

# The Aesthetic (and Social) Truth or Untruth of Popular Culture

Giuseppina Capone\*, interview with Stefano Marino\*\*

**1. Giuseppina Capone (GC):** Theodor W. Adorno was a leading figure of the tradition of critical theory of society linked to the so-called Frankfurt School. What kind of role was played, in Adorno's thinking, by the question of the cultural industry and the aesthetic experience that characterizes it?

**Stefano Marino (SM):** First of all, thanks a lot for your interest in my philosophical work: I truly appreciate it. Then, replying to your question, I would say that what you have rightly called the critical confrontation with the culture industry (and the particular aesthetic experiences that characterize it) played a very important role in Adorno's work as a philosopher, a sociologist and a musicologist. So, this critical confrontation did not play a secondary, ancillary or minor role in Adorno's work, notwithstanding what many people often think about this. As I have tried to show in the interpretation that I offered in my last book (*Verità e non-verità del popolare*, 2021), Adorno devoted a lot of time, work and intellectual energy to planning and writing such essays as *On the Social Situation of Music* (1932), *On Jazz* (1936), *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* (1938) and *On Popular Music* (1941). This was due to the fact that Adorno did *not* conceive of the study of popular music (which, for him, also included jazz) as a sort of diversion in comparison to seemingly more serious and more important works, like those concerning the philosophical-sociological deciphering of avant-garde compositions by Schönberg, Berg, Webern or Stravinskij. As Adorno wrote in the book that probably represents his musicological masterpiece, namely *Philosophy of New Music* (1949), “[t]he forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents”. This implied, for a critical theorist of society like Adorno, that the effort to develop a truly adequate and complete aesthetic theory (as he attempted to do until the last days of his life, as testified by his unfinished and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* from

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1970) required a scrupulous confrontation with both spheres of culture, namely with both “high” and “low” culture (and with both “serious” and “light” music). These spheres were understood by Adorno as “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however, they do not add up”, as he famously claimed in a letter to Walter Benjamin from March 18, 1936.

Of course, this does *not* exclude that in most cases (starting from his essays of the early 1930s and arriving to his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* and other works from the 1960s) Adorno’s confrontation with mass culture, the culture industry and popular music was a very critical one – sometimes even exaggeratedly critical, indeed. In fact, in my view, some of his writings on these topics are often characterized by an excessive tendency to relentlessly reduce *all* popular music to the sole features of standardization and pseudo-individualization, thus arriving to claim in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer) that “all mass culture is identical”. Anyway, this does *not* mean that the analytical and conceptual instruments provided by Adorno, in the context of his critical investigation of contemporary culture and society, cannot prove to be still useful and penetrating: indeed, sometimes I think that Adorno’s general approach remains unsurpassed and necessary today for a critical and normative (rather than uncritical and merely descriptive) inquiry into the popular culture of our time.

**2. GC:** Adorno’s thinking had a dynamic, open and plural nature, aimed at investigating the question of the truth of the untrue – and, conversely, the question of the untruth that often inheres in the true. In this context, what kind of reflections did arise from Adorno’s critical confrontation with 20<sup>th</sup>-century popular music?

**SM:** In one of my previous books – entitled *Le verità del non-vero* (2019) and tightly connected, from a thematic point of view, to *Verità e non-verità del popolare* – I have tried to show that, although Adorno (differently than many other thinkers of his time) never wrote *a* single work specifically centered on the concept of truth, the question of truth was anyway present in his thinking and, indeed, was present in a very significant way and, once again, at various levels: philosophical, sociological, musicological, etc. Furthermore, it is characteristic of Adorno’s genuinely dialectical approach to constantly conceive of truth in its inextricable entanglement with its very opposite, namely untruth. In *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963) Adorno writes that “[p]hilosophy itself takes place within the permanent disjunction between the true and the false”; however, in assigning such a relevance to the notion of truth, Adorno also maintains that a certain phenomenon or event (be it philosophical, musical, social, cultural, historical), even when it is provided with a “truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*)”, cannot consider itself as entirely

exempt from the risk of the presence of an aspect or a dimension of untruth, which may appear when the phenomenon is observed into detail and from a broader perspective. In my book from 2019 *Le verità del non-vero* I have tried to test the validity, the legitimacy and also the range of this interpretation key through an examination, in the various chapters of the book, of Adorno's critical readings of the philosophies of thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Spengler; instead, in my book from 2021 *Verità e non-verità del popolare* my interpretation key (focused on the relation between truth and untruth) was tested through an investigation of Adorno's seminal writings on popular music and, more generally, on the culture industry. So, replying now to the second part of your question, I would recommend to *never* forget that, if we read today Adorno's essays on jazz, mass culture, fetishism and regressive listening, we read them with (partially or totally) different cultural references and experiences than Adorno's. This fact has been rightly emphasized in the specific and very accurate studies offered by Adorno scholars such as J. Bradford Robinson, Richard Leppert, Max Paddison, Robert W. Witkin and others. Considering the fact that Adorno's education made him grow, on the one side, in contact with early 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde movements, and, on the other side, with a certain kind of German "pseudo-jazz" of the 1920-1930s and danceable American swing music of the 1940s: considering this fact, some of his strong critiques of popular music, or also his lack of understanding and feeling for musical improvisation, become more understandable. This does *not* exclude, as I said, that many Adornian categories, if applied to the interpretation of recent musical phenomena, are still meaningful, actual and capable to disclose new significant interpretive horizons. This becomes especially clear, when such categories as "standardization" or "plugging" are critically rethought and applied in a free and flexible way (rather than in a dogmatic and rigid way) to different musical phenomena than the ones typically considered by Adorno. The contributions by Alessandro Alfieri, Colin J. Campbell, Giacomo Fronzi and Marco Maurizi included in the book *Adorno and Popular Music* (co-edited by Colin J. Campbell, Samir Gandesha and me in 2019), or the essay by Cristina Parapar included in the book *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* (co-edited by Andrea Schembari and me in 2021), are good examples of the general discourse that I have tried to sketch above. As an author, in my books *La filosofia di Frank Zappa* (2014) and *La filosofia dei Radiohead* (written with my pupil Eleonora Guzzi in 2021) I have also tried to go in this direction, so to speak.

**3. GC:** In your recent writings you have sometimes marched against Adorno (so to speak), in examining the relation between art and society. In your opinion, what kind of political potential can popular culture have today?

**SM:** My choice to investigate mass culture and popular music, in some of my recent articles and books, with an approach inspired by Adorno's aesthetic theory (namely, an aesthetic theory that was part of the more general project of a critical theory of society) derives from my conviction that a great part of Adorno's analytical and conceptual instruments is still extraordinarily penetrating and useful. Of course, this is true and can function well only if one does *not* assume an intellectual attitude of immediate acceptance of, and uncritical adhesion to, what Adorno thought and wrote about popular culture (mostly in pessimistic and polemical terms, as is well-known). Rather, what is *always* recommended is an open, alert and critical intellectual attitude towards Adorno's own interpretive categories and approach. After all, this is true not only in the case of Adorno, but more generally in the case of our study of *every* great philosopher – be it Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Arendt or Foucault. In fact, if there is something that one should *never* do in philosophy, it is precisely to adopt an uncritical or even dogmatic attitude towards the philosophical theory that one studies and investigates. *Every* great philosophy should be studied in a critical way, although *always* starting from a great sense of respect (and sometimes also of gratitude) towards the author and his/her ideas; this is especially important to prevent possible degenerations into silly and naïve attitudes of arrogance or intellectual *hubris*.

Returning now to your question, in some of my recent contributions on Adorno I have sometimes used simple expressions such as “orthodox *vs.* unorthodox Adornian approach”, or also “thinking *with* Adorno and at the same time *against* Adorno”: these expressions are meant to express and exemplify in very simple terms the kind of methodological and interpretive attitude that I chose to adopt in my articles and books. On the one hand, it is important to approach Adorno (like *every* other great philosopher, as I said) in a critical way, without discounting the problematic aspects in his thinking, without being conditioned by his undisputed authority in philosophy and musicology, without depriving oneself of the interpretive freedom to shed light on some ambiguities or “fractures” that are present in his writings. On the other hand, it is equally important to acknowledge the particular and indeed unique value of Adorno's philosophical-sociological investigations of cultural phenomena, including musical phenomena (and, among them, those concerning popular music). From this point of view, I surely recognize the legitimacy, in principle, of every objection or critique against Adorno's critical (and sometimes all too critical) understanding of the culture industry and popular music, when these objections and critiques are supported by solid, valid and reasonable argumentations. At the same time, however, I think that it is a big mistake and the sign of a veritable

misunderstanding when objections and critiques eventually result in stereotyped or even caricatural presentations of Adorno's thinking, as sometimes happened and unfortunately still happens.

As to the question concerning the political potential that is inherent in the aesthetic dimension (including our "distracted" aesthetic experiences with the popular arts in everyday life), I consider it a big and extremely relevant question, not only in itself, but also for the influence and impact that popular culture and the aestheticization of our everydayness have on our ideas, judgments and decisions at many levels – including an ethical and political level. With regard to this, I would add that there is still a lot to learn from the observations of Frankfurt critical theorists like Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse on the question concerning commitment and engagement in the various arts (including pop-rock songs, why not?). For example, we can learn from these great thinkers that the range and efficacy of ethical-political commitment in an artwork can be often more connected to the aspect of the artwork's experimentation at a formal or structural level than it is to the aspect of the mere transmission of politicized contents or messages. An aesthetic theory of this kind, in my view, is capable to disclose stimulating horizons and perspectives for the purposes of a non-immediate and non-superficial (but rather mediated and pondered) account of the different shades, components, levels and sometimes almost imperceptible details that characterize an artwork, a performance or an aesthetic experience. A good example, in this field, is probably represented by the original interpretation of blues songs that has been offered by the famous critical theorist and feminist theorist Angela Davis (who, as is well-known, was originally a pupil of Marcuse), as I could learn from my student Ines Zampaglione who wrote a very interesting essay on this topic included in my edited collection from 2022 *Estetica, tecnica, politica. Immagini critiche del contemporaneo* (because it is true that sometimes also professors learn from their students!).

Should we want to mention some recent works on the relation between aesthetic dimension and political potential, I would recommend the various essays included in the volumes *Aesthetic Marx* and *The Spell of Capital*, both edited by Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle. Beside this, making reference to another philosophical tradition our time (i.e., not Marxism or critical theory, but pragmatism), I would also recommend the writings of the American philosopher Richard Shusterman, whose work in pragmatism and somaesthetics (his original disciplinary proposal) has offered stimulating insights in the somatic component of aesthetic experiences and artistic performances: a component, the latter, that often plays a significant role also at the level of the political potential displayed and conveyed by the aesthetic dimension. In some of my writings on this topic, I have thus tried to combine the influence of Adorno and Shusterman on my own thinking, and I have tried to explore what I like to

call the “power of the body” of performers in pop-rock music, also for the purpose of spreading certain political messages and ethical contents through the form of an artwork or an artistic event.

**4. GC:** Can music and fashion turn out to be subtle and treacherous “weapons”, capable of soliciting the most unpredictable exoticisms and racisms?

**SM:** This is really a vast, complex and ambitious question. I fear that, at least *in principle*, I must give a positive answer to your question: namely, what you say is surely (and unfortunately) something that *can* happen, a possibility that *can* sometimes become real. Your question makes me think very spontaneously of another human phenomenon, namely *love*. In fact, just like love, also music (as well as art, fashion, politics, philosophy, poetry, sport, and many other human practices) is something that, depending on several factors, on different circumstances, on the people involved etc., can represent either a source of salvation or, vice-versa, a source of damnation. Thinking about pop-rock music, we could mention Sting’s lines about love that “can break your heart” but at the same time “can mend your life”, Chris Cornell’s lines according to which “love’s like suicide” but at the same time “love heals all wounds with time”, or Nick Cave’s lines according to which “Despair and Deception [are] Love’s ugly little twins” and “[it is] Far worse to be Love’s lover than the lover that Love has scorned” but at the same time what really makes life meaningful are those moments in which “a sudden sun explodes! [...] And it’s only love / Rolling down the mountains / Like a train”. Thinking about another product of popular culture, namely film, we could mention an observation by the protagonist of Gaspar Noé’s controversial movie *Love* (2015): “Love is strange. How can something so wonderful bring such great pain?”

Anyway, beside this comparison with the phenomenon of love (that, as I said, quite spontaneously came to my mind, perhaps because it has always represented a big challenge for me!), I would say that, *mutatis mutandis*, such oscillations may frequently happen in the course of human life and in respect of different experiences or events. From a certain point of view, no human practice is safe “a priori”; no human experience is totally guaranteed from the risk of a reversal into its opposite, i.e., a reversal into what we would *not* associate with it in the first instance. In a fitting passage of his book *Prisms* Adorno explains that “it is not enough to defame barbarism and rely on the health of culture”; rather, in a less naïve or blissful way (and thus in a more disenchanting way), the task for Adorno was that of recognizing “the barbaric element in culture itself”, namely to critically put into question and challenge “the idea of culture as well as the reality of barbarism”. The meaning and the function of a work of art, of an

experience, of an event, of a historical phenomenon or cultural movement, or even of a sentence or an action, are *never* guaranteed once and for all; rather, they are *always* subject to the dangerous and paradoxical possibility of turning into something else, of acquiring a different sense or direction, of reversing into their very opposite, also due to the unpredictable variety of contingent situations.

Apropos of the specific aspects and problems addressed by your question (fashion, music, racism), I would firstly say, in general, that in recent times also the aesthetics of fashion has undergone a significant recognition and development – as had previously happened with the aesthetics of film, design or other arts that were not included in the traditional (and narrow) paradigm of aesthetics understood *only* as a philosophy of the high fine arts. This is testified, for example, by the philosophical writings on fashion of serious authors like Gwenda-Lin Grewal, Nickolas Pappas, Richard Shusterman, Lars Svendsen and others. Should it be of some interest for you and/or your readers, I allow myself to remind of the volume *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2017) and of the English edition of Eugen Fink's 1969 book *Fashion: Seductive Play* (forthcoming in summer 2023), both co-edited by Giovanni Matteucci and me.

Secondly, apropos of the problems raised by your question, I would also say that precisely Adorno was sometimes accused of racism because of his extremely harsh judgments on an Afro-American musical form like jazz. However, as I said before, it is surely necessary to study Adorno (like *all* other great philosophers) with a critical attitude, and hence it is surely legitimate to raise objections against him, but at the same time one must be very careful to *never* fall into misunderstandings that may easily generate ungrounded and illegitimate critiques. In my opinion, this is precisely what happens, when one accuses Adorno of racism. As has been noted by Richard Leppert in his Commentary to the Section “Music and Mass Culture” of Adorno's collection of *Essays on Music*, “[s]ome scholars have read Adorno's comments on blacks and jazz as racist, a charge that is, frankly, absurd, and not least the result of careless reading. [...] Adorno's position is explicitly anti-racist”. In this context, it is also remarkable to note that Adorno himself was aware of the possibility of this objection; this is testified, for example, by the final lines of his short text from 1953 *Replik zu einer Kritik der “Zeitlosen Mode”* – a reply to the critiques raised by the German musicologist Joachim-Ernst Berendt against Adorno's essay *Zeitlose Mode. Zum Jazz*, now republished in the vol. 10/2 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*. In fact, in *Replik zu einer Kritik der “Zeitlosen Mode”* we read: “Er [*scil.* Berendt] mag mir glauben, daß [...] die Neger gerade vor meinem weißen Hochmut – dem eines von Hitler Verjagten – zu beschützen, ist grotesk. Eher möchte ich nach meinen schwachen Kräften die Neger gegen die Entwürdigung

verteidigen, die ihnen widerfährt, wo man ihre Ausdrucksfähigkeit für die Leistung von Exzentriklowns mißbraucht. Daß es unter den Fans [*scil.* of jazz] ehrlich protestierende, nach Freiheit begierige Menschen gibt, weiß ich [...]. Aber ich glaube, daß ihre Sehnsucht, vielleicht infolge des abscheulichen musikalischen Bildungsprivilegs, das in der Welt herrscht, auf eine falsche Urtümlichkeit abgelenkt and autoritär gesteuert wird". (To my knowledge, this text of Adorno has not been translated into English yet, so I allowed myself to cite it in the original German version. An Italian translation of this text has been included in *Variazioni sul jazz*. *Critica della musica come merce*, the collection of all Adorno's writings on jazz that was translated from German into Italian by Giovanni Matteucci and me in 2018).

**5. GC:** In your view, what is the function and significance of culture today?

**SM:** Your question is a very broad and ambitious one, and hence it is difficult to provide a short and one-sided answer to it. This depends, firstly, on the simple and well-known fact that the notion itself of culture, like many other notions with a similar range, profoundness and history, does *not* have only one definition or interpretation; rather, culture (like art, science, knowledge, taste, judgment, being, becoming, mind, spirit, truth, etc.) has been defined or understood in different ways throughout the centuries. Many factors can contribute to determine this situation, such as one's theoretical background and basic assumptions, one's final task and goal of inquiry, and so on. As Dick Hebdige wrote at the beginning of his influential book *Subcultures*: "[c]ulture is a notoriously ambiguous concept [...]. Refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings".

Anyway, having said this, and considering the specific context and aims of our conversation on truth and untruth in Adorno's thinking (as connected, respectively, to the adoption of a critical-negative or, vice-versa, an uncritical-affirmative approach), I would say that "[c]ulture is a paradoxical commodity", as Horkheimer and Adorno claim in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. On the one hand, at least since the late modernity, since the rise of mass society and since the advent of what we may call pop aesthetics (with Baudelaire's famous and thought-provoking definition of art as "prostitution", and with Warhol's controversial aim to convert art into business), culture cannot avoid to recognize the presence of the commodity status and fetishism within itself. On the other hand, what we may call "true" culture cannot avoid to critically reflect on itself and try to put into question the existing reality – i.e., using Adorno's terminology, "what exists (*das Bestehende*)". In the case of those particular and indeed unique cultural products that are artworks, we can tentatively say, following Adorno, that a

work of art, although undergoing today very strong processes of commodification and fetishization, must frankly deal with such processes, incorporate them in its structure and, by doing so, overcome them, thus configuring and presenting itself as a thing that is capable to get rid of its own thing character, as a commodity that is capable to immanently transcend its own commodity status. As Adorno wrote in his unfinished and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*: “[a]esthetic comportment is the capacity to perceive more in things than they are; it is the gaze under which the given is transformed into an image. [...] Aesthetic comportment is the unimpaired corrective of reified consciousness that has in the meantime burgeoned as totality. [...] Artworks are things that tend to slough off their reity. However, in artworks the aesthetic is not superimposed on the thing in such a fashion that, given a solid foundation, their spirit could emerge. Essential to artworks is that their thingly structure, by virtue of its constitution, makes them into what is not a thing; their reity is the medium of their own transcendence. The two are mediated in each other: the spirit of artworks is constituted in their reity, and their reity, the existence of works, originates in their spirit. [...] The spirit of artworks is not their meaning and not their intention, but rather their truth content, or, in other words, the truth that is revealed through them. [...] What is beyond the semblance of what appears is the aesthetic truth content: that aspect of semblance that is not semblance. The truth content is no more the factual reality of an artwork, no more one fact among others in an artwork, than it is independent from its appearance. Nothing transcends without that which it transcends”.

A genuinely dialectical (and somehow also paradoxical) process of this kind can be understood as a sort of immanent transcending the artwork’s reity by means of its very thingly structure and its status of *res*, as a means to express a protest and a resistance against the growing reification of life in the administered world. This process can be also associated to Adorno’s famous example of the Baron Munchausen’s gesture of “pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail” – an example that Adorno, in *Minima moralia* (§46), commented with these words: “nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them”.

Beside this, returning to your more general question about the role of culture today, I would like to conclude my answer with a quick reference to the persisting and still valid *critical* function and meaning that culture may have (and actually has) in our time. By saying this, I especially refer to the potentiality of culture to favor the development of a critical attitude towards the real – hence an attitude that is active and oriented to the possibility of change, rather than passive, resigned, submissive or subjugated. My colleague Valentina Antoniol, a political philosopher at the University of

Bologna, has offered a very interesting contribution on biopolitics and the Covid-19 pandemic to my abovementioned edited volume *Estetica, tecnica, politica*. In her essay Antoniol rightly draws our attention on Foucault's conception of philosophy, in his 1982-1983 lectures *The Government of Self and Others*, as "the surface of emergence of a present reality (*actualité*)" that one should elaborate "an ontology" of – namely, as an ontology of contemporary reality that is also "a critical ontology of ourselves". Although it is obviously not possible to overlap *sic et simpliciter* Foucault's critical perspective and Adorno's, I nevertheless believe that such a conception of philosophy (and, more generally, of knowledge and culture as providing us with "instruments" that may allow us to take a critical stand towards the real) can be compared in a stimulating way with Adorno's idea of philosophy as "the ontology of the wrong state of things". As Adorno famously wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, "[a]n ontology of culture, above all, would have to include where culture as such went wrong".

As a philosopher, I always try to be open to the insights offered not only by critical theory of society strictly speaking (namely, the Frankfurt School) but also by other forms of critical philosophizing, such as Foucault-inspired theories or also pragmatist theories, as I said before with reference to Richard Shusterman. In this context, I have often found intriguing the adoption of a comparative method: for example, a great part of my book *Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Language* (2015) was based on critical comparisons between authors such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Arendt, Rorty and McDowell. One of my next projects will be a co-edited collection of essays on a comparison between Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Shusterman's somaesthetics, which I precisely consider as two stimulating sources for a critical approach to philosophy and culture. Focusing again on Frankfurt critical theory, another project in the next future will be the launch of a new international journal specifically focused on Adorno's work and legacy, the *Journal of Adorno Studies*, which will be published by the Mimesis International Press and whose Editorial Committee will be formed by Samir Gandesha, Johan F. Hartle, Antonia Hofstätter, Han-Gyeol Lie and me. This new adventure, the *Journal of Adorno Studies* that I will direct with these highly esteemed colleagues and dear friends, is very exciting for me, and I hope that it will attract the attention and interest of many scholars of Adorno and the Frankfurt School at a global level.

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*estetica e critica della società* (2021), *La filosofia dei Radiohead* (2021), *Le verità del non-vero. Tre studi su Adorno, teoria critica ed estetica* (2019), *Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Language: Essays on Heidegger and Gadamer* (2015), *La filosofia di Frank Zappa* (2014), *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-scientific Civilization* (2011).