



The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

Language and Culture in Marxist Theory: 'The Culture Industry' and 'Ideological State Apparatuses'

Alfie Goodwin

S/S 2026

"Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them. And all its agents [...] are on alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind."

(Horkheimer and Adorno 100)

Horkheimer and Adorno's 'The Culture Industry' (1947) and Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970) represent two profoundly influential and important contributions to twentieth-century Marxist theory. As such, critical comparison will prove highly edifying, uncovering both points of consensus and contention between these two major works. Moreover, a comparative method will enable us to explore some of the more muted or underacknowledged aspects of these texts, insofar as viewing one text through the lens of another often illuminates submerged yet rich seams of meaning. Ultimately, then, comparison will lead to a clearer, and deeper, understanding of the contours of twentieth-century Marxist theory, enriching literary practice given the shared themes of culture, ideology, and language. Broadly speaking, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' argues that capitalist society achieves the reproduction of relations of production through ideology, which includes culture. 'The Culture Industry' also sees culture under late capitalism as performing an important ideological function, albeit while simultaneously degenerating into debased homogeneity due to the power of 'the culture industry' (94). This essay will argue that the two texts find significant common ground when it comes to culture and ideology, yet diverge radically on questions of subjecthood and language.

Both 'The Culture Industry' and 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' articulate a similar, characteristically Marxist analysis of the ideological function of culture in class society. Whereas Althusser is interested in the '*omni-historical*' (151) and thus universalises, Horkheimer and Adorno focus mostly on the specific historical dispensation of 'late capitalism' and its concomitant 'culture industry' (109, 95). In line with classic Marxist theory, both see culture as part of the 'superstructure' (Horkheimer and Adorno 106): the 'politico-legal' (Althusser 129) and ideological level of society based upon the '*infrastructure*, or economic base' (Althusser 129). Accordingly, culture is dependent on the

infrastructure and subservient to its masters, the capitalist ruling class (Althusser 129-30; Horkheimer and Adorno 96). Culture, then, is an 'Ideological State Apparatus' (Althusser 139). It functions to disseminate 'ideology' (Horkheimer and Adorno 103), which Althusser broadly defines as the imaginary representation of the individual's relation to society concocted to serve the interests of the ruling class (155, 139). This, in turn, ensures the reproduction of the labour force's 'submission to the rules of the established order' (Althusser 127), what Horkheimer and Adorno call 'the simple reproduction of mind' (100), and thereby guarantees 'the reproduction of the relations of production [...] *relations of exploitation*' (Althusser 142). Althusser regards this as ideology's, and thus culture's, ultimate purpose (131, 137), and Horkheimer and Adorno similarly see cultural ideology as propping up the crumbling infrastructure under late capitalism (131).

The specific mechanisms by which cultural ideology misrepresents people's relation to society, thereby subjugating them, is explored at length by both texts. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the 'entertainment apparatus' (111) constantly insinuates the spectator's powerlessness by parading the technological and economic superpower of the ruling class, which is implicit in high-budget films and more, and thus discourages rebellion (98, 123, 108). Furthermore, they argue that cultural products work to reify the reigning social order, whether by painting its forms in a veneer of factuality (99, 118-9) or reiterating them *ad nauseam* to construct them into a sort of ineluctable Absolute (104, 119). The individual's relation to society is thus defined by impotence and necessity, revolutionary sentiment is neutralised, and the reproduction of the relations of production is secured. Similarly, Althusser, through his concept of 'specular' 'interpellation' (167-8), argues that ideology constitutes the individual's subjecthood in such a way that it intrinsically mirrors an 'Absolute Subject' (168) to whom the subject cannot but be subjected: God, the King, the

Boss, and so on. Althusser thus elides ontological subjecthood and political subjection to similarly portray (cultural) ideology's purpose of perpetuating relations of domination (169).

The relation between subjecthood and subjection, however, is conceptualised in radically different ways by the texts in question. Whereas Althusser sees subjection to be achieved by the process of subject constitution (interpellation), Horkheimer and Adorno see subjection to be enacted through the process of subject erasure. To elaborate, Althusser sees the process of 'interpellation' as active in all ideology, ceaselessly and ritualistically constituting people's subject status, that is, people's status as 'individual, distinguishable and [...] irreplaceable' (162). Inbuilt into this constitution of subjecthood is the mirroring of an Absolute Subject, to whom one is subjected. Subjection is thus ensured through the constitution of subjecthood. In contrast, Horkheimer and Adorno see the culture industry as relentlessly undermining the sense that people are 'individual, distinguishable and [...] irreplaceable', that is, their status as subjects. The culture industry so tirelessly stereotypes that all its actors and performers 'are fungible, mere specimens. As individuals they are absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness' (117). They are indistinguishable from the society they personify (124). '[P]seudoindividuality reigns' (125), and the paradigms of the culture industry are carried over into real life as its spectators strive to conform to the model it presents for success (94, 136). People thus cease to be subjects, 'individual, distinguishable and [...] irreplaceable', and become instead mere instantiations of 'the myth of success' (106) like everybody else. The erasure of their subjecthood, their cramming into the universal mould, thus achieves their subjection. The culture industry, however, does not stop here. 'The fight is waged against an enemy who has already been defeated, the thinking subject' (120), Horkheimer and Adorno write, arguing that this process is consolidated by the industry's conspiracy against deep thought and imagination. As they note, Kant's conceptualisation of subjecthood involves the capacity for reasoning, specifically the ability to synthesise sensory

data into a system of fundamental concepts (98). The simplistic, ready-made meanings of the culture industry, however, leave no room for thought or imagination (98): the ‘spectator must need no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each reaction’ (109). The erasure of the thinking subject further helps achieve subjection to the reigning order, insofar as thoughtless, ‘dreamless art’ enables the ‘escape [...] from the last thought of resisting that reality’ (116).

However, where Althusser and Horkheimer and Adorno diverge most radically is in their approaches to language. Horkheimer and Adorno see scientific Enlightenment as having done great ‘violence’ (135) to words. They argue that, before Enlightenment, language was infused with ‘magic’ (133) insofar as word and thing were ‘indissolubly linked’ (133) in human consciousness. Enlightenment demythologized language, foregrounding the arbitrariness of words, and thus doing away ‘with the superstitious commingling of word and thing’ (133). Words thus became gutted of their experiential charge, mere abstractions, signposts towards a reality beyond themselves (133). At the same time, however, they paradoxically ‘revert[ed] to magic’ (133), inevitably re-infused and re-associated with the realities they designated (134). What Horkheimer and Adorno describe, then, is essentially a stalled dialectic: language can neither be completely abstract nor completely magical, and there is as of yet no synthesis.

Importantly, Horkheimer and Adorno lament this development insofar as it brings language closer to that of advertisement and propaganda. These tend to exploit the experientially gutted, narrowly rationalistic mode of language, adopting a ‘quasiscientific’ register (118), describing things ‘with utmost exactitude’ (119), in order to elevate their discourse ‘into the realm of facts’ (119). Similarly, the albeit fraught mystification of language is also exploited by such agents, deploying highly charged words like “‘bureaucracy” and “‘intellectuals”” for political effect (134). Horkheimer and Adorno are thus highly suspicious of any discourse which employs either of these two modalities. This

shows in their own language, which is complex, free-flowing, and poetic, designed to provoke thought and imagination.

Althusser, in contrast, employs exactly the kind of ‘quasiscientific’ diction that Horkheimer and Adorno criticise. For Althusser, science enables the transcendence of one’s subject position and thus ideology itself, ascending into the realm of objectivity (160). Accordingly, Althusser deploys ‘quasiscientific’ language and pedantic, performative meticulousness. He starts sentences with phrases like ‘[l]et us try and examine the matter methodically’ (124), or ‘[t]o put this more scientifically’ (127). Moreover, he uses an abundance of quasi-scientific jargon such as “‘derivatory” effectivity’ (130) or ‘speculary’ ‘interpellation’ (167-8). Indeed, he employs a variety of verbal figures which, in their conspicuous impenetrability, their performative severance from the realm of lived experience, deploy exactly the kind of experientially purged, rationalistic register that Horkheimer and Adorno criticise as a device to reify ideology. Latin formulations like ‘*a fortiori*’ (124), abbreviations like ‘sc.’ (126), ‘i.e.’ (127), or ‘NB’ (130), as well as the obscure jargon that I have just discussed, all abound, as though Althusser wished to depict his ideological portrayal of reality as something of an algebraic equation, a verbal computation of simple actuality, uninfected by subjectivity or lived experience and the vested interests that go along with it: verbal mathematics. Althusser’s approach to language, then, is radically different from, and opposed to, Horkheimer and Adorno’s approach, in which Althusser’s use of language is ideologically suspect, irresponsible, and dishonest.

‘The Culture Industry’ and ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, then, form a dynamic pairing. They agree on the ideological function of culture as part of the capitalist superstructure, and advance similar mechanisms by which such ideology functions. However, on the theme of subjecthood and subjection they significantly diverge, and on the theme of language even more so. As such, comparing these texts has produced a clearer knowledge of

the contours of Marxist thinking in the twentieth-century. Moreover, it has illuminated more submerged, less obvious aspects of each text, such as Althusser's approach to language or Horkheimer and Adorno's approach to the human subject. This has enriching implications for literary criticism, providing a clearer and deeper understanding of Marxist theory and its diverse perspectives on culture, ideology, and language.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971.

Horkheimer, Max, and Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford University Press, 2002.