Your Ad Here ...

Advertising & Design: Preface

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If you look up the word "advertisings" in a popular search engine, about approximately 1,460,000,000 results appear in 0.15 seconds. If you look up the word "news", you get approximately 1,340,000,000 results in 0.14 seconds and for the word "sustainability" you get 82,500,000 results in 0.23 seconds. Assuming that the Internet provides a sort of mirror of human values, this is interesting. It seems that advertising in all its manifestations pervades our lives. This motivated the editors to organize a lecture series on advertising, which was held at the University of Graz in the winter term of 2012/13 and which received the teaching award "Lehre: Ausgezeichnet" (teaching excellence) in 2013. The purpose of this series was to bring together different perspectives to provide a possibly deeper understanding of this phenomenon of everyday life.

Interdisciplinary approaches are more than to agree on differences when it comes to defining the 'shingling grounds' of scientific disciplines and are

1 Interdisciplinary scientific thinking is challenging in various ways: besides the different subjects, methods and especially scientific cultures, there are different ways of arguing on the basis of scientific literature, evidence and statistical data. These ways are formalized in different types of citation. To underline the existence of these differences the editors decided to give the authors the possibility to choose between two types of citation (Footnote and Harvard citation style).
Capitalism Propaganda
Adorno’s Kulturindustrie and Freedom of Creativity

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POLITICS OF AUTONOMY

The history of art, the history of design, and the history of advertising run in parallel tracks but are not identical. From the point of view of visual studies (or the Bildwissenschaften), the combination of image and text may be one important pathway that these forms of communication do share. They are ways of communication that attract the viewer’s gaze. But the theory of gaze might blur a difference between art and advertisement, between pictures and commercials, and between drawing and graphic design, which are expressed emphatically in other theoretical approaches. In the following I want to scrutinize one specific formulation, that of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, to show that the discrimination between the autonomy of art and the dependence of applied art at a crucial point during the last century carried an eminent political meaning. I believe that this political interest today is most worthy to be kept from oblivion.

The defamation of advertisement as a form of propaganda and the defamation of all channels of mass media as means of propaganda were in themselves political statement that were at once anti-fascist, anti-capitalist and anti-communist. In times of digital monitoring, in times of personalized advertisement through social media, and in times of ever-present ad spaces on smart phones and mobile tablet computers, it might be of some relevance to again frame the question of freedom within the discussion of the relation between art and advertisement. In doing so, I do not address the
freedom of the generative system, but the freedom of people: the freedom of the producers as well as the users of images.

In asking these questions, the perspective of semiotics seems to have a blind spot, and in opposition to poststructuralist theories of signs, Adorno’s critical theory is more interested in intentions and affections than in effectiveness. The functional operation of communication in art and also within design processes is not a valid criterion of a successful act of creation to Adorno. In his eyes, a good design is not necessarily a functional one. A good design is one that keeps the moral integrity of the designer, as well as that of the beholder, unsmirched. Autonomy and independence are the guardians of the possibility of a freedom of choice and a free will. Propaganda is the perfect antonym to this understanding of freedom. Advertising will make a person consume things against his or her own will; advertising may affect people to the disadvantage of their own health: this would be just a form of propaganda. Following this logic, advertisements can never be art. But Adorno is giving some hints how, or at least to what extent, contract work – and that would include all kinds of design work – could be called art.

KUL TURINDUSTRIE AS PROPAGANDA

Fleeing from fascist Germany to England in 1934 and later on to California, Adorno escaped the Holocaust and the battlegrounds of World War II. During his exile in the United States of America, he and his co-refugee, friend, and mentor Max Horkheimer, coined the term »Kulturindustrie«. Popular music (like jazz), cinema, journals and illustrated magazines, radio programs, fashion and, most of all, advertising – all of what today might be called mass media or the creative industries – was part of Kulturindustrie. Adorno and Horkheimer, the two representatives of what was not yet called critical theory, invented this term to mark the difference between folk art and mass culture. They wanted to avoid the impression »that it [the Kulturindustrie] is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneous-

ly from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme.«

Kulturindustrie does not include original products by individuals. It is a powerful instrument of the ruling class – in Berlin, Moscow, Rome or Hollywood alike – to silence people, to sedate critique, to curtail civic rights and to keep all citizens in a passive state of consumption. Independent and self-reliant thought and the philosophical ideals of enlightenment are eroded by Kulturindustrie, which is itself a result of enlightenment. No act that helps to keep up the mechanisms of consumption can be truly creative. That is because there is no originality and no inventive quality in recreating a system that already exists. Fulfilling the will of any given authority cannot bring something new into the world, but only perpetuate the old and traditional.

As long as there is a »constraint of the client or the market« – as long as design is used to produce consumer goods or items of trade only – there will be no creativity. Art must completely rid itself of the character of ware. As this concept of creativity is in some ways indebted to nineteenth century ideas of the original genius and a model of the autonomous subject in the tradition of German idealistic philosophy, Adorno’s point of departure may be questionable. Within the framework of the relationship between art and advertising two primary questions arise at this point: the first is why is Adorno so strident? The second is, what would art that exists outside of a consumerist world look like?

**NO POEMS AFTER AUSCHWITZ**

Adorno’s uncompromising attitude was a direct result of his experience of German National Socialism, the aggressive and racist anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust, and the aesthetic politics of propaganda with the help of radio and cinema, newspapers, architecture, mass performances or the doctrine of »Entartete Kunst«. Affected personally as a Jew and intel-

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2 Theodor W. Adorno, Theodor, Culture Industry Reconsidered. (translated by Anson G. Rabinbach), in: New German Critique, 6, Fall 1975, 12.

lectually as a sociological researcher he found that the traditional occidental concept of culture annihilated itself within the Holocaust. A tradition that led into inhumanity must be inhuman:

»It (culture) abhors the stench, because it stinks; because, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, its palace is built of dogshit. Years after that line was written, Auschwitz irrefutably proved the failure of culture. That it could happen in the midst of all the traditions of philosophy, art and the enlightening sciences, says more than just that these traditions, the spirit, was not able to seize and to change man. In those fields themselves, in their emphatic claim of self-sufficiency, dwells the untruth. All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage.«

A culture that enabled Auschwitz could not produce or convey any truth and so meant nothing but shit and rubbish. After the Holocaust, a culture that traded on its values stank. But that leads directly into a classical dilemma. Even criticizing the dog shit culture is impossible: how could one defend art, if the concept of autarky itself had become dirty? »Not even silence gets us out of this circle«:

»Whoever pleads for the preservation of a radically culpable and shabby culture makes himself its accomplice, while one who denies culture directly promotes the barbarism that the culture has revealed itself to be.«

Those who intended to continue prewar culture were cohorts of the fascists; those who fought culture would bring barbarism. There was no way to escape this constraint by reason. »Die Hure Vernunft«, the whore of reason, without any moral prejudice, obeyed even the organizers and managers of the Holocaust. But this way of thinking was a dead end. It was not only Umberto Eco who saw the impossibility of being active within a culture that had discredited itself in such a fundamental manner.

5 Ibid., 360.
6 Ibid., 376.
Adorno adjusted his position during the following years writing his »Negative Dialectics«, and he found a legitimate case of being productive within a cultural context. A valid form of creativity is the expression of pain:

»Perennial suffering has as much a right to expression as the martyred has to scream. Thus it may have been wrong to say that poems could not be written after Auschwitz.«

The raison d’être of art can only be one: »to withstand suffering by signalling/marking it.« Enlightenment failed in making human beings more human. Culture is not apt to improve mankind; culture is not even able to relieve the pain of the tortured. But the traditions of literature, of music and visual arts can at least be used to voice the cruelty and to communicate the inhumanity.

Conversely that would mean that Kulturindustrie wants to silence the scream, the cry, the groan. Kulturindustrie pretends that during WWII nothing worth mentioning happened and that everything is back to normal, back to business as usual. Kulturindustrie puts some new paint on the blood spattered walls of occidental tradition ignoring its complete and essential collapse, interpreting the Holocaust as a momentary malfunction or an error of some misled and now eliminated historical figures. In Adorno’s eyes the products of Kulturindustrie are meaningless because of this ignorance of the true (that is the failed) nature of western philosophy.

Art that still wants to be art, that still insists on a meaning as revelation of truth has to become anti-art. In his last years Adorno wrote:

»That art which holds onto its concept and refuses consumption, turns into anti-art; its uneasiness about itself, after the real disasters and in the face of future ones, to which its continued existence stands in moral disparity, informs aesthetic theory, to whose tradition such scruples were alien.«

8 Adorno: Negative Dialektik, 355.
Adorno wants aesthetical theory to teach »resistance against art as a consumer good.«¹¹ This is his main target: to fight a capitalist use of culture as just another way to make money. Advertising has no chance whatsoever to be judged as an art form. Anti-art is defined rather vaguely, but most of all, it must not be sellable. Anti-art is not about masterpieces and enduring materials, anti-art is not about timelessness and eternal beauty, anti-art is not about virtuosity and skill.¹² Anti-art from Adorno’s point of view should be ephemeral, time based, sketchy, open, polysemantic, torn, unsolved, uncompromising, and uneasy. It is defined by the »anti«: It is negative by definition. To the artist as well as to the designer, theory is helpful only to find out what is to be avoided. The only sense of definitions and standards is to delineate what is to be rejected.

In this understanding Adorno himself was a decisive advocate of modern art during the 1950s and 1960s. »I identify with the cause of modern art in its extreme form,«¹³ he confessed in 1950. He was a defender of radical gestures – although he was more into modern music than into visual arts like painting. Radical – in the etymological significance of a change down to the roots bare of any compromises – to him meant to substitute works of art by the act of making them: »To replace artworks with the process of their own creation« which leads to the conclusion: »Radically-made art terminates in the problem of its feasibility.«¹⁴

The process, not the product, a »manipulation of chance«¹⁵, an aesthetics of do-it-yourself, the »self-made«¹⁶ and »the once hidden moment of the made, the manufactured«¹⁷ are indicators of the new art, the anti-art. In the

¹¹ Ibid., 500.
¹⁴ Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie, 46.
¹⁵ Ibid., 322.
¹⁶ Ibid., 506.
¹⁷ Ibid., 46.
heyday of action painting, Adorno supports the handmade, the not cleaned, but process oriented character of manipulations of accidental shapes.

Not function, nor intention, nor purpose, nor communication should be the goals of artists, but an authentic expression of pain. Even to try to be understood by a growing number of persons and to try chum up with the uneducated (like the Nazis) will carry the connotation of the »popular« and by that, will raise the suspicion of making items of trade. Adorno becomes elitist ex negativo.

CRITICAL ADVERTISING?

In his intention of unintendedness, Adorno might have felt this contradiction himself: you cannot command freedom. It is not possible to fight blind obedience with authoritative proclamations. What Adorno was unable to see in his condemnation of Kulturindustrie was that he was led by prejudices. He refused even to take a closer look at what he judged as popular. Perhaps he feared he would be contaminated or affected like he saw so many people become by Nazi propaganda as well as by Hollywood movies. And it could be that advertising and popular media like cinema, comic strips or pop music indeed mainly transport uncritical stereotypes and, in doing so, attract narrow-minded people, who are happy to be told what to do.

On the other hand, Umberto Eco’s answer is appropriate for taking a closer look at comic strips like the Peanuts or Superman or at pulp literature like Ian Fleming’s James Bond books. Eco presents the argument that no human exists always and only on one and the same side, but that everybody is able read both – high culture lyrics and low culture comic strips. This means that the strict categories of Adorno do not describe the social reality in a proper way.

Moreover it was precisely this discussion on the initial collapse of enlightenment that triggered developments, for instance, within the mass medium of comics that allowed dealing with the Holocaust, like Art Spiegelman did in his Maus books – the first Pulitzer Price winning graphic novel. Maus shows all of Adorno’s characteristics of radical art like the do-it-yourself attitude, the sketchiness, and the reflection on the problems of its own making. The aesthetic genealogy of underground Comix by artists like Robert Crumb and others is uncompromising, torn, and radical, with no
simple conclusions and solutions, made by an inspired individual instead of a profit oriented industry. Spiegelman, for sure, was able to voice the scream of the tortured.

In the very same moment, *Maus* is without question an item that was produced to be sold and to be understood, a product of Kulturindustrie. The widespread discussions about the legitimacy of a Holocaust comic strip during the 1990s clearly showed that elitist strategy of critical theory was still alive. But it also showed that its contradictions still are unsolved. There is no way for Adorno’s artist to survive economically in this world. Or the artist will have to make his money with another job, which may force him to compromise with the failed culture in other ways.

At the same time it is possible to imitate the aesthetic surface of do-it-yourself style in non-autonomous contexts. Advertising indeed does show some of Adorno’s characteristics as well. Advertising is ephemeral and time based, sometimes even auto-reflexive, too. Some strategies make use of subculture techniques, for instance, methods of guerrilla marketing using graffiti and street art to attract the attention of specific target groups. In other cases ad strategies aim not at a direct sale of products but are conceptualized as a mere image campaign. Within these concepts advertising can address people’s critical sense and their will to think for themselves, even can strengthen a self-reliant and responsible attitude – we do not buy a product, we buy a quiet consciousness. The catchword of »green washing« marks some of these strategies – although there might be business companies that honestly try to deliver moral integrity. Still most people might not be willing to believe that the message of anyone who works for profit is morally integrous.

**BEYOND DICHOTOMIES**

Adorno was a justly angry man and Eco was similarly justly concerned about what to do. Eco rejected Adorno’s strict judgment but he still kept the categories of high and low culture. I would like to suggest, that in the time of Web 2.0 these juxtapositions of two contrasting values like mainstream vs. sub culture, like system vs. individual, like dependency vs. authenticity, like industry vs. consumer are too simple and too undifferentiated either to explain our reactions to advertising or to develop a set of ethical recom
mendations. No human can be educated enough not to respond emotionally to certain affections. At the same time no one in the western world is a completely helpless slave of the ›Kulturindustrie‹ or an unconscious victim of advertising. We can watch TV and be critical in the same instance. But still Adorno’s critique is valid. So the question is: what can be done to keep up the political urge of freedom without nurturing either an imperative or a resigned tone?

What I want to suggest is to modify the categories and, by that, switch the perspective. Freedom is not an absolute term; total freedom is neither thinkable nor desirable. Humans, producers as well as consumers, are always free and dependant in the same instant. There is no way of thinking about a completely hermetic artwork and there is no way of thinking about any kind of ad message that would communicate to or affect each and every person on this planet. The question of freedom is a question of degrees and by that one of conventions. In order to communicate at all, we are all dependent on iconographies and typologies and on prejudices and preconceptions. Even Adorno himself necessarily had to cultivate his prejudices in order to express his horror, his anger, and his despair.

Critical theory cannot speak from outside the world. But it still is important to formulate criteria of judgment to tell the better from the less good. Neither the theory of the gaze nor of semiotics alone are apt to reason a judgment of quality beyond functionality. If Bildwissenschaften can keep up the quest for integrity without the dichotomy between indifference or confirmation, critical theory will be an important source of visual studies. For me it is not so much the decision whether a given phenomenon is to be judged as free or dependent that is important. Of more importance is the question to what degree moral integrity is of concern. This culture may be a palace built from dog shit, as Bertold Brecht suggested. Still it is a palace.

With the Holocaust, enlightenment brought its own dark twin into the world in a dialectical manner, as Adorno diagnosed. Still, the nature of human relationships are too rich to be rendered simply in right or wrong, in free or not free. Seen in this perspective Adorno’s theory itself is a piece of art in his definition: a cry of pain.
References

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