Chapter 13
The Ends of Culture; or, Late Modernism, Redux

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This essay takes up what might appear at first glance to be a quite disparate group of texts, first published over the course of more than half a century and dealing with a range of different media: Theodor Adorno’s World War II-era interventions, Minima Moralia (1951) and Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947), the latter coauthored with Max Horkheimer; Rem Koolhaas’ Delirious New York (1978); Serge Guilbaut’s How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (1983); Michael Denning’s The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (1996); and the Tim Robbins directed film The Cradle will Rock (1999). What unifies these texts are the insights each provides into the cultural formation Fredric Jameson names “late modernism,” a kind of black box mediator out of which ultimately will emerge both the 1960s countercultures and a later postmodernism. However, more than just shedding light upon a crucial moment of US and global cultural history—roughly, to draw upon the periodization offered by Guilbaut, the years between 1935 and 1948—these works raise an additional question: What is the value of returning to the historical formation of “late modernism” once again in our postcontemporary present?

In the short essay “Baby with the bath-water,” which is part of his great experiment in aphoristic thinking, Minima Moralia, Adorno examines “one of the most long-established and central . . . motifs of cultural criticism”:

That of the lie: that culture creates the illusion of a society worthy of man which does not exist; that it conceals the material conditions upon which all human works rise, and that, comforting and lulling, it serves to keep alive the bad economic determination of existence. This is the notion of culture as ideology, which appears at first sight common to both the bourgeois doctrine of violence and its adversary, to Nietzsche and Marx.

Adorno suggests that such a sweeping dismissal of all cultural work as ideological has “a suspicious tendency to become itself ideology,” quickly
devolving into the instrumental thinking, *resentment*, and even “barbarism” of the “business mentality.” Such a criticism thus throws out “with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition.” Adorno goes on: “Since Utopia was set aside and the unity of theory and practice demanded, we have become all too practical” (44). It is precisely such a “practicality” that Adorno argues in his materialist reprise of the Kantian notion of the aesthetic (more on this in one moment) “authentic” culture rejects: indeed, culture remains one of the few spaces of real freedom, or as I will suggest of authentic *play*, left available in our world. Adorno thus concludes: “That culture so far has failed is no justification for furthering its failure, by strewing the store of good flour on the spilt beer like the girl in the fairy tale” (44).

That such a “practicality” has begun to infect even the world of culture itself is made evident both in an earlier aphorism in *Minima Moralia*—“Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse” (25)—and in the extended elaboration of this claim in the infamous “Culture Industry” chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Near the opening of the latter, Horkheimer and Adorno argue:

All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products.  

I cite this passage, as well as the preceding one from *Minima Moralia*, to underscore a simple point, one too often missed in discussions of this landmark essay: Horkheimer and Adorno are not talking about new media technologies, “films and radio”; nor are they, as Jameson argues, offering a “theory of culture.” Nor, as will be at the center of much of later cultural studies work, are they even focused on audience reception and consumption. (Similarly, as I will suggest a bit later, *The Cradle Will Rock* does not, as some overly hasty commentaries have suggested, offer a retrograde attack on abstraction and modernism per se.) Instead, their focus remains throughout the essay squarely upon a then increasingly unified and centralized *industry*, a business system of production and distribution centered in the United States whose necessary subordination of all other ends to profit has dramatic effects on the nature of its products. The importance of their essay lies in the fact that it is one of the first to take the power of this industry seriously, and to recognize *avant le lettre* the crucial role that it will play in what has been called “Americanization,” the spread of US hegemony throughout Europe.