turns individuals and potential political challengers into mere consumers. That is to say, individuals become disinterested in and distracted from genuine political processes when faced with the cycle of capitalist consumption. Hammer offers a historical explanation for the staying power of commodification by attributing modern Western capitalism to the economic changes that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s that were a direct result of the fiscal policies of the New Deal (Hammer 2005, 82). These policies made it possible for diverse groups to

participate in mass consumption. Without the mass participation of the public, the centralization of capital and the emphasis on technological change as we see with modern capitalism today would not be possible. It seems that, to those entrapped in the policies resultant from the New Deal, the systemic imperatives of mass consumption were irresistible and modern capitalism became bound up in the culture industry. Hammer's line of thinking seems to suggest that, because of particular historical forces, we could not have possibly resisted the creation and proliferation of the culture industry. The creation of needs that were a result of the economic changes has become cemented in Western neoliberal culture.

### Production of Art in the Culture Industry

Art created by the culture industry becomes tools that serve to subjugate members of society and turn us all into passive 'democratic' consumers. The production process, however, may not have necessarily intentionally been formulated as a tool of subjugation. The reason capitalist modes of production are compelling is that they are cheaper, easier, and less risky to produce. Popular culture is cheap, easy, and relatively low-risk to produce, and the art created is uniform, save for negligible variance in detail that gives the consumers an illusion of choice.[4] Adorno and Horkheimer give a good example of this kind of production:

> Not only do hit songs, stars, and soap operas conform to types
> recurring cyclically as rigid invariants, but the specific content of
> productions, the seemingly variable element, is itself derived from

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[4] By low-risk, I mean that their cost of production is low and the chances for failure of a product produced through this method is low. A film that is produced to follow a well-known and successful formula is much lower risk than an experimental film that uses a novel idea. Take Terry Gilliam's film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, which was critically acclaimed because of its novelty and ingenuity but flopped in the box office because it was too unusual – that film was a risk to produce, and its commercial failure reflected that.

those types. The details become interchangeable. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 98)

Basically, the variations that we see in hit music, films, and art, conform to some kind of set model. The details of one popular pulp fiction novel are interchangeable with another that falls under the same genre, where the only real differences are miniscule. One example of this is the use of tropes in popular media, which are, according to the TV Tropes website, "devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations" (TV Tropes).[5] Tropes are ideas or characters that are recycled from one story to the next, which allow for easy creation of media with essentially interchangeable parts.

Adorno and Horkheimer believe that this type of production of mass culture results in a number of things; first, there is a decline in the real variety and quality of cultural goods when they are produced by the culture industry; second, the new techniques of production and standardization have produced media simply to serve capitalism; and finally, the primacy of the illusion of choice over actual content in mass media has removed the critical power of art. The decline in quality for cultural goods can be seen in this passage: "The culture industry has developed in conjunction with the predominance of effect, the tangible performance, the technical detail, over the work which once carried the idea and was liquidated with it" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 99). This passage suggests that the emphasis on flair or style over form or content has led to the creation of inferior cultural goods. Cultural goods are created with a preference for effect over the content, and this subsequently leads to a lack of variety in content and form in the culture that we consume. The lack of variety in content and form is a result of

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[5] See website: http://www.tvtropes.org

the new techniques of production championed by capitalism, and the resultant techniques of production and standardization in media result in art being created simply as reflections of capitalist modes of production. Another result is that the homogeneity of pop culture turns art into a tool for capitalist domination. The production of new effect while maintaining the old schema "merely increases the power of the tradition which the individual effect seeks to escape" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 101). The culture industry allows for variation in effect and style insofar as it falls within an acceptable range – anything that falls outside it is purged from mainstream popular culture and forgotten, and anything that isn't purged is co-opted into perpetuating the consumerism of the culture industry. The culture industry, besides lacking substance, co-opts anything novel and purges the market of anything critical.

### The Culture Industry's Preoccupation with Style

Though the culture industry may appear monolithic and insurmountable, for Adorno there still exists emancipatory potential in art. Though it may appear that Adorno and Horkheimer's readings are pessimistic, I think they do believe that, under the right conditions, art can open us up to new possibilities. The way this point is expressed in their writing is through comparing the strategic artistic use of style between 'great' artists and what Adorno and Horkheimer saw as modern art. Specifically, they argue that great artists were willing to push the envelope when it came to style, and modern art suffers from the trappings of style. Adorno and Horkheimer write: "The great artists were never those whose works embodied style in its least fractured, most perfect form but those who adopted style as a rigor to set against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 103). Great artists were not afraid to subvert style,

and some even expressed a mistrust of it. In contrast, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, modern art suffers from an "untruth of style … in being absorbed through style into the dominant form of universality" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 103). The mass production of uniform products that is necessary for capitalist production and style because it is the adherence to a particular form, which is easy to recreate or imitate, becomes important in capitalist production. That is, modern art, because it adheres strictly to style as is required in capitalist production, simply reflects the dominant universal paradigm.

Modern art, because of its emphasis on flair or style over meaningful content, lacks a tension between content and style, which is necessary for emancipatory art, according to Adorno and Horkheimer. Their observation about art in modern capitalist society is that it lacks critical power due to it lacking the necessary tension between content and style. That is, the content of modern capitalist art is not challenged by the styles that are used to express them, and vice versa. This relationship is similar to what Adorno wrote about in his *Negative Dialectics* concerning the origin of critical power (Adorno 1981). Modern art fails at critique and negation because it adheres strictly to style, is a product of a capitalist system which aims at profit rather than human flourishing, and instead of allowing for us to explore genuine human needs, obfuscates them along with any real expression of suffering. For art to be critical, it must be truthful, and sometimes the truth involves the expression of human suffering and the culture industry does not allow for this. Style is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the record of tradition, and must thus be confronted in some way in order for art to express human suffering. The culture industry creates a uniform style and does not allow for the

deviation in style necessary for radical art or for the expression of suffering.

Adorno and Horkheimer believe that existing modes of style must be challenged fundamentally in order for art to have critical value. This challenge to style does not result in harmony or unity between content and form – great works of art, for example, fail to conform to style and are happy to fail at producing a uniform style. In other words, great artists dare to defy style, while modern art works are inferior in that they conform rigidly to style necessarily for them to achieve an audience in modern capitalist society. The lesson to take away from this is that radical art ought to have radical form; that is, part of the emancipatory potential lies in its ability to defy form and style. That is to say, being able to defy style is an aspect of artistic political praxis and not the totality of it – stylistic variance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for critical artistic practice.

The importance of stylistic variance lies in the thought that the delivery of seemingly radical messages through a standardized form is a weapon of capitalism – such practice does not allow for us to be critically reflective of or critically engage in the messages behind these works when their delivery in form and content is so uniform. The seeming plurality that we see in content still conform to rigid styles – there seems on the surface to be a plurality of views and ideas but only the ones that conform to the rigid lines drawn in the sand by the culture industry survive. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote: "Anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated. Once registered as diverging from the culture industry, they belong to it as the land reformer belongs to capitalism" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 104). It seems here that Adorno and Horkheimer are suggesting that the artworks or works of art mainstream artists produce within the culture industry are controlled by the institutions and processes of the culture

industry, which determine what is or isn't art (Sharma 2006, 2).

This looks very much like a closed and cynical view of the function of the cultural industry, almost a hopeless one, where deviation from the norm is tolerably only insofar as it fits somehow into the prevailing style or narrative – as soon as a work deviates too far from the permitted styles, it is squashed and forgotten. With such a reading, it does not seem possible to resurrect art's emancipatory potential because it is almost entirely beholden to the efficient production methods instituted by capitalism. I disagree with this pessimistic reading of this essay and would argue that the authors did in fact allow for art to achieve its emancipatory potential. The influence and extent of the culture industry is indeed pervasive, but it does not extend to all aspects of culture. In other words, the culture industry does not encompass all culture, only popular Western, neoliberal capitalist culture. There are ways to see outside of our social reality, and emancipation from the culture industry is possible. As such, the art that is created outside of the capitalism, or art created within it that critically engages in style and form, may indeed have emancipatory potential if it is not dismissed as merely amusement.

**Art as Amusement**

When we read the authors' treatment of the culture industry as limited specifically to modern Western neoliberal capitalism, we can evaluate how art is used to reinforce that system. One critique that Adorno and Horkheimer articulated is that art is valued for its instrumental use value as a source of amusement. Art that is created today is done so with the goals of entertainment and distraction in mind. Espen Hammer offers a good evaluation of art's use value in his book *Adorno and the Political*:

The culture industry is corrupt not only because it prevents cultural items

from actualizing their use-value but because, in doing so, it exploits people's genuine desires in order to profit from products that, rather than satisfying those desires, reconfigure them and offer substitute forms of gratification. (Hammer 2005, 78)

The entertainment and distraction provided by the products of the culture industry do not even satisfy the genuine desires and needs of the consumer; rather, the desires are reconfigured and repackaged and averted.

One of Edward Bernays' most successful public relations campaigns was to promote the Lucky Strikes brand of cigarettes to women, and it made cigarette-smoking fashionable amongst women at the time. He had a group of young models march through New York City and called photographers and journalists to tell them that women were marching through the city to light "torches of freedom." Upon the arrival of the press, the women lit the Lucky Strikes cigarettes in front of the journalists and photographers, and the New York Times (1 April 1929) printed the story, "Group of Girls Puff at Cigarettes as a Gesture of Freedom." The commodified smoking of cigarettes became equated with the women's rights movement, and as women's rights became more widely accepted, so did the smoking of cigarettes for women. Bernays' move can be seen as a successful subversion or redirection of the desire for women's rights into the purchase of commodified goods.[6]

The work of popular art in the culture industry is that of amusement, pacification, and repression. The perniciousness of popular art goes even deeper than simply that, though. Despite the base and unfulfilling nature of popular art, it still suggests at or hints at some higher gratification or even negation that cannot actually occur. "The culture industry is corrupt," write Adorno and Horkheimer, "not as a sink of iniquity but as the

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[6] Adam Curtis' documentary, *The Century of the Self*, characterizes this campaign pretty well.

cathedral of higher gratification" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 114). That is, pure amusement for its own sake cannot be permitted in the culture industry because it is considered "naive" – the entertainment of the culture industry must scoff at unbridled amusement and hint at something higher. The culture industry promotes some kind of 'elevated' amusement that hints at negation or critique but does not actually allow for it. Here, it seems that the culture industry reduces the role of art to that of simple amusement and gratification, yet it perversely makes it so that we cannot enjoy art simply as amusement. Popular art's attempt to present itself as 'higher gratification' makes it so that it not only does not satisfy our need for amusement but also diverts our need for a critical culture.

The result of this reaching for elevated meaning in popular art is the elevation of amusement itself, above all other values, as the ideal to strive towards in the culture industry. Art's value becomes equated with the amusement, and subsequent pacification, that it can provide. Art's value is reduced two functions: amusement, and catharsis.[7] The thought is that art's value in the culture industry is in its value as something that mitigates our desire for critique. This is also how amusement becomes a means by which the culture industry can control the masses – art acts as a cathartic release for our emotions and our experiences of suffering, or source of vulgar amusement to distract and pacify the consumers. An example of art's place in catharsis and pacification exists in how Aristotle characterized his tragedies. For Aristotle, the tragedy was supposed to allow us to experience intense emotion in the controlled atmosphere of the theater so that the populace could resume their lives as good citizens and members of the polus. Aristotelian

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[7] Dramatic catharsis is "a therapeutic purgation, relieving oppressive emotions by arousing and expelling them" (Aristotle 1997, 11).

tragedy was not supposed to make us feel out of place but was supposed to affirm the citizens' place in society.

Furthermore, art that is created as amusement, instead of showing us possibilities beyond our mundane reality, becomes identical and identified with reality. The art that is created through the culture industry reinforces the existing capitalist paradigm by depicting our realities as natural and unquestionable. The argument is that the cultural products that are presented to us through the culture industry unreflectively reflect the reality in which we live thus preventing any kind of critical analysis. That popular art that is created is pacifying and provides relief from the stresses of modern capitalist life without offering any kind of reflection on the capitalist reality in which it exists. The cathartic amusement entrenches the consumers into capitalism until they accept it as a natural reality, and the consumer uniformly accepts the narrative of the dominant culture.

**Uniformity of the Consumer**

The result of the uniformity in the culture industry and its emphasis on amusement is a uniform consumer. That is, contemporary popular culture becomes a tool for domination when the choices of the consumers are confined by capitalist production. These consumers become victims, blindly accepting the narrative of culture that is offered to them. The relationship between popular culture and the consumer is not as one-sided as the consumer being victimized totally by this pernicious system – rather, the consumers become part of what perpetuates capitalist production through expecting and even demanding uniformity in their cultural goods, rejecting media that does not fit into the capitalist narrative. The producers of culture gladly comply with the consumers' demand for uniformity, allowing both parties to achieve some kind of capitalist harmony

in which the exploited are complicit in their own exploitation.

The most egregious result of the commodification and demystification of art, in my opinion, are the effect that it has on creating individual consumers and the way it affects individual consciousnesses. The critical potential that could have existed in an auratic work of art is removed completely when a work of art becomes a reified commodity through the process of commodification removing works of art from their particular context. The removal of art from its context is achieved precisely through the mechanical reproduction of art as outlined by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1969). The power of a work of art, or what Benjamin would call its 'aura,' is removed through the process of mechanical reproduction. Subsequently, commodified art renders the individual consumer's analysis of art shallow. It weakens the consumer's critical abilities by reducing the depth of a potential consumer's analysis of any given work of art purely to surface-level expressions of 'I like it' or 'I don't like it.' The analysis of art is simplified through a standard cultural form that the art takes.

### The Untotality of the Culture Industry

There are a few reasons why Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry seems unsatisfactory to its detractors, and I wish to explore them in this section. One thought behind an objection to their characterization of modern Western capitalist culture is that it simply does not match up with how culture actually exists today. In the essay, culture is monolithic and monopolized. However, there is the thought that culture we experience today is fragmented and dispersed, that does not exist a monolithic and centralized production centers of culture like Adorno and Horkheimer believe there is – Sven

Birkerts suggests in *The Gutenberg Elegies* that, as we move into a more sophisticated multimedia age, knowledge and culture are becoming less and less centralized (Birkerts, 2006). Some believe that there is a fragmentation in meaning and a shattered faith in existing institutions, which seems contradictory to how Adorno and Horkheimer seem to want to characterize culture today. So the question is, is there really a monolithic culture industry that centrally produces culture when the way we consume and produce culture in the media age appears so dispersed?

An immediate response to this idea of fragmentation is simply that Adorno and Horkheimer disagree and do not see our age as fragmented. Perhaps the culture industry as we experience it today allows for a surface plurality, and there exist a large number of cultural products being produced for consumption from various places, but there does not exist any genuine plurality, or any real choice for the consumer. As fragmented as some aspects of modern media culture seem, the centers of production are still few, with a small number of multinational corporations controlling a large share of our cultural goods. An example of this is the production and dissemination of popular music that has remained and continues to be centralized through four big record companies.[8] The particular choices we are supposed to have are illusory, and as Espen Hammer writes:

> Adorno's claim makes explicit use of a Hegelian figure: it presupposes a notion of totality, as well as the false reconciliation or identity between the general (the system of cultural exchange or capitalism as such) and the particular (the product and its consumption) within this (false) totality (Hammer 2005, 75).

According to Adorno, this lack of genuine plurality is not just horizontal (where we

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[8] There do exist enclaves of independent record companies, but I think that were they to go head to head with multinationals, it is most likely that they will lose. Multinationals still control a very sizeable portion of the music market, and their control is sizeable enough that it does not appear that indie and underground labels can topple their monopolies anytime soon.

choose between near-identical pop hits), but also vertical – "the experience of someone attending an opera tends to be no less commodified than that of the consumer of soap-operas on the television" (Hammer 2005, 76). Here, he is making the claim that bourgeois art is no more valuable than popular art, and even at the level of 'fine art,' we do not have the kind of plurality necessary for a truly fragmented culture. In popular culture, there is no real difference between the consumption of what we call high and low art. Consuming the music of the Three Tenors is no different than consuming the music of the Backstreet Boys; even the venues in which they perform are the same. The point is that both high and low art are regulated and disseminated by the culture industry, and the production and consumption of each is no different from the other.

Though Adorno and Horkheimer paint the culture industry as daunting and monolithic, and though it may appear as if there does not exist any hope for autonomy under such a system, I think there exists room for autonomy under the culture industry, and that the totality of the culture industry is not quite as total as it appears at first glance. Espen Hammer writes: "For Adorno, the only real potential for autonomy – or rather some form of semi-autonomy – arises with the figure of the intellectual, for whom theory becomes a tool by which to maintain one's reflective distance from culture" (Hammer 2005, 81). Theory, then, is what allows us to retain our distance from the society in which we exist, which under late capitalism is comprised of the culture industry. It seems like he is saying, we can escape the culture industry so long as we allow room to explore possibilities.

**From Fordism to Post-Fordism**

One of the criticisms of Adorno and Horkheimer's characterization of the culture

industry lies in the progression of the culture industry, and the influence of capital on it. Chantal Mouffe, in her essay "Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals," argues that Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry is limited. Their belief that the capitalist mode of production has infiltrated culture does not allow them to see how the industrialization of culture and cultural forces has now changed the way that production is engaged in (Mouffe 2013b, 208). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry developed when the Fordist mode of production managed to infiltrate the field of culture.[9] Mouffe writes: "They present this evolution as a further stage in the process of commodification and of subjugation of society to the requisites of capitalist production" (Mouffe 2013b, 208). Here, she is suggesting that Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis sees only how society is commodified and subjugated through this commodification, and not how the culture industry itself has changed the modes of production Mouffe draws her analysis on the work of Paolo Virno, who argues that the culture industry played an important role in the move from Fordism to post-Fordism (Mouffe 2013b, 208).

There is something hopeful in the way that post-Fordist production is construed, and though Adorno and Horkheimer may see a possibility for critique within the Fordist view of the culture industry, Virno sees hope in the move from Fordism to post-Fordism. According to Mouffe, while Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the existence of the informal, unexpected, and unplanned spaces as remnants of the past, Virno sees such spaces as anticipatory omens of a new future (Mouffe 2013b, 208). That is, with the development of immaterial labor, such spaces have come to play an important role in opening the way for new forms of social relations. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

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[9] Fordism is the term Mouffe uses to describe the mode of production described by Adorno and Horkheimer that is characterized by industrialized and standardized forms of mass production. It is named after Henry Ford, who pioneered the assembly-line process.

claim that the new social relations signify "the end of the disciplinary regime that was exercised over bodies in enclosed spaces like school, factories and asylums" (Mouffe 2013b, 209). Instead, procedures of control are now linked to "the growth of networks," which permits more autonomous and independent forms of subjectivity (Mouffe 2013b, 209).

Mouffe suggests that this new form of relationship is not necessarily for the better. In Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of the culture industry, the precarisation of identities and subjects is a result of some Fordist mode of production; in other words, the culture industry is something that happened *to* us, and Adorno and Horkheimer's suggestions for solutions rely on achieving autonomy from the culture industry (Mouffe 2013b, 209). Virno and Mouffe, on the other hand, stress that because people under post-Fordism are not as passive as they were under Fordism, they have now become "active actors of their own precarisation" (Mouffe 2013b, 209). This results in what Mouffe calls a 'communism of capital,' where victims of the culture industry become participants and the same forces that perpetuate it.

One aspect of Mouffe's post-Fordism is that the people that live under it are not passive and instead participate in and perpetuate it. If this is true, then we can see new ways of resisting the culture industry that Adorno may not have considered. Because the people under post-Fordism are agents that participate in the culture industry (instead of being victims of the culture industry), they also comprise of the forces that create the subjectivities that exist under the culture industry. That is, people under a post-Fordist culture industry have the opportunity to remold their subjectivities, norms, and values. The possibilities that can be created under post-Fordism are not just limited to a

resistance of whatever forces that perpetuate the culture industry. Rather, those

participating in culture can actively create subjectivities and norms.

# Chapter II: Negative Aesthetics and Praxis

## Benjamin and Adorno

This chapter of the thesis is an attempt to synthesize and evaluate the positive political conceptions for art presented by Theodor Adorno throughout his writings. Included are his works *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory*, his *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (which he coauthored with Max Horkheimer), and his correspondences with Walter Benjamin. At the conclusion of his and Horkheimer's essay on the culture industry, it seems as if radical social change in the Western world is nigh impossible. Adorno saw revolutions and resistance movements of his time being miscarried and mismanaged because of what he viewed as a mistaken priority of political action over theoretical engagement (Hammer 2005, 98). The prioritization of praxis over theory is reflected well in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* in which he wrote, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx and Simon 1994, 101). Nevertheless, Adorno believed that a return to theory was not regressive – indeed, the return to theory was supposed to serve a political purpose.

To understand Adorno's conception of a positive political praxis, I will move first through his correspondences with Walter Benjamin which transpired between 1928 and 1940, ending abruptly in Benjamin's suicide while attempting to escape from the Nazis. The correspondence that I concern myself with most is the one addressed to Benjamin after his publication of the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," with which Adorno took issue (Benjamin 1969). The reason I engage with this correspondence is because Adorno's objection to Benjamin's conception of aura serves as a good prompt for how Adorno engages with artistic praxis – Benjamin believes

that art has political implications as well, but the conclusion that he comes to with respect to how to engage with art is wildly different from Adorno's. My hope is that the inclusion of this discourse will allow me to better explain Adorno's conception of autonomy, and by extension shed light on Adorno's aesthetic praxis.

Next, I will attempt to outline Adorno's formulation of negative dialectics and contrast it to the dialectical methods of Marx and Hegel that were influential at the time through his book *Negative Dialectics*. Finally, I will lay out Adorno's argument for the importance and primacy of the autonomy and sovereignty of art in *Aesthetic Theory* and tie it back to a concept of aesthetic negativity, which I believe is fundamental to understanding how Adorno conceived of artistic political praxis.

**Benjamin on Aura**

Adorno's letters to Benjamin were in response to Benjamin's publication of his essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Espen Hammer suggests that we read Adorno's letters as an immanent critique of Benjamin's work, as they take Benjamin's concepts and attempt to critique his overall work with his concepts in mind. Adorno and Benjamin ultimately disagree about the significance or importance of autonomy in particular works of art. For Adorno, the political potential of art lies in its ability to remain autonomous and sovereign.[10] Benjamin believes that under mechanical reproduction, art can no longer be autonomous like Adorno wants it to be. For Benjamin, when a work of art is valued for its uniqueness or authenticity, its value lies in its ritual

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[10] Benjamin does not believe such autonomy is possible. He writes: "When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever" (Benjamin 1969, 219).

function. "This ritualistic basis," Benjamin writes, "however remote, is still recognized as secularized ritual" (Benjamin 1969, 224). To center the political value of art in its autonomy or sovereignty would be wrong, because it is precisely the ritualization of art and denying art's sociality that Benjamin critiques with his essay. The new kinds of art that are being created under mechanical reproduction, then, must rely on something other than ritual. Adorno does not necessarily see mechanical reproduction as having escaped the trappings of ritual, nor does he believe that escaping ritual is enough for art to achieve its political potential. Whereas, for Benjamin, art's reliance on ritual or 'aura' is something that is holding it back from its full political potential, for Adorno, it is precisely its ability to stand outside of society itself that art is able to serve any political function. Espen Hammer suggests that Benjamin's emphasis on art taking on a political role is a response to the fascist aestheticization of politics – "This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (Hammer 2005, 122). Hammer believes that Benjamin is reducing art to its political function in the same way that fascists attempt to aestheticize and ritualize the political. Adorno touches on this when he talks about art's political potential lies in its autonomy and sovereignty.

In the essay "Work of Art," Benjamin is trying to identify what it is that gives works of art their unique quality, and he settles on a concept he calls 'aura.' Traditional forms of art like painting, live music, or sculpture, are entirely unique and thus have an unreproducibility about them that give them a cult quality (Benjamin 1969, 223). Benjamin calls this quality "aura" and writes that it is "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (Benjamin 1969, 222). Experiencing a work of art

with aura requires one to be in its presence, and any attempt at reproduction fails to replicate the aura of the original work. The object of art with aura is ineffable, distant, and yet present at the same time. This is contrasted with an object that is infinitely reproducible, like a photograph, where no original object to which we can attach cult value exists. Benjamin attributes the nature of auratic art to the ritual practices that sustain it, which guarantee the particular work's authenticity and authority.[11]

Benjamin believes that a work of art can have aura if it is ritually sustained. This is an interesting concept when applied to works that have been mechanically reproduced, like an Andy Warhol print. An original Andy Warhol that sits in the MoMA in New York is not qualitatively different than one you can purchase online, except the original's cult value and aura have been ritualistically maintained. Benjamin's claim is that mechanical reproduction makes it more difficult for artworks that are created through such means to maintain their auratic nature through ritual practice. According to Benjamin, in an age of mechanical reproduction, art loses its aura and cult value as a unique and privileged entity: "For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (Benjamin 1969, 224). When art's value is no longer based in ritual, it then must become based in something else. According to Benjamin, the kinds of art that will allow for art to remove itself from aura and ritual are the kinds that are mechanically reproducible, like film or photography. Benjamin postulates that when the criterion of authenticity is no longer applicable to the process of artistic production (due to mechanization of the production process), aura is no longer the basis for the work's value. "Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics" (Benjamin 1969, 224). Mechanically reproduced art

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[11] More on this, see Section 5 of Benjamin's essay.

takes on exhibition value instead of ritual value, and this is supposed to help art establish its basis on the practice of politics.[12] That is, because the production and reception of mechanically produced art is collective rather than private, "this medium challenges the predominantly *private* and *solitary* conditions for the production and reception of bourgeois autonomous art, making it eminently suitable for the transmission of political ideals in a mass society" (Hammer 2005, 125). Multiple hands may touch a piece of bourgeois art and multiple people may play a role in the production of a piece of music, but the production and reception are both limited to an elite class.

Mechanically reproduced art is created collectively and is not valued for its aura, which bourgeois art is. This can potentially lead to the blurring of the divide between 'high' and 'low' art, making all art more accessible to the masses rather than a select elite. The collective manpower required to create mechanically reproduced art also allows art to be created more democratically rather than under the solitary conditions that are employed for the creation of auratic art. Benjamin sees film as lacking the auratic aspect of fine visual arts, allowing the audience to react differently to them. He writes: "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie" (Benjamin 1969, 233). Benjamin believes that film, unlike painting, has emancipatory potential because it allows for a sharper distinction between the enjoyment and criticism of the art form. He does not think criticism is possible for conventional art, which he thinks is "uncritically enjoyed" for its possession of aura (Benjamin 1969, 233). Adorno's response to Benjamin's essay will allow us to understand how it is that art's political potential can lie in its autonomy and sovereignty.

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[12] Art on display for the masses has exhibition value.

**Aura and Autonomy**

Adorno, on the other hand, disagrees with Benjamin's conception of what function aura serves. Where Benjamin sees the use of aura as something that ritualistically reinforces the bourgeois elitism of high art, Adorno takes it in a slightly different direction. Adorno accuses Benjamin of "flatly assigning to [aura] a counterrevolutionary function" (Adorno et al. 2007, 121). Adorno writes:

> The utmost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, or something that can be consciously produced and made. (Adorno et al. 2007, 122)

Adorno thinks that autonomous art can lead to some kind of emancipation, and Benjamin's rejection of it solely on the grounds of it having aura is wrong. Espen Hammer attributes to Adorno the idea that aura is "a residue of non-intentional meaning," and can be either cultivated, through producing art, or exploited, through commodification or advertising (Hammer 2005, 126). Adorno will argue that the politicization of art does not actually help art serve its revolutionary function, and politicizing art actually does the opposite of what it intends to do.

Adorno urges Benjamin to resist reducing art to its immediate political statements, for he thinks that this will reduce its capacities for political judgment.[13] To have an idea of where Adorno is coming from, here is his prescription for Benjamin's essay: "Accordingly, what I would postulate is *more* dialectics" (Adorno et al. 2007, 124).

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[13] Adorno attributed he and Benjamin's theoretical disagreements to the influence of the work of Bertolt Brecht on Benjamin, whose emphasis on the political value of art had a big impact in how Benjamin conceived of art. Adorno writes in one of his letters: "Indeed I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us but rather, that it is my task to hold your arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters" (Adorno et al. 2007, 126).

Adorno believes that art is reduced in its capacities for judgment when its value is based on the practice of politics as Benjamin says art under mechanical reproduction should be. Adorno believes that some distance between art and the society that it exists in is necessary for art to be critical. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

> Social struggles and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structure of artworks; by contrast, the political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content. Political opinions count for little. (Adorno 1997, 232)

Artworks, because they are situated in history and are constructed by people in history, carry in their structure hints or reflections of existing class relations and social struggles. However, the artworks need not reflect particular political positions, for political ends do not inhere in the artworks like social relations do, but rather are imposed upon works as something external to them, and instead of creating more meaning, stand as obstacles to our recognizing the reality of the works of art as situated in time. Hammer elaborates on this point by saying that art, essentially, cannot address an audience directly without being trapped by a logic of "false immediacy" (Hammer 2005, 126).

A main point of contention between Benjamin and Adorno was what Adorno considered Benjamin's overestimation of the emancipatory potential of what he thought were non-auratic forms of art like film and photography. As discussed in the previous chapter on the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer do not see film and photography as forms of art that are free of the trappings of the bourgeois culture industry. Indeed, their essay very correctly pointed out the fetishization and fetish character of film and photography through what they call the "cult of stars" which is the phenomenon where film stars and supermodels develop cult followings and become ritually worshipped in popular culture and media. The culture industry essay can be considered an emphatic

rejection of Benjamin's insistence that mechanically reproduced art can be rid of aura and become emancipatory simply by its technological reproducibility (Adorno et al. 2007, 123). In other words, changing the tools which we use to create art does not itself destroy aura, for aura can be created in many different ways, and Adorno believes that Benjamin is mistaken if he thinks changing production technique alone could bring about a higher degree of political consciousness.[14]

If Benjamin's rejection of aura rests on the fact that auratic art is accepted uncritically (a point that Adorno will surely contest), then he is wrong in saying film does not possess this uncritical reception. "The laughter of the audience at a cinema … is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism," Adorno writes (Adorno et al. 2007, 123). In fact, he argues that film possesses unreflective aura to an extreme degree, and characterizes Chaplin's work (which Benjamin praises), as "out-and-out romanticization" (Adorno et al. 2007, 123). Adorno argues that mechanically produced art has the same cult-like auratic qualities of conventional forms of art, but exploits this quality for easy manipulation of the audience. Adorno rejects the emancipatory potential of film on the grounds that the medium of film is a passive one, in that when we watch films we are required to sit passively and receive information. Film and photography are entirely passive mediums, which do not leave room for participation and reflection; instead, they foster passivity in the consumer and allow for authoritarian dictation. This is why they are good mediums for delivering propaganda and political messages but also why Adorno believes that the claim that film

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[14] I do not think that Benjamin would think this, considering Nazi propaganda films existed at the time and it was very clear that film could be used for auratic and authoritarian purposes. Adorno's interpretation of Benjamin here seems uncharitable.

and photography would have emancipatory potential solely by being the medium that they are is ludicrous. Adorno rejects the idea that some forms of art may be free from aura simply because it is produced in a different way, and he also does not see how the auratic quality that exists in a work can itself make a work unable to articulate critique. He does not believe that autonomy alone renders a work of art into a taboo or fetish, and writes: "… precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and … brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made" (Adorno et al. 2007, 122). Just because film or photography have auratic qualities does not mean they cannot articulate any critique. The problem Adorno has with them, as artistic mediums, are that they appear to him to be comprised entirely of passive reception.

Another issue that Adorno has with Benjamin is one that is related to the historical relevance of the essay to which he is responding. Benjamin's essay was supposed to be a response to the fascist aestheticization of the political, as reflected in particular art movements like Futurism which massively influenced fascism.[15] Espen Hammer writes on how Adorno might be concerned with the communist politicization of the aesthetic in response to fascism:

> If fascism renders politics aesthetic by means of propagandist specularity and communism renders the aesthetic political by means of socialist-realist rhetoric, then what is the deep and ultimate difference between these two forms of cultural politics? In both cases, the artwork is potentially reduced to a means for achieving a political end." (Hammer 2005, 127)

This argument acts as a reason for Adorno to reject a politicization of the aesthetic, as with art that engages in politics directly, there is no distinguishable difference between

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[15] Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* is a work worth looking at for its role in the aestheticization of the political.

the form of political art and propaganda. Instead, Adorno argues that we should promote and cultivate art's distance from the society in which it exists. Adorno writes: "Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the works' own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence" (Adorno 1997, 6). This can be understood as a preservation of the aura, but I am reluctant to interpret it that way; Adorno believes that even art that is pointedly non-auratic is able to offer critique, and it is able to because of a concept of autonomy. Adorno conceives of autonomy as entirely different from Benjamin's aura.[16] Adorno believes that art's autonomy lies in its purposelessness, without "being for society" (Adorno 1997, 236). For Adorno, autonomous art is inherently dialectical, and can transform aura from a fetish or taboo to an explication of a state of freedom that can be consciously produced and made.

Espen Hammer points out that this concept of autonomy may seem contradictory to the idea of the culture industry, as it does not seem like art can ever exist apart from its social conditions, which, under capitalism, is characterized by a capitalist system of exchange (Hammer 2005, 134). However, he argues that Adorno's conception of autonomy is not self-contradictory precisely because it does not take art as existing outside of social structures. In fact, Adorno sees art as entirely a social fact. Adorno writes: "Art's double character – its autonomy and *fait social* – is expressed ever and again in the palpable dependencies and conflicts between the two spheres" (Adorno 1997, 229). Here it seems that the dialectical nature of art is a result of the tension between the autonomy of the work and the social realm that it occupies.

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[16] Adorno thought Schoenberg's music was non-auratic but autonomous and critical nonetheless.

**Negative Dialectics**

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno distinguishes his own theory of dialectics from that of Marx and Hegel. In his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, he writes "When I make use of the term 'dialectics' I would ask you not to think of the famous triadic scheme of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in the usual sense, as you encounter it in the most superficial account of school dialectics" (Adorno 2008, 6). Adorno implores us to discard the 'skeletal format' of dialectics that has been extracted from Hegel's dialectical model, but rather to focus on what he believes is the inner structure of the dialectical method. When the conceptual skeletal model of dialectics is discarded, what is left is the focus of the dialectical method. The focus, for him, is rather on "the way in which … the concept moves toward its opposite, the non-conceptual" (Adorno 2008, 6). Instead of the dialectical tension existing between different concepts or between material objects, Adorno sees the dialectical relationship in the tension between concepts and the objects to which they refer. Negative dialectics is a concept of dialectics that is concerned with contradiction – that is, the contradiction that exists in things themselves, contradiction *in* the concept as well as contradiction *between* concepts. The contradiction lies in the thought that any given concept is both more and less than the object to which it refers.

First, the idea that the concept is less than the object to which it refers is that the concept necessarily enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers in a way that leaves it short. Adorno writes: "If I subsume a series of characteristics … under a concept, what normally happens is that I abstract a particular characteristic from these elements, one that they have in common: and this characteristic will then be the concept, it will represent the unity of all the elements that possess this characteristic" (Adorno

1997, 232). That is, the concept is less than the object to which it refers. When you call an object 'woman' or 'tree,' you are necessarily referring to an aspect of the object, not the object's entirety. That is, "when B is defined as A, it is always also different from and more than the A" (Adorno 2008, 7). When we speak of the status of an object as 'free,' we are similarly referring only to an aspect of the object.

Second, the concept is more than the characteristic objects that are subsumed under it. Adorno explains it thusly: "If I think and speak of 'freedom,' this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution" (Adorno 2008, 7). Here, we see that freedom is above and beyond the particular states of the individuals who are 'free.' The contradictory nature of concept is that it is always simultaneously more and less than the elements included in it. Similarly, when we refer to the concept 'woman' or 'tree,' the concept is above and beyond the particular women or particular trees that fall under the category. That is, A=B, when A and B refer to concepts and the objects to which they are applied, cannot be right because it implies that A and B are identical; A=B is self-contradictory, however, because A and B are both somehow more and less than the other.

When Adorno writes about art's dialectical nature in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, he is concerned primarily with the contradiction in art. The concept of contradiction is not concerned simply with the space between two objects, but rather with the immanent contradiction in the object itself. I believe this is the key to understanding how Adorno conceived of praxis. Adorno believes that contradiction is necessary for dialectical thought, and we can see the contradiction in the structure of the concept and

the relation of the concept to the thing it stands for. This contradiction can be used to understand political praxis; a characteristic of Adorno's political thought is that society is necessarily antagonistic, and such an antagonism entails contradiction. He writes, "[An antagonistic society] not a society with contradictions or despite its contradictions, but by virtue of its contradictions" (Adorno 2008, 8-9).[17] In the example of the culture industry, "[The] profit motive which divides society and potentially tears it apart is also the factor by means of which society reproduces its own existence" (Adorno 2008, 9).

### Aesthetic Autonomy and Negativity

Adorno is wedded to the idea that the value of art lies not in its instrumental use for some other cause, but that there is something in art that is valuable apart from its instrumentalization, bearing in mind the tension caused by the instrumentalization on the autonomy of the work. To understand his positive conception of artistic political praxis, I turn to Adorno's work in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*. Christoph Menke, in his book *The Sovereignty of Art*, helps us understand the autonomy outlined in Adorno's work and elaborates on Adorno's conception of aesthetic autonomy, which I will use in this section of the chapter. According to Menke, Adorno's art can be understood in terms of its sovereignty and its autonomy (McCarthy and Menke 1999). The concept of autonomy was introduced in the previous section, and in this section, I will offer an elaboration on how it is used in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. For the purposes of this project, I do not believe I need to elaborate on the epistemic sovereignty of art to

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[17] Hegel believes that something affirmative could be discovered at the end of all negations, and Adorno postulates the opposite, that there is something negative at the end of all positive relations.

understand its place in political praxis.[18] As such, I will not be utilizing this concept and instead will focus on explaining Adorno's concept of autonomy to understand his artistic political praxis.

One reason for why art cannot be reduced to its political function is because it gains its critical value in its autonomy. Menke characterizes Adorno's autonomy of art as an aesthetic phenomenon that adheres "to its own internal logic" and has its own space alongside other spaces in the "pluralistic structure of modern reason" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, vii). In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, for art to stand in a critical relationship to the society that exists in, it must be autonomous. "Art's asociality," Adorno writes, "is the determinate negation of a determinate society" (Adorno 1997, 226). Autonomous art becomes a pure productive force that is freed from control and "keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance" (Adorno 1997, 226). The autonomy in art lies in the fact that nothing that is social about art is immediately social – even with art that attempts to promote ideology, there is always some negation of whatever message is being conveyed or whatever social order is being instituted. Menke points out that the negation that is achieved through aesthetic experience is possible because aesthetic experience does not hinge on any other forms of reason (like political reason) which cannot escape the trappings of ideology (McCarthy and Menke 1999, viii). The distinctive internal logic of aesthetic experience is demonstrated by how nonaesthetic experience takes place alongside other discourses, allowing it to have a critical perspective to these other experiences.

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[18] This concept is different from autonomy and is characterize by how aesthetic experience "does not take its place within the differentiated structure of plural reason, but rather exceeds its bounds" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, viii). Epistemic sovereignty is supposed to be the model that grants aesthetic experience absolute validity, as it disrupts nonaesthetic discourses. I do not see this as a point that we need to address to understand Adorno's view on the place of art in politics.

For Adorno, art's autonomy as well as its critical value comes from its dialectical nature. That is, art is critical when it is autonomous, and it is autonomous because it is dialectical. "The distinctiveness, the uniqueness of art," writes Menke, "is that it sets itself apart, that it separates itself off" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 3). Menke believes that, for Adorno, the critical value of art lies in it being a completely different realm of reason than other forms of reason, and in its distinctiveness and its being set apart from everything else, it draws attention to the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, or aesthetic difference.[19] According to Menke, aesthetic difference, or the distinction between the aesthetic and nonaesthetic, is aesthetic negativity (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 3). Menke writes: "What art actually is, is contradiction, rejection, negation" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 3). Adorno believes that the aesthetic is necessarily connected to the social, yet ought not be reduced to the social, for aesthetic negativity is found in the contradiction within the social and autonomous nature of the aesthetic. Adorno writes, "...art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art" (Adorno 1997, 225). Here, it seems that for art to have a critical function in society, it must stand in opposition to society. An art that goes along with society loses its opportunity to play a critical social function. So the autonomy of art, its ability to stand outside of society, allows for it to critique the society that it exists in.

Christoph Menke identifies two misconceptions of Adorno's aesthetic negativity that need to be addressed. These misconceptions either reduce art to its social function thereby neglecting its autonomy, or removing the social function from art altogether,

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[19] Aesthetic experience is something that arises out of the space in which concepts are mapped onto representative objects (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 18).

turning the work of art into a fetish object. Adorno rejects these two misconceptions by explicitly critiquing both the aestheticism that separates the aesthetic from the social, and also the reduction of the aesthetic to the social (Adorno 1997, 226). Essentially, the aesthetic is necessarily connected to the social, yet cannot be reduced to the social, and both of the misconceptions try to either remove the aesthetic from the social or reducing its function entirely to that of the social. The criticism of both positions can be understood as "outlining the basic and necessary conditions of a concept of aesthetic autonomy that any useful concept of aesthetic negativity must … satisfy" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 6). Both the misconceptions addressed by Menke take into account one aspect of the aesthetic but not the other. In the next two sections, I will outline Menke's characterization of the two big ways that Adorno's work in *Aesthetic Theory* is misunderstood. This is done in an attempt to understand how it is that aesthetic negativity can lead to an artistic political praxis.

### The Socio-Critical Misconception

The first misconception that Menke lays out is that art's value lies in its function as a critique of nonaesthetic reality (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 3). Menke calls this idea the socio-critical misconception. In this misconception, art is the critical negation of society – it brings to bear potentialities, capabilities, and insights, which can, in principle, be removed from the aesthetic and applied to the nonaesthetic. The critical negations that aesthetic negativity provides under this conception are not limited to the aesthetic sphere, but rather can be extrapolated to the nonaesthetic and function directly as a critique of society. This conception seems to entirely misunderstand how Adorno conceives of critical artistic praxis. Adorno writes: "[Art's] contribution to society is not

communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: It is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated" (Adorno 1997, 226). The socio-critical misconception is wrong because it attempts to use art as a direct articulation of social critique and in direct communication with the social reality. This misconception completely misses the requirement that Adorno set for a critical artistic praxis – that it be autonomous. The socio-critical misconception seems to reject aesthetic autonomy for a sociocritical understanding of art.

This view is unsatisfactory, according to Menke, because it "levels the difference between aesthetic and moral experience, and thus fails to grasp a defining feature of aesthetic autonomy" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 8). That is, if aesthetic critique requires autonomy, this view of negativity does not acknowledge the autonomy in art and thus fails under Adorno's model. Thinking of aesthetic negativity as only the contradiction between the social meaning of the work of art and the society in which it exists only allows the art to offer direct critique that does not move beyond the trappings of society. The charge that Adorno levels against Benjamin is that Benjamin equates aesthetic experience with a moral or political one, and that is why Adorno thinks Benjamin fails to see the true critical potential of art. Adorno thinks that what is truly critical in art "is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions" (Adorno 1997, 227). The social function that can be predicated for critical works of art is their functionlessness – artworks not being used as a means to convey particular messages allows them to be critical of the the instrumentalization of things that exist under the culture industry.

Works of art cannot exist only autonomously, however, as they also exist in society. I think Adorno sees the moral understanding of aesthetics as existing alongside one based on autonomy. Art "measures its profundity by whether or not it can, through the reconciliation that its formal law brings to contradictions, emphasize the real lack of reconciliation all the more" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 8). Menke believes that Adorno's conception of autonomy requires a different set of criteria for judgment of a work of art besides its moral value – he calls these criteria for value aesthetic pleasure (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 8). Art's ability to emphasize contradictions and our attempts at reconciling them is just as important as the aesthetic pleasure derived from its autonomy. The critical role of art is not to reflect the society in which it exists but rather to exist in a negative dialectical relationship with it. In this way, aesthetic pleasure, or art's autonomous value, is as necessary as art's moral value in the way that it offers critique in society.

Seeing the value of aesthetic pleasure is not the same as reducing art to a form of amusement or recreation. Both aesthetic pleasure and amusement require that art be somehow separated from the society in which it inhabits. The difference between aesthetic pleasure and amusement is that the former allows art to express some truth content, while the latter neutralizes it. Adorno writes: "...once artworks are entombed in the pantheon of cultural commodities, they themselves – their truth content – are also damaged" (Adorno 1997, 228). Adorno believes that works of art are usually critical in the era in which they are made, but they later become neutralized because of changed social relations. That is, the work becomes removed from the social relations around it, and that is the source of its neutralization. For art to have aesthetic pleasure, then, it must

necessarily be social – only when the work exists dialectically in a sociohistorical frame can it exhibit any truth content.[20] In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno rejects art as "recreational activity" that is done only in the "evening hours" of the working day (Adorno 1998, 182). This rejection targets the equation of aesthetic pleasure with amusement as outlined in my first chapter. This is a rejection of the lack of distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic forms of pleasure, and rejection of art solely "as a vehicle for the satisfaction of needs and desires" (Adorno 1998, 182). It is not a rejection of the detachment from object in aesthetic experience that Adorno thinks is necessary for art.

The amusement characterized here and in my first chapter is one in which one is allowed to forget human suffering or not even ever have to think about it. Art is amusement and recreation in that it becomes a distraction from the reality of our condition which, according to Adorno, good art is supposed to bring our attention to. Amusement means forgetting and not having to think about suffering; in contrast, a truly aesthetic experience brings forth suffering that is hidden from us. Thus, amusement cannot be what aesthetic pleasure is comprised of. The amusement characterized in the culture industry is based on diversion, and the pleasure derived from it is from satisfying or diverting a need or desire. Menke writes: "Adorno explains the pleasure of amusement as an 'identity,' 'imitation,' or 'repetition' experienced in a 'state of diversion'" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 11). For Adorno, true aesthetic pleasure arises out of a negative process that is directed critically toward conventional amusement. Aesthetic pleasure is supposed to bring to light the unsatisfactory nature of conventional amusement and desire-satisfaction. "The uniqueness of aesthetic enjoyment," writes

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[20] An argument against amusement is also spelled out in the first chapter of this paper.

Menke, "is based on pleasure from that which does not let itself be recognized or identified" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 12).

### The Purist Misconception

Menke characterizes the purist misconception of Adorno's aesthetic autonomy as a view that removes the social from aesthetic negativity. This misconception states that art is a place where the intensity of lived experience is increased in relation to that of nonaesthetic reality. That is, there is something about the experience of art that sets it apart from nonaesthetic reality in an incommensurable way (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 4). Essentially, it states that there exists an insurmountable divide between art and society, and the lived experience that art promises is pure only when it is indifferent to social reality (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 4). The purist misconception collapses the concept of aesthetic autonomy into that of aesthetic pleasure without taking into consideration the social aspect that is required for aesthetic negativity. "Such pleasure arises not in direct confrontation with an object, in our rationally or sensuously testing its qualities, but in our reflective recourse or return to the process of experiencing the object" (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 13). Aesthetic pleasure is what happens when we aesthetically experience an object; it is not an unmediated response or reaction to the object. Negativity, then, is the aesthetic process of experience from which we extract pleasure or displeasure. Aesthetic experience is an experiential event that may not have innate aesthetic qualities, but is transformed negatively to reflect aesthetic pleasure or displeasure.

Menke suggests that we can understand Adorno better when we realize that aesthetic negativity underlies the process of aesthetic experience (McCarthy and Menke

1999, 14). That is, negativity is not equivalent to aesthetic experience because this negativity is necessary for aesthetic experience to even happen. This formulation of aesthetic negativity satisfies a condition of aesthetic autonomy in that it is a concept entirely different from any other kinds of pleasure (moral, sensuous, etc.), and shows that the difference between aesthetic pleasure and sensuous pleasure is structural, not just gradual. Aesthetic pleasure is also not equivalent to sensuous pleasure because the pleasure of art comes from its negativity; thus, there is something different about art that makes it valuable besides its ability to please us. Adorno writes: "Even when artworks divest themselves of every atmospheric element … it is conserved in them as a negated and shunned element" (Adorno 1998, 274). That is, even when art does not serve us as something that brings us sensuous pleasure (for example art may be ugly or jarring or not pleasant to look at); it still serves a function as something that reflects the negative dialectical relationship between the realm of ideas and objects. Though one may take sensual pleasure in recognizing the beauty or desire-satisfaction of a work of art, the aesthetic pleasure that Adorno wants to say is necessary for a work to be critical is a property that is separate from it. So to enjoy a work's sensual pleasure and to enjoy its aesthetic pleasure are two separable experiences. The purist who collapses negativity into a concept of pleasure is mistaken because aesthetic negativity is more than mere pleasure; it exists in a category outside of other kinds of pleasure in that it is entirely dialectical.

Menke explains the negativity in aesthetic experience as the breakdown or failure of our attempts at understanding (McCarthy and Menke 1999, 27). When we attempt to ascribe concepts or ideas to the objects of experience (in this case, art), we are faced with a problem of representation. The object cannot represent the concept, as, because of its

negative dialectical relationship to the concept, it is both more and less than the concept. The aesthetic experience, then, arises out of this negative space between the object and the concept, neither of which are aesthetic before the tension arises. Aesthetic pleasure is achieved when we experience an object beyond understanding and are released or emancipated from this experience. In such a case, negative dialectical understanding of the aesthetic is one, which takes the aesthetic experience, without reducing it to its sociocritical function or conflating aesthetic experience with sensuous pleasure. Art is sovereign and autonomous, and in some way seems like it stands outside of our experience of social reality. This is where the first misconception of aesthetic negativity comes into play – art cannot be a critical thing that simply serves a moral pleasure because art goes beyond our sociocritical reality and can be in a privileged position.

### Political Praxis and Aesthetic Negativity

Adorno does indeed believe in the political potential of artistic praxis, and does see that art has emancipatory potential. However, he is vehemently opposed to the politicization of art, the turning of art into *merely* a political object, for doing so does not allow us to escape the reasoning that is tied up with the existing social relations. Adorno believes that reducing art to something heteronomous and entirely socially contingent, as he believes Benjamin is attempting to do, strips art of its critical power because it makes art subject to the exchange society that the culture industry functions in. Adorno writes: "Arkworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity" (Adorno 1997, 227). Adorno rejects fetishism only insofar as it is commodity fetishism that the culture industry engages in;

the fetishism that arises out of autonomy contains what he calls "the organon of truth" (Adorno 1997, 227).

According to Espen Hammer, there is a connection between the impact of art and the political questions of how universal interest is to be articulated and translated into praxis (Hammer 2005, 131). Hammer believes that art partakes in politics by withdrawing from society, allowing art to speak in a voice that "fundamentally challenges present arrangements" (Hammer 2005, 134). Adorno certainly thinks that art can offer a critique of present political arrangements, but he does not see this as a direct articulation of critique that is spelled out in the message or concepts that the artwork is supposed to try to convey. The critique is a result of the artwork's aesthetic negativity, which arises out of the tension between the work's autonomy, and the social reality in which it exists. Adorno writes, "Every authentic artwork is internally revolutionary" because he sees the political potential of art in the art object itself as it stands (Adorno 1997, 228). So long as a work of art is autonomous, it will be dialectical, and thus be able to be critical. Though Adorno sees the culture industry as something to be opposed, he does not believe that a direct critique of the existing social reality is a good way to go about it. I believe that he makes this move because he thinks that a direct critique does not allow for us to be able to shed ourselves of the lens and the line of reasoning that led to the creation of the culture industry in the first place.

Adorno makes some ambitious claims about the political implications of art. Art, even when it exists to negate the society that it inhabits, is still a mode of praxis. Hammer believes that there is a connection between art's autonomy and the "overtly political question of how universal interest is to be articulated and translated into rational, non-

violent praxis" (Hammer 2007, 131). Adorno writes that the truth content of art cannot be separated from the concept of humanity, and through negativity, art acts as images of a transformed humanity (Adorno 1997, 241). Aesthetic truth is transformative in that it allows us to see the society in which we live while maintaining an autonomous lens outside of said society. Here, it seems that Adorno is falling back into a notion of a universal humanity that can be articulated, and in light of the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics, this may appear to be very problematic. Hammer suggests that we read Adorno's claim as "making a claim to community" rather than speaking in the name of some universal humanity (Hammer 2007, 133). Although art may withdraw from the actual community in which it inhabits, it can still be seen as partaking in politics by challenging the present arrangements, something it can do only because of its distance and autonomy from said arrangements. Hammer writes: "Art needs to embody a claim to resistance that can be exercised in a space within which it is free to follow its own logic" (Hammer 2007, 138). This must occur, and when art addresses the interests of the stifled and repressed, it must do so solely as art, and not as mere documentation, propaganda, or illustration.

# Chapter III: Praxis in Hegemony

## Cultural Workers and Production

Mouffe sees Adorno and Horkheimer's project to indicate that the advent of the culture industry began the moment "the Fordist mode of production finally managed to enter into the field of culture" (Mouffe 2013a, 85). However, she believes that there is divergence in envisaging different forms of resistance, for she does not believe that the total power of capitalism is quite so totalizing. Adorno sees the space for autonomy within negative dialectical space in particular works of art, but Mouffe sees a different vision. Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry relies heavily on the way that art is produced in capitalism, with centralized production and widespread distribution. Mouffe argues that their analysis is not useful for trying to examine new modes of production that exist in our digital age (Mouffe 2013a, 86).[21] She makes the argument that Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis may not be so useful a guide to examining some new forms of production because it is based on the Fordist model (Mouffe 2013b, 207). That is, it is possible to envisage different forms of resistance and different strategies for opposition through the new forms of production that are now dominant today in the current post-Fordist mode of production (Mouffe 2013b, 207). For examples of new modes of production, Mouffe draws in Paolo Virno, who writes about how, with the advent of technology, labor is now more intellectual than physical (Mouffe 2013a, 87).[22]

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[21] The goods that we now consume are not only physical goods – the advent of digital media and the internet, and the types of goods that they produce, cannot adequately be characterized by the Fordist mode of production characterized by Adorno and Horkheimer in "The Culture Industry."

[22] More on this see last section of Chapter I: The Culture Industry.

Mouffe, in *Agonistics*, outlines some imaginative ways of envisioning the production and proliferation of capitalism today. Labor today is not tied to material goods in the same way that it was in the past – the booming tech and information industries are a testament to that. Mouffe calls this 'advanced capitalism,' and argues that the labor process in this kind of production is now performative in the same way that a performing artists' work is (Mouffe 2013a, 86). In this modern age, "the boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action, and labor have dissolved" because they are supported by homogeneous principles and criteria (Mouffe 2013a, 87). That is, these fields used to be separate in their ends and their actions, but have become more similar because of the way capitalism and globalization have changed our world. The good news is, that new ways of envisaging resistance are now opened up due to this new configuration. Mouffe states that the goal of artistic practices should be to help transform the work process by producing new subjectivities and helping us envision worlds that we did not think are possible (Mouffe 2013a, 87). Bringing to light new subjectivities includes bringing to fore identities and persons who would otherwise be forgotten under a dominant hegemonic narrative. For example, the people used by Hamas as human shields were not seen as subjects and therefore their loss was not seen as grievable. Victims of drone strikes are simply called insurgents, not allowing for them to be recognized as subjects or as people. Because the perpetuation and transformation of capitalism relies at least partially on our role in the culture industry, artistic practices can help us envision ourselves as subjects that have power to change capitalism through the powers of culture. To understand how we can change our relationship with the dominant culture of

consumerism, we must first understand how art can allow us to engage in a critical perspective.

Artistic intervention can be wielded to oppose the absolute mobilization of art by capitalism because culture plays a role in creating and transforming capitalism under post-Fordism. The objective of artistic praxis, for Mouffe, then, is to undermine the environment necessary for capitalist reproduction (Mouffe 2013a, 88). A task for those engaged in agonistic hegemonic struggle, then, is the production of new subjectivities. Mouffe believes that, considering how capitalism operates today, this task is more important than ever (Mouffe 2013b, 212). Capitalism today relies on semiotic techniques to create modes of subjectivation that are necessary for its reproduction.[23] Like Adorno and Horkheimer, she sees the new forms of exploitation in the constant creation of new needs and desire for the acquisition of goods (Mouffe 2013b, 212). Because Mouffe's goal with art is to undermine the social environment for capitalist reproduction, she believes that art can contribute to a struggle against capitalist domination only when we first understand the dynamics of democratic politics. To understand art's struggle against capitalist domination, we must first acknowledge the antagonism she sees is inherent in politics and the contingency of social orders.

### Antagonism and the Political

Mouffe makes a distinction between 'the political' and 'politics.' She writes: "'The political' refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated" (Mouffe 2013a, 2). I take this to mean that the political is defined by the antagonism that

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[23] Semiotics is the study of meaning-making and signs and symbols.

is inherent in social orders. Politics, then, is taken to be: "the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order" (Mouffe 2013a, 2). Politics are the series of contingent practices that organize human existence and are affected by the political.

Mouffe suggests that politics, which always deals with the formation of collective identity, requires the demarcation between a 'we' and a 'they' (Mouffe 2013a, 5). The problem with pluralist liberal democratic politics, for Mouffe, is that it tries to defuse "the potential antagonism that exists in human relations" (Mouffe 2013a, 6). Mouffe sees that as a problem because that involves the construction of an 'us' that does not have a corresponding 'them.' This is impossible because the antagonistic nature of 'the political' requires that there necessarily be a 'them.' How, then, can we establish an us/them distinction that is still compatible with pluralistic politics? Mouffe writes: "What liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned" (Mouffe 2013a, 7). The conflict ought not take the form of 'antagonism' but the form of 'agonism.' The difference between the two lies in the idea that the former is a struggle between enemies, whereas the latter is a struggle between adversaries. In agonistic politics, the distinction between the 'we' and the 'they' is one of adversaries rather than enemies. "This can be done," writes Mouffe, "by fostering an ensemble of institutions, practices and language games which will make it possible for conflicts to take an 'agonistic' form instead of an 'antagonistic' one" (Mouffe 2013b, 211). The difference between the two lies in the idea that the former is a struggle between enemies, whereas the latter is a struggle between adversaries. In

agonistic politics, the distinction between the 'we' and the 'they' is one of adversaries rather than enemies. Mouffe writes: "This supposes that, although they are in conflict, they nevertheless see themselves as belonging to the same political association as their opponents with whom they share a common symbolic space within which their conflict takes place" (Mouffe 2013b, 210).

This does not mean that an antagonistic relationship will necessarily end up being adversarial. That is, the us/them relationship "might become one of friend/enemy" (Mouffe 2013a, 5). The antagonism that characterizes politics need not always be a friendly adversarial one, and can often be one where we are instead actively trying to destroy our enemies. Even with agonistic politics, the adversarial way of engaging with conflict is something that should be worked for and is processual. The condition that allows for the possibility that there exist political identities is the same condition that does not allow antagonism to be eliminated from our society (Mouffe 2013a, 5). So even the formation of adversarial relationships between two opposing parties requires some form of mutual respect, or at the very least the respect that your opponent has the right to defend their ideas to the best of their abilities. I think that is the difference between antagonistic and agonistic relationships even amongst adversaries. According to this agonistic perspective, the opponent should be seen as an adversary, not an enemy. The adversary is someone 'with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of 'liberty and equality for all,' while disagreeing about their interpretation" (Mouffe 2013a, 7). Adversaries respect their opponent's rights to fight for their position, while enemies do not. Mouffe thinks this is the condition necessary for a vibrant democracy. Mouffe points out that even in a consensual democracy, there will always be

disagreement concerning the meaning of democratic values, and thus the consensus will always be a conflictual one (Mouffe 2013a, 8). The confrontation in agonistic democracy is real, according to Mouffe, but still "one that is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries" (Mouffe 2013a, 9).[24]

The problem with liberalism, for Mouffe, lies in envisaging the problems we face in a political way – her argument is that political problems are not technical issues that can be solved mechanistically via rational argumentation, but rather involve choosing between conflicting and sometimes intractable alternatives. Mouffe lays out the role that liberalism has played in our ability to think politically. The dominant tendency in liberalism is to have a rationalist and individualist view that does not allow us to adequately grasp pluralism in a social world. The liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world with a variety of perspectives, but we may never be able to adopt all of them. However, the chorus of all the perspectives together constitutes what consensus liberals see as "a harmonious ensemble" (Mouffe 2007, 2). This liberal view, which Mouffe thinks is characterized by the work of philosopher John Rawls, is wrong in Mouffe's view, because she believes they are ontologically mistaken about how politics function. This means that Mouffe disagrees with the kinds of things that they take for granted in politics, like the idea that a consensus can be reached through rational deliberation. Mouffe argues that liberal theorists fail to see that antagonism characterizes human societies, and that the achievement of a liberal consensus is not possible. That is,

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[24] A worry one might have here is that the acceptance of 'democratic procedures' might also be considered a hegemony, in that one must agree on what things can and cannot be brought into question – it might appear, for example, that questioning the procedure or disrespecting the right of one's opponents might not be permissible in the struggle that Mouffe outlined. The key to understanding this concept lies in Mouffe's emphasis on democratic practices rather than rules. That is, the rules that Mouffe lays out are more a set of practices that lead to a desired end rather than rules that must be followed in order for an end to be legitimate.

there exists conflicts where there is no rational solution: "The denial of 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension is, I have argued, what prevents liberal theory from envisaging politics in an adequate way" (Mouffe 2013a, 3). Because the liberalism of deliberative politics always seeks to find some kind of rational, mutually agreed consensus, it fails to understand the fundamental antagonistic nature of some of our political conflicts (Mouffe 2007, 2). Mouffe believes that liberal individualism also fails to account for the formation of collective identities, and in that way, it fails to understand the political, which is always dealing with the formation of 'we' (Mouffe 2013a, 4).

**Agonism and Hegemony**

Part of the reality of antagonism in politics is that every social order can be displaced by another social order. Mouffe writes: "Those practices of articulation through which a certain order is created and the meaning of social institutions fixed, we call 'hegemonic practices'" (Mouffe 2013b, 210). Every order, then, is a temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. This points to the hegemonic nature of every social order. That is, society is "the product of practices attempting at establishing order in a context of contingency" (Mouffe 2007, 2). Here, it seems that every order is the precarious and historically bound articulation of contingent practices, and every order is predicated on the exclusion of some other possibility. Because the United States is a representative democracy, it cannot possibly be a direct democracy, and trying to reconcile the two does not make sense. A consensus liberal would not be able to reconcile the two views and would have to pick one over the other, but the consensus liberal would frame the conflict in a way that does not acknowledge the irreconcilability of the two (sometimes equally valid) positions, instead couching his choice in a language of

rationality. The argument of the consensus liberal is couched in a language of rationality, where consensus can be achieved if discourse is sufficiently rational. This standpoint of universalism and rationality does not adequately acknowledge the importance of pluralism for democracy. The consensus liberal would argue for how an opposing view must clearly be rejected on the grounds that their argument is more 'rational' their opponents.' This, Mouffe would argue, is a failure to take the pluralism of democracy seriously. Mouffe writes: "… the domain of politics … is not a neutral terrain that could be insulated from the pluralism of values and where rational, universal solutions could be formulated" (Mouffe 1999, 8).

Central also to her understanding of hegemonic struggle is an agonistic conception of democracy. Agonistic struggle is "a configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured" (Mouffe 2007, 3). The struggle between opposing hegemonic projects, according to Mouffe, cannot be reconciled rationally. An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of society at any given moment and sees society as a series of precarious and pragmatic constructions that are sedimented and hegemonic. It recognizes that any hegemonic construction is still precarious in that it can be "disarticulated and transformed as the result of agonistic struggle" (Mouffe 2013b, 210). Mouffe criticizes those who ignore the contingent nature of politics and reduce politics "to a set of supposedly technical moves and neutral procedures" (Mouffe 2007, 3).

Under capitalism, the "control of souls" plays a role in governing our desires and passions (Mouffe 2013b, 212). This is why advertising plays such an important role in the perpetuation of capitalism. That is, the role that advertising plays is not simply to

promote products but to produce a world or a way of imagining the world where consumers can imagine themselves as part of an imagined community based on the particular goods that they consume (Mouffe 2013b, 212). A reason capitalism is so pervasive is that the construction of the consumer's identity is tied in to the things that they buy. Because capitalism's hegemony is maintained by mobilizing people's desires, Mouffe believes that a disarticulation through counter-hegemonic practice must include engaging with the terrain of desire and passions. The creation of new subjectivities and forms of identification, then, become fair game in agonistic counter-hegemonic struggle (Mouffe 2013b, 212).

### Public Space

Public space, for Mouffe, is envisioned as the place in which democracy can be practiced. Public space is not constituted only of tangible, physical spaces but also of the different terrains in which politics is practiced. There are different articulations of public space that exist. Mouffe's agonistic construction of public space has certain consequences. Mouffe writes: "Its main contribution is to challenge the widespread conception that, albeit in different ways, informs most visions of public space conceived as the terrain where one should aim at creating consensus" (Mouffe 2013b, 213). For theorists like Habermas, it is the place where a rational consensus can take place through deliberation. I have outlined some of the objections that Mouffe has to a consensus democracy in the previous sections. The problem for Mouffe, though, is not an empirical one but an ontological one. That is, rational consensus is a conceptual impossibility because consensus without exclusion is impossible under the agonistic model. The

obstacles to rationalist views like "the original position" or "the ideal discourse" are not merely an empirical impossibility (Mouffe 2000, 13).

Hannah Arendt is another theorist famous for her agonistic model of politics. Mouffe, however, does not believe that Arendt's model is properly agonistic, for she believes Arendt is trying to set up an 'agonism without antagonism.' Arendt, in her work, emphasizes the importance of human plurality but forgets to acknowledge that the plurality itself is the origin of antagonistic conflict. That is, there cannot possibly be a plurality without antagonism. Mouffe characterizes Arendt's conception of agonism as, "to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives" (Mouffe 2007, 4). While Arendt emphasizes plurality, community, and reciprocity of human beings, she does not acknowledge the antagonistic origin of such a plurality (Mouffe 2013b, 213). While this may seem like a good agonistic model, Mouffe thinks that this makes her view no different than that of the liberal, for it hints at intersubjective agreement underneath the supposed agonism through her use of Kant's idea of 'enlarged thought' (Mouffe 2013b, 213). Arendt, like Habermas, appears to believe that consensus emerges through the use of public space. Mouffe sees the difference between Arendt and Habermas through their different uses of rational consensus. While for Arendt, consensus emerges out of the exchange of voice and opinion (*doxa*), for Habermas it emerges through rational discourse (Mouffe 2007, 4). Mouffe believes that Arendt sees agreement or consensus as something to be achieved through persuasion and negotiation, since it emerges out of the exchange of opinion – the point is to sway your opponent's opinion to match your own. Neither of these models acknowledges the hegemonic nature that Mouffe believes characterizes every consensus.

The suggestion here is that antagonism is ineradicable. Mouffe sees her agonism as similar to Arendt's but different in some fundamental ways. While Arendt stresses the plurality and multiplicity of views, Mouffe stresses the impossibility of a final reconciliation in a way that Arendt's does not. Mouffe writes:

> Both approaches assert that under modern democratic conditions, the people cannot be envisaged as 'one.' But while in the first approach the people is seen as 'multiple,' in the second the people appears as 'divided.' It is only when division and antagonism are recognized as being ineradicable that it is possible to think in a properly political way. (Mouffe 2013a, 15)

So Mouffe thinks that people are fundamentally divided in a way that she believes Arendt does not recognize.

The problem with other models of agonism like those outlined by Connolly and Honig is that they fail to account for two dimensions that Mouffe believes are central to politics: antagonism and hegemony (Mouffe 2013a, 14). Mouffe believes that these other agonistic theories celebrate a politics of disturbance but do not recognize the other side of the struggle, which is the construction of an alternative hegemony. "It is not enough," she writes, "to unsettle the dominant procedures and to disrupt the existing arrangements in order to radicalize democracy" (Mouffe 2013a, 14). For Mouffe, because hegemony is necessarily part of the political process, any disarticulation of an existing hegemony requires the rearticulation of a new one. An agonistic politics that fails to recognize this process of rearticulation fails to account for an important part of the hegemonic process. Visualizing public spaces in an agonistic model is important for artistic practices because it allows us to envisage how such practices can contribute to the hegemonic struggle (Mouffe 2013b, 213). Artistic practices can penetrate realms of society that other forms of resistance may not be able to. For example, there are sedimented hegemonic practices

that become ingrained in the way that we view the world, and it becomes difficult to see outside of them. Mouffe sees artistic practices as being able to penetrate the realm of the social and not just the political.

Mouffe writes that it is important to be able to distinguish the social from the political, and I will attempt to do this here. She writes, "The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution" (Mouffe 2007, 3), and "the social is the realm of sedimented practices" (Mouffe 2007, 4). While the political is based on the particular acts of the institutions, the social is the set of practices that are taken for granted. When the hegemony becomes social, their origins in political institutions is taken for granted or forgotten about, and certain modes of organization become seen as a given and unquestionable. For example, under our modern nation-state style of organizing humans, some things about human nature are assumed, and the possibility for non-hierarchical or non-state centered order is not taken into consideration as possible modes of organization. The idea is that political institutions can become sedimented into social institutions when the origins of the social practice are forgotten and become seen as constitutive of the particular society.[25] She believes that the only reason neo-liberal hegemony is thought to be a natural consequence of technological progress is because its political origins have been erased through a process of sedimentation turning the actions from political to social (Mouffe 2013a, 89). "That is why," she writes, "neo-liberal practices and institutions appear as the outcome of natural processes, as a fate that we have to accept because 'there is no alternative'" (Mouffe 2013a, 89).

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[25] Such an assumption or sedimented social institution is the thought that capitalism is necessary for democracy.

Mouffe writes that the social and the political are "existentials" that are necessary for societal life – that is, societal life as we know it exists only because social and political institutions are in play (Mouffe 2007, 2). It is impossible, however, to determine what is the social and what is the political out of their particular context. The space between the social and the political is unstable, and often requires renegotiation. That is, something that is political can eventually become sedimented as social and something that was considered social can suddenly be examined for its political origins or institutions. So the social institution of heterosexual marriage, for example, can be taken apart and examined for its political origins and suddenly it becomes a political institution that is as contingent as any other. Here, we see how the social and the political are expressions of particular power relations. What we can learn from this argument is that the "natural order" at any given moment is simply the result of sedimented hegemonic practices that lack any deeper objectivity. Mouffe writes, "The practices through which an order is established as 'natural' are hegemonic practices" (Mouffe 2007, 3).[26] Here, I think, lies Mouffe's understanding of the potential of art – every hegemonic practice, she argues, can be challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disrupt the existing order to install a new hegemony. Here, it seems, the critical potential in art lies in its ability to articulate this new hegemony or, at the very least, disarticulate the environment needed to maintain the existing hegemony (Mouffe 2013a, 90).

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[26] I do not see how the social is different than the political. Just because the social is comprised of *sedimented* hegemonic practices does not mean that it is in any way functioning differently than what Mouffe calls the political. I do not know why she thinks it is important to make this distinction, which I see as merely a psychological one. Hegemonic orders do not achieve legitimacy simply through social sedimentation. Concepts and orders that are sedimented into the social to the point where we cannot see how we can live without them are just as contingent as any other, and Mouffe says so as well. I think she uses this distinction to show that some concepts are sedimented, and those are the ones that must be put into question.

In Mouffe's agonistic model, the public space is the battleground for hegemonic projects. The difference between her conception of public space and those of theorists before her like Arendt and Habermas is that there is no possibility of a final reconciliation. Further, public spaces are never singular but always plural – that is, there are always multiple public spaces. Public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured with no predetermined center, and always allow for diverse forms of articulation. The hegemony results from a specific articulation of space, and hegemonic struggle is an attempt to create different forms of articulation in public spaces. These things, Mouffe believes, are necessary to have a truly agonistic public space that can host artistic resistance.

### Critical Artistic Resistance

There exists disagreement about how resistance can be deployed in relation to established institutions. According to Mouffe, there are two possibilities for how art can behave – artists can either engage with established institutions or they can desert the existing institutions for a number of reasons. Those who call for a strategy of withdrawal argue that artistic institutions are entirely complicit with capitalism and it is no longer possible to achieve critical art within an institutional frame due to the pervasiveness of the culture industry (Mouffe 2007, 4). Under this model, cultural workers are entirely instrumentalized in a way that leaves them only able to reproduce the capitalist system that already exists. For these people, resistance must necessarily be located outside of institutions. This may seem like a pessimistic view of the place of resistance under capitalism, but there are also those who believe in the Exodus as a legitimate form of resistance for other reasons. Paolo Virno writes that, in post-Fordist society, traditional

structures of power are becoming irrelevant and will eventually fade away (Mouffe 2013a, 68). Because these structures are no longer useful, opposition within them is also no longer effective. Virno discourages collaboration with traditional political channels for that reason, and his idea is that we must construct a non-state public sphere and a democracy that is nonrepresentative and extra-parliamentary (Mouffe 2013a, 69-70).

The possibility for resistance that Mouffe is going to argue for is one of engagement. She believes that the social is revealed through a multiplicity of discursive practices. That is, the social world is constructed, and that construction is a result of a particular hegemony. Mouffe believes that society is always politically constituted, and the social is a result of sedimented political practices (Mouffe, 2012). This view highlights the idea that hegemonic confrontation is not just limited to that of traditional institutions, but also engages in civil society. This point of view discourages a politics of desertion because desertion fails to engage with the terrain in which our subjectivities are constructed. That is, because our subjectivities are constituted socially, without engaging in the social terrain, we cannot actually change the existing hegemony. A politics of desertion favors abandoning existing social institutions in favor of constructing new ones, but without disarticulating the ones that exist, there is no way that cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role in the disarticulation of hegemony. Mouffe writes: "As the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices, every order is an expression of a particular structure of power relations" (Mouffe, 2012). The domain of culture is one where hegemonic practices are built and subjectivities are constructed. Within the hegemonic approach, artistic practices are part of the contingent practices and are always political – they either reproduce a given hegemony or they challenge it.

Counter-hegemonic practices are characterized by the disarticulation of existing hegemony and the rearticulation of new social orders. Art and cultural production is, in fact, vital for the valorization of capital. To acknowledge the political dimension of artistic intervention means relinquishing the idea that to be political, we must make a total break with the existing state of affairs to create something new. A withdrawal from institutions as advocated in some conceptions of resistance like those advocated for by theorists like Paolo Virno is not a good enough strategy because it does not stop the reproduction of culture under a capitalist system.

Mouffe argues that just because the artists of today can no longer pretend to constitute an 'avant-garde' that is differentiated from and separate from existing institutions does not mean that the political role of the artist is over. Mouffe writes that artists must abandon the illusion of their privileged position (Mouffe 2007, 5). Critical artistic practices, for Mouffe, engage in the institutional terrain with the aim of fostering dissent and creating new agonistic spaces where dominant consensus is challenged as new identifications are made available. How, then, can artistic practice contribute to the questioning of the dominant hegemony? Is the objective of critical artistic practice to unveil the oppression instituted by a dominant consensus or to create a critical alternative? According to Mouffe's agonism, critical art is art that "foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate" (Mouffe 2013a, 4). It is constituted by particular practices aimed at giving voice to those silenced within a framework of an existing hegemony. Artistic practices can play a role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity, but it is through using resources, which induce emotional responses that can reach humans at an affective level (Mouffe 2013a, 98).

Mouffe believes that the power of artistic practices lie in their ability to make us feel things and thus be able to perceive things in a different way. "The point," she writes, "is not meant to deny that there is a cognitive dimension to art, but to assert that it is through the affects that it can reach the intellect" (Mouffe 2013a, 97).

To illustrate this, she points to the artist Alfredo Jaar, whose work she believes is a great example of an aesthetic of resistance (Mouffe 2013a, 94). Jaar is a 'project artist,' whose work Mouffe believes contributes to the production of counter-hegemonic practices. The way that Jaar successfully engages in this is by his method of production, which involves disarticulating an existing 'common sense,' and fostering a variety of public spaces that constitute a counter-hegemony (Mouffe 2013a, 94-95). Jaar attempts to make people question their unexamined beliefs by practices that are exemplified by his 'Questions Questions' project that involved tactics such as occupying available public spaces for a period of time to "restore the meaning of the public space, which had been erased by the control of Berlusconi" (Mouffe 2013a, 95). When asked to create an installation in a city that lacked an art exhibition building, Jaar built a faux exhibition building made of paper, helping the town to realize their need for such a space (Mouffe, 95-96). This is an example of how art contributes to our realization of a need and arousing a desire for change. The town later had Jaar design and build the exhibition hall. Jaar's example illustrates a way of engaging in institutions in a critical way, by pointing out the parts of them that are flawed, and at the same time working to rectify them. Mouffe believes that these rectifications are possible not because of art's pointing to any cognitive truth, but rather because of art's ability to impact our affects and emotions.

Mouffe believes that there are many ways of engaging with institutions and challenging the existing consensus with art, and one such way is consisted of artistic activism (Mouffe 2013a, 97). Artistic activism, or 'artivism,' puts aesthetic means at the service of political activism, and she believes that this artivism is a counter-hegemonic move against capitalist appropriation of aesthetics (Mouffe 2012). The political character of artistic activism can be understood when we see them as counter-hegemonic projects occupying the public space to disrupt the smooth image of corporate capitalism, "bringing to fore its repressive character" (Mouffe 2013a, 5). An example of this that Mouffe provides is that of the Yes Men, who pretended to be representatives of the World Trade Organization to 'correct' the image that the organization was attempting to project (Mouffe 2013a, 97). "Their aim," writes Mouffe, "is to target institutions that foster neo-liberalism at the expense of people's well-being, and they do this by assuming the identities of these institutions in order to offer correctives" (Mouffe 2013. 98). Mouffe believes that putting aesthetics in the service of activism can be seen as a counter-hegemonic move against capitalist appropriation of aesthetics.

Though Mouffe believes that art can foment agonistic contestation and contribute to the creation of new subjectivities, there are indeed limits to the power of art. For one, art is not an adequate substitute for other forms of political practices, and cannot bring about any new hegemonic order on their own. That is, new political subjectivities is only one dimension of agonistic struggle, one which agonism does successfully satisfy. Though Mouffe believes that artistic practices are important in democratic politics, she thinks it is a mistake to believe that artistic practices alone can bring about the end to

neo-liberal hegemony (Mouffe 2007, 5). That is, she thinks aesthetic resistance is only one dimension out of many for the unseating of neoliberal capitalism.

Mouffe does not believe that hegemonic critique ought to be conducted solely outside of existing institutions; rather, she advocates for different modes of intervention, and some ways of challenging the dominant consensus involve engaging with the existing institutions. Similarly, she does not believe that artistic activism is the only in which critical art can exist (Mouffe 2013a, 99). She takes issue with those who claim that artists should avoid traditional artistic institutions like museums in order to articulate a critique (Mouffe 2013a, 99). This position is clearly held by the type of radical critique that a politics of withdrawal would advocate for, and Mouffe wants to challenge the view that critique of institutions can exist only outside of them. A politics of withdrawal and an artistic practice based on it does not allow for the possibility of a counter-hegemonic struggle within the institutions themselves that can disarticulate some constitutive elements of neo-liberal hegemony (Mouffe 2013a, 99-100). Mouffe argues for a plurality of efforts in engaging in counter-hegemonic struggle; similarly, she argues for a plurality of methods for engaging in critical artistic practice. Because of this, Mouffe does not believe that 'artivism' is the only way in which we can engage in aesthetic resistance (Mouffe 2013a, 99).

Mouffe believes that even institutions like museums can provide agonistic spaces for resistance, and not every artist that displays their work in a museum is automatically recuperated by the system. Though museums may serve to perpetuate the culture industry, they are not created for that purpose, and because of that, we ought not dismiss the role that they can play in counter-hegemonic resistance against capitalism. Mouffe

speaks out against those who only recognize institutional achievements as obstacles. "What is foreclosed," she writes, "is an immanent critique of institutions, whose objective is to transform them into a terrain for contesting the hegemonic order" (Mouffe 2013, 100). Mouffe acknowledges that there is always tension within any given configuration of forces, including those of museums, and it is possible to act in a way to subvert them (Mouffe 2013, 100). Mouffe argues that "signification is always dependent on context" and "use determines meaning," and thus museums can, instead of constructing bourgeois hegemony, be used for the subversion of capitalist ideology (Mouffe 2013, 100-101). Museums and institutions do not exist simply to fulfill the immutable function of perpetuating hegemony. Museums can be envisaged as spaces for resisting the effects of commercialization on art.

Under post-Fordism, resistance against the culture industry becomes complicated, as we all perpetuate the culture industry by participating in society. We are required not only to resist something that is outside ourselves but also to resist something that we ourselves perpetuate. When we recognize this political dimension of critical practices (including artistic ones), Mouffe thinks that we will challenge the idea that "to be political means to offer a radical critique requiring a total break with the existing state of affairs" (Mouffe 2013, 104). This recognition allows us to shed ourselves of the idea that all critical gestures will be recuperated into the culture industry, because the gestures themselves have the power to change the institutions that perpetuate the culture industry. Similarly, it also allows us to rid ourselves of the thought that to be radical means to be transgressive, as the changes that we see as a result of critical artistic practices are precisely the changes *in* the institutions, and transgressing institutions is not a better way

than engaging *with* them to enact change. Mouffe's agonistics requires engagement with the key institutions of neoliberalism in order to challenge them, as organizing outside of dominant structures alone is not enough to confront the way that capitalism perpetuates itself (Mouffe 2013, 116).

# Chapter IV: Conclusions

In this project, I have looked at Theodor Adorno and Chantal Mouffe's responses to the phenomenon of the culture industry, where capitalist modes of production and economic exchange has seeped into the social world of art and culture. Both theorists are concerned with the commodification of art and culture and their instrumentalization in the service of neoliberal capitalism. Adorno and Mouffe respond to the phenomena of the culture industry in very different ways. In this concluding chapter, I will concern myself with comparing and contrasting their divergent views on how we ought to resist the pervasiveness of neoliberal capitalism and what the role of art is in this resistance. I believe that they both have insights on how to engage with capitalism through artistic praxis. It is clear that Mouffe and Adorno both see emancipatory potential in art, and sometimes their views on emancipation may appear similar. For one thing, they both see art's potential in being able to show us new possibilities and arrangements that we otherwise would be blind to under the spell of the culture industry. Adorno's negative aesthetics is supposed to show us the possibilities that exist outside of neoliberal hegemony, and so is Mouffe's critical artistic praxis. However, what it is that they consider artistic political praxis is wildly divergent from each other, and each is (in my reading) critical of the view held by the other.

Part of the reason for the divergence in Mouffe and Adorno's thinking about how to engage with the culture industry is Mouffe's introduction of a changed mode of production under what she calls post-Fordism (Mouffe 2013b, 208). I understand Adorno and Horkheimer as still considering a Fordist model of production in their formulation of the culture industry, and Mouffe expands on that with her work. Both

theorists agree that the culture industry, under Fordism and post-Fordism, has the power to perpetuate itself when it is not faced with opposition. The culture industry also has the power to absorb or co-opt movements that do not fit into the dominant narrative. However, under post-Fordism, the culture industry take on a different characteristic – because of the way that labor has changed, oppression under capitalism is no longer as straightforward as a top-down model would suggest. Rather, those who are victimized by the culture industry also in turn perpetuate and participate in it (Mouffe 2013b, 209). I think that this view drastically changes how we can conceive of what it means to resist in the culture industry, and will contribute to the differences between how Adorno and Mouffe not only conceive of resistance but also how they conceive of what the political is.

There are certain fundamental differences between how Adorno and Mouffe conceive of political space and what it is that makes something political. Adorno is concerned with the politicization of art, which is the instrumentalization of art for political ends, and believes that using art for the instrumental end of overthrowing capitalism is wrong (Adorno 1997, 6). He sees art as being inherently and internally political, and when art is instrumentalized, it loses its potential for critique (Adorno 1997, 6). The political that Adorno sees in art is a result of the aesthetic negativity that he sees in works of art that expose the cleavages in the dominant culture (or, to use Mouffe's language, the hegemonic narrative). Adorno's problem with the culture industry is its reduction of culture to a relationship of exchange and commodification (Adorno 1997, 227). He sees art as the one thing left in our culture that can be protected from this instrumentalization. The things that exist within the culture industry are

necessarily commodified and instrumentalized, even the politics that are supposed to challenge the existing order. He does not see this challenge as possible when the challengers themselves are instrumentalizing the forces around them in an effort to fight capitalism; this seems no different to him than what capitalism aims to do. The aesthetic negativity that we see in art allows us to see how art can refuse to be co-opted and allow us to see the possibilities outside of the dominant hegemony.

Mouffe, on the other hand, sees the practices that we engage in as political in themselves. She is critical of those, like Adorno, who seek to find political space outside of the dominant hegemony, for she believes that refusing to engage with the hegemony simply allows the system to perpetuate itself (Mouffe 2013, 116). Indeed, this view seems to line up even with Adorno and Horkheimer's view of the culture industry, where we explore how capitalism perpetuates itself when left on its own. How, then, can Adorno expect to challenge the culture industry by disengaging from the politicization of art when the culture industry will simply continue to perpetuate itself when left on its own? Adorno fears co-option of movements against the culture industry, and that is why he seeks to find something that can resist this co-option (Adorno et al. 2007, 124). Mouffe, however, does not share this fear, and I believe this is precisely because of the introduction of post-Fordism to her conception of the culture industry. Under post-Fordism, we become participants and agents of the culture industry. It is no longer enough to withdraw from the culture industry, as withdrawal will still allow the system of commodification to perpetuate itself – under post-Fordism, we must engage with the institutions that perpetuate the culture industry in some way or another in order to change them.

Adorno is concerned with opposing the capitalist commodification of culture, and seeks to find in art something that can exist outside of it. Because of this, he becomes concerned with particular works of art and how they manage to subvert the culture industry by existing as they are and possessing aesthetic negativity. Initially, it does not seem to make sense to me that he would be opposing the processes of capitalist reproduction without directly engaging with counter-processes that can negate capitalist reproduction. Indeed, this would be one of Mouffe's biggest criticisms of the way Adorno conceives of artistic praxis. Though Adorno focuses on the way that capitalism is produced in his essay on the culture industry, it does not appear that he adequately considers how the processes of creating art objects can contribute to the struggle against the culture industry. Mouffe's argument does allow for the consideration of artistic processes because she is not solely concerned with art as object but rather with artistic practices that either articulate or disarticulate an existing hegemony.

An interesting implication of Adorno's failure to account for the importance of processes in the creation of art is that he cannot account for the political impact of some kinds of art, such as performance art, in his conception. In the art of Ai Weiwei, for example, the production process of each work of art is just as important as the finished end product, and the process of creation in his work sets itself apart from other processes of production. Adorno would surely be able to critique Ai Weiwei's art on the grounds of aesthetic negativity, but I believe that he would fail to understand the point of the pieces such as the *Name List*, which was a list of names of elementary school students who died in a 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China.[27] This work of art, when presented as it is, is a list of names of dead children. When the process that went into making it is

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[27] See: http://aiweiwei.com/projects/5-12-citizens-investigation/remembrance/.

taken into consideration, when we consider the volunteers that signed up to call the parents of children to find their names, when we see how the state government tried to hush up the investigation, we see the political impact of the piece and its value there. Mouffe's conception of critical artistic praxis would be able to account for these processes.

I think the closest Adorno comes to directly tackling capitalist reproductive processes is in his focus on style as a way to subvert capitalist reproduction (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 99).[28] Adorno saw the subversion of style as necessary for opposing capitalist reproduction because of how capitalism utilized uniformity in style to commodify art and culture. Because capitalism uses style to inundate the critical potential of art and to reproduce itself, subverting style then becomes a way of subverting capitalist influence. Adorno concerning himself with subversion of style in the culture industry shows that he is not entirely disregarding the role that process plays in the disarticulation of the culture industry. However, this subversion of style he only sees as one aspect of resisting the culture industry, and I fail to see how the rest of his aesthetic theory even comes close to engaging with capitalism the way that he does with his and Horkheimer's comment on the critical potential of subverting style.

While Mouffe is concerned with artistic practice as only one avenue of resisting capitalism, not categorically different than all the other methods, Adorno sees art as something that can resist with a reason that no other process can possess. I think the difference here is that for Mouffe, art does not hold a special or privileged cognitive position that other forms of reason cannot possess. For Mouffe, the advantage that art

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[28] Actually, I find Mouffe's view of artistic praxis more in line with Horkheimer and Adorno's view of the culture industry.

has over other forms of resistance is that it appeals to our affects, and *that* is enough for art to inspire us to political action. Adorno, on the other hand, sees art as operating in a separate cognitive realm; one that instrumental reason cannot touch (Adorno 1997, 228). For Adorno, the value of art is that it touches on a reasoning or a way of seeing humanity that other forms of reason simply cannot. Mouffe does not discount the cognitive capability of art, nor its impact on aesthetic resistance, but she does not believe that the effectiveness of artistic resistance lies there. Mouffe's agonistic model holds that the political is affective, and tackling the affective is specifically the role she sees for artistic practices (Mouffe 2013, 54-55). She certainly does not hold the position that all art is necessarily affective, but the effectiveness of artistic resistance is in its ability to move our affects.

If we buy Mouffe's argument that the political is indeed (at least partly) affective, then there will be parts of the political that rationality cannot reach. If we see art as merely a different form of cognitive reasoning from instrumental reason, then it can be argued the impact that art can potentially have on politics is gravely limited, and we have fewer reasons for engaging in artistic political praxis. The type of reasoning that Adorno thinks art engages in, however, is precisely one that utilizes the affect. The contradiction or negation of art is supposed to stir in us a reason, which, if Menke is right, Adorno does not see as separable from affect (McCarthy and Menke 1999, viii). Thus, the reasoning that Adorno sees art engaging in is not at all analogous with instrumental rationality. This way, the cognitive capability that Adorno sees in art also tackles the affective nature of the political, and it can do so without instrumentalizing the art in the same way Mouffe's artistic practice does. Thus, it is not enough to reject

Adorno's conception of artistic praxis simply on the grounds that it requires a different set of reasoning, and our objections must rest on other grounds.

One problem that Adorno is concerned with is how art, when it is engaging with politics directly, can be co-opted by the culture industry. He bases his aesthetic theory on how art can resist this co-option and stay above the fray. Mouffe does not seem to care if movements are co-opted, as new movements that challenge the dominant hegemony will emerge. If we are indeed in a post-Fordist age, then every challenge that emerges, and is then co-opted into the culture industry, has already fundamentally changed the nature of the culture industry. Adorno would see the movements that are not resistant to co-option as having been neutralized and made ineffectual. However, institutions are not static under post-Fordism and society changes along with the things that change around it. This means that every movement or work of art that becomes co-opted by the culture industry, even though that particular work may be absorbed and commodified, still has the power to impact and change the way that society reproduces itself. Mouffe is not concerned with co-option because movements that work to *change* society actually *do*. When we choose to disengage from society and withdraw to create something outside of the existing arrangements, we are relinquishing our ability to change the arrangements that currently exist. Just because some movements become neutralized does not mean that we ought to stop strategizing new ways to change the social relations around us, and when we become concerned with preserving the purity of whatever project we are engaged in currently (whether it be artistic or political), we lose sight of the change that we can accomplish with our political work.

Though I find Mouffe's conception of artistic political praxis to be more viable than Adorno's, taking into consideration the nature of neoliberal capitalism and the culture industry today, I see some problems with how Mouffe conceives of counter-hegemony in her work. Mouffe writes that counter-hegemonic practice requires not only a disarticulation of existing forces but also a rearticulation of new order (Mouffe 2013b, 213). She provides some examples of how counter-hegemonic practices in art have successfully done this. I think, however, that Mouffe's requirement that counter-hegemonic practices must necessarily rearticulate some new order conflates two separate processes that I think would most usefully be kept separated from each other. Under this strict reading of counter-hegemony, any practice that solely seeks to disrupt or disarticulate without providing some alternative social order is not truly counter-hegemonic. Mouffe appears to conflate the two separable processes of disarticulating existing hegemonies and the rearticulating new ones. The first is what I think would be most pertinent to call 'counter-hegemonic,' whereas the second is simply the engagement in a new hegemonic project that should be considered a process separable from the former.

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