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Teas, symphonies and the culture industry: unpacking Bridgerton's *musical legacy*

Abstract

This paper re-examines Theodor W Adorno's critique of the culture industry through a close analysis of the musical and aesthetic logic of *Bridgerton* (2020-). Drawing on Adorno's essays 'The radio symphony' (1941) and 'On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening' (1938), it traces how the series reproduces the same mechanisms of standardisation and pseudo-individualisation that characterised radio music in Adorno's time. In *Bridgerton*, orchestral adaptations of popular songs aestheticise repetition, offering the illusion of refinement while diminishing the listener's capacity for critical engagement. Classical music becomes a decorative and affective device, subordinated to narrative function rather than autonomous contemplation. The paper argues that *Bridgerton* exemplifies the persistence of the culture industry's logic: the transformation of art into administered pleasure. By translating Adorno's mid-20th-century concerns into a contemporary televisual context, the analysis reveals how the commodification of listening continues to erode the emancipatory potential of musical experience.

Keywords: Adorno, culture industry, *Bridgerton*, mass culture, musical aesthetics

Introduction: Adorno, exile, and the problem of cultural mediation

When Adorno arrived in the United States in 1938, his philosophical project was already underway but not yet fully developed. Exile did not simply remove him from Europe; it displaced him into the world that would most clearly confirm the truth of his critical theory: the world of commercial mass culture. The United States, with its industrialised media systems, its burgeoning recording industry, and its new technologies of dissemination such as radio, presented Adorno with a living laboratory in which the contradictions of Enlightenment reason became audible. Within this context, his early aesthetic writings developed into what would become one of the most enduring concepts in 20th-century critical theory: the culture industry.

The notion of the culture industry, elaborated with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972 [1944]), designates the system by which culture itself becomes a branch of industrial production. Unlike the earlier idea of "mass culture", which implied a culture created *for* the masses, the "culture industry" describes a culture created *against* them, a mechanism that produces standardised pleasures to sustain social conformity. "Culture today," they wrote, "is infecting everything with sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 94). The cultural commodity is no longer the expression of freedom or individuality but the vehicle through which social domination reproduces itself.

Adorno's encounter with the American media landscape during his exile profoundly shaped this critique. As part of the Princeton Radio Research Project, he was tasked with studying the social effects of radio music, an experience he later described as both illuminating and alienating (Adorno 1945: 211; Hohendahl 1995: 82). The project's empirical emphasis on listener responses stood in stark contrast to Adorno's philosophical concern with the autonomy of art. For him, the attempt to quantify aesthetic experience exemplified the very process he sought to criticise: the transformation of listening from reflective attention into passive adaptation (Adorno 1945: 212). Radio, in this sense, was not merely a technological medium but a symbol of a broader social shift in which even the most intimate acts of reception became administered.

This confrontation with industrialised media provided the empirical grounding for Adorno's lifelong concern with the commodification of musical experience. Across essays such as 'On the fetish character in music and the

regression of listening' (1991 [1938]), *On Popular Music* (1941), and *A Social Critique of Radio Music* (1945), he traced how music's social function changed once it entered the circuits of mechanical reproduction. These works articulate the foundations of what he would later call the "administered world", a social order in which even aesthetic pleasure becomes rationalised and standardised (Adorno 1966: 41).

At the heart of Adorno's analysis lie two mechanisms: standardisation and pseudo-individualisation. Standardisation ensures that cultural products conform to pre-established formulas, while pseudo-individualisation offers minor variations that disguise this underlying sameness. Together, they create the illusion of freedom within a system of constraint: "it keeps the customers in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already pre-digested" (Adorno 1941: 445). The listener's pleasure thus becomes a reflex of recognition rather than a moment of reflection.

These mechanisms, first crystallised in Adorno's studies of radio, continue to structure the logic of contemporary streaming culture. Just as radio compressed symphonic form into the limits of domestic receivers, today's platforms – Spotify, YouTube, and Netflix – compress musical experience into algorithmically managed fragments (Kullick and Petry 2025). Pleasure is quantified through clicks, shares, and playlist placements; affect becomes a measurable commodity.

It is within this historical and theoretical continuum that this paper situates Netflix's *Bridgerton* (2020-). The series, celebrated for its orchestral arrangements of contemporary pop songs by the Vitamin String Quartet and Duomo under the direction of Kris Bowers, transforms modern hits into a baroque spectacle. These musical choices collapse temporal and stylistic boundaries, creating a sonic aesthetic that feels both classical and contemporary, refined and accessible. From an Adornian perspective, *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack exemplifies the contemporary evolution of the culture industry: each arrangement is at once standardised and pseudo-individualised, offering emotional familiarity beneath the guise of distinction.

This paper argues that *Bridgerton*'s score represents the streaming-era perfection of Adorno's concept of the culture industry. It enacts his insights under digital capitalism, where the mechanisms of control have become aesthetic. Each orchestral cover functions as a miniature of the administered

world beautiful, polished, and entirely predictable. Yet within this beauty lies the possibility of critique. For Adorno (1997: 245), art's truth content resides in contradiction: the moment when harmony reveals its own conditions of production.

To develop this argument, the paper proceeds in four movements. Section 1 reconstructs Adorno's theory of the culture industry as it emerged from his American exile, focusing on the transformation of listening under technological mediation. Section 2 applies these concepts to *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack, examining how standardisation, pseudo-individualisation, and the fetish character of music operate within its orchestral pop covers. Section 3 extends Adorno's critique to the question of *administered listening*, comparing *Bridgerton*'s affective pedagogy to Adorno's analysis of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*. Section 4 concludes by situating these dynamics within the broader Adorno-Benjamin debate on aura and reproducibility, considering whether *Bridgerton*'s aesthetic excess might paradoxically disclose a residual potential for critical reflection.

In this way, the paper reads *Bridgerton* not simply as a cultural text but as a site where the historical logic of the culture industry becomes newly audible. By tracing the lineage from radio to streaming, from mechanical reproduction to algorithmic curation, it aims to show how Adorno's critique remains vital for understanding the commodified soundscape of the 21st century.

Adorno in exile: the Princeton Project and the foundations of the culture industry

The very dynamics that structure *Bridgerton*'s musical and visual economy, its reproducible glamour, its calculated diversity, and its algorithmic circulation, were already discernible in the radio systems that Adorno studied during the late 1930s. His engagement with the Princeton Radio Research Project exposed him to the mechanisms through which listening was quantified and administered, turning subjective experience into statistical data. In this encounter, the foundations of the culture industry were laid: a critique of how technological mediation transforms not only how we hear music but also how culture itself becomes organised as a system of production and control.

His exposure to the mass media environment of the United States compelled him to confront the social function of art under conditions of industrial modernity. Between 1938 and 1941, while working on the *Princeton Radio Research Project* under Paul Lazarsfeld, Adorno became acutely aware that

the apparatus of cultural production had become fully integrated into systems of administration, measurement, and consumption (Hohendahl 1995: 82-84). This experience sharpened the theoretical tools that would later structure *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 [1944]): the concepts of reification, and the culture industry.

Adorno's conflict with Lazarsfeld was primarily methodological. Lazarsfeld's "administrative research" sought to understand musical preferences through audience surveys and statistical analysis. Adorno, however, regarded this positivist framework as an expression of what he called reification – the process by which living experience is turned into measurable data (Adorno 1945: 211). Drawing from Marx and Lukács, Adorno used the term to describe how social relations in capitalist society appear as relations between things. In the context of the Princeton Project, listeners were treated as data points, their subjective responses quantified into patterns of behaviour. What was lost, Adorno insisted, was the qualitative dimension of musical experience: the capacity of music to mediate truth through its form rather than its popularity (Hohendahl 1995: 86).

For Adorno, reification thus became the central pathology of the culture industry. When musical response is reduced to preference, music itself is reduced to stimulus. He warned that "what is measured as enjoyment is often no more than the reflex of recognition" (Adorno 1945: 213). This critique foreshadows his later description of atomised listening – a fragmented engagement in which the listener no longer grasps the work as a totality but merely consumes its effects (Adorno 1976: 255). The radio project, therefore, revealed to him the structural transformation of art under capitalism: its subsumption into the logic of exchange and its reduction to social function.

The *culture industry* is not, as Adorno repeatedly emphasised, a conspiracy of producers but a structural consequence of advanced capitalism. The term identifies the industrial system that organises cultural production according to the principles of standardisation, predictability, and profit. Cultural commodities – films, songs, radio broadcasts – are designed to reproduce pleasure in standardised form, ensuring continual consumption.

The autonomous artwork, which once resisted the instrumental logic of society through its formal complexity, becomes functionalised. Its aim is no longer truth but entertainment. "In the culture industry", he observes, "the customer is not the subject but the object" (Adorno 1991: 30). The apparent democracy of choice conceals a deeper homogeneity. Listeners and viewers are offered a range of products that differ only in surface detail.

In *On Popular Music* (1941), Adorno identifies the twin mechanisms that sustain the culture industry within music: standardisation and pseudo-individualisation. Standardisation refers to the replication of structural patterns across cultural products, from harmonic progressions in pop songs to narrative formulas in cinema. Pseudo-individualisation, conversely, provides the illusion of novelty through small surface variations – different singers, orchestrations, or visual styles – without altering the underlying template. "It keeps the customers in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already pre-digested" (Adorno 1941: 445).

These concepts reveal the dialectical logic of domination within mass culture. Standardisation ensures stability and predictability, while pseudo-individualisation sustains the illusion of freedom. Together, they neutralise the potential for resistance by reconciling the listener to the system's sameness. As Paddison (1993: 213) notes, Adorno's critique was not a simple dismissal of popular culture but an analysis of its form: the way its very structure reproduces the logic of capitalist rationalisation.

Adorno's engagement with radio also brought him into dialogue with Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous reflections on art and technology. While Benjamin (1936: 223) viewed the loss of the *aura* – the singular presence of the artwork in time and space – as potentially emancipatory, Adorno considered it a symptom of social regression. Mechanical reproduction, he argued, did not democratise art but commodified it. In his view, "technology is not a neutral tool; it is the social process itself" (Adorno 1976: 34). The radio's capacity to disseminate music widely came at the cost of its autonomy. Music, once bound to performance and ritual, became a reproducible object, a background to everyday life.

In 'On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening' (Adorno 1991 [1938]), Adorno deepens this critique by applying Marx's concept of the commodity fetish to musical consumption. The fetish character of music refers to the way listeners attribute value to the mere possession or exchange of musical goods rather than to their aesthetic or structural qualities. The listener's relation to music becomes analogous to the consumer's relation to the commodity: it is mediated by social prestige, branding, and recognition. "The enjoyment of popular music", Adorno writes, "is conditioned by its social rating rather than by its inherent qualities" (Adorno 1991: 32).

Bridgerton's soundtrack exemplifies this fetishisation. The listener's pleasure derives as much from recognition – the thrill of identifying the pop original – as from the music itself. The "classical" veneer of the arrangements becomes a signifier of cultural capital, transforming aesthetic experience into symbolic possession. The intellectual trajectory from the Princeton Project to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thus traces a continuous argument: that the rationalisation of culture mirrors the rationalisation of society. The same logic that governs industrial production – efficiency, calculability, and control – extends to the production of pleasure. As Hohendahl (1995: 90) observes, Adorno's writings mark the shift from a philosophy of art to a critique of cultural systems. What begins as an aesthetic question – *how do we listen?* – becomes a sociological one – *what kind of society produces this listening?*

In this light, *Bridgerton*'s musical aesthetic is not an anomaly but a culmination. It translates the conditions of the 1940s culture industry into the digital present. The show's soundtrack operates according to the same principles of standardisation, pseudo-individualisation, and fetishisation that Adorno uncovered in radio music. Yet its technological form intensifies their effects. The orchestral-pop arrangement becomes a data-driven product, calibrated for global platforms and algorithmic recommendation. The commodification that Adorno witnessed in radio has been perfected in streaming: pleasure itself has become programmable.

By engaging directly with the machinery of media research, he transformed philosophical speculation into social critique. His insights into standardisation, pseudo-individualisation, and technological mediation remain uncannily prescient in the context of 21st-century media. *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack – its orchestral refinement, its reproducible glamour – realises the tendencies Adorno identified in embryo: the subsumption of art under the logic of production and the transformation of individuality into a marketing aesthetic.

The culture industry, Adorno argued, "perpetuates the deception that the world outside can be mastered as one masters the work of art" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 131). In *Bridgerton*, that deception takes the form of sonic perfection. The music's polished beauty reconciles the listener to the world it adorns, embodying the dialectic of pleasure and domination that Adorno first heard over the airwaves of exile.

Adorno's encounter with radio thus provided not only the conceptual framework for his critique of the culture industry but also the prototype for the mechanisms that would later define digital media. What he observed in the listener surveys of the Princeton Project – the quantification of attention, the standardisation of taste, and the conversion of feeling into data – finds its contemporary equivalent in the streaming platforms that circulate *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack. The dialectic between art and administration that emerged in the age of radio now unfolds within the algorithmic logic of 21st-century media.

A social critique of Bridgerton's score: music as commodity in the culture industry

"Today, the commodity character of music tends radically to alter it. In his day, Bach was considered and considered himself an artisan, although his music functioned as art. Today, music is considered ethereal and sublime, although it actually functions as a commodity." (Adorno 1945: 336)

Adorno's critique of the *commodity character* of music, first articulated in 'On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening' (1938) and elaborated in *A Social Critique of Radio Music* (1945), marks a decisive moment in 20th-century aesthetic theory. In these essays, Adorno isolates the processes by which musical art is transformed into an industrial product and the listener into a consumer. What had once been a vehicle for transcendence and reflection becomes an object of circulation and exchange. The culture industry, he insists, "converts all forms of art into commodities and all commodities into forms of art" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 129).

In *On Popular Music* (1941), Adorno identifies standardisation as the fundamental aesthetic law of the culture industry. It describes how cultural production in capitalist society operates through repetition rather than creation. "The whole structure of popular music is standardised", he writes, "even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardisation" (Adorno 1941: 439). Songs are built from identical harmonic progressions and rhythmic formulas; even apparent innovations are calculated within the boundaries of recognisability. Standardisation ensures that musical consumption requires no effort: the listener knows what to expect and finds comfort in its repetition.

Adorno's observation was historically rooted in the music of Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood, but its logic extends easily to the contemporary streaming economy. *Bridgerton's* soundtrack is exemplary of this aesthetic. Each

orchestral arrangement – whether of Ariana Grande's *"thank u, next"*[1], Taylor Swift's *"Wildest Dreams"*[2], or Miley Cyrus's *"Wrecking Ball"*[3] – follows a uniform structure: the initial swell of strings, the gradual layering of melody, and the climactic resolution timed to visual emotion. Despite their baroque instrumentation, *Bridgerton*'s covers retain the harmonic DNA of their pop sources. As Hughes and Lavengood (Open Music Theory 2023) note, pop music frequently relies on stock schemas like I–V–vi–IV, which persist even in orchestral adaptations. This harmonic continuity ensures emotional accessibility, allowing contemporary intimacy to resonate within a period setting.

Standardisation, for Adorno, functions ideologically by disguising domination as pleasure. The listener's enjoyment becomes a reflex conditioned by familiarity. "The enjoyment of popular music", he writes, "is conditioned not by the spontaneous experience of form but by the anticipation of what will happen next" (Adorno 1941: 440). In *Bridgerton* Season 1, Episode 6, the consummation scene between Daphne and Simon is underscored by Duomo's orchestral cover of Taylor Swift's "Wildest Dreams". The arrangement builds with swelling strings and harmonic tension, mirroring the emotional arc of the scene. The viewer anticipates the musical modulation and cadence just as they anticipate the narrative climax, producing what Adorno might call *administrative pleasure*: a moment engineered for emotional payoff through synchronisation of musical and dramatic expectation. The harmonic structure of the original pop song remains intact, ensuring emotional accessibility while cloaking contemporary intimacy in the refined language of period drama.

This aesthetic strategy is further illuminated by Adorno's concept of the fetish character of music. Adapting Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, Adorno argues that under capitalism, the listener's relation to music is mediated by its exchange value rather than its form. Music becomes revered as a symbol of taste or prestige, not apprehended as a meaningful structure. "The attitude of the listener", he writes, "is one of worship of the commodity, not of attention to the work" (Adorno 1991: 31). This fetishism produces what he calls the regression of listening, a decline in the capacity for structural engagement. Instead of contemplating musical logic, the listener consumes sound as stimulus; pleasure arises from recognition, not reflection. "The listening subject", Adorno insists, "has become the obedient consumer of musical effects" (Adorno 1991: 36).

1 Listen here: https://youtu.be/tmljfYBkGVg?si=-5pThLXmnwvVhCvy
2 Listen here: https://youtu.be/gn7HgsOEdHU?si=jKYMrqrRpzfYUoOu
3 Listen here: https://youtu.be/dKNPRcfrv5c?si=_IQc4QWyrKazhN9b

Bridgerton's score exemplifies this regression. Its orchestral pieces are not intended for analytic listening but for emotional synchronisation. Each cue corresponds to a specific affect – desire, revelation, heartbreak – and concludes precisely at the moment of narrative closure. The music's role is to guide feeling, not to invite contemplation. In this way, the listener, like the viewer, is gently trained to respond to pre-coded emotions. Recognition replaces cognition; affect replaces understanding.

This dynamic is reinforced by the show's use of pop covers. Adorno's analysis of the NBC Music Appreciation Hour (1994) captures the logic at work: cultural institutions teach audiences to identify familiar motifs rather than engage formatively with structure. *Bridgerton's* orchestral adaptations rely on precisely this reflex. This regime of listening exemplifies what Adorno (1976: 33) terms atomised listening, the fragmentation of experience into isolated effects. Each musical cue operates as a discrete emotional event rather than as part of an integrated whole. The unity of musical form dissolves into a sequence of sonic gestures calibrated to visual rhythm. Music thus functions as affective infrastructure: a technology of synchronisation between audience and narrative rather than a space of autonomous expression.

For Adorno, the most insidious feature of the culture industry is its commodification of affect. "Pleasure hardens into a compulsion to repeat", he observes, "and the repetition of what is pleasing becomes the mechanism of control" (Adorno 1976: 93). Emotional experience itself becomes standardised; subjects learn to feel according to predictable cues. *Bridgerton's* orchestral climaxes illustrate this dynamic perfectly: each swelling cadence corresponds to a foreseen emotion, achieving catharsis without surprise. The music's beauty conceals its function as administration.

As DeNora (2000: 23) notes, music operates socially as a "technology of the self," shaping emotion in ways that appear voluntary yet remain culturally coded. In *Bridgerton*, this conditioning is aestheticised as refinement. The lush orchestration and harmonic consonance produce what Adorno (1991: 34) calls false reconciliation the appearance of unity that masks contradiction. Harmony replaces conflict; pleasure substitutes for critique.

Adorno foresaw this evolution in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1976: 87), predicting that the social function of music would shift "from performance to distribution, from art to administration." *Bridgerton's* musical language realises this vision. Its compositions are polished to perfection,

calibrated for emotional efficiency, and designed to merge seamlessly with the visual texture of the series. As Leppert (2002: 208) explains, Adorno's concept of the "administered world" finds in such smooth surfaces its most compelling artistic manifestation: art that conceals its own mediation.

In this sense, *Bridgerton* represents not the decline but the culmination of the culture industry. The mechanisms Adorno identified – standardisation, pseudo-individualisation, fetishisation, and regression – operate here with unprecedented subtlety. The orchestral adaptation, symbol of refinement, is also the perfected form of industrial design. Its elegance is inseparable from its function.

Yet, as Adorno insists, art's truth content resides in contradiction. The very excess of *Bridgerton's* musical splendour and the exaggerated grandeur of its arrangements, betray the system it serves. This overabundance exposes the artificiality of its pleasures. To perceive this is to glimpse what Adorno (1997: 245) calls art's critical potential: the moment when beauty reveals the conditions of its own production. *Bridgerton's* score, in this light, does not escape the culture industry, it makes its logic audible.

Bridgerton's musical logic thus brings Adorno's critique full circle. The orchestral cover, perfected for streaming, realises the pedagogical mechanisms he first identified in early radio culture. Where the listener of the 1930s was trained by the Music Appreciation Hour to recognise canonical motifs, the contemporary viewer is trained by the algorithm to recognise affective patterns. Both forms of mediation transform listening into instruction, pleasure into pedagogy. It is precisely this continuity of the conversion of aesthetic experience into a mode of cultural training that links *Bridgerton*'s musical design to Adorno's analysis of the NBC Music Appreciation Hour.

Administered listening and the pedagogy of recognition

Adorno's *Analytical Study of the NBC Music Appreciation Hour* (1994 [1938]) isolates with precision the culture industry's pedagogical function: to train the ear not towards comprehension, but towards recognition. The NBC programme, designed to cultivate musical appreciation among schoolchildren, becomes for Adorno the prototype of administered listening. Its segmented exercises and pre-digested commentary simulate participation while eliminating interpretive freedom. Musical understanding is reduced to the ability to identify motifs and

recall them at the correct moment. As Adorno (1994: 356) writes, "instead of cultivating an ear for structure, the listener is trained to identify commodities." This is not education but habituation, the conditioning of perception to expect repetition and to experience recognition as satisfaction.

This process defines what Adorno would later call *the administration of listening*: the organisation of affect and attention through techniques of recognition that mirror the logic of industrial production. The listener's consciousness is standardised through repetition and reward; pleasure becomes a reflex of predictability. As Hohendahl (1995: 86) observes, Adorno's critique exposes how the culture industry's promise of accessibility conceals a deeper subjection: "the same mechanisms that regulate labour in the factory regulate feeling in the concert hall." The subject learns to find comfort in recognition and equates the familiar with the beautiful. Listening becomes the sensory analogue of exchange, a process of confirming what one already possesses.

It is precisely this logic that *Bridgerton* perfects and naturalises. The series' orchestral reinterpretations of pop songs transpose the NBC programme's didacticism into the language of luxury. As showrunner Chris Van Dusen explains, the decision to re-score contemporary pop into baroque form was intended to allow "modern audiences to relate to the show and see themselves on screen" (Van Dusen 2020). His phrasing discloses the pedagogical intent underlying the series' musical design: the cultivation of self-recognition as aesthetic participation. Where Adorno's radio listeners were instructed through commentary, *Bridgerton*'s audience is guided through affect. Its arrangements transform recognition into the condition of pleasure. The listener hears the melodic outline of Taylor Swift or Ariana Grande beneath the baroque sheen and experiences that act of identification as refinement. The affective charge of the series depends on this oscillation between familiarity and elevation, between the immediacy of pop and the prestige of classical form.

The orchestral surface of *Bridgerton* provides the aesthetic distinction that conceals repetition. What is consumed as novelty is the rebranding of the already-known; what is perceived as elegance is the confirmation of standardisation. As music supervisor Alexandra Patsavas notes, "those pieces … were accessible, recognisable, but perhaps not right away perhaps it was a few bars or measures before the viewer would recognise it" (Patsavas 2021). This calculated delay produces the small interval in which recognition becomes both the listener's task and their pleasure: the pedagogical moment

of self-confirmation. The viewer's pleasure derives from the recognition that the familiar has been transposed into the idiom of refinement, a sonic enactment of Adorno's *pleasure as conformity* (Adorno 1976: 94). Recognition thus functions as ideology's most affective form: it converts predictability into delight and renders the administered world sensually agreeable.

Through this logic, *Bridgerton* realises the pedagogical ideal implicit in the NBC programme; the alignment of musical pleasure with social obedience. Each orchestral cue teaches the listener how to feel by teaching them what to recognise. Emotional and cognitive responses are synchronised through repetition; subjectivity is instructed in affective compliance. The ear learns that pleasure lies in confirmation, not in discovery. The "education of feeling" promised by *Bridgerton* is in fact the education of recognition: the transformation of aesthetic experience into the reflex of familiarity.

Yet Adorno's dialectical aesthetics refuses to stabilise this condition as total. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he insists that art's *truth content* emerges precisely where its mediation becomes perceptible (Adorno 1997: 111). In *Bridgerton*, this occurs in the excess of its polish. The hyper-orchestrated string arrangements, their immaculate harmonic resolutions and cinematic sheen, render their artificiality transparent. Recognition thus turns reflexive: the moment of identification becomes the moment in which the mechanism of identification is itself revealed.

In this sense, *Bridgerton* does not merely continue the culture industry's pedagogy; it exposes its logic through exaggeration. Its orchestral surfaces stage the contradiction between individuality and administration that defines late-capitalist subjectivity. When the strings swell too perfectly, when the harmony resolves too predictably, the listener hears the echo of their own conditioning. This is the dialectical potential of administered listening: under certain conditions, the administration becomes audible.

The NBC Music Appreciation Hour taught audiences how to recognise musical commodities; *Bridgerton* teaches them how to *feel* recognition as pleasure. Both transform listening into a technique of affirmation, converting musical experience into the confirmation of expectation. Yet *Bridgerton*'s sophistication renders this process visible. As Van Dusen later remarked, the orchestral covers "invite audiences to hear something they already know differently" (Van Dusen 2022). This invitation marks a subtle shift from administration to awareness: the same act of recognition that once secured conformity now opens the possibility of reflective perception. In aestheticising

recognition itself, it brings to light what Adorno and Horkheimer (1972 [1944]: 131) called the "principle of the administered world" that the listener, like the consumer, "is not the subject but the object." The difference is that, in *Bridgerton*, this objecthood is pleasurable, even luxurious. The culture industry's pedagogy of recognition has become sensuous, glamorous, and intimate.

Nevertheless, within this pleasure lies the trace of its own contradiction. The more the listener delights in recognition, the more the apparatus that produces this delight becomes perceptible. *Bridgerton*'s orchestral aesthetic thus constitutes both the fulfilment and the exposure of administered listening: the point where recognition ceases to conceal repetition and begins to reveal it. In this dialectical reversal, Adorno's critique finds its contemporary resonance; the recognition of recognition itself as the form through which consciousness might again become aware of its mediation.

If Adorno's analysis culminates in the exposure of this administered pleasure, Benjamin reimagines what such moments of exposure might afford. For where Adorno hears in repetition the echo of domination, Benjamin detects the potential for re-enchantment for a collective experience of renewed attentiveness within the very circuits of reproducibility. The orchestral surfaces of *Bridgerton*, suspended between enchantment and recognition, thus mark the threshold between these two critical legacies: Adorno's negative pedagogy of awareness and Benjamin's affirmative vision of redeemed perception. It is to this tension between recognition as administration and recognition as re-enchantment that the next section now turns.

Re-enchanting the culture industry: aesthetic pleasure and the persistence of ideology in *Bridgerton*

Few debates in 20th-century critical theory better illuminate the problem of modern aesthetics than that between Adorno and Benjamin over the political meaning of technological mediation. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility*, Benjamin (1936: 223) claimed that mechanical reproduction – photography, film, phonography – stripped the artwork of its *aura*, its singular presence in time and space, and thereby released art from its cultic isolation. The loss of aura, for Benjamin, opened art to a new political function: reproduction could democratise aesthetic experience and transform the masses from passive spectators into critics (Benjamin 1936: 226).

Adorno, though initially sympathetic, came to regard Benjamin's optimism as naïve. He observed that reproduction had not emancipated art but subsumed it within capitalist circulation. "Technology", he insists, "is not a neutral instrument but the social process itself" (Adorno 1976: 34). The radio, the gramophone, and later cinema were not tools of liberation but mechanisms through which listening was standardised and pleasure administered. The aura did not disappear; it was manufactured as commodity prestige. The culture industry, Adorno argued, "converts all forms of art into commodities and all commodities into forms of art" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 129).

Benjamin locates in technology a redemptive potential, an opening towards collective experience, while Adorno identifies the same process as domination disguised as delight. *Bridgerton* stands precisely at the intersection of these perspectives. Its orchestral re-arrangements of pop music appear to re-aura-tise the mechanically produced song, re-investing the reproducible with uniqueness. Yet this restoration of aura is itself technologically mediated, achieved through the refined production of the modern recording studio. What Benjamin would call the emancipation of art through reproduction becomes, in Adorno's sense, the perfection of enchantment as ideology.

Benjamin's notion of aura refers to "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique appearance of distance, however close the object may be" (Benjamin 1936: 222). In *Bridgerton*, aura returns as synthetic aura, a crafted experience of distance and intimacy. The orchestral covers of contemporary hits reproduce the gestures of high art: live instrumentation, reverberant acoustic space, and dynamic nuance. Yet each recording is assembled through layering, equalisation, and compression optimised for mass listening. The listener perceives authenticity where every sonic element is technologically controlled. This, as Adorno would observe, exemplifies the fetish character of music: "the investment of the commodity with the appearance of immediacy" (Adorno 1991 [1938]: 30).

The same process that Benjamin hailed as de-auratic now manufactures aura anew. Reproduction no longer dissolves uniqueness; it fabricates it. The orchestral timbre, the simulated concert-hall reverb, and the cinematic sweep of strings generate the illusion of depth and historical weight. The aura is reborn as style. As Cook (2008: 14) notes, the contemporary recording studio has become "the workshop of authenticity", a site where sound is technologically purified to evoke naturalness. *Bridgerton* thus enacts the paradox Adorno foresaw: "What was once mediated by technique now presents itself as unmediated" (Adorno 1976: 35).

Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* introduces the concept of the *wish image*, those dream-like constellations in which modernity imagines reconciliation with the past (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 7). The *wish image* transforms historical memory into commodity fantasy, allowing the collective unconscious of an epoch to express its desires through aesthetic form. *Bridgerton* operates precisely as such a wish image. Its Regency setting, populated by racially diverse aristocrats and underscored by pop-orchestral music, stages a world where the contradictions of history – colonialism, patriarchy, class – appear resolved in beauty. The music's polished sheen literalises Benjamin's observation that "each epoch dreams the next" (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 8): the contemporary world dreams itself through the fantasy of a harmonious past.

Adorno would interpret this aesthetic nostalgia as an instance of false reconciliation, where pleasure masks contradiction. "Art's task is to make suffering speak", he writes; "the culture industry transforms suffering into style" (Adorno 1976: 93). The sumptuous musical textures of *Bridgerton* convert the dissonances of history into affective resolution. When the string quartet plays "thank u, next" at a debutante ball, the piece performs reconciliation at multiple levels: between pop and classical, modern and historical, mass and elite. The listener experiences what Adorno (1997: 245) calls "the semblance of harmony, in which aesthetic unity conceals social fracture."

For Adorno, the danger of such reconciliation lies not in pleasure itself but in the form pleasure takes. Pleasure, he insists, "is not the antithesis of labour but its continuation by other means" (Adorno 1976: 94). In the culture industry, aesthetic enjoyment becomes an instrument of adaptation: it trains subjects to accept the administered world. The smooth consonance of *Bridgerton*'s score exemplifies this process. Its harmonies produce what Leppert (2002: 210) calls "the sonic ideology of order," translating social hierarchy into musical hierarchy melody over accompaniment, foreground over background.

Benjamin might counter that within this very pleasure lies a fragmentary redemption. In the *Arcades Project*, he writes that the commodity's "seductive shimmer" can still reveal the utopian desire embedded in the material (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 12). The delight one feels when hearing a familiar pop melody transformed into orchestral grandeur may momentarily disclose the collective longing for beauty, equality, or transcendence. Yet for Adorno, such moments remain bound to the system they illuminate. The dialectic of pleasure and

domination cannot be resolved within the commodity form. "Every pleasure is paid for by the dulling of critical awareness", he warns (Adorno 1941: 444).

The apparent re-enchantment of music, its aura of craftsmanship and elegance, is therefore the aesthetic surface of a deeper disenchantment. The orchestral sound that seems to restore beauty to the mechanical world is itself the most advanced form of mechanical mediation. What Adorno (1976: 155) called "the fusion of art and administration" reaches completion in the culture industry's perfection of reproduction.

Benjamin distinguishes between *cult value*, the artwork's ritual aura, and exhibition value, its reproducibility and public display (Benjamin 1936: 224). Under capitalism, exhibition value triumphs: art becomes designed for circulation and consumption. What once demanded reverent distance is now defined by visibility. *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack represents the next stage in this dialectic. Each orchestral cover is produced for mass exhibition, its repetition and recognisability functioning as signs of value. In this economy, the aesthetic aura no longer depends on uniqueness but on ubiquity. What once defined art's singularity is now simulated through repetition: the more a piece circulates, the more it appears to possess cultural weight.

Benjamin suggests that within the ruins of aura there lies the possibility of *profane illumination*, a flash in which the commodity reveals utopian desire (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 10). Adorno, by contrast, maintains that such illumination cannot escape ideology unless it negates itself. "The reconciliation that art promises", he writes, "exists only in the tension of unreconciled contradiction" (Adorno 1997: 246). *Bridgerton* performs precisely this ambivalent re-enchantment. Its lush orchestral timbres and inclusive imagery appear to redeem the past, offering an aesthetically harmonious world freed from historical injustice. Yet this reconciliation is aesthetic, not material. The show transforms inequality into ornament: race, gender, and class become visual and sonic textures of diversity rather than structures of conflict. Adorno would argue that the music's "smooth surface" (Adorno 1976: 155) functions ideologically, presenting social difference as consonant harmony.

Still, following Benjamin, one might locate within this enchantment a faint utopian residue. The thrill of hearing a familiar pop melody refracted through baroque instrumentation gestures towards collective longing, a wish for continuity between past and present, high and low, elite and popular. Such moments exemplify what Benjamin calls "the dialectical image": the

instant when past and now "come together in a constellation" (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 462). The contradiction between the historical setting and the modern sound may therefore open, however briefly, a space of reflection rather than mere consumption.

Adorno's later *Negative Dialectics* transforms this tension into philosophical method. Against systems that reconcile contradiction into unity, he insists that thought must "stay with the negative" (Adorno 1966: 5). Aesthetics, too, must preserve dissonance as the sign of truth. Art's critical potential lies in its refusal to resolve conflict. "The more art is autonomous", he writes, "the more completely it expresses the social antinomy" (Adorno 1997: 247).

Applied to *Bridgerton*, this means listening not for harmony but for dissonance, the points where aesthetic perfection exposes its own artificiality. The exaggerated sweetness of the strings, the immaculate production, the predictable climaxes: these excesses betray the labour and calculation behind pleasure. To perceive this is to practice what Adorno (1976: 175) calls *critical listening* – hearing music "with the consciousness of its alienation". Such listening recognises the commodity form without succumbing to it. The soundtrack thus becomes legible as ideology and as its critique, depending on the listener's mode of attention.

Benjamin's aura and Adorno's semblance are not opposed concepts but two sides of the same philosophical problem: how art maintains its claim to truth within a world governed by exchange. For Benjamin (1936: 223), aura is "the unique appearance of a distance, however close the object may be", the trace of ritual reverence in modern perception. Its decay under mechanical reproduction marks both the loss of tradition and the potential for new, collective forms of aesthetic participation.

Adorno inherits this insight but transposes it. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he argues that what survives after the destruction of aura is *semblance*, "the appearance through which art's truth becomes visible" (Adorno 1997: 111). Semblance is not illusion but mediation: the way art presents its autonomy as if it were natural, even though it is socially produced. "Art's semblance of being-in-itself", he writes, "is the mark of its historical dependence" (Adorno 1997: 112). Through semblance, art embodies the contradiction of modernity: its autonomy is both real and ideological.

Bridgerton's orchestral soundtrack can thus be heard as an art of semblance. It stages the return of aura, the lushness, refinement, and temporal distance of classical form, but this aura is constructed, even self-conscious. The string arrangements' cinematic sheen and engineered warmth create an aesthetic surface that feels immediate while signalling its artifice. In this sense, *Bridgerton* produces what Adorno (1997: 113) calls "semblance without illusion": beauty that reveals its own fabrication. The pleasure it offers is genuine, yet that genuineness is mediated through industrial form.

Adorno's concept of semblance also clarifies his ambivalent stance towards pleasure. Pleasure, he argues, is never innocent because it is bound to social form. In bourgeois aesthetics, pleasure functions ideologically; it reconciles contradiction by transforming suffering into harmony (Adorno 1997: 15). Yet pleasure is also the necessary vehicle for art's utopian promise: only through feeling can art gesture towards what transcends the world. "The idea of reconciliation", Adorno writes, "is inherent in pleasure itself, even where pleasure is condemned" (Adorno 1997: 18).

Benjamin's view of aesthetic affect parallels this. In his discussion of film and mechanical reproduction, he sees collective laughter or shock as potentially revolutionary affects that break bourgeois contemplation (Benjamin 1936: 226). Both thinkers thus locate a dialectic within pleasure: it can reinforce domination, or it can awaken critical consciousness.

Bridgerton's music performs this dialectic audibly. On one hand, its tonal consonance and rhythmic predictability aestheticise the social order, converting difference into cohesion, what Adorno (1976: 94) calls "pleasure as conformity." On the other hand, the very surplus of this beauty, the intensity of its orchestral swell, the almost excessive sweetness of its harmonic resolution, creates a moment of estrangement. The listener recognises that the feeling exceeds its object. This surplus of pleasure, what Paddison (1993: 220) calls "Adorno's aesthetic remainder", is where critique begins.

Benjamin's late writings describe modernity as an era of disenchantment punctuated by moments of aesthetic renewal, "flashes" in which history's suppressed possibilities briefly reappear (Benjamin 1999 [1935]: 463). Adorno transforms this redemptive moment into a negative aesthetic: art's task is not to restore enchantment but to expose its absence. "Art keeps faith with enchantment precisely by not being enchanted", he writes (Adorno 1997: 178).

This paradox defines *Bridgerton*'s appeal. The series re-enchants the viewer through sound, texture, and historical fantasy, but the enchantment is openly aesthetic. The orchestral sheen is not presented as authentic; it is knowingly artificial, a sonic costume as deliberate as the visual spectacle. This self-awareness aligns with Adorno's notion of semblance: art's truth lies in its capacity to reveal illusion as illusion. The pleasure of *Bridgerton*'s music therefore enacts both ideology and critique; it seduces while displaying the mechanisms of seduction.

Leppert (2002: 214) observes that Adorno's music philosophy hinges on this duality: music "holds up a mirror to domination by reproducing its forms in sound, yet it also whispers of the possibility of another order." In *Bridgerton*, the shimmering orchestral surfaces reproduce the order of aesthetic hierarchy -– classical over popular, orchestral over vocal – but their excess simultaneously mocks that hierarchy. The listener knows the song beneath the strings. Recognition interrupts immersion. The aura fractures into play.

Adorno's and Benjamin's aesthetics converge on one crucial point: the aesthetic experience that truly matters is not identification but reflection. For Benjamin, the shock of modern art awakens the spectator from habit; for Adorno, the dissonance of modern form compels thought. Both oppose passive enjoyment to critical engagement. "Aesthetic experience", Adorno insists, "is cognition through feeling" (Adorno 1997: 144).

To listen to *Bridgerton* critically, then, is not to reject its pleasure but to experience it reflectively to perceive the contradiction between the music's beauty and the industrial process that produces it. The listener must hear what Adorno (1976: 175) calls "the alienation of sound": the distance between human expression and technical perfection. This act of listening transforms pleasure into knowledge; it realises Benjamin's idea of "profane illumination" within Adorno's framework of negative dialectics.

Bridgerton's orchestral re-enchantment thus becomes an opportunity to practice what Hohendahl (1995: 94) terms "critical aesthetic consciousness": an awareness of mediation that neither dissolves pleasure into cynicism nor idealises it as transcendence. The experience of semblance feeling the beauty and knowing its falsity is the modern equivalent of Benjamin's aura: a fragile, flickering space where art and critique momentarily coincide.

By bringing Benjamin's *aura* into dialogue with Adorno's *semblance*, we can understand *Bridgerton*'s musical pleasure not as superficial escapism but as the contemporary form of aesthetic ideology. The series re-enchants the listener precisely through semblance: it restores aura while revealing its artificiality. In doing so, it enacts the double movement central to critical theory art as both social symptom and utopian trace. The task of critique, as Adorno (1997: 245) reminds us, is "to grasp the truth of appearance as appearance." *Bridgerton*'s orchestral score, with its radiant surface and mechanical core, allows us to hear that truth resoundingly.

Bridgerton is therefore to hear the persistence of Adorno's question: how can art resist when resistance itself becomes marketable? The series does not answer this question, but it keeps it resonant. Its music, circulating endlessly through playlists and platforms, performs the continuity of the culture industry's logic while refracting it through the sensibilities of the streaming age. In the algorithmic reproduction of the baroque, we hear not the end of Adorno's critique but its digital refrain, the sound of freedom rendered elegantly measurable.

Conclusion

Bridgerton exemplifies the condition Adorno describes in his critique of the culture industry: the transformation of music from an event of experience into an object of consumption. Its orchestral covers and classical quotations reproduce the outward signs of sophistication while hollowing out their structural and expressive depth. As in Adorno's "radio symphony", where the broadcast format fragments the unity of musical form, *Bridgerton* reconfigures the symphonic experience into aesthetic fragments that serve narrative and emotional utility. The music no longer unfolds as a temporal whole but operates as a sequence of cues, decorative, familiar, and instantly legible.

In this reconfiguration, the listener's relation to music shifts from active engagement to passive recognition. The symphonic form, which Adorno saw as a model of dialectical totality, a unity emerging through the tension of its parts, is here reduced to atmosphere. *Bridgerton*'s classical arrangements no longer demand interpretation; they offer reassurance. What once required sustained attention now functions as background affect.

This transformation is not merely a stylistic choice but a symptom of the culture industry's logic: the subordination of aesthetic experience to consumption. The series aestheticises the remnants of high art, converting its autonomy into ornamentation. What remains is the echo of a form that once resisted commodification, now tuned to the smooth continuity of entertainment. In Adorno's terms, *Bridgerton* performs the regression of listening a return to a condition where music no longer speaks but only pleases, where the dissonance that once demanded thought resolves too quickly into harmony.

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