Querying Magic as a Critical Pedagogical Activity: Theodor Adorno and the Problem of Authoritarian Irrationalism in the Culture Industry

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Abstract

This essay investigates the resurgence of what the Western Culture Industry refers to as magic—a broad matrix of entertaining activities that range from card tricks, sleight of hand, and theatrical deception. Specifically, this research queries the possibility of these practices as they are aimed as critical educational tools: That is to say, the possibilities of these activities to engage us in activities which allow us to illuminate broader structures of power implicated in our lives. By reading these activities through Theodor Adorno’s concerns about the occult and irrationalism, specifically in his treatise “The Stars Down to Earth,” I argue that it is the reliance on the ongoing tradition of authoritarian irrationalism in magic that poses significant obstacles for critical pedagogues. These obstacles revolve around the tradition of allowing someone (the magician), or something (the culture industry), to define problems to be solved.

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Down to Earth,” I argue that it is the reliance on the ongoing tradition of authoritarian irrationalism in magic that poses significant obstacles for critical pedagogues. These obstacles revolve around the tradition of allowing someone (the magician), or something (the culture industry), to define problems to be solved. Science is an historical and cultural forms of practice rather than the basis for judging it, according to Habermas. This statement, let it be noted, lies somewhere between his original position in the positivist dispute in support of Adorno and subsequent concerns about developing a critical social science.” It also reflects his belief that it is necessary, above all, to buffer the extremes of Marxist and fascist radicalism, never far from the surface, which erupted in West Germany in the form first of the student protest movement and thereafter of the public and governmental response to it. The foregoing is not offered as evidence that Habermas is no longer a Marxian thinker; on the contrary. Theodor Adorno was one of the more important philosophers of the Institute for Social Research, the “Frankfurt School,” which flourished in Weimar Germany. A friend and student of the Viennese composer Alban Berg, Adorno was a musicologist as well. Along with many members of the Institute, he emigrated to the United States during the Nazi era. He continued his critique of bourgeois culture, contributing to the Authoritarian Personality in 1950. He and his friend and collaborator, Max Horkheimer, returned to Frankfurt in 1953 and reestablished the Institute. A chapter in the book entitled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” is the second item of interest to us. The third is “Culture Industry Reconsidered.”