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Tell Me Lies, and Show Me Invisible Images! Adorno's Criticism on Film – Revisited

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For a long time critical theorists have reproduced the thesis that culture, industrially produced, loses the element of critical negativity hidden in its bourgeois affirmative character; insofar it loses the element of dialectics. Instead of freeing the masses, the culture industry delivers mere deception, and cinema is treated as the central sector of that swindle. But it is important to realise that Adorno, the main representative of this thesis, adopts several contradictory positions about cinema. His criticism is focussed on the principle of visualisation: Adorno is an enemy of images interested in invisible images; he is a blind realist outlining the contradiction between representation and meaning, intention and action without intention. Adorno only assumes this double perspective in his later short essays on film. He does not deliver a theory, but offers a theoretical profile somewhere between the approaches of image and language theory. And he himself rejects the claim that the culture industry and mass culture are identical. Rather, the culture industry is as antagonistic as society as a whole; it includes the antidote of its own lie. Insofar popular culture, generally speaking a medium of untruth, is rescued by dialectical thought.