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The Subtle Classism of *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and Our Culture

Industry

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Abstract

This article analyzes the film *Spider-Man: Homecoming* through the lenses of Marxism and “The Culture Industry” as described by social theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. The film vilifies an exploited member of the working class who takes it upon himself to better his situation by operating outside of what is socially acceptable. In making this choice, the narrative then constructs him as an irredeemable antagonist that must be defeated. Peter Parker presents a contrast, as he is also working class. However, he is the exception, with his role as a hero bestowed upon him by billionaire Avenger Tony Stark. The messaging here is that one may only rise above their station if deemed worthy by the owner-class, a rare occurrence. This film acts as a case study used to analyze the implications of messages like this on the world outside of the film. Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that popular culture is manufactured and that to be entertained by popular culture is to agree with the messages presented. This “culture industry” functions to manipulate the masses and keep them satisfied with capitalism even though it exploits them. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a franchise owned by Disney. Disney is a conglomerate with a net worth of over 317 billion dollars. It has a history of exploiting its laborers and increasingly monopolizes both

entertainment and news. Thus, Disney and the film are contemporary real-world examples of the culture industry as presented by Adorno and Horkheimer.

Keywords: Film, Disney, Spider-man, Marvel, Popular Culture, Marxism, Capitalism, Labor, Adorno, Horkheimer

“The Culture Industry”, written by German social philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, describes popular culture as an industry the same as any other business, based on profit rather than creativity and meaningfulness. The industry also focuses on keeping the proletarian masses that consume the media it produces in line. Jon Watts’ *Spider-Man: Homecoming* makes a worthy case study of this approach. The film depicts its villains, Adrian Toomes and his henchmen, as working-class people who address their mistreatment by the upper echelon of society and rise above their station. By no longer playing by the rules ingrained in their society, they are thus villains and the film frames them as violent enough to justify this characterization. The subtle messaging of the film encourages individuals to remain in their place in society rather than attempt to rise above, which is particularly worthy of note when considering how popular the franchise the message comes from is as well as that it is owned by an organization that undeniably commoditizes the entertainment it produces.

In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Adrian Toomes, the film’s main villain, can be easily identified as representative of the proletariat. He’s a blue-collar worker, who works at a small salvage company he owns. The company has been contracted to clean up the city of New York after the Battle of New York that takes place in the earlier film *The Avengers* eight years prior to the rest of the events that occur in the film. Worker alienation is not actually something he has

experienced; he seems to enjoy what he does and has a lot of knowledge in the area, exhibited as he helps one of his workers take apart some alien materials, telling him “You can’t saw through that stuff. These alien bastards are tough, you gotta use the stuff they use” (Watts). Still, Toomes experiences alienation nonetheless; his particular alienation comes not from the work he does, but the fact he is forced away from it. As he and his workers salvage, they are approached by a group of people telling them their department now has jurisdiction over the area, in spite of Toomes’ company’s contract with the City of New York. Avenger and billionaire Tony Stark has partnered with the United States government to create a new government department dedicated to cleaning up superhero-related disasters, leaving Toomes and his crew without jobs. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx writes, “The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in the place of the old ones” (Marx 661). Though the film takes place in both a different time and different version of the world, the bourgeoisie, too, can be identified as not only the wealthy Tony Stark and other Avengers, but the new department Stark created as well. Though they will supposedly be performing the same job of salvaging and disaster-clean-up, there is a clear difference in appearance between Toomes and his crew versus the new “qualified” team. While Toomes’ group literally wears blue-collared jumpsuits, the people at the front of the group taking over wear professional outfits: a dress on the woman, suits and ties on the men, though one wears a hardhat. A clear class division is established visually. The conditions of oppression and struggles are also evidenced in the film. Toomes tells the new group that he spent a lot of money hiring for this job and renting trucks, which was necessary for a job as big as this one.

This spending outside his means would be no issue with the money he would make from his contract that has now been taken from him without warning. He pleads that he and the others have families to provide for; this loss of a job would be a significant blow to all of them and their loved ones. The woman tells him there's nothing she can do, and the man with both the suit and hardhat replies with the callous ignorance of somebody incapable of understanding Toomes' situation, "Maybe next time don't overextend yourself" (Watts). For this, Toomes punches him and finds himself quickly surrounded by guns before one of the members of the new group stops the men and lets him go. Marx writes,

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (Marx 661).

While the oppressor and oppressed exist and oppose one another in the film, the revolution that occurs is a subtle one that largely benefits Toomes, his workers, and their families rather than their former class as a whole. Toomes decides to hold on to what he and his crew have already salvaged: alien technology.

The representation of class division and the working-class, particularly in the film, raises questions regarding how these elements are portrayed outside of this specific film as well as what the reality of these things is, if such a reality can be known at all. In his article "They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation", Dr. Peter Hitchcock of City University of New York writes,

Here it must be said that just as mimesis has dominated aesthetic practice in the cultural mainstream, so it has conditioned the forms of working-class political practice possible. The truth of mimesis is not an accident-it is just that a representation does not coincide with whatever it is purported to represent, so vigilance is necessary to avoid conflation of them (Hitchcock 22).

Representation, particularly of the working-class or proletariat (whether these two are synonymous or not is grounds for a whole other debate), often relies on aesthetic mimicry. It is far less common for members of the working-class to be creating the stories representing them, and so it is up to the storytellers who *are* writing the stories to do so. Because their knowledge is lacking in this area, the representation is done far more in a physical, visual way than with legitimate stories representing their lives. Authors, filmmakers, and other creators are able to observe the hair-styles, the outfits, that which is visible, but the interior worlds of these characters being represented in novels or on screen are often lackluster. This may be applicable to Toomes in the film, who at the start is easily recognizable by his clothes as the working-class. Toomes, however, is the villain of the film, and so there is little time spent learning about his life outside of his work, and eventually, the dangerous black-market technology he builds as well as his conflict with the film's protagonist Peter Parker, otherwise known as Spider-Man. Hitchcock continues,

“Class is not a thing but a relation and one that puts a heavy burden on representation.

For instance, Marx in the chapter on the commodity in *Capital* (vol. 1) struggles to articulate how labor constitutes value. Marx wants to convey how an unseen relation nevertheless constructs a social reality, but then he resists a representational imperative

by pointing to use value's absent presence in exchange... Exchange value substitutes for use value and then measures it by price, using that 'universal' equivalent money.... It is an extremely complex and ingenious approach to the labor theory of value, an approach whose main objective is to get materialists to think beyond the tactile presence of the commodity to labor's integral role in the commodity's potentiality " (Hitchcock 23).

Hitchcock establishes that even Marx could not and did not define class as a thing within itself. Class only exists as it relates to others: who has more and who has less, who performs manual labor in factories and who profits by owning those factories. Marx's approach is abstract rather than focusing on the cheap representation of the working-class that is often utilized in works of fiction. Rather than focus on working-class people in the sense of their physical or personal characteristics, he forces others to consider that without the working-class' labor, the objects available for consumption by the bourgeoisie could not exist. This tactic proves useful in considering the role of the working-class in the capitalist system, after all, Marxism is largely an economic theory, however, it offers little aid in how the working-class ought to be represented in media. No conclusive answer seems to have been discovered since Marx's time either. Hitchcock's article eventually concludes that in regards to representation the "task is still before us" (Hitchcock 30).

Returning to *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, while how the working-class *should* be represented is still unknown, there is a somewhat concrete answer regarding how they *are*. Eight years after the opening scene of the film, Toomes, and his crew are wealthy arms dealers. Using the technology they salvaged, they have created advanced weaponry including a super-suit that allows Toomes to take on the identity of the Vulture. The wealth Toomes has acquired

is displayed when his popular daughter Liz, Peter's crush, throws a party while her parents are out of the house midway through the film. Still, it is only at the end when Peter takes Liz to homecoming and meets her father that he and the audience make the connection. Whether Toomes is corrupted by his wealth or rotten to begin with is up to interpretation. He begins the film quick-to-anger but is still a sympathetic character who cares about his family and was a victim of something truly not his fault. The moment that likely makes the audience lose that sympathy they may have had entirely is when Toomes uses the wrong piece of technology on a colleague, accidentally murders him, and appears unphased. He simply appoints his third in command to the now vacant second spot, as if his fellow workers are all replaceable. Ultimately, Toomes is, of course, defeated by the film's hero, Peter Parker, and incarcerated for his crimes. His daughter Liz is shown at the end deeply upset and this perhaps revives some sympathy for the audience, but ultimately because of his violence and crimes, Toomes is rightfully in jail. Nonetheless, what leads him to this path is the desire to defy and work outside a system that only harms him, and while the members of the audience may not consciously make this connection, the message is still there.

What makes the messaging of this film all the more interesting (or insidious) is the fact that it is owned by a gargantuan global monopoly and conglomerate: Disney. Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry" particularly pertains to this in multiple ways. Disney is undeniably a huge part of popular culture, from the traditional animated films to their more newly acquired franchises like *Star Wars* and, of course, Marvel, to even news networks. When one company controls that much of what messages go to the general populace, those messages *matter*. According to Adorno, "To be entertained means to be in agreement" (Adorno 1042).

Based on what Adorno says, when the \$880.2 million worth of people go to see the film in theaters and find themselves entertained and immersed in the story of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, they are susceptible to its messaging. For Adorno, this goes so far as to be automatically in agreement. This extreme assertion is debatable; such an absolute statement can always be challenged on the grounds that at least one individual could prove it wrong. Enjoying a film while not agreeing with everything it presents is essentially a component of media literacy; Adorno's statement presumes that the masses that consume popular culture are incapable of making this distinction. He presents a dichotomy, arguably a false one: one can be a sheep, in essence, absorbing popular culture and what it purports without question, or one can be intelligent and therefore not enjoy popular culture. While the absoluteness of his statement may render it not entirely correct, it is not without some truth either. When describing "The Culture Industry," academic Arnold Schuetz writes

The culture industry prepares the ground for domination through the application of pressure and manipulation so strong and pervasive that it can be equated with a form of terror. The culture industry overwhelms its victims with such an enormous machine that they feel no longer capable of resisting its message (Schuetz 7).

The assertion here is less the idea that those consuming popular culture are not educated enough to see through its messages, but rather that they experience popular culture, have it pushed upon them with such force, that resistance is futile entirely. This more sympathetic assertion of the working-class almost seems worse: they are not even capable of seeing through the messages of the system if they tried, it is simply too overbearing. While the 'why'

of both theorists differ, the conclusion is ultimately the same. Popular culture dominates and its messages are nearly impossible to escape. Furthermore, Adorno continues,

As employees people are reminded of the rational organization and must fit into it as common sense requires. As customers they are regaled, whether on the screen or in the press, with human interest stories demonstrating freedom of choice and the charm of not belonging to the system. In both cases they remain objects” (Adorno 1044).

The message in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* in relation to the working-class absolutely fits in “the rational organization” that almost exclusively benefits the bourgeoisie. Peter’s uniqueness gives the story its protagonist and its compelling narrative, but ultimately because he is chosen, the message, not choosing to change his life in a way the bourgeoisie does not approve of, he is not representative of the general population. Furthermore, his being chosen actually helps bolster the message it is propagating. The insinuation is this: workers must keep doing what they are supposed to in line with bourgeoisie constructed society and if they are truly special enough, as Peter is, they too will be chosen. They will get to be heroes.

Therefore, if firstly to be entertained is to be in agreement, and secondly, the messages of popular culture often fit into the narrative that benefits the bourgeoisie portrayals of the working-class like those in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* are extremely questionable. Through the subtle suggestion that working-class people like Toomes taking action to change their situations is a negative that leads only to corruption, many people who are indeed in that class will absorb the theme, even if they do not consciously realize it, and not seek to rise above their stations outside of what is considered acceptable or to change the system that has been constructed unfairly. Not only is this an issue broadly, but Disney the company is particularly notorious for

its poor treatment of its low-wage workers. Jobs with Justice, a union's rights organization, reports that the working conditions at Disney parks are extremely poor, especially given how much money Disney makes that could easily be used to improve those conditions, and that employees essentially “sign [their lives] away” and must agree to “work whenever and however long Disney wants.” An employee interviewed by the organization reported working between 40 to 60 hours a week and still being unable to pay her bills. Based on the subtle messaging of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, no matter how appalling the working conditions at Disney, Disney’s employees should not be standing against them or quitting to do something that benefits them more, especially not if that thing operates outside of what is conventionally acceptable to the bourgeoisie, lest these workers become villains.

Furthermore, because Disney owns *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, it and Disney more broadly also function as a perfect case study for the other primary component of the Culture Industry: the commoditization of art. The for-profit motives of Disney as a corporation are easily observable. The trend of making live-action remakes of their classic films while bringing very little new to the table is one noteworthy example of this. The films could hardly be called original, but they are certainly profitable. According to Schuetz in reference to popular culture art forms such as these,

Such art, devoid of its rebellious character, becomes absorbed into the status quo. It is being used by the established system, deprived of its autonomy, and turned into a commodity. This is precisely how culture turns into a culture industry. The industry, not the independent artist, becomes the source of cultural products. (Schuetz 6)

When art becomes an industry rather than something based on creativity and originality, the motivation of the artist shifts from seeking to impact its viewer to simply seeking to profit. Commoditized art not only loses its nature of often challenging structures, be it social or artistic, but it can be used to support the desired social structure of the bourgeoisie. It is no longer art at all, in fact, but rather entertainment produced the same way factory lineups produce the same clothing or device over and over again. Commoditized art can also be recognized even a step further than Schuetz addresses, not only with the lifeless live action remakes of previous hit films that Disney produces, but with the selling of all kinds of different clothing, toys, gadgets, home decor, cereals, theme park experiences, and more via the appeal of the commoditized works that have inundated our culture.

Exactly what is being produced has changed, but the theory of the culture industry is very much applicable to popular culture at present, especially what is put out by Disney the company. *Spider-Man; Homecoming* functions as a perfect case study of how the Culture Industry is intended to keep workers in line. The messages it and several similar films present are often able to both content the films' audiences and simultaneously discourage them from challenging the status quo. These messages benefit a system operated by the bourgeoisie, including Disney's owners and investors. At present, the company is worth over 317 billion dollars. As Disney and other media monopolies continue to acquire the ownership to more franchises and companies, it's unlikely the industry aspect of our culture will slow down, nor the increasingly controlled messaging. Where this will leave us when all major outlets of media promote the same ideas remains to be seen, but it's unlikely to be something Adorno, Horkheimer, or Marx would approve of.

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