

# **Althusser, Adorno, and the State of Art as an Ideological Framework Under Late-Stage Capitalism**

**Aaliya Bukhary, Rammanohar Gupta, Ishana Bhardwaj, Chahat Mehrotra**

## INTRODUCTION

The cessation of the boundaries between media, entertainment, products, and culture in the 21st century has relegated art to a state of cultural decline. Under a state where capitalism permeates every aspect of an individual living under it, this paper will explore how the dissemination of content and art often acts as Althusser's ideological state apparatus, usually dictated by the ruling class. Art's ubiquity and its complete control of the model cultural sphere, whether through social media, often function in imbuing certain values and political ideas into the public. Aesthetics and art as perceived by the public is often a more subliminal form of social semiotics, and since the worth given to art and "high culture" is decided by the superstructure of the time, this paper will explore the concealing of aesthetics that are antithetical to cultural values supported by the ruling class. Its hypothesis explores the function of art as an exertion of the power of the ruling class, as well as explores the contemporary aestheticization of art through the conceptual framework of Adorno's Culture Industry.

## I

Art is primarily a subject of study that is concerned with human creativity and imagination, it largely consists of a wide variety of human creations that are aesthetically or emotionally valuable. Art can be visual, auditory, literary, interactive or spatial and is also sometimes interdisciplinary. The key difference between art and crafts lies in its usage; where a work of art is created for aesthetic value and exciting emotional or intellectual response, art that has practical value is often considered craft.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 1, popular culture has reduced the value of art due to its systematic and machine-like production of works that are then used to manipulate the population and maintain passivity. The commercialisation and the commodification of art have reduced its creation to a systematic, mechanical process that churns out artworks according to demand which further weakens the essence of human creativity, and the integrity of art and compromises its meaning. This leads to repetition in the body of work in various artistic fields like literature, cinema and music where one can observe the emergence of tried and tested formulas for producing art that pleases the masses while also keeping in line with familiar patterns.

Censorship and increasing state involvement in the process of creation and presentation of art also impose limitations and hinder the full extent of its influence, works of art such as films and books that are banned by governments often contain themes and explore ideas that are extremely subversive and have the power to radicalize those who engage with them. As mentioned in French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's 1970 essay "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses," 2 due to the means of production lying solely in the hands of the ruling class, popular culture and art are wielded with the intent of propagating their ideologies.

Even subversive art is eventually brought into the folds of the system it aims to shed light on; once those works are established in popular media they are reduced to caricatures of their originally intended message. Popular culture and the commercialisation of art also contribute to the further marginalization of artists from minority communities, leading to repetitive themes that are recycled throughout a period of time. With little to no powerful voices speaking in contention against the dominant ideologies present in the artistic domain, art turns stagnant. The aestheticization of one's interaction with art also determines exactly what kind of art one ends up consuming. The image or "branding" that comes with the presentation of oneself as an audience of certain artists outshines the actual work of art at hand. Appreciation of art is then reduced to mere performance with no regard for the substance of the artwork itself. This paper will first explore the concepts of art and its status as a tool for the propagation of ideologies by the ruling class, the ways in which said ideologies are integrated into society, and high culture and its contribution to this propagation through the framework of ideological state Apparatuses set by Althusser. Furthermore, it will expand on the evolution of art into a mechanized system which is part of capitalist society through the concept of Adorno's Culture Industry. Additionally, touching upon the topic of segregation of art based on genres, trends and clichés which are produced by this Industry.

## II

Louis Althusser, in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, stated that institutions otherwise part of civil society and seen as relatively harmless are the very tools weaponized by the dominant class to reinforce ideology. The way we are taught to see and understand things, ourselves, media and the world at large do not come from within but are instead internalised narratives. This, of course, includes art and content. "Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone 3 ," in 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art' successfully draws a connection between contemporary art and the structuring of reality by the Empire. This Empire is not meant to be a monarchical state, a matter of the past. Instead, it refers to modern-day market capitalism.

Whether looked at from a 21st-century perspective or the ways in which indoctrination begins through "simple" children's literature, the fact of the matter is: interpretations and methods of assessing value in content at large are a result of interpellation. Notions of class or the overarching structures of marginalising women who do not fit into the acceptable image inevitably amalgamate into the psyche and are reinforced time and again. Aesthetic cognition can be understood as a question of the place of art and its function throughout historical changes. All art is ideological, in the same way, language and writing are - they are produced as well as interpreted within specific sociocultural frameworks, and the meaning or value present in art is not independent of economic, cultural and ideological processes.

Glorification of the "war machine" in movies and historical revisionism in cinema is not uncommon. Shows and movies that distort facts and present a dramatised account often aim to paint a certain community in a negative light and/or to spark a version of patriotism most beneficial to the dominant class. Such content faces no censorship, gains the approval of those in power as it propagates ideology and goes undetected by the general consumers. The events portrayed are taken as the end all be all - this is how cinema becomes a tool for the hegemonization of historical revisionism. Further, when catered to younger

audiences, especially those who idealise the personalities featured, ideology integrates itself with the base years of development. As the ruling class changes, so does the acceptable art under their regime. Art once considered to have great value quickly becomes a voice of dissent, its messages ignored and shunned after being labeled as having a politically radical outlook on the issues at hand. All mention of it is then seen as defying the commonly accepted narrative about the present power struggle; which the community deserves to be heard and which needs to be silenced.

High culture comes into play when established bodies assess art, ranging from museums to award academies. Marks of merit assigned by these institutions enable the display of significant art, which then becomes a representative of that cultural period, studied as a part of history and also actively consumed in the present as the cream of the crop. A particularly concerning aspect of this emerges when the question regarding how the side of history that has survived the test of time came to be in the first place arises. What was suppressed and what was forgotten - what might never be known? This process makes the cycle of repressing art that challenges existing ideology easy and thus delivers a packaged and ready idea of value to then incorporate into the critique of “other” media.

Defining ignorance as another form of knowledge has invariably led to a decline in art and its understanding - anti-intellectualism is the most suitable example of this. A major factor in its consistent rise is the rejection of any knowledge deemed unfit for practical use, the critical appreciation and creation of art being one of many. Historically, the educated middle class has either been removed from positions of power or executed to prevent any challenge to totalitarian regimes. It is not limited to dictatorships; subtle forms of the same seem to have permeated into an idea of normalcy and its power has been downplayed. Many seem to understand it as something that simply looks at media literacy as a bore, identifying and analysing subtexts as being a part of a pretentious group of people. However, the commodification of information as a result of it and just how easy it is for governments to weaponize it to silence dissent goes unnoticed. Anti-intellectualism and the dangers it possesses have been explored by Claussen Dane:

The effects of mass media on attitudes toward intellect are certainly multiple and ambiguous. On the one hand, mass communications greatly expand the sheer volume of information available for public consumption. On the other hand, much of this information comes pre-interpreted for easy digestion and laden with hidden assumptions, saving consumers the work of having to interpret it for themselves.

Commodified information naturally tends to reflect the assumptions and interests of those who produce it, and its producers are not driven entirely by a passion to promote critical reflection. 4

Through various facets, art has thus become a mere tool for the propagation of ideology. Various pieces of art in the 21st century do encompass values that oppose that of the Empire, however, their outreach is greatly limited.

### III

The state of contemporary art and artistic production can also be understood through the allegory of the Culture Industry as propounded by Marxist thinkers Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 5 , they propose that art no longer remains a means of recreation, but has transformed into an industry with standardised production. Advanced technology has not, as Marx proposed, led to the emancipation of labour 6 , but has led to a more repressed society. Culture, which they believe to include

any means of expression, has grown to be an integrated unit like never before. Consumption of art no longer serves as a detachment from labour, but simply a continuation of it. This is because, as a result of the prioritisation of capital, art is sold not to escape labour and strife, but to regain one's strength and enable one to function efficiently and productively in the cycles of production and consumption.

The economic principle of standardization permeates into every aspect of art and culture, dwarfing the individual's consciousness and absorbing the artist. Art, in a technologically advanced society, can be neatly divided based on the audience it is targeted at. The hyper-division of all contemporary literature into genres and the emphasis on those genres, as opposed to the emphasis on content, has contributed greatly to the decline of the literary arts. The development of clichés such as the manic pixie dream girl or the white saviour was predicted by Adorno and Horkheimer. These clichés are industrially produced and worked in the literature to an extent that the characters are simply imitations of each other. This function of the Culture Industry forces the author to integrate these clichés into their work to claim either financial success or social media clout amongst users. We are witness to a society where a sticker declaring a book to be a TikTok Sensation provides it with greater familiarity than a Man Booker Prize would. The promotion of books simply by advertising their genres and the tropes within the book foreshadows a disturbing trend. The classification of literary work into subgenres targeted at particular individuals, which then determine the success of the work, signals the complete industrialisation of art. It provides the artists and authors with incentives to make certain that they stick to the classifications hoisted upon them and ensure that every literary work is neatly compartmentalised into one of the popular genres. It does not matter that all the works end up appearing to be imitations of the same plot when the most concerning factor for the industry remains the social clout and financial success of the book. Thus, any individualism that art originally claimed to develop, remains a shunted prospect. Along with this, we observe a significant drop in the quality of literature. Literature now openly presents itself as an industry, with authors at the mercy of their publishers. Similar trends can also be observed in the music industry. TikTok, and the social clout it brings, has been determined to greatly ensure the financial success of tracks and artists. As a result of this, artists are further forced, if not incentivised to ensure that all the conditions necessary for a trend on TikTok are met. Similar to the literary industry, we see the decline of individualism as well as that of the diversity that art forms are meant to present. The constant industrialisation of the artistic fields and the push to standardise manifests as a threat to the very purpose of artistic creation, hampering any development of the same. The constant development of artistic trends, schools of thought, and cinematic breakthroughs have seemingly come to a halt. The development of trends such as Dadaism or Expressionism, based on the contemporary situation around the artist has not replicated itself in a while. Furthermore, Art itself has been classified ever so neatly into describable aesthetics to the extent that feeding some words into an algorithm can generate the same piece of art in seconds, which would have taken individuals days to perfect. Art now presents itself plainly as an industry and the objective now becomes the promotion of the social order and imposition of the social hierarchy. Culture becomes industrialised and catalogued for the consumers; it is administered by the government to ensure it fulfils its' purpose. Furthermore, any development of a counterculture, in opposition to the culture of social hierarchy, is made into a spectacle and further integrated into the machinery for repetitive imitation. It becomes impossible to violate the mainstream if all artists inherently become a part of the mainstream as a result of culture being an industry, not an independent means of expression. Mark Fisher

points out, in his work, *Capitalist Realism* 8 , Alternative and Independent cultures are no longer innovative, but dreadfully repetitive. Moreover, they do not represent a culture outside the dominant, but in fact, they represent the mainstream culture itself. There remains no alternative, in this case, for artists, but to submit to the ever-expanding Culture Industry and contribute to the making of a more integrated, yet repressive culture.

#### IV

Both Adorno's Culture Industry and Althusser's ideological state apparatus function as progenies of the Marxist conception of ideology under a capitalist framework. However, though these concepts are fundamentally similar in their spatial existence on the political spectrum, the approaches taken by both towards describing the advance of capitalism and the ruling class in art are vastly different. The primary deviation resides in the concept of ideology for both Althusser and Adorno. Neo-Marxists Horkheimer and Adorno present the ideology as something created by the industry to increase demand for more of the same products, rather than by consumer demand.

What separates this from its Marxist progenitor is the concept of a singular ideology in Adorno's Culture industry, as opposed to the Marxist plurality of ideologies. This uniform ideology has the effect of establishing servile uniformity in the masses by generating patterns of speech and behaviour that people believe they must follow in order to avoid ostracisation.

The existence of a single ideology is paramount in expressing the aestheticisation of art under a capitalist society because it describes the impossibility of artistic evolution or political upheaval. The Culture Industry, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, only allows for the formation of a single ideology for the masses to absorb; any originality in mass culture is quickly assimilated and homogenised by the industry. Ideology, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is Marxist in the sense that it does not portray economic reality; rather, it is an illusion that produces demand for capitalism's goods while suppressing pluralism and independent thought that could potentially lead to political unrest.

Contrarily, Althusser's concept of ideology advocates for the more traditionally Marxist plurality of ideology. Althusser extends Marx's term by claiming that "ideology has a material existence."<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon can be further understood by looking at Antonio Gramsci's ideas of a cultural hegemony 9 of the upper socio-economic classes. The universal dominant ideology, according to Marx, is controlled by the ruling class which controls the means of economic production, along with cultural and intellectual means of production. The phenomenon as explained by Gramsci was further developed by Edward Said in his study of imperialism and the imposition of Western culture 10 . Thus, it must be clear that the decline of art correlates to its greater integration as a means of upholding the social hierarchy.

While Adorno and Horkheimer indicate the existence of a single ideology, Althusser recognises the presence of various ideologies to which people adhere and must continually navigate. Thus, the role of the ideology in the decline of art under capitalism is largely different due to their conception of the term.

Under the Culture Industry, ideology would exist simply as an apparatus of the industry itself, removing all

autonomy from the individual in deciding what ideology to ascribe themselves to. No matter what art they consume, the fundamental ideology would remain the same. His conception of ideology is pertinent to the news as well as certain mass-produced media such as trends on the social media app TikTok. Although consumers are lulled into a certain sense of individuality and autonomy, apps such as TikTok function entirely on the virality of certain trends. These trends are intended not only for mass consumption but also for mass production, wherein they are produced by the very consumers. This then results in the homogenisation of content produced on the platform, as to avoid ostracisation, the consumer must adhere to the singular ideology of the industry. This then results in the homogenisation of countercultures and individual ideologies, as everything slowly regresses into the mainstream and thus the single ideology Adorno refers to. However, Althusser's conception of ideology serves to explain a different facet of the decline of art. "To an Althusserian, the media functions to disseminate ideology to the masses. Yet all the ISA's are themselves mediums through which ideologies are transmitted to the individual." 11 When placed into context, the ostensive plurality may indicate a sense of freedom for the individual, but Althusser instead simply encapsulates the comprehensive array of apparatuses intending to imbibe the same set of beliefs into the individual.

The Culture Industry and Althusser's ideological state apparatus do not only differ in their perspective of capitalism ideology and its metastasis through art, but also in the very method of the inculcation of this ideology. The spread of ideology through the Ideological State Apparatus functions differently from the Culture Industry as it creates an Empire or a Summit through which the ideology is ultimately instilled. There is a supreme power in the ruling class and the USA simply functions to impress this ideology into individuals. The Culture Industry instead takes a Foucauldian approach "constituting itself from below" 12 where there is no Summit, but the supreme ideological power and engendering of beliefs surrounding the value of art and high culture instead emerge as an effect of multiple micro powers all supporting the singular ideology. Though these ideologies function almost contradictorily, one can see them as not foils of each other but rather frameworks that work in tandem under a late capitalist world, and thus outline the decline of art.

The ISA and the Culture Industry are two distinct structures pertaining to the dissemination of media and art as a function of capitalist ideology. However, both describe identical phenomena and provide explanations for the proliferation of ideology and the sentiments of the ruling class under capitalism. As mass-produced media becomes the primary arbiter of trends and culture, it is more necessary than ever to analyse the role of corporations and capitalism in the decline of culture. The ubiquity of the global ruling class and its illusion of individuality has led to nothing but the rapid descent of culture into a formulaic, vapid distraction from the totalitarian assimilation of individuals into nothing more than consumers and regurgitators of capitalist ideology.

## Works Cited

- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. (1975, January 1). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Vol. Vol. 1* (J. Cumming, Trans.). Herder and Herder. <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780826400932>
- Althusser, L. (2014, February 4). *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. In *Ideology and Ideological*

State Apparatuses. Verso.

- Badiou. (2004, May 16). Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art. Lacanian Ink. Retrieved November 13, 2022, from <https://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm>
- Claussen. (2004). Anti-Intellectualism in American Media (p. 43). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1944). Dialectic of enlightenment. Verso. (Original work published 1944)
- Does automation spell the end of capitalism? (2020, November 29). Morning Star. <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/does-automation-spell-the-end-of-capitalism>
- Bavier, W. (2020, June 16). How TikTok is Ruining the Music Industry. The Register Forum <https://registerforum.org/12193/opinion/how-tiktok-is-ruining-the-music-industry/>
- Fisher, M. (2009). Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? Zero Books.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. International Publishers.
- El Aidi, A., & Yechouti, Y. (2017). Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Cultural Hegemony in Edward Said's Orientalism. *Galaxy IMRJ*, 6(5). 11. Czolacz, Michael. Ideology. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/ideology/>
- Zizek, Slavoj. (1994). Mapping ideology. London ; New York : Verso.