

# Mundus Vult Decipi: *RuPaul's Drag Race* as Part of the Culture Industry

---

Eelke André Verhagen

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

Citation: Eelke André Verhagen. "Mundus Vult Decipi: *RuPaul's Drag Race* as Part of the Culture Industry." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 10, n.º 2, 2021, pp. 74-87. ISSN: 2182-9934. Web: <http://ojs.lettras.up.pt/>. DOI: 10.21747/2182-9934/via10\_2a5.

## Abstract

In this article I examine the ways in which the competitive reality television franchise *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR), immensely popular with Western LGBTQ+-communities, can be considered a product of what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer identified as the Culture Industry (CI). On the one hand, this allows for a concrete application of the CI-thesis and the exploration of possible lines of critique concerning RPDR and its effects on its viewership, while, on the other hand, it is an opportunity to evaluate the aptitude of the CI-thesis for critical analysis in the 21st century. While the concepts related to the CI-thesis turn out to be remarkably productive, its latent totalitarian and pessimistic framework tends to skew any analysis. This may warrant supplementing its coarse-grained perspective with a more fine-grained empirical investigation.

**Keywords:** Pop Culture; *RuPaul's Drag Race*; Culture Industry; Theodor W. Adorno; Max Horkheimer

## Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo explorar os diversos modos em que o reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR), extremamente popular entre as comunidades LGBTQ+ ocidentais, pode ser considerado um produto daquilo que Theodor W. Adorno e Max Horkheimer identificaram como a indústria cultural (IC). Esta análise, que proporciona uma aplicação direta da tese da IC, bem como a exploração de linhas críticas potenciais respeitantes ao programa RPDR e aos efeitos que este produz na audiência, constitui ainda uma oportunidade preciosa para avaliar a possibilidade de realizar uma apreciação crítica sob o prisma da IC no século XXI. Apesar de os conceitos relacionados com a tese da IC se mostrarem particularmente adequados, o seu enquadramento pessimista e totalitário tende a influenciar qualquer tentativa de análise, sugerindo-se, deste modo, a possibilidade de complementar o uso desta perspetiva com uma observação empírica mais refinada.

**Palavras-chave:** Cultura Popular; *RuPaul's Drag Race*; Indústria Cultural; Theodor W. Adorno; Max Horkheimer

“Let’s change the motherf\*cking world!” Those were the words belted out by Alexander Hedges Steinberg (stage name: Sasha Velour) after winning season 9 of the immensely popular competitive reality television franchise *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (RPDR). It is not a commitment one would necessarily expect to hear on the stage of other shows belonging to the same genre, like *The Voice* and *Project Runway*. Drag indeed seems to give a tired format a rebellious edge, which prompted me to consider somewhat more critically Sasha Velour’s call to arms and the context in which it occurred, by drawing on Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s Culture Industry (CI) thesis. To what extent can Sasha Velour’s battle cry actually materialise? I will first briefly consider how drag might have become an attractive cultural object for the CI in the first place. Then I will examine the ways in which we can recognise the CI at work in RPDR itself. Thirdly I will look at the influence the CI may exert through RPDR over its viewership. Fourthly, and in conclusion, I will evaluate the aptitude of Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory for a critical analysis of the above question.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. “The Great Drag Queen Hype”

Over the past decades, drag has gone through a process that could be described as a progressive absorption by the CI, culminating in RPDR. In this televised reality competition show twelve to fifteen drag queens compete for the title of America’s Next Drag Superstar, which comes with a cash prize of \$100,000. Some might deem drag’s relatively swift commercialisation remarkable, considering drag’s past existence on the margins of the traditionally already marginalised LGBTQ+-community. However, at least two factors account for this apparent paradox: niche marketing targeting gays and the close relation between drag and pop culture.

Concerning the first, the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, in which drag queens played a pivotal role, catalysed an important change in the public’s general perception of queers. Explicitly confronted with the difficult circumstances under which the gay community lived, American society became somewhat more accepting, while the community itself began to lose some of its self-stigma and shame (Balzer 114). Possibly this development heralded gay minority culture’s availability for commoditisation by the, in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, naturally prudish CI. Provided with “the trade description ‘daring’” (“The Culture Industry” 111), the CI could opportunistically make money out of its “shock value”, all the while celebrating its own role in the movement of gay liberation. Thus, in capital’s perpetual “search

[for] new opportunities for the realization of capital” (Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” 99), the sprouting gay rights movement was gradually “drawn into market-based tactics and objectives”, promoting “identity difference only to the extent that it [served] as a basis for niche marketing” (Chasin vii). “A somewhat embattled minority” acquired what Stephen Valocchi calls a “domesticated and consumer identity” (324). It is thus no coincidence that RPDR premiered in 2009 on Logo TV, a cable network catering to the LGBTQ+-community.

Secondly, one should not overlook the fact that the type of drag underlying RPDR is the predominantly black and Latino “drag ball tradition” of Harlem, as it existed in the 1980s and 1990s. While undoubtedly undermining different cultural norms regarding gender, class, skin colour and sexuality, it did draw heavily on pop culture, while also influencing the latter. A particularly salient example of this mutual influence is “vogue”, a dance style that evolved inside Harlem’s drag scene, characterised by a succession of model-like poses. It rose to global fame with Madonna’s 1990 hit single carrying its name (Balzer 115; Daggett 272). Another important manifestation of this cross-pollination is RuPaul’s 1993 hit single “Supermodel of the World”, which was broadcasted by MTV at the time. Indeed, Chelsea Daggett states that “neoliberalism and drag subculture share a mutual interest in political communities built around celebrity and consumption” (271). Together with the famous 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* by Jennie Livingston, this set the stage for what Carsten Balzer retrospectively labelled “The Great Drag Queen Hype” of the nineties.

## **2. Inside *RuPaul’s Drag Race*: Extended Mechanical Reproduction**

RPDR displays, both covertly and explicitly, the posited absorption of drag by the CI and its technical rationality, which translates “the diverse objects of the world into fiscally equivalent phenomena” (O’Connor 31-32). Not many viewers will contest that “RPDR is about consuming the RuPaul brand and its franchises” (Brennan 39-40). RPDR may indeed epitomise the way in which culture “merges with the advertisement” (“The Culture Industry” 131). Ostentatious promotion of sponsored products for the LGBTQ+-community and plugs of RuPaul merchandise are an integral part of every episode. Furthermore, the show conveys a markedly neoliberal ideology. As the show’s host RuPaul herself tells the contestants (also: queens) in S4E3: “Remember, you need to connect with the TV audience, make them laugh, *sell some product.*” The queens themselves willingly transform themselves into commodities and openly use their airtime to shape their own “brand” for future exploitation outside the show. By

constantly attempting to create “iconic” moments and come up with “unique” catchphrases, they seek to separate themselves from the pack, paradoxically *creating* an identity for themselves of which “authenticity” is considered an important element (Brennan 33).

One of the characteristics that make RPDR particularly attractive to Western audiences, is precisely how it frames contestants’ personal development, their “authenticity” as people, throughout a season. The queens need to match a particular “successful” profile in order to be potential winners (broadly based on and summarised by the somewhat misogynist acronym CUNT, formed by the words: charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent), and viewers get to see how they struggle in the process of acquiring it. Over the years this profile, Julia Yudelman notes (26), has become more and more overtly about entrepreneurialism and self-branding. Moreover, every season the contestants entering the competition seem to have adapted better to this neoliberal profile from the get-go, thereby serving as an illustration of Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim that “the talents belong to the operation long before they are put on show” (“The Culture Industry” 96).

However, the influence of the CI goes well beyond these conspicuous phenomena and is discernible also in some of RPDR’s formal characteristics. Horkheimer and Adorno describe how the CI denies spectators the active role of the Kantian subject - who as an individual has to organise and interpret a multitude of sensory impressions. Instead, they are confronted with impressions which have been pre-schematised for them. As such, what is left are “ready-made clichés, to be used here and there as desired and always completely defined by the purpose they serve within the schema” (*idem* 98). All footage included in RPDR has been pre-organised by the editors to convey a particular commercially and ideologically viable storyline. Every scene plays its part in this preconceived structure. As an example, we can consider the portrayal of contestant Pearl’s personal transformation on *S7* (Yudelman 25-6). In the first episodes of the season, Pearl is actively framed as lazy, a frame conveyed by a constant stream of more or less explicit references to her sleepiness and lack of enthusiasm, including negative comments from judges and fellow-contestants alike. After some particularly harsh individual interventions, the climax being a stare down with host RuPaul herself, she finally stands victorious in the fifth episode. Her reaction on stage: “RuPaul, you gave me a smack down yesterday and it worked. Thank you. I appreciate it.” From that moment on the number of references to her laziness diminishes dramatically, as she continues to harvest praise from the

judges' panel and ends the season as one of the top four queens - the success story is complete.

Much is categorised for the viewer and preformatted. For example, the queens label themselves, or are labelled by their fellow contestants, into subcategories of drag - which allows some of them to fashionably refuse "being put in a box" by others - such as comedy queen, pageant queen, social media queen and club kid. Every category comes with a set of specific performative expectations. Even the public's reaction to what is shown is decided upon beforehand - as Horkheimer and Adorno formulate it: every scene "prescribes [the spectator] each reaction . . . through signals" ("The Culture Industry" 109). Pearl's lack of enthusiasm in those first episodes is supposed to trigger frustration in viewers, as one after the other queen appears on camera to comment negatively on her reprehensible attitude. Laughing judges in response to a contestant's joke signals approval of their "witty humour". The absence of laughter, silly sound-effects, concerned looks and explicit reprehension indicate "failure" (Yudelman 20, 26).

Another structural feature that must be noted is the element of repetition. To a considerable extent RPDR is composed of recyclable components, being first and foremost a species of the well-known genre of the televised reality competition. Hilarious challenges, harsh evaluations, nail-biting eliminations and heartfelt confessions are only some of RPDR's composite parts lent directly from it. Despite such abundant reprocessing the CI was able to "make it new" by fusing the same mechanical formula with drag, and in particular with the New York ballroom tradition, as documented by the already mentioned *Paris is Burning*. It is no secret that Livingston's documentary has provided RPDR with a rich pallet of colours to give a classic format a fresh look: the final runway that every episode leads up to, the seasonal "reading sessions" and balls, but also the show's very particular language. A language so specific in fact (one can find vocabulary lists online), that one of the show's contestants who did *not* seem to be sufficiently fluent (Serena ChaCha; S5), was lambasted by fellow-contestants, eliminated on the first episode, and attacked ferociously online by "fans" of the show (Brusselaers). Conversely, a contestant familiar with the whole vocabulary but applying it in a forced manner (Laganja Estranja; S6) met with comparable disdain and was accused of a lack of authenticity.

While the show is thus infused with repetition, several factors (one could include them in the "signals" referred to above) give RPDR an air of legitimacy and novelty. Two more examples. First and foremost, there is the fact that the show "dares" to give the stage to such a controversial cultural phenomenon as drag, which

provides RPDR (and through consuming it also its viewers) with a progressive, emancipatory, maybe even revolutionary identity. Secondly, the show's constant emphasis on the CUNT and stardom of its competitors signals the authenticity already mentioned above. Consequently, competitors who are "too good at drag" are regularly criticised for not showing vulnerability, for not dropping their mask, in other words: for not being "real" (for example: Chad Michaels; S4). As noted, the show includes personal conversations while the queens prepare for challenges, emotional breakthroughs on stage and fights amongst the queens, to provide an authentic feel. Naturally however, it is difficult to imagine any "true", non-staged authenticity, particularity and progressiveness in the artificial, repetitive and commercial setting of RPDR. In a spin on Walter Benjamin, we might say that the whole sphere of authenticity lies outside the CI, which does not allow for anything beyond the incessant sameness produced within its eternal framework of profit-making. Benjamin's famous aura in decay is conserved by the CI "as a foggy mist" (Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" 102), being nothing more than "the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity" (Benjamin 231).

### **3. Through *RuPaul's Drag Race*: Simple Reproduction of Mind**

Having briefly considered the way in which the CI is at work in RPDR itself, we have to address also, to the extent here possible, its effects on its viewership. As the subtitle of Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter indicates, the CI is an instrument of "mass deception" in the service of capital. As a product of the CI-complex, what RPDR duplicates, reinforces and strengthens (Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" 99) is the neoliberal, consumerist mentality already well-sedimented within Western communities. It effectuates a *simple* reproduction of mind in its consumers ("The Culture Industry" 100), simultaneously facilitating the *extended* reproduction of capital itself.<sup>2</sup>

Because RPDR is shaped in accordance with the technical rationality of domination that is typical of capitalism, its spectators are inculcated with the same type of thinking that governs their working lives. People are still mobilised as cogs in the capitalist machinery, and as such, it is "the prolongation of work under late capitalism" (*idem* 109). RPDR merely provides an apparent escape from it by presenting "that same everyday world as paradise" (*idem* 113; O'Connor 178). The fact that RPDR belongs to the genre of "reality television" only reinforces the effect of the latter. The people competing on its stage, only one can win the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, belong to a structurally marginalised group, but they have been

able to emancipate themselves from their very real misery, staying positive and humorous, and, most importantly, never having ceased to believe in the opportunities America's neoliberal economy offers to everyone.

Once more, Pearl's story on *S7* can serve as an illustration. The public is urged to condemn her "laziness" and "lack of enthusiasm", her stubborn refusal to emotionally commit to the competition. Her attitude frustrates fellow-contestant Ginger Minj (*RPDR: Untucked S7E4*): "This is a f\*cking competition! If you're not bringing your A-game, I'm sorry, that pisses me off." Not the competition (read: society) or its rules are the problem, Pearl's mentality is. *RPDR*'s message is clear: one should work hard and keep a positive attitude, turn any painful experience from the past into a strength, comply with the challenges and accept the critiques and decisions thrown at one by the judges' panel, and by RuPaul in particular. Pearl's win of the season's fifth episode symbolises her cheerful submission to the rules of the game, for which she harvests praise all-around. On *E6* RuPaul comments: "It feels like the old self died and the new self has emerged." As Horkheimer and Adorno explain: "Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power which beats them" (*idem* 124), and: "Anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated" (*idem* 104). The public's, and contestants', acceptance of this neoliberal narrative should not pose a surprise either:

. . . just as the ruled have always taken the morality dispensed to them by the rulers more seriously than the rulers themselves, the defrauded masses today cling to the myth of success still more ardently than the successful. They, too, have their aspirations. They insist unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved. (*Idem* 106)

The deception that *RPDR* engages in "is mediated by entertainment" (*idem* 108). Any seriousness and heaviness are easily outweighed by laughter and lightness. Through entertainment "a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need [unifies] the system ever more tightly" (*idem* 95). The fact that spectators are led to ignore the structural injustice ("wrong society") they are subject to, makes laughter about all of this a gesture of self-hatred, whatever the momentary relief it might bring (Adorno, "How to Look at Television" 166-7; Leeb 83-4). Spectators lack the will, power and perspective to actively engage in the difficult antitheses to modern society present in what Adorno calls autonomous art (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 225). As Adorno put it not long before his death in 1969 in an interview with Hellmut Becker: "The mechanism of dependence [*Unmündigkeit*] today, is *mundus vult decipi*, that the

world wants to be deceived, raised to the planetary level” (Adorno, “Erziehung zur Mündigkeit” 146).<sup>3</sup> Gladly meeting, or reproducing, this “demand”, the CI’s products only further the “withering of imagination and spontaneity . . . through their objective makeup” (“The Culture Industry” 100; see section 2 above also). The conclusion about audiences’ enjoyment of a show like RPDR is bitter: “In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society’s worthless totality” (*idem* 112).

Through this deception, spectators are led to believe that RPDR, and by extension American society for bringing forth such a “radical” product, is the ultimate example of freedom. What is perceived as freedom, however, is actually strictly bound to the system it is a function of. This impoverished notion of freedom is tightly connected with a harmful type of autonomy. Deeply influenced by the products of the CI, we consider as autonomy our “attempt to turn [ourselves] into an apparatus meeting the requirements of success” (*idem* 136). Our perception of ourselves and the world around us is filtered by the type of rationality suitable to the system, and we take on certain social roles (employee, parent, citizen ...), the exercise of which we *perceive* as freedom and autonomy, “realising ourselves” by pursuing those functions, “where we essentially feel ourselves as dependent upon society, but not indeed so much as real parts, that is, as beings that are also reliant upon themselves, since we have already been assigned a role by society itself” (Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* lecture 11). We are dissuaded from thinking deeply about what freedom could actually mean *beyond* the society we live in. In fact, our interactions with the world and ourselves are dominated to such an extent by this technical rationality, that it has become near impossible to experience “anything peculiar” in ourselves or in other people, anything “truly” individual. We compulsively imitate cultural commodities such as RPDR “which, at the same time, [we] recognize as false” (“The Culture Industry” 136). As a result, the ways of drag queens on RPDR have been swiftly adopted by Western gay communities, many gay men assuming their “true selves” by imitating their typical catchphrases and gestures. Horkheimer and Adorno label this type of modern identity “pseudoindividuality”, where “the peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural” (*idem* 125).<sup>4</sup>

In an important way Adorno sees true autonomy as “a negative behaviour: a capacity to resist collective political and cultural norms” (O’Connor 134). While it is clear that RPDR offers entertainment that *signals* “freedom”, it thus fails to actually transport its viewers beyond the framework that dominates the CI, making it highly deceptive. As its cultural deviations are mediated by the market, it only strengthens

the social totality's hold on its spectators, thereby paradoxically and fundamentally being unfreedom. Any apparent novelty and deviation allowed to appear anyway within its mould confirms, in fact, "the validity of the system all the more zealously" ("The Culture Industry" 102). For RPDR to actually stimulate freedom and autonomy, it would have to transcend the capitalist context it is fundamentally bound to. However, as Adorno's most famous aphorism, from his 1951 *Minima Moralia*, goes: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (39). Grim as this perspective might be, education can still have an important role in fostering a critical consciousness:

. . . that the only true realisation of independence [*Mündigkeit*] depends on a few people who are determined to invest all their energies in making sure that education is an education of contestation and of resistance. I could imagine, for example, that in the higher grades of *höheren Schulen*, but probably also of *Volksschulen*, one would collectively go see commercial movies and would simply point out to students how deceptive, how mendacious they are.<sup>5</sup> (Adorno, "Erziehung zur Mündigkeit" 145)

Since they perceived it as such based on their concrete experience, Horkheimer and Adorno consciously described the society of their time as a *near*, or at least latent, totalitarian system (Huysen 4), a characteristic of their theory that has inspired considerable criticism.<sup>6</sup> Because of this trait one has to be particularly careful, also in keeping with the Marxist roots of critical theory, not to mechanically reapply the CI-thesis top-bottom to phenomena seventy-five years later. A critical evaluation is thus warranted.

#### 4. A Critical Look at the Culture Industry Thesis

Considering the potential of the concepts discussed in "The Culture Industry", one might conclude provisionally that they are rather productive. Besides many important differences there are, after all, also many fundamental parallels between the 1940s and our time. For one, the general framework of capitalism is still well-established, and the CI is more than ever dominated by monopoly. Returning to the observation of RPDR specifically, the show does seem to be a prime example of the fusion between entertainment and advertisement, its contestants are commodified, it spreads a markedly capitalist ideology, it combines well-known elements from different sources into something only apparently new, its episodes largely consist of what could be considered signals which consistently serve a particular function within their general schema. On the other hand, even though the general framework of capitalism is still intact, there have occurred some important changes within it too, which may or may

not prompt certain revisions of Horkheimer and Adorno's theory. We have witnessed the sexual "liberation" of the 60s and 70s, in the Western world neoliberalism is ideologically dominant (a dominance reflected in the particular content of commercial entertainment such as RPDR, as shown above), intercultural differences have faded or turned into folklore, modern technology (notably the internet and smartphones) has become what some consider an extension of people's bodies.

The last development seems to turn a specific part of "The Culture Industry" into an anachronism, at least to a certain extent. In response to Walter Benjamin's claim that mechanical reproduction allows for a more active, critical role of the public (228), how it allows everyone to be an artist (232), Horkheimer and Adorno point out how for the mass media "no mechanism of reply has been developed, and [that] private transmissions . . . confine themselves to the apocryphal sphere of 'amateurs'" ("The Culture Industry" 96). Anno 2021, with platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, the sphere of replies and reactions seems to have exploded. There is an enormous online circuit of commentary on RPDR and its contestants, which exerts considerable power over the latter. In no way, however, does this seem to affect the foundations of the CI-thesis, since this circuit is still, in any case, "organised from above" (*ibidem*). YouTubers, for example, who are as individuals already pervaded by the existing social totality and moreover do not control the platform itself, operate in a context infused with capital, dominated by clicks, subscribers, sponsored products and advertisements - making any large-scale dissent beyond that horizon highly improbable, near impossible or powerless.

Nevertheless, the key characteristic that one may indeed take issue with, and which this analysis of RPDR implicitly exposes, is the often-criticised pessimistic and allegedly totalitarian framework that the CI-thesis entails (e.g. by Habermas and Eagleton).<sup>7</sup> When transporting RPDR into its sphere, one easily forgets that maybe not *all* is negative. Potentially positive characteristics tend to be overlooked, because they are ultimately not capable of overcoming the deeply deceptive framework that the CI-thesis places them in. Or in other words: put in this framework, Sasha Velour's call for change that opened this essay was bound to be suspect from the very beginning. While it is thus not hard to make a case for the claim that any (formerly) antithetical phenomenon absorbed by capitalism only strengthens the existing order, and that this happens continuously, it seems dubious to deny that RPDR has had a very real positive influence on people's lives *within* the pernicious system. The visibility of drag, its celebration by capitalism and its extension to straight audiences have furthered Western societies' acceptance of the LGBTQ+-community in general and of

drag in particular, making it easier for people to express their “pseudoindividual selves” through queer consumption. While from the perspective of Horkheimer and Adorno that might be nothing more than capitalism’s supreme deception, and while RPDR might also limit the space available for non-mainstream drag (Montgomery), many people around the globe *experience* it as a very real, practical liberation. For that reason, Shane Gunster’s recommendation to approach the CI-thesis as “the exploration of certain tendencies within ‘reality’” (66) seems fertile.<sup>8</sup> As Gunster suggests, it would be useful to do more empirical work on the subject of reception, in order to find out how viewers experience RPDR and how they actually react to it (65). It would be a productive continuation of an effort to complement the coarse-grained framework that the CI-thesis offers with a more fine-grained analysis and test them against each other.<sup>9</sup> Maybe it is there that we will find some way of not crushing Sasha Velour’s enthusiasm.

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, 2002 [1997].
- . *An Introduction to Dialectics*, edited by Christoph Ziermann and translated by Nicholas Walker. E-book, Polity Press, 2017.
- . “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited Jay M. Bernstein and translated by Anson G. Rabinbach, Routledge, 2005 [1991], pp. 98-106.
- . “Erziehung zur Mündigkeit.” *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit: Vorträge und Gespräche mit Hellmut Becker (1959-1969)*, edited by Gerd Kadelbach, Suhrkamp, 1970, pp. 133-47.
- . “How to Look at Television.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by Jay M. Bernstein, Routledge, 2005 [1991], pp. 158-77.
- . *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, translated by Edmund F.N. Jephcott, Verso, 2005 [1974].
- Balzer, Carsten. “The Great Drag Queen Hype: Thoughts on Cultural Globalisation and Autochtony.” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 51, 2005, pp. 111-31.

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 2007 [1968], pp. 217-51.
- Brennan, Niall. "Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and 'RuPaul's Drag Race'." *"RuPaul's Drag Race" and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 29-43.
- Brusselaers, Dieter. "'Pick up a book and go read'": Art and Legitimacy in RuPaul's Drag Race." *"RuPaul's Drag Race" and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 45-59.
- Chasin, Alexandra. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. Palgrave, 2000.
- Daggett, Chelsea. "'If You Can't Love Yourself, How in the Hell You Gonna Love Somebody Else?' Drag TV and Self-Love Discourse." *"RuPaul's Drag Race" and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 271-86.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. Verso, 1991.
- Gunster, Shane. "Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 45, 2000, pp. 40-70.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures.*: Polity Press, 1987.
- "Hat Adorno Trump vorhergesehen? Teil A." Hessischer Rundfunk, 25 Aug. 2017, by Eberhard Nembach, <https://www.hr-inforadio.de/podcast/wissen/hat-adorno-trump-vorhergesehen-teil-a,podcast-episode-30286.html>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Horkheimer, Max. "Traditional and Critical Theory." *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, Continuum, 2002, pp. 188-243.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and translated by Translated by Edmund F.N. Jephcott, Stanford UP, 2002, pp. 94-136.
- Huysen, Andreas. "Introduction to Adorno." *New German Critique*, vol. 3, no.6, 1975, pp. 3-11.

Jarvis, Simon. "Adorno, Marx, Materialism." *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, edited by Tom Huhn, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 79-100.

Leeb, Claudia. "Laughing at the Other: Toward an Understanding of the Alt-Right with Adorno." *Reading Adorno: The Endless Road*, edited by Amirhosein Khandizaji, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 75-100.

Montgomery, Hugh. "Is RuPaul's Drag Race good for drag?" BBC, 2 October 2019. Web Article, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191002-is-rupauls-drag-race-a-good-thing-for-drag>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.

O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno*. Routledge, 2013.

*Paris Is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston, Academy Entertainment, 1990.

Valocchi, Stephen. "Capitalisms and Gay Identities." *Social Problems*, vol. 64, no.2 2017, pp. 315-31.

Yudelman, Julia. "The 'RuPaulitics' of Subjectification in 'RuPaul's Drag Race'." *"RuPaul's Drag Race" and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 15-28.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Miguel Ramalhete Gomes for his comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> As Stefan Müller-Doohm states in an interview with the German Hessischer Rundfunk (HR): "According to Adorno, the categorical imperative of the culture industry is 'Become what you are'" ("Hat Adorno Trump" 15:26-15:31, my translation). Original: "Die kategorische Imperativ der Kulturindustrie ist laut Adorno 'Werde was du bist'."

<sup>3</sup> My translation. Original: "Denn der Mechanismus der Unmündigkeit heute ist das zum Planetarischen erhobene *mundus vult decipi*, daß die Welt betrogen sein will." The German word *Unmündigkeit* is difficult to translate. *Mündigkeit* refers to the capability of voicing opposition (*Mund* is German for 'mouth'), which implies an autonomous individual capable of resisting authority. *Unmündigkeit*, then, is the negation of that capacity, implying a dependent, dominated and silent individual.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno himself described these conditions as follows: "Nowadays it is the case that public opinion itself, through the mass media, the Culture Industry and by innumerable mechanisms, is directed, steered, in such a way, that the individual consciousness and its experience really do not have the opportunity anymore to resist it" ("Hat Adorno Trump" 17:21-17:46, my translation). Original: "Heute ist es doch so, dass die Öffentlichkeit selber, durch die Massenmedien, die Kulturindustrie und durch ungezählte Mechanismen, in einer Weise gesteuert wird, und gelenkt wird, in der das einzelmenschliche Bewusstsein und seine Erfahrung eigentlich gar keine Chance mehr hat, dagegen an zu kommen."

<sup>5</sup> My translation. Original: ". . . daß also die einzige wirkliche Konkretisierung der Mündigkeit darin besteht, daß die paar Menschen, die dazu gesonnen sind, mit aller Energie darauf hinwirken, daß die Erziehung eine Erziehung zum Widerspruch und zum Widerstand ist. Ich könnte mir etwa denken, daß man auf den Oberstufen von höheren Schulen, aber wahrscheinlich auch von Volksschulen gemeinsam kommerzielle Filme besucht und den Schülern ganz einfach zeigt, welcher Schwindel da vorliegt, wie verlogen das ist . . .". The school types were left untranslated, since they do not have clear English equivalents. *Volksschule* refers to a particular, by the time of the interview already dissolved, type of compulsive education in Western Germany, that ran until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. With *höheren Schulen* Adorno is most likely referring to the Gymnasium, a type of school partially parallel to the higher grades of the *Volksschule*, that prepares its students, often from well-off families, specifically for academic education.

<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno's social theory mirrors what they thought to be the state of society under monopolistic capitalism. Adorno indeed hardly sees a way out, but it is important to state here that for

---

him “society has *become* a totality [my emphasis]. Its totalistic character is not an inevitable or desirable development” (O’Connor 28; see also Jarvis 95).

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, for example, criticised Horkheimer and Adorno for having “surrendered themselves to an uninhibited scepticism regarding reason” (129). The main focus of Terry Eagleton’s straightforward critique is the latent totalitarianism of Horkheimer & Adorno’s theory: “For Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, capitalist society languishes in the grip of an all-pervasive reification, all the way from commodity fetishism and speech habits to political bureaucracy and technological thought. This seamless monolith of a dominant ideology is apparently devoid of contradictions - which means in effect, that Marcuse and Adorno take it at face value, judging it as it would wish to appear. If reification exerts its sway everywhere, then this must presumably include the criteria by which we judge reification in the first place - in which case we would not be able to identify it at all, and the late Frankfurt School critique becomes an impossibility. The final alienation would be not to know that we were alienated” (46-7). Andreas Huyssen, in comparable fashion, warns that “historical specificity . . . gets lost in such generalizations” (4).

Shane Gunster, however, rightfully warns us exactly against understanding the CI-thesis “as a totalizing indictment” (66). For one, if we would understand Horkheimer and Adorno as positing an admittedly deeply problematic complete and eternal reification, even excluding the possibility of the basic “labour of the negative” which is the motor behind Adorno’s critical thought, the whole project of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would indeed be a fundamental contradiction. Adorno’s defence of education cited in this essay would have been equally contradictory, just as it would have been impossible for Max Horkheimer to write already in his 1937 “Traditional and Critical Theory”: “Truth has sought refuge among small groups of admirable men” (237-8). The portrait sketched by Eagleton also seems to be at odds with Adorno’s own understanding of the dialectical method, to which change and non-identity are central (see note 9 below also). Andreas Huyssen confirms that at least in later years Adorno’s thought on this topic seems to have been one in terms of a “double consciousness” (10). In a radio lecture that he gave shortly before his death Adorno said: “It seems that the integration of consciousness and leisure time is not yet complete after all. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist total manipulation up to a point. This analysis would be in tune with the prognosis that consciousness cannot be totally integrated in a society in which the basic contradictions remain undiminished” (qtd. in Huyssen 10).

<sup>8</sup> However, the related claim that the CI-thesis “is an ideal type” (Gunster 65) is clearly false. Adorno elsewhere explicitly dismisses this Weberian category as “a pre-dialectical model of knowledge which reflects the perspective of traditional logic” (Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* lecture 16), yet he *does* connect “the social whole” or “totality” explicitly to “the social tendency within which . . . particular instances of knowledge can be grasped for their own part” (*idem* lecture 12).

<sup>9</sup> For “. . . on the one hand, dialectical thought must always try and measure up the data with which it is concerned against theory . . . ; on the other hand, dialectical thought must equally keep theory open to those specific experiences by which it is nourished and sustained, and in this regard must equally avoid becoming something merely rigid and definitive” (Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* lecture 10).