The chapter on the cultural industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is without a doubt one of the most influential texts in the history of film, media, and cultural studies, albeit as a kind of negative horizon against which these new disciplines could emerge. Although the pessimism, rigidity, and totalizing character of its argumentation has given occasion for corrections and differentiations, the issues addressed by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer continue to reappear in these disciplines in ever new forms. In fact, historicizing the many turns back to this text and inquiring about its future potential within the respective fields would probably demand a study of its own. The aim of this text is somewhat different as it reaches beyond the specialized interests of film, media, and cultural studies, and focuses instead on just a few, though quite fundamental, questions within the broad debate on the current relevance of the “idea of the culture industry.”

In order to identify these questions, we first need to reach past Adorno and Horkheimer all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville, who offered the earliest theory of the culture industry (Part I). His book *Democracy in America* centers on his claim that democracy is endangered by distorted versions of the value of equality so crucial to democracy: homogeneity and conformism, averageness, and mediocrity threaten to hollow out the life of democracies from within. Tocqueville offers various different, not entirely compatible interpretations of this problem (see Rebentisch and Trautmann 2017) – one of which would have a significant influence on the analysis of the idea of the culture industry in the first half of the twentieth century. He presents a political critique of commodified [ökonomisierte] culture, of how it transforms the nature of production, consumption, and products themselves, as well as of their ethical and political implications. Following this critique, one must distinguish between two different lines of argumentation. Whereas the first tends to associate the culture industry with mass culture, contrasting both with art (Part II), the second regards the idea of the culture industry as enabling a critical perspective within an investigation of mass culture; it does not reject mass culture out of hand but defends it for all its ambivalences (Part III). If the concept of the culture industry is not equated with the concept of mass culture, but rather indicates certain problems within mass culture, this concept proves fruitful even today, just as the analyses of Adorno and Horkheimer prove, despite their historical nature, extraordinarily prescient (Parts IV and V).

**Tocqueville’s Early Theory of the Culture Industry**

In the chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that deals with the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer confirm explicitly Tocqueville’s diagnosis of a democratic “tyranny of
the majority,” which does not suppress the body, but rather encourages a conformism of the mind. They claim that this diagnosis “has in the meantime proved wholly accurate” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 133). “Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything” (Ibid: 120) is one of the more well-known formulations in this connection. Tocqueville’s description of artistic productions in early democratic American mass culture does, in fact, anticipate aspects that would also come to dominate Adorno and Horkheimer’s claims about the late-capitalist culture industry over one hundred years later. If Tocqueville’s book Democracy in America indeed contains, as Claus Offe put it, a “surprisingly developed theory of a ‘culture industry’” (Offe 2005: 27), this is especially true for his descriptions of how the democratization and marketization of culture could combine in such a way as to impinge on the cultivation of differences so crucial to democratic life.

According to Tocqueville, the possibility of social mobility in democracies causes the production of culture to become interwoven with commercial interests. In democracies, many people are wealthier than their ancestors, which, in turn, usually means that they also have a disproportionately greater number of desires and thus long for goods they cannot afford (see Tocqueville 2010: 791). Although people in all societies desire to be more and different from what they are in reality, the social mobility characteristic of democratic societies adds a new facet to this problem: the “hypocrisy of luxury” (Ibid: 793). This is precisely the problem to which low-cost production is the answer, and, as Tocqueville points out, it solves this problem by developing “better, shorter and more skillful means of producing,” as well as the large-scale production of commodities of lesser value.

Tocqueville goes on to say that this same dynamic also takes hold of artistic production: while aristocrats, with their traditional penchant for the consummate products of the fine arts, become impoverished, the up-and-coming democrats, whose inclination for the arts is just awakening, have not yet become rich. Although there are more consumers of culture, the number of “very rich and very refined consumers” (Ibid: 793–794) dwindles. Therefore, Tocqueville surmises that in the long run the cultural sphere will also see a greater number of lower-quality works. Grand and unique works of art will come to be replaced by smaller, more easily reproducible forms: “In aristocracies you do a few great paintings, and, in democratic countries, a multitude of small pictures. In the first, you raise bronze statues, and, in the second, you cast plaster statues” (Ibid: 794). Whether this hierarchy of large versus small paintings and bronze versus plaster sculptures is convincing or not is a question we will have to put aside.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of Tocqueville’s aristocratic blindness to the originality of the new, democratic arts, he develops a particularly strong sense for the reshaping of culture along market lines, which became ever more apparent in his day. Ignoring the democratic arts’ interest in the ordinary and the everyday, previously excluded from the aesthetic sphere, he notes, for instance, that the new dynamic of distinction with its monotonous expressions of difference does not revive the democratic spirit but restricts it. Not only do individuals remain attached to the value system characteristic of aristocratic culture, but distinction and the imitation of others’ successful distinctions also lead to the rapprochement of the various classes previously locked in an unchanging hierarchy, but only by making their remaining differences all the more apparent (Ibid: 773). Equality itself therefore not only “induces a desire for ever more equality” but also evokes that “even the smallest difference becomes the greatest annoyance” (Offe 2005: 20) – a dynamic that came to be known in the social sciences as the “Tocqueville paradox.” Finally, as Tocqueville shows with reference to literature, the commodification of the democratic lifeworld causes a fundamental shift in the function of art. Even for aristocrats, who in democracies no longer enjoy the privilege of unrestrictedly busying themselves with the arts, there is less and less time to read. Reading thus becomes a matter of instant gratification, a “temporary and necessary relaxation amid the serious work of life” (Tocqueville 2010: 808).
According to Tocqueville, the fact that writers must cope with the new economy of time and the accompanying need for rapid consumption points to a much more fundamental dependence. He argues that because democrats disregard tradition and refuse to be bound by its rules, the sole basis for the legitimacy of a literary work is the recognition of the “incoherent and agitated multitude” from which the authors emerge and to which they succumb (Ibid: 808). For Tocqueville, this is one of the major symptoms of what he calls the “tyranny of the majority”: “No writer, no matter how famous, can escape this obligation to heap praise upon his fellow citizens” (Ibid: 419). Although Tocqueville fails to mention literary critique, which struggles to find criteria for distinguishing democratic culture from aristocratic standards of artistic quality, his aristocratic blindness to the innovations of democratic culture corresponds to his particularly sharp eye for the crucial role played by consumption and sale in the cultural productions within a democratic society. “Democracy not only makes the taste for letters penetrate the industrial classes, it introduces the industrial spirit into literature.” Writers have become “sellers of ideas” (Ibid) who have subjected themselves to the mass market and, driven by the desire for economic success, pand to the desires of the reading masses. Yet the fact that those who give impulses to the masses are themselves dependent on the masses, at least partially conforming to their ordinary tastes in order to maintain their own extraordinary position, gives rise to the danger – emphasized by Adorno and Horkheimer in the Tocquevillian tradition – that anything incompatible with the taste of the masses will end up being marginalized.

Tocqueville’s critique of early mass culture conveys a radically democratic concern for the life of the democracies in which this culture thrives, but from an aesthetic perspective, it remains largely bound to aristocratic standards. Adorno and Horkheimer, who further develop the theory of the culture industry, transform Tocqueville’s contrast between aristocratic art and democratic mass culture into a contrast between art that emancipates and a culture industry that merely affirms existing social relations.

**Art and the Culture Industry**

In order to understand the idea of the culture industry, especially as it appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it must be contrasted to the concept of art. Such a contrast, which is also crucial to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, is particularly important given that art and the products of the culture industry share a certain detachment from the so-called “seriousness of life.” The difference between the two therefore depends on how we articulate this detachment. As Adorno notes in his essay “Is Art Lighthearted?” there is a “measure of truth” in Schiller’s “platitude about art’s lightheartedness” (Adorno 1992: 248). According to Adorno, however, the inkling of truth in Schiller’s famous verse, “life is serious, art is cheerful” – to be found at the end of the prologue to his play *Wallenstein* – lies in the structure of art as art. Art embodies something like “freedom in the midst of unfreedom” (Ibid) for its existence does not immediately serve the aim of self-preservation. Herein lies for Adorno art’s promise of happiness, as it points beyond the existing society. Furthermore, art always deals with appearances, with an “as if,” with the playfulness that elevates art above social reality with all its consequences and its seriousness.

Nevertheless, there is no question that art, like the products of the culture industry, is a part of the late-capitalist society from which it emerges. Where cultural production imagines itself as the playful counterpart to serious society, it in fact becomes a compensatory “shot in the arm” (Ibid). It thus distorts our perspective on the real political transformation of society. The normative consequence in Adorno’s eyes is that the products of the culture industry cease to be art in the true sense of the term and instead become cultural commodities. He believes that as long as art does not take up a critical stance