



Kalle Lasn

Revising the "Culture Industry" critical theory with Kalle Lasn

by Cecilia Pacheco | April 17, 2019

In 1944, the Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer published "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" as a chapter in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Being a core text within the field of critical theory it was time to revise the term brought up of "Culture Industry" and scrutinize on whether the age of enlightenment and mechanical

reproduction is still a failure as stated by Adorno and Horkheimer.

In summation, the chapter "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" states that "Culture Industry" is the subjugation of artwork into a product within the cultural economy of capitalism; in which all products are subjected to the interest of money and power for sole profit purposes. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the commodification of culture is the commodification of human consciousness as the "Culture Industry" manipulates the masses into passivity and subordination, unable critically think for themselves which perpetuates the cycle of ongoing manipulation.

Mass culture is furtherly brought up as a recycled formula that is reused throughout all mediums, which sells the lie of equal opportunity to everyone of an idealistic perfect life that can be controlled through chance and planning of fortune itself. Adorno and Horkheimer accept the "Triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false".

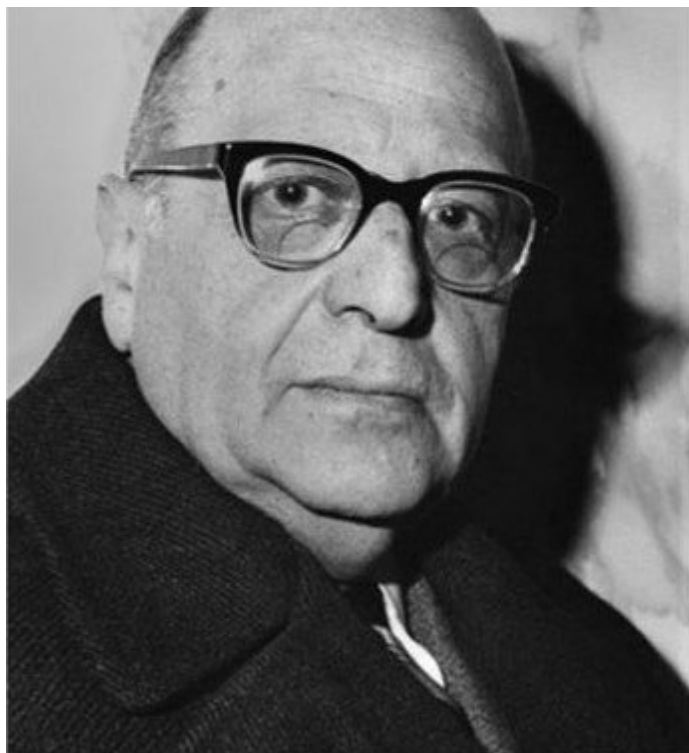
After shining such negative light to the concept of mass culture and glistening on its main flaws, it was more than necessary to revise such ideas after so many years have passed since Adorno and

Horkheimer coined the “Culture Industry” theory; given how much society has changed in the last 75 years since the theory emerged and how much technology and communications have evolved ever since.

To revise the concept of “Culture Industry” I talked to a vanguardist of our time, Kalle Lasn, co-founder of the *Adbusters* magazine and author of the books *Culture Jam* and *Design Anarchy*. Lasn is credited as one of the people to conceptualize and commence the Occupy Wall Street protests that began in 2011. Throughout the years through *Adbusters*, Lasn became a leading voice in global environmentalism, anti-capitalism and anti-consumerism movements.

Myself, as an undergrad student in Media Studies at the University of British Columbia decided to develop a series of questions based on the “Culture Industry” theory by Adorno and Horkheimer; as described in the chapter “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” and interview Kalle Lasn about the pressing issues once brought up by Adorno and Horkheimer and examine how someone on the calibre of Kalle Lasn would reflect on the issue of “Culture Industry”.

Note: the letter Q has been used for myself the interviewer, and the letter A has been used for the answers given by the



Theodor W. Adorno



Max Horkheimer



Digital art piece created for the Occupy Wall Street movement

interviewee, Kalle Lasn.

Q. I'm going to begin with a very standard question that you probably get asked a lot.

What was your initial motivation to start the magazine and like what was your epiphany moment?

A. The epiphany moments happened a long time ago, it's about 30 years ago now and there was a campaign in the forest industry here in British Columbia. And that campaign had full page ads in the Vancouver newspapers and it had 30 second TV spots. And it was a multi-million dollar campaign that basically tried to tell British Columbians that they had nothing to worry about, that the forest industry was taking fantastic care of their forests. And their slogan was "Forests forever, we have forests forever". And so a bunch of us environmentalists, we felt that they were lying to the people. And so we came up with our own 30 second TV spot then and tried to have a bit of a meme war with them on TV. And to our surprise, the CBC and some of the other private CTV and other stations --- they refused to sell us the airtime.

So, they were quite happy selling airtime to the forest industry. But they said no, no, no you're not --- your ad is not really an ad and we don't really want to sell you time for it. And that was for me an epiphany moment, the moment when I realized that there is really no free speech on what at that time, 30 years ago was the most powerful social communications medium of our time. And that was the epiphany that was the moment when I said well fuck it. You know I have to sort of begin a fight here and then --- we launch some lawsuits against the CBC and we relaunched the newsletter which grew into a magazine. And the rest is history.

Q. So now that you brought up that it was difficult at the time through the medium of television. How would you compare that to the internet? What role does the Internet play in relation to mass culture nowadays? Like do you think it is more difficult to keep the public on their submission or are people more freed in a certain way with the internet? What is your opinion to that?

A. Yeah, well it's really complex kind of a situation we are courting now and nobody has really --- we just at the very early stages of figuring it all out, I think. But for me it was a an incredible almighty surprise. I mean I thought that we were fighting one of the great freedom of speech and communications issues of our time. You know 30 years ago and when we used to launch those lawsuits against the CBC and tried to open up the airwaves to give citizens the right to walk into their stations and buy airtime and participate. You know it's there that the Internet has kind of rushed upon us and on one level it has given us incredible power to say what we want to say in the early stages of the internet like OK finally here's the holy grail here.

This is finally the moment when everybody will have a voice and then we can fight our meme wars. And may the best ideas win --- for a while it looked like a godsend.

And yet now you know with what we're starting to realize you know, how Facebook and Google have actually --- what they've actually done how we've been sort of living in this age of surveillance capitalism where we're these --- with our elections and some of the biggest issues of our time somehow decided in robotic ways that we don't quite understand. And now we're sort of --- I don't know at the early stage of a whole new sort of game, the communications game and I think it's a big struggle between whether us, the people who continue to sort of have a kind of a relatively free net or whether we're going to have some kind of a down the road; whether in the future we're going to have some sort of a mind fuck net you know? where we are actually --- is that the Internet is not delivering that freedom and democracy that we all dreamed about in the early days. But it's actually suddenly now becoming this oppressive Orwellian actuality and kind of a force that is actually subverting our values and swinging elections and giving bad people

the power to have their way with us.

Q. I think it is a valid answer, I agree with that.

A. Yeah. You know it's quite scary what's happened recently I mean --- I thought I sort of had it all figured out a year ago --- But when I started reading some of the recent books especially that book by Shoshana Zuboff *The (Age of) Surveillance Capitalism* and then all of a sudden I had shit going down my back you know trying to figure out all what sort of a future we're all going to have.

Q. OK. This other question is kind of going back to the concept of advertising and what you deal with advertising technically. **If you agree that the dominant taste in culture derives from advertising nowadays?**

A. Yeah, I mean --- I think that getting back in the old days advertising was something that we were aware of and you know when a 30-second ad came on TV then it was very easy to walk to the bathroom or do what --- or to just switch it off or mute the sound or whatever. And somehow that sort of mental manipulation was on a level that was still totally understandable. But now, advertising is this sort of advertising that you get on Facebook and on Google, you know with where they are. They sort of have this incredible amount of information on you. And they're able to target you and play sly psychological games with you on a level that nobody quite understands. Yes, so all of a sudden, I think advertising has become this. This is one of the biggest questions of our time and we have to ask ourselves whether we want to mix communication with the commercialism you know; do we really want to have our search engines monetized in the way that Google has done? You know do we really want our social relations to be monetized in the way that Facebook has done it? So, I think that this is one of the big questions of our time

now, to what extent you know can we have a viable society? You know if we mix the communication with commercialism? To me that's the big question of our time now, and I have a feeling that if we allow that kind of easy mixing of communication with commercialism you know, then we're entering some sort of a dark hole that you know, that will destroy a lot of the values that we have believed for. You know for the for the last couple of hundred years.

Q. So what will you say that is the *Adbusters'* response to the fusion of culture and entertainment and the intellectualization of amusement? What's your response to that? How do you support that?

A. In a way that sort of basically answered that question. I mean what I just said so. So, I think that at the moment you know in our magazine and some of the things that we're doing and especially on this new website that we started a billionpeople.org, you know we're basically trying to do is to wake people up to the fact that you know --- entertainment and commercialism are mixing, you know thinking that this is a sort of rabbit hole, that is way more dangerous than we ever imagined; and that we really have to come up with a sort of fundamental rethinking of our communication systems.

Q. Does "Culture Jamming" has a formula?

A. Well no, I don't think it has a formula but there's a big idea behind the "Culture Jamming". I mean constant jamming was born out of this idea that the situation is to you know half a century ago --- where we're talking about this idea of the tournament --- this idea that one powerful way to change cultures is to use the power of existing culture and in judo-like moves you know to figure out ways to sort of ride on the power, on the back of existing culture and to overthrow it. You know in the throw it back on the map, in judo-like move so behind counter jamming is to shift situations; the idea of just subverting the existing status quo in all kinds of quite often fun and interesting and profound ways.

Q. This next question is more open but this is related to mass culture. **Do you believe that mass culture was able to bring art to the masses?** If we didn't have mass production a lot of people would not have access to certain parts of culture because beforehand culture was thought up of something higher that only certain groups in society would have. **So do you think this is true? And what effect does this has on society?**

A. Yeah, I think that --- I think it's sort of up in the air. I think that though absolutely you know, the mass culture and especially the Internet has opened things up and in one way you know, we the people have more access than we've ever had before to everything that exists and especially in the more profound areas like art and so on. I think that you know somebody like you how old are you about?

Q. 20.

A. Yeah. So, when I was 20 then, I had just a very tiny amount of access compared to what you have seen, the way you are way ahead of the game. And then I was, you know when 50 years ago when I was your age. But at the same time, I think that again --- art has become commercialized now and many museums and art galleries sort of you know have partnerships with corporations. And then art to some degree has been trivialized and that sort of a gravitas feeling that I had towards art, a long time ago has somehow vanished. And now the power of art is somehow nowhere near as potent as it used to be, it's no longer one of the great cultural drivers of how people think and feel and so on. So, I think that it's a double-edged sword.

Q. **Do you see *Adbusters* as a culture commodity? Why or why not?**

A. Do I see *Adbusters* as a cultural commodity? Well no. I see. I mean in my mind, I don't know exactly how well we are communicating this to the world but in my mind Adbusters is --- especially in the last 10 years or so ever since we found out that we are in an existential crisis with climate change and that the global financial system is incredibly unstable and may crash at any time in the mother of all meltdowns. You know in the last ten years *Adbusters* has been sort of like a revolutionary organization, when we are basically saying that we have to sort of tinker with the DNA of the current world system. And, then we have to sort of pull off profound transformations, like we have to outlaw secrecy and we have to change the way money flows and we have to redefine progress and we have to make prices tell the ecological truth. And, of course we have to halt the arms trade. And then, and above all, in this sort of artistic aesthetic realm. You know we have to sort of take the straight line and move it in a more curvy kind of a direction. We need sort aesthetic and cathartic transformation as well. So yes, in a way I see *Adbusters* as sort of an attempt to trigger jump-in in the human imagination to sort of come up with new ways to live, love and think. And then figure out you know, what sort of a sane sustainable future would look like. You know, what sort of a society do we have to build to survive the 21st century.

Q. So now that you talked about going against the current. **Do you think anyone that does not conform into capitalist practices inside the system is condemned to economic impotence?**

A. Yeah at the moment it feels a little bit like that. I think that the people who sort of fight the system you know, like I think that this thing that happened to Assange yesterday (Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks was arrested on April 11th, 2019 by the Metropolitan Police when Ecuador withdrew the whistleblower's political asylum in the country's embassy located in London where Assange had resided since 2012). I mean that's a typical example of somebody who spoke truth to power and all of a sudden you know he's in danger of spending the rest of his life inside some American jail, I think. Yeah, I think it's tough to be against the current system. But then again you know, I'm also

mightily impressed by things like “Extinction Rebellion”, you know this thing that started in the UK a few months ago. And it's basically saying that we have to sort of stand up, and then engage in civil disobedience, and put our asses on the line, and then get there, and get arrested, and do all kinds of things that were sort of unthinkable to previous generations of activists. And then, we have this phenomenon of you know high school kids, you know basically walking out of class on Friday afternoons and saying that, and pointing the finger at you know --- at our leaders, and saying that --- you guys aren't doing enough to stop climate change. And give us, kids, a sort of any kind of a sane sustainable future. So yes, I think again, the future is up for grabs. I think we're at the fork in the road where either we the people will learn how to use this most revolutionary tool ever invented, that's sitting in the palm of our hands. Now these iPhones and smartphones, and you know will we learn to use this and start generating power? you know from the bottom up, we the people getting our way with the world? or will you know, will other people hijack the corporations and then men and political leaders and so on? and populist movements you know, will they sort of learn how to sort of basically do the opposite? instead of you know bottoms up, are they going to create a sort of a top down kind of a world where we live? where they call the shots from the top down? So we're at the fork in the road moment and at the moment it's hard to tell whether you know who's going to win.

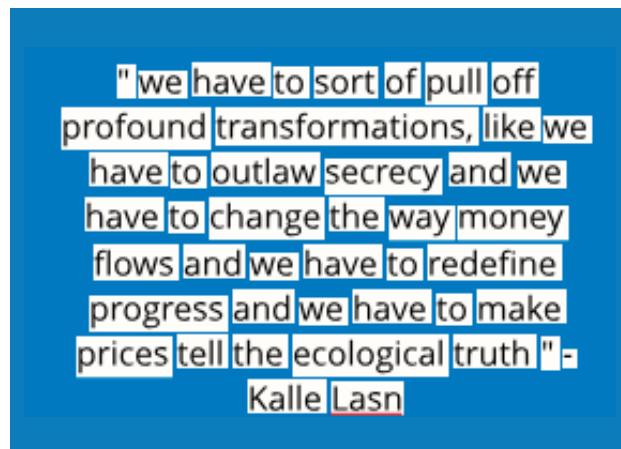


“we basically saying that we have to sort of tinker with the DNA of the current world system” - Kalle Lasn

After an engaging interview with Kalle Lasn, as a Media Studies student I was able to trace the similarities and differences between Adorno's and Horkheimer's "Culture Industry" theory and Lasn's thinking in relation to "Culture Industry".

If Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the "Culture Industry" society lives under submission and anesthesia of the mass media, then Kalle Lasn escapes this idea. It's been more than 30 years since Lasn started *Adbusters* and continues to intellectually fight against the system whether it is against capitalism, advertising conventions or unsustainable ecological practices. Kalle Lasn's view on the internet subverts to a certain extent the view presented by Adorno and Horkheimer of media being one dimensional by only serving those in power. Yet, Lasn is very careful when talking about the power of the internet as while he recognizes the freeing impact of the internet on society, he also warns about recent issues regarding surveillance and the commodification of the user through the internet, as he says we are at the early stages of figuring out how to employ the internet as a tool. After all, it seems like Adorno's and Horkheimer's critical view on media is not too outdated after all. It

seems like Lasn just reinforced the idea of how an influential medium like the internet can be used to subvert society as a whole through mental manipulation.



In addition, Lasn commented that the presence of certain companies like Google and Facebook has become so overwhelming through the internet that it can no longer be easily turned off as one could easily turn off a television. Lasn questions the mix of communication and commercialism and whether if humanity is prepared to fully assume the consequences of going down this path and accept a change in human values. Almost as if Adorno and Horkheimer had predicted the internet, their vision of distrust is shared with Lasn and how the internet as a medium of communication has furtherly not only made it possible to keep creating products for capitalism to sell, but has also made of the consumer a product for sale. The manufacture production of culture into capitalization of the "Culture Industry" theory has been furtherly proven true, given Lasn view on the internet.



Examples of how ads are subverted through "Culture Jamming" as done by Adbusters

Lasn talked about one of his most recent campaigns "A Billion People", that has had the purpose to wake up people to the fact that entertainment and commercialism are mixing and that it is necessary to rethink the functioning of the current communication systems; that action is necessary to change the current system in place. Within Adorno's and Horkheimer's view, Lasn is an individual trying to fight the system from within; to what Adorno and Horkheimer would say that such is a redundant fight to be fought, as to their view, which is pessimistic in the best case says that every individual within the system is already defeated. Yet, they recognize the increasing difficulty to keep the public under submission and maybe then somehow, still offer some hope for more than a mere subsistence within the system. It is important to have individuals like Kalle Lasn, who has dedicated his life to denouncing flaws of the system by

of the existential problems we confront as a society in our way of living.

Kalle Lasn greatly diverges from Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory when talking about the power of culture. Lasn is a leading figure when talking about the art of subversion, "Culture Jamming". The magazine *Adbusters* has been a leading publication on the form of guerilla communication against capitalist practices like advertising. Lasn argues that there is no formula to "Culture Jamming", but that there is a central idea of using the power of existing culture to talk about it in a reflexive way to overthrow standardized ideas. It almost seems as if "Culture Jamming" was created as a response to Adorno's and Horkheimer's baleful "Culture Industry". It seems that after all, the answer of how to change and denounce capitalistic practices is to fight against it with what it does best; which is advertising. "Culture Jamming" decries hidden truths about the products we consume on a daily basis to instigate reflection from the consumer. It seems like Adorno and Horkheimer did not consider that culture could produce self-awareness made by the people for the people, as it has been achieved through "Culture Jamming".

Adorno and Horkheimer even being so critical of the "Culture Industry" practices, do assert that mass culture was

able to bring art to the masses. Yet, they allege mass production has brought art to its own end, as they proclaim art is now meaningless and purposelessness through its intention of creating profit. Kalle Lasn shares a similar view to that contended by Adorno and Horkheimer. Lasn expressed that while he feels people have more access to content now more than ever, the partnerships established between corporations and art institutes have helped in the trivialization of art. He says that art is not as powerful as it used to be and that it no longer is a great cultural driver of how people feel. Still, Lasn claims that the concept of mass access to art is up in the air given its status as a double-edged sword.

When questioning Kalle Lasn on whether he saw *Adbusters* as a commodity, he says that he does not think of it that way; after all, one needs to pay to have access to the magazine either online or in print. Lasn asserted that he thinks of *Adbusters* as a revolutionary organization trying to pull off profound transformations in the world through the triggering of the human imagination to come up with new ways to live, love and think; while trying to survive the 21st century. It seems that under Adorno's and Horkheimer's perspective one cannot truly be against the system while being part of it, as we must consider that everyone involved within the

production of the magazine still needs capital to be able to live and to continue to produce content. At this point, it has to be said that *Adbusters* is not trying to completely revolutionize and overthrow existing systems like Adorno and Horkheimer would claim its necessary, but *Adbusters* is rather trying to tinker with the DNA of the current world system in Kalle Lasn words and provoke change.

I further inquired with Kalle Lasn on whether he thought that individuals that do not conform to capitalist practices within the system are condemned to economic impotence. Lasn replied that it feels that way, as just recently a figure like Julian Assange, a whistleblower, might just spend his life in prison. Yet, he said that he was impressed that there are still movements surging such as the "Extinction Rebellion" that are promoting civil disobedience, which is radical in comparison to previous generations of activists. Lasn said to be surprised by the awareness of younger generations, as high schoolers have been standing up to their governments and demanding a greener viable future. Lasn believes the future is up for grabs as it is up to the people to learn how to use the most revolutionary tool ever invented, the smartphones; to then start generating power to maybe change the flow of power from top down to bottoms up. Lasn believes we are at the forking path where we do not know yet

who is going to win.

Kalle Lasn has hope in the fight against the current institutionalized practices of the system we live in, while Adorno and Horkheimer did not see the light at the end of the tunnel that Lasn seems to believe there could be. After all, Adorno and Horkheimer did not live up to see the advent of the internet and the rooting changes it brought to human communication and cultural production. Adorno and Horkheimer did not get a chance to see the rise of the user-creator, as the roles of the creator and the consumer have now mixed up. How just anyone with internet access has the opportunity to raise their voice and capitalize on their ideas without the need of big corporations. The arrival of the internet has also paved the path for new alternative ideas and ways of living that could not have been when the cinema and television were living their golden ages.

It seems like technology has given the people a chance at redemption, yet it is up to us the people to learn how to play the game against the system; which will only be purposeful if we learn how to use the technological tools available, to instigate change through action and begin to make conscious choices of what we consume and produce. Then, maybe someday, prove that the "Culture Industry" is not the inescapable and dull endpoint once prophesied by Adorno and Horkheimer.



Adbusters' magazine covers