The Culture Industry and Transformation
of the Value of Hope

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In this paper I point to the degraded value of hope in the contemporary digital world and discuss the dangers of this transformation. Hope constitutes one of the basic drives that sustains vitality in the human species. Especially contemporary philosophers such as Hume, Kant, and Bloch, among others, consider hope from a philosophical perspective and despite their differences, they agree on the overall importance of hope as one of the fundamental motivations of humans towards a future life that makes striving possible. However, in the contemporary world, starting with the film industry as Adorno and Horkheimer stated, and later advanced by social media practices, hope becomes solely a hope of fame. This desire for fame is such that, as Baudrillard anticipated before the widespread use of the internet and the emergence of social media, a panoptical system is no longer required as people share their private life publicly, 'hoping' that they gain more followers, likes and attention. People exhibit 'glamorous', 'beautiful', and 'delicious' moments that constrain hope to one dimension and disconnect it from reality. From these points, I argue that what the contemporary world presents is a passive, negative hope that marks the loss of hope which should be productive and transformative.

Keywords: hope, culture industry, social media, internet, Bloch, Adorno, Fromm

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Introduction

Hope hardly presents a unique, systematic philosophical study throughout the history of philosophy, and one may say that it is only after the 17th century that it becomes a significant subject. It is partly because hope has also negative denotations such as empty expectation.

One may find only a few sentences that imply the importance of hope in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The first significant accounts of hope appear in theology, in Christian philosophers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who mainly consider hope as a constituent of faith and point to its central position in religious belief. Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, though they have nuanced approaches, take hope as a passion of the mind, a capacity that has the power to determine the psychological, social/political spheres of human life. The main conceptions of their age consider hope as a pleasure of the mind and/or a form of thinking. Therefore, by the 17th century onwards, the renewed interest in hope has psychological characteristics rather than theological ones.[1]

I must also mention Immanuel Kant who brings hope to a serious and respectable position, and states hope as one of the central subjects in his philosophy. As is well known, Kant asks three main questions that determine transcendental philosophy, which are, "What can I know?," "What should I do?" and "What I may hope?".[2] One may find accounts of hope in *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of the Power of Judgement* concerning epistemology and aesthetic judgments, which extends to moral philosophy,[3] which, in turn, also has political repercussions, as one may also hope for a moral political sphere, a perpetual peace, a cosmopolitan future. Though Kant's account affects philosophers after him, it was the 20th century philosopher, Ernst Bloch, who shapes the contemporary interpretations of hope with his extensive three-volume study published in the se-cond half of the 1950s, entitled *The Principle of Hope* (*Das*

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[1] For a detailed account see Claudia Bloeser, Titus Stahl, "Hope," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/ (accessed: 04.04.2020).

[2] Kant adds a fourth and overarching question to these and asks, "What is human?"

[3] For a detailed account see Deryck Beyleveld, Paul Ziche, "Towards a Kantian Phenomenology of Hope," *Ethic Theory Moral Practice* 2015, no. 18: 927–942, DOI: 10.1007/s10677-015-9564-x.

Prinzip Hoffnung). In his *magnum opus* Bloch considers hope from ontological, political, ethical, and psychological angles, and holds hope as a basis of progressive political theory. Bloch rightly values political hope as a vital component of political change towards a better future. In that, his ideas cross paths with Kant's ethical and political philosophy.[4]

Hope and the culture industry

Hope is a constituent of basic human affects that sustains vitality in human species. In that sense, hope has an ontological status as one of the elements that makes us humans. Hope means the future, expecting something in the future and imagining a future. In their detailed examination of hope, Miceli and Castelfranchi rightly state, "if there is no possible anticipation of a better future, no meaningful future, there is little reason to live as well."[5] Despite the differences in approaches, one may agree on the overall importance of hope as one of the fundamental motivations of humans towards a future that makes striving possible. Hope also has a strong political content, and therefore "hope is a decisive element in any attempt to bring about social change in the direction of greater aliveness, awareness and reason."[6]

Nevertheless, despite its importance in human life and in the political sphere, hope in the contemporary world has been losing its positive enunciations. The main role in this devaluation belongs to the culture industry.

When Adorno and Horkheimer write "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in 1944, the culture industry has less media than it has today. With the rapid growth of technology, the film industry, printed media, television, and for a couple of decades now, internet and social media become strong components of the culture industry. Additionally, as the media is omnipresent

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[4] See Ivan Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries: Locating Utopian Messianism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 125.

[5] Maria Miceli, Cristiano Castelfranchi, "Hope: The Power of Wish and Possibility," *Theory & Psychology* 20, no: 2 (2010): 270, DOI:10.1177/0959354309354393

[6] Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1968), 6.

through the internet and portable devices, the effects of the culture industry become severer.

Adorno and Horkheimer have already indicated the transformation of hope. Focusing especially on the film industry, they signify that it creates an illusion and reduces hope to the hope of a glittering life.[7] Transformation of hope represents one of the several dangers of the culture industry, and it is one of the gravest. How the culture industry executes this illusion requires elaborate examination including psychological aspects of identification processes, yet it is evident that it manages to do so. Here I must note that I do not consider the culture industry from a strict deterministic point of view, as some scholars criticize it. The culture industry does not directly determine the ways humans act and think, yet one must be naïve, as Adorno points out, not to see the effects of it. Therefore, it requires serious study.[8]

How does the culture industry reduce hope to the hope of being famous, getting rich and having a glittering life? In the products of the film industry, people see ordinary lives on the screen, secretaries, kids from suburbs or ghettos whose lives resemble very much the life of the audience; yet a fortunate event transforms the characters, and they walk in evening gowns toward a glittering life. The similarity with the audience becomes the tie that attaches them on the screen. "Now the happy couple on the screen are specimens of the same species as everyone in the audience."[9] The culture industry manages to achieve it "because the film seeks strictly to reproduce the world of everyday perception."[10] Even though people know that the events taking place on the screen are hardly possible – which is, in Adorno and Horkheimer's terms, statistically equal to drawing the winning lot – they cannot help dreaming of it. Indeed, this means leaving one's hopes to chance.

I would like to turn here to Bloch, who indicates that the chances of moving upwards in capitalist stratification is small, yet it manages to create the hope for it,

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[7] Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, "Culture Industry," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 116.

[8] See Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, eds. Jay M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 98–106.

[9] Adorno, Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 116.

[10] Ibidem, 99.

which in turn manages to deceive millions of people.[11] Bloch grounds the tendency in believing in the illusion of a happy ending, with the basic human drive for happiness which, for him, has also been the motor of history. However, once the illusion, the fiction, takes over the human will, and reduces hope to solely a picturesque happy end, it also takes away the reforming power of the will.[12] As he puts it, "If the will-content of the goal is missing, then even the good probable is left undone; if the goal remains, however, then even the improbable can be done or at least made more probable later."[13]

The danger is severer today, as the main source for this hope was once just the screen in the movie theater, but now the screens surround us inescapably. The negative effects of the culture industry grow with the internet and social media, as they are, in certain respects, *omnipresent*, *omnipotent* and *omniscient* through smart phones, computers, tablets, etc. In that, one must especially consider audio-visual material, now named as content, which depicts glittering lives. People exhibit 'glamorous', 'beautiful', 'delicious' moments that constrain hope to one dimension and disconnect it from reality. The desire for glamor is such that, as Baudrillard anticipated[14] before the widespread use of the internet and emergence of social media, a panoptical system is no longer required as people share their private life publicly 'hoping' that they have more followers, likes and attention. Millions of social media users want to be famous on the internet. I select the concept of fame as it also represents 'effortless' richness, as people conceive of it. Especially social media celebrities and influencers reinforce this idea that their finances come effortlessly just by being beautiful/handsome, being great at make-up, at foods, dressing, and travelling etc. People equate being famous with being rich and having a glamourous life. They do not want to be just rich but also visible, recognizable, and famous. Therefore, the value of self, equates itself with the value of being seen. In order to feel worthy, one hopes to be recognized on the internet. As Guy Debord underlines in *The Society of Spectacle*, "The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as

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[11] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 442–443.

[12] Ibidem, 443.

[13] Ibidem, 444.

[14] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).

a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at."[15] The contemporary world works with the motto "what appears is good; what is good appears."[16] Therefore, the majority of the images in social media does not represent the 'ugly' face of reality unless it is related to some news. Therefore, the contemporary world works with images, representations, appearances of life. As Ernst Bloch rightly puts it, in the modern world "the ego changes itself into a commodity, into a saleable, even sparkling commodity."[17] However, as the name industry indicates, the culture industry creates identical commodity-selves out of identical dreams, which destructs personal identities, differences, different choices, and different, variant hopes. In this regard, the hope for fame represents the loss of hope rather than having hope in a transformative, positive sense of the concept.

Real versus Virtual

To understand the current problem of hope, one may understand what it means for humanity. Hope is a personal/individual and social/political concept that imagination generates for not only a personal better future but also a better social, shared future. A person who is deprived of imagining a future becomes a passive agent and attracts hopelessness and unhappiness, as having hopes means the power to create possibilities in life.[18] From this perspective, harmless though it may seem, the hope for fame as the sole hope for millions of people all around the world, is an alarming issue. The hope for fame melts imagination and hopes in an identical pot. Therefore, hope for fame reduces hope to one dimension, which strictly limits creative imagination. Celebrities and/or influencers of social media nourish this reduction. Here I recall Adorno and Horkheimer, who indicate that the film industry archives to create an illusion by creating similarity to reality. Today, especially in social media, the examples do not represent a fictitious story but a real one. New celebrities of social media, influencers, represent a so-called real possibility, an allegedly real story, as they are not the characters of a film but real persons in this very world. It is no longer an extension of reality as Adorno and

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[15] Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), #2.

[16] Ibidem, #12.

[17] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 339.

[18] Miceli, Castelfranchi, "Hope," 251–276.

Horkheimer point out for the film industry; social media represents simulacra in a Baudrillardian sense. Therefore, it is important to notice what social media presents and conceals, as Bourdieu similarly enounces for television.[19] The contemporary world hides what is not glamorous, that is, our real life.

The culture industry demands plurality of passive individuals, those who pin their hopes on the chance of being famous rather than being active, dreaming, hoping powerful agents. They dream of a beautiful house, beautiful clothes, beautiful make-up, or in short, a beautiful appearance. The picture of happiness is composed of these. Nevertheless, it makes people forget that it is only a picture, not happiness itself. The greyer the life gets the more colorful the picture people present.

In his book, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the field of Vision*, Kevin Robins discusses that we live in a world in which there are no longer utopias and dreams about the future. Technological visual culture produces new promises. "Mundane realities and experiences seem to pale in comparison to dreams of virtual life (…)."[20] Robins discusses that the representation of the real is more valuable than the real itself, and the contemporary world provides shelters from the unpleasantness of the real world. Therefore, people prefer the representation of a would-be reality to reality itself. In that, the culture industry deceives those who wants to be deceived, and as Bloch puts it "we know only too well men want to be deceived. However, this is not only because stupid people are in the majority. But because men, born to pleasure, have none, because they are crying out for pleasure".[21]

When the link between hope and reality disappears, hope loses its positive connotations.

Conclusion: The form of hope in the culture industry: passive hope

One of the powers of hope entails protection from desperateness. Active hope brings "a motivating power which is hope specific, and it may be useful

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[19] See Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

[20] Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the field of Vision* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.

[21] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 441.

and adaptive."[22] However, passive hope presents the opposite. Passive hope signifies passive waiting which may even hinder positive motivation for action to a certain extent. One may observe such passive states of hope when the hoped-for is outside of one's control and requires external interventions or chance. As Miceli and Castelfranchi note, "hope may happen to focus on the desired result with no consideration of the possible conditions or plans for obtaining it. The hopeful mind-set may merely consist of positive fantasies about p, figuring it as already realized."[23] Focusing on the final result, hope may either make the agent of hope passive in planning; or by dreaming, having a virtual satisfactory experience "one may feel little need to act for realizing one's fantasy. This is why hope may be devoid of any propulsive role, and be even detrimental, because it remains confined to the status of a dream."[24] Passive hope endorses mere waiting for the hoped-for and may result in some self-deception or inaccurate perception of reality.[25]

As I mentioned earlier, the contemporary world brings about a negative hope that focuses on fame and richness, the realization of which seems to depend on chance, as this represents a rare possibility that is equal to drawing the winning lot, and therefore it exceeds one's capacity to realize the expected results. As Fromm puts it, when the agent does not have the power of realizing his/her own hopes, this could also be considered as hope, "but it is non-hope if it has the quality of passiveness, and 'waiting for' -until the hope becomes, in fact, a cover for resignation, a mere ideology."[26] The culture industry creates passive hopes which have been coined as "alienation of hope."[27] Indeed, they are disguised forms of hopelessness, impotence, despair that arise from the disregard of reality and forcing what is not forceable.[28] In that sense, passive hope does not only harms individuals but also societies, as they lose hope for a better future with positive hopes.

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[22] Miceli, Castelfranchi, "Hope," 266.

[23] Ibidem, 268.

[24] Ibidem, 268.

[25] Ibidem, 269.

[26] Fromm, 6.

[27] I took this term from Erich Fromm.

[28] See, Fromm, 10.

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Streszczenie

Przemysł kulturalny i transformacja wartości nadziei

W artykule przedstawiam zdegradowaną we współczesnym cyfrowym świecie wartość nadziei i omawiam niebezpieczeństwa związane z tą transformacją. Nadzieja stanowi jeden z podstawowych czynników podtrzymujących życie gatunku ludzkiego. Zwłaszcza współcześni filozofowie, tacy jak Hume, Kant, Bloch, rozważają nadzieję z perspektywy filozoficznej i mimo dzielących ich różnic zgadzają się co do ogólnego znaczenia nadziei jako jednej z podstawowych motywacji człowieka do przyszłego życia, umożliwiającej jakiekolwiek dążenie. Jednak we współczesnym świecie, poczynając od przemysłu filmowego, jak stwierdzili Adorno i Horkheimer, a następnie dzięki praktykom mediów społecznościowych, nadzieja staje się wyłącznie nadzieją na sławę. To pragnienie sławy jest tak wielkie, że – jak Baudrillard prognozował przed upowszechnieniem się Internetu i pojawieniem się mediów społecznościowych – system panoptyczny nie jest już potrzebny, ludzie dzielą się bowiem publicznie swoim życiem prywatnym, „mając nadzieję", że zdobędą więcej zwolenników, polubień i zainteresowania. Ludzie pokazują „efektowne", „piękne", „wspaniałe" momenty, które

ograniczają nadzieję do jednego wymiaru i odrywają ją od rzeczywistości. Na podstawie tych argumentów stwierdzam, że współczesny świat prezentuje nadzieję pasywną, negatywną, oznaczającą utratę nadziei, która powinna być konstruktywna i przeobrażająca.

Słowa kluczowe: nadzieja, przemysł kulturalny, media społecznościowe, Internet, Bloch, Adorno, Fromm

Zusammenfassung

Kulturindustrie und die Transformation des Wertes der Hoffnung

Im Artikel stelle ich den degradierten Wert der Hoffnung in der heutigen digitalen Welt vor und erörtere die Gefahren dieser Transformation. Die Hoffnung ist einer der grundlegenden Faktoren, die das Leben der Menschheit aufrechterhalten. Besonders moderne Philosophen wie Hume, Kant, Bloch betrachten die Hoffnung aus einer philosophischen Perspektive und sind sich trotz mancher Unterschiede über die allgemeine Bedeutung der Hoffnung als einer der grundlegenden Motivationen des Menschen für das zukünftige Leben einig, die jedes Streben ermöglicht. In der modernen Welt jedoch, beginnend mit der Filmindustrie, wie Adorno und Horkheimer feststellten, und dann durch Social-Media-Praktiken, wird Hoffnung ausschließlich zu einer Hoffnung auf Ruhm. Dieser Wunsch nach Ruhm ist so groß, dass – wie Baudrillard vor der Verbreitung des Internets und dem Aufkommen der sozialen Medien vorhergesagt hat – das panoptische System nicht mehr nötig ist, denn die Menschen teilen ihr Privatleben öffentlich und „hoffen", mehr Follower, Likes und Interesse zu gewinnen. Die Menschen zeigen „glamouröse", „schöne", „wunderbare" Momente, die die Hoffnung auf eine Dimension beschränken und sie von der Realität lösen. Auf der Grundlage dieser Argumente komme ich zu dem Schluss, dass die moderne Welt eine passive, negative Hoffnung darstellt, die den Verlust der Hoffnung bedeutet, die konstruktiv und transformativ sein sollte.

Schlüsselworte: Hoffnung, Kulturindustrie, soziale Medien, Internet, Bloch, Adorno, Fromm

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