Response to Art versus Commerce as a Macromarketing Theme

Alan Bradshaw, Pierre McDonagh, and David Marshall

The authors respond to Holbrook’s (2005) art-versus-commerce article by suggesting that a deeper understanding can be found away from semiotic analyses of hackneyed cinematic cliches. Instead, they encourage a historically and empirically grounded understanding of the often complex and dialectical relationship of art and commerce and consider the macro implications.

Keywords: musicians; art; commerce; Adorno; culture industry

For Holbrook (2005), the familiar narrative of art versus commerce as played out by the ever self-destructive star in the “man-with-a-horn film genre” is an axiological theme of great importance to macromarketing. To more cynical observers, the melodrama of Spike Lee standing in the rain pronouncing “your horn stands for something important, Bleek!”, as featured in the film analyzed by Holbrook, *Mo' Better Blues*, is the sort of hackneyed cliche they love to satirize. Reduced to this simply stated dualism of “art versus commerce” as dramatized in well-worn cinematic narratives, the possibility of considering a more realistic way in which musicians experience this problematic becomes marginal. Rather like how McGregor’s (1960) X-versus-Y dualism can remain quite a pedestrian understanding of human behavior, the art-versus-commerce dualism, we suggest, is useful inasmuch as it begins a process of unpacking and learning about the complex and dialectical relationship between the two. As an alternative to Holbrook, we seek to historically and theoretically ground the art-versus-commerce dialogue and point to the contributions of empirical research in the area, noting how these approaches problematize the grand narrative celebrated in the “Young-man-with-a-horn” cinematic tradition. In this sense, we seek to build on Holbrook’s contribution and help develop the macromarketing understanding of the art-versus-commerce axiology.

Art versus Commerce—A Historical Inheritance

In terms of understanding why there should be tension between art and commerce it is useful to historically locate this dualism. As those who tracked the development of modern consumerism noted, the explosion of mass consumerism resulted in a concern that consumers were suffering from “epidemical madness” (McCracken 1990, 17), and materialism came to be understood as selfish, meaningless, and non-productive (Firat and Dholakia 1998). The Romantic period that followed the industrial revolution became associated with disenchantment from bourgeoisie values (Campbell 2005). In particular, the field of artistic production became identified as the site whereby romantic ideals might be realized with philosophers such as Rousseau and Schopenhauer emphasizing the importance of music within society. Audiences now approached music expecting a profound aesthetic experience exemplified by the destabilized individual seeking the divine spirit, engaged in endless longing and search for revelation (Johnson 1995). Art was to be experienced emotionally and through deep contemplation and was understood to be transcendent to everyday life and material culture (Kearney and Rasmussen 2001).

As such, Adorno (2002a) considered culture as antithetical to the industrial world; culture is thus a myth that “would like to be higher and more pure, something untouchable which cannot be tailored according to any tactical or technical considerations . . . the manifestation of pure humanity without regard for its functional relationships within society” (p. 108). Naturally, such culture unadministered was an impossibility, and Adorno theorized culture that carried this promise as acting deceptively within a negative dialectic contributing to capitalist hegemony (Adorno and Horkheimer 1998). Framed this way, we can understand this dialectic as entailing music embodying social commentary—as Attali (1985) theorized, music is a battleground to knowledge.

Of course, if music is a battleground, then musicians are located at the front line, and consequently many become integrated into what Campbell (2005) defined as the social em-
bodiment of romantic values—bohemia; “an unconventional and irregular way of life, voluntarily chosen, and frequently involving artistic pursuits, of those Romantics who are self-consciously in revolt against what they see as a utilitarian and philistine society” (p. 195). Therefore, opting for the financial insecurity of professional musicianship can be framed, in some cases, as a lived critique of the bourgeoisie (Grana and Grana 1990; Siegel 1986; Wilson 2000). For bohemians, sacrificing material comforts was a defining aspect of the artistic spirit and for many a decline into poverty, alcoholism, and misadventure ensued on the road to becoming an established artist—best captured in Murger’s Scènes de la vie de bohème and its latter adaptation into Puccini’s La Bohème (Baldick 1961). As Frith and Horne (1987) identified, bohemia acts as a demand for musicians, instructing them to live as a musician and accept antibourgeois values. Where musicians perform nonbohemian acts of labor, it is therefore all the more striking—as Adorno and Eisler (1994) noted that musicians who perform for money often carry the stigma reserved for a prostitute.

**Holbrook’s Contribution**

At this point, we return to Holbrook’s analysis of the “young-man-with-a-horn” genre and see the heroic representation of jazz artists who, echoing Goethe’s Young Werther, soulfully struggle against the dominance of a bourgeois, philistine, administered society too square to understand the symbolic importance of the lone artist’s bohemian struggle. Indeed, Becker’s (1991) research into jazz musicians shows how anticommunal ideologies are a defining aspect of musician communities, leading to contempt for the square non-musicians. This bohemian commitment to the higher ideals of jazz as art perhaps explain the will toward increased sophistication, if not rampant esotericism, that Holbrook notes has defined jazz since the 1940s. Yet was this agenda not always present? For example, the career of the supposedly first jazz musician, Scott Joplin, has been interpreted as a crusade to register his music as high art during the late nineteenth century (Berlin 1994), while Gershwin composed the jazz and classical synthesis Rhapsody in Blue in 1923 (Schwartz 1973).

But let’s reflect here on Holbrook’s contribution and instead of framing a seismic shift as having taken place within jazz at a certain period, we submit that it is more useful to understand jazz as a space where the art-versus-commerce dialogue has continuously played out, juxtaposing the high art of Scott Joplin with the low art of his contemporary minstrels (Berlin 1994), to today where the hugely popular Diana Krall offending the jazz hoi polloi. Instead of understanding these musicians as occupying separate homologies, as Holbrook suggests, we submit that it is more useful to frame them along an Adornian-style dialectic where both commercial and artistic discourses remain inherent. Echoing Campbell (2005), we suggest that commercially and supposedly non-commercially orientated jazz, rather than being regarded as constituting separate homologies, in fact represent a “double” within jazz where apparently conflicting orientations serve to integrate discrete patterns of marketplace ideology into a larger and fundamentally balanced system. As Adorno (2002b) put it, the “difference between ‘serious’ and ‘light’ culture is either eroded or expressly organized and thus incorporated into the almighty totality” (p. 69). For Adorno, this organization represented a fundamental aspect of the schema of mass culture and adds a theoretical macromarketing perspective to the art-versus-commerce narrative explored by Holbrook.

Within empirical studies, we can see how the art-versus-commerce dialectic is often a defining aspect of musicians’ careers, ranging from background musicians in bars to pop stars (Becker 1991; Bradshaw et al. 2005; Cottrell 2004; Kubacki and Croft 2004). As Murger (1990) himself warned, “In artistic struggles it is almost the same as in war, the whole of the glory acquired falls to the leaders”, so too by limiting research to the most famous musicians, or to melodrama as Holbrook has done, we as macromarketers “never lower our glance towards that underground world where the obscure workers are struggling” (p. 47) and fail to acknowledge how the art-versus-commerce clash plays out within a wider spectrum of musical and cultural domains, from pit musicians in Andrew Lloyd Weber productions (Cottrell 2004) to background musicians providing corporate entertainment (Bradshaw et al. 2005). As a result, we miss opportunities for deeper understanding and applying those macro insights to both music and film (such as those provided by Adorno and Eisler 1994; Celeste 2005) and more macro issues. We nonetheless hope that Holbrook has begun to focus increasing interest within this important macromarketing axiology and extend the art-versus-commerce debate beyond jazz to other musical genres and artistic endeavors and to how this dialogue contributes to a schema of mass culture.

**REFERENCES**


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Alan Bradshaw is a lecturer at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom; fax: 00 44 1392 263242; e-mail: a.bradshaw@exeter.ac.uk. His interests include critical theory, theorizing culture, and culturally inclined people within commercial and consumer contexts.

Pierre McDonagh is associate dean for research at the Dublin City University Business School, United Kingdom; fax: 00 44 1392 263242; e-mail: a.bradshaw@exeter.ac.uk. His research interests include critical management and marketing studies, sustainable communication, oppositional communicative acts, the problematization of sustainable consumption, and the representation of market logic.

David Marshall is a senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom; e-mail: marshall@staffmail.ed.ac.uk. His research interests include consumer behavior and marketing, with special interest in food choice, health issues and change, children’s consumption, and consumption in an institutional context.