


THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY AND THE ALIENATION OF THE MASSES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN THE BOOM OF THE 20S AND THE CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the cultural legacies of the 1920s boom and its influence on the current cultural industry. The objective is to understand how the mechanisms of cultural production and consumption of that time shaped contemporary practices, perpetuating the alienation of the masses. Using a comparative approach, the study is based on a literature review and content analysis of primary and secondary sources, including works by Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as historical and contemporary data on cultural production. The methodology involves the detailed analysis of texts, films, music and other forms of media from the 20s, comparing them with the cultural productions of the digital age, such as social networks, streaming and other digital platforms. The results indicate that the cultural massification that began in the 1920s, driven by technological advances and the market economy, established the foundations for the modern cultural industry, characterized by globalization and digitalization. It is concluded that, despite technological changes, the principles of alienation and mass consumption remain central, evidencing the continuity and adaptation of cultural control strategies over time. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and social dynamics that shape the perception and behavior of the masses in contemporary times, highlighting the historical relevance and persistence of cultural patterns established a century ago. In addition, the research underscores the importance of critically recognizing and analyzing these cultural heritages to better understand the challenges and opportunities present in the digital age.

Keywords: Cultural Industry. Mass Manipulation. Boom of the 20s. Cultural massification. It was digital.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of World War I, with the recent defeat of Germany and its allies, the United States assisted the affected countries of Europe in their reconstruction, due to the damage caused by World War I. Consequently, this brought to the United States a period of high economic growth, which became known as the "Boom of the 20s" or "The Roaring 20s", due to the high economic development and breaking of several taboos. In this way, this period is marked not only by economic ascension, but also by developing and creating various cultural aspects that shaped and influenced the world, such as the creation of Jazz, the development of the Hollywood industry, the first break in the female paradigm and the creation of the *American Way of Life* .

Added to this, the United States spread its lifestyle through the media of the time, proclaiming itself the ideal country to live in, which constituted the American lifestyle and in a way, carried the example of the sovereignty of capitalism and democracy. However, the *American Way of Life* brought one of the first ideas of mass alienation, because at the time it was disseminated through advertisements in the media, such as Hollywood movies, in order to show everyone that the country was going through the best phase of its history and that in a way it was superior to other countries, which created and shaped the premise of the perfect country, where there would be no poverty and not even difficulties, ideals that still persist and have gradually strengthened themselves to the present day, which is currently displayed on social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook.

In this way, the painting of the perfect country and the perfect American life, or at least superior to most countries, still persists, through advertisements and digital influencers. Consequently, nowadays, these aspects shape some social behaviors of citizens of other countries, such as Brazil, where most of the population idealizes the United States as a perfect country to live in and, in addition, an inferiority complex has developed in the country when compared to other nations.

Figure 1: Photo of the famous American balls of the early 20s.



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OBJECTIVES

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To understand the events of the Boom of the 20's, with emphasis on the propaganda of the American lifestyle, consequences experienced in contemporary times by the Brazilian population and in the world, corroborating the clarification of how the mechanisms of cultural production and consumption of that time shaped contemporary practices, perpetuating the alienation of the masses.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

To analyze how the events of the Boom of the 20's influenced Brazil, with emphasis on American propaganda (cultural heritage), understanding the rooting of the Cultural Industry in Brazil;

In addition, analyze the first signs of the emergence of mass alienation, its first intentions and dissemination through the media of the time, and the emergence of the Cultural Industry, reaching the development of mass alienation and the Cultural Industry in the world, in 1920, and how this affects other countries;

In this way, it also demonstrates how mass alienation has grown and been perpetuated in contemporary times, as one of the greatest ways to influence the population to consumption or in political issues, and its consequences, specifying its development and strengthening.



METHODS

To carry out this work, which was developed in the discipline of History, taught by Professor and Advisor Cássio, by students of the 3rd year of High School with Formative Itinerary in Exact Sciences and Engineering of the Technical School Etec Professor Massuyuki Kawano. In the first instance, a qualitative research (bibliographic survey) was carried out in order to understand the aspects that guided the consequences of the Post-World War I and the Cultural Industry, in order to expose the events of the 20s, experienced by the United States and other countries. In addition, the classes and support materials made available by the teacher were used, as well as research materials from the internet. In the second instance, a collection of responses was carried out, through a digital form, with a sample of the population, on a national scale, in order to relate the practical aspects with the theoretical ones and demonstrate the characteristics of mass alienation in contemporary times and in Brazil, this was made available to public servants and people who had passed public examinations. Finally, it was related to the theoretical ideas developed with the results obtained in practice, in order to develop the concluding theses for the relevant work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 1920, after World War I, the United States experienced great economic growth, which would later result in the Crisis of 1929, known as one of the greatest crises in the capitalist environment. During the years 1920 to 1929, the USA developed its culture and consolidated itself as a world power, which enabled the formation and dissemination of the idea of the *American Way of Life*, or "American Lifestyle", which preached American supremacy and the ideal of the perfect life, possible only for Americans and residents of the USA. In addition, this lifestyle began, at the time, to be propagated by Hollywood, through films and advertisements that showed the good moment experienced by the American population, in addition to developing the first expressions of female freedom and breaking antiquated feminine standards, as well as the strong development of American culture, such as the creation of Jazz.

Consequently, the American way of life did not take long to spread around the world. However, a devastated world living in a disastrous and nebulous post-war period began to be frequently bombarded by American propaganda, such as newspapers, films and other media of the time. In these aspects, the advertisements showed a reality very different from that experienced in the rest of the world, influencing several people to believe in the idea of the American lifestyle and in the sovereignty of capitalism and consumerism. Thus, a good



part of the world's population was influenced to believe that the United States was the perfect country, which, at the time, further spread the ideals of capitalism and democracy.

In this way, the *American Way of Life* began to consolidate itself around the world and become an apparatus of strong influence. Consequently, it influenced the world in several ways, but with a focus on the need for well-being expressed in the consumerism of material goods, which became a hallmark of American society and led to the Crisis of 1929, due to the Fordist model (Taylorism). During the 1920s, films such as "The Jazz Singer" (1927) exemplified the new freedoms and cultural expressions, while reinforcing the ideals of consumerism and the *American Way of Life*. The advertising of the time, present in newspapers and magazines, incessantly promoted products that symbolized this new lifestyle, such as Ford automobiles and innovative appliances.

In this way, according to Instrumental Reason, a term introduced by the founders of the Frankfurt School Adorno and Horkheimer, which refers to the use of reason as a tool to achieve practical and utilitarian ends, often at the expense of ethics and human values, the *American Way of Life* was used as a way to maximize the profits of the industries of the time, carrying few traces of true American culture and carrying traces of the need for consumerism to achieve happiness.

However, it is crucial to understand that the Cultural Industry does not come from capitalism, but from the industrial environment. In this way, the *American Way of Life* was not necessarily influenced by government doctrines, but by the industries of the time, which aimed to sell the large inventories generated by Fordism, which marked a consumer society. Thus, the idea is maintained that mass manipulation was not necessarily born from the social or political environment, but from the industrial environment and was, at the time, driven by the beneficial scenario, that is, the strong development of Hollywood industry and the weakening of European industries. Consequently, the American lifestyle has become fixed on the world stage with the idea of well-being in the consumerism of material goods, socially shaping diverse populations in a consumerist scenario. In this way, the American lifestyle was not only a way of manipulating people, but the first facet of the Cultural Industry and mass manipulation worldwide.

In Brazil, it did not take long for the consequences to be evidenced, with one of the most striking scenarios being the 1950s and its consolidation in São Paulo. With the growing spread of the Cultural Industry, it did not take long for the concept to arrive in Brazil, especially after industrialization during the Vargas government, marking a more refined lifestyle for some São Paulo residents, but also establishing a consumer society, as added by Marcia Barros Valdivia.



In the face of the American "way of life", very well expressed in the media, the need for well-being was presented to Brazilian society, expressed in the consumerism of material goods, since industries were producing novelties such as household appliances, automobiles, furniture, clothing and accessories, which marked the era and outlined styles. People were seduced into having material goods, so that they could accept the invitation to enter the consumer society, as long as they had the main passport, "capital". (VALDIVIA, 2015, p. 187).

Consequently, the facet of the Cultural Industry influenced the people of São Paulo at the time to believe in a society more based on consumerism. However, this fostered some social problems in Brazil, as the *American Way of Life* could indeed be very beneficial and tempting to the people of São Paulo, as it was a fabulous escape from the problems and exhausting days of work, but with the recent urbanization of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the ideals of the American lifestyle showed, also, that they could not solve the individual social problems of São Paulo society, the famous urban problems, which were invisible, because man should be a worker, guided and standardized on the basis of a capitalist industrial society. Exacerbated consumerism, propagated both in the 1920s and in the current digital age, has brought significant social and economic impacts. In the 1920s, the incentive to unbridled consumption resulted in the Crisis of 1929, highlighting the risks of a market excessively dependent on consumption. Currently, consumerism is perpetuated by algorithms that personalize ads and promote incessant consumption. This phenomenon contributes to growing social inequality and environmental problems, as the mass production and disposal of consumer goods increases the ecological footprint.

As a result, the Cultural Industry did not emerge today, but gradually established itself on the world stage, having its roots in the Boom of the 20s and, mainly, in the *American Way of Life*. In this regard, with the recent globalization and the speed of connections, the Cultural Industry has gained a much larger stage of action than in the 1920s. Consequently, films, music, books, and other cultural products are produced with the aim of maximizing profit, rather than promoting critical thinking or social transformation, perpetuating consumer ideals. In this way, the Cultural Industry has never had an end since its conception, as it has been used in different ways until it reached the present day. For example, the Cultural Industry has already served to disseminate capitalism around the world and, at the same time, to disseminate authoritarian doctrines, such as Nazism and fascism. In this way, the Cultural Industry remains relevant in the contemporary digital age, as it has been modified to adapt to digital media, which could serve to combat the dissemination of scientific knowledge and ways to develop critical thinking.

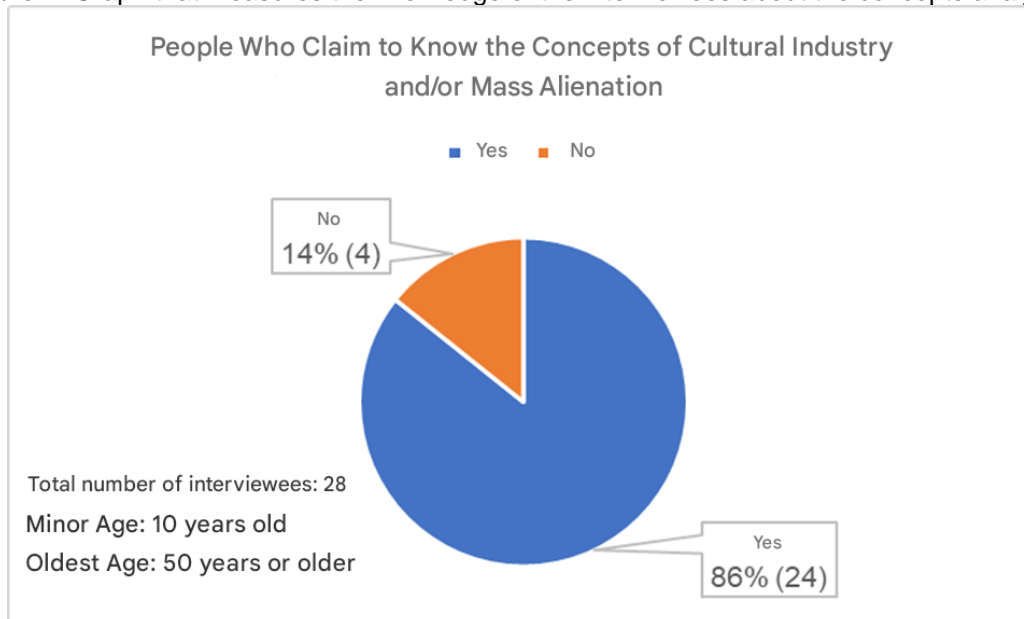
In addition, in the contemporary digital age, the Cultural Industry also exerts a significant influence on the population in political affairs, using advanced technologies to



manipulate perceptions and behaviors. In this way, social networks and digital media platforms are designed to maximize engagement through algorithms that reinforce biases and create information bubbles, limiting exposure to divergent perspectives. This facilitates the spread of dominant narratives and disinformation, shaping public opinions in ways that favor specific interests. The manipulation of the masses by the digital cultural industry results not only in media alienation, but also in political alienation, transforming individuals into passive consumers of polarizing and often misleading content. This algorithmic segmentation not only perpetuates consumerism but also facilitates the spread of misinformation, further polarizing society and hindering critical public debate.

As a result, the Cultural Industry proved to be an abrasive concept in Brazil, having its appearance in the 1950s. In this context, as much as in the 1920s it was used to transmit the ideal of exacerbated consumerism and American sovereignty to the people of São Paulo, evidencing problems even in this lifestyle, the Cultural Industry currently exercises a great social paradigm, as it served as a way to accentuate different social problems in the urban environment, especially in large cities. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Cultural Industry influences the great mass to passivity, condoning a society inert to advertisements. Consequently, Brazilians have been molded to patterns that accentuate social alleys and predominate social inequalities. In this scenario, urban advertising has increasingly become a game of influences, where each advertisement aims to engage the population, through their perceptions, segmenting Brazilian society between those who influence and those who are influenced. In this perspective, cities considered urban serve as a way of visualizing the effects of the Cultural Industry. In addition, it favors the famous "cancel culture" on social networks, as it instigates social division and the clash of ideas, by preaching the supremacy of an ideology, instigating in the digital environment the cancellation of the opinion of third parties, which generally do not reach or agree with the ideals of the Cultural Industry or the ideology that many already share, such as the case of actress Thaila Ayala, who launched a clothing brand called Vir.us.2020 in the midst of the pandemic and was canceled for the suggestive name.

Figure 2: Graph that measures the knowledge of the interviewees about the concepts analyzed.



Authorship: Graph of the research carried out, Tupã (SP); Marcio Gabriel Schinor Mazega, 3rd grade of the Formative Itinerary in Exact Sciences and Engineering. Accessed on: September 16, 2024.

Based on the data obtained and what was mentioned earlier, it is notable that the majority of the population claims to know the terms worked. However, even with this knowledge, the population is still strongly influenced by the Cultural Industry and its mechanisms, being stuck in conformity. Thus, despite recognizing these concepts, many individuals are already born in an environment impregnated by these ideals, such as the idealization of a foreign lifestyle, which leads many Brazilians to consider other cultures superior. This phenomenon is the result of exposure to commercials and disclosures that promote the supremacy of a culture, country or ideology, as shown by the *American Way of Life*, fixing a reality imposed for years.

Although they identify that the concepts mentioned exist, the population is inserted in this environment in such a way that they do not see how it directly affects their behaviors. As a result, mass culture is perpetuated, aggravating its social consequences and making the population amorphous, in addition to weakening Brazilian democracy. According to Jean Baudrillard, the world lives in a reality of simulacra, where images and representations replace reality, creating a 'hyper-reality'. The Cultural Industry, according to him, creates a great scenario of perceptions and achievements through images that reach society directly. In this way, the imposed manipulation generates a hyper-reality, causing the propagated images to replace people's reality, shaping their perceptions and actions, homogenizing society.

Consequently, in contemporary times, the Cultural Industry is not only based on its old mechanisms, but also on conformity. For many societies, the Cultural Industry is



considered something normal or cultural, transmitted over the years as a form of culture and its constant influence, promoting false realities and feelings of acquisition. Thus, the Cultural Industry perpetuates itself, masked in a conformism, as shown in the American society of the 1920s and consolidated in contemporary American society as a lifestyle, where only through consumption is it possible to achieve social well-being.

Therefore, most people cannot escape this imposed reality, passing on an imposed ideal and homogenizing. Society has lost the ability to criticize what is imposed, fixating on a social illusion of consumption and inferiority, affecting the social development of several countries, especially Brazil. In Brazil, the Cultural Industry, in addition to promoting consumption for social welfare, has also consolidated ideals of inferiority among the Brazilian population, which feels inferior when compared to foreigners. This feeling is generated by the perception of living in an inferior nation. These ideals were presented to Brazilian society during years of living with the American lifestyle and its ideals of supremacy and consumerism.

In addition, the Cultural Industry has appropriated digital media to expand its radius of influence and social manipulation. In this way, the Cultural Industry also gains prominence in the digital age, through social algorithms that create cultural bubbles and facilitate dissemination, the so-called echo cameras. In these environments, people enter cycles of posting and viewing the same content, dividing society into cultural bubbles and expanding the manipulation of the masses. In addition, this scenario favors the influence of people, who are grouped by common ideals. From this point of view, according to Jürgen Habermas, the Cultural Industry transforms communication into a commodity, maximizing dominant ideologies and reducing criticism, promoting a superficial and homogenized view of reality. Consequently, the mechanisms of social networks, such as echo cameras, increase the control capacity of the great masses, maximizing the reach of the Cultural Industry. This reduces cultural differences between social groups, reducing the socialization of different groups in the digital environment, opening space for the circulation of fake news and slowing down critical and social development.

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, the mechanisms of the culture industry, shaped in the 1920s, continue to influence the masses in the digital age. The *American Way of Life*, propagated through the media of the time, sedimented an ideal of consumption and success that transcended borders and persists to the present day. Thus, alienation is not a new phenomenon, but a constant that adapts to new technologies and forms of communication, with this, the data



collected reveal that the Brazilian population, despite knowing what these terms are, as in other parts of the world, is still strongly influenced by stereotypes and consumption patterns disseminated by the cultural industry.

Consequently, the idealization of an American lifestyle, the search for material goods and the adherence to trends dictated by social networks are concrete examples of this alienation. In this way, the contemporary cultural industry, with its tools of personalization and segmentation, has made the manipulation of the masses even more effective. Social media algorithms, for example, create information bubbles that reinforce biases and make it difficult to access different perspectives, which fragments society and facilitates the spread of fake news and political polarization, reducing the critical capacity of individuals and weakening democracy.

Therefore, it is essential that society develops tools to resist the manipulation of the cultural industry, critical education, encouraging critical thinking and access to reliable information are essential for individuals to become more conscious consumers and more engaged citizens. In addition, there needs to be stricter regulation of digital platforms in order to ensure transparency and accountability in the production and dissemination of content. In short, the cultural industry has shaped and continues to shape society, influencing values, behaviors and decisions, but it has changed from what was shaped in the 20s. Understanding the mechanisms that sustain it is the first step to building a fairer and more democratic future, in which individual autonomy and diversity of thought are valued



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