

BAIMP Media Concepts Essay 2 –

Assess the view that the mass media promotes a 'consumerist ideology'. What are the consequences of this?

The mass media is a highly powerful force, shaping the consciousness on both an individual and public level; developing the very mental and physical impulses that inevitably cause personal taste in consumable products, possessions and commodities or popular culture. The outcome is a 'consumerist ideology' where the public remain in a submissive state to those who feed them these consumables, but it could also be argued that the reverse is true; that instead of a cynical production line intended solely to keep the public in a passive state it is a simple circumstance of consumer reflection where the public are those in power. In either case, strong evidential consequences for each opposing theory could be interpreted using examples from the mass media.

One of the first groups to challenge the role of mass media and its potentially negative influence was the Frankfurt School for Social Research (founded 1923), a group of bourgeois philosophers who were fans of Marxist theory and their 'critical theory rejected the ideal of Western Civilization in the age of modern science, that is, the verification or falsifying of theory by experimental evidence¹'; they posited the notion that a role of the media was for dangerous consumer domination - to them 'the mass media was... a well-oiled machine producing entertainment products in order to make profit... (these) German intellectuals were clearly devastated by the reduction of culture to a set of manufactured products²'. The people no longer produced culture, instead merely imposed from above so as to bind the public at the bottom to the highest few within the 'first class' echelon. Horkheimer and Adorno were two highly influential members of the school who wrote that the current capitalist state produced all culture as 'exactly the same³' intrinsically, even if each product had an 'individual air³' so as to create the 'illusion³' of choice to the consumer upon purchase. These bindings are imposed so tightly that 'something is provided for all so none can escape³' or even the most wayward and deviant of individual would have some form of fulfilling consumable to buy and take home; even if the message is anti-capitalist, the generation of profit for those above is still certainly the case. The 'high-art' sentimentalities of the group were not echoed in this chilling vision of control and between them proposed many issues surrounding the debate whether anything popular could be considered as inferior, as fundamental to anything mass produced is the question of artistic and intellectual challenge; for the very reason it is mass produced, could it be considered less?

A more contemporary approach can be studied through Dominic Strinati, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester who similarly questioned the origin of popular culture using such examples as the modern GCSE in English; 'high-brow' novels such as Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* are imposed upon students from above regardless of individual choice. Although once seen as 'serious culture' the boundary of this example (and other works of art such as Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa') and between popular culture is no longer hermetically sealed as they once were. Ideologically the role of popular culture is to inflict these ideas and ideals from those in power, where school is just another production line preparing children for their roles in society, which when earning money is thus generating more consumerism through the media. A highly pessimistic view, and in this post-modern age he goes further by quoting 'that post-modern TV and film become preoccupied merely with surface style and imagery, rather than deeper underlying themes, which might relate to the 'realities' of the human condition⁴', that even when media is available for consumers it no longer takes

into account any sense of history or context; only a shallow sense of superficial style remains.

Television represents one of the most transcendental forms of the media, unmistakably manifesting itself within the lives of most of the individuals within the Western world and as such could be viewed as one of the main proponents in the ‘media promoting consumerism’ debate. The bourgeois could view the cultural commodification of folklore within Disney animation, as an example, with its seemingly endless merchandise as highly damaging; questioning if anything is ‘sacred anymore’, whereas the advocate of popular culture who sees the Disney corporation as a group of highly talented artists and writers would argue that their films represent modern works of film-art. This ‘cultural relativism’ within the world of moving images was ‘challenged by a group of influential sociologists, most notably Shils and Gans, who argued that the popular media diet included material of high quality relative to the cultural patterns of a large swath of the mass audience⁵’ which is in direct sharp contrast to the ‘elitist assumption that mass consumption of ‘common denominator’ programmes is homogenous, shallow and superficial⁵’. A study by the two showed that ‘TV quiz shows were viewed by some as relaxing entertainment, whereas they were experienced by others, particularly those with limited schooling, as an enriching and testing educative experience⁵’. Where one could group could be criticised for being grandiose and pretentious the bourgeois could retaliate with the simple notion that the uneducated could not comprehend the depth of damage that homogenised popular culture is accomplishing. Although the working class could be viewed as ignorant, they are certainly not stupid – ‘popular culture and especially television was not a medium which created the identities of the working class, because it is as audience was able to raid it for progressive meanings and even to make resistant readings⁶’.

Either way, television certainly impacts through advertising the desire for consumable products. Whether or not a personality can be built up or a lifestyle can be sold through the media by clever and innovative use of slogans and logos is important, as this would suggest that the mass media inherently promotes consumerism. ‘Brand loyalty’ is built upon years of population identity with a single corporation; Nike Sportswear no longer even need print their name on a product – the ‘swoosh’ says it all.

‘It is therefore possible to point to the formation of audiences, publics and consumers of post-modern cultural goods, which is part of a long-term process of the growth of the power-potential of symbol producers and their importance within the cultural sphere⁷’.

New products are sold on the very notion that people are generally more dependant on cultural forms from which they are disenfranchised; if the advertising or product itself is inherently ‘culturally fresh’ to the consumer it could ‘kick-start’ a new trend until that becomes over-popular, and the process begins again with another ‘fresh’ product. From this point of view, as the media and its advertising in particular become an even more integral part of everyday life that it is there only to sell products; sponsorship deals overrun sport and film with product placement and emblems emblazoned upon people viewed all over the world. The forcing at the corporate level to create more advanced and creative adverts show a positive shift in creative awareness, especially amongst young people. The music-video promo released for Fatboy Slim’s ‘*Weapon of Choice*’ (Jonze, 2000) had a naturally rhythmically gifted Christopher Walken starring as the main focus – it points towards a new generation of directors such as Chris Cunningham, Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze whom are employed by musicians to grant another dimension to their pieces of music.

‘It seems they design their products to give aesthetic pleasure to be enjoyed in and for itself... the fusion of advertising with other expressive forms is also evident in the borrowing of actors from film and television to play characters in advertisements⁸’

Any media audience cannot help but be affected by the texts they consume, and whether merchandise or otherwise can be sold as a result supports the argument. The Marxist view on the media proposes a more sinister side effect of this seemingly mindless consuming self-indulgence; that the audience is passive to any manipulative effects as discussed here. Whilst any creative originality can always be viewed in a positive light it also leads to complicated effects upon those who view them; a subliminal creative symbolic relationship which can lead to subconscious brand loyalty whether the public like it or not.

Parallel image obsessed publications such as ‘Hello!’ and ‘OK!’ magazine are generally aimed at the ‘housewife’ stereotype; filled with publicity-hungry media celebrities it is a para-social relationship between the reader and the stars where all their intimate details, emotionally and externally within their houses are laid bare in a non-reciprocal process. ‘The pleasures of these texts, the glossy pages, the visual images, the fantasies of the perfect face, body and wardrobe is in short pleasures of conventional femininity⁹’, yet whether this generates a feeling of aspirational emulation towards those they look up or simple depressing envy could be questioned but the usual reader could be accused of being shallow and superficial as the most lifestyle guidelines to be found are how to dress as Victoria Beckham - accordingly more products are consumed. Such publication based on external fashions and aesthetics advocate a Western world where those in power keep resistance low by channelling such celebrities based on looks rather than intelligence into the media where ideologies and politics should be being discussed.

At a polar opposite to this cynical debate is John Fiske, a social optimist who dismisses any idea of a conspiracy between the media and the imposition of a consumerist ideology by arguing the case for ‘people power’.

‘The power of the audience to interpret media texts, and determine their popularity far outweighs the ability of media institutions to send a particular message or ideology to audiences within their texts¹⁰’

To Fiske there is no popular mass, instead only individuals who are capable of making their own minds up so any debate concerning a possible conspiracy to him is irrelevant. As an alternative of every manufactured item being basically the same the reverse is true; the text itself expresses dissimilar meanings to different people as a result. The combinations of separate texts creating separate emotions are the very elements of inspiration that an audience achieve when engaged.

As powerful as the mass media may be and the fact it has infiltrated every life within the Western world would support the idea of a plot from those in power within these media institutions, yet close observation reveal that the general population are either happy being pretentious and knowledgeable or on the other side of the scale, comfortable with their fashion and celebrities. A conspiracy or not, people still have and will tend to their day-to-day lives dissimilar to the Frankfurt Schools seeming paranoia.

Academic texts

Surname	Initial	Date	Title	Publisher
2 – (page 20), 10 – (page23) Gauntlett	D	2002	Media Gender and Identity	Routledge

3 – (page 122), Horkheimer and Adorno	T & M	1979	Dialectic of Enlightenment	
5 – (page 271), 6 – (page 109), 9 – (page 173), Curran	J	1998	Cultural Studies and Communication	Arnold
7 – (page 60), Featherstone	M	1997	Consumer Culture and Postmodernism	Featherstone
8 – (page 48), Willis	P	1990	Common Culture	Open University Press

Websites

Site name	Web address
1 – Frankfurt School	http://www.newtotalitarians.com/FrankfurtSchool.html
4 - Strinati	http://www.sociology.org.uk/ws1sw3.htm