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Culture industry 2.0: Africa, Global South, world

The term 'culture industry', as set forth by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, describes the ongoing process whereby the forms of culture are absorbed into the capitalist system of production. Marked above all by a drive for standardisation, the culture industry mass produces uniform cultural products whose ultimate purpose is to lull mass society into receptive quiescence. Contemporaneously this has entailed the spread of commodification from 'culture' to all non-work activities of humanity – hobbies, sports, self-improvement, mental health, tourism, and so on. It has been the better part of a century since the appearance of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the technologies of mass communication that Adorno and Horkheimer placed at the centre of their analysis of mass culture have altered beyond recognition, and with them the culture itself. And this in turn raises the question of the continuing relevance of the 'culture industry' concept. Does the contemporary culture industry still operate along the same lines that Adorno and Horkheimer charted or has it evolved to a point at which their analysis no longer applies? Does the contemporary interactive mediascape radiate disaster triumphant or, as Benjamin and

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Kracauer suggested, does the evolution of our technological media bring with it new potentialities for liberation and resistance? The 4th Annual Conference of the South African Society for Critical Theory (SASCT), which took place in hybrid format at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University from the 17th to the 19th of November 2022, sought to address these critical questions and in so doing to re-affirm the continuing relevance of Critical Theory for enquiries related to the culture industry.

Such enquiries included, but were not limited to, asking what a critical analysis of the contemporary culture industry would reveal, what stance Critical Theory should adopt towards the culture industry in both its historical and modern figurations, how the culture industry figures into contemporary education, how the coronavirus outbreak (potentially) affected the contemporary culture industry, how nature's otherness influences the culture industry, how the culture industry functions in relation to postcoloniality, what an 'African culture industry' might entail, and how migration may be seen to factor into the culture industry of the world today. The perils and potentialities of the imminent total colonisation of the life world, strategies of resistance, points of breakdown, as well as cultural and natural heritage as a public good or commodity are all questions that Critical Theory is geared to address.

The papers gathered here provide an intriguing breadth of views on the foregoing questions, and reflect a variety of strategies for the critical analysis of the contemporary culture industry. They have been grouped thematically into several sections. The first section, containing papers by Bitang, Sands, Pauwels, and Amiradakis, deals with the history and theory of Critical Theory, and incorporates African critical theory traditions alongside theoretical revisitations of canonical Critical Theorists. The second section, with papers by Kompatsiaris, Mylonas, and Nkuna, Govender & Sewchurran, explores the diverse manifestations of contemporary digital culture. And the third section, with papers by Fourie, Naidoo, and te Water, focuses on neoliberalism and its effects. A final paper, Afolabi's, retheorises culture in relation to environmental praxis (which relates prospectively, though unexpectedly, to the topic of SASCT's next conference and special issue).

The first group of papers in this collection have a primarily theoretical focus. The first two papers in this section make a significant contribution to the development of a canon of critical theories from the Global South by putting forward the works of Marcien Towa and Tsenay Serequeberhan as instances of African critical theory, whilst the third and fourth papers revisit the works of foundational figures in the history of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin respectively.

Bitang in the first paper, provides a sympathetic overview of the main contours of the thought of the Cameroonian philosopher, Marcien Towa. They go on to argue that Towa's thought should be considered to be Critical Theory in the stronger sense of having clear parallels with the methodological and theoretical commitments of the Frankfurt School. Bitang substantiates their claim by way of comparison with the work of Max Horkheimer, particularly with regards to their shared emphases on reason as tool of domination and violence, and the role of science and technology in facilitating oppression through the expansion of 'liberating' rationality to all parts of the world. Bitang also observes that Towa shares with Horkheimer a dedication to a Hegelian Marxist mode of critical philosophy, although Bitang also places emphasis on the significant divergences between their formulations of Hegelian Marxism. Bitang notes Towa's critique of Hegel's rationalisation of European supremacy, and also Towa's singular understanding of Marxism drawn primarily from Lenin but mediated through the philosophy of Kwame Nkrumah. Bitang's treatment of Towa is intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, and hopefully will serve to stimulate interest and further research on this singular African philosophical voice.

Sands's paper explores the critical potential of Tsenay Serequeberhan's political hermeneutics. Through a critical appropriation of Heidegger's existential phenomenology and post-phenomenology, and Gadamer's hermeneutics, Sands argues that Serequeberhan develops a political hermeneutics of post-colonial emancipation. Central to this project is the belief that emancipatory self-realisation necessarily involves the subject's recognition of its own historicity. And for Serequeberhan, Sands claims, recognising one's historicity involves not merely acknowledging the extent to which one's existence is shaped by one's cultural heritage but, in the case of post-colonial Africa, the extent to which that heritage also contains within it the Eurocentricism that is often the target of much decolonial critique. On Serequeberhan's account, Sands informs us, the subject cannot actualize its possibilities unless it grasps the history of the world in which it finds itself and in so doing find within it new possibilities for emancipatory action. Sands closes their paper with an instance of the possible application of Serequeberhan's "activistic" hermeneutics in the form of Serequeberhan's idiosyncratic reading of Fanon's work as the chronicle of a "lived existence" in dynamic tension between the concrete actuality of existence and the heritage that Fanon inherited.

Pauwels paper revisits a classic work of political theory, Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, through the lens of Jacques Rancière's philosophy. Rancière is typically taken to hold a decidedly negative view of this particular work and this is largely due to the excoriating treatment that Rancière subjected Marx's essay to in his 1985 book *The Philosopher and His Poor*. In this

work Rancière effectively charges Marx with political sour grapes, suggesting that Marx's derisive portrayal of the February Revolution and its aftermath is a form of literary revenge on recalcitrant historical events that failed to conform to the Marxist grand narrative of historical progress. Pauwels argues however that in a subsequent work, *The Names of History* (1994), Rancière's position on *The Eighteenth Brumaire* alters significantly. Through a detailed analysis of the nature of historical borrowings by revolutionary movements from earlier revolutionary movements, Rancière develops an affirmative reading of Marx's essay in which the performative and imaginative aspects of revolutionary activity are foregrounded and validated. On this account the historical borrowings of emancipatory movements are not a sign of a paucity of content, but are rather an integral component in the production of an 'excess' of novel meanings.

Amiradakis's paper revisits Walter Benjamin's account of the relationship between mass culture and the reproductive technologies. Although Benjamin's analysis of modern technological culture is often overshadowed by those of his Frankfurt School counterparts, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, Amiradakis argues that we find within Benjamin writings an account of mass culture and its technologies that is still of considerable utility to the contemporary analyst. In contrast to the technological jeremiads of Adorno and Horkheimer, Amiradakis argues, Benjamin's account remains far more balanced. Whilst mindful of the capacity of technological media to peddle conformity and consumption, Benjamin remained convinced of the enormous emancipatory power of the new technologies. Benjamin's analysis focuses on the transformative effects of media technologies on the perceptual capacities of the technologically-mediated individual and the possibilities thereby created for an altered, more critical grasp of reality. And as such, Amiradakis points out, it remains just as applicable to the social media and digital technologies of today's technological culture as it was to the film and radio technologies of Benjamin's own time.

The papers in the next section of this special issue focus specifically on the culture industry as presently manifested in the form of digital culture. They examine the ways in which the use of digital platforms alters the digital denizen's capacity to understand themselves and communicate their experiences to others. These papers offer a fascinating snapshot of the ways in which the imperatives of the market intertwine with matters of identity and self-transformation, and the ever-present dangers to the digital public sphere from corporate and State powers in addition to the new possibilities opened up by the new media technologies for solidarity and resistance to the neoliberal order.

In the first paper Kompatsiaris examines the now ubiquitous social phenomenon of life coaching as it presents itself on social media platforms.

Kompatsiaris argues that we should consider life coaching as a technology of the self and explores the way in which the self is both constructed and understood within the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. They then go on to explore the role of coaches as self-constituted charismatic authorities and what they term “the coaching imperative”, within the operations of platform culture. The life coach, they claim, operates as both purveyor of self-transforming practices and a living exemplar of those practices and their efficacy. And in propagating their own personal brand through the platforms they develop what Kompatsiaris terms “inspirational capital”, a degree of influence over a set of followers which itself is tradable as an economic asset. Which is itself contingent upon the coaches’ perpetual curation of their own personas as they appear in virtual space. Particularly important here is the coach’s ability to use social media platforms to overcome their lack of physical proximity to their followers through continuous interaction in the form of emotional and relational labour. Kompatsiaris then turns their attention to coaching imperative, the continuous insistence that the power of transformation exists solely at an individual level. And thus, that one’s success or failure in life is entirely contingent upon the individual’s willingness to continuously self-actualise. Any consideration of class, gender, or other social inequalities is thereby eschewed in favour of a relentless focus on the training of the self.

In the next paper, Mylonas explores the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, a space for the discussion and dissemination of social meanings which mediates between the private realm and the State. Mylonas characterises Habermas’s understanding of the public sphere as a republican one in which the public sphere supports the liberal rule of law through the exercise of reason and thereby advances the democratisation of society. Such an understanding does not consider the present-day situation in which the public sphere reflects the interests of those who wield cultural and economic power in neoliberal capitalist society and is used as an effective means to control the proletariat by naturalising and legitimising social privilege in the current political order. Rather than thinking with Habermas of *a* public sphere, Mylonas follows Kluge and Negt in arguing for the existence of *three* types of public sphere: the liberal-bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes, the public sphere of commercial public relations and corporate media, and oppositional “counterpublic” of the proletarian public sphere. This last public sphere appears as an antagonistic response to the recent crises of capitalism and acts as a space where the experiences of the proletariat can be brought to public attention. This space however is in perpetual danger of being hegemonized by the bourgeois public sphere, a danger that Mylonas substantiates through an exploration of the negation of the proletarian perspective in Greece during the Eurozone crisis and migration crisis of the 2010s.

In the final paper of this section Njabulo, Govender and Sewchurran provide a comparative analysis of several recent social media protest movements in South Africa and India. Namely, the #feesmustfall movement (2015-2016) that protested the increasing cost of higher education in South Africa, the #Jallikattu movement in Tamil Nadu which protested the ban on the traditional bull-taming sport, and Abahlali baseMjondolo, a socialist shackdwellers' movement in South Africa. Taking Habermas's public sphere and theory of communicative action as a starting point the authors draw upon Fuchs's Habermas-derived concepts of instrumental and co-operative communication in order to examine the political economy of national media. Their comparison of these different social media protest movements brings into focus the ways in which State actors progressively restrict the diversity of the public sphere by actively targeting the communicative actions of the protesters through increased surveillance, arrests and intimidation. The authors then point to the ways in which the social media movements discussed here resisted the restriction of the public sphere by using digital platforms to mobilise support outside their countries through the use of diasporic formations.

The final group of papers in this special issue comprises three papers, namely Fourie's 'The Individual and the gig society: is the gig economy an opportunity for empowered entrepreneurship or a perpetuation of exploitation in the informal economy?', Naidoo's 'The atomisation and massification of neoliberal reason', and te Water's 'In Medias Res: the diminishing of historical continuity in modern thought'. The common feature amongst these papers is that they view neoliberalism and its effects as crucial for an encompassing analysis of the culture industry.

In their contribution, Fourie critically evaluates the gig economy as exploitative extension of the informal economy. They contend that the gig economy, with its decentralized model championing individual entrepreneurship, imposes undue burdens on workers. Workers become designated as 'independent contractors', which entails responsibilities that would typically be shouldered by employers. Employing a Marcusean perspective, Fourie underscores two primary concerns. Firstly, they discuss Marcuse's critique of 'industrial rationality' to elucidate how this rationality establishes the groundwork for, and rationalization of, exploitation within the gig economy. Secondly, they draw on Wendy Brown's insights (following Marcuse) that the gig economy propagates the neoliberal concept of "self-care" as a mechanism for relieving corporations of any obligation towards their workforce. More precisely, "self-care" becomes integral to the exploitation of workers in the informal economy within the gig economy, even though the gig economy is often perceived as a buffer to absorb the unemployed in a neoliberal societal framework. Expanding on this analysis, Fourie references Byung-Chul

Han's work on "self-exploitation" and posits that the gig economy should be conceptualized as an extension of the informal economy, structurally facilitating a state of perpetual servitude amongst workers.

Naidoo critiques neoliberal reason, which is often championed for its advocacy of radical individualism, in their submission. While critics often focus on the atomizing impact of pervasive individualism, Naidoo suggests that we also must not overlook the failure, on its own terms, of neoliberalism. They argue that neoliberal reason falls short in establishing conditions for individuals to actualize their potentiality, explore possibilities, and embrace openness. According to Naidoo, this failure stems from restricting human activity to the pursuit of capital maximization and the potential to accumulate capital. Capital, they assert, inherently cannot serve as an ultimate end because it leaves subjects of neoliberal reason in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of an endless goal hinders neoliberal subjects from gaining a comprehensive view of their potentiality-for-Being as inherently their own. Drawing on the insights of Adorno and Horkheimer, who address capitalistic massification in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Naidoo utilizes Foucault's and Brown's perspectives on neoliberalism to comprehend how said neoliberalism extends its governance beyond industry, permeating every facet of human life.

Te Water delves into the prevailing discourse that innovation and future predictions are the primary objectives of modern technology. In this empirical and modern world there exists a potential diminishing of the value of historical continuity, where observation and outcome-based theory take precedence over contemplation and tradition. Te Water suggests that the forgetfulness inherent in modernity contributes to a distorted perception of time and thought, leading to a dissonance between the perceiving subject and their surroundings. This dissonance is further heightened by the influence of digital media, which often presents information as an appealing or trending source of amusement rather than an opportunity for edification. The result of this dissonance and the impact of digital media manifests in thoughtless or repetitive actions and, in extreme cases, the abandonment of action altogether as individuals seek escape from reality. Te Water problematizes this situation, highlighting that constructive action for individual well-being is unsustainable with the current levels of engagement with digital technology. Building on the insights of Connerton (1989, 2009), Davidson (2004), and Habermas (1987, 1989), they explore how the diminishing historical continuity in thought can lead to manipulation and a lack of rationality (as is discussed by Horkheimer and Adorno through their culture industry thesis). Te Water proposes adopting an approach of continuity, embodied in the concept of "in medias res" (in the midst of things) in interpretation, as an alternative perspective to this problematic space. This rethinking may encourage individuals

to take contextual action instead of attempting to escape action altogether as part of the advocacy for a constructive and achievable perspective, rather than resigning to a problematic system of distraction and the increasing degradation of thought.

A final paper, which falls outside the ambit of the foregoing three themes, links the discussion of the culture industry to a broader retheorisation of culture through environmental praxis. In their exploration of environmental threats to cultural resources amid the contemporary environmental crisis, Afolabi critically examines the oft overlooked assumption that culture inherently embraces change. They suggest that, if change is always a pervasive part of culture, one should be morally neutral about changes to cultural values and resources, especially when such change is harmful and external forces are responsible. In answer to this postulate and as arguing against a morally neutral stance, Afolabi employs a social constructivist perspective on culture that emphasizes the normative flaws in viewing the loss of culture during environmental crises as merely a form of cultural change. They urge that a reconsideration of the moral implications of cultural change concerning environmental issues is crucial, though this perspective has not been extensively explored in environmental justice literature. Afolabi asserts that failing to integrate this idea of environmental justice may lead to the dismissal of harm to certain cultural groups under the guise of 'normal' cultural change.

In conclusion, this special issue gathers together a broad range of theoretical approaches that address the pressing need for the analysis of the contemporary culture industry in the Global South and beyond. Through the lenses of the history and theory of Critical Theory (and African critical theory traditions), digital culture, and neoliberalism and its effects, as well as suggestions towards an environmental praxis, the culture industry of Adorno and Horkheimer is revisited. But not in a spirit of reverence, as if approaching a conceptual museum piece, but rather in the spirit of renewal and positive critique, in order to provide a diverse range of conceptual tools for future research in this area.