

Culture Industry vs. Fandom Approaches to the American Broadcast Media Case of Professional Wrestling

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Abstract

Imposing feature, “system” (a modern technological society) uses a powerful apparatus of the culture industry. Offering their values and behaviors, the media creates needs and language. In order of mass-distribution the industrial culture creates values and models which are uniform, amorphous, and primitive. They block the initiative and creativity, and require the audience to adore “the realism”, by passively accepting information. Those ideas were introduced by the members of the “Frankfurt school” theorists Adorno and Horkheimer. The two scholars in their book “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” were trying to understand the contradictions of the modern culture, especially - its monotony. For this reason they introduced the concept of “cultural industry.” On the contrary “Fandom” is viewed as a radical opposition to the industrial products. Fans are creating their own cultural products, language and signs. John Fiske in his works criticizes Frankfurt school scholars, showing the fans as being the productive scours of the individual culture which is going along and sometimes even against the official, industrial one.

Using the case of the American Professional Wrestling I want to show the relationship of the two media theories. Its fan base once mainly consisted of closet fans, meaning that they didn’t openly admit to being wrestling fans. That has changed over the past few years, as wrestling has become one of the highest rated shows on television. In the article will be shown how the broadcasting media is used in the culture industry and fandom, how the fandom radicalism is avoided in the wrestling and what the main tools of the cultural oppression are.

Keywords: American Broadcast, culture, fandom, Frankfurt School, industry, media, Professional Wrestling, USA, U.S. Media Studies

Introduction

Imposing feature, “system” (a modern technological society) uses a powerful apparatus of the culture industry. Offering their values and behaviors, the media creates needs and language. In order of mass-distribution the industrial culture creates values and models which are uniform, amorphous, and primitive. They block the initiative and creativity, and require the audience to adore “the realism”, by passively accepting information. Cultural industry insidiously substituted personal by general (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Those ideas were introduced by the members of the “Frankfurt school” theorists Adorno and Horkheimer. The two scholars in their book “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” were trying to understand the contradictions of the modern culture, especially - its monotony. For this rea-

son they introduced the concept of “cultural industry.” The term does not imply to process of the production, rather standardization and rationalization of distribution methods of culture. The products of culture are manufactured exclusively for the mass consumption. Moreover the created ideology of consumerism determines the needs of the society. In the criticism of the “culture industry” we can recognize the main motive of the whole philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer: the loss of individual and universal victory, the victory of the system. The system which imposes the environment of the sameness represented even in the ascetical political opposites (in the architecture: the buildings of the city occupants are designed as cells crystallizing the homogeneity of the society), with the broadcasting media being

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an important tool in the domination in the industrial ideology. The television is used to represent "the realism" of the systematic structure, where the repressed opposition of the individualism to the ideological form is shown as irrelevant.

Fandom is viewed as a radical opposition to the industrial products. Fans are creating their own cultural products, language and signs (Fiske, 1992). John Fiske in his works criticizes Frankfurt school scholars, showing the fans as being the productive scours of the individual culture which is going along and sometimes even against the official, industrial one (Fiske, 1978). The fandom is standing outside from the monopolistic dictatorship of consumerism. The fan products are carrying emotional value; the need in them does not derive from the needs of the consumers, but from the creative and cultural capital of the fan himself. Even though fans are the actively accumulating the industrial products, in order to acquire the richer cultural capital, they transform its semiotic and textual form, shaping the new cultural outgrowth and thus alienating themselves from the sameness of the dominating ideology. This productivity of the fans marked by their individual criteria is the radicalism the dominant ideology fears as according to Adorno.

Using the case of the American Professional Wrestling I want to show the relationship of the two media theories. Wrestling has become a popular form of broadcasted entertainment. Its fan base once mainly consisted of closet fans, meaning that they didn't openly admit to being wrestling fans. That has changed over the past few years, as wrestling has become one of the highest rated shows on television. The popularity of wrestling in the United States cannot be rejected. For the moment two of the biggest wrestling TV shows Monday Night Raw and Friday Night Smackdown are the longest running, in the U.S. broadcasting history. The company's total profit in 2012 was 99\$ million (World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. (WWE), n.d.). The World Wrestling Entertainment Company is one of, if not the only organization, who crafted a special term "WWE Universe" to implement to all of its fans. It looks like fan participation is very important for the industry. At the same time, being the product of the cultural industry wrestling is also crafted for the mass consumption. In the essay I will show how the broadcasting media is used in the culture industry and fandom, how the fandom radicalism is avoided in the wrestling and what are the main tools of the cultural oppression.

Frankfurt School: the Culture Industry

Everything produced by the mass culture under the monopoly is keeping the idea of sameness. The form and the structure of the TV programming are based on one and the same ideology of business. The main goal of television is to reach the masses in order to earn more. It is argued that the reproduction of the same outputs is demanded by the public representatives. The Frankfurt School scholars, refused to accept this suggestion, saying that the true reasons lay actually in the top bottom influence in the mass-culture. The owners, the directors are the "gatekeepers" of the social necessity of the final products. The media belongs to the power mighty industries of steel, oil, electricity. This huge economic dependence on the big industries where

the individuals are spreading their own interest on the broadcasting process creates the biased ideology of oppression. The broadcasting channel which distributes the Monday Night Raw for example is owned by the General Electric's Corporation, the WWE Company itself is owned by its founder - Vince McMahon, (53 % of shares). "The dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). This tight interrelationship reaches a level where the boarders between the company names and technical sectors are over flown by the concentration of intellect. The top down repressing bears in its core the common determination, not to produce or let pass anything that is not confirming to the concept of consumer. The spontaneous actions of the audience are ultimately absorbed by business ideology of the power mighty. Adorno and Horkheimer are arguing that the step from the telephone to radio robbed the audience of their voice, leaving them as the "armatures" falling into everything the dominant mass culture is producing. The talented performers are never free from the top influence, as it would be impossible for them to fit into existing system of programming. At the same time public mentality is favoring the mass production thus becoming the part of the culture industry system.

The favoritism of the public of mass culture product is the result of "realism" representation. Forms of films, TV programs and shows are constructed in a way to show the repression as a part of our environment. The Frankfurt School scholars explaining the realism of "oppression" use the example of Donald Duck, whose non-stopping suffering in the movies are teaching us to face the problems of our everyday life, at the same time breaking down the personal individual resisting (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). The sufferings in the cartoons are shown as the part of the social structure. The sense of a "no way out from it" is hammered into our minds by the repeat full form and unity of the mass-cultural products. In wrestling the theme of suffering is a core stone of industry's ideology. Wrestling according to Roland Barthes is exposing the essence of the reality, but not the reality itself (Barthes, 1972). Wrestling, contrary to the other sport actions, is based not on the competition of the physical abilities, rather on the purpose of entertaining the audience. The audience is expecting from the fighter to perform the image of the passion. The perfect representation of pain on the face of a wrestler is demanded from the fighters (Garis, 2004). Since it is not sport, the result is not important, so the emotional suffering of the moment, as a part of amusement, is attractive for the audience. There should be left no doubts in the personality of the wrestler, the bad personage or the "the heal" as they are called, should drive only clear negative image: he is lying, mocks the crowd, cheats. Even his appearance has to be unattractive and repulsive. When the "good" personage (the baby face) is defeated, usually due to the cheating caused by the opponent, his loss is not momentary like in judo or box, it is not an outcome rather a reason for duration. The defeat is shown not as an oppression of the system which allowed the injustice to happen, rather as a part of necessary suffering the honest person must undergo. At the same