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When Capital Met Culture

A Review of

Gunster, Shane. 2004. *Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

This is not the first attempt at a rapprochement between cultural studies and critical theory, nor is it the only recent attempt to update the analysis of the culture industry for the 21st century. In this re-examination of Adorno and Benjamin, Shane Gunster thinks that their claim about the logic and effects of commodification points to a blindspot in cultural studies. For Gunster, all that is meaningful, polysemous, pleasurable and contradictory about popular culture melts into a commodity form, a totalizing logic that capitalism imposes on “mass culture.” He makes a convincing case that the culture industry thesis is not only about cultural form, but about the role the capitalist culture industry plays in weakening human autonomy and impoverishing experience. By re-dialecticizing their critical theory, Gunster hopes to renovate the culture industry thesis and coax cultural studies and critical theory into a dialogue with one another on the commodification of culture. As cultural studies puts forth the “creative industries” thesis, such a dialogue may help us cut our conceptual losses.

In the first three chapters, Gunster pursues three objectives. First, he revisits Adorno’s cultural industry thesis to rescue it from readings that misconstrue his claims and isolate his arguments from the broader project of critical theory. The thrust of Adorno’s critique is familiar: the endless repetition of standardized objects produces restricted cognition. What is really being bought and sold, according to Gunster, are “practices of identification” (2004: 51). He goes on to describe how Adorno relies on Freud to explain how we get pleasure from the ever-same products: the structural equivalence of commodities doubles as a conduit for narcissistic projection, consumption and integration. For Gunster, the cunning of the cultural industry is not that it transmits ideology, but that reality and mass culture duplicate each other in accordance with

Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis about the paradoxes of enlightenment.

Turning to Benjamin in the second chapter, Gunster details his focus on the expression of economy in culture, his attention to the resurgence of cultural forms that circulated signs of untamed nature and how this is accompanied by the return of myth, as capitalism becomes our second nature. For Benjamin, commodities function as a "fetishized" "wish image of change within an unchanged system" (77). Waking up from capitalism's dream-sleep requires the creation of images to generate and mobilize alienation as well as the use of the "mimetic faculty" to innervate us and revive our memories. Paradoxically, mimesis has its defensive uses as well and can be oriented to the production of a consumer subjectivity. For Gunster, it is in Benjamin's account of the shift in the mode of experience from *Enfabrung* to *Erlebnis* that his cultural criticism converges with Adorno's verdict on mass culture. This sets the stage for the third chapter which mobilizes the debate between Adorno and Benjamin to produce a "dialectical theory of mass culture" (8) and to demonstrate that each can be read as "illuminating the hidden dimensions of each other's work" (269). He shows how these two minds converge and diverge on the possibilities buried within the commodity form. For Adorno, art is an absolute commodity, but autonomous aesthetic mimesis can de-fetishize the commodity and make us aware of reification. For Benjamin, dialectical images can reveal "the misinvestment of desire and hope in commodities" (135). When it comes to emancipatory potential, Benjamin favours surrealism, film and epic theatre over avant-garde art.

Gunster explores and explains British cultural studies failure to engage with the culture industry thesis in the fourth chapter. During the 1960s and 70s, Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies eschewed Adorno's pessimistic cultural diagnosis in favour of Thompsonian bottom-up history and, later, under Hall's direction, engagements with Marxist theory and French structuralism. Gunster goes on to describe how Hallian cultural studies' accomplishments—his redefinition of culture as a signifying practice, his differential unity model of society, his encoding/decoding model of communication—obscured the commodification of culture. In Gunster's assessment, *Policing the Crisis*—the canonical cultural studies book that showed how the articulation of state and media interests around the theme of mugging ushered in authoritarian populism—ignored commodification as the foundation for both conservative articulation and for the dominance of articulation as a social logic. By the late 1980s "New Times" debate, which addressed the economic shift to post-Fordism, Gunster claims that the economic was still regarded in structuralist, semiotic terms, rather than in terms of the market's restrictive logic. He even goes so far as to claim that the cultural industry thesis was "repressed" (174).

The fifth chapter examines the cultural studies shift from signification to articulation beginning with Laclau's work, followed by Hall's and Grossberg's uptake of the theory of articulation. If culture is connection, for Hall the connections are signifying and discursive, whereas for Grossberg the connections are between culture practices and an array of other social practices, structures and apparatuses. The possibility of any connection depends not only upon meaning, but on affective energy and alliances which make certain differences matter. In this approach to culture, any "totalities or unities constructed through articulation are predominantly spatial rather than temporal, historically contingent rather than teleologically determined" (226). In Gunster's view, this move from a signification framework to a spatio-social one, from hermeneutics

to postmodern materialism, opens up the analysis of the mutual determination of “reciprocal effects” to a consideration of the effects of commodification on culture (226).

In his conclusion, Gunster avoids the usual talk of merging critical theory and cultural studies by proposing an alternative strategy: deploy Adorno and Benjamin together against any tendency to dismiss critical theory as too pessimistic in its generalizations. Remembering Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image” can provide the kinetic charge we need to tear apart and redeem the “phantasmagoric veil woven by the commodity form” (129). In a capitalist democracy, we have nothing but our libidinal, somatic and cognitive chains to lose, so a “dialectical analysis of the pleasures of the culture industry” remains important (275).

Whether or not Adorno and Benjamin provide all the cultural theory we need today is another question. Doubtless, the culture industry thesis is more complex than the clichés about the culture industry thesis have made it out to be. Yet, this foray into cultural studies evades the complexity of cultural studies by limiting it to a close reading of two figures. A broader survey of British and post-British cultural studies would have discovered that Raymond Williams analyzed advertising and Meaghan Morris wrote about shopping malls and that post-CCCS cultural studies has addressed material culture, cultural production, commodification and the cultural economy. It is one thing to reread the classics of Adorno and Benjamin so that we may appreciate neglected or undervalued aspects of their often cited or neglected works. But it is another thing to reassess their relevance for understanding a variety of pressing, contemporary issues in the study of culture. Is the commodity form the key to unlocking the relation between capitalism and culture?

If our goal is to better understand economy, media culture and society, we will need to avoid commodity determinism and move into grounded analysis. The only contemporary examples of popular culture discussed in this book are advertising and *Seinfeld*. Gunster speculates that new media involve characteristics and strategies that move beyond what Adorno and Benjamin could envisage. Global visual culture, for example, is produced, promoted and distributed in an international market within and on the margins of global Hollywood (Miller et al. 2003; Badley et al. 2006). The circulation and reception of texts and images of war, terror and torture may be better understood by taking up Mirzoeff’s concept of Babylonian modernity, or Retort’s concept of military neoliberalism (Mirzoeff 2005; Retort 2005). Neither a commodity-centered nor single cultural industry-centered, approach will be adequate to understand the material and symbolic dimensions of entertainment industries that have converged with promotional culture on one hand and the military modeling, simulation and training industries on the other.

After reading this book, I am convinced that rereading Adorno and Benjamin together provides valuable insights into the history of approaches to media culture. But I would be more convinced that critical theory is “better equipped to explore the issues surrounding the commodification of culture” (Gunster 2004: 271) if commodification was linked to a rethinking of other concepts like labour, property, stratification, regulation and corporatization. Contemporary culture is embedded in a political economy that encompasses more than commodification. Cultural studies has been rightly criticized for its complicity with hip consumerism and cool capitalism

(McGuigan 2006) but, then again, critical theory has not found a way to escape commodification either (Agger 1990). Gunster objects to cultural studies' "timid relativism," but maintains dubious distinctions between real and pseudo-activity, participation, pleasure and difference (252). Whether we buy any neo-Adornian arguments about the effect of the commodity form on unconscious patterns of behaviour depends upon whether we can still accept the Freudian account of pleasure and its suppression as a universal psychological process after reading Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. We will not be coaxed into a dialogue if we believe desire can be false or if we remain enamoured by the omnipotent power of the commodity-form. Any exchange between cultural studies and critical theory must not give up on the core of cultural studies approach to culture—the conjunctural analysis of constellations of practice, structure and myriad articulations, especially the articulation of theory to practice. This requires a form of critical thought that is more open to historical circumstances than to reproducing the canon, more propelled to analyze the systematic contingencies that produce reality and subjectivity, than to engage in exegetical academic exercise.

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