How do Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer contradict themselves by establishing the culture industry as a system that affects reality, while simultaneously presenting it as a singular reality. In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” the authors generally explore how culture is spreading sameness through society. The piece offers the reader a meta perspective on a specific issue that permeates in capitalist society. While this perspective was helpful when the authors framed the culture industry as a system, it became more difficult when the culture industry was possessed as a single reality. The culture industry is framed as a single reality by intimately detailing the ways each individual is affected by entertainment and simultaneously presenting only one grim escape from the culture industry itself. The authors position the culture industry as an all encompassing and inescapable reality, rather than a developed system that affects modernity, as they set out in there opening pages.

Before setting forth the contradiction, it is important to understand how the authors put forth the culture industry as a system. In there introductory statements the authors assert “In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 95). The authors establish that the culture industry has not always operated as it does now and that the pervasive system of the culture industry has altered society to produce the facade of the “universal and particular” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 95). In their view, this system is represented by directors of industries who are meant to convince the public of their need for products and propagate the system as a whole. The culture industry is not an ever present reality of capitalism, rather the authors frame it as a system built by technologies and propagated by industry.
A defining aspect of this critique involves the scope of the work put forth by Adorno and Horkheimer. To be sure, the scope of this work is appropriate and viewing the culture industry with such a wide lense assists the readers understand on how consumerism permeates in a variety of aspects of everyday life. They assert “The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 99). Statements like these work twofold, in that they give a needed perspective on how the culture industry operates, but begins to blur the lines between the culture industry as a system or as a single reality. This is not the only time that the authors present their work as a meta concept “Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape…” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 97). Not only does the culture industry operate on a wholistic scale, but it also provides no clear avenues for escape.

If the culture industry negatively propagates samness through society, the reader is lead to believe that there must be an escape. The authors put forth one explicit escape from the culture industry “But anyone who goes hungry and suffers from cold, especially if he once had good prospects is a marked man. He is an outsider and-with the occasional exception of the capital crime-to be an outsider is the gravest guilt” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 121). Assuming that outsider means outside society and outside the culture industry, those who suffer from the cold and being hungry have escaped. No doubt, this escape is less desirable than being in the culture industry itself. Framing the only explicit escape from the culture industry as undesirable does not present it as a system so much as it does a singular reality.

It could be argued that the authors are presenting the culture industry as a force so pervasive that it creates a singular reality for its subjects. The authors put forth “That life could continue without the whole culture industry is too certain; the satiation and apathy it generates
mong consumers are too great” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 131). The system has worked as it was intended, to sedate consumers into buying products with little difference. While this is an appealing conjecture, the authors have presented the culture industry in such broad terms and in a contradictory manner. The piece begins by placing the culture industry as a system that affects consumerism, with various parts that make up the whole, like film, art, music etc. As the piece progresses, the authors make various assertions about how the culture industry affects every part of life. Further, the only explicit escape from the culture industry would be to be pushed to the outside and be “cold and hungry”. Given these two themes in the piece, the culture industry is a difficult concept for the reader to fully understand. If the culture industry affects each aspect of life and has no escape, this becomes a single reality for those in capitalist society, not a system like was originally put forth. Given the title of the piece “Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, there is immense value in understanding whether the culture industry is a system or a single reality. If the culture industry is a system developed by technology as it was originally put forth, than solutions can be found in the specific people, areas and industries that created it. If it is a single reality of capitalists/liberal societies, the solutions to its many issues would most likely be found in the principles that lead to its conceptions. Principles like those developed in the enlightenment.