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Midterm Research Paper
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The Melodramatic Foundations of Consumer Capitalist Society

Ben Singer in his work *Melodrama and the Consequences of Capitalism* commentates on the transitional period during the decline of religious belief and the growth of consumer capitalism in Western Europe during the 19th and 20th Centuries. He argues that during this period of a set of melodramatic consumer ideologies replaced the original religious way of thinking -to which can be attributed much of capitalism's success. I am first going to provide a background to this transitional period by discussing Singer's research alongside the work of sociologist Max Weber. I will then evaluate the affects that the indoctrination of melodrama, as a device for economic prosperity, has had to capitalist societies -citing studies from several of capitalisms most famed critics: Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer. Through my research I aim to provide the reader with a fundamental understanding of the significance of melodrama in shaping the materialistic consumer mentality that now saturates modern capitalist societies across the world today.

Although Capitalism is praised for providing people with a new and empowering sense of freedom, Singer states that "for many people the social upheavals of modernity -the erosion of traditional and feudal and religious authority and the rise of modern capitalism- were more anxious, unsettling and oppressive than they were empowering." Traditionally the growth of capitalism in Europe could largely be attributed to the dominance of religion in society at the

time as the foundation of people's moral compass -religion unified people, regulating how they thought and behaved whilst providing a much needed sense of unification and emotional connection. Famously, Max Weber theorizes how religion aided the development of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In his study Weber attributes much of capitalism's success in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, to a set of religious ideas, specifically true to Protestantism. Weber says that Protestantism assists the success of Capitalism in that it instills people with a powerful work ethic whilst making people feel guilty and anxious in the eyes of the judgmental all-seeing God. Therefore, to Weber, religious devotion is usually accompanied by the pursuit of wealth and the acquisition of possessions -primary ingredients to the growth of capitalist economies.

Whilst Karl Marx had argued that religion was the "opium of the masses" -a drug that induced passive acceptance of the horrors of capitalism- Weber turned this idea on its head, stating that people did not tolerate capitalism because of religion, they only became capitalists as a result of their religion. Weber's analysis prompts us to understand that much of what we associate with vast impersonal external forces is reliant upon the thoughts and ideas in our heads, traditionally dictated by religious tradition. The serious influence of decreasing religious faith in Europe is set forth in Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, in which he attributes increasing suicide rates in capitalist Europe to increased numbers of atheists. Though Durkheim and Weber were atheists they both appreciated the sense of community and consolation that religion offered, an important factor that capitalism had yet found a replacement for.

Singer attributes the emergence of melodrama to the loss of social and psychological moorings which causes individuals to feel a sense of detachment and abandonment, or

“transcendental homelessness” to cite the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács. Singer argues that melodrama helped fill the vacuum that religion left, neatly embodying the moral and social groundings religion had set forth by which capitalist economies had originally thrived. In the same way that religion had created ‘good’ capitalist citizens, melodrama sought to bolster faith in a stable moral order in “an ideological bedrock to ward off the anxiety of transcendental homelessness” (Singer, 136). In other words, culture could replace religion in orientating people to think as effective consumers. Melodrama provided people a basis for unification through a structure of shared psychological characteristics. “With its exaltation of virtue and ultimate poetic justice, melodrama offered a kind of compensatory faith that helped people cope with the vicissitudes of modern life” (Singer, 135).

The introduction of television in America serves as a good example that proves the significance of melodrama as a driving force in creating ideologies for mass manipulation. Television networks adopted the Studio Production Code in 1951 which contained an almost identical set of ethical standards than that of the Hollywood Classic Studio System of the 1930s. This code, and such alike, dictated the nature of the content presented on television and in this way served as a moral compass under which the American people could unify through a common ideology -much in that way that religion had operated during the pre-modern era.

The single most important economic factor of television was its ability to transform American values. During this time period the U.S. called for radio and television to reprogram society and create a new consumer culture. Acclaimed Wall Street banker Paul Mazer in 1927 stated, “We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire. To want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a

new mentality in America.” Radio was television’s springboard into the homes and minds of the American masses who were still living in the age of innocence -in mass media they trusted. Post war economic prosperity brought the growth of national industry and improvement in the standard of living, most notably with the movement of wealthy white American families into the suburban areas. Almost miraculously the perfect market presented itself to broadcast networks - and they swooped in.

Achieving complete saturation of the American public through the expert use of broadcasting networks, radio and television, material consumerism had the entire country within its control. Through the use of melodramatic devices television promoted material anxiety, creating the illusion of an idealistic and plentiful suburban family life that could only be satisfied by consumption, much in the way that religion had done so before. It created inferiority, shame, guilt and false problems that could only be resolved by submission to purchase. Psychoanalysis was used by advertising to manipulate intrinsic primitive urges alongside inherent values instilled by the education of television. Once the viewer had been downloaded with the urge for fleeting satisfaction brought by consumption, advertising’s constant bombardment of updates kept the them forever striving for an illusory sense of completeness. Indeed this notion of upward ascendance and competitiveness is central to the study of modern capitalist society. Singer writes “nineteenth century social theory was fixated on the phenomenon of competitive individualism as a historical development closely linked to the transition from traditional to modern urban society” (138).

The doctrine that culture has replaced religion as our moral compass runs parallel with Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s theory of the “Culture Industry”. Culture industry is a

term coined to describe the machine-like system of cultural production in capitalist societies that manipulates the masses into a state of passivity and false contentment. Described in the essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, part of the duo's book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the culture industry functions as an economic entity by which giant cooperations utilize modern advertising and conglomerate media systems to manipulate mass populations into a docile existence as materialistic consumers -compliant cogs in the larger capitalist system. Central to this theory is the strategic manipulation people's thoughts and actions through the indoctrination of melodramatic devices that teach people to be 'good' conformist materialist consumers. According to Adorno and Horkheimer it is role of the culture industry to control what people think and do in order to assure the constant economic success of capitalist society.

Due to the vast range of goods available in society today we are lead to believe that everything we could possibly desire is available to us, if only we had the financial resources. Adorno and Horkheimer believe that capitalist industry intelligently masks true human desires with the use of melodramatic tools so that we forget what we actually find meaningful and instead we settle for manufactured goods distributed to us by cooperations that have no interest in our true happiness and wellbeing. The modern entertainment machine is designed to keep us distracted, unable to understand ourselves, and absent of the will to alter political reality. "The culture industry [...] did not serve human needs, but rather the needs of the postwar capitalist system, which required fresh hordes of eager consumers willing to buy shiny new products (whether they need them or not)" (Wray p.65).

Melodrama, mass media and advertising teach us to constantly desire unnecessary products by strategically and subliminally assigning meaning to fundamentally meaningless products. Advertising links material (often unnecessary) products to ideals of the things that we truly desire and find meaningful, such as genuine freedom, family, friendship and community. In this way we are taught by the culture industry to forget what is genuinely meaningful and important to us as human beings, instead our real desires are hidden from us and replaced with manufactured commodities. Ultimately this system strives to keep the consumer lonely, distracted, confused and entirely dependent upon the system for fulfillment. The individual is engrained with false psychological needs can only be granted by capitalism; the consumer is coaxed into an oppressive state of dependency within the larger economic system.

As an example in attempt to illustrate the extent to which melodrama has saturated the psychology of individuals within modern capitalist societies, I prompt the reader to consider the life of a materialist individual as the protagonist of a melodramatic narrative. With competitive pressures and obligations for financial and material ascendance engrained within our protagonist's psyche, we can understand economic success, material completeness and social gratification as his ultimate goal of resolution and catharcism -towards which he is constantly striving. Yet, in light of the research I have provided, we can surely understand that this eventual state of fulfillment (promised to us by capitalist society) is in fact forever fleeting and unattainable.

I hope from my analysis the reader holds a more broad and in depth understanding of the significance of melodrama as an integral foundation of capitalist society. Through Singer and Weber we see how, in many ways, culture has efficiently overtaken religion in dictating people's

thoughts and actions. Moreover, by studying the work of capitalism's famed skeptics Adorno and Horkheimer, we are warned of the negative influences that melodramatic devices can potentially have upon our lives. It is important that we take all of these factors into consideration when we are consuming media in attempt not to submit to a docile existence of material consumerism. Individually, we should strive to identify and set out our own set of beliefs and motives free from the economic agenda at the heart capitalist society.

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