On Popular Music in Advertising

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This is not a critical analysis of Adorno's "On Popular Music," that has been done (e.g. Middleton 1990; 2000). Nor is it yet another "attack" on popular music (Adorno 1941). This is also not a condemnation of the use of popular music in advertising (Burns 1996). This is an analysis and discussion of popular music in advertising from Adorno's perspective, primarily based on his "On Popular Music." While it may appear from the title, or as the article progresses that this essay supports Adorno's viewpoint, this is not the intention. The purpose is to not "get past the ghost of Adorno" (Krims 2003a, 157), but to confront his cultural theories once again to provide one possible explanation and justification for the increasing use of popular music in advertising. The goal is to provide some classical perspective and theoretical foundation to this growing advertising technique.

Background

Turn on the television and you are likely to hear Bob Seger's "Like A Rock" in a Chevrolet commercial or The Vines' "Ride" in an iPod advertisement. Each year it is suggested that popular music in advertising is growing (see James Marks in U.S. News & World Report, 25 May 1998; Teresa Buyikian in Billboard, 8 May 1999; Davin Seay in Brandweek, 22 May 2000; Phil Patton in the New York Times, 15 September 2002; Theresa Howard in USA Today, 11 August 2003). Mark Fried of Spirit Music Group argued in Billboard, 8 March 2003 that "the syncing of both classic and new songs into advertising campaigns has kept up its torrid pace and shows no sign of abating." In 2004, Felicity Shea suggested in B&T Weekly, 1 October 2004 that "in the past five years advertisers have been unrelenting in their appropriation of popular music and there's no sign of the trend abating."

The basis for popular music's popularity in advertising has been well documented. Advertisers have found that "music is a great vehicle to be relevant with consumers across boundaries whether ethnic, geographic, or age," according to the Ken Kunze, the marketing director for Heinekin in USA Today, 11 August 2003. Neil Gillis, VP of A&R and Advertising at Warner-Chappell Music in Billboard, 22 March 2003 agreed that "companies that smartly and creatively utilize music think they can reach a wider audience by a great use of any kind of music, as long as it serves the ultimate message well." Artists who were somewhat reluctant in the past to license their music have begun to more actively pursue commercial licensing due to economics, consolidation or greater acceptance. Theresa Howard suggested in USA Today, 11 August 2003 that "pop musicians are taking their top 40 hits to TV ads. Musical

artists used to view commercial use of their songs as taboo, forcing marketers to wait years to use those songs in ads. But an oversupply of artists and a 13% decline in worldwide album sales since 2001 are forcing musicians to sing a new tune." Advertising then, has not only been a way for "hits" to continue to cash in, but for new music to get exposure. "Advertising has become a vehicle in bringing new music to people-like movie soundtracks of the past... it's good for ads and good for music" says Deuthsch's Eric Hirshberg in this article. The result has been financially beneficial to both new and old. "All the rock tunes popping up in commercials are making superstar bands ever richer and turning unknown acts into the next big thing" according to Valerie Block in AdAge, 3 February 2003. Wendy Melillo agreed in Adweek, 12 April 2004 that it certainly appears that "they [artists] need advertising as much as advertising needs them."

Adorno and Cultural Theory

Adorno would not be surprised that the use of popular music in advertising was growing or successful. He predicted it, or at least suggested it. His much criticized "On Popular Music" and some of his subsequent writings provide one possible theoretical foundation for the use of popular music in advertising. The very basis of the cultural theory regarding popular music that came out of the Frankfurt School had deep economic implications.

Some of the earliest cultural theory with regard to popular music, of course, originated from the Frankfurt School for Social Research formed in 1923. Its founders, lead by Adorno (1903-1970) and Horkheimer (1895-1973), tended to be German and Jewish intellectuals who developed critical theory and research about what they felt were the social contradictions of the capitalist societies at that time. Their focus became what they called the "culture industry" which they felt as a movement that attracts its members through technology as well as economic means (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). According to them, the masses were not primary but secondary, and not people but merely objects or numbers. They argued that the culture industry was in control, not the customer. Adorno and Horkheimer were convinced that the culture industry was crucial to the domination of capitalism. They theorized that in contemporary capitalist societies the culture industry produced forms of culture which were commodities that were bought and sold and that possessed exchange value, thus companies produced culture just to make money. In their opinion, this "commodification" had become increasingly widespread; affecting all aspects of cultural production and social life. This led to a standardization of the products of the culture industries, and resulted in passivity in those who consumed the culture industry products. "The all-powerful culture industry appropriates the enlightening principle and, in its relationship with human beings, defaces it for the benefit of prevailing obscurity. Art vehemently opposes this tendency; it offers an ever-sharper contrast to such false clarity" (Adorno 1973, 15). Adorno further argued that the Marxist principle of "commodity fetishism" was how cultural forms secure the control of capital through economical, political and ideological means. According to him, it also shapes the tastes and preferences of the masses. It creates false needs, prohibits alternative ways of thinking, and does all this without people realizing it.

At this time, popular music was a new and growing part of the culture industry. It became a primary focus (some would say obsession) of Adorno. Agree with him or not, it is impossible to talk about popular music theory effectively without beginning with Adorno. Notwithstanding whether Adorno was comparing classical music with what would be considered to be popular music today, or simply Tin Pan Alley, his critical theory as it relates to popular music provides the theoretical foundation that is still being cited and debated today. Gendron argued that "despite its failures and excesses 'On Popular Music' remains one of the two or three most penetrating pieces on the subject" (Gendron 1986, 19). Strinati (1995) agreed that "the contemporary analysis of popular music still commences, however critically, on the basis of Adorno's theory, while his name is sometimes invoked as a symbol of a whole way of thinking about theory and culture" (52). Krims acknowledged that "even those of us, perhaps the majority, in popular music studies who contest his descriptions nevertheless find it necessary to confront them" (Krims 2003a, 131). The basis of Adorno's critical analysis of popular music centered on the premise that popular music was not serious music because it was standardized and pseudo-individualized.

Popular Music Not Serious Music

To Adorno, classical music was serious music where "every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme" (1941, 19). Popular music, on the other hand, "would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out of the context; the listener can supply the 'framework' automatically, since it is a mere musical automation itself" (19). This concept of a "framework" could be a major advantage to advertisers when using popular music in advertising for the successful retrieval of advertising messages. Some contemporary researchers have observed the importance of such a "framework." Wallace (1994) suggested that "music focuses listeners on the surface characteristics of the music and text and the music provides a 'framework' for encoding and retrieving a text" (1482). Wallace also suggested that the melody of a song can facilitate recall in certain environments; text is better recalled when it is heard as a song rather than as speech provided the music repeats so that it is easily learned; melodies provide more than just a context, they provide an information-rich context that is critically connected to the text; and music contributes more to recall than rhythmical information" (1482). Rubin (1977) found that recall of information is improved when "cued" with the melody of a well known song (Star Spangled Banner"). Adorno would not have been surprised. In fact, he argued that the natural language for the "American listener" originates from "his earliest musical experiences, the nursery rhymes, the hymns he sings in Sunday school, the little tunes he whistles on his way home from school" (1941, 24). This certainly might begin to explain the effective use of Bob Seger's "Like a Rock" for Chevy Trucks or The Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up" for Windows 95. Roehm (2001) observed that for individuals who were familiar with a song the recall of an advertising message was greater for instrumental versions than vocal versions.

A growing technique in advertising today is the replacement of original lyrics of a popular song with new, altered lyrics carrying the advertiser's message. Two examples of this in American

advertising are Old Navy's use of "In the Navy" by the Village People and eBay's use of "My Way" by Frank Sinatra. Adorno (1941) would have predicted this integration and alteration to be successful because with popular music "it would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out of the context" and "the beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses" (19). Adorno also called popular lyrics "baby talk" and said that "genuine and pseudo-nursery rhymes are combined with purposeful alterations of the lyrics of original nursery rhymes in order to make them commercial hits" (30). While research on this type of advertising is scarce, limited study has suggested that contrary to Adorno's theories original lyrics with the original melody of a song are most effective (Crowder et al. 1990).

Standardization and Pseudo-individualization

The most important characteristics that made popular music not serious music were what Adorno termed standardization and pseudo-individualization. Adorno (1941) defined standardization as "the melody and the lyric are constructed within a definite pattern or structural form" (17). Strinati (1995) suggested that Adorno believed that "standardization defines the way the culture industry squeezes out any kind of challenge, originality, authenticity or intellectual stimulation from the music it produces, while pseudo-individualization provides the 'hook,' or apparent novelty or uniqueness of the song to the consumer" (65). Adorno (1941) argued that popular music makes the listener "rhythmically obedient and divests the listener of spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes" (40). If this is true, than the combination of popular music and advertising could potentially magnify that "conditioning" affect. The experimental support for the concept of classical conditioning of popular music and advertising, has been widely studied with both successful (Gorn 1982) and unsuccessful (Pitt and Abratt 1988) results.

Adorno (1941) also believed that popular music must simultaneously meet two demands. "One is for stimuli that provoke the listener's attention. The other is for the material to fall within the category of what the musically untrained listener would call 'natural' music" (40). Some researchers have studied and observed music's "attention-gaining value" (Kellaris et al. 1993) with moderate success in supporting Adorno's theory.

In addition to standardization, Adorno (1941) explained the subtle differences of popular music as "pseudo-individualism," or "the halo of free choice" (25) to find individual meaning in the music. Whereas standardization "keeps the listener in line by doing the listening for them" (25), Adorno argued that pseudo-individualism "keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them" (25). In mass market advertising, the 'appearance' of individualism is a very important characteristic. Consumers are usually more receptive when the ad is 'personalized' so as to appear to be "talking to me."

The characterization of popular music as "standardized" and "pseudo-individualized," while blasphemy to most popular musicologists and culturalists, is welcomed by most advertisers. Suspending opinion for a moment, a standardized response to advertising is desired so as to

segment consumers into a target market that will buy in unison. In addition, the advertising must at least appear to be individually targeted to individuals who want to feel uniquely pursued by the advertiser. If popular music could not only stimulate a standardized reaction to itself but to the advertising messages integrated with it, then the result could be a very successful and focused mass marketing campaign. If popular music with advertising could also stimulate in each potential consumer the illusion of free choice so as to not appear to be selling something or grouping them indiscriminately, then the advertising effectiveness could be even better. Of even greater potential is Adorno's assessment that popular music "is composed in such a way that the process of translation of the unique into the norm is already planned and, to a certain extent, achieved within the composition itself" (1941, 22). A major consideration and challenge for most advertisers is a consistent and integrated interpretation of their advertising message by their target market. If this were true of popular music then its integration with advertising could significantly assist in this effort.

How Music Becomes Popular

As for how popular music became popular and was disseminated, the dominant channel of the time and arguably the same dominant one today, was radio. Adorno chastised radio for the mass distribution and promotion of this new "popular inferior product" (Adorno 1941, 27). He said that radio did not broadcast "serious music" and that "recognition of radio music as such would shatter the listeners' artificially fostered belief that they are dealing with the world's greatest music " (Adorno 1950, 312). Popular music was designed to be made popular by radio. "To be plugged, a song-hit must have at least one feature by which it can be distinguished from any other, and yet possess the complete conventionality and triviality of all others" (312). Radio facilitated what Adorno called "mass listening" which was different then the "elite listening of the past" (313). It was effortless and what he called "commodity listening" (311). Reisman (1957) supported Adorno's concept of mass listening. "In the field of popular music, the music industry, with its song pluggers, its jukebox outlets, its radio grip, seems to be able to mold popular taste and to eliminate free choice by consumers" (409). Both Adorno and Reisman believed popular music to have some type of "massification effect" (Ortega y Gassett 1957, 41), and that radio "serves to keep listeners from criticizing social realities. It offers a new function of creating smugness and self-satisfaction" (Adorno 1950, 312).

Of course, radio became a major outlet for not only popular music but mass marketing and advertising. The "plugging" of a song and the "plugging" of an advertiser are very similar. Both songs and consumer goods and services are "plugged" on the radio to make them more popular. A "song-hit" that has been "plugged" into popularity and was then integrated with advertising would seemingly have the potential of "molding popular taste and eliminating free choice by consumers" (Reisman 1957, 409).

Popular Music and Advertising

While Adorno did not specifically address popular music and advertising, he did reference and

compare them. He suggested that "a further requirement of plugging is a certain richness and roundness of sound. This requirement evolves that feature in the whole plugging mechanism which is overtly bound up with advertising as a business as well as with the commercialization of entertainment" (1941, 28). He argued that "the interplay of lyrics and music in popular music is similar to the interplay of picture and word in advertising. The picture provides the sensual stimulus, the words add slogans or jokes that tend to fix the commodity in the minds of the public and 'subsume' it under definite, settled categories" (1941, 29). He even compared popular music with a popular breakfast brand when he said that "it is the ideal of Aunt Jemima's ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music" (1950, 311). The similarities and the comparisons do not end here.

Adorno also talked about popular music in terms of the first two stages of the hierarchy of advertising effects: attention and memory. "He [the producer of pop music] must write something impressive enough to be remembered and at the same time well known enough to be banal. It [pop music] must catch the listener's attention, must differ from other popular songs if it is to sell, to reach the listener at all" (1976, 31). Adorno was also one of the first to analyze popular music and recognition. He argued that "the appropriate beginning for investigating recognition in respect of any particular song hit may be made by drafting a scheme which divides the experience of recognition into its different components. The components we consider to be involved are the following: vague remembrance; actual identification; subsumption by label; self-reflection on the act of recognition; and psychological transfer of recognition-authority to the object" (1941, 33). Attention and recognition are key components of effective advertising and must be present to affect attitude and ultimately purchase intention.

Discussion

It is possible that if he had lived to witness the proliferation of popular music in advertising, Adorno may have indeed revisited his most controversial article and entitled it "On Popular Music in Advertising." In it he may have expressed vindication for his earlier assessments of popular music as not serious and a "commodity" of the culture industry as confirmed by its integration in advertising. He might even have addressed the genre of hip hop and rap music as yet another example of "inferior" popular music where "pseudo-nursery rhymes" are combined with "purposeful alterations of the lyrics" to make popular hits and "plug" products. He would have been surprised and critical, however, of the use of "serious music" in advertising arguing that Classical music should be "free from commerce" (Brackett 2000, 200). He would have also lamented over the further decline of "serious music" and serious music outlets and most likely held the culture industry responsible.

When addressing popular music and advertising specifically this time, Adorno probably would have reaffirmed and expanded his theories of standardization and pseudo-individualization. He may have argued that the abundance of popular music in advertising confirms that it [popular music] is effective at stimulating the listener's attention and memory for not only the music itself but the advertiser messages. This process, he might have suggested, is facilitated

by the hypnotization of the masses of consumers by popular music's standardization. Furthermore, he might have argued that the pseudo-individualism of the popular music used in the advertising enables the advertiser to target the customer while making them forget that what they are listening to is mass marketed and "predigested" (1941, 25).

On the subject of how and where music becomes popular, Adorno certainly would have argued that the "plugging" of both popular music and advertising on the radio has increased. This, he might have suggested, has been confirmed by the recent actions of radio companies such as Clear Channel, Inc. who have initiated "Less is More" campaigns to reduce some of radio's promotional and commercial clutter. Further proof, he might suggest exists in the fact that not only can popular music be heard in advertising, but advertising can be heard in popular music as witnessed by the advertising technique of product placement in popular music primarily in hip hop and rap music (e.g. "Pass the Courvoisier"- Busta Rhymes). Adorno might have concluded this to be the epitome of "commodity listening."

Adorno's "On Popular Music in Advertising" would certainly have been met with similar and quite possibly even stronger opposition than was the original. Popular musicologists would have attacked Adorno's perpetuation of popular music's "myth of inferiority" (Hamm 1995, 7) and defended all genres of music including rap (Krims 2000, 17). Popular music culturalists would cite literature on the role of popular music in people's lives (Fiske 1992) with especially fans and fandom (Grossberg 1992) as an argument against its standardization. They would also cite studies involving the importance of lyrics as "cultural artifacts" (Freudiger and Almquist 1978, 54) and as "involving" (Larson and Reed 1983, 25) as examples of popular music's individualism. This would no doubt be followed by a discussion of an active, popular music fan far from "the shadow of Adorno's pessimistic account of increasingly manipulated and regressive listeners" (Krims 2003b, 186). Additional support for popular music's empowerment stimulated by its "personal relevance" would most likely lead to a discussion of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and involvement (Zaichkowsky 1994) as counter-explanations to Adorno's theory on why popular music is effective in advertising.

Ironically, most while defending popular music would be more than happy to agree with Adorno's suggestion of advertising as an evil of commerce and the so-called culture industry. Only a small amount of qualified support would come from those who have argued advertising's role in popular culture (Fowles 1996) or suggested that this marriage of art and commerce [popular music and advertising] deserves some respect (Allan 2005).

Conclusion

While popular music clearly does evoke both "celebration and despair," (Negus 1990, 381) this essay was only meant to "celebrate" its versatility and potential by confronting Adorno's cultural theories once again and applying them to the integration of it [popular music] in advertising. It was not meant to provide confirmation to Adorno's writings, nor was it meant to re-ignite counter-condemnation from popular musicologists and culturalists. It was intended to

show that Adorno's cultural theories on popular music can still be applied and debated today over fifty years after the original "On Popular Music" was written. For all his one-sided and untested theories, Adorno appears to have recognized in condemnation some compliment between popular music and advertising.

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