

A Study on the "Entertainment Carnival" Phenomenon From the Perspective of Critical Theory of Cultural Industry

Taking Chinese Variety Show as the Research Object

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of "entertainment carnival" was proposed based on the fact that the contemporary cultural industry has become a social reality, and now it has become one of the most important cultural phenomena in the modern age. The criticism of the cultural industry is an important theoretical part of Adorno's philosophical aesthetics, and the cultural phenomenon of "entertainment carnival" is regarded as one of the important contents in the development of cultural industry globalization. This article will take Chinese variety shows as the analysis object, combined with the critical theory of cultural industry proposed by members of Frankfurt School Adorno and Horkheimer to analyze and study the complicated and complex "entertainment carnival" phenomenon in China, and it's also a probe into the theoretical significance of the critical theory of cultural industry in contemporary Chinese culture.

Keywords: *criticism of cultural industry, entertainment carnival, Chinese variety show*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Entertainment carnival" is not only an organic part of popular culture but also an important feature of contemporary popular culture. From the perspective of the development of Chinese variety shows, since the mid-1990s, with the continuous deepening of the industrialization of media and media technology, the content of variety shows has become increasingly close to the market and ratings, both in form and content. It develops in the direction of entertainment and carnivalization. It can be seen that the proposition of the "entertainment carnival" phenomenon has a profound cultural context. Influenced by the growing development of cultural industry, consumerism, and media technology, it has gradually developed into the result of the continuous alienation of people's desires in today's society. Adorno and Horkheimer once sharply criticized the current phenomenon of cultural industry in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, pointing out that the cultural industry is created for commercial purposes and seems to be integrated with sophisticated art, which has an important theoretical value for the analysis of the phenomenon of "entertainment carnival" in the Chinese variety shows and can bring some more speculative meaning to the present "eyeless viewing", so as to achieve the enlightening significance of the

negative dialectics of Frankfurt School, at the same time, it also responds to the practical significance of Adorno's critical theory of cultural industry in contemporary Chinese society.

II. "ENTERTAINMENT CARNIVAL": THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF CHINESE VARIETY SHOWS

The carnival theory was first proposed by the famous Soviet literary theorist Bakhtin based on cultural reflections on social life in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Carnival, carnival, and carnivalization are the core concepts of his theory. He once expounded on the nationality of the carnival: "In the carnival, people do not stand idly by but live in it, and all people live in it because, from its concept, it is universal. In the process of carnival, there is no other life except itself. People can't avoid it because the carnival has no space boundary. During the carnival, people can only follow its rules, that is, carnival Free and regular life. The carnival has the nature of the universe. This is a special state of the entire world. This is the regeneration and renewal of the world where everyone participates" [1]. From the perspective of universality, the Chinese variety show is for The grand carnival tailor-made by the masses, it seems that people

exist as viewers, in fact, we are also in it, and carnival according to the rules set by it. From the perspective of the carnival's cosmic nature, "entertainment carnival" has a strong ability to tolerate and expand itself. It makes the whole society deeply in the situation it involves. No country can pull away from the state of the carnival. Various contents and forms appear in social life and affect people's lifestyles at the same time. Everyone has entered the prosperous age of carnival. "eyeless viewing" has become a common way of viewing in "entertainment carnival".

Along with the development of communication industrialization and technology, scholars Hu Zhifeng and Zhou Jianxin proposed "Chinese TV has entered a stage where 'products' are the leading factor, and program innovation also revolves around 'products'" [2]. At the moment when the technological level of the communication media has developed by leaps and bounds, the way of disseminating programs is no longer limited to TV, but more borrowed from the Internet. The industrialization and scientific development of communication will inevitably lead to the "productized" survival state of variety shows. Judging from the purpose of "productized" variety shows, all types of variety shows are aimed at entertaining the public, thereby improving the ratings of the show. The means of entertainment is not simply to satisfy the viewer's viewing pleasure but to mobilize the viewer's emotions by this means. Judging from the recent reality TV show *Longing for Life*, the guests who appear to bring joy to the audience by showing the anecdotes of the star's life, there is no lack of sensational and moving plot design; then the star talk show that has emerged in the past two years *Roast* as an example, when the guests expressed their deliberately teasing or even bitter "teasing" on the current hot topic or characters, it brought joy to some audiences and also disgust to others; secondly, in terms of content, the purpose of variety shows is not educational functions but entertainment. The content of the programs does not have any substantive significance, and the reason is that in the wave of consumer society and the picture of the national "entertainment carnival", the entertainment industry has become a leading industry with much faster profits and higher returns, and educational variety shows no longer commercial value in this picture so that the ultimate purpose of China's variety shows now lies in comprehensive entertainment and industrialization. Moreover, from the viewpoint of production, similar phenomena of various variety shows are very common, from the naming of the title of the program to the setting of the content of the program, all the products with commercial attributes are produced from the assembly line factories of the cultural industry. What's more, from the perspective of its operation model, any variety show has commercial cooperation with advertisements and enterprises and uses the popularity

and high ratings of stars to promote commercial products and entice consumers to pay for it. Obtaining commercial benefits nakedly embodies the true purpose of "productized" variety shows, in addition, variety shows not only involve commercial cooperation such as advertising and promotion completed with enterprises but also rely on powerful communication methods and public relations teams. Many variety shows in China are not hesitating to create events and use the Internet era of information explosion to increase the popularity and ratings of the show, constantly building focus in the Internet space.

III. BUSINESS COLLUSION: DEHUMANIZED SPIRITUAL GOODS

The social criticism theory proposed by the Frankfurt School has important research significance for the current social analysis. "The school takes social philosophy as the main research direction and proposes a 'social critical theory' as a weapon for analyzing contemporary capitalist society, criticizing its alienation and anti-human nature" [3]. Culture becomes a technology in the continuous development of media communication. The development of the trend of commercialization and commodification was eventually controlled by capitalism, and it continued to become a tool for the bourgeoisie to profit. As a member of the Frankfurt School, Adorno's thoughts have strongly distinctive characteristics of the times. Under the background of cultural industry production under high-strength control of capitalism, he was a philosophy with a fierce critical position on the cultural industry Home and esthetician. In his article *Rethinking Cultural Industry*, he put forward: "The cultural industry melts ancient and familiar things into a new quality. In all branches, those specifically produced for mass consumption and to a large extent determines the type of consumer products, more or less prepared according to plan. The branches of the cultural industry are structurally similar or at least adapt to each other, they combine themselves into one seamless system. The reason why this situation is possible is because of the power of contemporary technology and the concentration of economy and administration." [4]

Behind the cultural industry, there is a set of seamless business rules for the production of commodities. By fully exploring and using public needs, relevant products are concocted according to the plan. The contemporary Internet communication technology and the operation mode of the consumer society make the cultural industry The situation becomes reality. Variety shows in the context of mass media are mainly produced in the form of mass culture and practice. It is undoubtedly one of the products of the cultural industry. Reality shows, drafts, talk shows, debates, interviews, speed dating, outdoor competitions,

etc. The purpose of all variety shows is to achieve a collusive relationship with business through the production and communication mechanism of the cultural industry, thereby inducing the public to blindly follow and recognize it. The cultural values of the society consume the public's attention and precious time with meaningless and non-social value content, so as to realize the entertainment of the program effect and so that increase the ratings. The fundamental purpose of variety shows is to pursue interests. Behind the appearance of the entertainment, the carnival is all kinds of calculations that collude with business. Viewing rate is one of their calculations of profit. A high rate means high traffic, and also means high business value. In addition, the advertising of variety shows is also a manifestation of great commercial value. As one of the products of the cultural industry, variety shows are produced in accordance with standards that achieve a high degree of commercial value. These so-called variety shows aimed at bringing joy to the public are behind a set of pipelines developed in cooperation with business. Produced by the production mechanism, and the combination of contemporary communication technology, business, and politics, consumers are integrated to create products with consumer nature in exchange for the exchange value of their commodities. "Dehumanization" is thus formed in the seamless structure of the cultural industry. Consumers are no longer the so-called gods. In the cultural industry colluding with business, they have shifted from the subject position to the object position. The various entertainment and carnival effects presented by variety shows are illusions, and the truth behind them is the face of collusion between variety shows and businesses. They control and dominate the ideology of the public and guide the generation of commodity fetishism. Variety shows operate in the same way as Adorno mentioned in his article *How to View TV?* — "The strict institutionalization makes modern popular culture a medium that can control people's psychology. The repetitiveness, identity, and universality of popular culture make it easy for people to react automatically, thus weakening their resistance ability"[5]. People have lost their individuality and self-awareness in the variety show of "Entertainment Carnival", and their resistance to the dehumanized spiritual goods even enjoyed it. They are willing to share the commercial with time and money. The important feature of "eyeless viewing" in "entertainment carnival", people's critical consciousness and negativity have gradually become numb in pleasure-filled variety shows, and hedonism also breeds on this basis. Variety shows, as a dehumanized spiritual commodities, have become the spiritual provision of many "one-sided people".

IV. DAMAGING OUTCOME: THE FORCIBLE CONVERGENCE OF SOPHISTICATED ART AND POPULAR ART

The various types of variety shows, regardless of their expression form or content level, are integrated with the cultural phenomena that appear in society, also include a lot of art categories, so the phenomenon of "entertainment carnival" is not just a cultural category but also belongs to the artistic category. When Adorno criticized the cultural industry, he also mentioned the relationship between the cultural industry and modern art. He wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*: "In terms of the degree to which art meets the existing needs of society, it has largely become a profit-seeking business. As a business, as long as art can be profitable, as long as its elegant and peaceful functions can deceive people into believing that art still exists, it will continue to exist. The seemingly prosperous types of art and art reproduction are like traditional opera. In the same way, in fact, it has long since decayed and lost meaning, but the official cultural view ignores this fact"[6]. In the vortex of the consumer society, human needs and desires are also continuously constructed in an exponential function. The realization of the satisfaction of social needs means profit, and modern art also cannot escape the erosion of the cultural industry in such a situation. While catering to the needs of society, it has absorbed the streamlined production model of the cultural industry to attract more audiences and meet more needs, it can deceive the public through false means and make it believe that modern art still exists. In fact, this kind of art has already become a product of mechanical reproduction, and the spirit has long ceased to exist. Take the recently popular talent variety show *Super-Vocal* as an example, it gathers 36 high-caliber students from major music universities as contestants and invites famous domestic singer Liao Changyong and other celebrities to serve as judges, through competitive singing. The competition is conducted in a way that the selected songs are mainly classical music or opera fragments. The program *Super-Vocal* has been widely praised by the public for its purpose of promoting the improvement of the status of classic music in contemporary art. Such a slogan of "art for art" was naturally born among the public, but when the public in order to pursue the high-quality effects and preemptive viewing of the show and competing for the pseudo-Dolby effect and the membership system to pay, it sacrifices its connotation under the banner of "art for art". The show deceives the audience into believing that the commercial imprint of sophisticated art still exists. Through this repetition, the similarity phenomenon of variety shows in the pursuit of interests has occurred frequently in the commercialization process. For example, with the appearance of the show variety show *Happy Girl*, *Super Girl* and *Happy Boy* have been produced one after another, once a variety

show becomes the focus of attention in the public domain, similar products will be produced in batches on the assembly line of the cultural industry to obtain commercial benefits. Such equalized variety shows which explained the repeated imitation caused by the popular culture of cultural industry production and industrialized mechanical means obliterated the creative personality of the producers, and fundamentally suppressed the creative freedom and personality.

In addition, Adorno also mentioned that "the cultural industry has ulterior motives to integrate its consumers from above. It has forcibly brought together the fields of sophisticated art and popular art that have been separated for thousands of years and so that cause damaging outcome for both sides. The seriousness of sophisticated art is destroyed by the speculative pursuit of its effect; the seriousness of popular art disappears due to the civilized control imposed on its inherent rebelliousness"[7]. Under the influence of the cultural industry, Chinese variety shows have the phenomenon of forcibly converging elegant art and popular art. In fact, it is a practice of losing both sides. It directly leads to the blurring of the boundary between the self-discipline of sophisticated art and the heteronomy of popular art. To further expand the consumer audience, the two are forcibly aggregated to attract more viewers. The influence of commodification is no longer self-discipline, and the otherness of popular art triggers the conflict with the seriousness of sophisticated art. Take the single-phase program that forcibly aggregates classical music and popular music in Super-vocal as an example. Pop music and traditional opera music are forcibly patched and aggregated. Such a combination for traditional opera has undoubtedly castrated the function of rebelling against society and even redeeming society, even turning to the collusion with business; for pop music, its own heteronomy is affected by the seriousness of opera music, and no longer has its own rebelliousness. It is not difficult to see that art has fallen into a dilemma of antinomy. Adorno believes that art gradually loses its salvation significance in the erosion of the cultural industry and actively leans on the cultural industry, but art must act as its negation, criticism, and the mission of salvation. Under such a development trend, sophisticated art will inevitably lose its own unique self-discipline and salvation significance, and the real art survival crisis is highlighted here.

V. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of "entertainment carnival" prevailed in the wave of Chinese consumer society and communication society, which is one of the products under the critical theory of the cultural industry proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer. Under the phenomenon of "entertainment and revelry" led by variety shows, the fusion of elegant art and popular art

has caused serious damage to the redemptive function of art and has even become a tool for the manipulation of commercial interests, which has further led to the gradual loss of people's critical awareness and the ability to deny under the operation of the cultural industry. The viewer must always maintain a vigilant attitude towards the cultural industry and must face the turbulent cultural industry with a "sighted look" so that the spirit of denial and criticism by the public can be reawakened in order to have redemption in the true sense. The art of function brings the dawn of hope. But I have to say that the criticism of the cultural industry proposed by Adorno is a bit over negative. In the continuous development of contemporary Chinese society, the accompanying pressure among human beings has also invisibly promoted the development of "entertainment carnival". The solace and adjustment effect brought by it is also increasing day by day. The form and meaning of literature and art are also fragmented in the postmodern context. Variety shows are no longer the object of intense criticism by Adorno's cultural industry, but medicine to compensate for social-psychological pressure. Even so, as an observer, we must remain vigilant and avoid falling into the business trap of the cultural industry, which can lead to the loss of your subjectivity.

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