The Frankfurt School

Adorno and pop music
Theories of audience

The Frankfurt School

- Who were they – a group of Jewish academics who fled Hitler’s Germany to America

- They had seen the terrifying effects of Nazi propaganda

- But were also disgusted by the emptiness of American culture
What were the Frankfurt School afraid of?
Frankfurt school: the mass audience

Made a distinction between art and popular culture:

- Popular culture is just business
- Art retains critical possibilities

Function of popular culture:

- To prevent independent thought
- To distract the working classes from the reality of oppression
What would the Frankfurt School say about popular music?

- Audiences enjoy them because they are not offered anything better – years of being subjected to this form of entertainment has dulled the critical faculties of the mass audience.

- Programmes such as pop idol distract the working class mass audience from the realities of oppression and dupe them into thinking that they too can gain material success.
Some quotes:

“….. They (fans of popular music) are childish; their primitivism is not that of the underdeveloped but that of the forcibly retarded.”

from On Popular Music, Theodor Adorno, 1941

Cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1869) also saw differences between what he termed ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture

“The working class…raw and half developed” in contrast to middle class high culture that is “the best that has been thought and said in the world”

from Matthew Arnold (1869)
Examples of the contrast between high and low culture

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Criticisms of the Frankfurt School

- **Mass society theory** – assumes we are all the same

- **Leans on conspiracy** – assumes that the music industry is run by people who intend to maintain the political status quo rather than just get high ratings

- **No place for critical pop culture** – doesn’t allow for the idea that some popular music opposes the status quo

- **No place for critical readings** – doesn’t allow that some of us may come up with our own radical interpretations of music (television)
Pop Idol – some thoughts

- Is it the ultimate manipulation of consumers – or an insightful deconstruction of the music industry for audiences?
- Is it one long advert for new bands and their managers (who often sit on the panel)?
- The pleasure of the collective viewing experience – ‘the water cooler moment’
- Ultimate interactive tv programme – do the audiences have the power to make or break the performers?
- Is there any focus on artistic abilities? Does this matter?
- Is this a superficial treatment of music and stars, or does it enhance the ‘artistic’ performance?
- ACTIVE AUDIENCES or MANIPULATED PASSIVE CONSUMERS?
Pop Idol v Later...

- Manufactured v authentic?
- Mass v niche?
- Low culture v high culture?
- Dance and mime v musicianship?
- Manipulated audience v ‘intellectual’ audience?
Essay

With reference to 3 music television programmes, evaluate how the medium of television provides pleasures for audiences

500 words