

Is "Vulgarization" Inevitable?

-- An Aesthetic-Cultural Inquiry into the short drama phenomenon

Xiao He

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, China

Abstract: Short dramas, as a cultural vehicle for fragmented emotional expression, have expanded rapidly in both market scale and audience reach, yet they exhibit a conspicuous tendency toward vulgarization driven by the primacy of instant gratification. This study, situated within the modern genealogy of popular culture, distinguishes vulgarization from popularization, arguing that the former is not the necessary correlate of the latter but rather a symptom of aesthetic culture's transformation under consumerism's efficiency logic. Drawing on the Frankfurt School's culture industry thesis, it examines the manipulative apparatus of algorithmic recommendation, template replication, and traffic orientation in short-drama production, revealing the systemic threat to artistic autonomy. It then explores the conditions under which creative art might still emerge within this field—namely, the preservation of creator independence, the formation of evaluation criteria beyond traffic metrics, and constructive critical intervention. The current vulgarity, the paper contends, is a transitional phase of early industrialization; whether short dramas can evolve from "vulgar" to "popular yet not mediocre" depends on whether these conditions can mature within the interstices of algorithmic and capital logics.

Keywords: Short Dramas, Culture Industry, Vulgarization, Artistic Autonomy.

1. Introduction

Short dramas have rapidly become a cultural phenomenon that registers the fragmented emotional pulses of contemporary society, fundamentally reshaping the social role of popular culture in the digital age. A recent video by the well-known Chinese media account "Yingshi Jufeng" highlighted a striking trend: domestically produced short dramas, featuring formulaic plots of class reversal and vengeful comeuppance, have, with the aid of AI tools, attracted massive overseas attention. Both viewers and industry insiders admit that, despite recognizing the intellectual vacuity of these productions, they nevertheless embrace the visceral thrill and commercial profitability they deliver. The scale of this market is staggering: the *2025 Phase-Based Development Report on Micro-Short Dramas* puts the domestic market value at over 63.4 billion yuan, with 696 million users—covering 68.4% of China's netizen population.[1] Yet the overwhelming majority of these offerings are marked by what critics variously describe as "vulgar," "low-quality," or "sensation-first" content. To understand this trajectory, one must trace short dramas back to their roots in the broader logic of popularization—a logic that, while democratizing cultural access, also carries inherent tensions that this paper seeks to unpack.

The central question is not whether short dramas are vulgar—this much seems empirically evident—but whether their vulgarity is an inescapable fate. Is it simply the price of mass appeal, or does it reflect deeper structural forces that could, under different conditions, be redirected toward more meaningful cultural expression? To address this, the paper proceeds in three steps. First, it situates short dramas within the historical and theoretical discourse on popular culture, clarifying the relationship between popularization and vulgarization. Second, it draws on the critical framework of the Frankfurt School—particularly the concepts of the culture industry, instrumental rationality, and the loss of artistic

autonomy—to diagnose the manipulative mechanisms at work in short-drama production. Third, it explores the possibilities for creative art to emerge within this domain, identifying necessary conditions and evaluating their current feasibility. Ultimately, the paper argues that the present vulgarity is not an intrinsic or permanent feature of the short-drama form, but a contingent outcome of its early industrial phase, and that its future hinges on the cultivation of countervailing forces within the algorithmic-capitalist landscape.

2. Popularization in Modernity

To grasp the significance of short dramas, one must first understand the broader historical trajectory of popular culture. The transition from Greek tragic art to Roman art already witnessed lamentations about the decline of artistic standards—a perennial anxiety that accompanies any major cultural shift. As Collingwood famously asserted, "there is no history of art, but only the history of human beings,"[2] implying that art's transformations are inseparable from the transformations of human societies. Conversely, every era's cultural shifts endow its emergent art forms with a certain legitimacy—a legitimacy that is best discerned not in abstract aesthetic criteria but in the concrete structural morphology of artistic production.[3] Style, in this view, is never merely formal; it embodies the existential temper of an age and the deep-seated demands of its social consciousness, thus becoming the symbolic carrier of its cultural-spiritual content.[4]

From primitive times to the present, humanity has progressively emerged from barbarism, discovered intellect, spirit, and reason—only to see reason expand to the point of losing its essential grounding. The history of literature, as some scholars have noted, records this complete and mournful journey.[5] In the contemporary epoch, often characterized by the proclamation "God is dead" and the collapse of grand narratives, popularization can be understood as a peculiar continuation of this state of loss. What is peculiar, however, is that twenty-first-century popular culture positions

itself as a non-utilitarian, purposeless "Other"-a claim that warrants critical scrutiny.

The term "popular" (or "the masses") is inherently elusive. John Storey, in his influential introduction to cultural theory, avoids a fixed definition, instead treating popular culture as a contested terrain. He introduces the notion of an "absent Other" against which popular culture is defined, suggesting that "popular culture is not historically a set of fixed texts and practices, nor a historically fixed conceptual category." [6] This relational approach helps us see that popular culture gains its meaning through opposition to elite culture, to folk culture, or to the state, depending on the historical context.

In the Chinese context, Jin Yuanpu offers a more specific definition: "What we refer to today as popular culture is a specific category, primarily denoting a contemporary cultural form that emerged in modern metropolises, is closely tied to modern large-scale industry, and is mass-produced via globalized modern media-particularly electronic media-within a consumer or quasi-consumer era." Following Storey's relational logic, popular culture in the new century aligns itself with consumerism and stands in opposition to any non-utilitarian, purposeless "Other." The underlying drive of consumerism is efficiency-the maximization of throughput, reach, and return. Short dramas, distributed via internet platforms and streaming services, epitomize this efficiency imperative: they are produced rapidly, consumed instantly, and optimized algorithmically for maximum engagement. In this sense, they are not accidental aberrations but exemplars of consumer aesthetic culture in its most accelerated form.

3. The (Non-)Equivalence of Popularization and Vulgarization

In a society thoroughly penetrated by market relations, it is hardly possible for art to remain entirely immune to the "vulgarizing" pressures of commodification. [7] Since popular culture flourishes alongside consumer capitalism, some degree of vulgarization seems inevitable. However, this does not justify conflating popularization with vulgarization, nor does it license the conclusion that mass appeal necessarily entails aesthetic debasement.

Popularized cultural production under consumerism exhibits two notable tendencies. First, it increasingly reflects the commodification of humanistic values, treating emotional resonance, moral insight, and aesthetic experience as exchangeable goods. Second, it tends to abandon the traditional triad of artistic pursuit-truth, goodness, and beauty-in favor of catering to the unconscious voids of audience desire. At its extreme, such art offers little more than a banal compensation for a harsh reality; it rarely cultivates a critical awareness of that reality. [8] Whether through depictions of sex and violence or reconciliatory happy endings, these works function as mere performances. The act of viewing dissolves the distinction between self and spectacle, while taboos and reverence are lost in hallucinatory pleasures. Even Walter Benjamin, in his reflections on mechanical reproduction, hinted that aesthetic configurations akin to short dramas can assume an ideological function: they misplace us within a naturalized order, teaching us to regard this misplacement as immutable and inevitable.

Yet despite this gloomy diagnosis, the persistence of artistic creation itself testifies to an enduring human aspiration toward truth, goodness, and beauty. The fact that creators continue to produce-and audiences continue to seek out-

works that aspire to more than mere distraction indicates that the story is not one of total surrender. The crucial question, then, shifts from whether vulgarization exists to how we might, within the novel context of consumer culture, reassert the pursuit of aesthetic and intellectual value. How can creative art be nurtured within the production-consumption matrix, so that vulgarization is dissolved into artistic practices that are widely accessible yet not intellectually or aesthetically impoverished? This is not a call for nostalgic elitism, but for a realistic assessment of the conditions that make meaningful cultural production possible in an age of algorithmic mediation.

4. The Prospects for Creative Art in Short Dramas

If short dramas are indeed products of algorithmic and product logic, can they still harbor the potential for creative art? Can we detect within them the outlines of an artist, or are they merely commodities devoid of authorship? To answer these questions, we turn to the Frankfurt School's theory of the culture industry, examining both the manipulative logic of production and the possibilities for resistance and autonomy within the consumption process.

(1) The Manipulative Logic of the Culture Industry

Under advanced capitalism, cultural production has become a fully standardized, reproducible process of commodity manufacture. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that the true vocation of spirit lies in its negation of reification; once spirit is transformed into a consumable cultural asset, it inevitably decays. The culture industry operates through a series of substitutions: it conceals deep uniformity beneath surface diversity, replaces the negativity of thought with the pleasure of entertainment, and substitutes the freedom of consumption for the freedom of spirit. Its profound insight is not simply that cultural products are commodities, but that modern popular culture, subjected to both instrumental rationality and the commodity form, reduces the essence of culture to a tool and thereby annihilates culture's transcendent, critical dimension. [9]

Genuine art, by contrast, maintains a critical distance from empirical reality, resisting the oppressive uniformity of the given through the autonomy of its formal structure. Culture industry products, however, provide banal compensation and false reconciliation: they soothe the consumer with pleasure, discouraging any questioning of the social order. When we apply this framework to short dramas, the explanatory power is striking. Their production model-algorithmic traffic orientation, emotionally tagged content, rapid template replication-is almost a textbook illustration of culture industry logic in the digital era. With the breakneck rhythm of "seven days to shoot, fourteen days to recoup," creation is reduced to calculating the ingredients of a hit: what plot twists, what emotional beats, what pacing maximize completion rates and shares? Adorno lamented the "loss of style" in mass art, where artworks cease to embody the artist's unique engagement with reality and become interchangeable. In short dramas, this loss is intensified: not only are works interchangeable, but the very act of creation has become a calculative exercise, hollowing out the creative core from within.

Yet the culture industry thesis is not a totalizing verdict. It identifies structural tendencies, not deterministic inevitabilities. The manipulative logic is powerful, but it does not wholly eliminate spaces of resistance-especially if we

attend to the consumption side, where audiences may appropriate meanings in unexpected ways, and to the production side, where creators may retain critical awareness even under constraint.

(2) Conditions for Artistic Autonomy in the Algorithmic Age

Creative art requires creative subjects, yet short-drama creators face a unique structural predicament. The essence of the culture industry's threat is the erosion of artistic autonomy—the capacity of art to follow its own internal rules, to set its own standards, and to resist external imperatives. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry is part of a broader rationalization and reification process that makes independent thinking increasingly difficult, rendering individuals dependent on social processes they cannot control.[10] When artistic production is entirely subsumed under market exchange, art ceases to operate according to its own logic.

In traditional artistic fields, legitimacy is conferred by a relatively autonomous evaluative community—critics, peers, academic institutions—which provides institutional buffers against pure market forces. In the short-drama domain, however, such a buffer is largely absent. Platform algorithms, relying on quantifiable metrics like completion rates, dwell time, and interaction counts, reduce artistic value to a direct function of traffic. Benjamin's notion of the "decay of the aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction is here radicalized: not only can works be endlessly reproduced, but the very process of "creation" is being reproduced—through template cloning, emotional formula reuse, and AI-assisted generation. This transforms creation into an assembly-line operation.

Nevertheless, this low threshold also has a democratizing potential. When art is liberated from ritualistic elitism, it can reach broader publics and invite more diverse voices into cultural production. The challenge is to prevent this democratization from collapsing into homogenization. This requires the cultivation of a relatively autonomous evaluative mechanism within the short-drama field—one that values aesthetic innovation, intellectual depth, and formal experimentation alongside, or even against, traffic performance. Such a mechanism cannot be imposed from above; it must emerge organically through the agency of creators, critics, and audiences.

Two conditions are particularly crucial. First, creators must maintain an inner vigilance—they must resist reducing themselves to extensions of algorithms, preserving a sense of expressive independence even when it conflicts with algorithmic optimization. This is not a romantic ideal but a practical discipline: it involves conscious choices about which formulas to follow and which to break, which emotional registers to explore and which to challenge. Second, the critical community must intervene constructively. Rather than dismissing short dramas wholesale as vulgar trash, critics should engage with them seriously, identifying works of genuine merit, analyzing formal innovations, and articulating standards that go beyond popularity. This constructive criticism can help shape audience expectations and creator aspirations, gradually building a field of cultural legitimacy.

These conditions are not yet fully realized, but there are signs of their emergence: some short-drama productions have begun to experiment with more complex narratives, nuanced characterizations, and social commentary; some platforms have launched "quality" channels or funding initiatives; and

some academics and critics are taking the form seriously rather than merely condemning it. The path forward is uncertain, but it is not closed.

5. Conclusion

The current vulgarization of short dramas is not an inevitable corollary of popularization but a transitional symptom of their early industrial phase. The culture industry's manipulative structures generate systemic risks of homogenization and vulgarization, yet the consumption process retains fissures of meaning, and some creators still exercise autonomous will—these residual spaces keep the possibility of creative art alive.

Whether short dramas can eventually host genuine creative art depends on a set of conditions that are still unfolding: whether creators can maintain expressive independence amid algorithmic pressure; whether evaluation mechanisms can develop relative autonomy from traffic metrics; and whether criticism can engage constructively with the field rather than merely denouncing it. These conditions are not yet robust, but they are slowly forming. Transitionality, by its nature, is open-ended—it encompasses multiple possible futures. Precisely because the current state is transitional, we need a critical perspective that is simultaneously vigilant and participatory: one that refuses to surrender to the logic of the culture industry, yet remains engaged with the actual practices and potentials of short dramas. If such a perspective can be sustained, short dramas may yet evolve from the culture industry's standardized logic into a genuine arena of popular cultural expression—a path from the vulgar to the popular-yet-not-mediocre, which is precisely the challenge that modern popular culture must confront.

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