Critical Theory
and Audiovisual Media

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Post-war mass communication and media studies have had two periods of radical change, the late 1960s-early 1970s and the 1980s, of which the former was characterised by the rise of Marxism and the latter by its decline. These transformations did not take place simultaneously in all countries, but as a generalisation this seems to hold true. For instance, Frands Mortensen (1994) recalls the year 1977 as the turning-point when critical vocabulary in his work began, for the time being at least, to fade out. Mortensen's fate was shared by many of the turn-of-the-seventies generation throughout Europe, the *soixante-huitards or '68ers' as the French call* them. As a result, some avoided radical thought altogether, denouncing their Marxist past; others changed to postmodernism, while a few still adhered to the Marxist project by trying to reshape it. However, they all had to keep abreast of the new 1980s generation – a generation more in tune with economies of deregulation, individualist policies and cultural anti-modernism.

Despite the many decisive breaks between the Marxism of the late sixties-early seventies and the post- and anti-Marxism of the eighties, there is one interesting continuity which, in the Nordic context at least, is relevant to point out: the critique of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. While it is true that Danish media studies was heavily influenced by Critical Theory

in the 1970s, it is equally true that at the same time the Frankfurt School was the object of acrimonious attack in Finland (see, especially, Nordenstreng 1975, 247-261). Actually, Denmark and Finland represented the antipodes of the North-European Marxism of the time, those of Western and 'Eastern' Marxisms so to speak, as Mortensen (1994) correctly has reminded us – indeed, for a semiotic Marxist living northeast of Copenhagen and Aarhus in the 1970s, Denmark looked like a promised land on the map of Nordic media studies. What was unexpected was that during the new phase introduced in the 1980s all this seemed to come to an end, and stern denunciations of Critical Theory were also to be heard from the peninsula of Jutland and its adjoining islands. (For a Danish critique of these trends and a knowledgeable plea for Critical Theory, see, however, Bondebjerg 1988.) In an ironic twist of history, orthodox Marxists of the seventies and what have been called the 'new revisionists' (Curran 1990) of the eighties had come to join forces against the Frankfurt School.

Now, given the decline of general interest in Marxism and the turn to postmodern popular culturalism in the eighties, is there any future for a Frankfurt School approach to critical media theory? Or, does it, as Kim Christian Schrøder and Michael Skovmand (1992, 2) have suggested, merely echo "voices from the past"? Using the debate

on 20th century audiovisual culture as a focus, I will address the question by trying to show how the mass communication theory presented by the Frankfurt School still remains relevant and may legitimately command the attention of critically minded media scholars.

The 20th century has witnessed at least three periods during which the nature and status of moving images have been at the centre of more or less comprehensive cultural-theoretical concerns: one in the 1920s with the stabilisation of the feature film and film art; one in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of full-blown television; and one from the 1980s to the present with the transformation of television, combined with the introduction of video and computer-based media. One of the underlying assumptions during this 70-year-debate boils down to the idea that if there is one thing that characterises 20th-century culture, at least its latter half, then it is audiovisuality. It is this view that unites 1920s avant-gardists and cinéaste-critics (e.g. Balázs 1982), 1950s and 1960s filmologists in France and Italy (e.g. Cohen-Séat 1961) who preceded but were, unfortunately, overshadowed by Marshall McLuhan, and the 1980s postmodernists (e.g. Kroker & Cook 1986). In the following discussion, I will, on the basis of this continuing debate, assume the centrality of image and sound media to our century. One of the key issues in audiovisual media theory, then, is concerned with accounting for this centrality of moving images in contemporary life. It is here, I argue, that the Frankfurt School may still prove helpful.

To establish my point, I will sketch an interpretation of the culture-industry chapter in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). As I have examined the basic elements of the interpretation elsewhere (Malmberg 1995), here I will try to show how the cultural trends indicated by Horkheimer and Adorno in the context of the 1940s are still relevant to media theory (on the birth of the culture-industry chapter, see Schröder & Hohenwald 1990, and as a comprehensive survey of Frankfurt School media theory, Kausch 1988). In terms of social theory, three of these trends provide three evolutionary perspectives on post-war society as the society of spectacle, entertainment and interaction. What they all centre on, however, is the idea of what could be called the *aesthetic society*.[1] In short, it is by aestheticising the everyday world, making it sensuously pleasurable in socially cohesive ways, that the culture industry contributes to the introduction of late modern society, which, in Horkheimer and Adorno's view, was prefigured in the interwar collectivism of socialism, fascism and monopoly capitalism alike during what has been called the "age of Stalin, Hitler and Disney" (Bathrick 1984, 215).

This process of aestheticisation has taken place in three waves. First, as a consequence of the ever-growing penetration of everyday life by media of different sorts, the distinction between reality and imagination – life and art, nature and culture, fact and fiction – begins to blur. As defenders of the autonomy of art as a prerequisite of individual autonomy, Horkheimer and Adorno were primarily interested in the homogenising effect this exerts on cultural products and their individual appropriation. There is, however, also another aspect of this transformation of life into art. It is the logical conclusion that, as the aesthetic de-realisation of reality advances far enough, the social world in its entirety tends to become a possible object of aesthetic attitude. Maybe the best-known formulation of this trend is Guy Debord's (1967) conception of

the *society of spectacle* where, in the state of general commodification, images are universalised.

Second, the aesthetic relations to reality that the culture industry helps to generalise become increasingly light, untragic and – only – entertaining. This is not inherent in the aesthetic attitude per se; pleasurable as producing aesthetic gratification may be, even from things that in themselves are terrible, the artistic appropriation of reality remains, in Horkheimer's and Adorno's view, basically tragic. What is conspicuous about the culture industry now is that by trivialising the tragic undercurrents of aesthetic relations, it transforms pleasure into mere entertainment or diversion. In this way what might be called the *society of entertainment*, in which the first civic duty is to keep smiling and have fun with others, is engendered.

Third, the entertaining spectacles by which the culture industry increasingly pervades everyday environments, turning them into a kind of 24-hours-a-day-festival fulfil a certain function – that of social control by trying to generate conformity. Following Kant, all aesthetic enjoyment presupposes the existence of a community and, accordingly, a minimum of consensus, but what is specific to the media communities sparked off by the culture industry is, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, that this is achieved by collective merry-making: trying to turn everything into fun is the culture industry's attempt to produce spontaneous sociality because laughing, one may legitimately assume, is a primordial means of interaction. This is the manner in which late modern society becomes the *society of interaction*. By universalising entertaining spectacles, the culture industry tends to increase social interaction enormously by forming media communities of various extent and endurance.
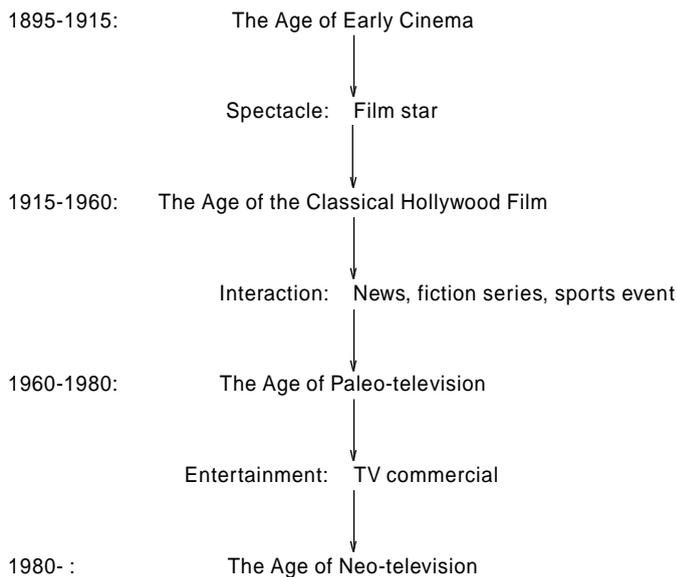
In what sense is the 20th century the "age of the image" (Gance 1927) as well as that of the society of spectacle, entertainment and interaction? Or, how are the increasing audiovisual and aesthetic components of 20th century civilization interconnected? To answer these questions, media theory has to account for four major empirical phenomena and historical periods (for another synoptical view of the audiovisual 20th century, cf. Zielinski 1989): the birth and beginnings of film (The Age of Early Cinema, 1895-1915), the heyday of the standard feature film (The Age of the Classical Hollywood Film, 1920-1960), the replacement of cinema films by television as the major audiovisual medium (The Age of Paleo-television, 1960-1980) and the transformation of television in the new audiovisual landscape of, *inter alia*, video and multimedia (The Age of Neo-television, 1980-; the terms 'paleo-' and 'neo-television', coming from Umberto Eco, seem to have established themselves [cf. e.g. Casetti & Odin 1990]). Because these are understandably highly complex and still insufficiently explored issues, let me just give a cursory idea of the explanatory potential of Critical media theory: I will elaborate on the argument that each change of period – from the early cinema to the Hollywood film, from the Hollywood film to paleo-television and from paleo- to neo-television – involves expansion and intensification of some aspects of the general aesthetisisation of the everyday world. To simplify matters for this essay, I shall attribute one single explanatory aspect to each change.

First, what distinguishes the classical film of the Hollywood type from early cinema is the standardisation of three major attributes: the length, type and screening time of the film. As a result, going to the movies means going to see a fiction film at a scheduled time. What this amounts to is to make

film-viewing akin to attending more traditional spectacles such as theatre, opera or ballet. In other words, it intensifies the spectacularity of films, for from now on moving images are to be received with more sustained concentration. The symbol for this new relation is perhaps first of all the *film star*, who functions as the imagined object of identifications and projections inherent in one's relation to the spectacle of films. Second, of the many differences between the cinema film and broadcast television, two are relevant in this context: moving images are privatised as they enter the home and their viewing becomes a daily pursuit. It is in this way that television, like the periodic press and broadcast radio before it, begins to bind the home incessantly to the outside world, which means a tremendous expansion of the interactive potential of moving images. What is new in these image-relations is perhaps captured best by the recurring, wave-like nature of such television programmes as *news, fiction series or sport events*; it is their ability again and again to attract viewers and forge a community or an audience out of them that crystallises their interactiveness. Third, the change from paleo- to neo-television mainly implies Americanisation, i.e., commercialisation in a multi-channel context, and seems to concern predominantly the development of European television. The struggle for maximising audiences forces channels to find ways both to attract viewers and to allure them to stay tuned. In this process, entertainment – fiction more probably than fact, exciting fact more probably than non-exciting – is likely to gain the upperhand. There is nothing original in

An application of Horkheimer and Adorno's culture-industry theory to the Audiovisual 20th Century: the periods, the determinants of the changes of period and the corresponding paradigms crystallising the changes.

1895-1915:   The Age of Early Cinema

Spectacle: Film star

1915-1960:   The Age of the Classical Hollywood Film

Interaction: News, fiction series, sports event

1960-1980:   The Age of Paleo-television

Entertainment: TV commercial

1980- :   The Age of Neo-television

considering the *commercial* as the prototype of this trend, but it is such basic virtues of television commercials as non-seriousness ('nothing really matters that much') which in the Age of Neo-television tend to become universalised.

Granting the centrality of audiovisual media in the 20th century and the heuristic contribution reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* may make to our understanding of it, what other reasons could be offered after the adverse 1980s conditions in defence of the re-actualisation of the Frankfurt School in media and mass communication studies? To conclude, let me pursue two further arguments.

First, dissatisfaction with French theorising has for some time now made room for alternative strains of critical thought; this dissolution of the structuralist and post-structuralist dynasty (cf. Steinman 1988 on its repercussions on US film and television studies) has benefitted, among others, American pragmatism (Rorty), Soviet semiotics (Bakhtin) and the Frankfurt School (Adorno). As a matter of fact, it has been argued (Hohendahl 1992) that since the 1980s Adorno has become more popular as a research subject than he ever was at the peak of the student movement. Second,

if one is to believe the opinion of the majority to be gathered from a recent survey of the field (Levy & Gurevitch 1993), the mass communication research community, especially its US quarters, have been seized by a sense of disorientation. The name of the malaise is marginalisation: media scholars feel as if they are out of touch with more established disciplines (what is more, this feeling is supported by prevailing citation patterns of the field; cf. So 1988). There is no panacea for the situation because the discipline is filled with contradictory pressures, but one could argue, like Graham Murdock (1991), that mass communication research should regain its contact with the general project of the human sciences, which is the historical study of modernity. It is especially here that the tradition of the Frankfurt School, as the cases of Jürgen Habermas and others exhibit, has not reached the end of its journey yet. It is in this sense that the intimate relationship between audiovisuality and what has been termed the "Short Twentieth Century" (Hobsbawm 1994) turns into one of the key avenues by which media studies can approach and contribute to the study of modernity and its contemporary vicissitudes.

Not

1. Admittedly, this is no longer a new idea: with roots in Nietzsche and applied by Walter Benjamin to national socialism, it has been incorporated into the main body of the aesthetic wing of postmodern cultural and social theory (Maffesoli 1990; Vattimo 1988; Welsch 1990). In view of the brevity of my paper, I shall, however, refrain from expanding on these trajectories, which, anyway, attest to the continuing relevance of Critical Theory for contemporary debates (for recent assessments of the general rela-

tions between the modern and the postmodern in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cf. Kellner 1993 and Rocco 1995).

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