

The Culture Industry, Co-optation, and the Taming of Godzilla: Reconfiguring Resistance Through Adorno's Critical Thought

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Abstract: This paper examines the tension between critique and co-optation through Godzilla, arguing that the franchise and its development exemplify how critical sentiments are systemically neutralized within the culture industry. The 1954 film, *Gojira*, was originally conceived to be a critical and politically charged work—an allegory deeply rooted in Japanese post-war trauma and a protest against imperialism, nuclear warfare, and modern instrumental rationality. However, its message has been diluted and lost in the spectacle of monster, devolving into the Godzilla franchise that we know today—a loud, juvenile extravaganza whose sole merit lies in its entertainment value. This shift typifies a broader process in which critique is subjugated, neutralized, and ultimately co-opted, reflecting the pathologies of the culture industry as theorized by Theodor W. Adorno. To investigate how these mechanisms operate—and consider how they might be resisted—this paper proceeds in three parts: I first conduct a

preliminary examination of Adorno's theory of the culture industry; second, I analyze the trajectory of Godzilla and its co-optation, as well as the pathologies involved; and lastly, I attempt to present a mode of resistance articulated through Adorno's philosophical lens.

Keywords: co-optation, culture industry, Godzilla, resistance

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary cultural landscape, works have become the site where both domination and resistance intersect. Art is a powerful, effective medium for critique and the expression of dissent, yet a persistent paradox arises: works and sentiments that initially challenge the status quo often become neutralized and sometimes even absorbed by the very systems they sought to critique. This is the phenomenon of co-optation. Co-optation generally refers to the act of integration and appropriation. It encompasses two related phenomena: commodification and recuperation.

Commodification pertains to the act of turning something into a means to profit, essentially integrating it into the process of the generation of pure value. On the other hand, recuperation pertains to the co-optation of dissent by re-circulating a neutralized, defanged version of it, effectively turning oppositional tactics into ideology.¹ Forms of dissent that initially sought to provide a ‘counterculture’ (such as punk music, ripped jeans, etc.) are ultimately recuperated.² Hence, the aim of counterculture to provide a ‘counter’ to the dominant status quo falls short as it now simply serves as an affirmation of the established order, showing the “freaks of the same life.”³ The danger, I believe, is that any and everything can be co-opted, may it be with the aim of profiting from it (commodification) or for ideological reasons, i.e., to neutralize it (recuperation).

With capital being the universal category of society, the logic of commodification spares none, as even dissent can be and has been subsumed and rendered into the commodity form. In the process of commodification, the commodity form is imposed on dissenting materials in order to exploit them as a new source of profit. This is mainly due to the permeability of symbolism to commodification: movements and ‘popular’

¹ See Karen Kurczynski, “Expression as Vandalism: Asger Jorn’s ‘Modifications,’” in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 53/54 (2008), 295–296.

² See Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 222.

³ See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 59.

forms of dissent tend to incorporate catchy, popular symbolism, and it is precisely this characteristic that is exploited. In the process of its commodification, dissenting sentiments within the symbolic content become interchangeable and impotent.⁴ We see this, for example, in companies mass-producing the face of Che Guevara or anti-corporate sentiments on various merchandise—from cups to T-shirts and many more! The symbolic content of the goods sold is subordinate to the monetary value generated by their sale; if the people in charge of production thought that the dissemination of such products would lead to revolutionary praxis, they would not consent to their retail. In other words, corporate power does not see anti-corporate sentiments commercialized to be a threat. The mere fact that individuals who supposedly agree with such sentiments purchase them demonstrates that the insidious ideological aims of capitalism have been successful to this end. Dissent, in this case, functions and is promoted as a commodity, effectively reducing rebellion to a mere act of consumerism. When dissent is nullified and defanged by consumer culture, it loses its weight and becomes mere harmless negation.

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

The term ‘culture industry’, as coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, can be understood as a systemic, pathological manufacturing and administration of the eversame within formal or informal cultural forms.⁵ Culture, once a realm of authentic human expression, is subsumed under the relentless logic of industrialization. The industrialization of

⁴ See Camila Cannon, “The Commodification of Anti-Capitalist Sentiment and Possible Paths of Resistance,” in *Auspex: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 4 (2015), 11.

⁵ By ‘cultural forms,’ I refer to both the formal, codified, and traditionally recognized modes of cultural expression (e.g., religion, law, and rituals) and informal, quotidian, less formally recognized expressions of culture (e.g., consumer habits, bodily gestures, subcultures). This term is to be understood differently from ‘cultural artifacts,’ which refer to tangible or intangible works that reflect/embody certain cultural forms. See Henry W. Pickford, “Adorno and the Categories of Resistance,” in *Constellations*, 31:2 (2024), 139.

culture is not done by a discrete entity but permeates the entirety of cultural production, revealing a systemic pathology wherein cultural artifacts are churned out as commodities governed by modern imperatives of standardization, rationalization, and fossilized repetition.⁶ The culture industry's adherence to such principles results in the administration of archetypal, formulaic commodities infected with sameness that are both "totally familiar and have never existed before."⁷ In this manner, the culture industry is symptomatic of modern reification and disenchantment, as even culture, the supposed bastion of subjectivity, becomes a mimesis of industrial rationality, rendering it into a mere economic frontier saturated with a pathological, eternal sameness.

In the culture industry, only meaninglessness is acceptable. The entertainment that it provides must require no labor, as it is offered precisely to people who seek to escape labor in their free time so that they may cope with it again.⁸ Even in their free time, people choose to be unfree—to prefer entertainment over their own freedom. As long as it guarantees even the most fleeting gratification, the masses would desire deception, even if it is known to them out of the desperate attempt to soothe their boredom and aches. However, the culture industry cheats its audiences out of the promise of pleasure: it is never fulfilled, as the best that the culture industry can offer is the anticipation of its fulfillment. Wrong laughter and superficial entertainment become the tools of the culture industry for cheating happiness as pain is replaced with jovial denial.⁹ Given that amusement must cost no effort on behalf of its audience and to ensure the spectator is relieved of independent and laborious

⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), 100–101.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer qualify the difference between wrong laughter and reconciled laughter: the former "copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it," as it "echoes the inescapability of power;" the latter "resounds with the echo of escape from power." *Ibid.*, 112.

thought, the products of the culture industry prescribe automated reactions through signals, patterns, and cues.¹⁰ In the culture industry, thinking too much is forbidden: the prime imperative of the culture industry is unthinking, unreflective action.

The culture industry exists as an instrument of domination that induces and perpetuates pathological conformism, propagating sameness and its homogenizing tendencies not only in cultural forms but in consciousness as well. In the constant reproduction of the eversame, ideology that lies fossilized in the messages within the products of the culture industry is also repeatedly perpetuated. In repeatedly circulating these messages and meanings, the culture industry effectively devalues any quality associated with inwardness and instead encourages the other-directedness of a well-adjusted person as portrayed via character types.¹¹ Through David Riesman, Adorno qualified the difference between an individual who is inner-directed and one who is other-directed: The actions of an inner-directed individual are mediated by a set of internal principles that ensure one's ability to fend off any sort of pressure from external factors (i.e., to fend off conformism), as the individual's guidance system is akin to a gyroscope; on the other hand, the actions of an other-directed individual are governed by a heightened sensitivity to the opinions of others, with a guidance system that functions more like a radar that receives signals as individuals receive cues for appropriate action from external factors.¹² Here, we see how consumerism undermines individuality as people are constrained and guided by their sensitivity to external impositions as communicated by cultural forms, and such sensitivity becomes a factor of control: the subject now becomes an object of domination.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 161–163.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7. See also Robert T. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 19–20.

What complicates the culture industry as a form of domination is that its actions and goals need not be hidden: it does not need to present its products as ‘art’ given that the very admission that it isn’t serves to legitimize its system and the trash that it intentionally produces. This is apparent even today, where such trash is ‘given a pass’ by virtue of being trash. We are made to think that one should not critically consider something precisely because they are not meant to be taken seriously.¹³ Moreover, such admittance only serves to reinforce the culture industry’s role in perpetuating ideology. It hides behind a veil of innocence—the idea that what the culture industry presents ought to be taken lightly, its confession of its diminished truth—which has been its excuse that it uses to evade all responsibility for its lies.¹⁴ For example, a comedy that, at first glance, seems to be totally detached from politics or ideology actually holds immense socio-political significance in the sense that it contains undertones that celebrate conformity and/or promote the idea of adjustment. In an example that Adorno provides in “How to Look at Television,” a young schoolteacher stars in a comedy where she cannot afford to buy her meals, and the comedy consists of her antics in trying to secure her next meal. Adorno writes:

Overtly, the play is just slight amusement [...]. The script does not try to ‘sell’ any idea. The ‘hidden meaning’ emerges simply by the way the story looks at human beings; thus the audience is invited to look at the characters in the same way without being made aware that indoctrination is present. [...] The script implies: ‘If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. You can cope with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but

¹³ See Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 164–165.

¹⁴ See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xix.

also above the rest of mankind'. In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment.¹⁵

Through a style that does not pretend to be involved with anything serious, the overt presentation hides inobtrusive messages that reinforce ideology and other qualities at home with totalitarian creeds (e.g., conformity, intellectual passivity, and gullibility). The culture industry dons its veil of innocence like a wolf in sheep's clothing, which makes it easier to smuggle certain messages past the conscious controls of the audience's minds.

Some advocates argue that, in light of the socio-technological developments that occurred after Adorno's time, the culture industry has become a net positive. The argument is that popular cultural artifacts that are produced within the culture industry are becoming more diverse, complex, and even partake in critique. For example, Douglas Kellner argues that the culture industry has developed into a "[theatre] for social conflict and [an instrument] of cultural diversity."¹⁶ To this, I respond that the culture industry has, to an extent, opened up after the 1950s, but only to the end of legitimizing its existence and that of the commodities it proliferates: The implementation of diversity and supposed critique within the culture industry only serves to "sell more junk to a society that is already saturated with it" and to legitimize the current system as a progressive one capable of addressing social issues.¹⁷ In other words, the culture industry relegates 'critique' to a status of either a tool for rationalization or of a

¹⁵ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 166–167.

¹⁶ Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory and the Culture Industries: A Reassessment," in *Telos*, 62 (January 1984), 203.

¹⁷ See Moïshe Gonzales, "Kellner's Critical Theory: A Reassessment," in *Telos*, 62 (1984), 208.

commodity. For example, we see how ‘punk’ was initially intended to be a means of expressing dissent; however, it has soon been defanged and co-opted into another consumerist lifestyle brand. Despite the honest and well-meaning efforts of some producers to facilitate critical artifacts within the culture industry, the fact remains that the framework of the culture industry compromises and does not allow for the existence (at least a sustained one) of genuine critique. As Adorno tells us:

The possibility of remedying the situation through goodwill should not be overrated. The culture industry is so fundamentally entangled with powerful interests that even the most honest efforts in its sector could not get very far.¹⁸

As such, representation, critique, and all of the supposed progressive or emancipatory aspects present in the products within the culture industry become less than what they actually stand for and are instead reduced to selling points of both the product and the system itself. In all manners in which products within the culture industry attempt to engage in critique, it is always in this same vein.

Ultimately, the culture industry neutralizes, or at the very least dilutes, the critical impulse within cultural artifacts as it is symptomatic of the pathological positivity that plagues modern society. It forcefully circulates excess positivity and shuns that which does not affirm. Negativity is not popular, and therefore does not sell: as such, the bitter truths of the wrong state of things are repressed with prejudice. In this context, positivity refers not merely to optimism, but to an ideological demand for reconciliation and identity—a refusal to confront discomfort, contradiction, and harsh social truths; negativity, by contrast, names the critical force that resists this mandate—an openness to dissonance, suffering, and irreconcilable truths. Even cultural artifacts produced within

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 69.

the culture industry that supposedly touch on the problems of society are compelled to pivot towards affirmation and force a positive note. There is a certain obsession with happy endings. The culture industry standardizes its commodities according to this positive ideal in order to satisfy the markers of entertainment and popularity. As a result, the culture industry not only censors negative artworks but also subsumes and co-opts them, thereby stripping them of their disruptive, emancipative power and converting them into pawns of the very system they sought to challenge. Such is the case, as will be shown later, with *Godzilla*, which, despite finding its origins in trauma, war, and protest, becomes yet another cog in the machinery of domination. Cultural artifacts, under the authority of the culture industry, fulfil their escapist function with excess precision, and in doing so, escape from the task of genuine escape.¹⁹

THE TAMING OF GOJIRA

To further illustrate the point of how the culture industry effectively stifles and compromises critique, let us take a look at *Godzilla*.²⁰ As a film franchise, *Godzilla* belongs to a subgenre of films known as ‘movies you can turn your brain off to.’ Overtly, the phrase offers an escape from contemporary modern rationalism, but inobtrusively, it serves as an invitation towards conformity, passivity, and the numbing of one’s critical faculties. It is a blatant admission that what is served is trash, yet the audience is still expected to swallow it whole without question. To consume these types of cultural artifacts, one must be totally engrossed by its spectacle, which typically involves heavy, brash use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). *Godzilla* is particularly worth examining because, in

¹⁹ John Durham Peters, “The Subtlety of Horkheimer and Adorno: Reading ‘The Culture Industry,’” in *Canonic Texts in Media Research* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 68–69.

²⁰ In this segment, I utilize ‘*Godzilla*,’ ‘*Gojira*,’ and ‘*Gojira*’ in different senses. ‘*Godzilla*’ refers to the pathological, Westernized form of the franchise, fitting as it is the Hepburn romanization of the original Japanese word; *Gojira* in italics refers to the title of the original 1954 Japanese film; and *Gojira* refers to the monster as seen in these movies.

analyzing its development as a franchise, we can see how the critical voice of the original 1954 film has been suppressed and covered with the culture industry's veil of innocence, along with all of its other pathologies. In other words, we see in *Godzilla* a concrete example of how something that was initially very political and served as a polemic commentary on relevant social strife has been reduced to mere entertainment, repurposed to reinforce the very systems of domination it once sought to challenge.

In the contemporary context, when one hears 'Godzilla,' one is reminded of brash, juvenile spectacles of giant monsters—perhaps fighting each other while leveling cities: 'Godzilla' invokes the image of a distractive and immature form of entertainment that lacks any real substance. However, if one were to look at its original form, the 1954 film entitled *Gojira*, it is so much more than that: it never hides behind the awesomeness of the spectacle caused by a towering monster, as it is inherently political. After all, it was a reaction to and a condemnation of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War (which occurred nine years before the film's release) and the nuclear testings that proceeded thereon (specifically the *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* incident).²¹ Ultimately, *Gojira* was a protest against the United States, the nuclear arms race, and unnecessary civilian casualties in warfare. Being such, grave themes are very much apparent in the film, which features some dark and disturbing scenes that express the experience of the Japanese people in light of the destructive magnitude they have faced.²² After all, the monster *Gojira* (ゴジラ)

²¹ See David Ropeik, "How the Unlucky Lucky Dragon Birthed an Era of Nuclear Fear," in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (28 February 28 2018), <<https://thebulletin.org/2018/02/how-the-unlucky-lucky-dragon-birtherd-an-era-of-nuclear-fear/>>. The *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* is a small Japanese tuna fishing boat which was exposed to nuclear fallout, along with its crew of 23 men, during a nuclear weapons test conducted by the United States. The opening scene of the film is a direct reference to the incident, following the stories told by the crew members who suffered extreme radiation burns.

²² Such scenes include a mother comforting her children as they are about to be crushed by the towering monster, children being affected by nuclear fallout, etc. What these scenes portray is—and this is often overlooked in contemporary *Godzilla* films that feature the

ジラ) was, first and foremost, a representation and product of the Japanese fear brought about by the devastating American atomic armament. Such a quality is completely divorced from Godzilla's role and character in contemporary society, as it now proclaims itself as something that is very uncritical, having nothing of value aside from that of entertainment. The image of Gojira, something which was once powerful and impactful, has been extremely bastardized by the culture industry. The catalyst for this was when Embassy Pictures, upon seeing the success of *Gojira* at the box office, decided to heavily edit the film, inserting a white man as the lead, and produce an Americanized version entitled *Godzilla: King of Monsters!*—essentially producing a defanged, censored, and commodified version of the film.²³ Since then, Gojira, the symbol of atomic destruction and the devastation of warfare, is now *celebrated* instead of viewed with contempt. Moreover, it is very insidiously ironic that it is now perceived by the outside as the figurehead—a representative—of Japan, especially when Gojira was appointed as the Japanese tourism ambassador in 2015!²⁴ A far cry from what it originally was, Gojira is now a symbol and an expression of neoliberal domination—a spectacle recuperated. There is no bigger contrast than the ending of the 1954 film, where there is no fanfare nor celebration upon Gojira's defeat—only a message that urged reflection regarding warfare and nuclear armaments, punctuated by a melancholic shot of a lonely sea inviting a moment of contemplation; the current Godzilla franchise, by contrast, has every beat filled with an action-packed sequence, leaving no room left to breathe, to think, nor to contemplate. In

spectacle of destruction—how destruction on a grand scale affects the common people, specifically how it affects the children who are scarred by war literally and metaphorically.

²³ See “‘Godzilla’ was a metaphor for Hiroshima, and Hollywood whitewashed it,” in *NBC News* (8 August 2020), <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/godzilla-was-metaphor-hiroshima-hollywood-whitewashed-it-n1236165>>.

²⁴ See “Godzilla recruited as tourism ambassador for Tokyo,” in *The Guardian* (9 April 2015), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/09/godzilla-recruited-as-tourism-ambassador-for-tokyo>>. There is something so unpalatable about the monster Godzilla being officially granted residency in Japan and being called “a character that is the pride of Japan.”

other words, something that ultimately called for a moment of pause and contemplation amidst the sound of the thunderous footsteps of the monster and the booming of the bombs has been turned into its ultimate opposite: a distractive spectacle that does not pretend to take on anything seriously—something which drowns out any moment of contemplation or pulse of criticality through the sheer, brash loudness of its imagery. The implications raised by the 1954 film, its critical voice against the matters of its time, and the original symbolism of Gojira have been diminished, with the focus now being shifted to the spectacle that the figure of Gojira provides. Moreover, what was once a critique of the arms race and of corrupt geniuses who sit idly and comply while their creations are used to decimate entire civilizations is now turned into something that inobtrusively advocates for the development of weapons in order to quell a threat, specifically a foreign threat that looms over American society.²⁵ Whereas the 1954 film calls on its audience to consider implications and to think about the issues of its time, *Godzilla* is very symptomatic of the pathology found in the products within the culture industry: problematic implications are hidden and are fed to the audience in an inobtrusive manner. To defeat *Godzilla*, audiences are simply made to accept heavy militarization, ecological imbalances, etc., which are hidden under the overt display of defeating a monster.²⁶ Surely, destruction was something that was already involved in the 1954 film, but I'd like to qualify such an idea. What is displayed in the 1954 film is something dreadful and horrible—an *awful* sense of destruction; whereas in the Westernized franchise of *Godzilla*, what is showcased is a spectacle—a show of *awesome* destruction. Both draw out a sense of awe, but differ in the type of awe they

²⁵ “Foreign threat” in the sense that (a) the movies following the 2014 production (dubbed as the ‘Kaiju Cinematic Universe’ or simply ‘Kaijuverse’) mostly center on American settings, feature American protagonists, and portray *Godzilla* as something coming from Asia; and (b) in the meta-narrative sense as *Godzilla* is a Japanese creation and is heavily associated with such society. Such serves to justify xenophobic arguments for the immunization of the American civilization at the cost of what is without.

²⁶ Cf. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 165.

arouse: in the former, the sight of destruction on such a grand and devastating scale invokes the feelings of sadness, agony, and/or dread, whereas the imagery of grand, devastating destruction in the latter elicits cheers and a sense of thrill. Overall, the case of *Gojira* and its [d]evolution reflects a familiar pattern with many cultural artifacts: a work born out of a critical impulse is eventually hijacked and co-opted by the culture industry, with its integrity and inner logic sacrificed for the sake of profit. It is converted from something that opposes the status quo into an instrument of it, losing any semblance of its former critical self.

Let us, for the sake of argument, consider this question: can genuine critique coincide with profit, i.e., can genuine critique be profitable? If so, the culture industry can attend to the fulfillment of its goal whilst serving as a vehicle for social change. Here, I provide a negatory response. Apart from the obvious fact that the commodification of critique already defeats the point, people do not want to think as they want to escape any obtrusive semblance of labor, and the culture industry concedes to such desire by making sure that entertainment, i.e., that which sells, requires little to no mental exercise or reactions other than automatic or pre-figured ones.²⁷ People want to flee from both boredom *and* effort; such is the appeal of entertainment provided by the culture industry—of ‘movies one can turn one’s brain off to.’

ADORNO CONTRA CO-OPTATION

Given that every act of critique risks being subsumed and neutralized by the mechanisms of consumer capitalism, what becomes now of resistance? Do philosophy and critique lose their potency when dissent is rendered into yet another commodity, a spectacle devoid of transformative force? In dialogue with Adorno’s critical theory, I do not want to concede to this point just yet. Instead, I reaffirm the resistive and emancipatory potential of [critical] thought. Since consumption-based

²⁷ See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 108–109.

capitalism functions in various ways across multiple channels, effectively resisting the system is not as simple as ‘do not consume.’ There is no one definitive action to solve the problem of commodification and co-optation: we have to rely on “critical situational problem-solving”—on undiminished insight.²⁸ As such, resistance ceases to be a particular, one-off discharged action as it now becomes a “critical way of life,” an eternally ongoing endeavor sustained throughout an individual’s social existence.²⁹ Thinking, insofar as it is the act of not merely accepting things passively, is already an act of resistance in itself;³⁰ in the face of the co-optive proficiency of the culture industry and our perilous times, it is perhaps the ‘safest’ act.³¹ As Adorno reminds us, thought and thinking have an important role in social praxis. Internalization and deliberation are vital if we are to act: “without [theory], there would be no changing the praxis that constantly calls for change.”³² The negative, generative power of thought lies in its ability to think differently to the status quo, creating the possibility for change and

²⁸ See Cannon, “The Commodification of Anti-Capitalist Sentiment and Possible Paths of Resistance,” 14–15. “Critical situational problem-solving” is emphasized given that there is really no one universal maxim that is capable of addressing each avenue of social praxis; in fact, clinging to the idea that such exists only serves to do harm. As Cannon points out, each situation calls for an appropriate action, and it is through the process of deliberation that we can come to arrive at such. See also Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 201.

²⁹ See Pickford, “Adorno and the Categories of Resistance,” 130.

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?,” in *New Left Review* 65 (2010), 35.

³¹ See Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 200–201. During the events of the May ‘68 student movements, Adorno grew concerned over the general coercion towards activity, a concern that remains sustained up to today’s socio-political climate. He saw that, despite being well-meaning, the *Aktionismus* that informed the general socio-political climate of the time was dangerously problematic as it regressed into the authoritarian forms that it sought to combat. Thus, when talking about the theory-praxis relation, Adorno has repeatedly emphasized the role of theory given its unique ability to reflect upon itself: without theory, practice becomes bad, ineffective, and sometimes even violent practice—a pseudo-activity. As such, for Adorno, the act of thinking is the least wrong action that we can undertake in a wrong society. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 245.

³² *Ibid.*, 143.

resistance.³³ Ultimately, Adorno's socio-political aim was to ensure that critical thought does not halt. Despite modern pragmatism's attempt to permeate even resistance, Adorno insists that holding fast to thought and philosophy is not merely an intellectual play nor a self-aggrandizing intellectual endeavor; it is, rather, an act of refusal—of refusing wrongness, barbarism, and resignation. In sum, the capacity of formulating independent thought becomes a form of resistance in two ways: (1) as an opposition to the mere acceptance of the established reality, i.e., as a means of questioning the status quo; and (2) as a capacity to immunize us from the distorting mechanisms of society.³⁴

The capacity for independent thought and judgment serves as a key faculty in Adorno's configuration of social praxis. Following Immanuel Kant, Adorno views maturity (*Mündigkeit*) as an important virtue for resistance: resistance only becomes possible when one possesses the ability to think for oneself and to distinguish between what is known and what is merely accepted by convention or authority.³⁵ This maturity, the certain capacity for self-determination, is what lies at the center of Adorno's negative articulation of the concept of non-participation (*nicht mitmachen*). Adorno argues that genuine social praxis can only be configured negatively, as any attempt to positively posit actions and alternatives to the status quo inevitably causes further harm.³⁶ The good, including 'good action,' is unknowable and impracticable under current material conditions; the wrong, however, is not just knowable but is the

³³ Jan McArthur, "Theodor Adorno (1903–1969): Restless, Fractured, and Uncomfortable Thought" in *Philosophers on the University*, ed. by Ronal Barrett and Amanda Fullford (Cham: Springer, 2020), 37.

³⁴ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 264.

³⁵ See Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁶ See Adorno, *Critical Models*, 4. See also Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960's," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40:9 (2014), 871–872.

actual state of the world we live in.³⁷ As such, we can only judge actions by virtue of their being ‘less wrong.’ In a sense, non-participation is the full manifestation of an individual’s maturity and autonomy as it necessitates a judgment, wherein individuals come to recognize the wrong state of things and actively choose to stop its perpetuation. As Adorno writes, “The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating.”³⁸

Given the importance of critical, mature thought, it must be fostered, and such cultivation must be fulfilled by education; “The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection.”³⁹ Particularly, there are two aspects to be cultivated, aspects which serve as main preconditions for the capacity to resist: a theoretical, cognitive judgement, and a non-cognitive, visceral reaction.⁴⁰

The cultivation of the cognitive aspect means fostering the inclination towards a critical examination of the wrong society, one that reveals and emphasizes conceptual and social antagonisms, eventually leading to the production of “critical social consciousness.”⁴¹ In other words, a cultivation of an intellectual culture that is inclined towards ideology critique, which brings forth an object of critical examination from seemingly innocuous facets of everyday life. This attempt is seen in the very type of philosophizing done by Adorno: generally, he aimed to contribute to the inoculation of people against the factors, tendencies, and norms that engender the distortion and restriction of consciousness. For him, ideology critique must be inculcated in the youth in order for them to be ‘immunized’

³⁷ Robin Celikates, “Critique and Resistance: Ethical, Social-theoretical, Political? On Fabian Freyenhagen’s Adorno’s Practical Philosophy,” in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25:3 (2017), 847.

³⁸ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 195.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁰ See Pickford, “Adorno and the Categories of Resistance,” 137–141.

⁴¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 323.

from the regressive ideological effects induced by the culture industry. Adorno writes:

[The] only real concrete form of maturity would consist of those few people who are of a mind to do so working with all their energies towards making education an education for protest and for resistance. I could imagine, for example, that the senior classes of secondary schools could be taken as a group to commercially produced films, and that the students could quite simply be shown what a con is being presented, how hypocritical it all is. In a similar way, they could be immunized against certain morning broadcasts, such as still exist on the radio, where on Sunday mornings cheerful music is played to them, as though we live in a so-called 'ideal world'—a dreadful thought, it must be said [...] So that, to begin with, all we try to do is simply to open people's minds to the fact that they are constantly being deceived, because the mechanism of tutelage has been raised to the status of a universal *mundus vult decipi*: the world wants to be deceived. Making everyone aware of these connections could perhaps be achieved in the spirit of an immanent critique, because there can be no normal democracy which could afford to be explicitly against an enlightenment of this kind [...] All of these things would have to be included in any genuine process for the promotion of maturity.⁴²

Adorno's sentiments here stand true in contemporary society, especially with the advent of the Internet, which serves to bolster the culture industry's reach and capacity for domination. This especially stands

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno and Hellmut Becker, "Education for maturity and responsibility," in *History of the Human Sciences*, 12:3 (1999), 21–34.

true for Filipinos who remain in need of the strengthening of their information and media literacy, and who often fall prey to the weaponization of mass media.⁴³ This performance of ideology critique, however, does not merely apply to formal and traditional cultural forms. As seen in the spirit behind the critiques in *Minima Moralia*, even the seemingly trivial aspects of private or social life are caught up in the pathologies that infect large-scale socio-political structures: “there is nothing innocuous left.”⁴⁴ For a wrong society, the only apt criticism is a “ruthless criticism of all that exists.”⁴⁵

On the other hand, the cultivation of the non-cognitive aspect is the cultivation of emotional or affective qualities—such as desire, anticipation, enthusiasm, and imagination—that serve as a normative force inspiring self-reflection and the active pursuit of genuine social praxis.⁴⁶ Across the compendium of his works, Adorno has repeatedly recognized and emphasized the role of non-cognitive factors such as perception and the emotion provoked by perceived stimuli. He writes:

What is needed for a willed act or for practice in general is the coincidence of two antagonistic elements that do not become completely fused. On the one hand, there is intellect, reason, about which [...] if you take the notion of practice very seriously, it contains or presupposes the idea of the unrestricted, highly progressive theoretical consciousness. On the other hand, there is what I have

⁴³ See Margarita Felipe Fajardo, “Filipino Students’ Competency in Evaluating Digital Media Content Credibility: ‘Beginning’ to ‘Emerging’ Levels,” in *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 15:2 (2023). See also “Exercising Media Literacy During Tyranny,” in *Malaya Movement* <<https://www.malayamovement.com/blog/medialiteracy>>.

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), Aphorism 5.

⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 13.

⁴⁶ See Pickford, “Adorno and the Categories of Resistance,” 140.

labeled the additional factor, the bodily impulse that cannot be reduced to reason.⁴⁷

The true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain [...] we find the justification for moral imperatives in the recourse to the material, corporeal, physical reality—not to its opposite pole, the pure idea.⁴⁸

The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.⁴⁹

If he had not had this insight, if he had had no knowledge of the vile evil that prevailed in Germany at the time, he would quite certainly never have been moved to that act of resistance. But we then find that this other factor comes into play, the conviction—for whatever reason—that ‘things cannot go on like this, I cannot allow this to happen, regardless of what might happen to me or others in consequence.’⁵⁰

Adorno emphasizes the importance of our ability to perceive suffering and to resonate with it in our attempts at social praxis: a recognition and an experience of the wrong state of things is the general guiding force for resistance. In other words, suffering and other negative features of society must guide thinking under current conditions. Hence, philosophy, if it were to fulfill its emancipative role in society, must be

⁴⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 239.

⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 116-117.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203–204.

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, Theodor W., *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 8.

materially constituted: when it disregards or distances itself from social, political, and historical conditions, it succumbs to naivete and thereby fails to criticize itself.⁵¹ To withdraw from society and the social, even when done out of protest or disgust, just leaves in place and even has the tendency to strengthen the status quo. In the face of this, Adorno calls for a reinvigoration of our responsiveness towards suffering, insisting that we must overcome ‘bourgeois coldness’—a learned indifference required by the competitive, capitalist order on all its participants that suppresses empathy, and ultimately allows the worst to happen.⁵² Ultimately, the development of a critical consciousness that *recognizes* the wrong state of things and *desires* to transcend it is the beginning of unraveling the cycle through which wrong society is sustained.

CONCLUSION

Amid the ever-present danger of co-optation, it is easy to be pessimistic. At first glance, it seems that we are confronted with the impossibility of resistance in contemporary society, where even dissent can be subsumed. However, I would like to believe—as did Adorno—that there remains hope for thought in its very constitution. I concede that there is no way of stopping the process of the co-optation of dissenting sentiments; the pervasion of reification—the strength of capital—has gone that far in society. However, I believe that hope is not yet lost. Co-optation does not render resistance impossible. Even if all available materials are compromised by co-optation, resistance remains possible—so long as the subject possesses the necessary cognitive and non-cognitive capacities. Resistance is not in the message, but in the one who chooses how to respond to it. As Cornelius Castoriadis has wonderfully put it:

⁵¹ Paolo A. Bolaños “Philosophy from the Standpoint of Damaged Life: Adorno on the Ethical Character of Thinking,” in *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 16:3 (2012), 81.

⁵² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 363.

There is no guarantee against cooptation; in a sense, everything can be coopted, and everything is one day or another. Pompidou quotes Apollinaire, Waldeck-Rochet calls himself a communist, there is a mausoleum for Lenin, people get rich selling Freud, May Day is a legal holiday. We should also point out, however, that the coopters coopt only corpses. For us, inasmuch as we are alive, Apollinaire's voice still speaks to us anew; ever and again the lines of the Communist Manifesto vibrate, giving us a glimpse into the chasm of history; ever and again the phrase [of Lenin] "Take back what has been taken from you" resounds in our ears; ever and again the [Freudian statement] "Where Id was, Ego shall become" reminds us of its unsurpassable exigency; ever and again the blood of the Chicago workers clouds and clears our vision. Everything can be coopted—save one thing: our own reflective, critical, autonomous activity. To fight cooptation is to extend this activity beyond the here and now; it is to give it a form that will convey its content for all time and make it utterly impossible to coopt—that is, capable of being conquered again and again, in its ever-new truth, by living beings.⁵³

Even the consciousness about problems such as that of co-optation shows us symptoms of hope; pondering even the seemingly bleakness of society indicates that the human is alive—that the human is thinking, resisting. To hold fast to careful, deliberate thought in these precarious times does not mean resignation, but rather it means holding on to the hope that the state of things may be less wrong; to hope that, maybe someday, life may live once more.

⁵³ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 132.

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