

CULTURE INDUSTRY: AN ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE VOICE TV SHOW

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Abstract: This article aims to present an empirical examination of the television show *The Voice of Romania*, revealing a structured interplay between aesthetic presentation, audience manipulation, and ideological reinforcement of the culture industry, as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972). The study argues that the show's format, from blind auditions to live performances, exhibits a consistent pattern of standardization, where musical and performative elements are shaped to fit pre-established norms of entertainment value and marketability.

Key words: cultural industry, television, music, *The Voice*,

1. Introduction

Televised talent competitions have become a defining feature of contemporary popular culture, blending performance, spectacle, and audience participation into a highly commodified entertainment format. Among these, *The Voice of Romania* stands out as a localized adaptation of a global franchise, offering a compelling case study for examining the cultural logic of mass media. This article situates the show within the theoretical framework of the Frankfurt School, particularly drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry, as articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. By analyzing the show's structure, aesthetic choices, and mechanisms of audience engagement, the study explores how *The Voice of Romania* reproduces patterns of standardization, commodification, and ideological reinforcement. Through this lens, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary media formats function as agents of socialization and cultural reproduction in late capitalist societies.

The methodological approach of this study is firmly anchored in the critical-theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School and is based on the interpretive critical analysis of *The Voice of Romania* as a cultural artifact.

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2. Television and the Cultural Industry

The development of television technology was a cumulative endeavor involving numerous inventors during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Moran, 2023). Innovators and corporate entities across various regions of the world engaged in competitive efforts to produce a device that would surpass existing technologies. While many were motivated by the potential for commercial gain, others aspired to transform global communication through advancements in visual and auditory media (Silverstone & Williams, 2004).

The emergence of television sets and television indicated the beginning of a new trend in mass culture. The emblematic figures of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno, emphasize in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) about the birth of television in the context of the emergence of a new form of mass culture that combines sight and hearing. Thus, in their vision, image and narrative are under the dome of an institution that embodies the types of production, texts and reception of cultural industry. The Frankfurt School was instrumental in initiating a systematic and comprehensive critical framework for the analysis of mass communication and culture, laying the foundation for the first coherent theory of the cultural industries within the tradition of critical social theory. Critical theorists (see Herzog 1941, Adorno 1978 [1932]; 1941; 1982; 1989; 1991; Lowenthal 1961, Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) examined mass-mediated cultural artifacts through the lens of industrial production, emphasizing that the outputs of the culture industries share fundamental characteristics with other commodities of mass manufacturing—namely, commodification, standardization, and massification. Building on this foundation, the Frankfurt School's engagement with television can be situated within its broader critique of mass culture and instrumental reason. Adorno, in particular, viewed television as a vehicle for the standardization and commodification of cultural products, which he argued contributed to the passive consumption and ideological conformity of audiences (Kellner, 2003). This perspective aligns with School's overarching concern that cultural industries—television included—serve to reinforce dominant capitalist ideologies by shaping consciousness in ways that inhibit critical reflection and emancipatory praxis (Marcuse, 1964; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Habermas (1981), while diverging from Adorno and Marcuse in his later work, nonetheless acknowledged the role of media in shaping the public sphere. He critiqued the transformation of communicative spaces into arenas dominated by strategic and instrumental communication, where television's commercial imperatives undermine the conditions for rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1981). This concern reflects his broader project of reconstructing the normative foundations of democratic deliberation in the face of media-driven distortions.

Among the empirical engagements with television within the Frankfurt School tradition, Adorno's study stands out for its focused analysis of the textual forms generated by network television and the nature of its audience reception (Kellner, 2003). Figures such as Horkheimer & Adorno (1972), Marcuse (1964), and Habermas (1981) consistently recognized the medium's significance in shaping contemporary social

dynamics. Television was acknowledged as a central cultural apparatus in their broader efforts to formulate a critical theory of society and to interpret emergent socio-political phenomena.

3. Music and Leisure Time

The reception and interpretation of music within mass society are shaped by the structural dynamics of the culture industry, as theorized by Theodor W. Adorno (1991). Popular music, in this context, is not merely entertainment, but a reflection of the repetitive and alienating routines of capitalist life. Adorno (1991: 99) emphasizes that in a society where "there is no difference between a person and their economic fate", individual subjectivity is increasingly subsumed under objective economic conditions. Consequently, music is relegated to the sphere of "leisure time," functioning as a commodified outlet that mirrors and reinforces the systemic constraints of late capitalism.

Viewers of the television program *The Voice* often engage with the show during periods of leisure, seeking emotional gratification and a sense of fulfillment through this mediated entertainment. Despite perceiving themselves as constrained by limited time or broader conditions of unfreedom, individuals consciously choose to watch the program rather than passively consuming (Livingstone, 2005) it as background noise, while engaging in other tasks. This decision reflects a deliberate act of media engagement, wherein the audience asserts agency within the confines of their temporal and social constraints. The constrained nature of individuals' leisure time is explained by Adorno (1991, p. 167) in terms of "truncation of their imagination," which deprives them of the very capacity that once rendered freedom a source of pleasure. In response, individuals turn to the superficial cultural offerings of the culture industry as a means of temporarily distancing themselves from labor. Within the ideological construction of 'free time' lies a rigid bifurcation between the realms of labor and leisure, each conceived as homogeneous and mutually exclusive. This division imposes distinct attitudinal dispositions upon the individual, reinforcing a compartmentalized experience of social life (Adorno, 1994, p. 72). Moreover, the domain of leisure is further constrained by a normative imperative that pleasure is only legitimate insofar as it contributes to instrumental goals such as personal advancement or self-promotion. As Adorno notes, "pleasure itself is permissible only if it serves ultimately some ulterior purpose of success and self-promotion" (1994, p. 74), thereby subordinating enjoyment to the logic of capitalist utility. On the other hand, Herbert Marcuse (1964), a leading figure of the Frankfurt School, argued that leisure under capitalism is not a domain of genuine freedom, but rather a space colonized by what he termed "false needs." Thus, the illusion of autonomy, whether in selecting one TV show instead of another, is embedded in a framework where desires are manufactured and satisfaction is commodified.

Television format developers typically prioritize audience preferences and market demands over considerations of social theory or embedded ideological content (Esser, 2013). Their creative decisions are largely guided by an intent to cater to viewers' emotional and recreational needs, particularly during periods of leisure following daily labor. The central objective is to produce a format that resonates with audiences and

achieves commercial viability. Within this framework, “success” is often defined not by cultural or critical impact, but by the format’s global marketability in the media landscapes.

4. The Reality behind *The Voice* show

The contestants on *The Voice* are aspiring vocalists, sometimes even professional vocalists, who have musical training. They are usually selected through public auditions, which are non-televised. Unlike formats such as *Idols* and *The X Factor*, the selection process used by *The Voice* is significantly more selective in terms of quantity. The producers usually choose a limited group of contestants, ranging from about 100 to 200 people. This selection is based on direct experience, meaning that only those contestants who are considered very good vocally, but also people who have charisma and who “look good on screen”, are chosen, with the aim of increasing the ratings and popularity of the show. Only those selected participants move on to the televised auditions stage, which serves as the initial public presentation of the program.

The first televised stage of *The Voice* is called the “*Blind Auditions*”. In this stage, the four coaches (either alone or in a small team of two), each a distinguished artist known by the public, must evaluate the contestants, based solely on vocal performance. The coaches are seated in chairs facing away from the stage, to eliminate visual influence. Upon hearing a performance, they consider promising, they activate a mechanism that rotates their chair in the direction of the stage, thus indicating their interest in mentoring that contestant. In cases where multiple coaches turn their chairs towards the stage, the contestant is given the freedom to select their preferred mentor. The *Blind Auditions* stage ends once each coach has built their own team, which has a designated number of participants. Subsequently, the coaches who become the competitors’ mentors are meant to be involved in the development of their team members. They work with the contestants to perfect their musical technique, offering advice from their own professional experience; but also, they work on the competitors’ appearance on stage, to create a harmonious image between sound and visual, making it appealing to the spectators.

A critical examination of *The Voice of Romania* reveals that its slogan, “*Only the voice matters*” is applicable primarily to the initial phase of the broadcast, namely the *Blind Auditions*. During this segment, coaches evaluate contestants merely based on vocal performance, without visual cues, thereby ostensibly eliminating biases related to physical appearance, demeanor, or stage presence. At this point, attributes such as shyness, body type, or charisma are rendered irrelevant. The singular criterion for advancement is vocal ability. This format initially conveys a sense of authenticity, suggesting that the coaches’ judgments are based exclusively on auditory perception, unmediated by visual or social preconceptions. However, the broader structure of the show aligns with Theodor Adorno’s (1941; 1991) critique of the culture industry, particularly his notion of standardization in popular music. Despite the blind format, the selection and presentation of contestants reflect a process of normalization, wherein aesthetic and performative traits are subtly regulated to conform to industry

expectations. This standardization functions as both a tool and a product of the culture industry, shaping audience habits and reinforcing predictable modes of listening.

Adorno's (1941, p. 20) observation that "one listens to popular cultural hits without really listening at all" becomes pertinent here. The experience of music within this context lacks genuine intersubjectivity, that is, the dynamic exchange between listener and musical expression. As Sherman (2007) suggests, the breakdown of mediating subjectivity results in a passive consumption of sound, where concentrated listening becomes increasingly rare or even intolerable. Thus, while *The Voice of Romania* initially purports to prioritize vocal authenticity, its underlying mechanisms reflect broader cultural patterns of homogenization and aesthetic simplification.

The selection of contestants in *The Voice of Romania* is fundamentally shaped by a process of standardization, which operates as both a methodological tool and a structural outcome of the culture industry. This standardization reflects a broader tendency toward the normalization of listening practices; whereby musical evaluation becomes aligned with pre-established conventions rather than individual artistic merit. Adorno stated in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972, p. 126) that "the listener's tendency to distraction is not only exploited but required by the structure of the music.", highlighting the passive and routinized nature of auditory engagement within mass-mediated contexts. This phenomenon is indicative of a rupture in what Sherman (2007) refers to as "mediating subjectivity"—the dynamic interpretive space between the listener and the musical work. In the context of *The Voice*, this breakdown manifests as a diminished intersubjective exchange between coach and contestant, wherein musical appreciation is reduced to a set of codified responses, rather than fostering a genuine aesthetic encounter. The show reinforces a system of cultural consumption predicated on familiarity and conformity. Thus, the process by which competitors are chosen reflects not an open-ended search for vocal excellence, but a curated alignment with the sound and performative norms of the culture industry.

The performative disputes among coaches on *The Voice of Romania*, particularly those staged to persuade contestants to join their teams, warrant critical scrutiny regarding their authenticity. While these exchanges are framed as spontaneous and competitive, they are embedded within a broader televisual structure that prioritizes entertainment value (Rose & Wood, 2005). Given that, the coaches are professionally trained musicians with formal backgrounds in music, so that the program ostensibly centers on musical expertise. However, the dramatization of interpersonal dynamics often eclipses this focus, suggesting a shift from artistic evaluation to spectacle. Simon Frith's (2007, p. 188) observes that music is used on television to "aestheticize the reality we see, to ground what we see, to tie a moment to a familiar song... [and] as an ironic commentary on what is seen, to distance viewers from the action and make them feel more knowing". In this case, the musical framing of these verbal confrontations not only enhances their emotional resonance but also positions them within a semi-scripted narrative that blurs the boundaries between reality and performance. In this sense, the coaches' interactions function less as genuine artistic deliberations and more as curated moments designed to sustain viewer engagement, reinforcing the culture industry's tendency to commodify both music and personality.

Following a contestant's performance, viewers often recognize the song being sung, which fosters a sense of familiarity. However, lacking formal musical expertise, audiences rely heavily on the coaches' commentaries to interpret and validate their own perceptions (Michelle, 2009). These commentaries serve not only as objective cues but also as mechanisms of entertainment, offering viewers the illusion of in-depth musical knowledge. In this context, the production strategically manipulates audience perception, crafting moments that simulate authenticity while adhering to a predetermined narrative structure. The reality presented is thus performative rather than spontaneous, reinforcing the scripted nature of the format and the culture industry's broader tendency to commodify experience for viewer gratification (Burditt, 2019).

5. Cultural industry Standardization

Following the *Blind Auditions*, the winning contestants advance to the *Battle Rounds*, a phase in which coaches' pair two members of their teams to perform the same song simultaneously in front of a live studio audience. This staged vocal duel culminates in the coach choosing a single contestant who is eligible for the next round. The other coaches also give their opinion on which contestant deserves to move on to the next round. In addition, the *Battle Rounds* introduce the possibility of "steals", whereby rival coaches can claim a contestant eliminated by their original mentor. If multiple coaches initiate a steal, the contestant is given the freedom to choose between them. Each coach is usually allotted a limited number of steals, reinforcing the strategic dimension of the competition.

Unlike *Blind Auditions*, where vocal quality is ostensibly the only criterion, *Battle Rounds* focus on a broader set of performance attributes, including stage presence, physical expressiveness, and general demeanour. Coaches' assessments increasingly emphasize these visual and emotional elements, often prioritizing attitude over the technical musical qualities of the contestant. This shift raises critical questions about the nature of listening in this phase of the performance. As Sherman (2007) interprets Adorno's theory, contemplative listening is not passive reception but active engagement, rooted in the structural and experiential dimensions of music. In this context, coaches, having trained their contestants, approach their performance with preconceived expectations, shaped by their familiarity with both the song and the performer (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). This dynamic reflects the broader phenomenon of standardized musical experience in mass culture, in which listeners anticipate and recognize familiar patterns without engaging in critical or reflective interpretation. The result is a form of perceptual habituation that, as Adorno (1941) suggests, stifles intersubjective engagement and reduces musical experience to a predictable and emotionally flattened encounter. The *Battle Rounds* thus exemplify how the logic of standardization in the culture industry permeates not only musical production but also modes of listening and evaluation within television performances.

To critically assess the role of taste within the context of *The Voice of Romania*, one must first interrogate the socio-cultural conditions under which taste is constructed and legitimized. Adorno (1991) argues that in the culture industry, acquiescence to

standardized forms is often misrepresented as modesty or discipline, masking a deeper ideological submission to mass-produced norms. Musical analysis, once a site of aesthetic inquiry, has deteriorated into formulaic gestures—its parody found in the mechanical counting of beats, which reflects a broader decline in musical expressivity and interpretive depth. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant when examining the show's progression from *Battle Rounds* to *Knockout Rounds*. In the latter, contestants perform individually selected songs while their opponent observes, and coaches must choose who advances. Although this format appears to offer greater artistic autonomy, it remains embedded within a system that privileges recognizability and conformity. Coaches, having trained their contestants, often anticipate the performance outcomes before they unfold, reinforcing Adorno's claim that musical experience in mass culture is governed by preconditioned expectations rather than genuine aesthetic engagement.

The *Elimination Rounds* further illustrate the tension between individualized artistic expression and the standardized mechanisms of televised competition. While the format ostensibly allows for greater autonomy in song selection, the underlying judging criteria remain shaped by the same cultural logic that Adorno criticizes—one that privileges conformity and superficial markers of musicality over substantial aesthetic engagement.

At first glance, the structure of this phase mirrors the preceding round, with the primary distinction being that contestants now select their own songs. This choice is not merely an act of artistic autonomy, but a strategic maneuver intended to elicit a favorable response from the coach. In this context, music ceases to function as a medium of personal expression and instead operates as a mechanism engineered to produce specific psychological effects on the listener (Witkin, 2004). Popular songs, in particular, tend to convey broadly recognizable meanings and evoke shared emotional experiences, achieved through the interplay of lyrical content and musical arrangement. The strategic selection of such songs serves to influence the coach's perception, shaping their evaluative judgment. If the coach responds positively, emotionally or cognitively, the contestant is more likely to advance to the subsequent stage of the competition.

6. The Winning Ticket of "The Voice"

"Fortune will not smile on all - just on the one who draws the winning ticket or, rather, the one designed to do so by a higher power - usually the entertainment industry itself, which presents itself as ceaselessly in search of talent"

(Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972, p. 57)

In the final stage of the competition, *Live Performance*, the leading contestants from each coach's team perform in a live televised broadcast, competing directly against one another. During this stage, the viewing audience participates by voting to save one contestant per team, while the coach is tasked with selecting an additional contestant to advance, based on the remaining performances. In the subsequent round, the decision-making process is shared equally between the public and the coach, each casting votes

to determine which of the two remaining team members will proceed. Ultimately, each coach is left with one finalist, who performs an original composition in the concluding episode. From these four finalists, one is selected, based on audiences' vote, as the winner of the competition and awarded the title of "*The Voice*."

As Redden (2008: 133) suggests, we can say that *The Voice* show tells the tale of "extraordinary journeys, one to the very end, while the majority return to the generalized public from which they emerged". The structure of the TV show aligns with Adorno and Horkheimer's (1972) critique of the culture industry, which suggests that the elevation of a singular "fortunate" winner, that is framed as an ordinary individual transformed by vocal coaches, serves to reinforce the illusion of accessibility and meritocracy within the entertainment system. The winner is portrayed as having been discovered and refined by authoritative figures in the music industry, thereby legitimizing the industry's gatekeeping role and mystifying the mechanisms through which stardom is conferred (Oyeleye & Gbadegesin, 2020). This process simultaneously affirms to the audience their own inability to discern the elusive and constructed nature of celebrity. The commodification of the "dream of fame" becomes a central ideological tool, sustaining both patriarchal capitalist structures and hegemonic cultural norms (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Through strategic marketing and narrative framing, *The Voice* perpetuates the fantasy of upward mobility while concealing the systemic processes of selection, branding, and standardization that underlie the production of popular music and its stars.

The material rewards offered by *The Voice* show, including substantial cash prizes and access to transformative experiences, are presented with such intensity that they risk overshadowing the competition itself. The audience does not need to be the competition winner to gain a sense of what collective utopian Enlightenment feels like. Perhaps the illusion of Enlightenment and the notion of the *winning ticket* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) are being disposed rest at the feet of the contestants. Typically, finalists receive monetary compensation and a recording contract². These rewards are framed as gateways to professional legitimacy, yet they also reinforce a narrative of escape rather than development. As Redden (2008, p. 141) argues, talent-based television formats such as *The Voice* portray working-class life "not as a site of cultural richness or potential, but as a condition to be transcended". The show thus, perpetuates a neoliberal logic in which personal transformation is equated with upward mobility, and fame operates as both a promise and a mechanism of ideological containment.

Securing the "winning ticket" in *The Voice* undeniably confers celebrity status, although one that is often fleeting and contingent upon continued public visibility (Turner, 2014). While the experience may gesture toward a form of personal or artistic Enlightenment, such transcendence remains elusive within the confines of the culture industry. What is assured, however, is the acquisition of a recording contract—an ostensibly prestigious reward that, in practice, functions as a form of indebtedness to the very system that commodifies artistic labor. This contractual arrangement, often

² often with Universal Music Group, the global label affiliated with The Voice franchise

framed as a gateway to professional legitimacy, mirrors the economic logic of the industry, wherein creative output is subordinated to market imperatives.

In this context, the spectacle of transformation and success serves to obscure the underlying mechanisms of control and standardization. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) argue in their critique of the culture industry, such narratives exemplify "mass deception" wherein the promise of individual distinction is used to reinforce systemic conformity. The illusion of upward mobility and artistic fulfillment masks the reality of cultural production as a tightly regulated and economically driven enterprise.

To this end, the cyclical nature of talent competitions like *The Voice*, introduce with each season a new cohort of candidates, which in this situation reinforces the disposability of cultural labour within the entertainment industry. The rapid turnover of contestants and winners reflects what Adorno (1991) describes as the "pseudo-individualization" of mass-produced culture, where minor variations in presentation conceal the underlying uniformity of the format. This repetition not only sustains audience engagement through the promise of novelty but also ensures that the mechanisms of selection and commodification remain intact and unchallenged.

In conclusion we can argue that *The Voice* TV show exemplifies the culture industry's capacity to absorb and neutralize audience, by potentially transform the subversive artistic voices into palatable commodities for mass consumption.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of *The Voice of Romania* reveals the enduring relevance of Frankfurt School theory in interpreting the dynamics of contemporary media culture. Despite its framing as a celebration of individual talent and democratic participation, the show operates within a tightly controlled structure that privileges marketability, emotional spectacle, and ideological conformity. The mechanisms of pseudo-individualization, audience manipulation, and standardized production underscore the culture industry's capacity to transform artistic expression into consumable entertainment. By applying Adorno and Horkheimer's critical lens to a modern television format, this study highlights the subtle ways in which mass-mediated culture continues to shape public consciousness and reinforce dominant social logics. Ultimately, the findings invite further reflection on the role of media in constructing cultural meaning and the possibilities for resistance within commodified cultural spaces.

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