

Introduction
to the English Translation of Wolfgang Fritz Haug's
Critique of Commodity Aesthetics
(1986)

by

Stuart Hall

In the English-speaking world over the last two decades, critical writing in social theory and cultural studies has been overwhelmingly dominated by French writers and theorists. The work of Levy-Strauss, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault and Derrida has made an indelible and, on the face of it, an unexpected mark on the surface of intellectual life. This is all the more surprising, since the first post-war break into this area in English by Continental thinkers was made in the 1960s, with the extensive publication in English translation, for the first time, of the work of the Frankfurt School and German critical theory, including Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas and the related writings by Walter Benjamin. In many ways the Frankfurt School set the scene and put in train many of the formative ideas for critical work in the cultural sphere: The essay by Adorno and Horkheimer on >The Culture Industry< was a seminal instance, in this respect. But, in fact, with the possible exception of Benjamin, the climate of English critical thought has, so far, shown itself relatively inhospitable, in the end, to those influences in anything more than a superficial way.

This turns out on balance to represent a major intellectual loss. There are problems with the way Adorno and Horkheimer advanced their theses about how the modern cultural industries manipulated the needs and instincts of mass society. But this is very different from saying that there is nothing to learn from this attempt to appropriate the theories of Marx and Freud directly into the analysis of modern culture and the mass technologies of modern industrial production - which was at the centre of the project of the Frankfurt School. In more recent times, this absence has meant, for example, that the studies of the mass media in Britain have proceeded largely in ignorance of an extremely interesting and important debate, influenced by the Frankfurt School, about the impact of commodity production on the sphere of culture, which has been raging in German intellectual circles for some time and to which writers like Hund, Holzer, Dieter Prokop and the work of Habermas, Oskar Negt and Kluge on the 'public sphere' have made a major contribution. The vagaries of translation have made this body of work, together with related studies in the literary field on 'reception aesthetics', virtually invisible in any public way within recent English debates.

One of the earliest and most important contributions to that German debate, which put the rich concept of 'commodity aesthetics' for the first time into the field, is the volume entitled *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, which finds its long-overdue way into English at last with this Polity Press/University of Minnesota Press edition.

Haug stands directly within the central preoccupations of the contributors named above. His work is led by a number of rich intellectual streams - German philosophy (which he teaches at the Free University in Berlin), Marxism, Freud and Brecht, to name only a few. His whole project, indeed, deserves to be much better known than it is on this side of the Channel. He

was the founder and, with his wife, Frigga, has remained the principal guide, mentor and inspirer of a major intellectual/political project centred around the journal *Das Argument* - an independent critical Marxist review which first appeared at the same time as the *New Left Review* in Britain. *Das Argument* represented a similar 'break' with Stalinist and reductionist modes of thought and action on the Left and - in the forbidding climate of a divided Germany, in the ideologically polarized context of the European 'front-line' - has courageously maintained its critical vigour and political independence over several decades. Through it, many of West Germany's finest young scholars have found their way to a philosophically informed tradition of independent Marxist thought. *Das Argument* has been responsible, in recent years, for introducing into German debates many of the influences and writers which have been making their own independent mark on ideas in France, Germany and Italy. It has, for example, gone further than most German circles in 'appropriating' the work of Gramsci into political currency in the Federal Republic. Its series of books and pamphlets now constitutes one of the richest - and cheapest - sets of 'texts' for critical students and scholars, across a wide intellectual range. Its *Project Ideologie* has brought together many of the most advanced ideas in the European Left on this troubling question. The journal also constitutes one of the most advanced centres of feminist scholarship and research in Europe.

Critique of Commodity Aesthetics does not represent Wolf Haug's most recent thinking on the subject. But this revised edition - the eighth - with a special Introduction by the author, makes available for the first time a 'classic' set of arguments. The book is addressed to the central issue which Adorno and Horkheimer first put on the intellectual agenda: the question of the relationship between modern forms of commodity production under advanced capitalism, the structure of human needs and what Haug calls 'the

fate of sensuality'. Haug roots his discourse in Marx's analysis of the commodity form in *Capital* and the discussion of 'needs' in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Moving, in a vigorous and subtle discourse, between high philosophical theory and the mundane world of modern advertising and design, he exploits and develops the contradiction between 'use'- and 'exchange'-value, in the context of modern cultural and social life. In ways which few comparable English texts could match, he shows how the development of modern commodity forms, dominated by exchange-value, intersects directly with the realm of human needs and the domain of sensuality. The implied 'project' of the book is to undermine that barrier between 'outside' and 'inside' - between social production and human psychology - which, it often seems, is erected for us not only by the tendencies of a whole intellectual culture but by the very English language itself. He spans the divide which has proved such an awkward stumbling block in this field of scholarly research - that between the incorporation into commodity forms of modern aesthetics, on the one hand, and the analysis of political economy, on the other.

This is the volume which opened up the whole argument around >commodity aesthetics< (*Warenästhetik*). But the most significant result of Haug's work - and the point which most clearly represents his 'break' with and advance on the classic formulations of the Frankfurt School - lies in the area of his discussion of 'manipulation'. It was the thesis concerning the powers of the modern cultural industries in the area of mass manipulation, advanced by the Frankfurt School under the rubric of the >eclipse of enlightenment<, which constituted, at one and the same time, the force of the critique they advanced, and the difficulties their work presented. Marcuse raised this philosophical critique to its highest political point of intervention in the 1960s with the theory of 'one-dimensional society' and, in *Eros and Civilization* and

other writings, he addressed the same nexus between production, culture and 'needs'. But the theory, despite its philosophical sophistication, appeared, at once, both startling, in many ways terrifying but also, too one-sided.

Haug does not refuse the thesis of 'manipulation'. But he does advance the argument considerably by showing the two-sided, contradictory nature of the manipulative process. He accomplishes this by what he calls a 'critique' of manipulation - that is, by exploring the conditions within which manipulation can occur, once we have ditched the simplified solaces of conspiracy theory. As he puts the argument in his Introduction, >manipulation could only be effective if it 'somehow' latched on to the 'objective interests' of those being manipulated [...] while pursuing their interests.< Even manipulative phenomena must >speak the language of real needs< - they must express real needs, even in an alienated or estranged mode, if they are to inscribe themselves in the domain of >subjective sensuality< (the *cognitio sensitiva*) where needs are >experienced<.

The book traces, in a series of probing investigations, the various dimensions along which modern commodity production, as it increasingly incorporates the aesthetic dimension (in, for example, advertising or contemporary design) develops a discourse which connects with and transforms >the sensual awareness< of modern consumer society. In so doing, it plays, with increasing complexity, across the ambiguities of the >real< and the >fantastic<. The whole argument is sustained by a self-reflexive philosophical discourse which doubles on itself, lifting the book into an altogether different domain from that occupied by most available 'analyses' of, say, contemporary advertising or design trends.

Haug's argument is certainly not completed in this volume. It bears, as he himself says, the provisional sign: >Further work needed here.< But it is a

bold and challenging start in what, for the English debates, is virtually a new direction -uncharted waters. It is sincerely to be hoped that it will have the major impact it deserves on critical work and scholarship in this area.