

A comparison between Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools in the Study of Mass Culture

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Abstract

This paper explores the contrasting perspectives of the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham School on mass culture. The Frankfurt School, rooted in critical theory, views mass culture as a tool of ideological domination that promotes conformity and stifles individuality. Scholars like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that the commodification of culture leads to passive consumption, undermining critical thought and genuine social change. In contrast, the Birmingham School, particularly through the works of Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart, adopts a more nuanced view. It emphasizes the active role of audiences in interpreting and negotiating cultural texts, suggesting that mass culture can serve as a site of resistance and identity formation. This paper analyzes these differing frameworks, highlighting how each school contributes to our understanding of the complexities of mass culture, and ultimately argues for a synthesis that recognizes both the oppressive and emancipatory potentials of mass cultural practices.

Keywords

The Birmingham School; the Frankfurt School; mass culture.

1. Introduction

Frankfurt school refers to a group of German intellectuals associated with the institute for social research at the university of Frankfurt. Birmingham School provides the most vigorous and indigenous strength in the cultural studies in Britain. They bear some similarities and some differences.

2. Comparison between the Two Schools

2.1. Similarities

First, there are something in common between these two schools. They agree on the commercialization of mass culture. Hoggart targets on the producers of the commodities from which mass culture is made. He observes the culture decline from mass fiction and observes that it lacks the "moral" tone. His ultimate fear is that competitive commerce may have totalitarian designs. Williams has similar opinions. He is insistent that we distinguish between the commodities made available by the cultural industries and what people make of these commodities, people are not reducible to the comedies they consume. The scholars from Frankfurt school also are aware of the devaluation of authentic culture by com commodification. Adorno points out that the culture industry, in its search for profits and cultural homogeneity, deprives authentic culture of its critical function.

2.2. Differences

Secondly, these two schools differ on their opinions of mass culture. The scholars from Birmingham school focus on the working class and its culture. Richard Hoggart is confident that “the working classes have a strong natural ability to survive change by adapting or assimilating what they want in the new and ignoring the rest”. The working class consumer seeks not “an escape from ordinary life”, but its intensification. The working class culture of the 1930s is marked by their rich full life and a strong sense of community. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E P Thompson defines class as “a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period”. He asserts that mass culture is a site of resistance to those in whose interests the Industrial Revolution was made. The ordinary men and women, have their own experiences, values, ideas, actions and desires. While the Frankfurt school criticizes the mass culture from its homogeneity and predictability, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term “cultural industry” to designate the products and processes of mass culture. Leo Lowenthal contends that the culture industry, has worked to depoliticize the working class. The cultural industry discourages the “masses” from thinking beyond the confines of the present. Marcuse asserts that the democratization of culture results in the blocking of the demand for full democracy and it stabilizes the prevailing social order. According to for school, working and leisure under capitalism form a compelling relationship. Work leads to mass culture, and mass culture leads back to work.

Thirdly, Frankfurt school and Birmingham school have different opinions on the mass. Birmingham school holds positive views towards a mass. Hoggart asserts that the working classes have a strong natural ability to survive change by adapting or assimilating what they want in the new and ignoring the rest. Thompson places experience of the English working class as central and considers the working class as a classic example of “history from below”. He agrees on Marx's famous claim that “Men make their own history and they make it under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”.

The Frankfurt school, on the other hand, asserts negative views towards the mass. Adorno claims in his essay, “On mass music” that “A pseudo-individualism keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them”. Thus, the mass only have “pre-digested” music and passive listening. They have little energy to escape and find the “authentic” culture. According to Leo Lowenthal, capitalism prevents the formation of fundamental desires and the masses are discouraged by the culture industry from thinking beyond the confines of the present. As Marcuse claims in *One Dimensional Man*, the masses have a false consciousness and one dimensional thought and behavior

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham School present two distinct yet complementary frameworks for analyzing mass culture. While the Frankfurt School critiques the homogenizing effects of mass culture, emphasizing its role in perpetuating social inequalities, the Birmingham School highlights the agency of individuals and communities in shaping cultural meanings. This tension between domination and resistance illustrates the multifaceted nature of mass culture, which can both reinforce existing power structures and provide avenues for subversion and empowerment. By integrating insights from both schools, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how mass culture functions within society, acknowledging its potential to both constrain and liberate. Future research should continue to explore this dynamic interplay, considering how contemporary digital landscapes further complicate these debates.

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