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A Mass Media Cure for Auschwitz: Adorno, Kafka and Žižek

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Mass Media Pessimism – From Adorno to Žižek

In today's regulated world of mass media corporations, what space is left for a radical politics? From the theoretical perspectives of most contemporary work in cultural studies, the answer seems to be "not much." For example, according to the classic Frankfurt School position, the mass media serve the politically conservative end of spreading ideological lies: telling us that the government bureaucracies and private corporations that control our daily lives know best and care personally for each and every one of us (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002).

In order for these lies to be effective, however, it is not enough that they are encoded at the level of message content - after all, in today's cynical climate few people fully trust what they are told in newspapers or see on television. How, then, can the mass media ensure that the lies that they circulate have an impact upon their audience; what, in any case, is the nature of that impact? The Frankfurt School answer (as represented, for example, in the early work of Theodor Adorno) is that a mass media

presentation has two methods of encoding ideological lies: (1) it encodes the lies *denotatively*, at the level of its *content*, or (2) it encodes them *connotatively*, at the more abstract level of *technique* or *form of presentation* (Barthes, 1985: 111-117). Consider a familiar example: a full page magazine advertisement that places an image of a bottle of perfume next to an image of a beautiful woman who is photographed while she is staring seductively into the camera. The advertisement encodes a message denotatively about the perfume's power to make its wearer attractive. But also, because the woman appears to look at us directly, as if she knew us personally, a meta-message is encoded connotatively into the form of presentation: "Hey you there, this message is for you!" Furthermore, and here is the key point, *even though we know that the latter message is a lie*, it has an impact upon us – each of us feels, and to a certain extent acts *as if* through the ad she or he is being addressed personally.¹ Adorno argues that it is in exactly this way, namely through their forms of presentation, that mass media presentations propagate ideological lies.

For example, advertisements, newscasts, talk shows and so on all typically engage their audience through such personal forms of address. By singling out each member of the audience for public recognition of a personal kind, this form of address contributes to the ideological lie at the heart of the liberal state, namely that it knows about and cares for each and every one of us individually (Goehr, xix-xx). And because the lie is encoded at the level of form rather than content, despite its transparency it sneaks under the audience's critical radar and affects what they do. In general terms, we may conclude, *even if mass media presentations are politically radical in their content*, thanks to their form of presentation their overall impact will fall on the conservative side of the political ledger.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Slavoj Žižek argues for a similar conclusion, but in the context of rather different theoretical premises (Žižek, 1989: 28-33). He

argues that the totalitarian conditions in which we live today create a perverse split between knowledge and action: we know very well the terrible things that are going on around us, *but even so* – perhaps because we can't do anything about them, or perhaps because we feel immune to their effects – we act as if we are ignorant. Like ostriches recognizing danger, we collectively stick our heads in the sand. It seems to follow that mass media exposés – or indeed any techniques of consciousness-raising – will be useless as radical political strategies for getting people to act differently. To put the argument in a nutshell: if, as Žižek claims, people don't act on what they know then broadcasting the truth to them will make no political difference.

But – and here I come to the central paradox that mobilizes this paper – by excluding the possibility of a radical mass mediated politics, Žižek no less than Adorno seems to be going too far. In particular, they both invite the following rejoinder: at an empirical level it seems undeniable that, on occasions, mass media exposés change public opinion, which in turn brings about political change. I am thinking here of the Watergate scandal, as well as the more recent news stories that led to the resignations of Donald Rumsfeld and Alberto Gonzales. At the very least, we can say, such exposés brought about collective shifts – not necessarily in what people do but at least in *what people thought should be done on their behalf*. And such shifts, in turn, brought about political changes that were “radical” in the minimal sense of working against the status quo – for example, leading to the resignation of high government officials, perhaps even policy changes, and so on.

It is true, of course, that in the long run, corporate capitalism and liberal-democratic forms of government seem to survive such scandals relatively unscathed – they are (in Barthes sense of the term) “inoculated” against scandal, perhaps even (so the official story goes) purified and strengthened by suffering through them (Barthes 1985: 150). Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that, in the short term at least, such

media events have had and continue to have radical political effects in the sense of working against the status quo.

An example of such effects is in the making as I write this paper, and here I quote from a focus piece in the Australian newspaper, *The Age*, of July 10, 2007 (page 9): The piece begins by recounting a famous episode in US mass media history. In 1968, Walter Cronkite, the doyen of US news-broadcasters, came out publicly against the Vietnam War. This event is credited with changing the war's course. Lyndon Johnson, then President, is reported to have said "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America," and within a few months the US was withdrawing troops from Vietnam. *The Age* goes on to say that even today, in the age of the internet, newspapers continue to have a similar impact:

What the big media institutions say about the really big issues, such as the occupation in Iraq, still matters. On Sunday, the most important newspaper in America – the one that fashions the agenda for other American papers and the big broadcast networks – *The New York Times*, called for a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. It was not a Cronkite moment because there can never be another one of those. But the editorial in the paper's biggest edition of the week, which features its primo columnists...represented a seismic shift in media attitudes to the occupation.²

We are left to assume that, despite what *The Age* wistfully refers to as the waning influence of newspapers in the age of the internet, the *Times* editorial is at the very least a pointer, perhaps even a contributing factor to imminent political change in the US.

The cautiously upbeat but also wistful, even nostalgic tone of the report in *The Age*, invoking an earlier period when newspapers were *really* newspapers, suggests that the possibility of such mass mediated political effects – what the report calls "Cronkite moments" – has silently crossed over from the domain of fact, and entered the liminal zone between fact and fiction that is occupied by the mass media's liberal *mythologie* about itself – a *mythologie* that, we may note, Hollywood vigorously circulates. I have in mind here a host of films like *Erin Brockovich*, and *Good Night, and Good Luck*, which

feature individual truth-tellers – from whistle blowers, like Erin Brockovich, to investigative journalists like Ed Murrow, who, like Cronkite, manage to use the mass media as constitutive bell weathers of political change. Nevertheless, and here is my main point, there is a grain of truth behind the *mythologie*: as *The Age* puts it, what newspapers say, it seems, “still matters,” perhaps even makes a difference.³

In sum, both the Frankfurt School and Žižek’s critiques of the mass media face a paradox: on the one hand, there seems to be good empirical evidence of mass media exposées having radical political effects; on the other hand, on cogent theoretical grounds, both the Frankfurt and Žižekian critiques deny that such exposées will have, indeed *can* have such effects.

How does the Frankfurt School handle this paradox? One way is to hang tough, and insist that, from a political point of view, none of the changes that mass media exposées bring about – even changes in government – go far enough to count as significant. I reject this answer because it smacks of what Saul Alinsky calls “means-and-ends moralism.” Whenever confronted with some concrete political action, the means-end moralist finds fault either with its ends or with its means: that is, either the means are criticized for compromising the ends or the ends are criticized for not going “far enough.” Such moralists, Alinsky writes, “should search themselves as to their real political position. In fact [wittingly or not] they are passive – but real – allies of the Haves [in the struggle with the Have-nots]. They are the ones [for whom] the fear of soiling [them]selves by entering the context of history is not [a] virtue, but a way of escaping virtue” (Alinsky, 1989: 25-26. Alinsky cites Jacques Maritain here).

What about Žižek? How does he answer the paradox that I have put forward here? Rather than offering an answer, he shifts attention away from the question of a politics of the mass media towards a Lacanian politics of the act. This shift, I suggest, indicates that, like his Frankfurt School rivals, Žižek has given up on the mass media as

a useful vehicle for radical politics. Which leaves me with a problem: deserted by both Žižek and the Frankfurt School, how do I propose resolving the paradox?

Adorno to the Rescue

In this paper I develop an alternative theoretical approach that points towards a new mass mediated radical politics that avoids the critiques by both Žižek and the early Frankfurt School. For help in this theoretical enterprise I turn to what may seem an unlikely source, namely the work of Adorno, whose 1947 book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written together with Max Horkheimer, is a canonical text in the traditional Frankfurt School attack upon the mass media. But instead of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I'll be referring to Adorno's later work, in particular his "Notes on Kafka," which appeared in the 1955 collection of essays *Prisms*, as well his last (uncompleted) book *Aesthetic Theory*.⁴ I elaborate Adorno's ideas by using Žižek's work – in particular Žižek's related concepts of "overconformity" and the "obscene underbelly of the law."

Adorno's radical politics rejects orthodox strategies of resistance. Why? Because – and here he anticipates Michel Foucault's work – Adorno posits that in the circumstances that we face today, it is already too late for resistance in any usual sense of the term. For example, art works that appear to resist by violating convention are quickly appropriated, and wrapped in their own institutional packaging as an "anti-genre" genre. In Adorno's terms, such works "drift to the brink of indifference, into mere hobbies, into idle formulas...They fall within the very sphere from which they seek to escape" (2007a: 191). A contemporary instance: the "anti-art" conceptual artist Banksy smuggles his paintings into galleries, where he hangs them illicitly. But, as his fame has spread, his work has been co-opted by the galleries. When they find one of his paintings on their walls, they incorporate them into their permanent collections. Under such

circumstances, resistance no longer constitutes a radical political gesture, but instead takes on a conservative political valence.

What, then, is to be done if resistance is useless? Does this mean the end of radical politics? Or is it possible to be subversive without resisting? Citing Kafka, Adorno claims that our “mute battle cry” should *not* be “*resist!*” but instead should be “*not to resist!*” (Adorno, 1981: 264). What does Adorno mean by taking “not to resist” as his battlecry – a “mute battlecry” at that (sic)? I suggest that it means subverting conventions (or laws more generally) not by resisting in the sense of breaking them, but rather by “overconforming,” that is, *sticking to them too closely* – in Adorno’s terms “objectifying them.” To be specific, I understand Adorno’s politics as a matter of working *within* rather than against the system of conventions, but at the same time *pushing them conventions to the point that they become overstretched, and loosen their grip – in Hegelian terms, pushing them to the point that they negate themselves.*

A case in point: subverting a propaganda slogan not by speaking out against it, but rather by speaking it over and over and over again in such a way that it gradually empties of all meaning.⁵ A more familiar example: a professor instructs students to come and see him during office hours, whenever they have a problem. Suppose that, obedient to the letter of the instruction, every student comes to every office hour – after all, when do students not have problems? As a result, the whole system grinds to a halt – not through resistance, but on the contrary through overconformity.

Finally a literary example: consider Kafka’s three large novels, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *America*. Here is what Adorno says about them: Because of their “fragmentary quality ... the three large novels ... do not permit themselves to be brought to an end ... the dialectic of expressionism in Kafka forces the novel-form ever closer to the serialized adventure story. Kafka loved such novels. By adopting their technique he at the same time dissociated himself from the established literary mores... The large

works are rather like detective novels in which the criminal fails to be exposed ... Kafka's subject ... passes from one desperate and hopeless situation to the next ... in the absence of contrast, the monstrous becomes the entire world" (Adorno, 1981: 265).

Adorno is careful here *not* to say that Kafka's novels *resist* (sic) the established literary mores. Instead he uses a more ambiguous formulation: namely that, in writing the novels, Kafka "dissociated himself from the established literary mores." The mores that Adorno has in mind here are the generic conventions of the novel, which frame it as a succession of narrative fragments, welded together by a secret that, when it is finally unveiled, will unify them retrospectively. Adorno, I suggest, is claiming that Kafka's novels overconform to, rather than outright resist this convention. How? In line with the novelistic convention, the novels sustain the sense of a hidden meaning, but do so *in extremis* – in particular, without ever revealing what that meaning might be. Even their last page, like all other pages, stands in wait of a closure to be delivered retrospectively from the future. But a future, which, it turns out, does not exist – is quite literally a closed book. More than a few loose ends, the novels leave the reader falling in an abyss of uncertainty that shows no signs of bottoming out (1997: 126-128).

I argue now that Adorno's deliberations here provide a framework for thinking a radical politics of the mass media. In particular, I will show that the essay "Education after Auschwitz," which Adorno wrote as a script for a mass radio broadcast, emerges as an instance of exactly such a politics.⁶

Education after Auschwitz

Adorno wrote "Education after Auschwitz" in 1966, in the middle of the rise of student radicalism in Europe, and only three years before his death in 1969. At the time, in his own West Germany, but also in the West more generally, it seemed that capitalism and the liberal values of freedom – even the freedom to protest – were winning the

ideological struggle against the “evil alliance” between Marxism and the forces of communism. (Because of the Berlin Wall, of course, this struggle took on special meaning in Adorno’s West Germany.)

Adorno wrote the essay as a talk in an ongoing series of radio broadcasts that he had begun much earlier, as part of an official post-World War II de-Nazification program, to which he was invited to contribute upon his return to Germany in 1949, after over ten years in exile.⁷ The essay discusses the radical political and ethical task which, Adorno claimed, education in Germany is obliged to shoulder in the wake of Auschwitz: namely, transforming the German people in order to guarantee never again Auschwitz: “Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz” (2005b: 191)

In the service of this utopian goal, Adorno’s essay advocates what appears to be a straightforward liberal politics, which deploys the mass media as channels for messages that speak against anything that might support another Auschwitz. But the espousal of such a politics raises a serious difficulty for Adorno. By picturing the political role of the mass media along liberal lines, he seems to contradict – one might even say betray – his earlier Marxist position, which not only criticizes liberalism as a bourgeois ideology, but also argues that the mass media constitute a politically conservative ideological apparatus that drives the dual processes of alienation and reification to which Marx draws critical attention. Of course, on Adorno’s behalf, it may be replied that his invoking liberalism is merely strategic – and in particular that he advocates liberal educational policies merely as local measures to impede the (re)growth of fascism among the German under-classes, rather than as part of a more general commitment to a liberal politics.⁸

But even if this reply works, there is another more serious difficulty for Adorno. Through disseminating an anti-Fascist message on national radio, it seems that his

essay not only *tells* about but also *shows* in action a liberal mass media politics, which, through a project of mass education, undertakes the task of reforming the German people in order to reduce the danger of a return to fascism.⁹ But here's the rub: from a liberal-democratic point of view, in order for the essay to function in this way, it must communicate with the people, and therefore, it seems, must be written in a popular style. But clearly it is not. As Lydia Goehr points out in her introduction to Adorno's collection of essays, *Critical Models*, Adorno's critics frequently remarked that even those of his essays, like "Education after Auschwitz," that were intended for a popular radio audience, were "terrifyingly dense," "polemical," "paradoxical," "cumbrous," "tedious," "idiosyncratic," even "dandified" (Goehr, 2005: xiii).

To give you an idea of what the critics were complaining about, let me quote a brief sample from another of Adorno's radio lectures, "Why Still Philosophy," delivered as a talk on *Hessischer Runfunk*, January 2, 1962: "If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only ... as thought's powerless attempt to remain its own master and to convict it of untruth, by their own criteria, both as fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned acquiescence on the other of untruth" – a quotation which, I might add, is no more user friendly in the original German than in English translation (2005a: 10). It follows that the essay cannot participate in any sort of liberal politics of reform, since, as I indicated, such a politics depends upon the essay's ability to communicate with the masses. Which raises the question: in what politics, if any, did the essay participate, if not the liberal politics that it espoused?¹⁰

It is tempting to give a Brechtian answer here: "If an essay, no less than a work of art, speaks the truth then, even if it does so in unusual, unconventional or high-flown terms, ordinary people will sense it, and be both willing and able to understand more of it than bourgeois 'people of culture' think." (Brecht, 2007: 84). From this Brechtian point of view, the unconventional, high style of Adorno's essay – unconventional for a radio

broadcast – is, indeed, an impediment to its political impact upon a mass audience (Adorno, 2007a: 188). But even so, Brecht argues – and here his faith in the people emerges – the mysterious sense that the people have of the essay’s inherent truth provides them with the necessary incentive to work with, and get past its formal difficulties.

Adorno rightly disparages this Brechtian position for what he calls its lack of “distance from official humanism” (2007a: 188).¹¹ So, it seems, we must look elsewhere for the politics in which “Education after Auschwitz” participates. But where? At this point in the argument I’m simply going to take the bull by the horns, and suggest that we look to the radical politics of art that I discussed in the previous section – a politics that Adorno advocated after, but also for a decade before “Education after Auschwitz.” In particular, I suggest that we override Adorno’s elitist refusal to apply his radical politics of art to mass media productions. In suggesting this, I am not denying the difference between mass culture and art. Rather I am making the more modest point that the difference between them does not map neatly onto the difference between the politically conservative and the politically radical.

In particular, I suggest that in the original context of its production and circulation, the politically subversive qualities of “Education after Auschwitz” arose from its extreme fidelity to the stylistic rules of German philosophical discourse, a fidelity that went beyond what there was good reason to expect. Why do I say this? Because the essay was to be delivered as a radio lecture, there were good reasons for making it an exception to the conventions of philosophical writing, and instead composing it in a lighter, more popular style. But Adorno refused to make any such stylistic compromise. In this respect, then, the essay *over-conformed* to, rather than broke with or resisted convention – in particular, it stuck faithfully to the rules of philosophical discourse in an exceptional situation for which there were good reasons for breaking (or at least

bending) them. In short, the essay took the rules of philosophical discourse more seriously than the rules took themselves. In Žižek's terms, then, the essay did not break the law, but instead refused to take advantage of the law's "obscene underside": namely, the tissue of illicit acts for which there were good reasons to expect that the law would overlook them, make an exception, and so on – "turn a blind eye" as we say. As such, in the context of its original delivery, "Education after Auschwitz" satisfied exactly the criterion of hyperconventionality that Adorno's radical politics of art requires: subversion not by resistance, but rather by overconformity.¹²

But now a major difficulty heaves into sight. Let's agree that, by overconforming to the conventions of philosophical discourse, the essay was indeed the site of subversion. Even if we agree to this, however, a further point needs to be made in order to establish the essay's political credentials as an impediment to the return of Auschwitz. To be specific, we need to show how on earth such a localized, purely discursive act of subversion, namely the creation of a point of tension between the essay's philosophical form and the forms that were generic to the mass mediated discursive field in which it was delivered, contributed to the grand political mission of "never again Auschwitz?"

I will show this in two steps. First, I point out that despite its conventional, dense philosophical style, criticized so strongly by commentators, the essay did *not* alienate its audience. On the contrary, the evidence suggests, rather than causing them to switch over to some lighter form of entertainment that allowed them to stop thinking, the essay not only engaged the audience's interest but also led them to *start thinking* – to engage in what Adorno calls "critical self-reflection."¹³

How did this come about? Certainly *not* because the essay offered insight into some exciting new truth (as Brecht might claim). On the contrary, as I indicate later, the essay merely recycled commonplace opinion about Auschwitz. Instead, I suggest, the reason for the attention that the essay received as well as for its ability to make people

think, resided in a combination of two factors. First factor: its unexpected form of presentation, as a piece of dense, academic philosophy in a mass media talk. As such, it puzzled its audience – not only because it was opaque to them but also because it constituted a form of *détournement*: a piece of writing that, although perfectly proper in its own right, turned up in an unexpected place. At a basic level, therefore, it posed the question: “What have we got here?” Second factor: the essay promised to deliver the truth on a topic of intense interest to its audience, namely, the prevention of a return of Auschwitz, a promise that was persuasive not only because of Adorno’s personal reputation but also because of the prestige that academic philosophy enjoyed within German postwar culture.¹⁴

The essay’s ability to make people think critically lay, then, in the particular balance that it struck between these two factors: on the one hand, its relative opacity (which, in turn, arose from its overconformity to philosophical form); on the other hand, a promise of truth that discouraged its audience from simply blowing it off. To put the argument in a nutshell: because people were puzzled by the essay even as they were interested in its subject matter, it made them think critically: “What is the essay saying here?” Furthermore, as they engaged with this question, they were led to grapple with the philosophical argumentation that made up the essay’s content. And since even in its most labored academic form, philosophical argumentation will contain traces of critical thinking, the audience was led to engage in such thinking twice over: first by the essay’s content, second by its form, specifically its overconformity to the conventions of philosophical writing (Adorno, 2005a).

Now we come to the key, second step in my argument, where I make a connection with the political problem of ensuring “never again Auschwitz.” Drawing upon his 1950 book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, which he completed in the US during the war, Adorno argues that, in modernity, the phenomenon of Auschwitz and of the

totalitarian state more generally is linked intimately with the rise of two types of authoritarian personality: on the one hand, obedient “dupes,” who unquestioningly accept authority and tradition, on the other hand, “manipulative characters,” whose lives are structured by instrumental reason that treats people as means to ends rather than as ends in their own right.

How to counter this phenomenon? According to Adorno, educating the uneducated masses in critical thinking will not only immunize them against dependence upon authority, but also preempt any tendency for them to think instrumentally about other people, thus effectively guarding them against developing authoritarian personalities of either type. In short, Adorno is saying: by getting the masses to think critically, the authoritarian personality types among them, who are essential for the running of a totalitarian state, will languish, thus guarding against the return of Auschwitz.

Adorno regretfully adds that if authoritarian personality types have already taken root then dousing them with critical reason will not *cure* them, nor will it prevent such personality types from appearing among the already educated bourgeoisie. But even so, he insists, spreading critical thinking will have some positive prophylactic effect: “I fear that the measures of even such an elaborate education will hardly hinder the renewed growth of (bourgeois) desktop murderers. But [even so] there are people who do it down below, indeed as servants...[and] against this...education and enlightenment can still manage a little something” (2005b: 204).

In sum, the political strategy of “Education after Auschwitz” is neither to enlighten people about Auschwitz in the sense of spreading information about it, nor to suggest a pedagogic program for so doing. This is just as well, since, as Espen Hammer and other critics have been quick to point out, Adorno’s claims about Auschwitz are “quaint” at best, as are the pedagogic strategies that the essay suggests: namely flying squads of

philosophers moving out into the country, bringing the ways of philosophy to the peasantry (Adorno, 2005b: 196; Hammer, *Adorno*, 71). What, then, is the essay's political strategy? It is spreading enlightenment in another sense: not as information or pedagogic advice, but rather as critical thinking. What is the political rationale for this? According to Adorno, we have seen, critical thought or "reason" function as a prophylactic against authoritarian personality types, and therefore against the recurrence of Auschwitz. As such, he argues: "the only education that has any sense at all [in the wake of Auschwitz] is an education towards critical self-reflection" (2005b: 193).

More generally, Adorno's utopian political vision is the transformation of society from a collection of blind followers and authoritarian bullies into a polis of critical thinkers. Not a society of philosopher kings, perhaps, but instead something closer to Hegel's vision of everyman free because everyman a philosopher - or better, everyman capable of critical reflection: a critical reflection which, beyond mere mental gymnastics, is material in its effects, in the sense that, as Adorno puts it in his essay *Resignation*, "it has a firm grasp on possibility...[an] insatiable quality...[and] rejects the foolish wisdom of resignation" (2001: 202). Here, then, rather than in any advice that it may offer at the level of its explicit content, lies the political point of the essay.

Adorno thus joins a long tradition according to which radical politics involves a process of emancipation: the "spreading of freedom." Not in George W. Bush's sense of course, but rather in the sense of nurturing a critical sensibility that Adorno equated with: "an open [that is, anti-dogmatic] thinking...closely related to a praxis truly involved in change... beyond all specialized and particular content" (2001: 202). It is at this point that Adorno articulates his politics with the utopian vision of "never again Auschwitz" - not out of dogmatic Zionism, but rather from an enlightened opposition to all dogma and the authoritarian personalities who produce, circulate and consume it. The later Adorno's original contribution to this tradition resides in (a) trusting the mass media with

the delicate task of encouraging critical thinking (thus reversing his earlier attitude to the mass media), (b) arguing that the radical political contribution by the mass media takes place at the level of message form rather than content, and (c) assigning a key role to strategies of overconformity.

The question that I want to leave you with is how from this Adornian perspective we might understand other cases of mass mediated radical politics for which, by contrast with Adorno's radio broadcasts, there is no attempt to convert the masses to critical thinking. How, for example, are we to understand the radical political impact of mass media scandals that result from the interventions of whistleblowers, like Erin Brockowich, or of investigative journalists, like Ed Murrow or Woodward and Bernstein? How too should we understand claims to radical political status in the domain of "popular culture:" for example, sixties rock 'n roll, seventies punk, and perhaps even post-punk emo bands such as Fugazi? Let me close with a few remarks in response to these questions.

Adorno's meditations suggest that in the context of popular music, politically significant work takes place at the level of the form of performances rather than the content of songs. Furthermore, at least in its Žižekian pre-incarnation, Adorno highlights the political importance of strategies of overconformity – the subversion of conventional cultural forms not by resisting them, but rather by pushing them to the limit. And, indeed, much popular music involves exactly such overconformity: for example, the punk over-valuing of consumer items such as safety pins combined with the total destruction of "disposable" items such as guitars, not to mention the over the top emotional quality of performance – an overconformity directed as much against earlier musical genres as against broader cultural trends. The question remains, however, whether and how such

acts of overconformity, which in the first instance at least are restricted to the cultural realm, come to have effects on a larger political scale. Situationists face a similar question: “As Debord and Wolan point out, dancing on top of the visuality of a dominant system may only be the beginning of a successful *détournement*. The trick is to reveal the underlying power relationships behind an image and then channel them into a productive, potentially ambiguous, sphere” (Thompson, 2004: 151). Adorno’s later work provides one promising direction in which to develop answers to this question.

¹According to Louis Althusser, it is through such effects that human beings first come to misrecognize themselves as subjects, each with their own interests, beliefs, place in life, and so on (Althusser, 1971: 160). The connotative dimension of the message operates upon its denotative content, namely the simple declarative message “Using this perfume makes this woman sexy,” and transforms it into a personalized promise: “Using this perfume will make you – *even you* – sexy”. Note, however, that, as Judith Williamson points out, the advertisement does not persuade by making such promises. On the contrary, few if any will take such promises too seriously. Nevertheless, the advertisement has a persuasive effect, namely by shifting the meanings that attach to the woman’s image onto the image of the perfume. It accomplishes this shift by physically linking the two images, in particular by matching their color and shape, as well as positioning them so that the eye is drawn from one to the other (Williamson, 1983: 18-19). The result is not a message about the perfume’s powers, but rather a sexy association for the perfume that makes it an accessory in a possible life-style.

² The article’s use of the word “big” is interesting – repeated four times in the brief extract I have quoted. Through using this word, the newspaper distinguishes itself from “big” media institutions, like the New York Times (and thus implicitly flatters itself by putting itself on the winning side of “big versus small” debate). But it also uses this word to implicitly draw a distinction between, on the one hand, “big countries” like the US, where “big issues,” like Iraq are decided, and, on the other hand, small countries, like Australia, which can only “follow” these issues from a distance, swept along in their wake as it were. What is being erased here is, of course, that in Australia the *Age* newspaper plays exactly the same agenda-setting “big” role that *The New York Times* plays in the US. Also erased is the fact that Australia is not merely a “small” passive bystander and observer in the Iraq war. Rather, as in the case of Vietnam, it is an active participant and collaborator in US foreign policy (although perhaps not as “big” as it would like to be or thinks of itself) - “all the way with LBJ” as we used to say.

³ It is worth noting, however, that in these stories the ideology of individualism foregrounds the actions of individual political agent rather than the less visible, because taken for granted, role of the mass media. Note too that one can strengthen the point here by remarking that, contra Žižek, other forms of collective education, such as sixties style “consciousness-raising” groups, also have radical political effects. Or at least they do, if one is prepared to broaden the concept of the political to include not only grand socio-structural changes, such as the overthrow of patriarchy, but also the local mitigation of structures of domination to the point that, at least at a local in-group or domestic level, practices of freedom together with more pliable relations of power become possible (Foucault, 1996: 434).

⁴ The power-house of this politics is what Adorno calls the “authentic” – or “autonomous” – work of art. Surprisingly, it will turn out that this politics is readily adapted to a mass mediated politics. (I say “surprisingly”, because of the Frankfurt School’s characteristic insistence upon an unbridgeable chasm between authentic art and the inauthentic art of the mass media.) Equally surprisingly, this politics turns out to be a version of the Lacanian politics of the act, which Žižek suggests in lieu of a radical mass media politics. Thus we will show that Žižek and the Frankfurt School are both premature in ignoring the possibilities for a radical mass mediated politics.

⁵ Clearly more needs to be said here. In concrete terms, what does it mean to “overconform” to the law, and how do we explain the alleged subversive effects of such a strategy. How, for example, does overconformity differ from a stubborn legalistic attachment to the law? What are the connections between strategies of overconformity and, on the one hand, the practices of “thinking” that Adorno, like Hegel, identifies with political praxis, and on the other hand, a politics of emancipation that embodies something like the liberal concept of freedom to which Marx alludes when he complains that everywhere man is free, but everywhere he is in chains.

⁶ Žižek, like Adorno, seems to regard his own mass mediated works - books, interviews, popular articles on the net and newspapers and so on - as disruptive. Indeed, even Žižek himself is disruptive, as a life-work that is inserted into the public domain through the mass media: films of his life, pictures of his wedding circulated on the net, and so on: a (more or less calculated)

challenge to academic proprieties as well as bourgeois existence: “You want publicity, well here it is: pictures of my wedding, film of me organizing my clothes, and so on” - a challenge not by opposition, however, but rather by overconformity (a point to which I return).

⁷ He spent these for the most part in the US where he worked under the directorship of Max Horkheimer at the New York based Institute for Social Research - the Institute had relocated to America in the wake of the rise of fascism in Germany in the early thirties (Goehr, 2005: xvii; Hammer, 2006: 49-53).

⁸ Adorno’s point here is that it is better to transform peasants into 19th century educated bourgeoisie, or even restore “old” authoritarian values of chivalry than to allow the new authoritarian structures of fascism to flourish (2005b: 196-7, 200, 204). In saying this Adorno is not celebrating bourgeois life or old style authoritarian values as political ends in themselves, let alone taking liberal educational methods as the ultimate political weapon in the struggle for emancipation. On the contrary he is making a strategic political point about how to stop fascism in the situation that presents itself today.

⁹ Later in this essay, I return to the vexed question of what “popularity” might mean here – as Lukács points out, it cannot be simply a question of counting heads in the audience, let alone evaluating how the audience responds (Adorno, 2007b: 54, and see too Brecht, 2005: 81). The question of the nature of the “popular” lay at the heart of a furious political debate that raged in the thirties between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Adorno, *et al.*

¹⁰ It is tempting here to apply the Hegelian logic of the negation of a negation or as Adorno puts it “the distortion of the distortion” (Adorno, 2007b: 168). But such logic gets us nowhere. The philosophical style is a negation-of-the-popular. And because the philosophical style is a negation-of-the-popular, applying it to a popular radio lecture constitutes a negation-of-the-negation-of-the-popular. In conformity with Hegelian logic, this means that the style transforms dialectically into a sublated version of the popular (2005b:168). But even if this is correct, it misses the point of Kafka’s strategy, for which, as Adorno tells us, the battle-cry is to be subversive but “to not resist” (1981: 264).

¹¹ Adorno’s suggestion, contra Brecht, is to concede that in the case of *avant garde* art - whether it is a Kafka novel, or a painting by George Grosz, or one might add Adorno’s own writings - people will fail to get the message. But in a cunning (although, I shall argue, ultimately misleading) dialectical move, Adorno turns this failure to advantage: it is precisely this negative moment of “not getting” that is disruptive. Why? Because, if it is objectified rather than taken as a human flaw, people’s failure to understand points towards the truth: namely the truth that there is no truth to understand. As Adorno puts it: “the suggestion that the world is unknowable...can become a moment of knowledge. This can happen where a gulf opens up between the overwhelming and unassimilable world of things, on the one hand, and a human experience impotently striving to gain a firm hold on the other” (Adorno, 2007b: 162-3); in Žižek’s terms: “the real secret is that there is no secret.” To be specific, it is merely a bourgeois illusion (a version of the hermeneutic fallacy) that underlying every obscure work there’s some secret truth or value that it represents. The “real truth” lies, then, in exposing the way in which, through discourse, the illusion of a secret is created. (Although even this lat way of putting it is misleading, because it fails to divorce itself from the hermeneutic fallacy of looking for a message at the level of content.)

¹² Indeed, the overconformity is doubled. By using a conventional academic piece of philosophical writing as a script, the radio broadcast gave the audience more than they bargained for when it promised them a serious commentary about Auschwitz. In short, by refusing to compromise the conventional philosophical style, the broadcast overconformed to the rules for “serious” mass media presentations: “You want a serious exposée of the truth...well take this!” Alternatively, of course, it may be argued that, rather than overconforming to the rules of mass media presentations, the essay resisted, indeed broke those rules; in particular, it broke the rule that requires an “accessible,” “popular” style for mass media presentations even when they are supposed to be serious commentary rather than mass entertainment (national public radio rather

than radio for the masses). In this particular case, then, overconformity and resistance coexist as two sides of the same coin.

¹³ 2005b: 193. Evidence for the essay's ability to engage its popular readership in thinking is indirect but compelling. In the Preface to Adorno's *Critical Models* Henry Pickford writes: "Adorno became virtually a popular author...a paperback edition of *Prisms* (1955) was printed with a run of 25,000 copies, while *Interventions* appeared with an initial run of 18,000 copies; by 1969 the former was in its third edition and the latter had 33,000 copies....Incomplete documentation indicates that between 1950 and 1969 Adorno participated in more than 160 radio programs." Pickford then goes on to cite comments by Adorno's editor at Hessischer Rundfunk that Adorno's radio lectures stimulated the sound technicians to "discussion that [often] was much better and more comprehensible than the lecture that he [Adorno] had just read into the microphone." Indeed, we are told, Adorno himself insisted upon such discussions (Pickford, 2005: viii).

¹⁴ The essay failed to deliver on this promise. It said nothing new, and what it did say was by and large incomprehensible to the bulk of its audience. But equally, I have argued, this failure to deliver on its promise was precisely the point at which it delivered – a delivery not of some secret truth, however, but rather of a critical thoughtfulness that Adorno equates with an idealized form of philosophical thinking. (Adorno assumes a normative conception of the philosophical that he takes from enlightenment thought in general, and from Kant and Hegel in particular. This conception divorces philosophy from the stylized, verbal gymnastics of professional philosophers, and identifies it more generally with critique: "If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only...as critique" - 2005a: 10.) Or to turn the point around, the truth that the essay delivered lay in its thoughtful recognition that there is no truth to deliver, a "truth" to which it led readers through their failure to "get" it; and, in particular, through its enigmatic quality that it created by overstressing its form. In short, by reflexively raising the question about itself - "What is it saying?" - the essay led its readers to question its own claim to truth - "Is it true?" And from there it led them to a consideration of the truth that there is no truth. (Adorno, 1997: 318) For Adorno, the point here resides not so much in the metaphysical conclusion, but rather in the philosophical engagement through which the conclusion is negotiated.

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