

Culture Industry Today

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Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-1955-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1955-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Fabio Akcelrud Durão	
Chapter One.....	5
The Exact Sense in which the Culture Industry No Longer Exists	
Robert Hullot-Kentor	
Chapter Two	23
What Barbarism Is?	
Robert Hullot-Kentor	
Chapter Three	43
The Means of Intellectual Production and their Working Alliances:	
Towards a Culture-Industry Analysis of “The Media”	
Heinz Steinert	
Chapter Four	71
Is it Barbarous to Watch TV after Auschwitz?	
Th. W. Adorno on the Television in the 1950s	
Yoshikazu Takemine	
Chapter Five	93
The Culture Industry in Brazil	
Rodrigo Duarte	
Chapter Six	113
Adorno’s <i>Minima Moralia</i> : On Passion, Psychoanalysis	
and the Postemotional Dilemma	
Shierry Weber NicholSEN	
Chapter Seven.....	133
Love as Resistance: A Miniature after Adorno	
Gerhard Richter	

Chapter Eight.....	141
Consumption and the Culture Industry in Light of Marx's <i>Grundrisse</i> Jonathan Dettman	
Chapter Nine.....	155
Fabio Akcelrud Durão in conversation with Robert Hullot-Kentor	
About the Authors	179

INTRODUCTION

FABIO AKCELROD DURÃO

Strong concepts have a particular tendency to live double lives. In one case, their potential for bringing intelligibility to the world makes them circulate widely and in that process they acquire new signification, meanings sedimented by the use they are put to, which then may easily contradict their initial content. “Society of the spectacle” was coined by Guy Debord in a Lukácsian vein as a new and most extreme degree of reification only to be later on, through the most minimal displacements in iteration, watered down and converted into its opposite, a well-nigh festive term, as if life were a show. “Culture industry” had a somewhat different fate, as Robert Hullot-Kentor shows in his first essay in this collection, for the concept’s double meanings were developed independently of one another. The same letters refer to two utterly different, ultimately incompatible, views of the same realm: on the one hand there is the critical concept forged by Adorno and Horkheimer in the forties; on the other, the purely descriptive expression of a business branch like any other. Not to be able to view the abyss separating the two usages of the same words is barbarous, as it is not to hear what the expression hides in itself. Indeed, as one can conclude from Hullot-Kentor’s second piece in the book, the source of today’s barbarism may lie in a very specific kind of blindness and deafness in relation to the presence of the primitive in the contemporaneous. Without this absence on the horizon of our *Zeitgeist* the acts of atrocity that pervade well-informed newspapers would make much more sense and could be much more easily criticized. Hullot-Kentor’s contribution concludes by pointing out how much art can contribute to reinserting the primitive in one’s scope of vision.

Something of enhanced perception is considered in Heinz Steinert’s essay too, which, following up on his well-known and celebrated *Culture Industry*,¹ starts by differentiating the concept from the idea of the media. Steinert then proceeds to characterize the kinds of messages transmitted by the media, its addressees and professionals working in it, as well as its

¹ Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

main genres. The result is an essay that is at the same time introductory and demystifying, and which provides an incisive instance of what critical theory of the media should look like.

Yoshikazu Takemine pursues this same tact by describing and evaluating Adorno's take on television. Not only does Takemine call attention to the philosopher's substantial engagement with this new medium of mass communication of the time, but also well characterizes Adorno's dialectical approach to it. For if it is true that the rise of television heralded an unprecedented psychic domination through images, this does not mean that television could not be used against itself in order to inoculate audiences with something close to an antidote. Indeed, Takemine closes his essay with a reference to Alexander Kluge's TV program as a concrete instance of what an anti-television could appear to be – one is here miles away from the usual image of Adorno as the pessimist mandarin, the secluded aesthete averse to things popular.

Rodrigo Duarte chooses another direction of inquiry. He poses the question of whether the notion of culture industry as it was elaborated by Adorno and Horkheimer could be applied to an undeveloped country like Brazil. Relying on four basic criteria, namely, the expropriation of schematism (conceived in Kantian fashion), the consummation of a "style," the corruption of the tragic and, finally, the fetishism of cultural goods, Duarte concludes that the concept is not only "applicable to our current situation" and that this "applicability has been even enhanced in the globalized phase of monopolist capitalism," but also that its scope of validity extends to Third World countries.

It is arguable that alongside images culture industry produces the affects that are inherent to them. The manufacture of feelings leads to a subjective dilemma, inasmuch as it is buttressed by the ideology of spontaneity, the imperative to be oneself. Manipulation of sentiments coupled with an ideal of transparent inwardness generate what Shierry Weber Nicholsen terms "postemotional society." Here Nicholsen approximates Adorno's description of damaged life in *Minima Moralia* to recent research in psychoanalysis, showing a striking agreement between what the German philosopher experienced more than sixty years ago and what therapists today diagnose. The result is not only the possibility of mutual improvement, furnishing Adorno with pointed concepts and implicating psychoanalysts in the situation they describe, but of a heightened sense of truth. By implication, Gerhard Richter's essay establishes an interesting dialogue with Nicholsen's in his own reading of *Minima Moralia*. If Nicholsen characterizes a contemporary, generalized condition of affective deadlock, Richter investigates how love could be a

defence against this. Of course, he does not have in mind the culture-industrial idea, the degraded romanticism of a heterosexual and perfectly harmonious couple's unity. On the contrary, his characterization of love, and of its twin notion, that of fidelity, takes into consideration its participation in an all-encompassing system of domination; nor does Richter's text exclude the moment of truth in unfaithfulness and the breaking away of desire from constrained patterns of conviviality. In the tension of these opposing forces a faint glimpse of authenticity can be contemplated in the world of manufactured affects.

One should not think, however, that Adorno's conception of the culture industry is beyond criticism. Jonathan Dettman bases himself on Moishe Postone's assessment to emphasize the concept's limitations. The kernel of Dettman's critique lies in early critical theory's assessment of state control under monopoly capitalism as effectively replacing competition in the market, thus creating "a system of static power relations that preserves class antagonisms and inequality, yet does not itself contain contradictions that propel an inner and potentially revolutionary dynamic." From this, Dettman proceeds to examine Adorno's notion of consumption as completely administered, and while Dettman is at pains to shun the assumption, so dear to much of cultural studies, that the sphere of consumption harbours oppositional hopes, his essay does encourage the reader to reevaluate consumption as "retaining the real social content that even its subordination to capital cannot eliminate."

The book ends with an interview of Robert Hullot-Kentor by Fabio Akcelrud Durão. After discussing the concept of intelligentsia and education, the conversation moves in many directions, including the United States' incapacity to represent the common good to itself, to the American system of representation, space and mimesis, and engaged art. The careful reader will notice that there is a subtle coherence in the conversational logic of this exchange. As in each of the contributions to this volume, so in this one culture industry is perceived as not only touching on every aspect of contemporary life, often where it could hardly be imagined, but as virtually all that there is to touch.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EXACT SENSE IN WHICH THE CULTURE INDUSTRY NO LONGER EXISTS¹

ROBERT HULLOT-KENTOR

Anyone who has been studying Adorno's philosophy over the past number of decades, perhaps including years overlapping with the philosopher's own life, may have noticed that despite the many new commentaries, despite the recently available publications of his correspondence and lecture courses, Adorno's writings are becoming increasingly obscure. This is not because Adorno is now more difficult to comprehend than he once was. On the contrary, the emerging obscurity of his philosophy is reciprocal with a newfound self-evidence in the writings. For this, the ready glosses and commentaries and years of growing familiarity are at least partly responsible, and we can start summing things up easily enough: Reification is the rigid web spun over the world, isolating the universal from the particular; dialectics rends that web, potentiating the conflict of the one and the many in which the primacy of the object is manifest; relations of production are this; forces of production that; the spell, the taboo, the fetish and barbarism, they are something else again. But the motive force of these concepts, their *noeud vital*, is gone. If, some decades ago, taking *Negative Dialectics* in hand, a reader was astounded at that title's daunting purport, now, in spite of himself, that same reader no longer distinctly sees how laying claim to the *negative* ever appeared to risk everything and confront all. Concepts that once spoke worlds for themselves, now stand mute in sight of the world. No doubt, one can put one's shoulder to the historical weight that is heavily ballasted in the flywheel of any one of them and, shoving, bring that concept around once, but "subjectivity," for instance, will not on its own bring itself around again. "Agency," not "subjectivity," is now the self-revolving

¹ An earlier version of this essay, "In Exactly What Sense the Culture Industry No Longer Exists," was published in *Cultural Critique*, Fall, 2008, vol.7.

topic. Plainly, it is not a matter of our individual volition which ideas are bindingly thinkable and which are not. But if it is not for us to decide, as an act of will or logical acuity, which concepts draw the world into themselves as into a vortex and which suddenly eddy back out again, slackly dispersing their phenomena, we can sometimes understand aspects of the moment in which this reversal occurs. Comprehending something of this event will figure in this discussion, but only by way of posing the overarching question of how the central concepts of Adorno's thinking have lost their grip on the historical moment. And, while, as is to be seen, it is possible to recover their *noeud vital* and state it, doing so will not reanimate the philosophy. On the contrary, it will reveal an almost intolerable point of dispute between the standpoint of thought today and the content of Adorno's philosophy, even while we recognize that this philosophy itself is of increasingly urgent interest and importance.

Boom Town Revenant

The *culture industry* is one of Adorno's concepts whose ghost for certain is gone. But it is also the concept whose paradoxical existence, when examined, provides unrivalled insight into the contemporary fate of the whole of his work. The potentially illuminating paradox is this: While the idea of the *culture industry* shares in the evident exhaustion of Adorno's central concepts; while there is no doubt that its ghost is gone; this concept all the same lives a vigorous afterlife, fully indifferent to the fact of its decease long ago. Unlike any other concept in the whole of Adorno's oeuvre, the term, the *culture industry*, is quoted omnipresently in the full-throated convictions of our age. If, today, anyone who intends to be alert, word by word, to the difference between what bears speaking about and what does not, would hesitate to draw a fresh breath to launch into a critique, for instance, of the depredations of reification, no one hesitates to hold forth *ad libitum* on the *culture industry*. This could be documented by presenting the statistical frequency of the term's citation in scholarly journals and even in the newspapers of major cities. But the ambitious tenacity of this concept's grip on existence is better demonstrated in a single quotation. It is excerpted from a Chinese government publication prepared in 2007 for the World Trade Organization. In its very own words, the article concerns the state of the *culture industry* in China: "China has witnessed a booming development of its *culture industry* since the 1990s. [...] However, the *culture industry*

in China is still very laggard if compared with that in developed countries.”²

The article goes on to deplore the continuing backwardness of the Chinese *culture industry*, then marshals graphs and statistics to assure the waiting world of finance that this deficiency, this “very laggard” culture industry, has long been in a process of considerable acceleration.

Homophony and Spontaneous Generation

Since the reason for quoting a Chinese publication on that nation’s *culture industry* is to document the term’s self-confident omnipresence, there is no stopping here to delve into this Chinese concept’s hermeneutics. No one doubts what the *culture industry* means or what is assembled under its apostrophe. The concept is a dependably interchangeable worldwide Esperanto. By absolute contrast, however – and now the paradoxical existence of Adorno’s concept of the *culture industry* comes into focus – the word that is *not* in anyone’s head, the word that cannot possibly be pronounced with the expectation of it being spontaneously reciprocated with comprehension of what it once meant is Adorno and Horkheimer’s homophonous trouvaille in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* more than fifty years ago. An accurately contemporary American dictionary would mark *their* catchword, *that* culture industry, *obsolete*. And although the dictionary entry would affirm that the terms are historically enmeshed, that they share the embedded perceptions of a single historical dynamic, a responsibly complete entry would take pains to deny the easy presumption that the homophony of the German philosophers’ term *culture industry* with our contemporary vernacular vouches for a single historical development of one concept. For in spite of the much-known fact that it was Adorno and Horkheimer who coined the expression, the contemporary sound-alike term did not come into this world as spawn of a German first that then adapted to current purposes through etymological evolution. On the contrary, it owes its existence to an entirely independent act of spontaneous generation. It is progeny of that piling up and compression of commercial entities from under the mass of which, one day, some decades ago, a great multitude of concepts began scurrying out, fully mature. We now take a moment to acknowledge this multitude, and not one by one, but sparsely instantiated in the likes of: the *hospitality industry*, the *education industry*, the *environmental industry*,

² “China and the WTO,” http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_focus/node_322.htm. Emphasis added.

and the *housing industry*. These industrial appellations – of which the *culture industry* is just one frank derivative – exist in mutually confirming aggregate with other multitudes of such met phrases and dependably pseudo organics as: the “family tree of industries,” “a family of electronic devices,” “corporate culture,” “the business community,” and “the banking community.”

Syllabic Ear Training I

This ideological weave of phrases is now so densely worked and imperviously matted that it obstructs any remnant of what Adorno’s term, the *culture industry*, once meant. But just in coming up against this impasse for the first time, there is a chance to notice something of the fate of the whole of Adorno’s thinking, for he would have been able to name this heavy weave a “net” (*Netz*) or, alternately, “a web of delusion” (*Verblendungszusammenhang*), whereas, obviously, we cannot. The concepts of “net” and “web” in which Adorno sought to capture self-consciously the totality of mediation, were instead themselves finally captured by the fact of all-encompassing mediation in which their self-reflection was effaced. In penalty for having touched directly on the truth, critical thought was metamorphosed into what it struggled to oppose. Repeatedly, understanding Adorno’s philosophy requires finding ways to demonstrate how each concept has been compelled to echo functions of socially necessary illusion. The alternative approach to his work, the analytical explication of the concepts of his philosophy, by contrast, is powerless against this process; in its obliviousness, as it waltzes off with half-dead concepts to gesture authoritatively, it necessarily consolidates this process. Only where ways can be fashioned to make visible how Adorno concepts now serve to barricade themselves against their own meaning, can it be understood why his work is today as urgently unalive as it is urgently alive.

In the instance of the *culture industry*, our linguistic auscultation requires pressing one step closer to the words themselves. But this requisite step is beyond our power; we can only pretend at what must be accomplished. For this purpose, we choose a linguistic conveyance, a common mix of objective correlative and bombast to set into relief what must once have been at stake in 1947, the publication date of the coinage of the term, *Kulturindustrie*. With that agglutination in mind, half-speak while reading: Shakespeare’s *cold fire*, Donne’s *miserable abundance*, Hugo’s *dwarf giants*, Quevedo’s *fleeting permanence*, Spencer’s *pleasing pain*, Beethoven’s *piano forte*, Baudelaire’s *soleil noir*, Caravaggio’s

chiaroscuro – room here for Nabokov’s *pale fire* – and then, again, Adorno’s *Kulturindustrie*.

Syllabic Ear Training II

What is there to perceive in this incantation of days gone by? Only a lizard-like fragment of a second to regard coolly the possible remembrance of forgetting. Under the accumulated crosswise momentum of every just cited *soleil noir*, our contemporary frictionless vernacular, the *culture industry* – an undergraduate topic available for three credits at any major university – was to snap in half, into culture and industry. And, then, in the pronouncement of Adorno’s long-ago “*Kulturindustrie*” these splintered parts were to be compelled to reassemble, but visibly marked by the splinteredness that was theirs in the first place. Thus, the “*culture industry*” might begin to divulge the first traces of its epigrammatical pulse: for it is a coerced unity of the uncombinable, an abrasive sparking of concept against concept – their electrical charges spun around positive to positive and jammed tight – a mutually rebarbative grinding of *culture* and *industry*, colliding while compressed at loggerheads.

This archaeological contrivance has provided a first perception of what transpires in Adorno’s self-antagonistic concept of the *culture industry*. Adorno himself, of course, never needed to trick out his concept’s self-antagonistic content, as we just have; he heard perfectly well what it was about and could not possibly, not once, have heard it as we exclusively hear it now. Neither, incidentally, would he have been subject to the strangest aspect of the entire cohort of concepts in which the contemporary *culture industry* travels. For even though the *hospital industry*, the *music industry*, let alone the *home office*, are among the most caustic expressions of the words of our tribe, they engage our perceptions exclusively as neutral fact. Adorno, by absolute contrast, would have heard these acrid phrases for what they are. It makes sense, then, that if we more exactly perceived something of what Adorno sensed in his concept of the *culture industry*; if we were thus prompted to acquire something akin to his auditory discernment among concepts, our perceptual aphasia for their content would be breeched. We would possess the rudiments of a spontaneous, contemporary *social physiognomy* in which the whole of our snap-together, commercial nomenclature would insist on the distinctiveness of its voice being sensed in a way that Adorno himself might have heard it.

The One Appetite of Commercial Reason

With this as an intention, it is possible to elucidate more closely the antagonism in Adorno's idea of the culture industry by considering the agglutinated concepts individually, all the while alert that our concentration will only tolerate summary and formulaic presentations. Fortunately, in the instance of *culture*, there is in fact no alternative to being succinct. For, according to Adorno, when *culture* is *culture* – which is the exception by far, since *culture* is overwhelmingly its own opposite – there is hardly anything to say about it that would not amount to something like: “Lovely sunset,” or “Beethoven's 109th is my favourite,” and thus pitch in with all of culture that is not that. But it can at least be said of *culture* that it potentially arises out of the capacity to suspend narrow purpose and constitute the only aspect of the idea of freedom that is not an abstraction. *Culture* may be “trash” – as Adorno once wrote – and nothing more than the rationalization of inhibition, but – as he also wrote – it is no less the idea of reconciliation. *Industry*, by contrast, the epitome of the modern force of production, which could itself be a power of culture as the capacity to assuage scarcity and suffering, is, in the imperative of its seventeenth century concept of systematic labour, limited systematically to the exclusion of all but narrow purpose. This rationality is the intellectualization of self-preservation. It is structured so that in addition to the manufacture of its cornucopia it must, to survive, simultaneously produce scarcity in consistently equal or greater measure. The old saw of the crisis of overproduction, the analysis of the tendency of prices to decline and ultimately to jeopardize industry's cash flow, once sought to make capitalism's cyclical, compulsory potlatches comprehensible. And the old saw still holds true, though it has been amended by the acceleration of the process of rationalization that it embodies. Computerized systems of distribution have made corporations logistical devices for dominating consumption; single companies have installed themselves as the social appetite's sole gatekeeper at every turn and in all regions. With this tactical leverage, the logistically based corporation has been able to disaggregate manufacture from its own internal structure and turn the whole of its powers against what was once its own supplies of labour and raw material, sources to which it no longer has any social responsibility whatsoever. Dispossession is now the fiercest form of possession. This development is a process of increasing corporate rationality. It is a heightened capacity to use every element of the material within the range of its system as efficiently as possible and to rid the system of all redundancy in the extraction of wealth. *Externally* to the corporation, this

rationality disintegrates markets and societies worldwide. *Internally* to the corporation, rationalization has eaten away and dissolved the corporation's own rationality. Holding sentinel guard over the appetites of the populous mouth, on one side, and responding to the demand of shareholders for maximized profits, on the other; having sloughed off the civilizing commitments to labour and region; having dismissed their own internal structure of middle management and product development, the dominant corporations, which in the twentieth century became the sinew and structure of the nation, have contracted to the blind devices of self-preservation. The lead economic institutions have become compact gangs and rackets for carving out profits. Planning has not only been reduced. It is actively rejected as interfering with the ability to seek risk, those points of perceived greatest vulnerability in an object in which the highest profits are potentially located. According to the business critic, Barry C. Lynn, the corporation as such has thus forfeited the capacity to "think comprehensively" and is now "unguided by any internal rational authority."³ If the United States feels far out to sea, for sure no one is steering; the country cannot locate its mind; it has excluded those rudimentary centres of cognition that could wake it up to what it is.

At a time when the (corporate) system itself is far more complex than ever before, and at a time when it faces threats unlike any it has ever faced, it would seem that we have placed it all under the control of our own stomach.⁴

The country is directed "more and more by some sort of pure desire, some sort of pure appetite."⁵ This is a desire and an appetite for survival as if no other impulse could be sensed. "Global" – however the word is conjured up, and in whatever combination – now means survival at the price of nothing less than the whole. Here, being what is bigger is the only conceivable, only acknowledgeable intention.

Exactly What It Is

In this study concerned with the exact sense in which the culture industry no longer exists, it should be noticed that the question is not being approached through movie land, web space or voiced concerns about TV and industrial entertainment. Instead, the problem has been engaged by

³ Barry C. Lynn, *End of the Line* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), pp.129-260, esp. p. 210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*

elucidating the elements of Adorno's own concept. Archaeological means have been required for this and the results are so far crude: if *culture*, when it is culture, is what potentially goes beyond self-preservation; and if *industry*, meaning considerably more than a device of manufacture, is what reduces this potential to the task of survival, then the *culture industry* – as the production of culture by industry – is the reduction of all that does and could go beyond self-preservation to nothing more than life lived in the violent struggle for survival. **The manufacture of culture as the production of barbarism is the culture industry.** This is the internal dynamic of the coerced unity of the uncombinable that Adorno objectified in the self-antagonistic concept of the *culture industry*. Here the modern is the cipher of the archaic insofar as culture, in its industrial transformation, becomes a permeating force of social regression. And while the condition of American English now makes it difficult to guess at a moment when any noun could not casually be combined with *industry*, it took two world wars to bring these words into combinatorial proximity. On its own first day, the glitter of the word-formation, *culture industry* sparkled flat against camouflage khakis. It was this, the locution's categorically *primitive* quality as produced by the modern itself that must have startled Adorno with the historical exactitude of his trouvaille. Every word he wrote about the *culture industry* was drawn into the cognition of this dynamic of primitivization interior to the concept.

Vestigial Physiognomy and Lapsed Imperative

Experiment now with an apparent non-entity of a phrase, selected from a catalogue of higher education for the compact agility with which, in its own split second, it promulgates its confident self-evidence: "Florida State University, Dedman School of Hospitality and Tourism," assures its students "of a career in Florida's number one industry."⁶ And if in reading this phrase, the effort at discerning the internal dynamic of the *culture industry* has begun to cause these collegiate words of the tribe even slightly to stutter and speak off the page, half in their own voice, motioning stiffly with inflexible lips, this is not ventriloquism. The distinctiveness of the vocables is real; here, in abrupt quotation, concept engulfs landscape – human and seaside – with unconscious ferocity. What Adorno himself would have perceived in our otherwise numb-to-us vernacular – in that aggregate characterized, for instance, by the

⁶ *General Bulletin*, Dedman School of Hospitality, College of Business, 2006-2007, Florida State University, p. 281.

hospitality industry – has perhaps thus become evident to us as well: these are stances of barbarization; actual powers of the primitivization of life by the forces of progress itself; rationality as reason's own antagonist; in the instance of the Dedman School, we perceive the university itself as an established device of stupidification and catastrophe – culture as what is altogether its contrary.

A *social physiognomy* of culture industry lingo could begin at this point to illuminate broad swaths of its phrasings under the constellation of the key ideas of Adorno's philosophy: the spell, the taboo, the ban, his concept of natural history, regression, and magic – each of which wants to reveal the modern itself as the force of the primitive. This study would begin to fulfil the categorical imperative of Adorno's thinking as he stated it in his "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," where he writes that the "sole adequate praxis would be to put all energies toward working our way out of barbarism."⁷ But exactly here, in considering Adorno's maxim, we call a halt. There is no sense deceiving ourselves. We are not about to undertake any struggle to overcome barbarism, not in a social physiognomy of culture industry lingo and not in any other way either. The categorical imperative of Adorno's thinking is not ours. On the contrary, the invocation of his maxim presents an index of our disinterest in the critical content of his work.

Velocity of Aversive Disinterest

The "barbaric" – an appellation alternating in various contexts in Adorno's writings with the "primitive" and the "archaic" – became a matter of aversive disinterest to us not because its reality vanished from world history, leaving its scattered vocables behind as an irritatingly vacant shells. For even if we knew nothing about the contemporary structure of the American economy, it is clear – as Hobsbawm has written – that when the First World War came to an end, barbarism itself only accelerated. To gauge its velocity by a series of markers, compare the outrage at what for us would be the minor injustice of the Dreyfus case; consider that Clauswitz assumed that in warfare armed forces fought to disable the opposing forces and did not murder prisoners, devastate the citizenry, or summarily demolish a nation; note the magnitudes of death and sacrifice to which governments drove their enlisted men at Ypres and

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 268.

Verdun, for example, and notice as well the emergence of slogans such as “better dead than red” that, as an end justifying any means, has successfully helped prepare society as a whole for its annihilation. If there was ever a movement to rid the world of catastrophic nuclear weaponry, what evidence of that movement now remains? Both in the centre and at the periphery of the developed world, Hobsbawm writes, “unspeakable things are done by people who no longer have social guides to action.”⁸ And if in the United States – which has yet to realize the degree to which it is a morally devastated nation – a fully discredited administration now faces a majority opposition, there is still no saying whether this country, which on its law books now grants margin to torture as well as to spying on its citizenry, will somehow withdraw from its commitment to a growing world unanimity in the conviction that “barbarism is more effective than civilization.”⁹ “How could it?” it might be asked given the international collapse of political order, the unravelling of the state monopoly on violence, and the dissolution of coherent frameworks of social relations. It must be, then, that our apparently spontaneous antipathy to the censure of the barbaric is an aspect of the dissolution of these frameworks of social relations. The process of barbarization itself has consumed the capacity for its own differentiation and jettisoned the idea when it was done with it.

“I too am against everything”

In this context, an essay that Adorno wrote in the nineteen fifties and presented as a lecture – “The Concept of Philosophy” – is invaluable, for it indicates a fundamental transformation in historical experience that reveals deeper layers of what has essentially gone missing for us in Adorno’s thinking. He presents this transformation as the *seminal idea of Western thought* that *infinitely* expanded the horizon of knowledge. This insight, to which he owed the sum total of the perceptions of his philosophy, was as much waiting for him in the thinking of his own day as it is no longer waiting for anyone now. And if this insight will at first be recognizable, perhaps with some disappointment, as having already been touched on, it involves an aspect and expanse of thinking that would be hard for us to guess at:

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Barbarism: A User’s Guide,” in *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 253-65, especially p. 264.

⁹ Ibid.

The horizon of knowledge has been *infinitely* expanded; layers have come into our field of vision that were hidden. To understand the *archaic in us and in reality*, this was the *definitive step* that Western thought made.¹⁰

Adorno did not in his essay go on to document the historical preparation for what he considered this definitive step in Western thought or to provide any detail of what was to be found on this new horizon – it was self-evident in the moment and context of his lecture, now a half century past.¹¹ But the contours of what Adorno then perceived as so prodigious can be reconstructed from the first sentences of *Aesthetic Theory*. There Adorno wrote of this same expanse as the “sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out.” This sea was drawn to its vanishing point at every degree of its encompassment exclusively on the horizon of the perception of the primitive in us and in reality.¹² This is what Adorno saw as the fundamental occurrence, for instance, in Picasso’s *Demoiselles* and in his African-inspired works of 1907-10; in the likes of Mary Wigman’s “Witch Dance” (1914); and in the stark glare of prehistory in every line of Kafka. In their familiarity to us these works present the best occasion to observe the mimetic spark of recognition that once shot across between what, on one hand, was already abstract in tribal totemic masks and fetishes and, on the other, the dynamic of abstraction that was transpiring in the societal material itself. Here is the exact occasion of the gesture of that spark in demonstratively slow motion as Picasso once glanced from the African and Polynesian fetishes across to “everything”:

I kept looking at the fetishes. I understood: I too am against everything. I too think that everything is unknown, is the enemy! Everything! Not just the details – women, children, animals, tobacco, playing – but everything!¹³

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Begriff der Philosophie,” in *Frankfurter Adorno Blaetter* II, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main Text/Kritik, 1992), p. 52. Emphases added.

¹¹ See, for instance, the article “Civilization” in the much reputed 11th Edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), which importantly parallels Adorno’s observation of the transformation of the idea of the primitive in its discussion of the “*the most radical metamorphosis of mental view that has taken place in the entire course of the historical period*” (www.1911encyclopedia.org/Civilization).

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 3.

¹³ Pablo Picasso quoted by André Malraux in *La Tete d’obsidienne*, now in Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 33.

Thus Picasso on an afternoon in 1907 at the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography. He himself had no ethnographic interest or curiosity whatsoever in the African sculptures he would come to collect.¹⁴ Art did not become modern art in scholarship of the primitive but by appropriating it as a power for the rejection of the sensuous in order to achieve a formal capacity to direct the violence of life back against its own violence.¹⁵ Sedimented in this formal achievement was the decisive element in modernism as the unfolding of an absolute depth of field in the profundity of the historical consciousness of the West. This defined the course of progress as modern progress. The desideratum of the *utterly new*, in a degree and quality never before conceivable but in a way that office buildings could spring fully imagined from Mondrian's canvases, originated in the awakening perception of the primitive – not in the establishment of a futuristic high-ground that threw the archaic into deep perspective. And when Cézanne said modestly of himself, “I remain the primitive of the way I discovered,” that self-protective modesty concealed the intention and resource of painting what had never been painted before.¹⁶

For Adorno, then, the perception of the primitive *in us* was momentous to the degree that it condensed in itself the entire critical consciousness of the West. Adorno pursued this one insight in every sentence he wrote in seeking to show that the domination of nature is the reproduction of the primitive, that only in comprehending this could domination surrender its violence and be reconciled with the primitive – the act in which progress would for once become progress. Adorno sought to render this insight irresistibly perspicacious in the conviction that comprehending it would make the difference between the survival and the self-destruction of humanity and the habitable world altogether.

Sum Total of Insight Interdicted

If, however, out of interest in this thinking, in wanting somehow to make good on it, we turned to regard this philosophy on the horizon against which it was conceived, we will be brought up short. That

¹⁴ Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 41-2.

¹⁵ Wallace Stevens, “The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words,” in *Collected Poems and Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 665.

¹⁶ Michael Doran, *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 73. See also, for instance, p. 86.

infinitely expanded horizon of insight into the primitive in us and in reality is not there to be seen. The self-reflection on the primitive has disappeared. It is for this reason that when we initially looked to understand the meaning of Adorno's idea of the *culture industry* we understood nothing even of its obsolescence without substantial historical bombast and reconstruction. In becoming aware of the vanishing of the horizon against which Adorno's concept of the *culture industry* construed its meaning, we now recognize the exact – and only – sense in which it can be said that the *culture industry* no longer exists. The rubric of postmodernism delineates, as a marker in time, however indistinctly drawn, the boundary across which the perception of the primitive in us did not travel. The loss of this perception was not of one moment among many, but has amounted to an absolute diminution of historical perception that so depotentiated the impulse of the modern that it contracted to a well-documented art-historical period. The result is evident at every point in contemporary thought, but most distinctly in the sum of insight, much of which had become common knowledge to that earlier generation, that is now blocked, and the degree to which binding insight itself is rigorously interdicted. The way in which the central concepts of Adorno's philosophy, of the spell, the fetish, myth, and so on set up directly alongside the famed collection of archaic statuary on Freud's desk indicates that whatever the complex alliance and pointed antagonism between Adorno's philosophy and psychoanalysis, the former's dialectic of enlightenment – of progress as regression – and the latter's insight, for instance, into a young patient who "from time to time translated his wishes from the totemic language into that of everyday life"¹⁷ only have thinkable meaning against that single horizon that once expanded in the recognition of the primitive in ourselves. This horizon's vanishment is the basis for the spontaneously self-evident disrepute that now meets Freud. And this is a disrepute that has implicitly already befallen Adorno's philosophy without account of this having yet been taken. What we cannot know of Adorno's philosophy – while knowing it perfectly well on some other level – is the primitive in us, and the primitivization of our own circumstance.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), vol. 13, p. 130.

Removing the Barbarians from our Minds

Adorno has noted that whole epochs of historical reality have disappeared from historical consciousness, the matriarchal age among them. But contrary to the disputes surrounding the reality of the few artefacts of that vastly remote age, the vanishing of the primitive – the archaic and the barbaric – has occurred under our own eyes and well within the plausible course of a single lifetime. E. H. Gombrich (1909-2001) was of Adorno's generation, though he outlived him by some thirty years, and was only recently obliged to admit in *The Preference for the Primitive*, his last major work, that his topic had just slipped out from under his fingers: "This book is about a movement of taste that came to its climax during my lifetime and appears to have lost strength during the last few years."¹⁸ Had Gombrich understood what was occurring he might have wanted to entitle the book something more akin to "Salvage the Primitive," since the volume's over-arching intention is to show that the loss of that taste for the primitive is inseparable from an emerging incapacity for aesthetic differentiation, an idea that would be profoundly deepened in related, central ideas of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

The dynamic that eroded the cognition of the primitive is available to observation because it has in many regards been carried out so self-consciously; its traces are effectively a measure of consciousness itself. The complexity of the event owes not least to the fact that the critique of the concept has been so substantial an achievement. Over the course of decades anti-colonial wars and rebellions successfully repudiated the apostrophe of the primitive and with it suzerainty's paternalism. Ethnography likewise succeeded, over the same decades, at the rejection of an evolutionary approach that was from its inception a distorted projection of Darwinism onto a scale of technological advance along which stages of the recapitulation of phylogeny calibrated the relative primitivism of all other peoples in comparison with the mind of the most technologically advanced West.¹⁹ The distinguished historian Peter Brown puts the entire critical transformation in a nutshell when he writes productively and critically in *The Rise of Western Christendom* of the figure of the barbarian that it is "part of the purpose of this book to remove

¹⁸ E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p. 7.

¹⁹ *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 177.

them [the barbarians] from our minds, and to substitute a more truthful and complex image of what happened at this time.”²⁰

But if removing the barbarians from our minds has been an accomplishment, what has made it possible is a dynamic that exists at a considerable remove from its presumed moral and historiographical claim. The spontaneity of the everyday – “What do *you* mean, ‘primitive’?”; “What do *you* mean, ‘barbaric’?” – is too broadly available, it comes too readily to people’s lips, to be motivated by any familiarity either with medieval studies or the vicious history of the colonialist’s hatred of the savage. On the contrary, the audible shock-quotes requisite to any mention of the word themselves stand in the colonial tradition, but in a changed form of economy and domination; they are only so eagerly mobilized because they are an act of triumph over the object. The gesture draws on a vernacular nominalism that amounts to a procedural dismissal of whatever aspect of an object might lay claim to the universal as the object’s own autonomy; this is rejected as fraudulent and an injustice for presuming to acknowledge anything that could come between the object and those uses that might be made of it. The nominalist impulse is a societal methodology, the act of a total social subject, however unconscious: it prepares the content at hand for being broken down into those ever smaller, simplest parts, which subjectivity demands for gaining ever greater levels of control over it. The parts themselves are analysed quantitatively, modelled on an exchange relationship in which all things, words as well, are necessarily equal as integers of one, to which the supposition of any inhering quality raises the threat that in its awareness the coin of the realm would no longer circulate, sustenance would disappear from the shelves and the businesses along main street would board up their shutters and be gone.

Thus the spontaneity of those requisite shock-quotes is the spontaneous blocking of a spontaneity: it is a power of manipulation and administration. If it were otherwise, there would be no possible understanding of how the struggle of once colonial nations to free themselves turned out to be inextricable from a movement that has subjected them as markets to global forces that now dominates them and tears them apart in no less unrelieved a fashion than colonialism once did – except that now it is next to impossible to mobilize against these forces, to lay claim to being anything in opposition to them, to understand the forces involved or who or what is in charge of the event. The bureaucratic triage that commands that the

²⁰ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christianity*. 2nd. Edition (London: Blackwell, 2003), p. 7.

word – the “primitive” – itself be shunned, as if nothing less than severing light from dark will come to the aid of the injustice done to dark lands, is the gesture that seeks to seal, once and for all, the primitive taboo on the primitive. It betrays its commercial alliance most of all through the injustice it does to the primitive, to the unformed and untamed in us without the differentiated impulse of which there is no capacity to do the next right thing, for person or nation to act on the moral impulse in that spontaneity in which we might for a moment actually feel that we are ourselves.²¹ If progress has to date been regression, actual progress nevertheless requires regression; wilful decisiveness and thinking, differentiating tenacity have no other resource and require nothing less than what Adorno in *Negative Dialectic* calls the “additional impulse” [*das Hinzutretende*], as primordial as any beast that refuses to take another step.²² The Victorian stricture, its entranced “How dare you!,” marked a considerable latitude of mind compared with the motto of the new Musée du Quai Branly which, in recently inheriting the contents of the Trocadero, would rather suppress what Picasso once saw in these holdings in favour of a further spiritualization of exchange: “*Les cultures sont faites pour dialoguer.*” “Dialoguer” – word as trade – is all that cultures can do if the point is to insist, as that museum insists at every turn, on the equivalence of all cultures, as if there is some basis in history to depend on all culture being culture, as if all we have ever known is an achieved freedom.

Munera Pulveris

The acknowledgment of the loss of insight into the primitive in us may be the only perspective from which we can understand not just the *culture industry* but the urgency of Adorno’s philosophy – that is, the possible recognition we find in it of the primitivization of life – and something of how the content of this philosophy is now beyond our own reasoning. It is the point at which, in studying his work our attention wavers, whatever the desire to concentrate. And this brings us, for a concluding moment in a discussion that has been preoccupied with the question of what we are and are not able to think about – with what we can and cannot concentrate on – to a comment that Walter Benjamin once made, when he wrote that the power of concentration has itself declined along with the disintegration of

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 222.

²² *History and Freedom*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 229-38.

the idea of eternity. Adorno would never have written this line, not as such. But he would have agreed entirely with Benjamin that the capacity to think, the power of concentration, itself depends on its object and on its object's coherence. Both would have insisted on what is at stake when, in an ancient and here unlikely text, the World-Honoured One, the Buddha, concludes an oration in the *Rose Sutra* and enters into "the place of immeasurable meanings." Beholding this moment, all those in the great assembly, both human and inhuman, the monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, heavenly beings, yakshas, mahagorgas, "having gained what they had never had before, were filled with joy and, pressing their palms together, gazed at the Buddha with a single mind."²³ It must be reality itself – in other words – that demands of the mind its singleness, even its collective singleness, its power of identity, its own strength as an ability of concentration even in its illusions, a unitariness that the mind could hardly fashion for itself anymore than our feet are able to produce the gravity beneath them.

If so, then perhaps to complete the experiment in the philosophy of the primacy of the object that, from its first word, this essay has been, read the reports as they came in, in August 2002, from the unprecedented flooding that damaged and destroyed museums and their holdings throughout central Europe; use the spontaneous disinterest one might have for these reports, for the distant places named, for their circumstances now some years out of date, as a measure of an incapacity to sense a transformation that has already occurred in what is closest at hand in days we are all living that are no longer days out of any recognizable season, and thus: the S.O.S. dispatched from the Museum of Central Bohemia – a renown museum of the Czech Republic – that "the buildings were completely drowned in water [...] permanent exhibitions completely destroyed"; the message from the Libechov Chateau, "flooded up to the second floor level, the whole complex including the park is totally devastated"; the message from the Invalides building in Prague, that the "huge archive of architecture and the archive of history of technology and industry, have been completely flooded"; the message from the Pinkas Synagogue, also in Prague, that the "recently renovated inscriptions on the walls, commemorating victims of the Holocaust, were destroyed up to the height of 2 meters."²⁴ In recognition of the hundreds and sometimes thousands of years over which major cities were located and established along rivers, at

²³ *The Rose Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 5-6.

²⁴ H-New Discussion Networks, "First estimate of damage, 30 August 2002," <http://www.h-net.org/~museum/>.

their junctions and along coast lines, in coastal breezes and in their rhythms; and in trying to comprehend, as one now must, that in a determinate future many of these places – New Orleans and Bangkok among them, and the many museums being the most and the least of it – will be partly and wholly gone, thinking becomes intolerable to itself. This is not the loss of concentration in the vanishment of eternity, though it is that as well, but in the loss of the possible continuity and coherence of historical truth – so that searching its contemporary physiognomy, it is somehow not possible to find a single clue to what *primitive* might mean or to comprehend why anyone would bother with a word that rubs so closely on a wound. We have crossed a threshold, not of sleep, but of what we will never again be able to wake up from. The question is not of possibly avoiding a tipping-point eight or twenty years from now, but of what might be saved in absolute emergency. In this moment, the exasperation at the inscrutability of the primitive – “What does the word mean?” – has become its constantly reiterated seal. These several decades will mark the transformation in all human history after which every word that has to date been written will bear an incomparably guilt-burdened irreversibility. Adorno’s much contested denial of any possible writing of poetry after Auschwitz did not conceive that the guilt of history would engulf the possibility of its reading altogether. The perception of the loss of historical depth, if we could grasp it in the absence of that horizon of insight indicated in *The Concept of Philosophy*, would bring us to an understanding of the exact sense in which the *culture industry* certainly does continue to exist, though not as the industrial entertainment section of the social division of labour but as society as a whole, as the power of primitivization that has consumed the possibility of its historical discernment. The content of Adorno’s philosophy is in the distinction between identity as, on one hand, a tit for tat, an eye for an eye – the power to knock anything out of someone else’s hands and grab it for oneself – and, on the other, of identity as the capacity to make reality break in on the mind that has mastered it. To rescue the primitive from itself and be reconciled with it requires “the unswerving effort to conjoin reason’s critical consciousness of itself and the critical experience of objects”²⁵ as a concentration capable of responding to the particular, as the possibility, that is, of hearing wave doubling up on wave, doubling up on wave, without being sickened.

²⁵ This is the idea of a negative dialectic. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 9-10.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT BARBARISM IS?

ROBERT HULLOT-KENTOR

An enormous nation happy in a style,
Everything as unreal as real can be.
—Wallace Stevens

Prometheus stole fire to distract the
gods, not as our gift; what he bestowed
was reason, the ability to make
anything into a weapon—even this.
—Anon.

What interests us in the thought and writings of T. W. Adorno cannot interest us. Where it touches us most closely in the urgency of the moment, it misses the mark entirely. When it cuts to the quick, nothing is felt. This is easily demonstrated. For wherever we open Adorno's writings, whichever volume we turn to, the topic is the barbaric and barbarism. In *Aesthetic Theory*, we read that the "literal is the *barbaric*"; we learn in the section on "Natural Beauty" that "it is *barbaric* to say of nature that one thing is more beautiful than another." Adorno insists, again in *Aesthetic Theory*, that he will not temper his most notorious claim that it is "*barbaric* to write poetry after Auschwitz." Concerns we barely recognize are none the less barbaric: The New Objectivity is said to "reverse into the *barbarically* pre-aesthetic." Inwardness is "*barbaric*." Even it is *barbaric*, says Adorno, to name the artist "a creator." I am positive that he would have found this fragmented rendering of phrases from his work barbaric. The relentless apostrophizing of the barbaric emerges as the single apostrophe of his labour and circumscribes the entirety of what he perceived. In *Minima Moralia* "the whole itself" is, indeed, said to be "*barbarism*." And, if so, if the whole itself really *is* barbarism then nothing less than all things *are* barbaric. In the stream of assertion that threads through his thousands of pages, Adorno never once admits a half-tone, not

a single “almost,” “semi,” or “formerly” barbaric. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the culture industry that the United States produced is “*barbarism*.” This American “*barbarism* is not the result of cultural lag,” as other European visitors to America speculated, he writes, but of progress itself. And here, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we arrive at the statement that shifts like a magnet under the iron filings of what has so far been a scattered catalogue of barbarism’s *membra disjecta* and causes them, as will be seen in a moment, to draw together, take their place, become legible and shape the focal point of the whole of thinking. The intention of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno writes, with Horkheimer – this is the sentence – is to understand why “humanity founders in a new form of *barbarism* instead of entering a truly human condition.”¹

A New Form of Barbarism

Here, Adorno has us. In the precision of the optic he crafted – that *humanity now founders in a new form of barbarism* – in a second barbarism, we stand in the glare of what has been forced into focus. More than a half century after the publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we know ourselves the addressees of Adorno’s work in a way that we could hardly have realized a decade ago. For the interregnum of the postwar years is over. We are experiencing a return of the great fear, as if it never ended – and perhaps it never did.² We are, without a doubt, the occupants of the most catastrophic moment in the whole of human history, in all of natural history, and we cannot get our wits about ourselves. What is being decided right now for all surviving generations including our own, is the exact sum total of the irreversible remainder, the unalterable “How it might have been.” By every indication we are going ahead with the irreparable calamity. Even if the treaties soon to be negotiated in Copenhagen are ratified whole – and nothing at all will be ratified – the proposals on the table are inadequate³; even if the legislation of the cap and trade of carbon emissions is eventually made binding on American industry, whatever limited good it may do, the scheme will become

¹ T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann in 20 volumes (Frankfurt am Main Suhrkamp), vols. 7, p. 114; vol. 7, p. 93; vol. 4, p. 174; vol. 7, p. 89; vol. 4, p. 121; vol. 3, p. 11; vol. 8, p. 335; vol. 3, p. 581; vol. 6, p. 275.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism* (London: Abacus Books, 2007), pp. 31-49.

³ This essay was originally presented as a talk at the University of Minnesota on December 1st, 2009.