CULTURE INDUSTRY, A FEMINIST READING[*]

Industria Cultural, una Lectura Feminista

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the concept of culture industry and seeks to reconceptualize it from a feminist perspective. My aim is to examine the concept's Marxist origins and explore a potential interpretation through the lens of feminist social reproduction theories. This approach involves a critical interrogation of the foundational premises of the concept, considering how feminist theories of social reproduction can offer a nuanced understanding of its dynamics and implications. By doing so, the article aspires to illuminate the intersections between cultural production, labor, and gendered social structures. Finally, the article aims to shed light on how the concept of culture industry can contribute to current feminist discussions.

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, culture industry, feminism, social reproduction.

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca revisitar el concepto de industria cultural y reconceptualizarlo desde una perspectiva feminista. El objetivo es examinar los orígenes marxistas del concepto y explorar una posible interpretación a través de las teorías feministas de la reproducción social. Este enfoque implica una interrogación crítica de los fundamentos del concepto, considerando cómo las teorías feministas de la reproducción social pueden ofrecer una comprensión matizada de sus dinámicas e implicaciones. De este modo, el artículo aspira a iluminar las intersecciones entre la producción cultural, trabajo, y las estructuras de género. Finalmente, el artículo pretende arrojar luz sobre cómo el

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concepto de industria cultural puede contribuir a los debates feministas actuales.

Palabras clave: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, industria cultural, feminismo, reproducción social.

Where issues of feminism are concerned, Theodor W. Adorno's oeuvre and institutional role are characterized by profound contradictions.

On one hand, Adorno was a critic of the reification of femininity and masculinity. In *Minima Moralia*, for instance, he asserts that "the feminine itself is the effect of the whip" (Adorno, 1951: 170). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Max Horkheimer, goes further to relate the domination of women and nature by men to fascism. Adorno was undoubtedly a significant inspiration for the protest movements in Germany during the 1960s, in which two of his Marxist and feminist students, Regina Becker-Schmidt and Elisabeth Lenk, played crucial roles (Bischof, 2022; Später, 2024). He is recognized as one of the founders of a critical theory that significantly expanded Marxism's horizons, thereby also contributing to feminism.

On the other hand, Adorno did not acknowledge the role of Gretel Karplus/Adorno, his partner, as his main intellectual collaborator[1]. As Sarah Speck

[1] Karplus frequented the Institute for Social Research daily after their return from the U.S. to Frankfurt, was active in establishing the manuscripts of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* and *Towards a New Manifesto,* edited Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* with Rolf Tiedemann after his death, edited the work of Walter Benjamin published in the 1950s and many others books such as Charles Fourier's *The Theory of the Four Movements*, and corrected Adorno's correspondences, among many others things. She was the woman who supported not only Adorno's but Benjamin's work in many ways, intellectually and financially. In *Minima Moralia,* Adorno aludes to her role as typist in the fragment "Sacrifical Lamb" [*Lämmergeier*] (Adorno, 1951: 406). According to the testimony of Susan Buck-Morss (2022), "Adorno had died, but his wife Gretel was still alive, and when I was writing my dissertation on Adorno and Benjamin, I visited her in her office. She was rather terrifying. She had a broken leg, which she had in a cast slung up on her desk. She smoked like a chimney. She struck me as bitter about her ancilliary role vis-à-vis Teddy. She had typed his manuscripts, of course. He needed that. But I don't believe he ever acknowledged her as his *Gesprächspartner*, which certainly she was." Unfortunately, as Staci Lynn von Boeckmann (2004: 12-13) states, "the question about Karplus' own position on the feminism of her day is one which, given the lack of material, can only be answered through speculation. The little we do know, however, makes it clear that Karplus managed to create a space for herself outside the domestic sphere, playing an active public role in her early adult life as manager of a factory and participant in the intellectual circles of her day in Berlin – circles which included both Walter Benjamin and her future husband, Theodor W. Adorno, among others – and later as a collaborator in the life and work of Adorno and the Institute of Social Research". Her trajectory, states Boeckmann, remains immersed in the gossip about Adorno's affairs, overshadowing her contribution to Critical Theory.

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stressed, the model of geniality that sustained the Institute for Social Research at his time, as well as Adorno's trajectory, was built on women's invisibility and intellectual reproductive labor[2]. Moreover, he rarely cited women, did not dedicate even a single essay to a woman writer in his *Notes to Literature*, nor a section to a female artist in his *Aesthetic Theory*. He debated with Jean-Paul Sartre but ignored the works of Simone de Beauvoir. Although he attempted to critique patriarchy[3], many of his references to women are deeply misogynistic. The often-evoked idea that Adorno "was a man of his time"—something that, in many respects, he was not—does not help us further in a contemporary feminist reading of his theory.

If we abide by the idea that one of the enduring imperatives of critical theory is to ask "Que horas são?" [What time is it?] (Schwarz, 1987), it is not only timely but indeed overdue for critical theory to recalibrate itself in alignment with feminist movements and the profound critiques these have articulated regarding Marxism as a whole. Thus, it becomes imperative to interrogate Adorno's relationship to feminism.

In recent decades, some scholars have endeavored to excavate a critique of male domination and patriarchy from between the lines of Adorno's writings (Heberle, 2006; White, 2017). This legitimate attempt to recover the relevance of his reflections for a feminist theory, however, is in some cases centered mainly on what he wrote about women (Ziege, 2004; Duford, 2017), which, as Regina Becker-Schmidt (2017: 104) underlines, may not be his most significant contribution to feminism.

This essay takes a different approach. Rather than rethinking Adorno's critique of patriarchy or clinging to his reflections on women, it is inspired by feminist readings of Karl Marx from the 1970s onward (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017; Gago, 2020) and the proposition that one should prioritize his analysis method and concepts for rethinking capitalism in a feminist way. The aim is to reexamine the notion of "culture industry," its Marxist origins, and its inherent limitations to explore the significance of this theory with-

[2] Unpublished keynote lecture at the conference I Conferência Internacional Marxismo Feminista held in in São Paulo on 22/04/2024.

[3] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer analyze the intertwinement between the Enlightenment as a process and patriarchy. Drawing from Sigmund Freud, they associate patriarchy with the impulse to dominate nature, and women understood as such. However, the book presents some very misogynist remarks, as I will discuss further in this article; besides that, as Barbara Taylor (2012) stresses, there is no reference to the women who criticized the Enlightenment from a feminist perspective, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, which would contribute to the dialectical enlightened defense of the Enlightenment envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer in the book.

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in a feminist critique of contemporary capitalism. The following notes propose ways in which this concept can be recontextualized, broadened, and brought up to date.

1 THE FEMININE CHARACTER AND THE COMMODITY FORM

Housewives who cry while listening to Toscanini, seeking refuge from their miserable lives at the cinema like beggars; secretaries who dream of becoming starlets; typists who waste their time with magazine contests; women who use music as a support for sexual fantasies, who fetishize their tanned bodies; who feel flattered when treated like men; who know they are hurt when they bleed; and whose beauty can be recognized by their voice tone over the phone—these are some of the images of female characters that populate Theodor W. Adorno's work. They represent all the stupidity, childishness, and heteronomy produced by the system of the culture industry and still echo the problematic Freudian theory of penis envy. Although Adorno emphasizes that this is not a natural fact but rather what has been made of women under capitalism, it is impossible not to notice how problematic this characterization is. Nevertheless, the association between culture industry and women is rarely problematized by his critical readers[4].

This association can be traced back to a letter Adorno wrote to Erich Fromm in 1937, proposing to study the "feminine character," in which some ideas that would later be formulated in the concept of culture industry appear and are directly related to the aura of misogyny surrounding his essays on the subject[5].

[4] One of the exceptions is Drucilla Cornell: "Adorno often insinuates that women seemingly are more easily manipulated than men. [...] Adorno frequently refers to women being much more vulnerable to their own fetishization than men. It is clear in such statements that he considers women to be prey to the masquerade that is femininity and therefore easily seduced by the culture industry, leading him to use women as examples of the beings who have had their individuality completely eclipsed. This unconscious sexism, however, is not necessary for his argument. But at the same time, it shows that Adorno tends to associate, on a very deep level, individuality and masculinity. It is not merely a coincidence that almost all his metaphors for the effective undermining of individuality are related to feminization, rendering us unable to stand up in any meaningful way to assert ourselves as our own persons". (2006:26) One of the few utopian feminine figures in Adorno's work, where the woman visitor is a door to happiness and cosmopolitism is present in the fragment "Heliotrope" in *Minima Moralia* (Adorno, 1951: 334-335).

[5] Eva-Maria Ziege (2004) deeply analyzed this piece, which is a rare finding in Adorno's scholarship. She highlights something central to this article: Adorno's critique of commodity form at the center of his contribution to a theory of authoritarianism. This allowed me to relate the letter to the further developed concept of culture industry. However, Ziege's analysis is highly problematic. She

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This letter is situated in a specific context. Adorno, who was still a collaborator of the Institute for Social Research, was at the time in Oxford, semi-exiled after Hitler's rise to power. Meanwhile, the Institute, already operating outside Germany, was developing its empirical research on "Authority and Family," conducted by Max Horkheimer and Erich Fromm (Ziege, 2004: 130). The research aimed to understand the rise of authoritarianism in Europe, particularly in Germany, and it worked with the concept of the "authoritarian character"—an idea that would be elaborated in various forms in the 1950s studies on *The Authoritarian Personality*, conducted then by Adorno and other researchers.

Adorno, who was not part of the project but was trying to surpass his role as a mere collaborator to the IfS, delineates a theory that was already emerging in his 1930s studies on music. He proposes it as a framework for contemplating political dynamics, particularly the ascent of authoritarianism in Europe. According to him, the presumption by Horkheimer and Fromm that authoritarianism was somehow related to the disintegration of the "cement that holds society together"—that is, the state, family, and religion—was misplaced (Adorno, 2023: 539-540). It was necessary, he argued, to "reexamine the question of cement." The decisive authority of this current phase of capitalism would not be associated with these institutions as mediators of social relations but with fetishized collectives that evoke another universal mediation – commodity form. In other words, the problem was not the disintegration of the aforementioned institutions but a dialectic between integration and disintegration born out of a shift in the mediating element of social relations. The movement of society, Adorno argued, was related much more to the "commodity form" than to any other social form or institution. In other words, what Adorno suggests is that the concept of the "authoritarian character" should be reexamined in light of these considerations and referred to the process of reification. Adorno advocated that the relationship between Marxism and Psychoanalysis – which critical theory sought to combine dialectically – should be addressed through the association of the economic character of fetishism with the laws of psychic fetishization. This is one of his contributions to a feminist critical theory, according to Becker-Schmidt (2017: 104): relating "societal transformations to restructurings of psychical energies on a collective scale." So far, so good. Nonethe-

argues that this letter exemplifies a radical theory and critique of gender in Adorno's work without considering the misogynistic content present in this letter.

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less, Adorno also introduces the notion of the "feminine character," which is associated with the authoritarian character, as an example of this approach:

> "[...] Women today are, to a certain degree, *more* dominated by the commodity character than men, and, to adapt a beautiful old formula of yours, they function as agents of the commodity in society. In close relation to this, it seems to me that women and their specific consumer consciousness are much more of a cement than, for example, family authority with its ascetic sexual morality, which today is very shaken, *without* this significantly altering the bourgeois character [...] What I put forward is an attempt to show that, precisely because of their exclusion from production, women have developed specific contours of bourgeois existence, different from those of men, and not that they transcend bourgeois society [...]. Yes, I go so far as to claim, and I assume that Horkheimer blindly assumes my opinion, that the traits in which women seem to claim their "immediacy" are actually the stigmas left by bourgeois society on them; traits that, in a real context of illusion, conceal what *true* nature might be. Analytically, it appears that the ego formation in most women, precisely due to their particular economic position, succeeded completely imperfectly. The additional childishness they have compared to men does not make them progressive.
>
> The task, whose solution I, as a non-economist and non-psychoanalyst, obviously do not dare to approach, would then be to develop an analysis of the economic position of women and their specific character traits; to show how precisely these traits contribute to the preservation of society and how precisely they ultimately provide the model for the ideals that finally end up in the fascist reproduction of stupidity.
>
> But these traits, which I would not like to prejudge, seem to me to be decisively related to the consumer's relationship with the commodity. It would be necessary to analyze in detail the completely irrational behavior of women concerning commodities, the shopping trips, the clothing, the hairstyles, etc., and one would very probably discover that all the factors that apparently serve sexual appeal, are, in fact, desexualized. The gesture of the girl who, while surrendering to her lover, is taken over by the fear that nothing happens to her clothing and hairstyle seems significant to me. I have a guess that female sexuality is largely desexualized; that it has become such a fetish for itself that its own commodity character [...] stands between her and her sexual activity, even in the most complete promiscuity. It would be a social theory of female frigidity that,

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> in my opinion, does not essentially stem from the fact that women are under too many sexual prohibitions or from not finding an adequate partner but rather from the fact that, even in coitus, women are themselves exchange objects to an end that naturally does not exist, failing to achieve pleasure due to this displacement. Even in sexuality, use value has been submitted to exchange value" (Adorno, 2023: 543-544).

As a feminist, it is impossible not to read these letter excerpts with immense outrage. To associate the "feminine character" with fascism (which, should be noticed, was predominantly led by men, who were the primary agents of its violence[6]), to blame the consumer character of women for their "frigidity" (absolving men's millennial disregard for women's pleasure), to comment on the imperfect formation of the female ego (appropriating the worst of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis[7]), to point out women as the main "agents" of the commodity form and, finally, as instruments of their husbands' castration seem like sufficient reasons to close Adorno's books never to open them again.

Notwithstanding, Adorno adds that "it goes without saying that the work would not be an 'attack' on women but a defense against the patriarchal society that has made them what they are and uses them for its purposes precisely because they are this way" (2023, 544) and writes that he had this idea of studying the "feminine character" while reading an essay by Leo Löwenthal on Henrik Ibsen, in which "he attributes to women, because they are not directly involved in the productive process of the economy, a lesser degree of reification and mutilated sexuality, a lesser degree of repression than men" (Adorno, 2023: 541). To Adorno, this statement would be too romantic:

[6] In *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1969: 313) even state that "the bloodlust of women in the *pogrom* surpasses that of men."

[7] Salima N. Ahmed argues that there is also a gender division in *Minima Moralia* from which one could deduce an idea of a female form of life that is connected to Adorno's conservative reading of Freud. According to her, "In *Minima Moralia*, some remarks suggest that the female form of life could be seen as a category dependent on biology. Adorno speaks of an "archaic frigidity," the "fear of the female animal of copulation," and of a sexual intercourse that "causes nothing but pain". This 'old' injury inflicted on women is said to arise from the intrinsic violence of sexuality that women have had to endure. This perspective on female forms of life suggests that they are bound to an "original nature," even though such a view is fundamentally rejected by Adorno. Later, Adorno replaces the idea of a 'biological' form of life with that of an exclusively social 'female nature.' Adorno thus rejects—in line with his stance on second nature—the notion of a natural female essence. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the, albeit rare, remarks that identify the 'archaic' not only with a 'natural history' but also with a 'biological' body concern exclusively women, and this paradoxically with the aim of denouncing a naturalized form of domination. But how can Adorno then claim that his Freudian standpoint allows for a critique of male domination?" (2019).

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> "I would be more inclined to suppose that the fantasy desires of Ibsen's Heddas and Noras are those of the desperate and that he took the childishness of women, which is produced by capitalist society, for something immediate and original. If that were the case, then Strindberg would ultimately be right in Marxist terms against Ibsen [...], namely by destroying the latter's anthropological illusion and showing that, in today's society, there really is no longer any refuge of 'Nature.' This opinion was particularly strengthened by my studies on Wagner [...] In it, the woman in figures like Isolde and Brünnhilde carries all the accents of romantic immediacy; they seem unharmed by the malignant will of the world, willing to sacrifice themselves, even ready for death. On the other hand, in figures like Fricka, but also like Gutrune and even Elsa, Wagner *unconsciously* detected precisely the specifically bourgeois traits in women, and it was particularly insightful to me in this context that Siegfried, in *Twilight of the Gods*, lost the last opportunity offered by the Rhine maidens to get rid of the cursed ring with the words 'if I consumed my property with you, my wife would surely get angry with me'" (Adorno, 2023: 541-542).

Besides being offensive and condescending, the passage also disappoints Ibsen's readers, who, despite the criticism he still receives today, contributed immensely to feminism in literature. [8] The letter fragment also reinforces how it is possible to glimpse in Adorno's essays a kind of sociological characterology of women with a strong inspiration in the culture industry itself, which refers to the typical magazine cover stereotype of the white, middle-class American or European woman with her electric vacuum cleaner, apron, and glamorous hairstyle. Adorno overlooks the fact that a large segment of non-white women all over the world did not fit this model of feminine fragility based on the white bourgeois family structure, as Angela Davis (1981) and many other feminist critical theorists would demonstrate decades later.

What is crucial to elucidate in this letter, however, is not merely the misogynistic foundations underpinning the initial formulation of the concept of culture industry but also the underlying assumptions that appear to persist in subsequent

[8] Even though nowadays the limits of *Nora* have been addressed by 20th-century feminisms – see, for example, Elfriede Jelinek's *What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband and Met the Pillars of Societies* – it is worth noticing that Adorno chose to criticize precisely one of the writers that contributed to feminism – to the point that *Nora* could be regarded as one of the first great European dramas of female social reproduction and marriage and, perhaps, as a character, a distant cousin of James Joyce's "Molly Bloom" – who's missing from Adorno's literary phisionomy of women.

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texts and warrant closer examination in this article. Adorno notes that the commodity form (and, given the examples he provides, one could refer them also to mass culture or culture industry—a concept that would only emerge in the 1940s) in some way affects women more deeply than men. He also suggests discriminatively that women are subject to reification and the commodity form by being outside the production process, immersed *only* (and more than men) in the sphere of circulation. As if women operated in capitalist reproduction *only* as consumers. Implicit here is the idea that those who operate in both production and consumption have a more complete and less authoritarian ego formation than those immersed only in the latter. As Ahmed (2019) stresses,

> "the culture industry functions within late capitalism as a potent anesthetic that 'only' among women erases the memory of their injury. Femininity thus acts as an accomplice to the Ever-Same. Only men seem capable of having a truly unique personality. For women, the division of the subject, this psychoanalytic safeguard against identitarian thinking, seems no longer to apply. Here, Adorno's thinking reaches its limits. Femininity becomes a special case: the total delusion of women prevents them from perceiving the failure of the capitalist form of life. At this point, Adorno himself seems to succumb to the reification of reason, equating women with the very figures of the culture industry he criticizes. Here, Regina Becker-Schmidt's critique is illuminating. She poses the question: "Why can't it be women's own painful experiences that initiate acts of self-liberation?" Becker-Schmidt emphasizes the idea of a rupture between Adorno and his Freudian epistemology of suffering. For him, suffering is nothing more than an opportunity within a crisis of the male form of life."

In the essay written with Horkheimer for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," (1969) the argument about "women as agents of the commodity" is not explicit; it remains solely in the examples of reified women. In this essay, it is culture industry itself that assumes the role of "social cement," becoming the primary system of socialization under capitalism, a thesis that, with the boom of platform capitalism and social networks, gains more and more relevance as people are exposed to this apparatus 24/7.

Adorno undoubtedly recognized that the culture industry functioned as a mechanism of domination intertwined with patriarchy. Arising from the theoretical and political experimentalism of the Weimar Republic, he and his many colleagues of the IfS were trying to discuss what we now call gender, but also sexuality

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and racism (through the studies of fascist prejudice). Yet, he failed to situate this perspective within a broader theoretical framework concerning the position of women in capitalism – a problem, I argue here, related to his reading of Marx. In contemporary discourse, one cannot contemplate the processes of gendering, racialization, and sexualization (indeed, the entirety of socialization) without accounting for the role of culture industry. While it is evident that the notion of a specific "feminine character" tied to the reification produced by culture industry constitutes a discriminatory interpretation, it remains a historical fact that women have been its primary targets. Thus, it is worthwhile to scrutinize this concept through the lens of the cracks in Adorno's Marxism, addressed through insights drawn from the feminist social reproduction theories.

2 CULTURE INDUSTRY AS AN EXPERIMENT IN SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

When delving into Adorno's essays on the culture industry—a research agenda that permeates the entire corpus of his work—one can locate oneself within the contextual and historical plethora of examples that, akin to pieces of a mosaic, delineate the conceptual topography of this concept: Ford automobiles, Hollywood, Donald Duck and Walt Disney, BBC radio broadcasts, camping, hobbies, jazz and its jitterbug dancers, the horoscope in *Los Angeles Times*. Even though Adorno often asserted that culture industry was a global system, its primary frame of reference is American culture. Detlev Claussen (2008: 136), for instance, underlines how the United States represented "the most advanced post" to observe this phenomenon during the 1940s and 1950s. Adorno spent several years working on the "Princeton Radio Research Project" in New York, and, along with Max Horkheimer, resided in Los Angeles, researching Hollywood and the consolidation of its star system.

These reflections evolved over decades, aiming not only to elucidate the cultural transformations accompanying the development of productive forces under capitalism but also to address its political dimensions, particularly the emergence of fascism. Consequently, references to Alfred Hugenberg and Adolf Hitler appear alongside Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin. In other words, Adorno's writings on the culture industry are anchored in a sociological analysis of Fordist regime in America and Nazism in Germany—arguably the two most significant mass dystopias

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of the twentieth century. This suggests that while the concept itself extends beyond the social context in which it was initially formulated, its sociological foundation remains specific. This discussion aims to examine the aspects of Adorno's interpretation of Fordism that are implicit in the concept of culture industry, further relating it to feminist critiques.

As Fredric Jameson (2005:154) has observed, for Adorno, the culture industry is both infrastructure and superstructure as it pertains simultaneously to the realms of production and consumption. Therefore, "culture industry" displays a double feature, encompassing both material and cultural dimensions. On the one hand, it is an industry comparable to any other highly monopolized sector within capitalism (such as the pharmaceutical or oil industries), whose output is what we contemporarily conceive as media, culture and/or entertainment. This industry is mainly sustained by advertisements, a tendency that nowadays has been exponentiated by social media. On the other hand, it serves as the social form of ideology—a vast apparatus encompassing television, radio, cinema, magazines, horoscopes, sports, and more, whose primary function is to conform people to the processes of reification. Consequently, the concept cannot be fully grasped by considering only one of its aspects. Adorno and Horkheimer (1969: 179) assert in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that "the industry is concerned only with individuals as consumers and employees, and indeed, it has reduced all of humanity, as well as each of its elements, to this exhaustive formula."

A central thesis related to this concept is that leisure time, or the so-called "free time" [*Freizeit*] (Adorno, 1997), dominated by culture industry, is a complement or extension to the alienated labor performed in factories or offices. Adorno repeatedly emphasized that, under capitalism, leisure is nothing but a continuation of labor. Concerned with the perpetuation of capitalism in a period (and place) of affluence and decreasing working hours, he aimed to explain how the capitalist reification process would extend beyond the immediate economic realm of labor. But what kind of labor? The monotonous, tedious, and alienating labor characteristic of Fordism, whether within offices or factories. This suggests that the concept of the culture industry delves into the experience of a separation between work and leisure, typical of the Welfare State that sustained the American ideal of full employment after World War II. The thesis posits that, in bourgeois society, leisure becomes an indispensable part of adapting individuals to alienated labor.

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Much like many Marxists of his time, Adorno constructs his theoretical framework based on the assumption of a wage-earning working class predominantly characterized by its whiteness, maleness, and middle-class position. Engaging with his colleagues at the Frankfurt School, he sought to elucidate how the post-war economy in the United States and Germany was characterized, among other factors, by an integration of the proletariat based on consumption and full employment[9]. The working class Adorno referenced was, without doubt, an anomaly, concerning both the broader American (and global) population and within the historical trajectory of capitalism—an assessment that, while not negating his analysis, demands reconsideration. From this perspective, the limitations of the concept of culture industry can be traced to the broader constraints inherent in Adorno's critique of Fordism.

What merits initial emphasis here is the role of women within this regime of accumulation. In the aforementioned letter, Adorno correlates the feminine consumer and character with authoritarianism; nevertheless, his writings offer no substantial consideration of how Fordism was differentially experienced by men and women within the same middle-class stratum. This dichotomy between domesticity and industrial labor, between work and leisure, and therefore between man *as a producer and a consumer* and women *as only a consumer* shaped his entire diagnosis[10].

[9] What Eduardo Altheman (2024: 528) discusses regarding Herbert Marcuse's diagnosis can also be referred to Adorno: "The capitalist uniqueness witnessed by Marcuse in the USA or Western Europe did influence his overall diagnosis. One must remember that, in those thirty years starting in 1945, capitalism yielded its best results, setting all-time records regarding social equality, employment, and rising living standards. [...] Inflation and unemployment were indeed kept in check at unprecedented levels, and the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest individuals was undeniably reduced in ways we, at the height of end-stage neoliberal capitalism, have come to grasp as inconceivable. Therefore, a tendency towards integration did point to a virtual and potential self-contained late capitalist formation, even if this was still only on the horizon. As Paul Mattick duly argued, 'It is clear that Marcuse is not realistically describing existing conditions but rather observable tendencies within these conditions.' We now know that the Fordist-Keynesian-Welfare arrangement was more volatile than it seemed and constituted more the exception than the rule in the history of capitalism."

[10] Even when considering the women who work outside the home, Adorno continues to associate them with the sphere of circulation, attached to a very orthodox diagnosis. This topic would return in the concatenated aphorisms "Excavation," "The truth about Hedda Gabler," and "Since I saw him," in *Minima Moralia,* in which Adorno resumes the discussion of the feminine character. The fact that Adorno maintains the idea that women in the job market can also be as reified as the former housewives is also proof that mixed with the sociological flaws of his theory, misogyny remains. In *Minima Moralia,* he states that "the admission of women to all kinds of supervised activities conceals the continuation of their dehumanization. In the large-scale enterprise, they remain what they were in the family: objects. One should consider not only their miserable working day in their profession and their life at home, which absurdly retains closed-household working conditions

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In contrast to the prevailing perception of a sophisticated theory distanced from orthodox Marxist tenets, the theory of the culture industry elucidates how Adorno's thought, in certain respects, adhered to what might be described as a traditional Marxist paradigm. Adorno's analysis, therefore, primarily considers the dichotomy between the spheres of production and consumption when addressing the culture industry. That is, while the concept of the culture industry cannot be regarded as an economistic theory of capitalism—given that Adorno is precisely attempting to move beyond a more orthodox Marxism to explain the social, cultural, and psychic reproduction of capitalism—Adorno relies on a dual block-like framework—home and factory—that perpetuates the invisibilization of a circuit essential not only to capital but also to understanding the culture industry itself.

This means that for a feminist interpretation of the culture industry, a third element must be considered. Marxist Feminism, which evolved concurrently with critical theory (and ought to be regarded as one of its most significant developments), has illuminated how this Marxian approach to capitalism neglected an element that crosses the domains of production and consumption and is presupposed by them: social reproduction, the "secret laboratory of capital" (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 2021: 71), for which women have historically been responsible, along with racialized and subaltern populations in the peripheries of capitalism.

As his letter to Fromm indicates, Adorno suggests that due to women's economic exclusion from capitalist production, they are integrated into this system *solely* through the consumption sphere. What he failed to recognize is that women—even the privileged white suburban housewives of the Fordist era—have always been integrated into this system not merely as consumers but also as agents not just

amidst industrial settings, but also think of them themselves. Willingly, without resistance, they reflect back the domination and identify with it. Instead of solving the women's question, male society has expanded its own principle to such an extent that the victims are no longer even able to pose the question. As long as they are granted a certain abundance of goods, they enthusiastically embrace their fate, leave the thinking to men, defame any reflection as a violation of the female ideal propagated by the culture industry, and generally find comfort in their lack of freedom, which they take to be the fulfillment of their sex. The defects they have to pay for this, chiefly neurotic stupidity, contribute to the continuation of this condition. Even in Ibsen's time, most women who represented anything bourgeois were ready to attack their hysterical sister, who took on the hopeless attempt to break out of the prison of society that so emphatically turned its four walls towards them all. The granddaughters, however, would smile indulgently at the hysterical woman without even feeling affected and would refer her to social welfare for treatment. The hysterical woman, who wanted the miraculous, has been replaced by the frantically busy fool who can hardly wait for the triumph of calamity (Adorno, 1951: 162-163).

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of commodities (like any other individual under capitalism, it should be noted, bearers of a social process), but of social reproduction, and thus as an intrinsic element of capitalist production. Reproduction, in this context, represents the third term in the Marxian dialectic between labor and capital, as it underpins both. Therefore, a feminist reading of the culture industry should account for this intricate dialectic, which remains insufficiently explored in Marxist theory. It is also essential to acknowledge that if the culture industry operates as both infra – and superstructure (and in this sense, the concept already points to a theory of capitalist reproduction), its relationship with gender must similarly be understood in dialectical terms rather than solely through women's association with the sphere of circulation.

In retrospect, it is evident that the culture industry system, as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer, crystallized in the United States during a period of post-war capitalist reorganization, which also entailed a reconfiguration of social reproduction. Middle-class women, who had entered the labor force due to the shortage of male labor during the two world wars, were subsequently relegated back to the domestic sphere. This shift represents a reinstatement of the so-called "family wage," premised on the notion that the masculine breadwinner's wage suffices to support his wife and children, thereby subordinating them to his authority and reinforcing patriarchal relations in the working class (Federici, 2021: 97). In other words, culture industry emerges as a form of universal mediation at a moment of profound backlash against the labor, social, political, intellectual, and social advancements made by women in preceding decades.

As Betty Friedan noted in her classic study, *The Feminine Mystique*[11], the percentage of women enrolled in universities in the 1920s, which stood at 47%, declined to 35% in the 1950s (with an average dropout rate of 60%). According to U.S. Census data[12], the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s represented the decades with the lowest average age of marriage for women in the United States from 1900 to the present. In the transition from the 1940s to the 1950s (precisely the period when the great essay on the subject was written by Adorno and Horkheimer), "the image

[11] Despite the many criticisms the book has received and continues to receive (as I will discuss later), it is worth turning to it because it is one of the earliest and most significant feminist studies of the relationship between what we now call domestic labor, social reproduction, the culture industry, and the suffering of American housewives. Viewed through this lens, the book could be considered a complementary study to critical theory's analyses of the culture industry.

[12] https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf

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of the American woman seems to have suffered a schizophrenic split," says Friedan (1977: 40). If in the 1920s, William Faulkner was published in women's magazines, from the 1940s onwards, these publications would turn exclusively to the reduction of women to their familial roles and the (re)constitution of the figure of the housewife and mother. In Friedan's words (1977: 13), "interior decorators were designing kitchens with mosaic murals and original paintings, for kitchens were once again the center of women's lives. Home sewing became a million-dollar industry. Many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands."

Adorno stresses that the culture industry extends the domain of labor by replicating, outside of formal workspaces, the same closed and impenetrable systems encountered by workers within factories and offices. He invokes Lukács' reflections on the reification process to discuss how individuals, reduced to mere appendices of the production process, adopt a contemplative stance toward work presented to them as a preconceived and ready system governed by immutable laws. The worker, arriving at the factory or office, confronts a fully operational production apparatus to which they are subjected and appears indifferent to them as they become its mere appendage. This engenders a contemplative disposition in workers, who perceive themselves as impotent before a world order that seems to preexist them (Lukács, 1977: 264). The system, appearing to function autonomously, fosters the illusion that its existence is independent of individuals; lacking alternatives, the worker acquiesces. Adorno extends this model to culture, illustrating that the rigidities observed in the factory are mirrored in or doubled by the culture industry, which is equally inflexible, as if culture industry was the cultural doppelganger of labor.

Through discussions of social reproduction, one can draw an analogy between the factory and the home to comprehend the culture industry more deeply. In that sense, what is the domestic sphere if not another form of factory? Drawing upon the insights of Marxist feminists who conceptualize the home and family as "social factories,"[13] it is possible to apply the same theoretical principles to the housewife

[13] As Hopkins (2017: 133) states, "The emphasis on worker autonomy and working-class struggle in what became known as the "social factory" instead of the factory workplace became front and center. The term social factory was coined by Mario Tronti in 1963, a leading Italian Marxist at the time. [...] Clearly, Tronti's work provided the occasion for Italian autonomist Marxist feminists to elaborate on reproduction. In so doing, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and others had a significant theoretical and political impact within and outside Italy. Theoretically, they extended Tronti's work to

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that goes for the industrial worker, thereby examining the effects of the culture industry on women from this viewpoint – which implies considering domestic space as a territory occupied by capital and built into its image, as the main place of the multidimensional production of the working class. Therefore, for housewives, their factory is the domestic sphere, and the family is a form they, too, encounter as preconfigured and rigid. The Fordist middle-class home is mechanized as the factory itself, replete with washing machines, dryers, electric vacuum cleaners, and a plethora of household appliances. Even the burden of cooking was, in this period, attenuated by the proliferation of canned goods, the iconic Campbell's soup, later immortalized by Andy Warhol, frozen foods, and Aunt Jemima pancake mixes, frequently mentioned by Adorno in his essays (1996: 231). However, even though this industrialization of the home enhanced what could be understood as the productivity of domestic labor – liberating women's physical effort and time, herein lies another contradiction that enriches the thesis of the culture industry from a feminist perspective. If Adorno perceptively recognized that technology and full employment, which ostensibly increased leisure time, were not as emancipatory as they might appear, one might argue that an even greater paradox pertains to the realm of reproduction: each technological innovation, ostensibly designed to diminish the necessity of reproductive labor, was accompanied by an expansion of reproduction itself during the same period in a way that gendered domestic reproduction and culture industry were merged to the point of indistinguishability. The so-called free time ostensibly made available by new technological advancements in the reproductive sphere was, paradoxically, consumed by additional reproductive activities as well as by culture industry itself. As Friedan (1977: 230) elucidates, this dynamic resulted in:

> "Housewifery expands to fill the time available, or motherhood expands to fill the time available, or even sex expands to fill the time available. This is, without question, the true explanation for the fact that even with all the new labor-saving appliances, the modern American housewife probably spends more time on housework than her grandmother. It is also part of the explanation for our national preoccupation with sex and love, and for the continued baby boom."

develop a conception of unpaid work outside of the formal factory, demonstrating how the reproduction of labor power in the home underpinned capitalism. Dalla Costa and James in particular argued for unpaid labor in the home to be valued and paid as labor. While Marx focused on the wage relation as central to capitalism, these feminists argued that women's work was the unpaid caring labor necessary to reproduce the wage labor force."

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Although several of Friedan's insights in this book may warrant critique, what is decisive here is that the culture industry, in this context, serves increasingly as a supplement to the sphere of reproduction, catering to the necessity of occupying time, expanding the domain of reproduction, and acclimatizing women to monotonous, repetitive, and alienating forms of reproductive labor—a dynamic manifest in the very products of this system. Susan Willis, for instance, drawing from the work of Tania Modleski, discusses the soap operas:

> "As we all know, nothing ever really happens, nor is any problem ever fully resolved in a soap opera. The characters who open a particular episode may drop out of sight for a day or two, a character might announce a dramatic or scandalous event, but its culmination and consequences may drag on for weeks. Viewers learn to hold plots and people in suspension, waiting from daily episode to daily episode in unbelieving anticipation of dénouement. As Modleski puts it: 'Soap operas are important to their viewers in part because they never end…The narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation an end in itself' (Modleski, 1982:88). Modleski astutely compares waiting as a formal feature of soap operas with the lived experience of the housewife. Alone at home, her husband at work, some or all of her children at school, the housewife performs all the daily chores necessary to maintain house and family in an all-encompassing ambience of waiting" (Willis, 1991: 4).

As Willis points out, soap operas make the frustrating experience of the housewife's waiting (waiting for the children to return from school, the husband to come back from work, the washing machine to stop, the cake to bake, etc.) more enjoyable and "allows her to apprehend waiting as pleasure" (Willis, 1991: 4). The same applies to women's and variety magazines, which are, by excellence, the typical genre of waiting rooms that foment distracted attention. This feature has become the center of the contemporary culture industry as social media is nothing more than an apparatus for wasting time (and empty waiting) – as Mark Zuckerberg recognized himself (Frank and Henkel, 2021).

In this sense, it is possible to state that women were not exactly agents of the commodity but rather that they were the main targets of the culture industry in an intense process of restructuring social reproduction in the middle sectors of society. That is, the apparatus of the culture industry functioned as a binding agent, a cement, uniting production and consumption, labor and leisure, and perhaps

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more significantly, as a force that interwove production and reproduction, profoundly influencing gender relations and reinforcing male domination through various mechanisms.

The thesis that leisure time serves as an extension of labor can, in this context, be re-evaluated through the lens of social reproduction. For women engaged in domestic work, there existed no clear demarcation between free time—understood as time outside of formal labor—and the professional realms of the factory or office. The porosity between reproductive labor and immersion in the culture industry demonstrates that, for women, the continuity between these spheres was even more pronounced (something most parts of the population started experiencing only after the advent of the personal computer and, more recently, the smartphone and similar gadgets). This group occupies a peculiar position in which they simultaneously experience a state of perpetual leisure and a complete absence of leisure, rendering them entirely exposed to the culture industry. To this day, radio, television, and their contemporary successors – such as music apps, podcasts, and so on – accompany the solitude of domestic labor for a significant part of society. When one has the TV or the radio on, one has the impression that they are not alone. In Brazil and Latin America, the radio is known to be the companion of paid domestic workers (as cheap reproductive labor is a heritage from slavery, now reconfigured in its postmodern digitalized version). Only looking through the lens of reproduction is it possible to understand Federici's aforementioned idea that "we have always belonged to capital every moment of our lives" (Federici, 2021: 20) and perceive how close it is to Adorno's critique of free time. The evolution of the productive forces within reproduction did not confer greater freedom from reproductive tasks. Instead, it and the culture industry intensified them—an evident illustration of how capitalist rationalization can produce a great deal of irrationality.

Although they were not the most exploited and oppressed women in American capitalism, it is possible to say that this sector of social reproduction was one of the first great laboratories of culture industry. As Willis highlights, although it is not statistically representative of society as a whole, "middle-class White America defines the model and the look of consumer capitalism" (Willis, 1991: 54)[14]. The fact

[14] One could protest this frame of analysis, as righfully did Bell Hooks (1984: 2-3) concerning Betty Friedan: "her famous phrase, "the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women-housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life. [...] She did not discuss who would be

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that Nazism was the other system where the culture industry blossomed only shows how authoritarian this apparatus was from its origins. One could even state that the culture industry in the 1940s and 1950s functioned as an apparatus for implementing the German KKK [*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*] *via* the market in the U.S.[15] These women were the perfect test group, exposed 24 hours a day to the apparatus. And besides that, white women who worked at home were not the only ones most affected by it: as Mariarosa Dalla Costa would claim in the 1970s, every woman, whether working outside the home or not, married or not, performes domestic labor (1975: 71) – which means that even for those who work for a wage but are responsible for domestic work and have a double shift, the relationship with "free time" was different from men. These housewives served as guinea pigs, for example, for the practice of shopping out of boredom, which today has spread under neoliberalism across almost all genders and classes with digitalization and cheapening of commodities produced by the intensification of labor precarization in the Global South. At that moment, when Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their famous essay on the culture industry, capitalism discovered that boredom and anxiety could be highly profitable.

This means, in Adornian terms, that it is not just the monotony of Fordist work that is the other face of the culture industry, but even more so, the monotony of the social reproduction that accompanies it and that it presupposes. The chronic

called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. [...] Nor did she move beyond her own life experience to acquire an expanded perspective on the lives of women in the United States". However, it is worth highlighting that one of the key aspects of critical theory is the criticism from a Marxist perspective of capitalism's high points (which sometimes compromised a deeper systemic approach of capitalism but also allowed them to criticize what no one in Marxism had done before them: consumer society, full employment, culture industry, and so on. As an industry, the culture industry produced for those who could consume and had time to read best-seller novels, horoscopes, and magazines. Its target audience was the white middle class, even though we could argue that non-white women were also highly subjected to it because they often worked in paid social reproduction, operating in a kind of mixed sphere. It is worth noticing that even if its products are "free," the culture industry still survives by advertising products for those who can consume them. That is why Willis states that white-middle class set the tone of consumer capitalism – because they are its primary consumers. This model has now spread to a major part of society with the financialization of poverty (Gago, 2020) and digitalization.

[15] This assertion is not to alleviate the blame of women that took part in Nazism or even to suggest that women in Nazi Germany were the primary victims of Nazism. Patriarchy as a structure has no gender and historically depended on women to survive. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing how the Fordist model in Germany and the U.S. during this period was constructed on the restructuring of reproduction and how the culture industry played a similar part in these two realities.

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fatigue and depression of housewives, accompanied by a whole process of medicalizing their suffering from Miltown and Valium to Zolpidem –what shows how culture industry also produces consumers for other industries – is updated in the generalized fatigue and anxiety that has taken over digitalized societies in the COVID-19 pandemic period, in which 24-hour exposure to culture industry was experienced by parts of the population that could stay home during that period.

Today, it seems almost obvious to say that the culture industry serves male domination and that everything related to women's images is inseparable from economic elements (as it is widely known today that women considered good-looking tend to earn more than women who are not – and this is also valid for sexuality and race). But curiously, the relationship of this apparatus with the sphere of reproduction is remarkably underexplored. In other words, it is possible to assert that the form of the culture industry weighed more heavily on women—not because they were outside the process of economic production, as Adorno argued—but precisely because they were deeply, yet invisibly, connected to it through reproduction. Reproduction once again served as capital's laboratory in this case. It is not fortuitous that nowadays, analyses of the current digital capitalism and its extraction of unpaid labor resort to the allegory of "the digital housewife" (Jarrett, 2016)[16] and insist on the idea of the domestic space as a laboratory[17]

[16] Jarret states that (2016: 4), "the term, the Digital Housewife, describes the actor that emerges from the structures and practices of the ostensibly voluntary work of consumers as they express themselves, their opinions and generate social solidarity with others in commercial digital media while, at the same time, adding economic value to those sites. The use of the term "housewife" may seem problematic – I could have readily used the non-gender specific term "domestic worker" for instance – but it is used here quite consciously. The figure of "the housewife" has a complex role in the political, economic, and social history of women. Using it here is intended to foreground the importance to this project of feminist thought about this history. It also highlights the importance of gender within the social and theoretical history of labor and in particular the kinds of labor associated with the sphere of social reproduction". She also adds that "consumers' interactions with digital media sites and with other users via those sites are thus a source of economic value. This indicates that the digital economy is fundamentally driven by consumer labor and, consequently, operates with a very blurry distinction between production and leisure activity (Jarrett, 2016: 40). What I argue here is that if we take the considerations above, one could relate the old fashioned culture industry to its new digitalized version through a combination of feminist theory and critical theory. This allows one to explore not only the current role of reproduction - in both a materialist sense, through the extraction of labor, and a cultural sense, through the extraction of surplus behavior (Zuboff, 2019: 65) as well as the fusion of free time and labor in our more than late capitalism.

[17] Verónica Gago and Luci Cavallero (2024: 28) assert that the financialization and digitalization of contemporary capitalism continue to make the home-factory a laboratory for capital under neoliberalism, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic:"If we used to speak of a triple workday for women, lesbians, transvestites, and trans people (waged labor, domestic work, and community work), today we face the near impossibility of distinguishing the hours in which each of these shifts occurs. On

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Finally, it is worth highlighting that the problem with reproduction refers not only to the unequal division of tasks between men and women, but the subordination of unpaid labor to paid labor therein presupposed and the privatization and devaluation of everything related to reproduction. A feminist theory of capitalism must recognize that capitalism has always been sustained (and increasingly is) by an extractivist axis—which does not invalidate the fact that it is a system sustained by the valorization of value and the spread of commodity form. However, if one does not take into account that this valorization has as its basic presupposition the privatization of social reproduction (and all the gender, race, and sexuality inequality that derives from it), the explanation of capitalism will be partial and erroneous, and the same applies to the theory of culture industry – a central concept of Adorno's theory of late capitalism. Furthermore, the concept of commodity fetishism explains how the process of constituting capitalist society produces social forms that obnubilate our perception of how this reality functions. Marx did not pay due attention to this, but one of the elements "invisibilized" by this process is precisely reproduction. Without a theory of social reproduction, Marxism fails to address the home and family and often views them either as the last protective barrier against capitalism or as spaces abstractly taken by the commodity form, as we saw in Adorno's letter—without explaining how these elements are inserted into capitalist production itself.

3 GENDER AS A COMMODITY AND OTHER LAYERS OF REPRODUCTION IN CULTURE INDUSTRY

Since the advent of the culture industry, feminists have called attention to the devastating effects of this apparatus on women's subjectivities (and now, with its digital platform peak on every gender's subjectivity) – especially concerning body image, beauty standards, the blur between work and leisure and so on. Yet few feminists combined this critique with Adorno's reflections on culture industry, perhaps

one hand, because there is a spatial indistinction that mixes everything together. On the other, because the workday not only expands in terms of hours but also intensifies due to the lack of distinctions and the growing accumulation of tasks. Every hour becomes a triple shift in itself. While teleworking, one is caregiving; while doing community work, one attends to family; while working from home, one handles procedures to access social benefits and cooks. For all these reasons, homes themselves have become spaces of experimentation for new dynamics of capital. In this context, there seems to be a sort of continuum of labor that even challenges the division between public and private that structures the labor market".

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because this concept is still somehow understood as a theory of reification of art and culture and less comprehended as a theory of socialization and politics under capitalism; perhaps because there was an abandonment of feminist Marxism's radicality, as suggests Wendy Brown.[18] So, if in the last section I focused on demonstrating the importance of feminism for a critical theory of the culture industry, the aim of this section is to argue how Adorno's ideas can contribute to a contemporary feminist critique of culture.

In that sense, Susan Willis, from whom I borrow part of the title of this item and one of the major theorists of feminism and culture industry, points out that:

> "In late twentieth-century capitalism, gendering has invariably to do with commodity consumption. We buy into a gender in the same way we buy into a style. It makes no difference whether we choose unisex or an ultra-feminine image, the act of buying is affirmed and the definition of gender as commodity is maintained. As Marx defined it, the commodity form is the negation of process and the social relations of production. When gender is assimilated to the commodity, it is conceived as something fixed and frozen: a number of sexually defined attributes that denote either masculinity or femininity on the supermarket shelf of gender possibilities" (Willis, 1991: 19).[19]

[18] Wendy Brown goes straight to the point: "To the extent that feminist theory does engage this tradition today, it is primarily through Jürgen Habermas; and within Habermas's extensive oeuvre, it is his theorization of the public sphere and communicative rationality—his later, markedly Kantian and more liberal thinking—that feminist theory has taken up. And whatever the value of Habermas's work on communicative ethics, it cannot be said to bear the philosophical reach or political radicalism represented by the early Frankfurt School. So also, then, has something in feminist thinking been tamed [...] this eschewal would seem to be com mensurate with an abandoned radicalism on the part of feminist theory itself and especially its replacement of ambitions to overthrow relations of domination in favor of projects of resistance, reform, or resignification, on the one hand, and normative political theory abstracted from conditions for its realization, on the other (Brown, 2006: 2). One exception would be Roswhita Scholz (2000) who somehow inverts Adorno's argument to state that value is related to masculinity – but she also does not further develop the concept of culture industry.

[19] Willis analyzes various moments of the commodification of gender, from the glamourization of domestic work incorporated in the Barbie "from the early sixties whose outfit includes a checkered apron, a wooden spoon, and dramatically spiked high heels" (Willis, 1991: 80) to the muscular bodies of He-Man and the feminine fitness empowerment produced by Jane Fonda's Workout program in the 1980s. Inspired by Walter Benjamin when analyzing capitalism through the history of toys, she argues that "our culture is mass culture, where one of the strongest early influences on gender is the mass toy market." (Willis, 1991: 20). Even though this changed in the last years, it is debatable how much did it change. The baby car toy is now replaced by a modern sling toy, and in Germany, it is very common to see girls of four and five years playing with it – like little miniatures of their modern mothers that profit from the sling's mobility. Neoliberalism and the fear of the

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This means that the culture industry sediments gender norms, producing adaptation instead of autonomy[20] as it further tends to reduce gender experience to a consumption experience. This does not mean that feminist claims about gender and sexuality are merely "cultural." Stating that gender is mediated by the culture industry does not mean falling into a simple argument that feminism has been co-opted by the market, but rather understanding that genders are constituted, like all socialization in capitalism, mainly through the consumption of commodities, and more than that, through the culture industry that increasingly becomes the mediating apparatus of commodity consumption today through advertising. It is necessary to recognize that culture industry, increasingly, is a form that mediates gendering and sexualization processes and thus subsumes them to the rules of capital. Judith Butler stated in the classic *Gender Trouble*: "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1999: 179).

If gender is a process that takes the form of something stable, one could argue that one of the most significant instances of this stabilization or the illusion of stabilization is culture industry itself, whose schematism will also organize gender stereotypes and their standardization processes[21]. What Adorno stated about radio music could also be applied to gender; stereotypes are imposed on us by "plug-

great replacement connected to white supremacism are enhancing the socialization of women for care work and reinstating the socialization for motherhood.

[20] As Lambert Zuidervaart (2006: 262) underlines, the culture industry compromises autonomy in three different senses: "the internal and self-critical independence of the autonomous work of art; the relative independence of (some of) high culture and 3) the autonomy of the self as a political and moral agent". Zuidervaart also problematizes the masculinist content of the idea of the autonomy of art, widely debated by feminists nowadays, something that also has to be addressed in a feminist critique of Adorno's work but does fit in the realm of this article, which is more focused in the third kind of autonomy destroyed by culture industry.

[21] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1969: 151) suggest that "the task that Kantian schematism had still expected from subjects[...] is taken over from the subject by the industry". The industry conducts schematism as its primary service to the customer". The culture industry organizes our experience of the world through images, stereotypes, and rigid patterns; it dictates how the individual apprehends reality both in sensory terms (consider the changes in perception brought about by technologies) and in what pertains to the order of understanding.

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ging[22]" techniques: a constant repetition of images and behaviors on screens, photographs, and billboards that aims to overcome our resistance through fatigue. In other words, one could say that we adhere to gender stereotypes as one ends up whistling a tune after hearing it twenty times on the radio, whether one likes it or not[23]. If Butler's argument that what's revolutionary about feminism is negating the pre-definitions of what a woman is and of gender itself as a reified category, then a feminist struggle has to address the generification models produced by the culture industry[24].

In this context, a book like *The Feminine Mystique* would greatly benefit from being interpreted through the framework of the culture industry, as it illuminates aspects that Adorno did not problematize. Fundamentally, the book also stands as one of the earliest and most significant analyses of the interplay between media, consumption, and the capitalist construction of female submission[25]. Even though

[22] In the essay "On Popular Music" (2002), Adorno draws on the idea of "plugging" (a widely known radio technique) to explain radio *hits.* "Plugging" relates to the manipulation of taste and the process of creating popular music by constantly repeating the same songs on the radio. The role of repetition would be to break down the individual's resistance to the ever-same by acclimating them to it. This repetition holds fundamental psychological significance, as it induces an automatic response of conformity in the face of the absence of any possible escape from this situation. Genderwise, it is visible in the current digital culture industry the same technique applies with the algorithmic logic that reinforces what's already dominant.

[23] In 1934, Marcel Mauss (1934: 7) observed the effect of the cinema on Women's way of mobilizing the body: "a sort of revelation came to me in the hospital. I was ill in New York. I wondered where I had seen young women walking like my nurses before. I had time to think about it. I finally realized it was in the movies. Back in France, I noticed, especially in Paris, the prevalence of this way of walking; the young women were French, and they walked in the same way. In fact, American walking styles, thanks to the movies, were beginning to arrive here. This was an idea I could generalize. The position of the arms, the hands while walking, form a social idiosyncrasy, not merely the product of some purely individual, almost entirely psychic arrangements and mechanisms".

[24] This means that less than a thinker of "identity" or "identitarian," Butler argues for a non-identitarian—if we prefer Adorno's term—a negative approach to gender, which a critique of the culture industry could enrich.

[25] Manon Garcia, begins her book *We are not Born Submissive* with a provocation that speaks directly to the topic addressed here: "From Penelope patiently weaving the shroud as she waits for the return of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, to Anastasia reveling in the commands of Christian Grey in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, from *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* to *Desperate Housewives*, from Annie Ernaux's *The Possession* to the actresses claiming for men a "right to bother" women, literature, movies, TV shows, and the news all stage and aestheticize a female submission
that is chosen, sometimes professed, and appears as a source of satisfaction and pleasure" (Garcia, 2021: 1). In her reinterpretation of Simone de Beauvoir, she states that male domination was always accompanied by a social process of production of submission in women. Her sociological reading of Beauvoir can be combined with Adorno's reflection on how the culture industry subsumes people not only through suffering but also via a complex approach to satisfaction. Garcia proposes, however, differently from Adorno, that "studying women's submission is a feminist enterprise as it consists in listening to women's experiences and taking them seriously, and in not deciding

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it addressed only middle-class white women, as Bell Hooks stated (1984), what it describes in terms of the effect of media on gender can be further and critically developed to also think about race and sexuality. Friedan, who engages extensively with the content of women's magazines in her study, provides a reproduction of the table of contents from the July 1960 issue of the women's magazine *McCall's*:

> "A lead article on "increasing baldness in women," caused by too much brushing and dyeing; A long poem in primer-size type about a child, called 'A Boy Is A Boy'; A short story about how a teenager who doesn't go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl; A short story about the minute sensations of a baby throwing his bottle out of the crib; The first of a two-part intimate 'up-to-date' account by the Duke of Windsor on 'How the Duchess and I now live and spend our time. The influence of clothes on me and vice versa'; A short story about a nineteen-year-old girl sent to a charm school to learn how to bat her eyelashes and lose at tennis; The story of a honeymoon couple commuting between separate bedrooms after an argument over gambling at Las Vegas; An article on 'how to overcome an inferiority complex'; A story called 'Wedding Day'; The story of a teenager's mother who learns how to dance rock-and-roll; Six pages of glamorous pictures of models in maternity clothes; Four glamorous pages on 'reduce the way the models do'; An article on airline delays; Patterns for home sewing; Patterns with which to make "Folding Screens— Bewitching Magic"; An article called 'An Encyclopedic Approach to Finding a Second Husband'; A 'barbecue bonanza,' dedicated 'to the Great American Mister who stands, chef's cap on head, fork in hand, on terrace or back porch, in patio or backyard anywhere in the land, watching his roast turning on the spit. And to his wife, without whom (sometimes) the barbecue could never be the smashing summer success it undoubtedly is…'"

This magazine's summary reveals that the "administered life" that Adorno discussed when referring to the culture industry, in the case of women, involved an even deeper administration. If one could argue that culture industry more and more thinks, remembers, and even drives for us – think of how nowadays your smartphones mediate how we watch a concert, look at a landscape, move around the city, and organize our memories – one could also argue that this administra-

in advance that they are victims, guilty, passive, or perverse" (Garcia, 2021: 6). This means there is a complex dialect between liberation or, still, pseudo-liberation and submission. Freedom is often portrayed as the "image" of the modern woman, yet this perception is fraught with contradictions. What is interesting here is that the ideology of freedom conceals other forms of domination.

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tion extends to women's bodies and behaviors since they were and still are the target of a continuous production of a dissatisfaction designed to be filled by a series of useless and often health-harming products[26]. It is an industry that produces a constant alienation of women from their bodies, resulting in the perpetual production of a feeling of inferiority and discontent—something that intensifies in non-white or non-gender conforming folks. The occupation with appearance increasingly becomes an additional work shift and has immediate material impacts on the life of women. The advent of social media further aggravates this situation. Previously, body dysphoria produced by the culture industry was related to its beauty standards incorporated in celebrities. Nowadays, as several plastic surgeons report, people come to their clinics not with a photo of one Hollywood superstar but with their own pictures taken with Instagram filters as desired models for surgery. People today want to look like their digital, algorithmic-oriented avatars – this is the extent of the current culture industry's impact on the body, as well as the extent of how much the digital world is producing reality. But the culture industry's effect on the female body does not stop there; it even affects reproductive rights. During Fordism, as Friedan shows, it played a central role in organizing the *baby boom*. Even nowadays, with the rise of the far-right on social media and influencers stating that the birth control pill modifies women's brains and the new trend of *Tradwives* (a curious post-postmodern Fordism nostalgia), the impact of the culture industry on women's role in reproduction continues to be immediate. Therefore, it is necessary to revive a project of critique of the culture industry, which Marxist and feminist leftist movements have generally abandoned in recent decades.

The "retroactive needs" that Adorno and Horkheimer (1969: 147) discuss in their excerpt on culture industry, in this case, likewise mean more than the production of false needs but rather concern a disciplining process that, in addition to accustoming women to reproductive labor, just as it integrated the male worker into the monotonous routine of the Fordist assembly line, further reinforced their subordinate position in the hierarchy of genders, races, and sexuality. In this sense,

[26] Susan Sontag relates the valorization of female youth – the most desired object in our society, beauty-wise – to a combination of the commodification of women and capitalist valorization of everything new: "This reevaluation of the life cycle of the young brilliantly serves a secular society whose idols are ever increasing industrial productivity and the unlimited cannibalization of nature" (Sontag, 2023: 5). The result is that "Women are taught to see their body in *parts*, and to evaluate each part separately. Breasts, feet, hips, waistline, neck, eyes, nose, complexion, hair, and so on – each in turn is submitted to na anxious, fretful, often despairing scrutiny" (Sontag, 2023: 91).

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it is possible to assert that the culture industry is a gendered and gendering apparatus, sexualized and sexualizing, racialized and racializing, as it produces and reproduces genders, races, sexualities, and inequality among them.

This means that an intersectional reading of the concept is much needed. The schematism of the culture industry, as stated above, which Adorno and Horkheimer examine, prepares the apprehension of the world based on rigid stereotypes—an element that is usually referred to reification in the entertainment realm—can be mobilized to understand how this process also occurs in terms of gender, race, and sexuality. As an apparatus that, as Adorno discussed, deals with desiring for us, or rather, structuring our desire, it is also valid to think about how the culture industry plays a fundamental role in maintaining compulsory cis-gendered heterosexuality to this day.

The infrastructural aspect of the culture industry, beyond the entertainment industry itself, is related to the reorganization of social reproduction and the place of women in this process, as well as to the deepening of economic inequality between genders, sexualities, and races based on the division between production and reproduction.

Its superstructural dimension, in turn, reinforces the process of gendering that further subordinates women and other subaltern gender, races, and sexualities both from a subjective and objective perspective. If, as Adorno and Horkheimer show, the culture industry as a superstructure promotes the destruction of autonomy—both individual and political—and thus replaces and reinforces the capitalist social process—"so that the simple reproduction of the spirit does not turn into expanded reproduction" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969: 154-155)—the same can be said about the gender, sexuality, and race dynamics of this apparatus. Its ideological form, derived from the commodity form, is inseparable from the social and economic order in which it is inserted. Furthermore, also care work, inside the home, becomes the object of intense administration, as this process of disciplining and adaptation goes through a series of heteronomous impositions coming from culture industry on how to take care of children, husbands, the house, and oneself. Just look at the programming of various channels to this day or Instagram influencers, where the attractions are presented as guides to cooking, behavior, fashion, relationships, decoration, and education, among many others. Google just announced a smartphone that suggests recipes with a photo of one's refrigerator content. All care work, including self-care, is mediated by this form. There is a pre-

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scribed performance from the moment a woman gets up until the time she goes to bed – which means capital organizes our lives where we least expect.

Someone could argue (as many do) today, despite, for instance, of the frightening similarity of our magazines with the magazine discussed by Friedan more than 60 years later, that the culture industry is no longer the same and that one can choose, for example, to consume images of "gender or body positivity" instead of the stereotypes that contribute to the illness of women, LGBTQIA+ folks, non-white people, etc. Obviously, a more inclusive capitalism is better than a completely exclusive one. However, the question that Adorno helps us pose, as feminists, is whether this constitutes a real democratization. One of the cores of the culture industry thesis (misunderstood by sociology to this day) is that an analysis of particular "cultural goods" and their content is not enough to address the objective and subjective effects of this apparatus on people's lives. The social core of its existence is much more in the (reified and reifying) function it performs as a system than in the ideas it transmits:

> "Contrary to what happens in the liberal era, industrialized culture, much like much as national-popular culture [völkisch] in fascism, can afford indignation over capitalism, but not the rejection of the threat of castration. This threat constitutes its entire essence. It endures the organized relaxation of morals towards uniformed men in the cheerful films produced for them and, ultimately, in reality. What is crucial today is no longer puritanism, although it still asserts itself in the form of women's organizations, but rather the necessity inherent in the system not to release the consumer, not to give them even a moment's inkling of the possibility of resistance. The principle dictates that all needs are to be presented to the consumer as fulfillable by the culture industry, while on the other hand, these needs are pre-arranged in such a way that the consumer experiences themselves only as an eternal consumer, as an object of the culture industry. The industry not only persuades them that its deception is satisfaction but also conveys that, regardless of the situation, they must make do with what is offered." (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969: 172).

If one finds in this excerpt yet another misogynistic reference related to the culture industry in the figure of "women's organizations", one can also glimpse at a fundamental reflection for thinking about the concept of the culture and feminism industry today, even more so under the regime of monetizing attention present in social networks, that is, the idea that even the critique of culture industry will be

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consumed through it, and this is what matters. One of its most severe ideological effects is to reduce the concept of freedom to the freedom of consuming – a core pillar in today's social platforms' pretense defense of "freedom of expression." Something like the body positivity trends we see on social media, in this sense, are nothing more than the counterpart of an entire communication and socialization system based on body negativity. If there were no culture industry (with gender, race, and sexuality domination embedded in it), no body positivity campaign would be necessary. The function of body positivity is not to improve the health of those who consume the products of the culture industry but to offer an alternative commodity as a solution to the discontent of a sector of the population—leaving out the possibility of thinking about actual alternatives to this system. Besides, these pseudo countertendencies of the apparatus are not new. Tabaco industries (and its lobby in film) have been playing with both "body negativity" and women's desire for liberation since the 1930s, advertising cigarettes as empowering commodities. Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, conducted many successful campaigns for Lucky Strike at the same time associating slimness and cigarettes – "Reach for Lucky instead of a sweet" – and with posters with women smoking with the headline "An ancient prejudice has been removed," which made the company a top seller for many years (Curtis, 2002).

This means that if culture industry reproduces capitalist forms of intersectional domination, it also incorporates its self-critique—as seen in the index of the magazine cited by Friedan on overcoming women's inferiority complexes, this very thing being reinforced by the culture industry's apparatus. Particularly in this case, we need Adorno to understand this process. In other words, the problem is not criticizing the assimilation of the critique by the culture industry but the existence of the apparatus itself, which nowadays has become more second nature than ever[27]. In this sense, as stated in the beggining of this section, feminism needs critical theory just as critical theory needs feminism to rise to the challenges of the contemporary moment.

Finally, it is worth noting that one of the great merits of the concept of the culture industry lies in its ability to question to the very nature of what constitutes

[27] As Jordi Maiso sets forth (2018: 134), the combination of culture and industry, which someday was perceived as contradictory terms, is entirely naturalized: "It could be said that the naturalness and profusion with which people talk about "culture industries" today refers to an entity that is deeply rooted in contemporary societies: no one seems to doubt what it means and the term seems to have acquired global validity."

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"free time." This question is of paramount importance to contemporary feminism. After all, what is—and what could be - free time for women? Amid the increasing privatization of social reproduction—which disproportionately burdens vulnerable feminized populations—the precarization of labor and the blurring of boundaries between labor and digital "leisure" (a form of entertainment that often engenders more psychological suffering and illness than anything else) imposed by digital platforms, the question of free time, as well as the defense of its existence as something genuinely free, is more pressing than ever. And for this, we must turn to Adorno.

This article sought to explore how the concept of the culture industry might be re-evaluated through a feminist—and Marxist—lens and to discuss how feminism can draw from critical theory to expand its critique of domination. Rather than claiming to exhaust the avenues for feminist analysis of this idea, the article endeavored to illustrate that advancing Critical Theory necessitates a rigorous engagement with its inherent oversights. This entails a thorough examination of Critical Theory's historical development, alongside an acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the Frankfurt School and a reflection on how these failures can inform future theoretical unfolding. This may suggest that, at times, we must apply Adorno's idea that we must confront and elaborate on our past to move forward. If critical theory does not incorporate reflection on this misogynistic moment within itself, it will seal its own fate.

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