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**The Political Economy of the USh Media and Its
Implications for the US Popular Culture's
Metamorphosis in the Digital Age**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the metamorphosis of American popular culture in the digital age, drawing on Franz Kafka's metaphorical use of “metamorphosis”, and John Fiske's theory of popular culture. The thesis sketches the changes the political economy of the US media has undergone in the information age as it shifted its focus from a product-based market economy to a consumer-based attention economy. It meticulously explores significant Marxist terms around which the theme is circumscribed such as use value, exchange value, surplus value, free labor, exploitation, and false consciousness, to name but a few. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on explaining the inner dynamics of digital media by shedding light on digital-related concepts such as visibility algorithms, shadow banning, filter bubbles, echo chambers, digital homophily, and confirmation bias to unravel the techniques undertaken by media owners and decision makers to shape the American culture and public opinion. The thesis further examines how the digital environment, including social media, streaming platforms, and participatory technologies, has reshaped cultural texts’ production, circulation, and consumption. By situating this discussion within a cultural studies framework, the thesis contends that digital platforms facilitate a radical redefinition of popular culture and its politics, embodying a new form of metamorphosis that echoes Kafka's themes of identity, alienation, and transformation. Case studies have been chosen to unravel and flesh out said transformation in culture industry- movie remakes, reality TV, political comedy, and athletes’ activism – and its concomitant popular culture metamorphosis. The thesis lays bare the difference between the media culture and popular culture, yet it further illustrates the existent metabolic relation between said cultures insofar as the balance of power is no longer

titled in favor of the power block; rather, it is unstable. The bottom-up influence of popular culture is equally effective and prevailing.

Keywords: popular culture, media culture, metamorphosis, political economy, attention economy, culturalism, participatory culture, Marxism, digital media.

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الأطروحة تحوّل الثقافة الشعبية الأمريكية في العصر الرقمي، مستندةً إلى الاستخدام المجازي لفرانز كافكا لمصطلح "التحوّل"، ونظرية جون فيسك في الثقافة الشعبية. وتستعرض الأطروحة التغيرات التي شهدتها الاقتصاد السياسي لوسائل الإعلام الأمريكية في عصر المعلومات، مع تحول تركيزه من اقتصاد السوق القائم على المنتج إلى اقتصاد الاهتمام القائم على المستهلك. وتستكشف بدقة المصطلحات الماركسية المهمة التي ينحصر حولها الموضوع، مثل قيمة الاستخدام، وقيمة التبادل، وفائض القيمة، والعمل الحر، والاستغلال، والوعي الزائف، على سبيل المثال لا الحصر. علاوة على ذلك، تُركّز على شرح الديناميكيات الداخلية للإعلام الرقمي من خلال تسليط الضوء على المفاهيم المرتبطة بالرقمنة، مثل خوارزميات الرؤية، والحظر الخفي، وفقاعات الترشيح، وغرف الصدى، والهوية الرقمية، والتحيز التأكدي، لكشف الأساليب التي يتبعها مالكو وسائل الإعلام وصانعو القرار لتشكيل الثقافة والرأي العام الأمريكي. تتناول هذه الرسالة كذلك كيف أعادت البيئة الرقمية، بما في ذلك وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ومنصات البث والتقنيات التشاركية، تشكيل إنتاج النصوص الثقافية وتداولها واستهلاكها. ومن خلال وضع هذه المناقشة في إطار الدراسات الثقافية، تُجادل الرسالة بأن المنصات الرقمية تُسهّل إعادة تعريف جذرية للثقافة الشعبية وسياساتها، مُجسّدةً شكلاً جديداً من التحوّل يُحاكي مواضيع كافكا في الهوية والاغتراب والتحول. وقد اختيرت دراسات حالة لكشف وتعميق هذا التحوّل في صناعة الثقافة - الأفلام، وبرامج تلفزيون الواقع، الكوميديا السياسية و نشاط الرياضيين في المجال السياسي- وما يصاحبه من تحوّل في الثقافة الشعبية. وتُبرز الرسالة الفرق بين ثقافة الإعلام والثقافة الشعبية، إلا أنها تُوضّح العلاقة الأيضية القائمة بينهما من حيث أن ميزان القوى لم يعد مُوجّهاً لصالح كتلة السلطة؛ بل أصبح غير مستقر. كما أن تأثير الثقافة الشعبية من القاعدة إلى القمة فعال وسائد بنفس القدر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة الشعبية، ثقافة الإعلام، التحول، الاقتصاد السياسي، اقتصاد الانتباه، الثقافوية، الثقافة التشاركية، الماركسية، وسائل الإعلام الرقمية.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Ad: Advertisement

AI: Artificial Intelligence

App: Application

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

CGI: Computer Generated Images

ICT: Information, Communication, and Technology

IP: Intellectual Property

IT: Information Technology

VALS: Values and Lifestyles

PE: Political Economy

CPE: Critical Political Economy

PR: Public Relations

2D: Two Dimensional form

3D: Three Dimensional form

WHCA: White House Correspondents' Association

VFX: Visual Effects

SFX: Special Effects

ISA: Ideological State Apparatuses

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Introduction

Introduction

Popular culture is the *sui generis* trademark of the USA, a nation that is relatively nascent vis-à-vis the world's oldest civilizations, the likes of Egypt, China, and India. Indeed, its mainstream culture is not steeped in age-old high arts. Albeit low-brow, American popular culture has had a lasting appeal ever since its early days and has, therefore, set the aesthetic standards for the world's popular cultures. It is, by all means, the impetus for the Americanization of all facades of human existence: political, economic, social, and linguistic. Coupled with the precipitous technological advancement in the culture industry and the media, especially during the digital age, popular culture's production, dissemination, and consumption have drastically changed as it becomes participatory, democratized, and decentralized. In this vein, popular culture as a serious field of study has garnered the attention of cultural analysts, political economists, and sociologists alike; a plethora of research has been conducted to come to grips with its rudiments and nuances. Undoubtedly, the unparalleled appeal and financial gain of Hollywood blockbusters, Disney fairy tale classics, pop, and hip-hop hit music videos place American culture on a pedestal and further buttresses its soft power potential. In this vein, this thesis seeks to tackle the issue of popular culture in terms of its interpretation, metamorphosis, and politics.

In light of the momentous power the audience has culminated in the digital age- upgrading their status from being consumers and internet browsers to media prosumers- popular culture now functions as a counterbalance to traditional media power. Citizen journalists are exerting pressure on the biased news networks, broadcasters are snatching fame from Hollywood aristocrats whose blessing has been sought by political leaders, and popular movements are swinging the balance in favor

of the oppressed. This thesis addresses the problematic: to what extent does the political economy of the media (old and new media) still subtly shape popular culture in the information age?

The appeal of popular culture is evident in the practices of social media users who increasingly engage with political discourse by capturing and sharing everyday incidents that mainstream media may avoid for various reasons. From pastiching music through covers and mash-ups, to producing satirical political comedy videos on platforms like YouTube, users actively participate in shaping cultural narratives. Moreover, the global circulation of American popular movements—such as the Women’s March, the Me Too movement, environmental activism, anti-immigration protests, the resurgence of white nationalist and fascist groups, nationalist mobilizations, anti-police brutality demonstrations, and the Black Lives Matter movement—illustrates the dynamic power of participatory culture in disseminating ideologies and mobilizing publics. Within this framework, the thesis poses several critical questions: Does the power struggle between the culture industry and popular culture remain as imbalanced as in the past? What sustains the liberating, resistant, and progressive potential of popular culture, even as the influence of its raw material—the culture industry—waned in both national and global contexts? And to what extent does popular culture affect the political economy of the media and influence decision-making among its corporate proprietors?

This thesis tests three interrelated hypotheses. The first posits that the metamorphosis of popular culture in the digital age has not subverted the ideological and economic determinism historically associated with legacy media and the culture industry. Instead, digital media have developed new centralizing and authoritarian mechanisms to preserve the existing power structures. The second hypothesis asserts

that, despite the participatory affordances of digital platforms, popular media content is increasingly appropriated, repackaged with a progressive veneer, and monetized by the capitalist media apparatus for profit. The third hypothesis contends that the political economy of media continues to regulate popular culture through symbolic control mechanisms such as visibility algorithms, shadow-banning, and account suspension. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that the structural asymmetries of media power remain fundamentally intact.

In the throes of conducting a thorough critical analysis of the social fabric and the respectively immanent cultural pedigree, researchers encounter the conundrum of soliciting a meticulously serious endeavor to account for popular culture in all its genres, be it frivolous or consequential. Erstwhile, popular culture was mooted off with a condescending tone and tenor, for it was associated with the masses that were perceived as low-ranking and inundated with low-brow mores. Of substantial weight is the high-brow culture that ought to be fashioned by and orchestrated for the elite. It is such culture, arguably, that is of merit and begs to invest one's time and best efforts to unweave its very bolts and nuts. Nonetheless, equating popular culture to mass culture circumvents the conceptualization and discussion of popular culture. Such theorization eclipses the *bona fide* potential of popular culture and capitalizes on the up-and-down striding of the latter on the cultural escalator. Based on John Fiske's reasoning of popular culture, one can hinge a research on the definition that contends that popular culture is a culture that is composed by the people out of the culture produced by the power bloc and levied on the subordinate. In this respect, popular culture is a counter-hegemonic culture that ought to resist the forces of incorporation operating in the interests of the dominant groups. In brief, by relying on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Fiske asserts that popular culture emerges from how people

engage with and repurpose the products of the culture industry: while mass culture provides the repertoire of commodities, popular culture is constituted by what individuals actively do with these commodified texts and practices. As a culture created by and for the people, popular culture fosters a sense of identity that both unites individuals under a shared communal umbrella and enables expressions of individualism to flourish within that collectivity. Studying popular culture is both an informative and engaging pursuit, allowing scholars to explore a wide range of topics—from literature, fashion, and music to social media, cartoons, comics, sports, and virtual realities.

This thesis is organized into four chapters. Chapter One, titled “*The Political Economy of the Media*,” introduces the foundational concepts of political economy as articulated by various theorists in the field. It offers a comprehensive interpretation of key terms—such as commodification, commodity, digital age, and information age—that are essential for understanding the arguments developed in subsequent chapters. The chapter also delves into the dynamics of digital media from a psychological perspective, examining core concepts and phenomena to facilitate a deeper understanding of the media landscape and its associated culture. Specifically, the chapter explores homophily, confirmation bias, and cognitive dissonance, situating them within the operational logic of algorithmic visibility.

Chapter Two, titled “*The Genealogy of Popular Culture*,” traces the evolution of key theoretical approaches to popular culture, beginning with the Leavisite tradition and culminating in the work of scholars like John Fiske. The chapter delineates the distinction between mass culture and popular culture, particularly through a Marxist lens. It further examines how stereotypical representations are

embedded within the culture industry and, more broadly, how they shape and reflect the American collective consciousness.

Chapter Three, titled “*Popular Culture through the Prism of John Fiske’s Perspective*,” explores Fiske’s progressive hermeneutic approach to popular culture. Fiske emphasizes the politics of popular pleasures, framing them as bottom-up, resistive, and subversive practices that challenge the top-down aesthetic and ideological control exerted by the culture industry. To deepen this analysis, the chapter engages with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the carnival and the carnivalesque, highlighting their relevance to understanding political satire within the American media landscape. Bakhtin’s insights on the roles of fools and clowns are particularly instrumental in examining satire as a form of cultural resistance.

Chapter Four, titled “*Popular Culture Metamorphosis in the Digital Age*,” employs Franz Kafka’s philosophical metaphor of “metamorphosis” to examine the transformation of popular culture in the context of digital technologies. The chapter argues that the evolution of popular culture cannot be fully understood without addressing the parallel transformation of media culture, which serves as its foundational material. As digital platforms expand access and visibility, popular culture has emerged as a critical force confronting the misrepresentation of marginalized communities in mainstream media, including Hollywood cinema and news outlets. This cultural pressure has prompted media industries to revisit and revise dominant narratives rooted in patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies. A wave of reboots and remakes—including *The Little Mermaid*, *Ocean’s 11*, *Black Panther*, and *The Matrix Resurrections*—reflect efforts to authentically represent minorities and address historical injustices. The chapter also turns to the role of sport, a powerful yet often under-examined domain of popular culture. Despite its pervasive

presence, sport is frequently dismissed as apolitical due to its physicality and association with spectacle and aggression. However, this study contends that sport offers a critical lens through which to interrogate broader socio-political and economic structures, making it a vital site for cultural analysis.

A descriptive and analytical analysis will be conducted to chronicle and contextualize political and social junctures. An analogy will be drawn between past popular culture practices and norms and digitized experiences in the digital era, highlighting previous stereotypical images and misrepresentation of minorities that were deemed standard and acceptable and present-day rhetorical shift towards a historical revision and moral remedial endeavor. Similarly, the same approach will be applied to unravel the changes, political and cultural, that have been brought about because of social awareness.

This study situates its analysis of popular culture within the framework of John Fiske's cultural theory, given its alignment with the core concerns of this research—particularly its distinction between media culture and popular culture. Fiske's approach is both comprehensive and nuanced; it rejects the notion that cultural consumers are passive dupes, susceptible to manipulation and devoid of agency. Instead, it emphasizes the active role of audiences in generating meaning and deriving pleasure from media texts. For Fiske, popular culture is constituted by what people do with the products of the culture industry, thereby rendering consumers as cultural producers in their own right. This framework is especially insightful when applied to the realm of sports, as it reveals how individuals appropriate and reinterpret this industry in relation to their everyday lived experiences. In tandem with Fiske's theory, the study also draws on Marxist thought to examine how power and economic

structures shape cultural production and consumption. Marx's critique enables a deeper understanding of labor exploitation within the culture industry—whether among celebrities, producers, screenwriters, athletes, content creators, or rank-and-file workers. It also highlights how popular culture can both reflect and reinforce capitalist ideologies such as individualism and consumerism, while interrogating the ideological messages conveyed through sports and athletes' activism. To explore the subversive dimensions of popular culture, the study incorporates Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which elucidates the ongoing power struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups. Additionally, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of subversive pleasure, particularly his notion of the carnivalesque, is employed to uncover the latent oppositional potential embedded within commodified cultural forms and practices.

Last but not least, this study contextualize the analysis of sport and athletes' activism within the framework of the sociological perspective given that sport is part and parcel of society. Elias Norbert's theory, figurational sociology, appears to be the most fitting theory for its holistic approach that refutes the study of society on the bases of class, race and ethnicity, gender, and religion. Rather, it conceptualizes society in terms of interdependent groups of figurations. Oppressed groups exist and intertwine in different categories. For instance, women are the oppressed group across the sex spectrum and are also the oppressed group in the class category regardless of their social status. Men, on the other hand, who belong to the oppressed working class, are still the oppressor of their female counterparts belonging to the same class.

Chapter 1: The Political Economy of the Media

That political economy (PE) of the media, communications, and culture gained traction attests to the weight PE analysis upholds in media, communication, and culture research. PE as a field of inquiry ought not to be viewed as a monolithic approach; a few various theoretical schools generate distinctively flavored PE approaches. It behooves the researcher to tread across the meaning of PE and to move forward to associate it with media and communication studies. This entails tackling the schools of PE with the purpose of synthesizing a fitting approach through which media analysis would be conducted. The media industry constitutes a vast and multipronged terrain that engulfs a plethora of sub-terrains, including but not limited to television, radio, publishing (books, newspapers, and magazines), music, video games, digital platforms, and advertising. Subsequently, the media industry also subsumes sectors- hitherto deemed independent, mainly, Internet services, telecommunications, and information and communication technology (ICT)- as integral components of its broader infrastructural and operational framework. Such convergences are indicative and anticipant of the steady yet convoluted evolution of media production, dissemination, and consumption in the digital age. Apropos of the scope and limits of the study, a selected few industries will be covered.

Communication has been digitally mediated, capitalized and commercialized, creating a network media. Albeit utterly submerged in the market, digital network media depends on and promotes socially produced forms of expression that are by no means market-driven. These forms of expression are sometimes referred to as "social production of information", "gift culture", the "digital commons" and "mass self-expression". (Winseck and Jin 4). The concept of "social ecology of information" is derivative of Yochai Benkler's account of non-profit-driven media and informational form whose diversity is expanding (Winseck and Jin 11). These stocks of knowledge

are endemic to all societies- albeit amplified and precipitated at the onset of the internet. The resultant digitalized flows of communication gave way to commercialized communication through the market's infiltration of the social ecology of information (Winseck and Jin 12). The social ecology of information can be said to span the market and nonmarket areas of life. Thus, information and communication belong to the public goods and constitute the repository of thoughts, images, language, symbols, and gestures from which people come to build their identities, perceive the world, and create social bonds. Contrary to the conventional connotation of goods, communication is a source of pleasure and the genesis around which societies are organized. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, serves as a case in point, as it relies on volunteer contributors, operates without advertising, and functions under an alternative property model—the GNU Free Documentation License¹ (Winseck and Jin 12). Fundamentally, non-commercial media platforms the sort of Wikipedia and Internet Archive- which rely entirely on unpaid volunteers for content creation and operate without ad-generated revenue- constitute a de-centralized, user-driven model of content production. Conversely, centralized, ad-based media platforms such as Google, YouTube, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Spotify avail themselves of the expertise of meticulously recruited and professionally trained staff.

The PE of media continues to evolve in relation to the developments in their objects of analysis- media institutions, technologies, markets, and society- and to

¹ The GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL), a copyleft license, allows free access to, edition, and distribution of content- primarily documentation such as textbooks, manuals, music recordings, map designs, and high-value governmental dataset. This open-source licensing approach, as opposed to propriety media systems that function under restrictive copyright property models designed to control access and reuse of content, ensures open access and promotes collaborative authorship. Notable examples of initiatives and projects that espoused GFDL principles include Petrucci Music Library (a community built archive of public domain music scores and recordings), OpenStreetMap (a collaborative project dedicated to design a free, editable map of the world), and OpenStax (a nonprofit educational initiative by Rice University offering free and openly licensed textbooks).

changes in scholarship. Media studies are multidisciplinary; however, the political-economic dimensions are central themes. Nonetheless, a PE synthesis ought to straddle disciplines on its periphery, mainly cultural studies, sociology, and public choice theory, and bridge the theoretical divides.

1- The Political Economy of Media: A Conceptual Definition

As the name intimates, political economists take it as axiomatic that any study conducted within the confines of this discipline ought to explore, first and foremost, the economic and political dimensions of human activities. The genesis of PE lies in its aim to analytically chronicle social change and historical transformation. In this connection, 18th and 19th-century European renowned intellectuals, namely: Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill conducted preliminary PE endeavors whereby they attributed societal transition- from agrarian to industrial urban- to the capitalist revolution. Thus, the PE of this era is known as classical PE and solicits to grapple with "how human kind arranges to allocate scarce resources with a view to satisfying certain needs and not others" (A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 161). The capitalist-based interpretation of societal transition is deemed a viable repository of marketplace behavior and power relations that ought to inform political decisions in order to help abet economic growth.

In rebuttal to the theorizing of classical political economists, Karl Marx put forward a PE paradigm that shreds the dynamic forces of capitalism- both those that are conducive to its growth and demise- and prospectively envisages the propitious historical conditions that would pedal capitalist societies towards a socialist alternative. A rigorous concern for construing social change and historical transformation was at a premium for Marx and Marxian thinkers. By the same token,

today's political economists display the same zeal for social change as the world has stepped into the digital age. Much to their chagrin, political economists are at pains to envisage the prospect of social transformation that the digital age and its concomitant fast-changing information technological forces inflect upon the hitherto capitalist society (Mosco 3).

Although the PE of media and communication is said to have started in the 1960's, the early earmarks of PE as a scholarly discourse started taking shape in the social totality by positioning itself as an intellectually informed and socially authoritative framework for handling household, and community affairs. PE takes as axiomatic socially grounded knowledge, practices, and norms to emanate a descriptive and perspective account of the production, distribution, and exchange systems. Essentially, economics is a portmanteau word derivative of the classical Greek *oikos* and *nomos*, house and laws respectively, which allude to household management. More tellingly, politics is rooted in the Greek term *polos*, which translates to city-state. Hence, PE connotes a not yet fully-fledged autonomous science, but a branch of the broader science pertinent to the "statesman or legislator." Accordingly, the political façade, shying away from analyzing government-governed dynamics, is condensed to the government decision-making based on instructive economic insights and incentives aimed at abetting economic growth (A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 395). Suffice it to say, PE, during the heyday of the Scottish Enlightenment dogma², was reductively dubbed the study of wealth; construing "how humankind arranges to allocate scarce resources

² The Scottish Enlightenment is an 18th century Scottish intellectual movement that spearheaded the earliest version of Political Economy, constituting a distinct field of study. The Scottish Enlightenment laid the stepping stone for a systematic approach to studying production, labor, value, trade, and governance. This nascent discipline was premised on a philosophical, moral, and analytical orientation, reflecting the Enlightenment broader commitment to reason, empirical inquiry, and social progress.

with a view to satisfying certain needs and not others" (A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 161). In light of this contention, Adam Smith's magnum opus *The Wealth of Nations* is regarded as the inaugural text of PE.

In the late 19 century, influenced by the drive to create a science of society modeled after developments in the hard sciences, PE was refurbished around mathematical equations and Newtonian mechanics and recast as a neoclassical paradigm that ushered in the foundation for mainstream economics. The neoclassical approach capitalized on the economic aspect of the production process to the detriment of eclipsing the political wing and its concomitant power relations at play. Within the neoclassical paradigm, consumers' tastes, preferences, and individual utility maximization take precedence over structural concerns such as labour value, production conditions, and social relations of production. This PE paradigm places consumer sovereignty at the center of its market analysis inasmuch as it focuses on commodity production and consumption as indicators of consumer choice autonomy shaped by the principle of marginal utility³. The neoclassical economics is defined by William Stanley Jevons, a leading founding figure of the discipline, as the study of "the mechanics of utility and self-interest." Jevons departed from the main precepts of classical PE- labour, production, and social relations- and espoused a utility-based, individual-centered approach to economic behavior. In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham challenges philosophers to engage in the task of succinctly measuring social welfare- based on the maximization

³The principle of marginal utility is a fundamental precept in neoclassical economics that alludes to the additional utility –or satisfaction- a consumer induces from consuming one more unit of a commodity. Economists were less interested in determining human rights and needs; rather, they aimed at measuring choices made in the marketplace. Furthermore, they were also less interested in vetting the absolute utility of a commodity; rather, they are overwhelmingly concerned with the utility of the last available item, that is, its marginal utility. Economists argue that the utility of a given commodity drops with its increasing availability, whereas the utility of the marginal or the last desired unit dictates its value.

of pleasure to the detriment of pain and cost- through the application of his *sui generis* formulated algorithm, the “Felicific Calculus.” Pleasure and pain rather than religious or natural creed, Bentham contends, are the *de facto* and sole determinants of ethical and moral behavior. In this vein, Jevons conceptualizes economics as a science of optimization- basically the maximization of individual utility or pleasure to the neglect of a historical materialist, class-based economics. In this respect, he divulges, “To satisfy our wants to the utmost with the least effort- to procure the greatest amount of what is desirable at the expense of the least that is undesirable- in other words, to maximize pleasure, is the problem of economics” (Jevons 101). Over and above, Jevons’s neoclassical approach corroborates the contention that economic agents reach decisions based on cost-benefit calculations concerted with the principles of rational choice theory.

The neoclassical approach accentuates the importance of the marketplace of ideas for the survival and prosperity of liberal democratic societies. The concept of “marketplace of ideas” is an amalgam of two foundational liberal precepts: free market and free speech. In this connection, the neoclassical approach has established itself as a canon within the field of PE owing to the enduring appeal of its foundational liberal doctrines. Nonetheless, economic analysis tends to focus on synchronic studies while overlooking the traditional emphasis on history. As a result, it concludes that the study of institutional change and structural transformation cannot be precisely quantified mathematically. Economics thus limits its focus on social change to small, incremental adjustments within general equilibrium patterns. Although economic methods can be applied across different historical periods, they are notably inadequate for addressing transitions between periods, especially when these transitions involve disjunctions and upheavals" (Mosco 47).

1-1 Political Economy through the Sociological Prism:

PE, when understood through the lens of social practice, focuses on how power dynamics shape the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. This approach moves beyond theoretical abstraction and instead emphasizes the real-world social relationships that underlie economic processes (Mosco 24). The foregoing definition accentuates the pivotal process and forces at work in the marketplace production distribution, and consumption. Power dynamics, resultant from the undulation of marketplace forces, tend to reproduce the *status quo* inasmuch as the asymmetrical social relations forged between the superordinate and subordinate hold sway. Notwithstanding its merits, this definition downplays the subordinate's agency and their incessant challenge to the reproduced power structure so as to render it constituted in their favor. Social structures should be understood as something that is continuously being created, rather than merely being upheld over time. This perspective is meaningful only if the theory recognizes that these structures can be formed in new ways. While powerful groups aim to maintain the systems that benefit them, it is always uncertain whether or how they will manage to do so (Connell, 44).

PE sets forward a broad approach to social life. It constitutes a discipline that solicits to encompass the wider social totality in its study, instead of assigning each everyday problem to a discrete field of study: social class to sociology, government to political science, and market to economics. PE cannot be reduced to economics; being exclusively concerned with the study of wealth does not gainsay its mutual constitution and multiple determination of social life. Political economists arrogate to themselves the role of deconstructionists of the power dynamics at play and its

burgeoning entanglement with wealth, communication and media, and the resulting cultural metamorphosis of said entanglement.

1-2 Political Economy and Moral Philosophy

Moral philosophy connotes social values that inform convenient social practices. Germane to the field, moral philosophy outlines the bona fide economic and political maneuvers apposite for the advancement of social good. Political economists of media, mainly Golding and Murdock, espouse a critical analysis approach to media that not only dissects the economic and political forces at play in the marketplace, but also gives momentum to basic moral questions of justice, equity, and the public good (“Culture, Communications, and Political Economy” 68-69).

A crucial attribute associated with the field is moral philosophy. The progenitors of the early fledgling field, mainly Adam Smith and Karl Marx, were first and foremost philosophers, each espousing a distinct version of moral values and the apposite social practices. Adam Smith’s 1759 ethics-infused tome *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which champions empathy and altruism as the epitome of human virtues, is in telling contrast to his later acclaimed work *The Wealth of Nations*. The latter advocates for the liberal doctrine and individualist values- such as self-interest, which prioritizes maximizing personal gain at the expense of public good,- individual freedom- which endorses minimizing the state's intervention and regulation of resource ownership and distribution of wealth,- and materialism- which lays the groundwork for a market economy based on mass production and mass consumption (Babe 14). Bewilderingly, Smith in his book that was written seventeen years before *The Wealth of Nations* attacked Hobbes’ notion of self-interest with a call to do good for others (A. Smith 71). In this vein, Smith's PE paradigm centers on "the study of

wealth generation, as opposed to the study of wealth distribution (economic justice)" (A. Smith 71). By the same token, Thomas Malthus took issue with uncontrolled population growth lest society would be incrementally headed for ruin as the growing population was incessantly squandering resources and intermittently spreading diseases. Albeit averse to the idea of uncontrolled population growth and its concomitant ramifications, Malthus was at odds with government intervention to contain the spread of disease insomuch as rampant raw sewage spilling over city streets would lead to the extermination "of the weak and thereby ensuring population control and survival of the fittest" (Mosco 39). Marx's moral philosophical standpoint solicits to usher in a societal model that shies away from a class-based society and thrives on satisfying people's needs. The onus is on moral philosophy to shape the way people are treated in the social totality; being deemed as part and parcel of the means of production and the marketplace by economists does lead to economic, social, and political practices that effectively reduce living labor to a factor of production. Moral values, when espoused, usher in welfare economics on board with a plethora of heterodox schools of thought, mainly: neo-conservatism, Marxian PE, environmental PE, and feminist PE.

1-3 The Political Economy of the Media:

A broad definition of PE accounts for a field that vets the mechanisms of "control and survival in social life". The foregoing definition is imputed to Dallas Smythe, one of the renowned architects of the PE of communication. This approach to PE cuts across the political and the economic spectrums insomuch as it deploys the term control to connote societal organization and management of inevitable changes, whereas survival denotes people's need for production to ensure human race

reproduction and societal survival. In this connection, control entails the political *modus operandi*, and survival implies the economic moorings (Mosco 3). One must appreciate the merits and weigh in on the demerits. The foregoing definition's breadth is manifest in its unwarranted magnitude to engulf all human activities in its scope of analysis. Nonetheless, this breadth condemns the field to conflate "human political economy, principally our consciousness or awareness, with nature-based processes of control and survival (Mosco 3).

Placing media PE within this definitional mold evinces the media's forces at play in the marketplace. Media, both old and new, and media products such as movies, news, books, videos, social media users' content, and audiences are the primacy resources. Of paramount importance is tracing the production process of the media industry and the reproduction of power structure; "how it deals with those who distribute the product and market it, and how consumers decide about what to watch, read, or listen to. Finally, it considers how consumer decisions are fed back into the process of producing new products" (Mosco 24). Control of the means of production extends to a monopoly on contouring power relations, whereby media companies and conglomerates are at the helm of, *inter alia*, the marketplace, wealth generation, content creation, and audience influence. Not only do these entities determine what content is produced and consumed, but they also shape audience responses, which in turn inform future media strategies. More to the point, they harvest and monetize audience surveillance data, selling it to advertisers and further consolidating their influence.

1-4 Critical Political Economy of the Media

Critical political economy (CPE), an inclusive approach to the study of media, tresses the unequal distribution of capital and power and criticizes the underpinning dynamics that sustain and reproduce such inequalities. It is, first and foremost, the offspring of the Marxist tradition insofar as it inherits the monumental Marxist precepts, mainly relations of production, commodification, class struggle, and labor value (Hardy 6). CPE theorizing runs contrary to mainstream media economics that “tends to ignore the relationship of power to wealth and thereby neglects the power of institutions to control markets (Mosco 62).

Critical political economists such as Nicolas Garnham, Vincent Mosco, Peter Golding, and Graham Murdock unanimously define CPE as a paradigm that links critical analysis of cultural production with the analysis of the political forces and economic factors that determine media products. As Golding and Murdock accentuate, “The industrial-capitalist manufacturing of communication products is regarded not as the core, but as part of the broader capitalist economy and structure of interests” (Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications, and Political Economy 61-63). CPE, in its endeavor to insinuate its principles into media studies terrain, takes as its focal point the underpinning features that shape the economic mechanisms and the political consequences of mass media. Equating media organizations to profit-based businesses, critical political economists appraise media content in terms of cultural products that ought to be subjected to the same laws governing material commodities. However, they by all means acknowledge the dual nature of cultural products (TV shows, music videos; news, fashion, games): the material and ideological strains of the cultural commodities and ideas. The aforementioned cultural duality is a central theme in every tentative definition of CPE. Reasonably, and within this framework of reference one could deduce that consumers of culture are also

producers of ideas. Suffice it to say, ideology takes precedence and constitutes a recurring theme in the study of the CPE of media so much so that it is incumbent on political economist to account for the production of ideology. Murdock and Golding contends that the production of ideology could be construed by articulating the general and systematic constraints brought about media's cultural products and commodities ("For a Political Economy of Mass Communications" 223). Its restrictive commodity-related nature exerts an attendant ideological bearing that maintains the status quo (Golding and Murdock, "For a Political Economy of Mass Communications" 226-227).

The vast terrain of CPE encompasses the analysis of meaning-making, ideology, subjectivity, and consciousness, along with the critique of capital accumulation and class struggle. Media and communication study is exclusively concerned with the hermeneutic analysis of texts and the psychological study of audience behavior at the expense of economic elucidation of the production process and labor value. CPE, however, concerns itself with how media and communication dynamics effectuate social justice and emancipation and sustain, or challenge thereof, power relations. Contentiously, CPE is met with the conundrum of the limitless potential of advanced digital media and the burgeoning power of capital: "The promise of limitlessness (in digital communications, content creation, creative labour, and global cultural flow) encounters the constraining influences of money and power (the economic and political) in a manner that is unavoidable for serious analysis" (Hardy 3-4).

The media industry has been the fastest growing business in the world. The media, both old and new, has dredged the world-life on every corner. The

privatization of the media expedites products, obliquely or opaquely, replete with miscellaneous ideologies and agendas. Albeit the lucrative orientation of media culture is held at a premium, its politicization is far from being sheathed to the public eye. The misrepresentation of the various social figurations in the movie industry, the whitewashing of the artistic award nominations, the manipulations orchestrated by the news outlets, and the propagation-driven exclusive social media platforms are, *inter alia*, among the sequelae of the media industry in the globalized era. Thus, for a thorough comprehension of the media and their products, one ought to draw on the PE paradigm that would spell out the crosscutting political and economic trends immanent in the media spectrum.

The progression towards the digital era, or the information age, has been swift and ineluctable; it started in the 21st century and stretches to the current day. It succeeded the post-Industrial age and is marked by an economic domination of information technology. Information technology (IT) is an umbrella term that encompasses “artificial intelligence (AI) systems, communication modes, machine learning, and robotic systems” (Windsor). The digital age require a distinctly new methods of learning to navigate the novel digital technology, media, and platform. Media literacy is a prerequisite to learn how to use social media and mobile devices in an effective way and understand how digital technologies impact “personal identity and perception of global culture” as well as relations of “gender, race/ethnicity, gender, or age” (Novak and El-Burki XVII).

2-The Political Economy of the New Media

In the wake of the shift from national industrial capitalism to global information capitalism, media, and digital technologies are by far the fastest-growing

lucrative industries, creators, and disseminators of culture. The touted democratization and equal distribution of communication power have been manifest in what came to be called "participatory culture," lowering the barriers to cultural participation, contesting mainstream media, bi-directional communication, citizen journalism, content creators and influencers, and robust social activism. Therefore, the sector has witnessed a steep rise in capital investment. More tellingly, permissive government policies facilitated the convergence of old and new media. Nonetheless, akin to the media industry, the internet industry is not exempt from ownership, concentration, state regulation, globalization, and advertising effects on the circulating content. The focal point of the media study's scope dictates the PE approach and theoretical edifice to be implemented.

Participatory culture is a fitting cultural model that succinctly accounts for the active role participants and internet users undertake in their culture consumption experience, especially in the engaging digital media landscape. Rather than being passive spectators, consumers contribute to and shape media content by creating, circulating, and interpreting texts on a par with their background and social conditions. The American media scholar Henry Jenkins defines participatory culture as a space in which multiple voices are heard and have some impact on the decisions that impact their own lives (Jenkins 15). Essentially, the cultural terrain permits a collective engagement and contribution wherein networked media "blurs the lines between consumer and producer, forcing media companies to forge different relationships with their fans" –Jenkins 15). In this vein, participatory culture, it could be asserted, is marked by "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creation, and some type of informal mentorship" (Jenkins et al. 33)

2-1- Social Media Dynamics

Although the internet has expanded the width and breadth of public debate- so much so consumers of information are rendered producers and purveyors of content- the online discourse is by no means dialogic and democratic in terms of exchanging opposing views and vertically interacting with decision-makers. Social media reinforces existing ideological orientations and preferences by selectively exposing like-minded users to favorable content and networks that echo their core beliefs and confirm their biases- thus the expressions: selective exposure, and confirmation bias. These expressions connote mechanisms inherent in social media that generate constellations of homogenous views, dubbed “echo chambers.” The socio-cognitive engineering behind online echo chambers is based on humans’ tendency to organize themselves in enclaves driven by confirmation bias and homophily.

Narrow exposure and concentrated user interest caused by recommender algorithm is an important mechanism imputed to the echo chamber effect. This tendency is exacerbated by the human underlying proclivity to lend credence to evidence that fits our existing beliefs. Confirmation bias, a term typically used in the psychological literature, connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand. Psychologists and philosophers alike have viewed confirmation bias as decisive determinant of human behaviour and attitude yet diagnosed it as a human reasoning flaw insomuch as it causes myriads of polarizing disagreements and disputes amongst individuals, communities, and polities. By definition, confirmation bias denotes the inadvertent biased selection and acquisition of new information that approves of pre-existing knowledge and well established mode of reasoning (Nickerson 175). Suffice it to say,

confirmation bias "connotes evidence that is perceived- to support- to increase the credibility of- a hypothesis" (Nickerson 176). More tellingly, not only do humans approach novel ideas in a biased fashion when their long-held belief system is contested or refuted wholesale, but they also engage in cherry-picking evidence although their hypothesis is not jeopardized. Indeed, when we have no personal involvement in a conflict between strangers, we are usually able to assess the situation objectively, carefully considering the evidence and reaching a rational conclusion. We can be persuaded to support either side based on solid evidence. However, when the conflict involves ourselves or those close to us—such as friends, family, or associates—our ability to consider alternative perspectives diminishes, making it harder to think rationally and intelligently (Thurstone 101).

In a similar vein, internet users, inherently equipped with confirmation bias, tend to sort through data with caution. Disquieting information or opinions are discarded insofar as it is difficult to cognitively reconcile two antithetical hypotheses; nonetheless, favourable hypotheses supportive of one's stance are adamantly sought and guarded. Consistency of established beliefs with evidence trumps rationality of counterindicative evidence inconsistent with long-held beliefs.

Psychologists and sociologists have approached homophily as an underlying structure of social networks that is prerequisite for contending with social contentious issues such as socialization, segregation, and social mobility. People with demographic similarity, shared knowledge and cultural tastes tend to sort themselves into enclaves of marital kinship, friendships, tribal affiliation, workplace acquaintances, to name but a few, in order to maintain smoothly substantive communication and reliable connection. It has been noticed that within the same social circle individuals with the most patent similarities- ranging from demographics

to mental states- are more likely to experience propinquity and, therefore, potentially selective association than those with fewer similarities; this is especially evident within adolescent subcultures (McPherson et al., 435).

Socio-demographic similarity is the *prima facie* determinant of homophilous connections; hence, sociologists placed the said socio-demographic attributes, mainly race, ethnicity, gender, age, and class at the center of social network studies. More to the point, sociologists Lazarsfeld and Merton identified two homophily categories: status homophily and value homophily; the former encompasses the perceived status of individuals including sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, academic achievement, and occupation whereas the latter denotes the internal states, mainly attitudes, values, political affiliation, purported to dictate our future behaviour and endeavors. An exclusively socio-demographics-based approach to online homophily, nonetheless, falls short to account for the digital social networks (Lazarsfeld and Merton).

Social media provided a venue for individuals to explore online community structure and social networks beyond their geographical locations and social circles, and across different time zones. Users' socio-demographic information such as gender, race, class, age, and education available on social media might not be reliable in terms of credibility whereas their interests, cultural tastes, religious beliefs, political affiliations, and ideologies are displayed advertently or inadvertently through likes, comments, reposting, and following.

Network studies shifted focus from socialization between individuals to organizational structures of social entities above the level of individuals such as businesses, political institutions, social movements, activist groups, to name but a few. The findings of these studies helped, *inter alia*, further individuals' careers,

improve business models and advertising strategies, and revolutionize political campaigning (McPherson et al., 418)

With humankind's homophilous bent in mind, social media algorithms were designed to conduct data mining and analytics in order to "segment society into digital silos" (Neudert and Marchal16) wherein users hedge in themselves such that they are impervious to opposing views. Contingent on psychographic⁴ analysis and behavioural micro-targeting, the tailor-made political and marketing messages successfully and constantly manage to reach the intended granular market of potential consumers or voters. User data is leveraged to "gain insights about uses' behaviour, preferences, attitudes and lifestyles, which then ultimately informs decision-making in areas as diverse as product design to formulating policy and campaign slogans" (Neudert and Marchal 23). Analysts, however, have warned against user data mining not least conducted on the behest of politicians owing to the fact that the latter engaged in unethical political interference in the way of redlining particular segment of users from political information, shadow banning certain groups' posts, and manufacturing attitudes. Arguably, social media algorithms are bound to generate managed citizenship instead of participatory citizenship (Chudacoff and J. Smith). This contention runs contrary to the popular belief asserting that social media is a beacon of democracy and informed citizenry eligible to make political decisions.

The internet was poised to be a boon for democracy, yet social media platforms, not least YouTube and Facebook, are constantly bashed for subtly shadow

⁴ Psychographics is defined as market research or statistics classifying population groups according to psychological variables. The term psychographics is derived from the words "psychological" and "demographics." Two common approaches to psychographics include analysis of consumers' activities, interests, and opinions (AIO variables), and values and lifestyles (VALS).

banning dissident voices and suspending their accounts under the pretext of “violation of community guidelines and maintaining a safe environment for users” (Neudert and Marchal 21). Shadow banning gained notoriety as a substantial digital misstep that “dramatically reduces the visibility of posts by hiding them from its Explore page without warning” (Are 2002). In 2016, conservative users accused Twitter and Facebook of content moderation in an attempt to muzzle the conservative voices. Twitter public relations (PR) team explained this away as “a glitch, an anticipated error in the algorithmic system that had limited the search bar visibility of large number of users, irrespective of political orientation” (Savolainen 1092).

The posts that are recommended by social media algorithms for users are more likely the posts users will view, react to, and share. Such recommendations are based on data gathering and analysis of users' preferences and orientations. That is, they are "not centered on who we are, nor even on what our data says about us, but on what can be imagined and inferred about who we might be- on our proclivities and potentialities" (Amoore 28). In this vein, algorithms constitute an integrated part of the social infrastructure as it tends to levy a distorted version of reality upon internet users: "They have the potential to become a reality and to reinforce, maintain or even shape visions of the social world, knowledge and encounters with information" (Beer 81). Echo chamber, filter bubble, epistemic bubble, recommender system and a plethora of similar concepts and metaphors coined by media scholars elucidate the inner workings of algorithmic processes and the boundaries and limitations they clandestinely impose upon internet users' agency. An algorithm chooses and strengthens one particular arrangement while sidelining others. As a result, agency is inherently contested within and through algorithms. They influence what actions can be taken and what can be expressed. Algorithms not only normalize certain systems

but also drive specific actions. They shape who interacts with whom by incorporating established patterns of thought, communication, and behavior" (Mackenzie 44).

The algorithm-instigated selectivity of data runs the risk of eclipsing diverse perspectives and worryingly generates confirmation-bias conducive to polarization and extremism (Hayat et al., 2002). The power of algorithms lies in their undetected structural forces that shape public opinions, decision-making, and cultural tastes. In effect, the digital invisibility of the algorithmic processes with regard to rule setting and maintaining creates a "technological unconsciousness" and naturalizes the jeopardy of users' agency and the censorship of information (Beer 69-70).

The adamant longing for proximity and immediate accessibility immediate is well satiated in the digital era insofar as platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X, YouTube, Twitch allow unprecedentedly unfettered access to the masses' favorite celebrities' and micro-celebrities'⁵ private lives. Livestreams introducing the micro-celebrities' daily routines, wardrobe choices, or interior design create the illusory aura of intimacy, authenticity, and nearness. The latter capitalize on such parasocial relationships for fame and financial gain. The authenticity is staged for the camera and the persona is meticulously curated for mass appeal. The online authenticity is by all means transitory by design by virtue of reproducibility. TikTok loops, ephemeral Snapchat posts, WhatsApp statuses, and Instagram stories are a case in point. The uniqueness and permanence characteristic of the artwork are lost on digital content inasmuch as content creators' agenda is geared for monetization and

⁵ Micro-celebrities, encompassing online celebrities, content creators, or influencers, is a term coined and defined by Terri Senft, in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* as internet personalities who devised a novel approach to performance and spectacle mediated through social networking, video, webcams, audio, and blogs for the sole purpose of ramping up their online visibility and, therefore, fame amongst their followers.

intention economy⁶ instead of the lure of lasting aesthetic value. Intention economy is consumer-oriented rather than product-based.

2-2- Web Layers and Sociality Modes

The selling of Americans' eyeballs has become the coming of age business model. Silicon Valley and Amazon are the titans of global tech industry whose initial intent was not to serve as a commercial online marketplace. Their exponentially burgeoning status in terms of customer subscription and its concomitant potential monetization skewed the aforementioned intent of the nascent digital companies. Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates and Jeff Besoz launched their startups- Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon, respectively- with a promising vision of connectivity, edge-cutting technological advancement, and unlimited and democratic access to information. Nonetheless, advertisement-generated revenue do pay the bills; hence, mainstream media and digital media alike felt the need to avail themselves of the opportunity and incorporate digital advertisements on their platforms that target consumers' attention. Mark Zuckerberg notably delayed the introduction of advertisements on Facebook for four years after its launch. He claimed that his primary goal was to connect people globally, not to capitalize on advertising opportunities. He later acknowledged that advertising was necessary to cover operational costs. Similarly, YouTube started as a platform driven by a small group of creators focused on art, but after being acquired by Google in 2006, advertising became a key revenue source within just two years. Interestingly, in its early days, Google opposed the idea of search engines being supported by ads, fearing the potential bias they could introduce" (Nelson-Field 2).

⁶ Attention economy is a concept that describes a marketplace where human attention is regarded a scarce and valuable commodity. Hence, various media, platforms, and advertisers compete to capture users' attention in that it has direct market value, mainly in digital environments wherein user engagement is translated to data, ad revenue, or influence.

Not only did the advertising industry morphed dramatically from its conventional paradigm: broad and demographic-based display advertisement that is affiliated with mainstream media, mainly television, radio, and newspaper, the notions of customer and labour have also assumed skewed connotations. Online advertisement is personalized, precise, and data-driven insofar as it draws on users' behavior, location, by means of data mining and sophisticated algorithms. The digital media companies do not sell products and services to advertisers but rather users' attention, thus giving rise to the concept of attention economy. Accordingly, e-markets ought to treat attention as a key economic resource. Within this frame of reference, users are no longer the customers of those digital companies' content but workers, for advertisers hold the customers position instead. Users are in fact the commodity to be sold in the marketplace wherein their focus and engagement turn into an unpaid labour. The Canadian communication scholar Dallas Smythe wrote prolifically about the political economy of the digital media. In his article "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work," he asserts that because "audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity... you audience members contribute your unpaid work time and in exchange you receive the program material and the explicit advertisements" (Smythe 233-238). More to the point, audience commodity is by no means a digital media emergent; traditional media do commodify its audience by selling their watching time to advertisers. The nuance lies in the fact that the latter are passive consumers of entertainment and information whereas the former are active consumers: that is, they contemporaneously consume and produce content, hence the term "prosumers." Suffice it to say, digital platforms, creators, and brands alike are by no means selling products; they are vying for users' time, clicks, likes and share.

Not only is Digital media a plethora of technological artifacts and AI companions, but it also is a techno-social system that enables and constrains human activities conducive to the production, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge within a framework that connects technological structure and human agency (Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* 37). Media need not be reduced to a fixed and objectified social system. Fundamentally, media as a means of communication is inherently multilayered. Accordingly, Fuchs contends that digital networks operate on three distinct layers- Web1.0, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0⁷, - each corresponding to a fundamental mode of sociality⁸: cognition, communication, and co-operation (*Social Media: A Critical Introduction* 44). Web 1.0, “a computer-based networked system of human cognition,” constitutes the nascent stage of the internet wherein communication and content circulation were a one-way endeavor. This internet paradigm gave precedence to the cognitive function of the internet- information retrieval and dissemination- to the detriment of its communicative function. The precept of Web 1.0 is reflective of Emile Durkheim’s theory of sociality that accentuates the social nature of human cognition: “a social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is in its own right independent of its individual manifestations” (Durkheim 59). Essentially, Durkheim asserts that cognition and social facts have a symbiotic relationship whereby it is incessantly “confronted with social facts and is the foundation for creating and recreating social facts (Fuchs, “The Contemporary World Wide Web: social medium or new space of accumulation 202).

⁷ Christian Fuchs uses the term « web » to refer not only to the World Wide Web but to connote any techno-social information network that instigates human action and interaction.

⁸ Sociality in the digital media field refers to the ways individuals form, maintain, and navigate social relationship online by virtue of technological artifacts. Scholars like Christian Fuchs and José van Dijck highlight that digital sociality is shaped by platform structures, algorithmic visibility, and the political economy of media—meaning that social interactions online are not only interpersonal but also deeply influenced by data commodification, surveillance, and attention economies.

Nonetheless, Durkheim's theory of social facts leaves many stones unturned as far as communication is concerned. In light of the swiftly evolving landscape of digital technology, Web 2.0 ushered in challenging realities to our comprehension of digital sociality. The early 2000's social webs, *inter alia* Google, social media, YouTube, Wikipedia, Blogger introduced a socially participatory, community-oriented, and content generating digital platforms that remarkably enhanced user experience, surpassing the limited potentials of Web 1.0. Web 2.0 refers to a network-based platform that connects all devices, with applications designed to leverage the advantages of this platform. These applications provide software that is continuously updated and improves with increased usage. They consume and remix data from various sources, including individual users, while also sharing their own data in ways that others can remix. This model creates network effects through an 'architecture of participation' and moves beyond the static page structure of Web 1.0 to offer more dynamic user experiences (O'Reilly).

The inherent interactivity endemic to Web 2.0 is a fitting rendition of Max Weber's theory of sociality: social action. Weber interprets social relations in terms of actions that are determined and oriented by the behaviour of other actors, irrespective of their physical presence (Weber 4). Weber differentiate between actions that attain a social character and those that do not: "overt action is not social if it is oriented solely to the behavior of inanimate objects" (Weber 22). In this regards, the action is social only because it is exclusively directed towards other people: a young lady who covers her head with her handbag because of the heavy rain is not deemed a social action as opposed to two individuals changing course in order not to bump into each other on the sidewalk. The latter incident is a social action because each individual takes into account the other actor's steps. Additionally, the Weberian perspective accords

importance to symbols, meaning, and signs in the communicative process: “communication is a process in which signs and symbols are given a certain meaning by a person or group of persons who share those meanings among themselves and with others who also give certain meanings to these signs and symbols” (Fuchs, “The Contemporary World Wide Web” 202).

Web 3.0 is a digital semantic network of human co-operation that promotes data integration and decentralized collaboration. Web 3.0 includes countless open-source software, peer-to-peer networks; chief of which wikis, blockchain apps⁹, and knowledge commons¹⁰. This digital media layer is congruent with the cooperative mode of sociality conceptualized and meticulously dissected by Karl Marx and Ferdinand Tönnies. Ferdinand Tönnies’s theory of co-operation is centered around the notion of community which entails the existence of a “consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence” (Tönnies 69). Co-operation is goal-oriented in that the community’s agents engage in a joint action within the contour of a harmonious consensus of beliefs, moral values, social mores and familial conventions. Marx, in his turn, took an economic approach to co-operation, contrary to Tönnies’s sociological undertaking. Marx posits a theory of sociality that is firmly rooted in a collaborative endeavor driven by the collective labour of many workers with the aim of producing goods to meet human needs and

⁹Blockchain is a decentralized, distributed digital ledger that records transactions across multiple computers, ensuring that no record can be altered retroactively without modifying all subsequent blocks. Blockchain applications leverage this technology to securely manage data, facilitate peer-to-peer transactions, and often bypass centralized authorities such as banks, governments, and large corporations.

¹⁰ Knowledge commons refer to shared information resources that are collectively created, maintained, and utilized by a community, typically accessible to all rather than controlled by a single entity. Examples include Wikipedia, open-source software like Linux and Mozilla Firefox, and open-access scientific research, among others.

eventually holding sway over the means of production. By 'social,' we mean the collaboration of individuals, regardless of the circumstances, methods, or goals involved. This implies that each stage of production or industry is linked to a specific form of cooperation or social structure, and this form of cooperation itself constitutes a 'productive force' (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 50)

Christian Fuchs devised a model that seemingly captures the three dimensions of digital media and their attendant three modes of sociality. The three modes of sociality are posed one atop the other: “co-operation is based on but more than communication and communication is based on but more than cognition.” In this vein, in order for individuals to communicate they should cognize and navigate the information and knowledge by dint of digital networked information system, to wit Web 1.0; moreover, if they are to co-operate they should first communicate meaningfully by dint of symbols encoded, transmitted, and decoded via computer network, to wit Web 2.0. The harmoniously web-mediated communication yields adept web-mediated co-operation, Web 3.0 (“The Contemporary World Wide Web” 202-203).

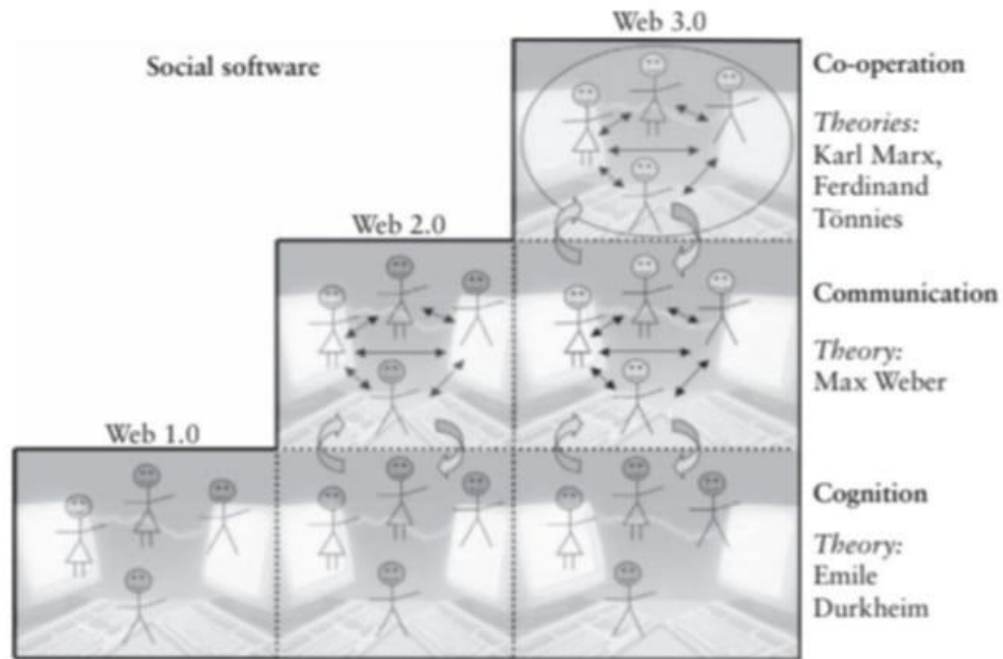


Figure 1: A Model of Social Software and its Three Subtypes (Winseck and Young Jin 203)

Worth noting is the fact that Christian Fuchs consequential and insightful analysis of digital media and their social functions was conducted in 2012 wherein the digital media spectrum has not yet witnessed the advent of artificial intelligence and the steep rise of Web 4.0. Notably, Web 4.0 is also dubbed Metaverse; it is the cross point where the virtual and the real worlds merge, and the technological artifacts and the human body interact. The rise of cyborg, AI, robots, and androids generated a symbiotic intelligent ecosystem generative of cultural production and social interaction. The AI-driven ecosystem is predicated on machine-augmented presence, predictive algorithms and hyper personalization (“Shaping Web 4.0” 4-0)

Web layer	Sociality mode	Key traits
Web 1.0	Cognition	-One-way communication -unmalleable data -conventional websites
Web 2.0	Communication	Interactive -User-generated content -Social networking (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)
Web 3.0	Co-operation	-Semantic web -Semantic web, intelligent data integration, decentralized collaboration (e.g., blockchain apps, knowledge commons)
Web 4.0	Symbiosis	-ambient social interaction -unlimited human-machine interaction -AI-integrated environment (e.g., AI assistants <i>Alexa</i> and <i>Siri</i> , e read-write-execution-concurrency web)

Figure 2: The Four Web Layers and Their Sociality Modes

The PE of media in the digital age circumvents its concerns around key crucial issues, namely technological dynamics and infrastructure, mediated production, dissemination and consumption of content and cultural commodities. In this light, the big tech companies like Google, TikTok, Amazon, and Disney constitute the barons of the industry that decide on the visibility and virality of content and its creators by dint of visibility algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers. Although the advent digital age was promising insomuch as technology is able to decentralize and

democratize access to information; nonetheless, the dynamics of the digital technology proved otherwise as humanity finds itself headed towards authoritarianism and fascism disguised in libertarianism.

Chapter 2: The Genealogy of Popular Culture Studies

The study of popular culture has developed into a highly contested and interdisciplinary field, engaging with disciplines such as sociology, media studies, cultural theory, and PE. As a concept, popular culture remains elusive and resistant to fixed definitions, often shaped by the ideological and historical context in which it is discussed. This chapter traces the intellectual genealogy of popular culture studies, examining how different theoretical schools have conceptualized popular culture and how their interpretations have been influenced by shifting historical, political, and cultural forces. From early moralistic critiques of mass entertainment to more nuanced Marxist, structuralist, and poststructuralist analyses, the conceptual terrain of popular culture is anything but static.

1- Mapping out the general conceptual landscape

1-1- Popular Culture:

The theoretical framework underpinning the research is shaped by the definition of popular culture employed. The term popular culture is as elusive as each of its two components separately: popular and culture. For a substantial understanding of popular culture, it is a prerequisite to define these two components.

Paradoxical this might seem, the Arnoldian and Leavisites perspectives that centered on the denigration of popular culture, and the "populace" wit large- Arnold employs the term to refer to the working class- and the rejection of the politics of rejection and protests constitutes the vanguard of popular culture studies. Their ideas, permeated the field until the 1950's, constituted an intellectual terrain of seminal importance that pioneered the application of literary techniques imputed to serious aesthetic products to popular works.

1-2- Culture:

Culture, "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams, *Keywords* 87), has been defined differently by a host of cultural analysts, perhaps the most famous and of who is Raymond Williams. He posited three potential connotations: the aesthetic, intellectual, or spiritual product of philosophers, acclaimed artists or poets: texts, people's way of life, such as literacy, religious festival, holidays, and pastime: practices, over a period of time, and the intellectual and artistic activities generative of meaning: texts and practices (Williams, *Keywords* 90).

Ostensibly, culture was a homogenous body of insight and aestheticism crafted by a handful of elites for people from different figurations; the cultural critic Matthew Arnold flaunts it as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 6, 1960) that is endowed with "moral, social, and beneficial character" (Arnold 46). Not only is culture the most refined body of knowledge, argues Arnold, but it also constitutes the means to attain the said body of knowledge, and its application to the "inward condition of the mind and spirit" (Arnold 31). The Arnoldian perspective attributes four connotations to the term culture: "(i) the ability to know what is best; (ii) what is best; (iii) the mental and spiritual application of what is best, and (iv) the pursuit of what is best" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 19-20).

Arnold dichotomizes the cultural debate into two terrains: culture and anarchy. The industrialization and urbanization forged a social class that morphed Western society with regards to political and cultural spectrums. Working class disrupted the status quo inasmuch as they engaged in politics through suffrage and subverted the cultural map by crafting their own lived culture. Arnold's anarchy is an allusion to

male urban working class disruptive entanglement with political and cultural issues. Arnold does not hide his aversion to the culture of the "raw and uncultivated" (176); and his blatant class-based discourse attests to a serious concern about the contested aristocrat and middle-class hegemony. In this vein, it could be ascertained that the Arnoldian perspective on culture and anarchy is inherently political. Culture ought to inculcate individuals with the principle of authority so as to refine the aristocracy and middle-class cultural tastes and police those barbarian "populace" who are in dire need of "a much wanted principles...of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy that seems to be threatening us" (82). In this respect, the recommended authoritative culture is akin to a centralized State so much so the two envisage a class-based society wherein sovereignty over individuals is enshrined by and exercised through a homogenized body of precepts, be them jurisdictional or cultural. That Arnold fervently expressed his nostalgia to 18th century aristocracy sophisticated and hegemonic culture and centralized power unravels his consternation over the decline of the aristocracy as a the central antipathy to democracy. The suffrage agitation of 1866-67 that culminated in Hyde Park riots and further disturbances is presumably a democratic endeavor that disturbed the status quo. Such democratic practices are symptomatic of a dangerous working-class which rid itself of "the strong feudal habits of subordination and deference" (Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* 76). The onus is on education to diffuse a pacifying culture capable of dissuading the working class from indulging in "trade unionism, political agitation, and cheap entertainment" and rendering it obsequious to exploitation and deference (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 21). Such education amounts to a state-sponsored civilizing process designed to encounter bottom-up working-class cultural revolution and political disorder (Arnold, Mathew. *Letters 1848–1888*). Suffice it to say, Arnold's promoted

culture is antithetical to democracy, pluralism, and working-class culture. Not only does he not prioritize culture as much as he underscores social authority and order in his *Culture and Anarchy*, but he also asserts that he is only interested in working class culture inasmuch as "it signals evidence of social and cultural decline and decline- a breakdown in social and cultural authority" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 22).

Popular culture has been a conundrum for the power-block owing to its endemic proclivity for political dissidence; thus, it behooved the powerful minority to refurbish the majority's culture by dint of patronage or direct intervention (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 18). This endeavor, whether advertently or inadvertently, marked the inception of a serious popular culture study, however its elitist glance and condescending sneer.

Culture, the best that has been thought and said in the world, is the preserve of a handful of cultural elites whose prime mission is to guide the progress of civilization. The unsound majority, in the Arnoldian tradition, has historically been proven to have corrupt influence and is doomed to remain so. They are unlikely to be elevated to the status of the cultivated; it behooves them to only recognize their cultural inferiority and acknowledge the aristocratic cultural deference (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 23).

A substantial cultural study should equally encompass its textual and practical landscapes. Given momentum to cultural texts at the expense of practices leaves many stones untouched. Culture is produced, practiced, and also lived. Indeed, culture is not circumscribed to the conscious production of intricate, aesthetic, or ideologically-laden texts targeting a certain social figuration. Culture ranges from an epic-drama

work to a religious ritual to an opera concert. Culture exists in three-fold fashions: material, textual, and symbolic. Be it a text or a practice, cultural products are steeped in the producer's subjectivity and attest to the zeitgeist of his era, his ideological orientation, political affiliation, and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the text is read differently by different cultural consumers who belong to different social figurations, who solicit to resist the text's ideology and practice their agency. In a different temporal or spatial context, these very readers would read said text differently. Indeed, civilizations that lie in antiquity are explored through their cultural heritage.

Culture is accorded a host of varying definitions by a host of cultural analysts and theoreticians. Reading across a given definition unveils the field of expertise of its author. Sociologists, along with a host of anthropologists, economists, literary analysts, and critical thinkers, posited substantial definitions with distinct foci. There is no definitive correct definition to the word culture; Hall attributes to everyday culture as he argues:" By culture, here we mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. We also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life" (Hall, "The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees" 439).

Some cultural material- for example gestures and habits that are part of distinctive social repertoires- has its primary existence when people act it out. Other culture, a movie for example, might seem different from the wind because there is a physical object called "the film". The trans-disciplinary dialogue and the poaching of conventional fields of studies' long-established boundaries, and the burgeoning effect of nascent disciplines such as, women studies, ecofeminism, transgender studies, critical race theory, environmentalism,

Culture has been reduced to its physical aspects and treated as external to its participants. Nonetheless, the impact of cultural ware on individuals goes beyond its material significance. A fashion item worn on a given occasion by women from different social strata communicates a message that transcends the quality of the fabric, the carefully chosen colours concocted together, or the design and its distinct cuts. The said fashion item delivers different statements: social, political, or aesthetic, as far as the context wherein it is worn is concerned. Likewise, movies, paintings, and music constitute cultural objects whose significance and social relevance vary in accordance with its practitioner. In crude terms, culture, be it a material object, an idea, or a ritual, is potentially capable of shaping people's actions and mindset. At the core of social relations, social identity, and power conflicts lies cultural symbols, argues C. Wright Mills, inasmuch as "their social relevance lies in their use to justify or to oppose the arrangement of power and the positions within this arrangement of the powerful" (*The Sociological Imagination* 37).

During the twentieth century, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists have the wherewithal to lay a claim to the study of culture; each capitalizing on a distinct focal point. Historians were mainly concerned with great ideas and intellectual history; anthropologists delved into less developed societies and deduced that culture is a way of life a people and all that the knowledge they ought to acquire and pass down for the upcoming generation to sustain their survival; whereas sociologists grappled with a host of topics such as Marx's theory of ideology and theory of revolution, Emile Durkheim's theory of collective ritual, Marx Weber's analysis of asceticism in relation to the capitalist social order. Some sociologists took a scientific method in studying culture while others pursued an interpretive approach to it at the expense of the hitherto uncontested artistic canon. The American

sociologist Talcott Parsons defined culture as "an overarching system of meaning" that "provides (or fail to provide) social norms of conduct that sustain society as a system by integrating personalities into it" (Hall et al. 4).

At the outset of post-industrial era, a disjuncture between "cultural identities appropriate to social worlds of leisure versus those of work" could not skip sociologists' notice (Hall et al. 4). In this vein, Daniel Boll further emphasized this contention in his 1976 book *The Cultural Contradiction of Capitalism*. Such an approach to culture does the domain injustice as many aspects of culture has been overlooked in their entirety. It was until the 1980's, as French theories of language and discourse, critical theory, feminism, post-structuralism, and subaltern theories rose to prominence, that cultural studies engaged in interdisciplinary dialogue with social sciences and the humanities to encompass the textual, historical and social aspect of culture into an integrative body of knowledge. The impact of language and discourse theories on culture overlooked the reality that exists outside of the cultural text (Hall et al. 4).

Post-World War II Europe witnessed the prevalence of popular culture in the 1950's and a strong surge of countercultural movements so much that cultural analysts in Britain, mainly E.P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, 1964. Eclecticism is the hallmark of British cultural studies; theoretical edifice is sternly underpinned on early twentieth century theories, namely the Marxist Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power, Ronald Barthes and Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist theories.

1-3- Culture and the Leavisite Tradition

Nonetheless, the American school introduced a politically-oriented approach to culture; cultural studies, in this frame of reference, "is not interested in the discourse per se but in the articulations between everyday life and the formations of power. Thus it ends with a different understanding of the context than that with which it began" (Grossberg 5). The early 19th century industrial urban civilization that superseded Western feudal agrarian society segregated towns by creating class-based residential separation. The social classes interacted along the lines of work relations- the resultant of the mechanisms of industrial capitalism. Interdependent as might be, the social classes were no longer bound to partake in a homogenized culture, hitherto put forward by the cultural authority of the upper-class and radiates outwards to the general public- although foisted downwards upon the lower class (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 18). Culture in the Leavisites tradition is approached with nostalgia to past aesthetic heritage; a culture that was exclusively a cultural minority's preserve whose uncontested authority attests to magisterial knowledge, the "possession of the finest consciousness of the (English or European) 'race', who knew the finest culture of the past and could detect its modern successors, and who know precisely what humanity should read for their own good" (Doker 22). Nonetheless, the nascent urban working-class upset the social order, challenged the long-established cultural map, and spawned the first British political movement: Chartism.

The pre-industrial culture manifests a delicate poise worthy of the aristocratic society it stems from, addresses, and reflects. The language- mostly discerned in writers such as Baudlaire, Shakespeare, and Dante- is "lucid, urbane, and polite, established common standards of taste and conduct" (Docker 27). Essentially, F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* unabashedly designates the canon of true fiction, namely George Eliot, Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and D. Lawrence, whose

literary products should be deferred for their succinct reflection of the society's collective mind and temperament (Docker 23). Anything that does not measure up to the grand narrative of high culture is beneath notice for its grotesqueness and vulgarity. That science or detective fiction, movies, popular art, pop music, and tabloid press are mistaken for true literature, painting, opera, real journalism is a telltale sign for the precipitous decline of the standards of artistic and literary works and unravels to what extent has the public gone uncultivated, informed, and indiscriminatory in the age of industrialism that exalts the machine.

2- Mass Culture vs. Popular Culture:

Mass culture, or commercial culture, is usually used interchangeably with popular culture that is deemed low for its vulgarity and crudeness. The massification attribute is by no means limited to its production process; it is mass produced to be mass consumed by an indefinite mass. Mass culture implies a passive receptivity on the part of its mass audience; otherwise how could the heterogeneous mass uncritically consume the intermittent influx of textual and material cultural fare? The quiescent mass of people constitutes an amalgam "of atomized individuals separated from their position in the social structure, detached from and unaware of their class consciousness, of their various social and cultural allegiances" (Fiske 20). The massification of people bereaves them of their agency and renders them cultural dupes

Mass culture has been considered a prior American phenomenon owing to its widespread appeal; nonetheless, many capitalist industrial societies manufacture their mass culture in conjunction with their own agenda, be it economic, political, or aesthetic. In the aftermath of the Second World War American mass culture rose to prominence for its global success as an entertainment industry and its national

political and cultural consensus as a liberal, pluralist, and classless culture. Mass culture pluralist, liberal narrative crumbled down as social and political activism- the Civil Rights movement, women's rights and gays' rights protests, anti-Vietnam war campaign- and the counterculture wave sprawled throughout the country. The implosion of cinema, bestsellers, jazz, the shopping malls, and the consumer culture writ large sounded the alarm not only for the a plethora of mass culture critics: the modernist cultural conservative school of Leavisism but also the left-leaning accounts of Marxist and Frankfurt Schools, feminism, the postmodern strand, and the liberal reading of culture.

Many mass culture critics belong to the American radical left; nonetheless, their criticism is by no means different from the 19th century conservatives in the light of the nostalgia for a pre-modern ideal society: the traditional small-scale community, and their unwavering trust in a cultural authority of American intellectuals who "as a social group, had the opportunity to recognize themselves as national agents of cultural, moral, and political leadership" (Ross 43). The processes of urbanization and industrialization alienated the people and severed their ties to their roots and organic culture. The Marxists' optimism about a revolutionary progress at the hands of the working class fell short; mass culture leftist critics started leaning towards the conservatives insomuch as socialism failed to mobilize the American working class to dismantle capitalism by fulfilling its agenda: seizing the means of production and eradicating classism. To this effect, working class is allegedly superseded by a politically dangerous mass that is posing threat to democracy and cultural values. The alleged danger had been lingering since the 19th century so much so thinkers such as Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche worried that the vulnerable masses would readily fall prey to political demagoguery and manipulation and abdicated against the

steep rise of mass culture that precipitated the undercutting of high culture's momentum and cretinizing of the public taste (Hall et al. 119). America radicals went yet further to condemn Europe's mass cultures for abetting the rise of Fascism and Nazism to power. A mass culture that is ideologically-driven and aesthetically appealing to the vulnerable urban masses is but an apparatus of social conformity and control. Much of the substantive debate about American mass culture is pared in a publication entitled *Mass Culture: Popular Arts in America*, 1957, that contained antithetical views. Bernard Rosenberg insulates the American capitalist society from mass culture, claiming that it is not endemically an American phenomenon, nor is it *a fortiori* the cultural offspring of democracy. Rather, it is the offspring of technology. Conversely, the American literary critic Leslie Fiedler puts forward a nuanced contention asserting that mass culture might be "a peculiarly American phenomenon;" nonetheless, it is by no means "found only in the United States, but that wherever it is found, it comes first from us, and is still to be discovered in fully developed form only among us." The American mass culture, years ahead of its European counterparts, sets "a preview for the rest of the world of what must follow the inevitable dissolution of the older aristocratic cultures" ("The Middle against Both Ends" 539).

Not only does mass culture debase the taste and brutalize the senses, but it also yields to totalitarianism (Rosenberg and White 9). Worth noting is that despite their economic and political context, mass cultures pursue an identical production process- "fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen," and geared toward passive consumption whereby mass consumers' choice "is limited between buying and not buying-" mass cultures' patrons presage different purpose: "the Lords of Kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class-rule... in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains"

(MacDonal 23). In this vein, mass culture in the American capitalist society is a lucrative cultural industry that aspires to meet the masses cultural needs. (MacDonal 24). Mass culture critic Dwight MacDonal, bemoaned the absence of a cultural authority that would maintain cultural stratification: high culture attuned to the educated elite's taste and folk culture congruous with the popular taste of the ordinary folk community (Hollows and Jancovich 23). High culture is removed from the lucrative market system and geared towards the educated elite with whom the artists share the same values. The artists, on their part, receive the support of the patrons and, therefore, are allowed considerable latitude to give vent to their individual artistic style. Both high culture and folk culture managed to achieve a *modus vivendi*, for folk culture displayed complacency about its inferior status (Hollows and Jancovich 23).

As a result of industrialization, mass culture was produced according to assembly-line techniques and organized by commercial methods, generating a homogenized and standardized culture for the masses who, educated nonetheless, did not find high culture appealing. Quantity and repetition are the hallmarks of mass culture as opposed to quality and innovation. MacDonald, a film critic, contends that the business of the film industry unveiled of formulas generative of profit by reiterating tried-and-tested ingredients. He instantiates his contention by analyzing the 1965 box-office musical drama hit *The Sound of Music* to spot its use of the hackneyed formulas of success. The film narrates the story of young Austrian postulant who resides in Salzburg and sent to the villa of a retired naval officer and widower and hired a governess to his seven children. The postulant married with the widower and helped him survive the loss of his homeland to the Nazis. He rattles off the established formula: nuns, children, family drama, Nazis, and Salzburg, and exhausted plots and themes: the 1947 play *Life with Father* that explored the poor-

father-clever-mother theme, and the 1950 musical *the king and I* tells the story of a British school teacher who headed to Siam, Thailand, at the behest of the king to tutor his several children as part of his drive to modernize his country. The head-on collision and reciprocated affection burgeoning between the king and the British school teacher unfolds. The formulaic movies appeal to the popular taste for their shoddy quality and unconvoluted storyline and predictability (Hollows and Jancovich 24-5). Accordingly, cultural producers gave momentum to mass culture at the expense of high culture owing to its popularity and profitability.

In contrast, Ernest van den Haag attributes the success of mass culture to two tempting factor: "(i) the financial rewards of mass culture, and (ii) the potentially enormous audience" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 31). Mass culture manages to appeal to a multitude of audience owing to its inherent aptitude to meet an average of taste, as opposite to low tastes. Its ability to echoing virtually everybody's taste nonetheless does not negate the fact that it "is unlikely to embody anybody's taste fully (Haag "Of happiness and despair we have no measure" 512). By the same token, van den Haag probes the case that if real artists of high culture were offered lucrative contract to adopt their work for the movies, tempted to write for *Sports Illustrated*, or constructed to condense their work for *Reader's Digest*, would they choose to divert from the path of creativity or maintain their aesthetic and moral standards? (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 31). Van den Haag did well highlighting the merits as well demerits of mass culture. Although he celebrated cultural pluralism in the American society and debunked the deterioration of taste argument, he asserts that mass culture is tantamount to a drug that "lessens people's capacity to experience life itself" (Haag 529). In lieu of experiencing real gratification, mass culture texts and practices are only capable of offering "substitute

gratifications" that constitute sheer distraction, a futile attempt to fill the emptiness within effectuated by the capitalist mass society. Mass culture-induced gratification represses the requisite gratifications that the masses ought to seek in the lifeworld¹¹.

Mass culture has erroneously been deemed a telltale sign for moral and taste debasement by cultural nostalgic theorists who romanticize about a subversive version of the past to warrant the indictment of the present. Although popular pleasures by no means measure up to the highbrow "aesthetic, moral or intellectual esteem" characteristic of high culture, they are remotely inferior to "the villainous things which gave pleasure to their European ancestors from Middle Ages to the nineteenth century (Shils "Mass society and its culture" 35). Reasonably, mass culture manifestation is much less detrimental to the masses than the wretched existence of earlier centuries were (Shils "Mass society and its culture" 36).

Mass culture is but popular culture that "refuses to know its place" (Fiedler 540). That the American society is predominantly imbued in mass culture does not refute the existence of other cultures; social stratification begets cultural classification. A high-brow culture imputed to the "aristocratic sensibility" stipulates deference; the genteel mediocre culture¹²- occupying the middle ground between the vulgar and the superior- seeks to discredit its rival cultures, and a popular culture, attuned to the "the brutal-populist mentality" (Fiedler 547). The cultural hierarchy is a

¹¹Lifeworld: Lifeworld" (German: Lebenswelt) is a concept in phenomenology and social sciences that refers to the everyday, lived experience of individuals. It encompasses the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted world that people experience in their daily lives, including their relationships, cultural norms, beliefs, and the environment they interact with. The term was popularized by philosopher Edmund Husserl, who used it to describe the background or context in which all human experience takes place before it's analyzed or theorized. Later, sociologist Jürgen Habermas expanded the concept, distinguishing the lifeworld from systems like bureaucracy and the economy, emphasizing how it is shaped by communication, shared meanings, and social interactions.

testament to the aesthetic awakening of the social classes whose values and tastes were thus far repressed by the aesthetic dictates of the upper class. Cultural plurality and hierarchy characteristic of the American society resuscitates the intellectual debate about classism, albeit in a bona fide fashion as opposed to the power conflict and class antagonism the concept hitherto connoted. Class analysis within the American cultural landscape, in the work of Leslie Fiedler and other writers in the 1950's and early 1960's, celebrates the non-antagonistic coexistence of different cultural classes that proved they "could exist as they kept themselves to themselves" (Ross 58).

Popular culture is rooted in prose rather than verse, secular rather than religious in origin." a quasi spontaneous expression of the rooted and culturally dispossessed inhabitants of anonymous cities. The principle problem is its working assumption that popular culture always represents little more than an example of cultural decline and potential political disorder. Given this assumption, theoretical research and empirical investigation continued to confirm what it always expected to find. The theory operated on the assumption that popular culture was flawed, and once this assumption was established, everything that followed aligned with it: evidence of decline and degeneration was sought out because the theory necessitated finding it. In essence, the products of popular culture were cast as the scapegoats (Bennett 6).

As the nineteenth century receded, and those traditionally outside 'culture' and 'society' demanded inclusion, strategies were adopted to incorporate and to exclude. Acceptance brought into being 'high society' and 'high culture', to be distinguished from society and culture or, better still, mass society and mass culture (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 35).

Mass culture is relegated to a second-rate cultural texts status, whereas its audience is disparagingly designated the mass that "crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified, and select" (Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* 19). Left to their own discretion, the masses would opt for the novel popular forms such as the cinema and broadcasting at the expense of the intellectuals-prescribed traditional culture (Approaches to popular Film 17). Such scathing criticism level against the masses for indulging in the debased and erotic culture undermines the momentum high culture still possesses: "for example; Shakespeare on TV, record figures for book borrowing from libraries, a successful tour by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, the fact that more people attend classical music events than attend baseball games, the increasing number of symphony orchestras" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 30).

The eighteenth century would be idealized and projected forward as utopian exemplar in just such terms in subsequent modernist thought: and the values of distance, rationality, control, restraint, would become approved modernist values, ways of countering what was seen as the emotionality and sensationalism of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century genres like romance and melodrama. (Docker 32).

The cheap and easy pleasures of mass culture prevent critical thought, thought that is critical of the modern industrial world and of mass culture. In being critical, the ideal modernist text will cause "disturbing repercussions in the reader's emotional make-up". By contrast, the bestseller, argues Fiction and the Reading Public, doesn't unsettle common preconceptions and disbelief, and so leaves the mass reader "with a comfortable state of mind", washed in "reassuring sentiment". Consequently, the bestseller and the cinema, Q.S.L tells us in a favorite phrase, appeal to the "herd-instinct". They are always on the side of "social, national, and herd prejudices". Her

main evidence seems to be that popular fiction is "completely stereotyped in its demands" and usually has a happy ending, which apparently encourages "conformity". Modernist writing, however, is properly pessimistic and tragic, hence necessarily disturbing (Docker 32-3).

The modernist critic of mass culture and the culture industry lost its authority and appeal as antithetical theories took a swipe at its grand narrative, mainly its "culture and civilization" tradition founded by Frank Raymond Leavis, Queenie Dorothy Leavis and Denys Thompson and the school of thought that inspired Leavisites that were destined to be highly influential in the development of the 20th century literary and cultural criticism. The said criticism solicited to establish a unified body of standards constitutive to a canon of genuine aesthetic values. In response to the Leavisites cultural elitism, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies institutionalized a constellations of ideas and texts of a host of British cultural theorists, mainly Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, under the rubric of "culturalism" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 38).

Q.D. leavis reassures her *Fition and the Reading Public* readers that the 18th century public was homogenized and its taste was informed and policed by a decorum that is "at once emotional and rational" (Doker 27). Society's lower class, in the sixteenth through to early nineteenth century, were mostly uneducated and concurrently received their standards of behaviour and judgement from the cultured minority. That this uneducated majority could not marvel in the high-brow culture is, Q.D. argues, a fortunate state of affairs:

One danger which I have long foreseen from the spread of the democratic sentiment, is that of the traditions of literary taste, the canons of literature,

being reversed with success by a popular vote. Up to the present time, in all parts of the world, the masses of uneducated or semieducated persons, who form the vast majority of readers, though they cannot and do not appreciate the classics of their race, have been content to acknowledge their traditional supremacy... the revolution against taste; once begun, will land us in irreparable chaos (Q.R. Leavis 190).

Q.D. Leavis's feckless attempt to shroud her condescendence towards the "uncultured" majority and minority's sense of entitlement to foist its standards on the rest of society by praising the communal life and its traditional lore and Puritan teaching that form a common stock of social wisdom and morality conducive to a richer "first-hand living" akin to their glorious ancestors (Docker 30) . Arguably, the masses need not consternate over their inaptitude to comprehend fine art products, such as Shakespeare's poetry, for they are actively participating "in music, in catches, ballads, whistling" (Docker 27). It is this "genuine community," favorable for Q.D. Leavis and her fellow-leavisites , that ensures the complementarity and unity of social classes, "from low to high and back again" (Docker 27). What we have lost is the natural sense of community that was reflected in its living culture. Folk songs, dances, cottages, and handmade goods are symbols of something deeper: a way of life, structured and harmonious, encompassing social customs, communication codes, and a responsive adaptation, developed over countless generations, to the natural world and the cyclical rhythms of the year (F.R. Leavis and Thompson 1-2)

The urbanization of the communal life pertinent to the hitherto predominantly rural society have a tremendous effect on the psyche of the individual as socialization is restricted in terms of spatiality and temporality. The inhabitants dwelling in the city disparate compounds could only acquaint in the dance-hall, cinema, popular theatre;

the concomitant emotional desolation experienced by the working class was mitigated by popular amusement, mainly reading vulgar and crude popular fiction and the press. Q.D. Leavis frown upon reader's engagement with bestsellers' characters. Bestsellers, and mass culture in its entirety, are characteristically popular for their addictive pleasures, as opposed to aesthetic pleasures, that hypnotize the mind, debilitate critical thinking and produce a passive escapist individual prone to plunge into ephemerally vicarious wish-fulfillment and daydreaming. Q.D. Leavis took issue with novelists for their advertently manipulative appropriation of romance and melodrama to attain popular appeal. Scathing criticism has been leveled against Charles Dickens- for his deceptive laughter-and-tears formula that "has been the foundation of practically every popular success since, in the bestseller as in the Hollywood film" (Docker 28)- along with popular journalism and advertisement resulted in a debasement of language and emotional life. Gatekeepers of the mass culture, journalists, novelists, and advertisers to name but a few, akin to businessmen resorted to applied psychology to garner a broader audience so much so it was "not easy to draw a line between the popular novelist, the journalist and the advertising copy writer" (Docker 29). Leavisism looks longingly to a cultural golden age, a mythical rural past; when there existed a share culture uncorrupted by commercial interests (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 27).

Trying to stake out the boundaries of the field of popular culture amounts to inciting an unsettling turf battle that obscures more than reveals. A sociological approach to popular culture need not proscribe miscellaneous theories and ideas from poaching its territories for the field per se is inherently interdisciplinary. Equally daunting is the task of positing an ironclad definition to popular culture. It suffice to define the components discretely and, thereafter, synthesize a substantial definition

that ought to inform and set a solid rationale for the research. The word popular is as polysemous as popular culture; it connotes being effectively popular for inherently appealing qualities, being nefariously popular- rather low-brow yet familiar- numerically popular- deliberately massified to appeal to gargantuan audience, or popular for being made by the people for the people. Using one of the aforementioned connotations of the modifier "popular" cast popular culture in an utterly different historical and theoretical fashion.

A prima facie definition of popular culture constitutes a qualitative perspective that denotes a culture that is favored by many people. In this vein, popularity ought to be measured by sales of cultural products- such as books, magazines, outfits, McDonald's, or Coca Cola- attendance record of festivals, concerts, sporting events, and movie theatres, TV and radio ratings and viewership of social media content. Equally putative is the qualitative approach to popular culture. Texts and practices that fall short of high-culture aesthetics lumped together under the rubric of popular culture. This definition is exclusivist, elitist- rejecting mass culture and advocating pursuit of "art for art's sake"- and reeks of class-based ideology- monolithic middle-class worldview. Culture ought to be esoteric- out of the reach of the layman's comprehension and mediocre taste. Simplicity and relevance are deemed degrading and, therefore, attributed to inferior popular culture. A musical masterpiece played in a New York subway by the renowned violinist Joshua Bell managed to garner the adulation of a handful of bystanders and raised \$30 in tips for the 45-minute-spectacle he delivered. The very same violinist, to days before, sold out a theatre in Boston- wherein the seat averaged about \$100-to deliver the very same riveting spectacle. Arguably, the subway experience is a testament of the ideologically categorical nature of taste and emphatically corroborates the claim that cultural consumption is

"predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 5).

The digital era popular culture bear traces of the postmodern avant-guardism and a revel in the "new sensibility" of late capitalist stage. The modernist canonization of all cultural venues- museums, opera houses, literature, music, art, social mores and ethics imputed to high-brow culture- lend itself to scathing criticism the 1960's late capitalist counter-culture. Popular culture is often approached from a postmodern prism; thus, a serious endeavor to account for the postmodern scaffolding of popular culture entails a rigorous reflection upon the modernist bourgeois culture. The dawning attributes of bourgeois culture constituted a staunch opposition to the classics of the aristocracy during the feudal era. Although modernism rose to prominence for its unabashedly flaunted antagonism to "bourgeois philistinism", it seamlessly swept into the museums, theatres, art galleries, and academia- the bastion of elitism and social hierarchy- and, therefore,

Anthropologists and archeologists alike, in their endeavor to stake out the conceptual landscape of culture, availed themselves of the etymology of the word. Fundamentally, the term "comes from the Latin for 'cultivating' or tilling the soil." In this respect, culture connotes "the way of taking care of things" (Hall et all. 8). The latter's approach to culture is materialist as they scrutinize humanly fabricated tools and objects, and the product of social actions prerequisite for adequate conduct of life, insomuch as cultural material stands the test of time and is both reflective and constitutive of it social practice. Nevertheless, cultural anthropologists and sociologists give momentum to ideal culture at the expense of its material counterpart. However exclusivist this perspective is, symbols, ideas, and texts are part and parcel of culture, for it undeniably constitutes "an historically transmitted pattern of

meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life" (Geertz, "The Interpretation of Cultures").

The dichotomy ideal culture/ material culture is far more complicated than an analogy drawn between what constitutes symbols and material. Material culture is not bereft of meaning, nor is it deprived of agency. A movie has physical and abstract aspects- the long strip of celluloid or the digital file attests to the physicality of a movie- until it is watched, acted nonetheless, the consumption of the movie's content and the audience's reaction to it emanates a symbolic culture. Objects are set to have a social life whereby they are decommodified and recontextualized. The identity and value of material culture oscillate from the status of commodified objects to decommodified social agent as it gets embroiled in a network of social entanglement and invested with personality and meaning through human interaction.

Culture gains momentum in times of social unrest, protests, wars, and concomitant political agitations. Culture meanings are incessantly morphed, and the conceptual landmark boundaries have become blurrier and more disciplines took interest in cultural studies. Indeed, culture has been approached by myriads scholars with different expertise and therefore intimates alternative meanings. The current cultural war launched by the right wing to constraint the rising tides of the prevailing leftist ideologies and activism. In light of the steering wheel of "cancel culture," the professional career of many public leaders, including politicians, has been tarnished, or worse terminated.

Undeniably daunting is the task of defining postmodern culture without grappling with the rudiment of the culture that preceding this era: modernist culture.

Fundamentally, the prefix "post" in hyphenated phrases emphasizes the phenomenon/situation being hyphenated at the expense of its preceding offshoot: "Post anything implies a coming after, defined, not so much in its own terms, but by what has come before" (Hall et al. 143). The atrophy orthodox contentious dialectic contouring the sociological halls of intelligentsia- mainly from human-animal, nurture-nature, agency-structure, abstract-material- has only been exacerbated by the rise of cyborg¹³-based world wherein humans are entangled in webs of hybrid interrelationships by dint of microcomputers and biotechnology "A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s" (Haraway 65). This novel social reality need not be eclipsed by the Western hitherto prioritization of individuality; rather, humans should embrace it individually and politically.

Sociologists and cultural theorists, in their cultural studies in the 1950's and 1960's, espoused an interpretative approach and hermeneutics to the detriment of grand theory prevalent during the modernist era. In the run up to post-industrial world, Europe went through an arduous trek treading towards postmodernism: the global expansion of Europe, the Protestant Reformation and its values of asceticism hard work and virtues.

The modern day culture's tenets date back to long before the advent of mass media, the internet, and technological advances. Essentially, the preindustrial cultural zeitgeist and its concomitant mindset worked as the engine that buttressed the triumph of capitalism not only in Europe but in remote corners in the world. The internalization of routinization and rationalization yielded to an externalized routinization and rationalization of social life, economic activities, and cultural production and consumption. The urbanization of Europe followed close on the heels

¹³ Cyborg: a cybernetic organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction

of the prevailing industrialization and market economy. Marx Weber gave pride of place to routinization and rationalization as key sinews of modern society dynamics. The iteration of activities pawns a systemized sequences of action wherein social life is pared down to "a set of clearly circumscribed routines." Owing to the process of routinization, social maneuvers are incrementally becoming predictable insofar as individuals are interwoven into a web of systematically coordinated activities (Hall et al. 94). Routinization can be best discerned in Fordism. Fordism developed out of the earlier stages of Taylorism in which the application of the principles of scientific management breaks down labour process into a series of repetitive and unskilled tasks to be performed within limited period of time. Rationalization entail undertaking a rational approach in performing daily activities so much so to warrant the attainability of effectiveness and efficiency.

3-Marxism and Popular Culture

Not dissimilar from his criticism of German speculative philosophy view about the philosophers' role in changing the world instead of merely interpreting it, Marx, along with his advocates, seeks to change culture to its best refined version in lieu of interpreting it. The most prominent Marxist cultural trend came to be known "the Frankfurt School." It draws heavily on Marxist axiom; yet it solicits to redress its drawbacks. The Marxist approach to culture is by design politically-oriented inasmuch as Marx theory is centered on class struggle, the materialist reading of history, dynamics of ideology, social relationships between the subordinate, the workers, and the dominant, those who control the means of production.

According to Marx, the sine qua non of human existence is to produce their material needs for subsistence, such as food, clothing and shelter. In the throes of satisfying their economic exigencies, men forge a conscious relation with nature and

with one another to make do with what is in their discretion. Their survival and lifestyle correlate with "what they produce and how produce, and the nature of individuals depends on the material conditions determining their production" (Marx, Karl and Engels, *German Ideology* 7). In this regard, Marx solicits to interpret history and society from a materialist prism by fleshing out human economic activity insomuch as the quintessential historical act is the act of production.

A Marxist approach to culture invokes Marx's famous, or infamous thereof, doctrine base/superstructure to account for social and historical development. Marx's reading the conception of history is materialistic insofar as he contends that "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general" (Marx, "Preface and Introduction" 3). The mode of production is the prime determinant of social structure wherein it generates "(i) specific ways of obtaining the necessities of life; (i) specific social relationships between workers and those who control the mode of production, and (iii) specific social institutions (including cultural ones)" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 61). Class status is determined by one's relation to the mode of production; The economic determinism entails that the economic base determines the social relations which in their turn shape consciousness which determines actual ideas and work.

Marx's theory of ideology came as a counterargument to Hegelians' idealist philosophy that undertook an abstractionist reading of social and political state of affairs. Marx took issue with Hegel's contention that "ideas were nothing less than effective forces in history"- a contention he substantiated by alluding to the French Revolution as an emblem of the historical product of ideas of freedom and liberty (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 43). More tellingly, Marx refuted Hegel's philosophical tradition of ideology that regard practical or material activities

as derivatives from ideas. The Hegelian proponents, dubbed the ideologists, approach reality from an interpretive philosophical vantage point to the detriment of an empirical representation. Accordingly, ideas are essentially deemed the incipient causes for historical development so much so they are ascribed material existence. Marx frowns at the Hegelian reification of the abstractions and, henceforth, its distortion of reality and emphatically ascertains that ideas are "the historical outcomes of economic activity" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 44). Marx's theory of ideology is, therefore, broadly comprehensive and empirical than that of the Hegelians'; it encompasses the conflation of "the concept of ideology" and "the theory of perception" entanglement of ideas with material activity in society, the function of ideology, and the association between ideology and the dominant classes (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 44). Marx argues that the first historical act of individuals is the economic act- the act of producing the material requirements of society- to sustain human survival. Suffices it to say, the economic production sets social relations and ushers in a social structure in tandem with the operating social relations; thus, it elicits a system of ideas and beliefs that, in its turn, echoes the mode of production and class relations. According to Marx, ideology is a system of prevailing ideas, beliefs, and attitudes through which individuals perceive reality, albeit a distorted up-side down version of reality. In this regards, Marx's theory of ideology ought to be conflated with the theory of perception insofar as it is a tantamount to distorting lenses that alter the way individuals come to perceive objective social reality and cajole them into uncritically adopting those perceptions as substitutes for reality (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 46). More tellingly, he asserts the power of ideology to shape reality, enshrine it, to yet alter the way individuals perceive it. Notwithstanding, individuals, in Marx's theory of

ideology, are not bereft of agency; rather, social relations, reality, and society writ large are deemed the product of human actors: "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 10). This relative agency is derivative of the diffuse perceptions that are imparted by "the ruling material force of society" that is *a fortiori* "its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 39). That is, "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control over the means of mental production, so that, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 39-40). Worth pointing up is the fact that those ideas arising from a material base reflects exclusively the wills and interests of the dominant class. Marx contends that individuals come to apprehend the world from the vantage point of the social class of which they are members. The ideologists of the aristocratic era, for instance, promoted the conceptions of honour, fealty and submission to the aristocrats, vis-à-vis the ideas of freedom and equality obtained during the capitalist era. Those conceptions of the dominant class- mainly economic, political and legal- are allegedly set to represent the common interest of society in terms of a legitimate system of ideas and social relations. Ultimately, each era's ideas were far-flung throughout the wider society so much so they assumed universality and a life for their own- albeit detrimental to the those existing on the fringe of, or beyond, the dominant class economic territory (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 39).

On sober reflection, Marx has pared down the functions of ideology to four points: the preponderant function is to conceal the inherent contradictions resulting

from class distinctions; the second function is to resolve these contradiction while simultaneously perpetuate the advantages enjoyed by the dominant class; the third function serves to banalize, or worse trivialize, social contradictions and legitimate the system of domination; while the forth serves to reducibly explain social life by recourse to economic laws and render economic exchange as the sole object of social relations (Morrison 50). Power is an elusive term whose dissection intersects with the conceptual scope of ideology. If the ruling class ideology is imposed on a helplessly passive subordinate class, power tends to stipulates social control and submission, whereas it entails an arena of collective struggle to exert one's will over others. Social revolutions attests to the role "ideological forms" at the superstructure level plays in galvanizing people to "become conscious of...conflict and fight it out" (Max and Engels, "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas" 4). Popular culture texts and practices constitute an ideologically-driven form of the superstructure.

Popular culture, from a Marxist perspective, is dissected in conjunction with its historical conditions of production to explain the material forces of the cultural text or practice production, unravel class struggle and oppression themes, the changes of the triggered audience in accordance with the changes in the mode of production. A Marxist approach to popular culture solicits to associate the emergence of, inter alia, stage melodrama and music hall with the drastic transformation the capitalist mode of production set in motion. It Is owing to this transformation that made the performance of a play like *My Poll and My Partner Joe* and abetted "the emergence and success of a music hall performer like Marie Lloyd" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 63).

The British Marxist William Morris critiqued art production and function in the capitalist society. He posited an analysis of art, as a form of labour in the

industrial capitalist world so much so notions such as alienation and denied creativity branded its production and workplace. Morris espoused Marx and Engels views of labour asserting that it surpasses its purported confines which reduce it to the satisfaction of a natural need or a manifestation of a natural capacity. Rather, labour constitutes so a social activity "entangled in history and politics, open to law and regulation, helping to define what it is to be human" (Storey, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* 16). Humans' social needs are socially and historically mediated; not only do humans venture to satisfy them, but they also reflect on them, write novels and sing about them, "produce films and television drams and documentaries and paint great works of art in an attempt to explain or celebrate them" (Storey, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* 15-6). Morris contends that labour is inherently an artistic expression, for art, in a Socialist society, is an umbrella term that encompasses the production of the kitchen culinary, the construction of a house, or the building of a steam engine: "anything that is made by man and has form, must either be a work of art or destructive to art" (Morris, "Art Labour and Socialism" 84). Conversely, industrial capitalism stripped labour of its artistic potential so much so only artists are entitled to pursue the artistic pleasures (Morris, "Art Labour and Socialism" 85). The Socialist promise stipulates the dismantling of the assembly-line-based labour and its commodification insofar as all work will produce popular art and all workers ought to deservedly wear the popular artist badge of status. The communist mode of production endeavors to reinstate creativity as an indispensable component of work wherein "there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 109). That is, nobody has an exclusive monopoly over a particular art or occupation; everyone is entitled to "do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon,

breed cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner", disencumbered of becoming a full time hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or a critic (qtd in McLellan, "E.P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context" 36). Labour division and its concomitant societal classicism drove a wedge between high culture that is the preserve of the cultivated and popular culture that is the by-product of the degraded classes. The dismantling of capitalism would dispense with the cultural hierarchy and the blatant demeaning popular culture and supersede it a classless society that is averse to cultural discrimination.

4- The Frankfurt School

Chief of the prominent progeny of the Marxist tradition is the Frankfurt School, a German cohort of social critics centered in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt that emerged after World War I. The institute wedded Marxism to psychoanalysis into a concoction coined Critical Theory devised to account for the culture industry- the products and processes mass culture- and explore the "conscious and unconscious openings for fascism in mass culture" (Hall et al. 120). The term "culture industry", coined by the Institute's leading figures Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, lent itself well to a trenchant mass culture criticism. In their endeavor to redress the traditional Marxist theory, the German critical theorists took refuge in American mass culture, literally and figuratively. Threatened by the rising tide of Nazism in Germany and the spread of Fascism in Europe, the aforementioned German thinkers, most of whom are of Jewish descent, fled Germany to the United States and relocated their Institute to New York in 1936. During the inter wars period, mass culture has become a hallmark of American-ness; a meticulous scrutinization of American mass culture serves as a microcosm of the inner workings of mass culture worldwide. Henceforth, critical theory avant-garde,

namely Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal and Herbert Marcuse, spawned an intricate analysis of popular culture's rudiments and nuances. Being Marxist adherents, the critical theorists took issue with the commodification of culture, for the mass produced of cultural objects and practices lacked authenticity and creativity. Mass culture is homogeneous: "film, radio, and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part... all mass culture is identical" (Adorno and Horkheimer 120-1). It is also predictable in terms of succinct anticipation of, *inter alia*, the plot's and characters' development of a movie, its lingering or ephemeral effects, the hackneyed archetypes, tropes, and stereotypes deployed in a soap opera or a serial, the rhythm and lyrics of a song, and the content and layout of a magazine. The short, catchy sequence found in a popular song, the hero's brief fall from grace which he embraces with good humor, the heroine's playful slaps from the male protagonist, and his blunt manner toward the spoiled heiress—all these details are pre-established clichés, ready to be used as needed, each fully defined by its role within the larger narrative structure (Adorno and Horkheimer 98)

The cultural sameness is met with little to no resistance from its consumers; the standardized formulas are invariably met with conformity for they are derived from to consumers' needs and devised to emulate their preferences. Each cultural form "is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together" so much so the resultant social conformity, unfathomably pervasive, would readily cease ground for authoritarianism. More tellingly, film, magazine and the radio constitute a system whereby the deceived masses are ensnared in a vicious circle of manipulation and obsequiousness as they are duped into passively consuming and reproducing an inauthentic, profit-driven, and authoritarian-adjacent culture that should stop

pretending to be art "for the obvious truth is that they are just businesses, industries, with their makers part of the market, as is clear from the published information about their managers' incomes (Docker 38). Nonetheless, the overstated purview of the cultural industry's producers should be taken with a grain of salt. The culture industry erodes social disparities pertinent to class, age, ethnicity, religion, sex, and gender.

The cultural monopolies by no means wield ultimate power to call the shots with regards to the cultural industry's contents and form. Similar to miscellaneous sectors of industry, the culture industry is run by the "subjective intentions of board chairmen"; however, dissimilar to those industries, the culture industry's patrons are utterly dependent on the *de facto* wielders of power: "the dependence of the most powerful broadcasting companies on the electrical industry, or of film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined" (Adorno, and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 96). The alleged objective social tendency, espoused and promoted by the Enlightenment thinkers, falls short of the industrial age's realities envisaged and implemented by the board chairmen of the powerful industrial and technological monopolies. The constellation between the different sectors of industry blurred the lines between the cultural production company and the technical sector as each has become a metonymy for the other (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 96).

The *prima facie* differences between cultural products, say Chrysler and Motors cars, Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer movie productions, are illusory in that they are bona fide identical: they implement identical techniques, serve the same function, harken back to long-held stereotypes and assumptions, and impart the prevailing ideology. Consumers fit obsequiously into their oppression as

"everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a 'level' determined by indices and to select the category of mass product manufactured for their type"

The classification of movies into A and B categories¹⁴ renders indecisive differences of the stardom of infamy of the cast, the big or low budget, the deployment of state of the art or mediocre technology, adept or inept labour and equipment, a hackneyed or the latest psychological formula, or the originality or rebooting of the script. Nonetheless, the text and the subtext of the movies are identical with respect to "the classification, organization, and identification of consumers" (Adorno and Horkheimer 97). The culture industry's products target the indiscriminate amalgam of the masses by manufacturing and disseminating products "provided for everyone so that no one can escape". The hierarchy of the cultural material quality sectionalizes, organizes, and labels consumers: "red, green, and blue areas according to income groups" (Adorno and Horkheimer 97). Regardless of the cultural product, be it a "thriller or detective or adventure movies" or "songs, starts, (radio) soap operas, and the 'idiotic women's serial'" the nuanced details and techniques are substitutable and the immalleable types and formulas are relentlessly recycled (Docker 38).

The disdain critical theorists unabashedly exhibit towards mass culture, to which they assign the appellation "popular culture", is in effect a disdain towards cultural decadence and social control, ironically, derivative of the democratizing technological advances, chiefly the mass media proclivity to instigate cultural

¹⁴ Films category A and B: The term "**B movie**" originated in the Golden Age of Hollywood, a time when movie theaters typically presented films as double features. The "A" movie had bigger stars, a larger budget, and higher production values, while the "B" movie was a less expensive, lower-budget film. As the studio system declined in the late 1950s and early 1960s, so did the traditional B movie. Yet, the term has persisted and evolved, now referring to a certain type of low-to-moderate budget film, often genre-based, and not necessarily part of a double feature.

plurality to counteract the exclusivity of the highbrow arts' cultural hegemony. Notwithstanding, the dichotomy between autonomous, long-haired art and mass. Controversially, the subjectivity of the autonomous art and the "inner consistency of the artifact;" the artifact embodies the artist's perceptions of reality, biography, and intention, and its meaning is self-contained as it insulates itself from extraneous bearings or interpretations drawn from the consumers' frame of reference, mainly their cultural repertoire. This 19th century's trend, known as "art for art's sake," is coined to consecrate the aesthetic autonomy of the artistic product and the tyrannical authority of the artists over their work.

The automatized reactions of television spectators is imputed to the monolithic predestined problematic and cliché-like characterization. The tension, hitherto aroused in the 19th century popular and semi-popular novels through the meandering, endless plots and subplots and the mind-bending denouement, is advertently diluted in movie such that the suspense and excitement is piqued only superficially- or worst kept at bay in the cinematic rendition of a tongue-in-cheek diegesis. Notwithstanding the counter production of thrill-deficient thriller movies, most of the movies prove to be a success by virtue of the psychological requisites of an exhausted working class audience that craves familiarity and a safe ground. movies tend to pander to the aforementioned craving that is reflective of "an infantile need of protection, rather than his desire for a thrill" (Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture" 476). This stratagem is part and parcel of the cultural unity of the form and content that is, in its turn, conducive to societal unity of individuals and the different social figurations. Indeed, the import of mass culture promotes other-directedness- as opposite to the inwardness channeled through early Puritan popular novels to

promulgate puritan values, chiefly the virtue of human decency that resolves inner conflicts, and inculcate in individuals a sense of conformity with adult authority:

The conformity of earlier generations of Americans of the type I term "inner-directed" was mainly assured by their internalization of adult authority. the middle-class urban American of today, the "other-directed," is, by contrast, in a characterological sense more the product of his peers- that is, in sociological terms, his "peer-groups," the other kids in school or in the block (Riesman V).

The Puritan values peddled in 18th century literary productions, most famously Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, Or, Virtue Rewarded* and *Clarissa, Or, the History of a Young Lady* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana: The Fortune Mistress* are preserved as middle-class ontology; if foisted on people with whose living conditions and rationale are by no means in conjunction, it would inoculated into the authoritarian machinery and leveled down to a shallow rendition of the said ontology. That the cultural industry promulgates the middle-class Puritan values does not gainsay its inherently manipulative hidden message whose dissection is, nonetheless, unchallenging.

Mass culture is by design an apparatus set up to solidify and legitimate the status quo; nevertheless, in its pursuit to reach a larger chunk of society it is incumbent on its content producers to stay relevant to the prevailing zeitgeist and display quasi-realistic features "in order to meet the expectations of a supposedly disillusioned, alert, and hard-boiled audience" (Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture" 477). To engage the masses, mass culture ought to level the disparities between the reigning ideology militating in favor of the capitalist and the social condition under which the masses live (Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of

Mass Culture 477). That is, the cultural product must conceal the capitalist ideology behind the working-class realities veneer. Adorno asserts that television shows are structurally multilayered so as to enthrall the masses on various psychological levels in a clandestine manner that would dodge the monitoring of consciousness. Therefore, television shows warrant an in-depth psychological scrutiny for to escape sales resistance (Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture 479). For efficacious authoritarianism, the shows' content and form should cater to "irrational and frequently unconscious motivations" (Docker 45).

The division of labour into repetitive unskilled tasks along a precisely prearranged array of stages of production set to be succinctly followed within a limited period of time stripped labour as a productive activity of its creativity and human nature, rendered it a routinized transactional activity, and alienate workers from the product they toiled away to produce. The worker's alienation from the product of his labor means that his work becomes an external object, something separate from him. It exists independently and becomes a force in itself, standing in opposition to the worker (Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour" 51).

Alienation intensified as the capitalist mode of production transformed- as outlined by the American Marxist Fredric Jameson in his book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: from market capitalism to monopoly capitalism to arrive at the present-day late or multinational capitalism (Jameson 78). Labour and workers alike were incrementally sorted out and organized along a hierarchical scheme. Wage labour distanced the workers from their products insofar as these products materialize "as an alien object" (Marx, "Estranged Labor" 53) an external existence utterly detached from their identities. Therefore, workers find themselves impeded from manifesting their creativity and fulfilling their pleasures: "the

alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him" (Marx, "Estranged Labor"51). A singer, for instance, ought not step into a shop and claim ownership of a copy of his record without making a purchase; his artistic production materializes into a profit-seeking commodity that exists independently of his will and beyond his control. Labour underwent a process of specialization as workers could solely claim a single job title; one can only be a peasant, a doctor, an author, or a singer.

Marx foregrounds his PE critic in his *magnum opus Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* by addressing the rudiments and nuances of commodity and commodification. Marx departs from his fellow classical PE theorists, chief among them is Adam Smith, with regards to accounting for the commodification of human activities. The latter define the term commodification as the process of transforming labor's products into commodities, and, by extension, as "the process of transforming use value into exchange value" (Mosco 129). Use value is based on the product's utility: its ability to satisfy humans' needs; however, the products whose value is determined by what it command in exchange rather than its utility. Smith naturalizes the process of commodification and contends that it is "a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity"; in contrast, Marx asserts that it is the product of "a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 175).

Marx elaborates further Smith's account for commodity, use value and exchange value. Fundamentally, Marxian deconstruction of commodity ascertains its miscellaneous connotations; commodities ought not be restricted to material needs

insomuch as they might ensue from a plethora of social needs, physical and cultural: "including satisfying physical hunger and meeting or contravening the status codes of a particular social group" (Mosco 130). Not only does use value denote the satisfaction of survival needs; but it also venture to encompass a "range of socially constituted uses" (ibid). Nonetheless, the exchange value imputed to the products circulating the market whose value is determined by the social arrangements of the market and by their market price: "marketable products that are valued for what they bring in exchange" (Mosco 2). That the exchange value of a circulating commodity manifests invariably in the monetization of the product serves to congeal, yet conceal, "the labour and social relations of its production" (Hardy 136). In a similar fashion, human labour inheres the properties endemic to labour's products, namely commodification and exchange value system. In the acquisitive and exploitative capitalist mode of production, workers' labour generates surplus value¹⁵ for capitalists who pay them wages incommensurable with the invested labour power. That workers earn hardly enough to reproduce their labour power impedes their "desires to pursue meaningful work, to be paid decently for their labour power, and to be able to sustain themselves" (Mosco and Fuchs, *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media* 42). Much to their chagrin, workers inability to express their natural creativity urges them to seek it outside of their work given that work in the capitalist society is reduced to wage labour unconcerned with "the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs" (Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* 177).

The four pillars that prop up the very foundation of the materialist theory of history are: "(i) means of production; (ii) relations of production; (iii) mode of

¹⁵ Surplus value: profit accumulated by capitalists through cheapening the cost of labour, extending the working day and intensifying production, and selling the total output for more than the original investment, generating capital.

production; and (iv) forces of production" (Morrison 36). The means of production ranges from the raw materials, tools, and technology to the workers and their skills. Noted historically is the fact that one class is exclusively in possession of the means of production; thus; a fissure between the owners and non-owners has incrementally been widening as the class monopolizing the means of production hinders the non-owners' endeavor to obtain access to the productive forces and, in effect, rules over them. Following Marx's line of reasoning, society is divided into economic classes: the dominant owner of the means of production and the subjugated direct producers of physical labour (Morrison 37).

Marx conceptualizes the term "relations of production" to account for the connection between the way a society produces and the social roles allotted to individuals (Morrison 37). Class monopoly over the means of production generates a social class system that, in its turn, metes out distinctive social roles for each individual: producers and non-producers of physical labor. The material needs, nonetheless, cannot be produced by own class but by the interdependency between the two classes as each embodies a specific role along the production line. The production relation, historically speaking, divulges asymmetry and subordination: the non-owners are compelled to enter into a quid pro quo relations of production with the landholders, factory or company owners in order to avail themselves of the means of production whereof they produce the material needs of individuals from all walks of life and secure livelihood in return (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique* 21). Marx reasons accentuates that "social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces, human beings change their way of earning their living and all their social relations. He further instantiates "the handmill gives you a society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, a society with the industrial capitalist"

(Marx, *The poverty of Philosophy* 109). To all intent and purposes, the production relation is by design a relation of domination that subjugate the non-owners to the authority of their superior, yields economic privilege to one class over the other, and is enshrined by state-sanctioned coercion and institutionalized by the political and legal structure of society (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique* 192-3). In effect, each mode of production engender attendant relations of production: "the slave mode produces master/slave relations; the feudal mode produces lord/peasant relations; the capitalist mode produces bourgeois/proletariat relations" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 62). The proprietors attain the uncontested right to a directly control the means of production, the labor of the producers, and the laborers' products. Marx takes pain to elucidate the dynamics of the capitalist economic base and its relations of production. Essentially, he contends that the capitalist is in total possession of the forces of production such as "the land, machinery, and materials" and enjoys an unfettered access to "the disposition of the product of labour but does not exercise rights over labor, as in the case of slavery or serfdom" (Morrison 39). The capitalist wields relative power over labor time that the laborer exchanges for a wage. The inequality a, nonetheless, is manifest in the disproportionate wage the capitalist pays out in vis-à-vis the wealth the laborer creates and the latter unwarrantedly accumulates (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 12). Not only does inequality characterize the capitalist mode of production and its concomitant social relations, but it has also been a perennial landmark of the historical development of the economic institutions of societies since the dawn of humanity. The economic, social, and political inequality is legitimated by "religion, law, and the political structure" (Morrison 40).

5- Popular Cultural Genres, the Audience, and the Marxist Perspective

The quintessential foundation of society is the base or economic structure, that cements the legal, political, and cultural superstructure that on a par with the established material relationships between social classes. The superstructure captures the social consciousness of a given stage of development through its social, political, and intellectual zeitgeist. That the ideology of the material relations can be read off the superstructure's texts and practices does not gainsay the latter's propensity to challenge of the base. The hardcore radical Marxists, also known as the vulgar Marxists, accentuate the value of economic determinism in succinctly dictating the terms for the superstructure institutions and rendering them passive reflection of the base dynamics. Nevertheless, Marx's collaborator, Frederick Engels, accords the superstructure a purview as its institutions- "the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds-" impact "the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their form" despite the decisive function the economic base maintains (Frederick Engels 2009 61). Henceforth, the superstructure terrain, mapped, produced, and reproduced by the base, is challenged and subverted by the interaction of its institutions and participants. By the same token, the superstructure-based texts and practices- albeit not "the primary force in history-" are able to act as "active agents in historical change or the servants of social stability" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 63).

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The Frankfurt school ushered in a new area of social criticism targeting the ramification of mass production and mass culture, that is the loss of authenticity in cultural forms and practices, mainly music, painting, fast food, identity and the self. Pre-capitalist art, the critical theorist Theodore Adorno contends, attests to artistic autonomy and unfettered expression of subjective creativity long lost in industrial capitalist culture: "the composer was less separated from the performance, and the performers less constrained by the text" (Hall, John. R et al. *Sociology on Culture* 121). The Frankfurt school took issue with the grand enlightenment project- exerting social control through the lenses of reason and science- that rendered art and culture a mechanical process that incessantly churns out uninteresting yet manipulative commodities. Albeit antithetical to the commercialization and industrialization of culture and the mechanical production of cultural sameness, the Frankfurt School was by no means a staunch proponent of the adage "art for art's sake." Benjamin Walter denounces the negative theological approach to art hitherto popular amongst artists that celebrates the purity of art to the neglect of its social function (Benjamin 224). More tellingly, that art, and culture in the broader scheme, has social and political

bearings transcends the Marxist rather reductionist base-superstructure model that relegates culture to the superstructure status, a mere derivative reflection of the base economic realities. Critical theorists contend that art and the social structure share a symbiotic relationship: " They considered the relation between art and social structure to be mediated and 'dialectical' – that is, subject to complex mutual influences between various interacting elements" (Hall, John. R et al. *Sociology on Culture* 120). The commodification and reification of artifacts stripped art of its sui generis impetus, that is being "a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of the domineering institutions, religious and otherwise" (Adorno 678). It engendered instead an affirmative culture that bolsters the dominant capitalist values and perpetuates the status quo (Hall, John. R et al. *Sociology on Culture* 120).

The mass production of artifacts does allow the masses to marvel at art, albeit inauthentic and depersonalized. Listening to a piped-in piece of Muzak on the radio or vetting the details of a photographed *Mona Lisa* erodes the authorship of the work, dispense it with its time and space, distort its original cult value- its religious, traditional or ritual purposes, and supersedes it with "exhibition value" (Benjamin 225). The exhibition value of art is by no means lost on the beholder inasmuch as the exhibited copy, be it a photography or phonography, meets its audience halfway in lowbrow venues, such as auditorium in the open air or lowbrow art¹⁶ alternative galleries and salons, instead of opera houses or theatres.

The uniqueness of the original artifact is rendered insignificant insofar as the mechanical limitless reproduction of its copies "permits a wide range of audience to view a normally inaccessible original work" (Hall, *Sociology on Culture* 121). The

¹⁶ Low brow art, also known as Pop Surrealism, is an underground art movement that rose to prominence in late 1960's, famous for its exuberant and flamboyant visual artworks inspired by cartoon imagery and themes and invigorated by the grotesque of the underground comix (X-rated comic). It is a counterculture movement that follows unorthodox artistic approaches and aesthetics in defiance to the highbrow art aestheticism.

uniqueness of the art work pertains to the qualities of "hereness and nowness" that are lost through the mechanical reproduction process. The masses' urge to hold the artifact at close range- albeit a reproduced work of art- outweighs their desire to indulge in an original work's permanence and uniqueness, what Benjamin referred to as the "aura" (Benjamin 211): "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (Benjamin 223).

In their criticism of popular art and its media- chief of which is popular music and its medium the radio- the critical analyst Theodore W. Adorno and the composer and the theorist Ernst Krenek espoused Benjamin's notions pertinent to authentic art: "aura", "hereness," and "nowness." In his 1938 paper "Bemerkungen zur Rundfunkmusik," 'Comments on Radio Music,' Krenek lays bare a compendious critique of radio's implications for music. Popular music, in its atonal and bogus harmony, constitutes a harbinger of the end of subjectivity not only in art but in society writ large serve to bolster social conformity. In a similar fashion, watching a football match on television or listening to its commentary on the radio erodes it of its aura and fandom culture. What critical analysts overlooked in their theorization of culture is the participatory role the audience plays while consuming the cultural industry products.

Walter situates the term aura within the spatial and temporal framework of the artwork. The mechanical reproduction of the artwork detaches it from its historical context and ritualistic strain; thus, it divests it of its aura. Historically, art served a ritual function, be it religious or magical, as it was endemic to and integrated in the cult culture and tradition. The aura lends credence and authenticity to the work of art and sets it asunder from churned out or low-brow artistic expression. Insulated from

mechanical reproduction, the ritual-imbued aura attached to the artwork is preserved although by no malleable. Benjamin asserts that the artwork's use value changes as per the spatial and temporal context of its exhibition. It could range from deification, veneration, secularization, to desecration: For instance, an ancient statue of Venus held different meanings for the Greeks, who revered it, and for the clergy of the Middle Ages, who saw it as a dangerous idol. Despite these differing interpretations, both groups were equally confronted with the statue's distinctiveness, its 'aura' (Benjamin, 223).

Similarly, parietal art, originally carved for the spirits, devised for magical purposes, and exposed to a handful of fellow cavemen, loses its cult value that entails "it remains hidden" (Benjamin 225). Statues of gods, sculptures on cathedrals, fresco and mosaic, and portrait busts are emancipated from their cult value as they are mechanically reproduced for mass presentability to embrace its exhibition value (Benjamin 225).

The prehistoric spiritual ritual endemic to arts was proceeded by the religious cult that idolized artwork, kept it preserved in the interior of temples; the religious cult was superseded in the Renaissance by the secular cult of beauty that denied artwork its hitherto social function. The secular cult of beauty espoused the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* that tends to disavow it of its incrementally waning aura and cult value. It moves away from the traditional aesthetic focus on fine arts, painting and sculpture primarily, but its main interest lies in the new media arts, chief of which is photography and films. He brushes aside a handful of outmoded concepts such the idealist and elitist veneration of intrinsic beauty and esoteric value. Benjamin by no means took issue with the new media art inasmuch as it is exoteric made by the people for the entertainment of the people. He contends that with the advent of the

reproductive technology and media, art has changed from being for and by the elites to being for and by the masses.

His avant-gardist essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” originally written in 1935, signaled the entanglement of art and politics in the interwar period- a critical historical epoch- such as fascists, Nazis and other extremist ideologues utilized art to manipulate and indoctrinate the masses. The technological reproduction of art liberates and democratizes it; it snatches art away from the hands of the elites and makes it accessible to the masses. Benjamin contends that this new form of art has cathartic effects: “that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (221). The liquidation occurs when reproduced artistic object, owing to the mechanical reproduction techniques, is detached from its tradition inasmuch as the hitherto original artwork is superseded by a plurality of copies whose authorship and critique is no longer exclusively confined to the discretion of a select few artists and critics. Perception transformation, Benjamin asserts, morphs historically in conjunction with the transformation of the artistic style. Indeed, painting style has evolved from utilizing linear tactile to pictorial technique¹⁷, and so did human perception shifted from the haptic to the optical mode of perception¹⁸

¹⁷ linear tactile to pictorial technique: This change represents a move toward a more sensory, immersive experience in visual art, enhancing depth, atmosphere, and emotional expression. It refers to the historical shift in artistic methods from precise, line-based representations **to** more visually immersive, color and light-based techniques. Linear Tactile Technique: This approach emphasizes sharp outlines and clear contours to define objects. It is often associated with early Renaissance art, where artists focused on creating forms with strong, structured lines. Example: Leonardo da Vinci’s early sketches or classical frescoes that relied on detailed line work. Pictorial technique: This method shifts the focus from rigid outlines to color, shading, and perspective to create a more naturalistic, immersive image. It moves towards optical blending rather than strict line definition, making the image appear more realistic. Example: Impressionist paintings (like Monet’s work), where colors and brushstrokes blend dynamically, without clear outlines.

¹⁸ haptic and optical mode of perception: refers to a historical and conceptual change in how people engage with and interpret their surroundings, particularly in art, technology, and media. Haptic Mode

Benjamin contends that human perception, mainly visual experience, is not shaped by natural constants wherein time and space are ahistorical; rather, it is determined and molded by historical and technological variables. Human sensory experience is by no means static; perception of the primitive man is strikingly different from that of the modern man living in the print culture era, and so is the print culture digital age. In this day and age, the technical apparatuses mediate the human sensory experience.

Indeed, Benjamin's theory of perception anticipated the extensive body of contemporary research written by countless socio-psychologists to account for the effect of digital technologies on human perception. A more comprehensive approach to perception that hitherto laid bare the brass tacks of the foregoing topic is phenomenology. The phenomenological approach to perception solicits to refute the long-held distinction between the physical and the mental espoused by the two rival approaches: empiricism and intellectualism. Despite their blatant differences, empiricism and intellectualism underscore the mental mechanism of perception to the neglect of the somatic mechanism. Perception, according to the leading phenomenological researcher, Maurice Merleau-Pontey, is an embodied experience as humans navigate and mediate their existence through the body and perceive it through

of Perception (Tactile or Touch-Based Perception)"Haptic" refers to touch and physical interaction with objects. In earlier times, people experienced the world primarily through touch, proximity, and physical engagement. In art, this meant a focus on texture, materiality, and the feel of objects. Example: In classical sculpture and early frescoes, form and depth were emphasized through tactile qualities rather than just visual cues. Optical Mode of Perception (Vision-Based Perception) "Optical" perception refers to the dominance of sight and distance-based observation over direct physical engagement. With the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance art, people began to see the world through a more visual, spatially structured lens. The rise of glass windows, mirrors, photography, and screens reinforced a world in which we perceive things from a distance rather than through touch. Example: The shift from medieval tactile art to Renaissance linear perspective paintings, where depth was conveyed through visual cues rather than raised relief or texture.

the mind. In this vein, interacting with digital technology conduces a sensorimotor experience that requires physical interaction and generates somatory sensations. Digital technology- ranging from 3D and wireless technologies, touch-screens and haptic interfaces, beauty filters, artificial intelligence, cyborgs and androids, to avatars and the multiverse- alters perception of oneself, the world, and reality per se. In his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty underscores the inextricable link between the “inner perception and the outer perception,” that is the mental and the somatory processes that jointly shape our experience of the world. More to the point, phenomenology conceives of perception as a sensorimotor process that is inherently embedded in the individuals’ surrounding:

I am aware of a harmony between sensation and concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept. Here the subject is no longer the universal thinker of a system of objects rigorously interrelated, the positing power who subjects the manifold to the law of the understanding, in so far as he is to be able to put together a world- he discovers and enjoys his own nature as spontaneously in harmony with the law of understanding (Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception* XIX).

The culture industry products seldom deliver on their promised pleasures. The promissory freight peddled through the plot and packaging is deferred *sine die*. The whole show is premised on a promise of desires inflamed by sexual exhibition: "the breast beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero," only to be diluted by its deeply entrenched denial and consequently relegated to the status of masochism. However the intensification of the erotic import of a show's innuendos and sensationalism, the undertone abashedly notifies the audience that there is nothing

more to come. Unlike authentic culture that is shamelessly sublime, aesthetic, and ascetic, "the culture industry is pornographic and prudish" (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). A genuine work of art's asceticism does not stigmatize nudity or sexuality; rather, it thrives on mediating "what has been denied," for art deems human drives denial a debasement as negative (Adorno and Horkheimer 11).

The pseudo-realism espoused by TV shows, mainly those of crime and punishment, banalizes violence and criminality to the neglect of the show's overtone, culpability, insomuch as the audience is lured to endorse "the heroic role of the big-shots of crime-" however villainous they were. Suffice it to say, TV shows incite violence and criminality in the audience by duping them into direct and passive identification. The opening of a TV show reveals its genre and probable closing; the show and real world become coterminous as the later constitutes an extension of the former. When the first scene takes place in a nightclub of the same name, and we see a man sitting at the bar with his hat on and a sorrowful, heavily made-up woman ordering another drink at a distance, we quickly anticipate that a murder is about to occur. Through both subtle and obvious cues, we understand that this is a crime drama, where we can expect dark and possibly violent events, where the hero will likely be saved from a seemingly impossible situation, and where the woman at the bar, while not the main culprit, is probably going to die as a gangster's lover (Adorno, *Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture* 482-3).

Not only does the familiarity of the crime settings- a night club, a vulnerable woman drinking alone, a shady character lurking in the dark- normalize criminality, but it also functions as a harbinger when the immediate real life situation resembles the crime movie's patterns. Arguably, The social and psychological function of the movie is distorted insofar as its symbolism is confused with "a pedantically

maintained realism in all matters of direct sense perception" (Adorno, *Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture* 483).

6-Popular Culture and Stereotypes:

The pseudo-realism is coupled with the implementation of stereotypes, universal patterns, and symbols to create a unified socio-psychological frame of reference that determines meanings and direct the audience to a certain direction. Adorno contends that movies are advertently stereotypically scripted, for stereotypes induce order and organization and anticipation into the human experience and hinges the mind from falling into chaos. Stereotype is a term introduced to social sciences by Walter Lippman in his book *On Public Opinion* to connote mental images humans create to make sense of the world

Preconceptions guide how we approach new experiences; they categorize the world into the familiar and the strange and stakes out the boundaries between the two territories "so that the slightly familiar is seen as very familiar, and the somewhat strange as sharply alien" (Lippman, Walter. *On Public Opinion* 61). Humans tend to interact with the world by alluding to mentally stored repertory of stereotype to decode the vaguely unfamiliar. The stereotypes are conjured by the immediate signs to which we are exposed so far as they analogize older images to fresh visions

Stereotypes, Lippman argues, constitute a solid system put together by personal tradition, which buttresses the defenses of one's position in society, and to which one's tastes, potentials, comforts and hopes are attuned. Stereotypes are not a fittingly thorough rendition of the world; rather, they draw a picture of a contingently subjective world wherein one's position, rights, and role are assumed, and based on which one adjust one's comportment and grooves (Lippman 63). That a challenge to

one's stereotypes is a deliberate attack on the foundations of the universe is a common misconception that most people hold. Rather, a potential challenge to one's stereotypes is an attack on one's universe- the distinction between the universe and one's universe is overlooked lest the perceived world "turns out to be one in which those we honor are unworthy, and those we despise are noble" (Lippman, *On Public Opinion* 64). A redress of long held stereotypes readily conduces to anarchy; the demolition of "fortress of our tradition" behind which we take refuge from "the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality" (Lippman 64). Anarchy ensues as one's long-held order proves flawed vis-à-vis other existing orders (Lippman 64).

Lippman's definition of the term stereotype is by no means ironclad in that his stereotypes and public mind synthesis predates the cognitive theory as we know it today. Lippman contends that men come to perceive their social environment based on mental representations of the objects of their perception. Cognition of the world had hitherto been deemed a passive veridical process that enables "the human perceiver to apprehend a more-or-less true picture of 'reality'" (Fiske and Shelley 209). It was in the 1950's that perception was construed as "a much more active, motivated and hot process" (Fiske and Shelley 209). Not only are stereotypes neutral mental images prerequisite for assuaging the perception of the world, but they also fasten men's ties to their own world- mainly their cultural frame of reference and governing preconceptions:

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture (Lippman, *On Public Mind* 55).

Stereotypes are generative of a universal system of categorizing people, events, and circumstances into boxes- each lumps together members of an in-group based on their intra-category similarities and pits them against an out-group members for their inter-category palpable disparities. In the pursuit of coming to term with the world, stereotypes levy a cognitive filter of "pre-existent cultural representations" upon the data perceived by the senses before it is transmitted to the brain:

In some measure, stimuli from the outside, especially when they are printed or spoken words, evoke some part of a system of stereotypes, so that the actual sensation and the preconception occupy the consciousness at the same time. The two are blended, much as if we looked at red through blue glasses and saw green (Lippman, *On Public Opinion* 66).

The resultant interpretation of the outside world is far removed from reality; it is, rather, a stereotype-based reality that is emphatically validated and, therefore, perpetually reinforced when the filtered signs succinctly correspond with the preconceptions: "as it is in a man who knows in advance that the Japanese are cunning and has the bad luck to run across two dishonest Japanese" (Lippman 66).

Stereotype has been defined differently across the social-psychology spectrum since its dawning day of introduction and used: stereotypes are streamlined mental construct that serve to box individuals into groups based on their perceived differences, mostly physical, and they tend to take a pejorative connotation as implemented to the out-group. They are deemed by some social psychologists cognitive shortcuts generative of overgeneralized attributes- based on inaccurate sketchily-made impressions- which serve to determine the relationships between groups. More tellingly, the static nature of stereotype is prone to subversion for the

sake of adapting to pivotal "economic, political, or social changes", that is, the stereotypes, whether legitimate or illegitimate, accorded to a group are malleable whenever "the situational requirements and own goals and motives of the person who uses them" entail it. Individuals are hardwired to acquire stereotypes at an early age – much of which generate favoritism towards in-group individuals and discrimination against out-group members (Lippman 233).

Stereotypes are inherently pejorative towards out-groups for the disposition of upholding negative generalization about members of other groups. they schematize and distort reality through the incessantly inevitable conjuring of preconceptions and clichés. They are indispensable and equally appealing insofar as they systematize the perceived signs in a simplistic schema "in order to ease cognitive and behavioral adaptation in a new situation of communication" and schematize cultural formula based on collective images expressive of a community and communal identity. Stereotypes generate group prototypes and labels that associate individuals with specific social behaviour allegedly characteristic of a particular ethnic group. Because stereotypes describe groups rather than individuals, people who are subject to them are often viewed not as unique persons, but as typical members of their social or ethnic group. The traits linked to specific ethnic groups are embedded in widely held beliefs and shape how we define "us" versus "them." These generalizations significantly influence social interactions by shaping and reinforcing relationships between different groups (Lippman 234).

Once we tap into the repertoire of stereotypes, we unwarrantedly strip the addressed individuals of their individuality. Readily, we draw heavily on a priori judgments of individuals in terms of their collective attributes that lamp them in the same group. Not only do stereotypes accentuate collectivity to the neglect of

individuality, but they also purvey discrimination against and negative prejudice towards the out-groups: "When someone, say a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, views all blacks as stupid, or all Jews as venal, or all Aboriginal children as 'snot-faced,' they are applying the same cast to their impression of all members of the particular group" (Fiske and Shelley 209).

By the same token, the cultivation thesis accentuates the medley of television shows' power to warp the "conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner et al. 37). Individuals are believed to have a narrow scope of insight harnessed from surmountable personal experiences based on which they can make sense of unfamiliar encounters. Hence, television, along with myriad media technologies, are poised to warrant vicarious experiences of the unfamiliar and reaffirm the familiar. Individuals' perception of the world is by no mean directly molded by their first-hand experience; rather, it is molded "by accounts both fictional and true, of other's experiences" (Hammermeister et al. 254-55) - however contentious the use of the word "true" might be. Media truth is scripted, enshrined, and disseminated by the industry's decision makers; hence, it is susceptible to bias, stereotypes, and misrepresentation.

The cultural industry products serve to indoctrinate through engendering a false consciousness wrapped in an entertainment veneer so enthralling that it enables it to legitimate its falsehood as a way of life. The cultural products usher in "prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole" (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* 14). The quantitative rationality of the capitalist society gave rise to the one-dimensional man endowed with one-dimensional thought and behavioral patterns many of which are predetermined to ward off any qualitative endeavor toward a desired political or social change. The

critical function highbrow art hitherto performed pits culture and the dystopian social reality against one another inasmuch as culture arrogates to itself the role of a social critic underscoring the societal predicaments and injustice and a catalyst cementing a purging revolution. Much to its chagrin, authentic culture revolutionary tendencies incrementally devolve into the counter-revolutionary forces of the culture industry. The cultural convergence conducive to a liquidized two-dimensional culture "takes place not through the denial and rejection of the 'cultural values,' but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale" (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* 60). The utopian future envisaged by authentic culture, by no means, gainsays the distraught present; rather, the commercialization and massification of high culture product generated a social harmony insofar as it enshrines the dystopian present as the desired utopian future. Playing the classical music of the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach as a background in the kitchen or hanging a copy of the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa* in the living room do bring the classics back to life again. However, "they come to life as other than themselves; they are deprived of their antagonistic force, of the estrangement which was the very dimension of their truth" (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* 67). Danish Painter Piet Mondrian's blocks of colour are incorporated in famous designers' dresses in the 1960's and later in inexpensive counterfeits (Hall et al.144). The classics were also embroiled in the advertisement business so much so that listening to a piece of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* would willy-nilly conjure a mental image of a Mercedes-Benz, or "hearing the second movement from Antonin Leopold Dvorak's *New World Symphony* without conjuring up an image of Hovis bread" (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 69-70).

Thus, the class-based societal model has long existed throughout successive epochs in the process of the economic formation of society. Indeed, in the Marxist scheme of things, the economic base of society shapes its social relations. The superstructure is the reflection of the power relations transpiring in the base or the economic structure of society. Drawing on Marx and the Marxist thinkers to contour the width and breadth of the spectrum of ideology with regard to popular culture does not suffice.

Equating ideology to false consciousness imputed to and disseminated by mass media and the culture industry is rebutted by many structural Marxists, most prominent of whom is Louis Althusser. Ideological dominance of media culture, overstated by traditional Marxists and Frankfurt School theorists, erroneously downplays bourgeois individualism and the revolutionary tendency of the working class. Althusser debunks the foregoing understanding of the concept “ideology” by putting forward a cohesive paradigm of social formation as opposed to the Marxist base/superstructure model. The superstructure is accorded an expressive function that is informed and determined by the base. The Althusserian reformulation of the social model emphatically asserts the monumental role the superstructure plays in maintaining and perpetuating the dynamics of the base. If the base, according to the Frankfurt theorists, is a determinant, the social structure writ large, for the structural Marxists, is a dominant. Social structure is multi-layered; it encompasses the economic, political, and ideological sub-structures. Althusser coined the term “structure in dominance” to account for the structure that holds dominance in a given historical conjuncture and, inevitably, authorizes the determination of the economic layer. The economic determination is by all means absolute; it is relegated to the status “determinant in the last instance.” Althusser echoes Marx’s contention that

although the Marxist tradition is derivative and sufficiently explicative of its time-largely capitalist-oriented era, - with regards to the economic determination of the superstructure, this does not hold true for previous epochs. Societies of the Middle Ages, wherein Catholicism reigned supreme, and Athens and Rome, wherein politics dominated, the economic system does not act unilaterally to determine events. Essentially, the operating economic system does determine the livelihood of Athenians and Romans but only subtly and indirectly. The economic is determinant solely in the last instance insofar as it is deferred and mediated through other structures, mainly politics, religion, culture, and ideology (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 176). Hence, the Althusserian perspective vouches for the relative autonomy of the superstructure as it intermittently exerts influence over the base. This is mostly evident during the Feudal system wherein the political structure spearheaded and maintained by the aristocrats and monarchs gains prominence and becomes dominant during that historical moment. More prominently, the economic structure installed and preserved by the capitalist oligarchy is the prevailing force in this day and age.

Ideology, Althusser contends, is both a system and a practice whereby men experience and instantiate their relations to the real conditions of existence. Ideology denotes a system of representation in that it constitutes a repertoire of ideas, images, and myths upon which men draw to make sense of their surroundings. Furthermore, Althusser aligns the practices of material production with the practices of conceptual and cultural production, emphasizing their mutual structural and ideological dynamics. The economic mode of production determines the transformation of raw materials into determinate finished products as per determinate human labour and social relations. By the same token, the ideological practices emanate a substantial

way of living and interpreting the world by transforming people's raw experiences and social conditions. On a sober reflection, Althusser's perspective concerning ideology is more inclusive than the economic deterministic perspective of the Marxist tradition. Ideology is by and large autonomous inasmuch as it is contingent on the articulation between structural elements- that is, ideology is articulated through interaction of the economic, political, and ideological structures and by the influence they exert on one another within historical contexts. Althusser asserts that people live real conditions of existence- their social class, labour conditions, and property ownership, or lack thereof- through imaginary relations by dint of ideological representations.

Accordingly, ideology symbolically distorts those realities. This is especially veracious in capitalist democracies as both the working class and the capitalist elites believe they enjoy the same rights and freedoms and live in equal and egalitarian societies despite the exploitative and profiteering tendencies of said societies. Individualism and meritocracy- ideologies that conceal the real dynamics of power relations and inequalities- are foundational pillars of the American identity and deeply embedded in the national psyche so much so criticizing their scarcity- or worse, their absence- is deemed un-American. Indeed, the US naked truth is that "beneath the surface lays corruption, poverty discrimination, and shortage in many needs" (Bouazid 429). In this respect, ideology tends to work unconsciously and practically; the masses are not so gullible as to readily acquiesce to the prevailing power structure. Ideology permeates roughly every façade of our social and cultural life, ranging from molding formal institutions such as the education system and religious instructions, to fashioning our cultural practices such as rituals and traditions and informing our engagement with media and entertainment platforms- all of which is lumped under the

rubric the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs). In short, ideology, according to the Althusserian perspective, subtly shapes how people perceive the world, their relation to their condition of existence, and their awareness of their position within the broader social order.

Ideology dilutes the contradictions inherent in the power structure and perpetuating the status quo, ensuring that people remain immersed and emotionally invested in it. Althusser best captures the gist of the foregoing contention:

In ideology men... express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an “imaginary”, “lived” relation. Ideology... is the expression of the relation between men and their “world”, that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence (*For Marx* 233-4).

Taken together, Louis Althusser's nuanced contribution to the theory of ideology and its bearing on popular culture is undeniably consequential. Althusser's approach to ideology sweeps beyond the restricted abstractionist scope of the term that sets its contour around “a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts)” (Althusser, *For Marx* 231). Rather, the term also encompasses the practices that unconsciously inculcate people with precepts to express their lived relations as per the social formations. To this effect, ideology serves to inveigle people to fit into their subscribed social class and succumb to their subordination and subjugation insofar as subordination and subjugation are tantamount to necessary, universal, and natural social order. In this vein, ideology is

but a “false consciousness” that serves the purpose of resolving social conflicts and naturalizing power imbalances, be they political or economic. Not only does this false consciousness cajole the subordinate class into consent and conformity, but it also corroborates their privilege and power grasp.

Herbert Marcuse, the French Marxist philosopher, attributes the social stasis to the rational underpinning the apparatus of production in advanced capitalist societies. Not only does the productive apparatus’s rational solicit to sell a product or a service to its consumers, but it also sells a social system that is impervious to repudiation. The appeal of the entertainment and information industries coupled with the ease and comfort goods, services, and accommodations offer to consumers naturalize and institutionalize their ideological import. The ideologically laden products generate a false consciousness that is immune to its falsehood, explain Marcuse. More to the point, the technologically and industrially driven civilization, Marcuse asserted, was believed to revolutionize and benefit individuals in terms of material possession and freedom of conceptual thinking as opposed to concrete thinking. Concreteness entails the use of abridged language that unequivocally identifies objects with their functions.

Ideology and false consciousness are by no means synonymous; however, they are inextricably linked. They reflect the relation between social reality and social consciousness that is the “relation between who one is (objectively) and what one thinks (subjectively) (Eyerman 44). Notwithstanding the fact that Marx never used the expression “false consciousness” in his writing, it penetrates the classical Marxists’ texts many of which explain it as the bourgeoisie mental production- mainly voiced through the medium of language- and purportedly confined within the contours of the superstructure wherein politics, laws, culture, religion, morality are institutionalized and enshrined. The mental production is not autonomous; rather, it is shaped and

“conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process” (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* 67-8). That false consciousness and ideology are confined to the realm of superstructure, the realm of the political establishment and the high cultural bastion, inoculate the working class from illusions about their existence inasmuch as their ideas are excluded from the conversation writ large (Eyerman 44). More tellingly, the working class experience their social reality through their assigned position; Marxists like Engels and Lenin assert that the owners of the means of production are the producers of the prevailing ideology- whose ideas, a fortiori, become the ruling ideas:

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do... they (the workers) are most painfully aware of the difference between being and thinking, between consciousness and life. They know that property, capital, money, wage labor and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, very objective products of their self-estrangement (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 64).

Over and above, the role of ideology in shaping and enshrining certain social formations and accounting for the emergence of social ideas rather than explaining the deterministic strains of the economic base and its concomitant bearing on the super structure. The contentious concept ideology has been resuscitated in the wake of the precipitous boom of the cultural industry. The sheer mention of ideology in the Marxist tradition evokes the more convoluted concept “false consciousness”. The two

concepts, however equally equivocal, are erroneously used interchangeably. False consciousness is generated by curating a subverted version of social reality that will inevitably attain unanimous consent and acquiescence of the masses and all social classes in advanced capitalist societies. Consent in the capitalist societies- that leads, oddly enough, to the stabilization of those unjust stratified societies- amongst the masses is attributed, from the Marxist perspective, to false consciousness. Other Marxists attribute it to ideology, although they contend that “consent is not maintained through the mechanisms of ideology alone. But the two cannot be divorced” (Hall 25).

Chapter 3: Popular Culture through the Prism of John Fiske's Perspective

This chapter examines popular culture through the theoretical framework of John Fiske, whose work in cultural studies radically reoriented scholarly understandings of how everyday audiences engage with media. Fiske's approach challenges the top-down model of cultural production typified by the Frankfurt School, foregrounding instead the active, participatory, and often resistive role of media consumers. For Fiske, popular culture is not simply imposed by dominant institutions but is created in the interpretive labor and symbolic appropriation performed by ordinary people. In this sense, it is a site of struggle—between incorporation and resistance, power and agency, hegemony and counter-hegemony.

This chapter contextualizes Fiske's contributions within broader debates about cultural production, media power, and audience reception. It draws attention to his influential concepts such as *semiotic democracy*, *the popularity of the popular*, and *productive consumption*, which illuminate how meaning is negotiated in the everyday. Fiske offers a compelling counter-narrative to deterministic accounts of media influence, emphasizing instead the “polysemic” nature of cultural texts and the ways in which audiences creatively rework these texts to serve their own purposes. By viewing popular culture through Fiske's lens, this chapter interrogates how media content becomes a terrain of symbolic contestation, shaped by the push and pull between dominant ideologies and subversive readings. It also considers how Fiske's theories remain relevant in the digital age—where audiences are not only readers but producers of media, and where participatory culture challenges traditional structures of cultural authority. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Fiske's perspective opens up a critical space for understanding popular culture as both a product of power and a potential site of resistance, creativity, and community-making.

1- Defining Popular Culture: Insights from John Fiske

Erroneously conflated with media culture, popular culture is by definition the culture made by the people for the people. Nonetheless, media culture does generate a rich reservoir of cultural texts to be deployed as the primary source in the formation of popular culture, either through appropriating, subverting, or dodging it all together (Fiske 24). Accordingly, popular culture constitutes a site of power struggle between the power-bloc-instigated media culture and the subordinate's appropriation and abrogation of this culture; it "is part of power relations; it always bears traces of forms of resistance to it or evasion of it, between military strategy and guerrilla tactics" (Fiske 19).

Despite centuries of sustained hegemonic power structures: authoritarianism, classism, sexism, elitism, and tribalism, popular cultural practices still resist those hegemonic forces; they constantly achieve "small wins, fleeting victories, keep the enemy constantly on the alert, and gain, and sometimes hold, pieces of territory (however small) for themselves" (Fiske 20). Owing to the erosion inflicted on the system, structural changes accrue: "Structural changes at the level of the system itself, in whatever domain- that of law, of politics, of industry, of the family- occur only after the system has been eroded and weakened by the tactic of everyday life" (Fiske 20).

John Fiske was intrigued by popular culture as a lifestyle so much so he formalized that intrigue into fully-fledged scientific research that spawned an array of books and academic papers. Evidently, his insightful book *Understanding Popular Culture* opens with the chapter "The Jeaning of America" to further tackle prevalent American cultural practices and texts ranging from American holidays, breakfast, fast food, shopping malls, beaches, and video arcades, to skyscrapers. John Fiske's theory

of popular culture is a theory of a “white, patriarchal, capitalist” culture, akin to his motherland’s, American culture. The theoretical edifice he makes use of is European in origin: Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and carnivalesque, Barthes’ theory of bodily pleasure, De Certeau’s theory of the bourgeois/ proletarian cultural tastes, and De Certeau’s appropriation of the military metaphor “guerrilla warfare” to explain the constructive process of popular culture and resistive tactic to the dominant ideology. Popular culture’s appeal has little to do with its functionality than its susceptibility to produce meaning, pleasure, and shape identity.

Using the media culture products and its spin-off commodities succinctly reflects the contradictions inherent in popular culture; poised to be a way of life and a means of social resistance, yet laying its foundation stone on the premises of the imposed media culture and bearing traces of its artifacts is paradoxical. John Fiske concludes that popular culture is imputed to capitalist societies, wherein power balance is titled in favor of one category- be it class, gender, or race- rather than the other. The social opposition endemic to popular culture is by no means muted; it is pronounced through disfiguring said cultural artifacts and texts. Therefore, popular culture constitutes a terrain of power relations central to the American societal system and, by extension, Americans’ social experiences. The significance of popular culture contradiction is twofold: “The first I have noted, that contradiction can entail the expression of both domination and subordination, of both power and resistance...the second is that contradiction entails semiotic richness and polysemy” (Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 5). Owing to the fact that media culture texts are not monosemic; their consumers will not conceive the same message. Casting a black actor, Denzel Washington, for the role of Macrinus in the 2000 *Gladiator*’s sequel, *Gladiator II*, 2024, constitutes an act of inclusivity towards Black Americans and an

Afrocentric revision of history for North Africans owing to the blackwashing of a character historically associated with North African legacy.

The casting choice is a quintessential example of the polysemy imputed to popular culture texts. From the producers' vantage point, casting a black actor to represent a historically non-black character and culture is a lucrative marketing ploy aiming to target the black community audience in order to give the movie a sub-culturally skewed inflection loaded with communal meanings. Macrinus- a Mauritanian who was born in what is now modern Algeria, a wealthy Roman of Berber descent and equestrian elite- is depicted by the movie director Ridley Scott as a former slave who later becomes a nouveau-rich social climber, a power broker, and eventually a one-year Roman Emperor. Macrinus, in Scott's vision, is set to embody the archetype of upstart that illustrates the complex dynamics of social strata and mobility in ancient Rome (Bond). More to the point, Scott's Macrinus embodies Black Americans' history that is steeped in slavery and emancipation, which runs contrary to his original social pedigree. Macrinus was never enslaved; rather, he descended from a wealthy family of elite Roman equestrians. However, Macrinus's ascent that marked a departure from conventional traditions- the first Roman emperor of Berber descent who rose from the equestrian order rather than the senatorial class- is accurately depicted in Scott's movie. Scott's Macrinus tracks the fate of numerous African Americans who were once enslaved or disadvantaged and later empowered. Notable example of enslaved and disadvantaged black Americans who rose to national prominence is Booker T. Washington, born into slavery and freed after the civil war, who became an educator, author, and eventually advisor to U.S. presidents. Additionally, Harriet Tubman, whose name became synonymous with the Underground Railroad, escaped slavery and helped free hundreds of others, later

serving as a spy for the Union Army during the Civil War. Robert Smalls, who was enslaved in South Carolina, famously commandeered a Confederate ship and sailed it to Union forces, later becoming a war hero and eventually serving as a U.S. Congressman.

This is redolent of Althusser's concept "interpellation" which extensively figures in his reflections and writings on ideology and the reproduction mechanism of capitalism. In his essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser credits the incessant success of capitalism in maintaining the exploitative system- including the horrendous labour conditions, unequal wealth distribution and entrenched social stratification- to the persistent circulation of the distorted and manipulative ruling class ideologies, peddled through what he terms the ISAs. More tellingly, ideology serves to transform concrete individuals onto subjects by means of interpellation: "all ideologies hail or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subject" (Althusser, *On the Production of Capitalism* 264). When one is hailed- as in "hey, you!"- one naturally spins around to face the hailing voice and is, inescapably, subjected to his ideologically imbued discourse, that is, his patterns of thoughts and modes of behavior. The natural reflex upon being interpellated gives way to the concomitant ideological ensnaring, as exposure to the caller's discourse sweeps the subject into his ideological orbit and demands active engagement and interaction. Amid the deluge of entertainment content, interpellation is the most salient attention grabbing technique advertisers resort to. Hailing individuals through markers such as name, race, gender, or class is a powerful marketing tool to ensure the product remains forefront and center in the consumers' line of sight. In this vein, American movie buffs from all walks of life are interpellated by the miscellaneous discourses and colliding ideologies channeled through *Gladiator II* script. Progressives are

persuaded to celebrate the progressive casting decision- the Black American actor Denzel Washington in the role of Macrinus, and the Chilin-American actor Pedro Pascal in the role of the Roman General Marcus Acacius. Conservative Americans approach the movie with disdain as they condemn the cultural appropriation and blackwashing of their Western heritage, which they deem intrinsically tied to Roman antiquity. Presumably, the movie botches historical accuracy and irresponsibly crams anachronistic ideas about race into classical antiquity. Over and above, interpellation entails that individuals recognize themselves within societal structures and identify with roles presented by dominant ideologies. By attaining a more inclusive cast, *Gladiator II* can be seen as a deliberate reconfiguration of traditional narratives, allowing a broader audience to see themselves reflected in historical contexts.



Figure 3: Macrinus (Denzel Washington) in *Gladiator II*, 2024 (Bond)



Figure 4: A Roman Bust Belonging to Emperor Macrinus (Athanasiou)

Ostensibly, the sequel is geared towards promoting inclusivity and enhancing minority representation in American media culture. The culture industry has been engaging in the whitewashing of nonwhite- what is academically designated BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) - culture and history. Through inclusive casting and narrative, Hollywood aspires to address the cultural erasure of BIPOC, their misrepresentation, and the perpetuation of false and denigrating stereotypical tropes on the screen as well as the racial disparities endemic to the everyday life of the average American. The most recent whitewashing examples are Scarlett Johansson's leading role as Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) and Tilda Swinton's role as the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* (2016).

Ghost in the Shell is a movie whose source material is rooted in a Japanese cyberpunk manga. The protagonist Motoko Kusanagi, whose identity is shaped by Japanese history, is, as the name implies, emblematic of Japanese culture and aesthetics whose identity is shaped by Japanese history, social issues, and philosophy. The Hollywood adaptation brought about a few changes to the original story as it renamed the protagonist Mira Killian who was portrayed as a Japanese woman whose

brain was transplanted into a synthetic, white presenting body in an attempt to retroactively justify the casting choice (Bui).



Figure 5: Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell* (right) and her Character in the Original Anime Movie (Rose)

In the original *Doctor Strange* comic book, the Ancient One is portrayed as an elderly Tibetan sorcerer who mentors Doctor Strange. Marvel Studios' film adaptation cast British actress Tilda Swinton to play that role- this serves as a quintessential example of the whitewashing of Asian culture representation and further underscores the exclusion of Asian actors who are culturally and contextually suitable to take the role. Marvel Studios claimed that the casting choice was intended to avoid the perpetuation of the wise mystical Asian trope and sidestep potential backlash from Chinese authorities due to the cultural and political sensitivities attached to the Tibetan's status. That is, the choice is driven by geopolitical considerations and a strategic endeavor to protect international market revenues. Nonetheless, the scathing criticism and online backlash leveled against the problematic casting of Swinton is founded on the contention that Marvel prioritized a market-friendly whitewashing at the expense of Asian identity erasure (Yuen 23).



Figure 6: Tilda Swinton as the Ancient One in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Doctor Strange (right) and the Original Character in Marvel Comics

The media industry is by all means Eurocentric; while white American audiences perceive the Eurocentric cinematic standards as the default or neutral prism through which producers should reimagine and dramatize cultural narratives- especially those involving BIPOC heritage- minorities often approach such media texts with a critical spirit. Instead of passively consuming the media representations, they engage in a subversive reading conducive to recognizing the power dynamics, historical erasure, the industry's systematic biases, and ideological bearings imparted by the media's retellings of their cultural identities.

The culture industry is motivated primarily by profit; so are the whitewashing practices. Fundamentally, the whitewashing of nonwhite characters is deeply rooted in the economic incentives of the entertainment industry. The commercial logic behind casting white actors is contingent on three factors: marketability, audience appeal, and global revenue maximization. Reasonably, it is easy to market a novel narrative imbued with unfamiliar exotic culture by relying on familiar household names and stars, to wit white actors. Allegedly, white leads are posed to attract larger audiences

on the local and global levels (Weaver 373) inasmuch as they constitute a safer investment due to their stardom power and fan base. Suffice it to say, they ascertain returns in the Box Office: Hollywood studios often operate under the belief that whiteness sells, while racial and ethnic authenticity may alienate the core (white) audience or risk censorship abroad” (Yuen 34). Consequently, this results in the marginalization of BIPOC actors and erasure of authentic cultural content in what would seem an apparent furtherance of an imperialist ideology (Rosewarne 158).

Media culture is a risk-averse industry that gives precedence to economics over political agenda. Production companies produce what is purported to sell irrespective of its authenticity, historical accuracy, or political sensitivity. Hollywood’s adaptation of foreign films is primarily driven by lucrative interests; therefore, leveraging what is called “pre-awareness” is the most efficacious strategic and lucrative marketing model (Epstein). Pre-awareness alludes to the familiarity of the audience with pre-existing stories and high-profile actors. Prominently, studios increasingly capitalized on recycling historical epics, cinematic classics, comic book superheroes and fairy tales, deeming them as commercially viable properties. Nonetheless, countless remakes and sequels have failed to meet expectations and pushed the studios to the brink of financial ruin. Notable examples include the 1963 epic historical drama *Cleopatra* (budget: \$42 million; worldwide gross: \$71 million) , the 1997 sequel *Speed II* (budget: \$160 million; worldwide gross: \$164.5 million), 2019 sequel *Terminator: Dark Fate* (budget: \$196 million; worldwide gross: \$261.1 million) , and 2019 sequel *X-Man: Dark Phoenix* (budget: \$200 million, Worldwide Gross: \$252.4 million)- all of which underperformed at the box office (Sherlock). Subsequently, movie producers started to explore new audience demographics and markets to revive attention and recoup losses. Thus, efforts towards inclusivity in

casting have become increasingly prominent, occasionally giving rise to debates surrounding the phenomenon of blackwashing.

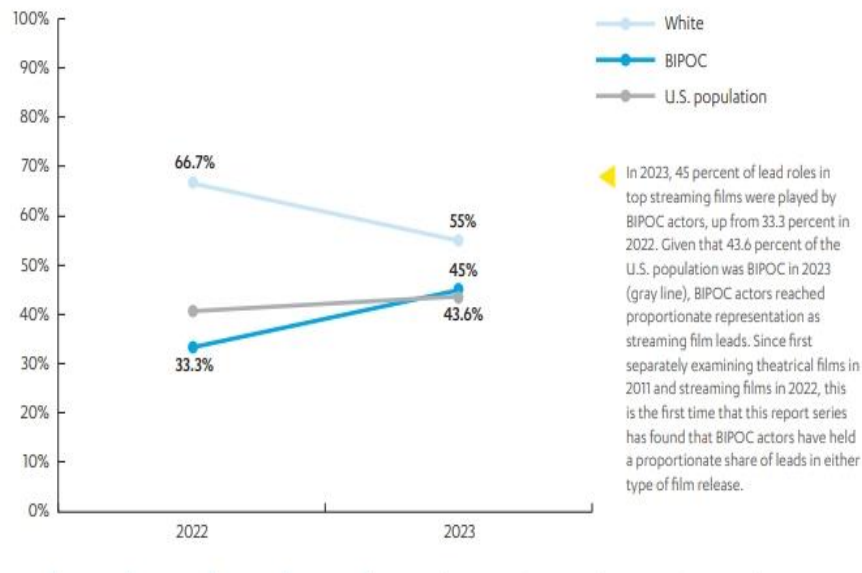


Figure 7: Lead Actor Race/ Ethnicity, Streaming Films, 2022-2023 ("Hollywood Diversity Report 2024")

Indeed, movies like *Black Panther* (2018), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), and *Encanto* (2021) reflect the inclusive casting Hollywood is incrementally featuring. Each of the aforementioned movies has a minority lead and a BIPOC-based narrative. The first, whose cast is predominantly black, celebrates the African identity and Afro-centric aesthetic and heritage insomuch as it dramatizes the fictional futuristic African country Wakanda- that has never been colonized- wherein Black excellence and sovereignty obtain. *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*- a Chinese superhero movie whose cast is predominantly Asian- appealed to all Chinese speaking communities worldwide and managed to countervail the dilution of Asian identity storytelling. The movie, albeit released in COVID lockdown, managed to become a blockbuster and, therefore, challenge the prevailing market strategy that has hitherto favored a Euro-centric standards at the expense of authenticity.

The Oscar nominated Disney animated movie *Encanto*- literally translates to enchanted- has captured massive acclaim for its authentic rendition of Hispanic culture, language, music, and multigenerational Latino identity. Not only did it resonate with Hispanic communities globally, but it also appealed to a broader international family audience. Unlike most Disney movies- whose main protagonist is a white princess who awaits her Prince Charming to rescue her, *Encanto*'s protagonist, Mirabel, arrogates to herself the mission of saving her entire family. *Encanto* features Disney's first Hispanic princess who happens to wear glasses, contrary to the long-held European princess aesthetics (Gutierrez).



Figure 8: "Encanto." Photo: The Associated Press (Gutierrez)

Despite their *prima facie* ethical and social motives, inclusivity and media representation are purely driven by commercial interest. In his book *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, media scholar Herman Gray highlights the superficiality of diversity in media stressing the contention that despite the palpable diverse cast in movies and TV shows the inclusion is held within frameworks that sustain the status quo with regards to Euro-centered norms, narratives, aesthetics, and power structure. Rather than subverting the status quo through authentic representation, media resorts to superficial, yet strategic, inclusivity

that would not upset the existing social hierarchies. This perspective begs a critical examination of *Black Panther*'s storytelling and production context. The movie is undoubtedly the first Marvel endeavor to introduce a black super hero story that celebrates African pride and Afrocentric themes. Nonetheless, a meticulous reading of the story pokes many holes in Hollywood's diversity claims and unravels the complexities in its representation strategies. The movie revolves around the antagonism between the protagonist T'Challa, king of the technologically advanced and isolated African nation Wakanda, and his rival claimant to the throne Erik Killmonger. Killmonger is portrayed as the antagonist who espouses extremist and radical ideals that pose a threat to the wellbeing of Wakanda and its people. He seeks to use Wakanda's resources to arm oppressed people globally and start a revolution; therefore, his revolutionary ideals are deemed destructive and antithetical to Wakanda's isolationist policies. In fact, Killmonger represents Black American historical trauma and radicalism; the character serves as a critique of systemic oppression. The conformist and moderate approach of T'Challa that aims at maintaining the status quo in Wakanda is tantamount to the media approach that serves to contain dissenting voices of minorities and perpetuate the dominant ideologies. The movie delegitimizes the antagonist's revolutionary ideas on the pretext that they are violent and misguided, therefore implying that any act of resistance to imperialism ought to be moderate and reformist. Fundamentally, despite its unprecedented representation, *Black Panther* was produced by a white-controlled industry. Marvel is dominated by white executives and scriptwriters, and as a corporation it follows global box office logic. That is, the content of the movie is marketed for a global audience and must appeal to them. Hence, the movie must

adheres to blockbuster formula that prioritizes spectacle and action over political upheavals.

2- Popular Culture and the Politics of Pleasure

Pleasure is endemic to culture, be it highbrow or popular. The hailed cultural pleasure can take up three categories: political (reactionary pleasure), aesthetic (sublime pleasure versus lowbrow enjoyment), and discursive (the pleasure of making meanings versus accepting ready-made ones), sometimes physiological (the spiritual versus the bodily pleasures). Nonetheless, popular culture entails popular pleasure, a pleasure that is forged as the subordinate comes in a head-on collision with the power block. The bottom-up oppositional pleasure is by no means the only pleasure the subordinate enjoy along the course of pop culture architecture; the pleasure of conformity is conspicuous in instances when power and its disciplinary thrust are passively accommodated and experienced by the subordinated group. Thus, one might identify two diffuse pleasure categories: popular pleasure and hegemonic pleasure (Fiske 49).

3- The Carnival and the Carnavalesque

The renowned Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival is, apparently, always a populist vision of the world seen from below, always a critique, in the festive inversion of hierarchy, of high culture. In particular, Bakhtin simplified the paradoxical, contradictory meanings of the marketplace and fairs in early modern Europe. Bakhtin succumbed to the separation of the festive and the commercial which is distinctive of capitalist rationality as it emerged in the Renaissance. Blinded by populism, Bakhtin could only see the fair as the potential space of popular and local subversion: the marketplace and the fair at carnival times were purely sites of pleasure, unconnected to any wider worlds. Bakhtin could not see

what was obvious, that such fairs also involved economic forces, that they were at the intersection of the cultural and the commercial.

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin introduced a riveting interpretation of the phenomenon "carnival" as he ascribed it to corporal pleasure and excessive offensiveness in opposition to morality, discipline, and social order. He poised the carnivalistic world with the lifeworld that is censored by the social order intermittently repressing the subordinate's latitude of pleasure. Carnival is tantamount to an animated euphoria underpinning the fleeting suspension of all "hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (10). It is governed by "the laws of its own freedom." Essentially, Bakhtin compares carnival to sport on account of their liberating potentials and governing rules. The nuance lies in the carnivalistic abrogation of sport-related rules attuned to social order. Carnival subverts these rules in a maneuver to create a world upside down (Fiske 82). Nonetheless, the collision between the lifeworld enshrined social control and the carnival-instigated rowdiness and debasement purveys what he coined "carnavalesque". Evidently, hooliganism is a manifestation of carnival with its concomitant "inside out" logic orchestrating "a parody of the extracarnival life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 7).

Allegedly, hooliganism is the sole practice through which working class youth can, in an act of catharsis, mitigate their aggressive impulses that could be expressed more violently elsewhere and escape from "the routinization of modern life" (idib., 32). Thus, authorities ought to countenance this uncontrolled yet containedly timely violence. Accordingly, hooliganism is a politically semiotic opposition to the forces of domination. The necessity, and impossibility, of suppressing violence-imbued pleasure gave way to licensed moments of violence eruption, known as carnival. In

the throes of controlling public release of popular pressure, licensing carnival's disruptive moment by the prevailing order serves to incorporate it into that order, "and thus enables the subordinate to fit more comfortably into their oppression" (Fiske 100). In this vein, the aforementioned containment strategy constitutes a safety valve that reinforces rather than attenuates the apparatus of social control. Stadiums, like "cities, shopping mall, schools, workplaces and houses" are "places" of compulsion constructed by the power-block to exert their power. The weak, unable to set up a place of their own, temporarily seize spaces within those places to exercise their agency and stage their counter-narrative (Fiske 32-3).

Bakhtin suggests that carnivalesque folk humour remained in the Middle Ages in an "almost elemental condition" because of the separation of festive laughter in the marketplace from all official and serious thought. In the heterogeneity of the Renaissance; however, this separation broke down, various kinds of interactions and mutual influencings took place. Folk humour could now rise to the "high level" of literature and ideology and fertilise it, while being itself fertilised by humanist knowledge, science, worldly political experience, and advanced literary techniques, as in Boccaccio, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare.

The medieval folk humour, previously divorced from official serious arena of high culture, existed in a primordial pristine and inherently popular state: "folk, rural, and local, to be admired as solely as a culture emerging from below and a critique of high culture" (Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* 187). The Renaissance eroded the barriers hitherto separating official culture and carnival conducing to their intersection and mutual interaction. Folk humour carnivalized the highbrow culture of the ruling elite and was, in its turn, fertilized by the era's scientific, literary, humanist, and political zeitgeist. The inoculation of carnival pristine and grotesque practices

refined the lowbrow culture and forged "a new free and critical historical consciousness" (Bakhtin, Michail. *Rebalais and His World*. Tr. Hélène Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984. 9-7). In this vein, carnival culture, from a Bakhtinian perspective, albeit appealing and liberating, is elementary and could only be elevated to artistic awareness and "come to consciousness" when developed and refined (Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* 188).

In these new combinations, of "lower genres" with the "higher levels of literature", medieval laughter, Bakhtin argues, was transferred from its "almost elemental condition" to a state of artistic awareness. *Rebalais and His World*, that is, does not celebrate the folk as folk, but the interplay during the Renaissance of the folk culture with more formal modes of literature and thought. Festive laughter can "now rise to the level of literature and ideology", and only now could there develop, from this mutual interaction, a "new free and critical historical consciousness". Bakhtin himself, we might observe, retains in his historical 188 argument in *Rebalais and His World* a sense of hierarchy, as if an intensely admirable, but "elemental", popular folk culture can only come to consciousness in more developed, educated forms.

3-1- The Carnival Mystique in Modern-day Media Culture:

That the tradition of carnival festivals lies in antiquity suggests they cemented the groundwork of popular culture insofar as they both were fashioned by the people for the people. One would be remiss to perceive carnival as a venue of rowdy festivity and feasting; it is, rather, a manifestation of the subordinate's oppositional culture- a utopian counter-cultural model that, albeit temporarily, suspends the hierarchical structure of power and comically subverts all the social conventions and etiquettes- and a popular account of the official world as perceived from below. Through partaking in carnival festivals, the subordinate aspires to forge a world

upside-down that can be celebratory of the aura of community, emancipatory and egalitarian. By the same token, carnival's demystifying force of the power structure's rudiments, "class hierarchy, sexual repressions, patriarchy, dogmatism, and paranoia," aborts its vigorous pursuit of communal solidarity- however paradoxical this might seem (Stam 95). That the subordinate instrumentalizes carnivals for political clout by tilting the balance in their favour polarize people along lines of class, gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. Despite being members of the same class category, women, gay people, people of colour, and children approach carnivals in rebellious strains against the authority of adult white straight men. Proto-feminists, for instance, revel in festivals featuring "sex without the price of lifelong subordination to one man" (Ehrenreich et al. 199). The boy defies the authority of the father figure as he "claims the freedom of the evening and curses his father all the more vehemently". He merrily chants "Death to you, sir father!" or readily endeavors to dethrone his king father (Docker 179). In view of this contention, carnivals soapbox the intricate play of intersectionality¹⁹ reflective of the real-world interaction of individuals' multiple identities- one's overlapping position across social markers: class, race, gender, sexuality, age, etc.- and the concomitant experiences of oppression and disempowering effects, or undeserved privilege thereof.

¹⁹ Intersectionality," a term coined by American critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her landmark article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," refers to the interconnected and compounding effects of various forms of discrimination that shape the daily lives of marginalized individuals. Drawing from her own perspective as a woman of color, Crenshaw articulates how overlapping aspects of identity—particularly race, gender, class, and religion—interact to produce distinct experiences of privilege or oppression.

Modernists contend that industrial and post-industrial mass culture bear no resemblance to pre-industrial popular culture and carnival, neither do they echo carnival's rituals. Carnival is a hallmark of the Middle Ages unofficial culture and its unofficial discourse and language. It is an amalgam of folk humour and satire manifest in public square drama and games, processions, feasts, thematizing carnival-related topoi: "the grotesque body, gay relativity, free and familiar contact, banquet imagery, marketplace speech, and the bodily lower stratum" (Stam 10).

Bakhtin's theory of carnival unravels the disparities between the controlling and repressive lifestyle foisted upon the subordinate by the social order. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin sketches out the rudiments and nuances of Rabelais's world that is famous, or infamous thereof, of its physical excesses, offensiveness, humour, bodily pleasures, rowdiness, and profanity. Rabelais' world manifestly project elements of the medieval carnival whose bodily pleasure is at odds with morality, order and social control. Carnival is translinguistic: it transgresses the linguistic borders insomuch as it apotheosizes peripheral energies, such as speech and festivals, to the detriment of "hegemonic project of centralization (officialdom, the language system)" (Stam 85). The momentum Bakhtin accords to "*parole* against the ossified rigidities of *langue*" is in resonance with his unequivocal exaltation of carnival's marginalized yet subversive pleasures as opposed to official culture's repressive and humdrum aesthetics (Stam 85).

Bakhtin's book scrutinizes the Renaissance cultural *spiritus mundi* dramatized by the French Renaissance François Rabelais in his misconstrued and underrated literary products, mainly *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Rabelais writings appropriate the carnival's satirical, humorous, extravagant, and obscene style and features fantastical figures whose language and comportment are averse to the reverence, linguistic

hierarchy, and social restraints of the church and the state. Rabelaisian literary products dramatized elements of the grotesque bodily humour into a novel literary mode grotesque realism. The Rabelaisian text, suffices it to say, attests to the carnivalization of art, that is "the transposition of the spirit of carnival festivities into art" (Stam 10). Carnavalesque in site of intersection between the literary, the social, and the bodily.

Historically, carnival has been a predicament that the church vied to repress, censor but was obliged to recognize and ephemerally license its manifestations. The carnival discourse is *sui generis* festive, jocular, and candid so much so it flouts the official language by using its linguistic medium, vernacular, to parody ecclesiastical or state-related issues:

"prayers, hymns, litanies, liturgy, gospels, monastic rules, ecclesiastical decrees, papal bulls, and encyclicals, sermons, wills, epitaphs, of legal texts and laws, of proverbs and sayings of common wisdom. Not a single saying of the Old and New Testaments was left unchallenged so long as it could provide some hints of equivocal bodily suggestion" (Docker 173).

Not only did vernacular penetrate highbrow literature and ideology, but it also managed to supersede medieval Latin insomuch as it warranted the "liberation of speech into free play" that is unequivocally redolent of the market place and banquet discourse (Docker 177-88).

More tellingly, folk humour, comic drama, and, by and large, low-brow genres fertilized culture beyond its conventional carnival spaces (Docker 174). English comic drama prevalent in the 17th century dramatized themes characteristic of carnival, mainly hierarchical inversion, ecclesiastical sacrilege, and the world upside-

down. The said drama features "magistrates as fools, judges as incompetent, the rich as idiots" (Docker 159).

Fools, clowns, and jugglers are recurrent figures or stock characters²⁰ in spectacles and festivals. The foregoing figures, along with a plethora of the marketplace comic performers like acrobats, tricksters, magicians, monkeys' trainers, and vendors, are a sine qua non for the comic travesty of the official high culture through their grotesque body. Fools and clowns, first and foremost, are emblematic of the social buffoonish critics and social commentators in disguise as they arrogate to themselves the role of "life's perpetual spy and reflector; to make public what is usually regarded and guarded, as in the sexual sphere, as private" (Docker 199). Bereft of social group membership and heedless of social constraints and religious prohibitions, these allegorical figures provocatively hyperbolize, tease, and confuse as they solicit to "act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors" (Docker 199). The vernacularized vulgar rhetoric trivializes the seriousness of life and death: "festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that possesses and restricts (Stam 86). The tradition of cruel comedy, a monumental attribute of carnival festivals, still endures in today's popular culture inasmuch as it has catalyzed a cinematic sub-genre, the scary clown genre, within the horror genre. The first killer clown is the joker, the Clown Prince of Crime appeared in 1940's comic books. Comics were originally grim, replete with violence, sex, drugs, and horror until 1954 when public outcry led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority that held the industry in a vise. It was in this period that the joker has been reduced the laughing goofy character coupled with a midget sidekick dressed in motley. The joker's character remained jocular and pacifist until the late 1980's with the hit stories

²⁰ Stock character: also known as "staple character" is a fictional character that frequently artistic work

like the *Dark Night Returns*, *Death in the Family*, and *The Killing Joker* resuscitated his inceptive gloomy roots and refashioned it into today's popular culture joker: a concoction of the past serial killer figure and its spin-off's lunatic antics. In ancient Rome, clowns had a real role in society called the *Stupidus*. These clowns were typically bald-headed, wore pointy hats and patchwork coats to single that first and foremost they were lower-class clowns. Clowns were goofy but also wise and spoke the truth. In the 15th century, every culture has its clowns, many of whom wore masks and peculiar costumes indicative of their character's traits and purpose. Clowns are stock characters imputed to the *commedia dell-arte* theatre²¹- formerly known as Italian comedy- whose role is readily recognized by the audience as soon as they take on the stage. Prominent of these clowns are: *Pulcinella*- the opportunist social climber and an staunch ally to the winner, whomever that might be and regardless of circumstances,- *Pantaloone*- the greedy and lustful clown,- the French pantomime- *Pierrot* the grim lovelorn clown recently deemed the avatar of the disenfranchised,- the famous, or infamous thereof, *Harlequin*- a masked clown equipped with a baseball bat, commonly known as the clown of chaos. Harlequin clowns are best known for their performance in physical comedy, namely the slapstick²² plays, wherein they hackle their co-performers with hurling innuendos and props at them.

The Medieval clowns were named the court jesters; merely servants serving and entertaining royalty, they were basically at the bottom of the totem pole. Their patchwork costume is a telltale sign of their social status and a guise that grants them exclusive impunity while taunting and humiliating royalty. Jesters' discourse was

²¹ *Commedia dell-arte*: a type of professional theatre prevalent in Europe between the 16th and the 18th centuries that features masked clowns and pantomime and stages improvised performances concocted with scripted sketches and scenarios.

²² Slapstick is a style of humor involving exaggerated physical activity that exceeds the boundaries of normal physical comedy. Slapstick may involve both intentional violence and violence by mishap, often resulting from inept use of props such as saws and ladders

impervious to censorship in that it was not deemed a threat that would result in social discord and dissidence. Jesters, fools, and clowns, along with today's comedians, avail themselves of the freedom to speak truth to power that is accorded to the fool on the pretext of insanity or irrationality, and, therefore, ineligibility to censorship. Historically, the madman's speech was either unheeded, ridiculed, or on occasion taken at face value insomuch as "people decipher in it a rationality, naïve or crafty, which they regarded as more rational than that of the sane" (Foucault "The Order of Discourse" 53).

3-2- Modern-day Clowns, Fools, and Political Satire

The annual presidential roast held at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner is reminiscent of the court jester's performance as the incumbent president and his cabinet attend the event and take the jokes lightly- however personal and vehemently accurate they were. The jokes delivered by the comedians are, by and large, bipartisan and cover a wide range of topics: domestic and foreign policies, the president's idiosyncrasies, his family members' and close ties' scandals and flops. American presidents had usually kept the tradition of making an appearance at the event that started in 1921 save for times of national grievances and malaise: the event was cancelled in 1930 following the death of president William Howard Taft, in 1942 during the US involvement in World War II, and in 1951 due the aggravated "uncertainty of the world situation-" reasoned Harry S. Truman (Edwards). American presidents seldom dodged the event since its first debut given its symbolic significance: "an enjoyable event of celebrating the First Amendment and great journalists past, present, and future" said the president of the White House Correspondents' Association (W.H.C.A), Oliver Knox (qtd., Johanson). The First Amendment that protects the freedom of speech concerns all Americans, not just

journalists. This is incessantly manifested in featuring a comedian host whose satirical jokes unabashedly take a swipe at the president, administration's high-ranking officials, right-wing and left-wing politicians, and journalists. Not only did President Donald Trump skip the event during his entire 4-year tenure in office, but he also directed his administration officials to boycott it altogether (Johnson) on account of his claim that "the dinner is so boring and so negative" (qtd in., Lucey). The incumbent president may also deliver self-deprecating jokes and scathing takedown of their political opponents- a notable case in point is President Obama's excruciating roast of the then-*Celebrity Apprentice* host Donald Trump in 2011 dinner's speech owing to the latter's conspiratory birther statements (Seipel). The dinner gala is annually organized by the White House Correspondents' Association at the end of April to debunk the rumours that the U.S congressional committee cherry-pick the journalists to be assigned to cover the president' press conference. Journalists are entitled to have access to the White House briefing room and to neutrally to lay bare an account of history from an unbiased view. Initially, the association and its organized dinner gala had constituted a microcosm of the American society, sexist and racist; only white men were accorded membership. It became incrementally inclusive as women and minority journalists were admitted; moreover, the dinner has featured multi-racial comedians and performers, few of which were women. The comic- whose discourse was trivialized and relegated to the status of a madman's gibberish- was "only symbolically" platformed in the theatre "where he would step forward, disarmed and reconciled, because there he played the role of truth in a mask" (Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discourse" 53).

Fools and clowns discourse resorts heavily to parody, satire, and humour to make light of serious political and social debacles by triggering public figures and

political or religious leaders in an endeavor to deflate their sense of superiority and self-importance: "Humour has the added merit of preventing the presidential candidate from developing messianic delusion... to find yourself the target of these witty men is to be both humbled and freed of self-delusion" (Gardner 12). Virtually, the performance of the designated comedian hosting the White House Correspondents' Association dinner presents the most stringing satire of American politics. The socially and politically disenfranchised groups in society weaponize satire and parody to expose "vice and hypocrisy in the hopes that the satirist's barbs will either be sufficiently embarrassing to cause the audience to recognize the need for change" (Gilbert 858).

Political satire channeled through the comics' performances constitutes, first and foremost, a distorted prism of sarcasm, irony, hyperbole, and travesty through which social and political abuses are humorously censured. It serves as a corrective device that galvanizes the audience into pressing the powers that be into enacting change. Disclosing leaders' vice, misdemeanor, and inaptitude keeps them grounded, humbled, and unnerved so much so they would recognize and, therefore, redress their vice. Not only do political satirists solicit to demolish the façade of authority reverence and unmask politicians' hypocrisy, but they also endeavors to demonstrate "the dangers if allowed to continue" (Gardner 859). The *Unabridged Webster's Dictionary* definition of satire states that it is a literary or dramatic device whose purpose is to "ridicule or censure social or political abuses; the technique employs parody, irony, wit, mockery and humor" (Complete and Unabridged Webster Dictionary. 1963 3762). Satire is a jocular expression of opinion rather than a succinct portrayal of the truth. Owing to its blatant disregard to literal truth, it cannot be lumped in the "defamatory speech" category. Thus, by virtue of the First

Amendment's constitutional right of free speech, it is impervious to censorship and incrimination and, therefore, its author is by no means prone to liability.

Political comedy is informative, condemnatory, and cathartic. It serves as a safety valve through which the electorate could release their heightened political tensions. It is an antidote to the disgruntling political and economic malaise and a hallmark of a democracy. Fundamentally, its comic appeal poses a catalyst for a ferocious yet informed public debate on contentious policies and controversial policy makers. Equating political comedy with defamatory speech with the intent of enticing violence against the target of the joke generates a *casus belli* for stifling free speech. This is especially evident in and characteristic of dictatorships. Unlike authoritarian regimes, wherein political satire is suppressed for being deemed a jeopardous subversive pastime to which no sane public figure would wittingly expose himself, (Gardner 12), the American Supreme Court has incessantly ruled in favor of comedians', or Americans' thereof, right to free speech to the detriment of offending high profile officials in landmark cases such as *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell*, 1987, *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 1964, *Watts v. United States* 1969, *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, *Virginia v. Black*, 2003 ("Mocking George: Political Satire as "True Threat" in the Age of Global Terrorism" 862). In *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, the Supreme Court asserted: "the general proposition that freedom of expression upon public questions is secured by the First Amendment has long been settled by our decisions" and, therefore, buttressed the "national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust and wide open, and that it may well include vehement, caustic and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials" ("N.Y. Times Co v. Sullivan" 297-80).

It is a landmark case inasmuch as it set the U.S. apart from other open democratic societies. The U.S. is the most speech and press protective democracy. Libel suits cannot be weaponized as a deterrent in political debate and public discourse to intimidate comedians into self-censorship and sanitize their discourse so much so to appease public figures whom they ought to challenge. Basically, political cartoon is, by definition, "a weapon of attack, of scorn and ridicule and satire; it is least effective when it tries to pat some politician on the back. It is usually as welcome as a bee sting and is always controversial in some quarters." (Long 57).

Jerry Falwell's self-promoted moralistic and religious persona was countered with a subversively incestuous drunken hypocrite featured in the inside cover page of November 1983 issue of *Hustler Magazine*²³. A full-page parody modeled after the Campari Liquor ad campaign entitled "Jerry Talks About His First Time" toys with a sexual double entendre as Jerry Falwell misconstrues the question about his "first time" tasting the liquor for his first sexual encounter with his mother. Thereupon, Falwell, a reputed minister and a well-known political commentator, felt entitled to sue *Hustler Magazine* "to recover damages for invasion of privacy, libel, and intentional infliction of emotional distress" ("*Hustler Magazine and Larry C. Flynt, Petitioners v. Falwell*"). Although the First Amendment unequivocally protects parody of public figures against civil liabilities, the District Court found for Falwell on the intentionally-inflicted emotional distress claim, as the jury ruled against him on privacy claim inasmuch as parody ought not "be understood as describing actual facts about [the respondent] or actual events in which [he] participated" (qtd in., *Hustler v. Falwell*). The Supreme Court vacated the District Court's ruling on the emotional distress claim echoing Justice Felix Frankfurter's contention in *Baumgartner v. United*

²³ Known for its explicit pictures of nude women, crude humor, and political satire, *Hustler*, a monthly magazine published by Larry Flynt, printed a parody ad in its November 1983 issue that targeted Jerry Falwell, a prominent Christian fundamentalist televangelist and conservative political commentator

States that asserts: "[o]ne of the prerogatives of American citizenship is the right to criticize public men and measures"(qtd in., *Hustler v. Falwell*). Not only did the Supreme Court reach a verdict in conjunction with the First Amendment constitutional rights to free speech, but it also set a landmark decision that prioritized satirists' entitlement to censuring public figures over public figures' claim for emotional distress award: "[w]ere we to hold otherwise, there can be little doubt that political cartoonists and satirists would be subjected to damages awards without any showing that their work falsely defamed its subject" (*Hustler v. Falwell*).

The modern American circus clown- the white-painted face with the red nose and big shoes, traces its lineage and look to the 16th century Italian *commedia dell'arte*, an improvised, popular form of theatre that relied on stock character types the audience would already be familiar with. The costumes of these clowns inspired modern-day's gleeful birthday clowns. The whiteface clown look is accredited to English clown Joseph Grimaldi. Nonetheless, the long tradition of the blackface and minstrelsy is by all means associated with clowning owing to their use of heavy garish make-up akin to that of clowns. Clowns' cinematography is a monumental corollary of a booming American film industry during the WWI. The silent films and comedy genres set a tranquil locus on which the circus clowns, pantomimes, and burlesque acrobatics would thrive. The vaudeville improvisation and absurdity gave rise to the figure of the tramp, best embodied by Charlie Chaplin in the 1917 silent romantic comedy *The Immigrant* and the 1936 part-talkie satirical romantic comedy *Modern Times*

Screen clowns ought not be viewed as a monolithic stock character featured in a specific genre befitting of their orthodox entertaining purpose and its concomitant traits. They are as versatile and resourceful as the other screen characters; they range

from the poetic and witty clowns, like Charlie Chaplin, to the romantic clown, like *The Man Who Laughs'* Gwynplaine, the disillusioned clown like *The One Who Gets Slapped's* Paul Beaumont, the alien clown Mr. Bean, to the alien clown killer *It*. The 1970 mockumentary film *I Clowns* that tackles people's fascination and childhood obsession with circus clowns. The clowning industry was a male preserve that seldom platformed female performers and selectively accorded them few roles, trapeze, music hall singer and dancers, the burlesque female clown shifted from the frail, naïve, tragic, and asexual figure- best portrayed by Gelsomina in the Italian director Federico Fellini's *La Strada*- to the powerful and hypersexualized- Harley Quinn in DC Comics- and the female killer clown in horror movies such as *Killjoy*, 2014, *The Funhouse Massacre* 2015, *Clowntown* 2016, *Killer Clowns from Outer Space*, *Terrifier 2*, *Halloween 4*, and the show *American Horror Story*. These women overstep norms of behaviour through the act of clowning itself through their role as clowning women and as women celebrating sexual pleasure in erotic burlesque performance.

Owing to the media industry, the "smiley circus entertainers" became "horror staple" in the collective consciousness of people. 1990 Tommy Lee Wallace's movie adaptation of Stephen King's 1986 novel *It*²⁴ amplified and perpetuated coulrophobia that was aggravated by the atrocious killing spree carried out by John Wayne Gacy, an American serial killer, whose clown persona- only played in local charity events- was misleadingly associated with his murderer persona by the media for lucrative motives emphatically corroborated the killer clown frenzy in the public mind.

²⁴ *It* is a coming of age horror novel penned by Stephen King in 1986 that recounts the story of Pennywise, an alien dancing clown taking refuge in the sewer system of the small town Derry, Maine , who terrorizes children and feeds of their fears. The novel have been adopted into a two-part miniseries *It* by the director Tommy Lee Lawrence in 1990 and rebooted by the Argentine filmmaker Andy Muschietti in a form of a film duology: *It* 2017 and *It Chapter Two* in 2019

Albeit figures of comic relief, clowns ooze horror in their own right. They can twist the tactics of comedy to transform their persona into figures of fear. The on-screen clowns vary from the poetic and witty clowns, like Charlie Chaplin, to the romantic, like *The Man Who Laughs*' Gwynplaine, the disillusioned clown like *The One Who Gets Slapped*'s Paul Beaumont, the alien clown Mr. Bean, Bozo, McDonald fast-food chain's clown Ronald McDonald, *The Simpsons*' clown Krusty, Stephen King's clown-based literary work, *It*, comic books' villain clowns: the Joker and Harley Quinn, the clown protagonist of the movie *The Mask*, *American Horror Story*'s clown Twisty). Clown in TV shows abound; renowned of which are *The Simpson's*. The 1924 silent film *He Who Got Slapped* marked an unprecedented departure from prevailing cinematic and narrative conventions by casting a clown as its leading protagonist. Bozo the Clown started appearing on local TV in Las Vegas in 1949. In late 1950's he was franchised which means local TVs across the country each had their own show of their own version of Bozo making the clown extremely popular and omnipresent. That is, he looked slightly different in every series, still conformed to the stereotypical clown look: whiteface, red clown nose and a fringe of red hair. In the 1960's McDonald modeled their clown- who would appear on ad campaigns for a fast-food chain- on Bozo and, henceforth, witnessed a spike in sales.

Even though scary clowns do not fit the stereotypical benign clown mold, they are not a menace to them, rather an iteration of them. Across the clowning spectrum, fear and laughter exist in a continuum. Nonetheless, scary clowns are incrementally superseding the happy clowns inasmuch as the former the scary clown showbiz is booming at the expense of birthday and circus clowns. The orthodox clowns hid behind the layers of makeup and costumes that overshadow their individuality and identity. While watching a clown, the audience are not privy to, nor curious about, the

individual underneath the disguise. They are not allowed a peek into their backgrounds and beliefs, nor would their background have a bearing on their performances. Today's version of clowns is the stand-up comedians who perform on stage, use satire and parody to provoke laughter and speak truth to power, the drag queens who wear gaudy make-up and ostentatious costumes to conjure a sense of extravagant glamour and delight, the internet trolls who advertently spread provocative content and controversial comments on the internet.

That a famous French *Pierrot* named Jean-Gaspard Debureau struck and killed a boy who heckled him in a Paris street in the 1830s attached an enduring evil aura to clowns writ large. However, it was the killer clown, John Wayne Gacy, who engendered a rash of clown scare across the U.S.A. His killing spree that took the lives of 35 people between 1972 and 1978 inspired Stephen King's extraterrestrial evil clown, Pennywise, novel *It* as well as and the movie *Poltergeist*, featuring an evil clown doll sweeps a little girl into an evil spirit world. Clowns are not funny; what is funny is "the face of the idiot who has tried to make us laugh and failed". Bozo is a commercialized clown and a popular culture icon that is as famous as American apple pie. In 1946 a music executive named Alan Livingston was trying to target children and teenagers audience for his records insomuch he realized that they constituted an untapped revenue stream.

In the last two decades, the horrific clowns have elbowed the benign goofy clowns out of the spotlight in the media industry and popular culture writ large. Deeply-entrenched in the nascent folk culture, they presage modern day popular culture's fools and clowns. Being a bona fide urban activity, carnival captured heterogeneous crowd of participants from all walks of life, lower class, middle class, clerics, students, teachers, tradesmen, gypsies, and corporation members. Carnival is,

by and large, an indiscriminatory, participatory, and communitarian culture that cements the groundwork for the full-fledged popular culture of modern time.

The church-state nexus has exercised its authority and maintained social control through violence in the form of "punishment for deviation from the norms" (Fiskse, *Understanding Popular Culture* 90), repression of pleasures and rowdy behavior, and sublimation of popular culture. Therefore, carnival constituted a church-state's bête noire that ought to be denounced for its disorderly creative and destructive tendencies.

The seriousness and asceticism of the official culture disgruntled the people who resorted to carnival for its festive aura to evade "the authority of all exalted and official genres, with their sanctimonious seriousness; their mysticism and 'abstract-idealistic sublimation,' their fear and piousness" (Docker 177).

The consciousness of medieval people was incessantly trapped in a cycle of awe, humility, fear, and submission; they could break this cycle during the transient, spontaneous, unpredictable, festive, and grotesquely problematic moments of carnival. The injustice and oppression of the feudal and theocratic order and the exclusivist proclivity of the canonical arts exhorted people to seek refuge in carnival insomuch as it offered them a platform to mock and parody that authority and create a world upside-down. In his book *The World Upside-Down*, Ian Donaldson demonstrates how carnival inverts the values and rules of the ruling elites by festively and comically deriding and subverting hierarchy and high culture: "the lunatic governor, the incompetent judge the mock doctor, the equivocating priest, the henpecked husband" (Docker 193)

Women were portrayed in festivals as "full of life and energy, clever, powerful, resourceful, lusty, saucy, licentious, witty, Amazonian, fighting for equality

if not dominance" as opposed to Early modern Europe's denigrating perspectives about females as being the disorderly and unruly gender, the incarnation of sin, and the bodily lure (idib., 194). Kings and queens are elected in lieu of chosen by God's mandation. In mock royalty, kings bear children whereas women wage carnivalesque wars, "with cheeses, baked apples, and mushrooms." Costumes, *inter alia*, worn inside out and pants donned over the head, the two genders cross-dressing role-play swapping emblemize the inversion of hierarchy and status across class and gender. Carnival, contends the Soviet intellectual Anatoly Lunacharsky, is tantamount to a safety valve whereby the subordinate would harmlessly and temporarily give vent to repressed emotions that would otherwise erupt violently and elsewhere and culminate in a purging revolution (Docker 171). This carnivalesque release is licensed by the prevailing order so that its eruptive tendency will be kept in check. Nonetheless, modernity ushered in a liberating era as people enjoyed the unalienable right to organize and participate in protests, trade unions, political parties, and suffrage movements (Docker 274). In light of this burgeoning scope of liberties, carnival momentum as a social institution that channeled political dissidence witnessed a retreat, and equally had its role as a form of folk culture: "from the seventeenth century to the present, a narrowing of the ritual, spectacle, and carnival forms of folk culture, which became 'small and trivial'" (Docker 182). More to the point, the state infiltration of carnivals warped it into sanitized and demonetized official parades insofar as its lucrative base, the marketplace, faced stringent restrictions. Modern day American parades range from national, such as Inauguration Day parades, 4th of July parades, and Thanksgiving parades, religious, like St. Patrick's Day parades and Mardi Gras parades, to ethnically exclusive observances like the Chinese New Year parade

and the Mexican *Cinco De Mayo* parade. Needless to mention Pride parades that constitute global civic festivals celebrating gender diversity.

Max Gluckman pokes holes in his safety valve theory inasmuch as he documented instances wherein licensed rituals in African societies were poised to perpetuate and buttress the status quo instead of subverting it. In the throes of constructing a world upside-down- wherein wives and children abuse husbands and fathers, subjects oppress their king, fraudulent judges, priests, and governors- subvert the conventional ruling authority, carnival festivals, nonetheless, serve to efficaciously command "general assent to the necessity of entrusting power" (Docker 193) to the incumbent governor and the ruling elites maintain law and order: doctor, priests, judges, husbands and fathers (Donaldson 14-15). "Civic festivals have always been the point of convergence of conservative rituals that regenerate the status quo and subversive currents that threatens ossified hierarchies" (Stam 95). More tellingly, the urbanization of Modern Europe incrementally privatized public life activities, chief of which are carnival festivals that were gradually domesticized and bereft of its creatively subversive and communal veneer.

The conviction that the rationalization and commercialization of culture industry products elicit a monosemous message is erroneous; for it to attain a far-flung reach and "enthrall the spectators on various psychological levels simultaneously," the cultural industry decision-makers incorporate the authentic culture's heritage of polymorphic meaning. The substantial interpretation of both the conscious and unconscious messages of a cultural material is a sine qua non for understanding its psychological effect on the consumers.

The hidden message frequently aims at reinforcing conventionally rigid and 'pseudo-realistic' attitudes similar to the accepted ideas more rationalistically

propagated by the surface message. Suppressed gratifications are allowed to transpire at the surface level sketchily through, inter alia, the use of sexual innuendos, sarcasm, allusions, and humour. the resultant interplay of the multilayered messages of a television show serves to channelize audience reaction insomuch as the its offshoot constitutes "producing, or at least reproducing, the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian" (Adorna,"Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture" 479). To illustrate this point, Adorno references an American situation comedy narrating a humorous account of an underpaid maltreated schoolteacher finds herself in the hustle of securing a meal at the expense of her coworkers. The script downplays the humiliating conditions of the teacher by accentuating her intellectual superiority and high-spiritedness as a compensation for her inferiority in the labour market and the social setup. The comical tone and tenor of the show equivocally promotes conformity with the capitalist injustices and exploitation inflicted upon workers without any resentment towards the modern capitalist society (Adorna "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture"480). The ultimate audience passivity is dwindled by the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht's approach to TV comedy asserting that even if the show's characters succumb, whether wittingly or unwittingly, to their oppression and exploitation, the audience is, nonetheless, able to learn from the televised experience of the helpless masses how to defy the oppressive dictates of the capitalist society (Brecht, Bertolt 1978,229

Chapter 4: Popular Culture Metamorphosis in the Digital Age

Popular culture has been a topic of heated debate for decades as it gained momentum in cultural studies for its salient role in shaping, maintain, and destabilizing the foundation of the American society. Popular culture has undergone dramatic transformation in the digital era insomuch as digital media and technology mediate its production, dissemination, and consumption. This study draws Kafka's dramatization of the term metamorphosis in his novella *The Metamorphosis*, written in 1915, in order to track and analyse the metamorphoses of popular culture in the digital era.

Kafka narrates the demise of the protagonist Gregor Samsa who lives a mundane life revolving around his monotonous office job. His passion to live a fulfilling meaningful life is by all means defunct. Gregor wakes up on what seems to be a regular workday, alas he realizes he has transformed into a "monstrous verminous bug" (Kafka 1). Gregor is met with the challenge of perceiving navigating his familiar surrounding through a novel lens, both literally and metaphorically. His long-held truths and routine are to be drastically morphed through his new bodily and sensory perception. Much to the reader's chagrin, Gregor is less dismayed by his surprising transformation as he is by how he manages to head to work. His new morphology is restricting his motion within the confines of his room, as he is not acquainted with the small limbs movements. Getting out of bed is Gregor's priority, unbothered of his bug-like condition: "but I must not stay in bed uselessly" (Kafka 4). Eventually, he succeeds in getting out of his bed and opening the door of his room, hurting himself in the process; poised to fulfill his capitalist dictates and join the production force to the detriment of his own well-being. Taken aback and repelled by his grotesque form, Gregor's family lock him away for months on the pretext that he is no longer to reach a *modus vivendi* with his community in his new non-human

form; moreover, he cannot produce value for the market economy. In sum, *The Metamorphosis* accounts for the literal and existential transformation of its protagonist and constitutes a poignant social critique that sheds light on the fact that human worth is predicated on economic productivity and social conformity

Kafka's novella is a testimony to the estrangement and alienation the American psyche endures in the contemporary digital culture and its metamorphic mechanism. Not only do the digital media transform popular culture, it also construct and deconstruct the notions of subjectivity, identity, authenticity, and participatory performances. Although the American individual does not undergo physical transformation, akin to Gregor, he nonetheless meet a similar fate as he finds himself bound to experience his reality, both physical and virtual. To this effect, digital media users ought to be media literate in order to avoid turning into the bug-like Gregor: linguistically mute, socially alienated, and economically useless. The online persona of users ought to be meticulously curated so that it would appeal to the online community and gain visibility. Furthermore, content creation is also governed by rules that solicit to manipulate algorithms, optimize its consumption, and, therefore, monetize its use value.

The metamorphosis of popular culture is inextricable from the transformation of media culture counterpart insomuch as it is used subversively and resistively popular as raw material media culture to concoct a culture that "is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry" (Fiske 24). The ground-breaking technological advancement has distorted the hierarchical business model of cultural production of cultural material and yielded a decentralized and participatory modes of production, distribution, and consumption.

1- Reality TV and Pseudo-Realism

Reality TV shows have their share of reality representation, or misrepresentation thereof, notwithstanding the allegedly unscripted genre they constitute. Akin to the lucrative nature of all the cultural industry, reality television shows deploy a set of techniques, such as "creating and compelling a storyline predicated on interpersonal conflicts" and categorizing participants into "a variety of unflattering stereotypes through creative- some say manipulative- editing", to generate high ratings (Riggs, *Reality TV* 9). Albeit diverse on the abstract, reality TV posits a formulaic diversified portrayals of a staged reality; similar to scripted shows, reality participants avail themselves of the services of a crafty team working behind the scenes- real-time manipulation such as coaching of cast members and reshooting scenes or heavy-hand manipulation during editing- to turn raw footage of their real lives into a beguiling serialized entertainment through inciting conflicts. In the throes of doing that, a consequential amount of craft is inducaed from concept to a final product that ought to emulate reality:

People have to be cast, story producers have to find narratives in raw footage, time has to be compressed. Only the most compelling footage and dialogue will survive. Even the best documentary film is heavily crafted- manipulated?- with footage carefully selected and ordered to make the best story or argument possible (Riggs, *Reality TV* 31-2).

Casting is the sine qua non of the show's ratings. Cast members are selected en par with their divergent backgrounds and undeniably riveting personalities- the essential attributes that keep the wheel of conflict and drama spinning. Diverse cast members tend to wade into controversial issues plaguing the American society, involving the centuries-old racial discrimination, sexual orientation, and class struggle. The

sensational feuds ramp up viewership and further variegate the story telling of the unscripted show. Brian Lowry, an American columnist and a critic for *Variety*, condemns reality shows like *The New Jersey* and *The Flavor of Love* for their excessively blatant use of stereotypes, mainly with regards to minorities portrayal (Lowry 57). Participants are depicted as shallow caricatures masquerading certain roles, based on which they are cast in specific shows and not others "where blonds are airheads and minorities are too-often shown fleeing from the cops" (Lowry 59).

Gays, for example, almost invariably possess an enviable knowledge of fashion, cooking and decorating- presuming the "Queer Eye" is inherently superior to its straight counterpart. Yet watch enough reality of this genre and you'll notice less-laudatory traits as well, among them a tendency to become hysterical under pressure (see Oxygen's "Addicted to Beauty") and relentless cattiness that regularly lurches into the snide (Lowry 58).

Prominent amongst reality shows are romance- and contest-based shows, such as *The Bachelor*, *Flavor of Love*, *American Idol*, *Top Chef*-to name but a few. Catherine Squires probed the genuineness of racial and ethnic portrayal in reality TV wherein she fleshed out the formulaic roles accorded to minority female participants.

2- Minority Representation and Bodily Pleasure:

The media industry has advertently marginalized minorities' experiences in American culture owing to long-held cultural and social practices that the institutionalized discourse that normalized the exclusivist middle-class white-male narrative. Minorities have been the object of the script inasmuch as subjectivities project their meanings upon their bodies through "policing and regulating its ontological modalities" (Jackson 11). The institutionally sanctioned discourse incumbent on the minority body is invariably met with conformity; nonetheless, the

distorted, mostly pejorative, discourse that is "promulgated via popular culture as well as other public vehicles" is by no means accepted passively (Jackson 12). The veritable incompatibility between the real world Other and the mediated Other catalyzed a cultural politics to counter, distort, and transform "the dominant regime of representation- first in music and style, later in literary, visual and cinematic forms" (Hall, 443). The fetishization, the sexual objectification, and the negative stereotyping of the Other's body are the constantly deployed strategies to represent the minority subject. Owing to the meager access to casting opportunities for minority artists and entertainment workers, minority experiences are crudely eroticized, curtly recounted and shallowly simplified. More tellingly, the scarce contestation to the mass-mediated racial projections instills, and thereafter perpetuates, the scripter's negative racial stereotypes and ideology in cultural interactants. Much to their chagrin, minorities are likely to internalize inaccurate, and sometimes dehumanizing, stereotypes owing to minority artists' complicity with the predominately white producers' script in return of cultural capital.

In his book *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse and Racial Politics*, Roland L. Jackson instantiates Black artists' use and recycle of the culture industry's sexual hypertext foisted upon the Black body. This is ostensibly manifest in hip-hop music and Black movies insofar as black artists, arrogating to themselves the role of street raconteurs, advertently avow, regurgitate, and vouch for the ghettoization and sexualization of Blackness by shrinking the miscellaneous Black experience to the monolithic projects' life: drug dealing and addiction, prostitution, school drop-out, single teenage mothers, mass incarceration, rampant criminality, short life expectancy, to name but a few:

Many of these contemporary hip-hop lyricists regard their role as aural bridges between the gang, thug, and pimp-related elements of the inner city's underbelly and the more diverse and well-to-do petit bourgeois and affluent segments of society (Jackson 105).

The ghettoization of the Black experience has become tantamount to Black artists' authenticity so much so they feel duty bound to churn out the projects' experience despite being utterly divorced from and unfamiliar with this reality- to the detriment of further impoverishing the conditions wherein Blackness is already pejoratively scripted by the media industry (Jackson 104). That the negative Black inscription commodifies Blackness into a promiscuous yet pleasure-satiating carnivalesque for the audience, Black artists, legitimately or illegitimately, claim the ghetto status "by mimicking sexual freedom, narrating ghetto life, exposing hypermasculine anxieties, and elucidating criminally strategic behaviors, gangsta and thug rappers, whether male or female" (Jackson 105) in pursuit of capital gain and fame. Notwithstanding, the ghetto artists, whose voice has long been suppressed and kept at the margins, find refuge in their artistic expression through which they "poetically articulate, dispute, and rhetorically reimagine an urban battleground in which dwellers are proud, strong, and most fit to survive" (Jackson 105) even if it is at the peril of losing props from the music award institutions.

Bodily pleasures, from the highbrow culture advocates' vantage point, are deemed *infra dig* and impure and, thus, need not be celebrated or conflated with the aesthetic. Art that incites the senses is natural rather than cultural, agreeable rather than beautiful, and sublime rather than charming, for, Schopenhauer contends, it "excites the will by presenting to it directly its fulfillment, its satisfaction;" suffices it to say, it is art that "draws the beholder away from the pure contemplation which is

demanding by all apprehension of the beautiful because it necessarily excites this will by object which directly appeal to it" (qtd in Bourdieu 487). The aesthetic entails a distanced contemplation of the object in pursuit of pleasure in lieu of the immediate sensuous enjoyment of said object. The unfettered indulgence in the enjoyable object taints beauty's pristineness and universality and reduces it to "animality, corporeality, the belly and sex, that is, to what is common and therefore vulgar" (Bourdieu 489).

That the body constitutes the site wherein popular pleasure is both experienced and manifest entails a stringent yet subtle control over its meanings and behaviours. Perhaps amongst the acclaimed figures who substantially mulled over the social and political momentum of the body is the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin took pains to debunk the stigma attached to bodily pleasures and multivalent meanings. The epicenter of bodily pleasures' celebration is the carnival.

Unlike the culture industry's products that are designed by media companies to target the masses who consume the said cultural commodities in their private homes, carnivals are festivals made by the people for themselves, spectacles held in "the streets, squares, marketplaces of a past era" as no footlights mark out the performers' and spectators' territories (Docker 273). The carnival participants are both actors and spectators as opposed to modern society's audiences who constitute a duped passive consumers of commercialized culture. Such a modernist take on the culture industry consumers downplays the unequivocal participation in and bearings on the scripting of media products. Studio audiences in game shows and infotainment programs, stadiums' spectators sports events, music concerts, sit coms by all means exert direct pressure on the artists performance- be it through riling them up, booing them off stage, or performing along with them. The audience pressure spills over the confines of the studio or stadium walls insofar as many soap opera and TV series hardcore fans

voice their discontent with the show and levy their dictates on the shows' script writers to change members of the cast, retain characters whose role has been ended, or morph the storyline to sustain the show's appeal. Of the essence is the popularity of the show amongst the audience for booking an airing reservation on commercialized networks.

3- The Digital Age:

The progression towards the digital era, or the information age, has been swift and ineluctable; it started in the 21st century and stretches to the current day. It succeeded the post-Industrial age and is marked by an economic domination of information technology. Information technology (IT) is an umbrella term that encompasses “artificial intelligence (AI) systems, communication modes, machine learning, and robotic systems” (Windsor). The digital age require a distinctly new methods of learning to navigate the novel digital technology, media, and platform. Media literacy is a prerequisite to learn how to use social media and mobile devices in an effective way and understand how digital technologies impact “personal identity and perception of global culture” as well as relations of “gender, race/ethnicity, gender, or age” (Novak and El-Burki XVII).

The term digital connotes the electronic artifacts and software, as well as the mental processes and sensorimotor perception involved in interacting with said technology. Broadly speaking, it alludes to the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the digital experience, namely “abstraction, codification, self-regulating, virtualization and programming” (qtd in., Lavender 127). More tellingly, owing to the computing common language of binary code that uses the digits 0 and 1 standardized the construction and dissemination of information worldwide allowing people to access different types information with the same device. Consequently, the aforementioned developments “have altered our experiences of creativity, ownership and distribution”

(Lavender 127). The digital age coincides with the heyday of the information revolution between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Digital age, information society, and post-industrial era are concepts- usually used interchangeably- that were conceptualized to track the economic and political shift, mainly the democratic crisis of the 20th century and the rise of information-driven economies (Stocchetti 4-5).

4- The Digitization of Popular Culture

In his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin stresses the conviction that the artwork's aura of authenticity began to whittle down with the onset of the industrial revolution. In the contemporary age of digital technology, authenticity is encountering new challenges. Media culture's remakes, reboots, and sequels permeate the big screen; the rise of the streaming platforms- mainly *Netflix*, *HBO*, *Hulu*, *Amazon Prime Video*, *Disney+*, *Crunchyroll* (anime-based), and *Spotify* (music and podcasts streaming)- introduced the culture of binge watching and hyper-personalized consumption. The contemporaneous beauty standards that are predominantly contrived and promoted by online makeup coupled with *TikTok*'s and *Instagram*'s beauty filters are dictating aesthetic norms for Hollywood.

That nine of the top ten highest grossing movies of 2019 are remakes attests to the fact that originality is on life-support and need to be reinvigorated. Remakes are not exclusive to movies; music beats and videos, fashion designs, bygone trends, video games and political agendas are being recycled. Reviving canonical cinematic production could be attributed to a historical and cultural revisionist endeavor that solicits to revisit and remedy its stereotypical images, cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, exclusivity, and modernize its dated technological artifacts by dint of edge-cutting technologies- such as the green screen, computer-generated imagery

(CGI), virtual effects (VFX), special effects (SFX), two dimensional form (2D), three dimensional form (3D) and Stereoscopic 3D, to name but a few (Dinur 7-9). The culture industry appears as though it is addicted to its glorious past so much so “the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the ‘re-’ prefix: re vials, re issues, re makes, re-enactments” (Reynold XI). The music writer Simon Reynold was primarily focused on the re-modeling of music from the mash-ups, reunion tours- such as the American bands *Backstreet Boys* (Sengwe) and *Evanescence* (Spanos) that reunited after years of hiatus and started touring and performing their old songs,- re-recording of old albums- Taylor Swift recording her first 10 albums to reclaim ownership of her music and undermine the original master recordings (Giles). Reynolds’s diagnosis of contemporary media culture malaise is not restricted to the music industry. Evidently, the culture industry has a penchant for revamping all sort of commodities, with a special interest in iconic TV shows of the big screen (XV).

Super-hero movies and franchises are hackneyed; nonetheless, Hollywood keeps spinning them for lucrative reasons. Knowingly, producing an original cinematic script is no risk-free endeavor; rather it is the most expensive entertainment project. Financers are cognizant of that; hence, you choose to invest in scripts and ideas that have a proven track record, notwithstanding the exhausted nature of such material. Superhero movies are a case in point. Essentially, a large array of movies, characters, and plots- the associate professor of film history Amanda Klein, in the book she co-edited *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, contends- could be traced back to centuries-old folklore- most famous of which is the story of King Arthur and his roundtable, Robin Hood, *Gladiator*, and *Troy*. Remakes and remodels are also manifest in today’s digital

culture: the posting and reposting of influencers' content, recreating trends, themes, and dance routines. Indeed, the artistic tradition of "copying in early cinema was rooted in a collective endeavor both to capitalize on popular trends, themes and productions, and to articulate the ever-changing modern experience" (Jess-Cooke 22). Suffice it to say, remakes are not endemic to contemporary media culture decadence and loss of originality; rather, it is the profit-driven logic of capitalism that urges the industry to draw on duplication and repetition of previously successful formulas to maximize financial gains. In a similar vein, the oxymoronic tendency of "creative stealing" ushered in an era of cultural pandering and replicating in the digital mediascape.

Movie remakes fall short to meet the lucrative expectations of the studios and financiers as opposed to their original counterparts; nonetheless, people head to cinema to consume their regurgitated content and buy their spin-off merchandises. Much to the consumers' chagrin, being swamped with a plethora of cultural products- most of which are new and unpredicted- compels the consumers to opt for the familiar movie titles that ring a bell. This is especially accurate for the streaming platforms that flood their subscribers with a miscellaneous gamut of movies and TV shows. Indeed, the two most watched shows on *Netflix* in 2018 were *Friends* and *The Office* despite the fact that the series' finales were aired years ago- *Friends* in 2004 and *The Office* in 2013 (Molla).

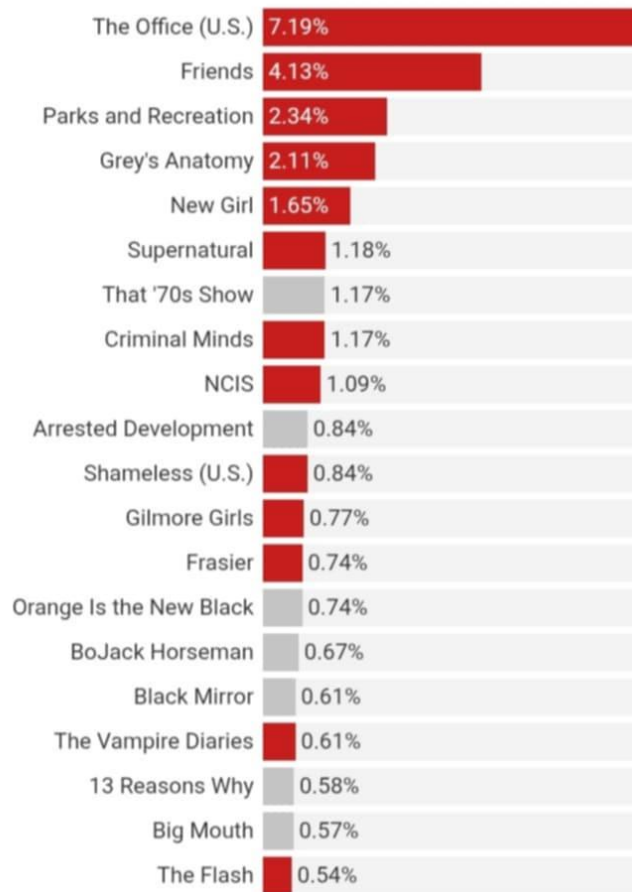


Figure 9: Most Viewed Netflix Shows, as a Percentage of All Netflix Views (Molla)²⁵

According to John Fiske's theory of popular culture, people are by no means cultural dupes who uncritically consume the media culture and adhere to its text and subtext. Rather, Fiske emphatically asserts the active and resistive reading and meaning circulation that people undertake as they navigate their position in the cultural territory. Fiske's approach is purely hermeneutic insomuch as he focuses on the interpretive model of consumption to the detriment of its economic and technological determination (Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 241). Fundamentally, popular culture, he asserts, is the terrain of meaning negotiation. Accordingly, consumers debate their progressive reading of the cultural product by

²⁵ Red bars are for shows that might be taken given that they are owned by Disney, Fox, WarnerMedia, or NBCU

dint of digital media platform. The convoluted narratives are of paramount importance for them so much so they take to the comment section to voice their views and provide their illustration and clarification of all the mysterious events and plot twists. More to the point, binge viewership allows a thorough scrutinization of the rudiments of the TV shows to the extent that viewers can also elaborate of the backstory of minor character. This hermeneutic process has become integral the viewing experience. This is reminiscent of the fuzz around complex TV shows such as *Lost* and *Mr. Robot*.

Remakes are less exerted by creativity than by strategic lucrative imperatives. That Amazon, for example, owns the intellectual property (IP) rights to a movie franchise or a comic book character entails its reproducibility to maintain its cultural viability and market value. Without incessant use, the intellectual property runs the risk of losing relevance and, therefore, becoming commercially worthless:

Intellectual property is not creativity or the product of creativity, therefore, but a result of contractually defined creative relationships, where the unequal autonomies of ‘franchisees’ (whether paying licensees or for-hire creative labor) and ‘franchisors’ (intellectual property owners) have been codified... Although intellectual property claims must never be confused with creativity itself, the cultural resources protected and monopolized by intellectual property law might simultaneously be considered a shared medium of exchange and social interaction obfuscated by the more stark claims of intellectual property law (Derek 8).

Indeed, had the intellectual property (IP) not been sustained by dint of remakes, sequels, or contract renewal, the legal protection and trademarks would expire, resulting in losing exclusive control over said intellectual property.

In their attempt to renovate the themes or develop back-stories of minor characters, movie remakes espoused to notions like inclusivity, woke values, and political correctness. Movies like *Ocean 11*, *The Matrix Resurrection*, *She Hulk* are remakes that position female leading actors at the center of the scripts that were originally predominated by male characters in the original franchises; *Ocean 7*, *The Matrix*, and *The Hulk*. Most movies reboots jumped the gender reconfiguration bandwagon and replaced their leading male actors by female characters. Albeit a progressive undertaking, casting leading female actors to promote gender equality is only symbolic and reinforces the status quo inasmuch as the existing gender-based pay gap is a fitting rendition of the patriarchal structure of the culture industry.

The live action remake of *Disney* classic *The Little Mermaid* sparked online criticism owing to the cast of a black actress for the leading role Ariel. Once depicted as half-woman half-fish, mermaid according to the Western literary tradition is a dangerous hybrid that utilized her angelic voice and singing skills to seduce men. Disney used to present a cartoonish white character with ginger hair for the role of Ariel; however, the new live-action adaptation depicted a black Ariel, the talented actress and singer Halle Bailey, with long curly braided hair and astonishing vocals. The fans of *The Little Mermaid* protested the allegedly “inaccurate” casting of Ariel on the pretext that mermaids, fictional characters, are in fact Caucasian. The deeply inherent racism plaguing the American society always finds its way to the surface and manifests its aversion to racial equality. Fundamentally, racism is not directed solely towards black America. Minorities are less represented in the culture industry, and

worse still misrepresented. Race, sociologists posit, is but a social construct that is politicized to preserve white Americans' undeserved privileged status (Agacan 31)

5- Sports Through the Lenses of Figurational Sociology

Although celebrated for its individual freedoms and pluralism, American society has always been a safe haven for racism, sexism, and xenophobia. As it is thoroughly mooted in Rory Magrath's insightful book *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives*, the long-haired adage accorded to the U.S.A a bastion of individualism and free speech absolutism is met with the harsh realities on the ground: a racist, patriarchal, Islamophobic, and homophobic police state that resort to power whenever its liberal utopian appeals fail to gain popular consensus. Sport is essentially a suitable venue to witness such power imbalances and social conflicts in play. Akin to every workplace's gender pay gap, female athletes are underpaid and their work value is trivialised. Misogynoir²⁶ is manifest in the depreciation of black women athleticism and underrating their femininity. Racial discrimination against black athletes also abounds on and off the playing field insofar as black athletes in sports considered white-man preserve are accorded peripheral positions on the pretext that black athletes excel at using force and fail at strategic planning, therefore reinforcing the false "mind-body" dichotomy²⁷. Similarly, black coaches are denied top jobs in leagues decades after; they are more likely to hold interim instead of full-

²⁶ Misogynoir is a portmanteau term formed by the combination of "misogyny" (hatred for women) and "noir" (derived from the French word for "black"). It highlights the entanglement of racism and sexism and accentuates the unique struggle black women face in society, media, and popular culture

²⁷ Mind-body dichotomy in sports refers to the chasm between an athlete's mental processes and their physical performance. It emphasizes the influence of psychological factors on an individual's ability to execute physical skills effectively and consistently. This dichotomy confines black athletes to specific positions that require physical strength instead of cognitive skills of planning, resilience, and leadership that are assumed to be possessed by their fellow white athletes.

time jobs, or they serve as assistants to their white fellow coaches. Fans scream racial slurs at minority athletes who fail to score. Overwhelmed with the discrimination and oppression they have to endure in their daily life and their professional sporting career, minority athletes use their platform, on the playing field and on their social media accounts, to voice their contempt and dissidence and, thus, rally their fans and followers around their social cause.

In this vein, this study opts for the figurational sociology that addresses the interdependencies and power dynamics between the different social segments. It outlines the development of the theory and its tenets in opposition to the Marxist and the Durkeihmian perspectives. Furthermore, this chapter adopts the figurational sociology to analyse sport and athletes' activism as part of the civilizing process and demonstrates through a Marxist standpoint the dynamics of sportbiz and the commodification of the athletes.

5-1 Figurational Sociology: An Overview

Figurational sociology is termed differently by sociologists, namely “process sociology” and “developmental sociology”. The expressions are suggestive of a sociological approach that studies social phenomena in conjunction with the historical and processual development of communities by dissecting their present through reflecting on their past. More to the point, figurational sociology does not exclusively stress the structure and the function of social and cultural institutions and systems as it is thoroughly substantiated in Talcott Parsons's and Emile Durkheim's structural functionalism²⁸. Rather, Elias “is concerned with the study of human beings ‘in the

²⁸ Structural functionalism is a sociological holistic theory that views society as a complex system composed of various interconnected parts. It focuses on the part while deeming the whole a backdrop frame of reference to weigh on the effects and consequences of the parts. Similarly, it might to focus on

rounds', and not only with particular aspects of their lives, such as ideas, values and norms, modes of production, or instincts and sentiments and their sublimation" (Goudsblom 79). That is, he is concerned with the study of human beings in their habitus by demonstrating their undeniable interconnectedness and interdependency.

Elias's use of the term "figuration" is set to refute the long-held sociological tradition that warrants the false dichotomies of society -individuals, structure-agency, and mind-body. Interdependency is endemic to human existence and survival, without which none will be born or be able to survive. The American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley contends: "a separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals" (qtd in., Dunning, "Figurational Sociology and the Sociology of Sport" 241). A separate individual is a detached "*Homo clausus*" or closed individual whose existence is experienced inwardly and is impervious to interactions with other individuals and environment. Alternatively, Elias asserts that individuals are justifiably "*Homines aperti*": open people who exist in inextricably interdependent figurations and pluralities:

The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such dependencies are the nexus of... the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist... only as pluralities, only in figurations. (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 261).

the whole insofar as the parts constitute constituent elements whose main task is to contribute in analyzing the entirety.

Sports as a field of study has been deemed low-brow in the early of the 20th century. Owing to the figurational sociologist Norbert Elias and his progeny, sports was anchored in comprehensive and substantial social studies and was accorded legitimate academic status insofar as it is part and parcel of the social fabric. Not only is sport a re-enactment of community-imbued aura, but it also is a manifestation of individual identity. Although it bonds spectators of the same athlete or team into a single fan community, sport also inculcates in them individualistic precepts, chief of which success, stiff self-image, competition, and social mobility. The stigma attached to sporting violence and its national pastime status has been dispelled by figurational sociology through its civilizing process and figuration paradigms.

5-2 Sport and Figurational Sociology:

Elias's conceptualization of the term figuration as the most propitious to scrutinize and reflect social reality. For a nuanced illustration and clarification of the term social figurations, Elias analogized it with games, pastimes, and wit large sports. Game structure is virtually identical to game structure insofar as "social reality, like the game, has 'no existence independently of the players'" (Layder 373). Perhaps the most prominent instantiation of the term social figuration has been Elias's allusion to "social dances" as he went on to explain:

One can certainly speak of dance in general, but no one will imagine a dance as a structure outside the individual or as a mere abstraction. The same dance figurations can certainly be danced by different people; but without a plurality of reciprocally oriented and dependent individuals, there is no dance. Like every other social configuration a dance figuration is relatively independent of the specific individuals forming here and now, but not of individuals as such.

It would be absurd to say that dances are mental constructions abstracted from observations of individuals considered separately (*The Civilizing Process* 262).

Suffice it to say, dance ought not to be conceived as a structure or a mental construction outside the dancers, and individuals in isolations are not attributed the status “dancers” without being engaged in a dance routine. The foregoing analogy is useful as it is a direct reference to a real-life process wherein dancers constitute a mobile figuration of interdependent people whose scope varies in terms of complexity and length. Fundamentally, the chain of interdependency tends to be less complex and less distinct in smaller dance groups than it is in outnumbered groups. By the same token, social figurations’ degree of complexity and length differs in families, villages, cities, nation states, capitalist or communist societies, government or non-government organization, and multinational corporations. Furthermore, figurations persist even if the individuals who concocted them cease to exist; this persistence is predicated upon the perpetual participation of constituent members (Dunning and Hughes 53).

The chain of interdependencies and processual dynamics constructive of social dances are evidently ostensible in games, mainly football and cards. One cannot envisage the existence of individuals in abstraction totally secluded from their societies and, in similar fashion, players independent of their games- the converse holds true: a game “has no being, no existence independently of the players as the word game might suggest” (Elias *What is Sociology?*130)

The ever-changing, fluid and unexpected nature of social reality negates the validity of the conventional sociological dictum “cause-effect”. Figurational sociology transcends the reductionism of psychology’s interpretive tradition that

analyses social phenomena in terms of the effects of particular individuals. It takes issue with the causality model that explains social development historically as the process of intended and strategic actions deliberately taken by actors to cause planned, rational results and events. Rather, Elias contends that shifting course of social development is “unplanned” and “blind”: the unplanned repercussion of entanglement of intended actions carried out by constituents (competitors, clients, suppliers, etc.) of innumerable interdependent groups across the eons (Dunning and Hughes 152). In this vein, the sport’s results are unplanned inasmuch as the players’ interweaving moves take a blind, unplanned, and utterly unanticipated course.

Sport is an inherent institution that is firmly interwoven in the social fabric; it is neither socially detached, nor free floating, unconnected from the holistic structure of social interdependencies. Sports have evolved from pristine pastime that abides by no rules into a professionalized version- a phenomenon that Elias dubbed ‘the sportization process’. The sportization process evolved in lockstep with the parliamentarization of political conflicts in Europe. Evidently, as the worldwide rampant violence started to dwindle across 17th century Europe, a rational civilized class of aristocrats took it upon themselves to devise pacifistic strategy in order to reconcile the hostile political and leisure arenas. As the aristocracy opted for more a civilized approach to address the age-old feuds between the monarchs and the barons and to handle people’s grievances through representation and enfranchisement, pastime was also refashioned into a formal and serious civilized enjoyment organized and controlled by internationally standardized rules (Elias “An Essay on Sport and Violence” 151-173). Sport was not impervious to the 20th century commercialization and professionalization of various aspects of social life. The sportization process set the sporting contour around the ethos of fair play and equal opportunity. This was

believed to be achieved through the enactment of strict rules to regulate sporting competitions. Moreover, installing a framework or rules to govern the games was not deemed sufficient; supervising and overseeing the rules is a *sine qua non* for fairness. Thus, participants could no longer evade penalties for breaking the rules (Dunning and Rojek 48). Cheating has become stigmatized in modern societies' sports vis-à-vis the pre-industrial societies' pastime wherein the absence of rules allowed indefinite number of players on both sides and legitimated physical contact (Dunning and Sheard). The sportization of pastime attached a stigma to cheating that had not existed in pre-industrial games insofar as "where there are no rules one cannot cheat" (Dunning, and Rojek, 48). Amongst the folk games that were refined into a more civilized leisure form in 18th century England, one can cite foxhunting, boxing, horseracing, and cricket (Dunning and Rojek 269).

The Elisian figurational sociology is best elucidated in his work on sport. From a sociological standpoint, a sporting game constitutes a chain of figurations formed by interdependent sports people: participants and fans. Fundamentally, figuration encompasses "(1) the two individuals or teams who co-operate with one another in more or less friendly rivalry; (2) controlling agents such as a referees and linesman; and (3) sometimes, but not always, a greater or lesser number of spectators" (Elias and Dunning 207). Of paramount importance is Elias's assertion that figurations are not static; rather, they are fluid and diachronically morphing (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 128). In this regard, the chains of interdependency is saptio-temporal inasmuch as they change in accordance with the processual development of society. Figurations could be local, regional, national, or global (Scambler *Sport and Society* 169). This is manifest in the sorts of sport-related figurations: fans of rival teams might form their separate figurations; however, said fans of a disqualified team

might join the rival team's figuration; spectators might form a single figuration that is pitted against the law enforcement cracking on hooliganism; and athletes congregate in single figuration against the club managers. More to the point, Elias and Dunning flesh out the distinction between, on the one hand, the "immediate figuration" that takes shape on the playing field and is formed by athletes and fans who directly take part in the game, and, on the other hand, the extended or "larger figuration" that encompasses the club members responsible of the maintenance and playing facilities and the legislative and administrative department that lays the foundation of the competitive framework (Elias and Dunning 207). Sport figurations are formed physically and emotionally as participants and spectators experience simultaneously antagonistic tension and organic bonds with interdependent players and fans. Effectively, the resulting tension-equilibrium dynamics serves to set the tone for the game on the playing ground generating a plethora of interdependent polarities (Elias and Dunning 208).

5-3 Athletes' Agency

Humans' agency and actions are not driven by sheer free will; rather, they are tailored by what the English sociologist Margaret Archer labelled "structural conditioning". Structural conditioning is the "objective influence which conditions action patterns and supplies agents with strategic directional guidance" (Archer 196). Essentially, it is a process that sets the framework within the contour of which humans act and react. Indeed, men finds themselves placed in an environment not of their choosing. This is reminiscent of Marx conviction that agents "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx and Engels 315). In this vein, they are instructed

to adopt certain strategies and rational that are congruent with their situation and favourable to them: “it is the situations to which people respond which are mediatory because they condition (without determining) different courses of action for those differently placed, by supplying different reasons to them” (Archer 201). Undeniably, humans do possess the ability to act freely and individually as we can opt for a rational and collective approach; either way they fail to control or predict the consequences of their actions and the oblique dynamism of the social world they inhabit (Scambler, *Sport and Society* 163). Suffices it to say, agency is, by all means, extant; however, its fortitude is mitigated by weakness of will and structural conditioning.

Applying Archer’s theory structural conditioning to sport emanates the three pillars. First, the involuntary placement of the athletes wherein their pre-structured environment, background, race, and gender are levied on them, shape their life course and affect their opportunities- be them advantageous or disadvantageous. Second, vested interest that is the intended and meticulously calculated plan the athletes design for “the furtherance of his or her life chances or well-being” (Archer 203). Indeed, athletes vie to join the best clubs and sign contracts with different brands in order for them to advance their career and amplify their profit. The last pillar is opportunity cost that alludes to the pursuit of human needs and wants despite their negative repercussions. More tellingly, the athletes’ desires might supersede their vested interest resulting in “either rewards (in terms of greater societal enfranchisement or improved life-chances) or costs (in terms of reduced autonomy or freedom of action and stagnant or declining life chances) or a different balance between the two” (Creaven 211). Opportunity cost is well illustrated in athletes’ activism against contentious issues that sparks backlash and cost them their careers.

5-4 Athletes' Activism

Activism constitutes grassroots campaigns done on behalf of a cause and go beyond conventional behavior and politics. It is political in the sense that it rile up support against political oppression and social injustice; however, it utilizes non-conventional political platforms- mainly streets, bridges, public squares, door-to-door canvassing, stadiums, government buildings, universities, social media platforms and podcasts- to stage militant actions, such as marches, boycott, rent strikes, blockades, sit-ins, hunger strikes, encampment, chants, etc. For an act to be designated activism, it ought to go beyond conventional behavior. Encampment is a pastime activity, but students' encampment in universities is a protest against the American illegitimate wars (Anderson and Herr 19-22).

From the figurational standpoint, activism is part and parcel of the civilizing process insomuch as it is a pacifist approach to express dissent and subvert the status quo that is disenfranchising for the masses and only advantageous for the rich few minority. The historical record attests to the bloody revolutions, riots, insurgencies, and armed resistance waged by the masses to topple oppressive regimes across the globe. Diplomacy, a civilized approach adopted by the power block- world leaders- to placate and reconcile their differences, antagonism and adversary, suppressed its orthodox hostile counterpart, to wit wars. Similarly, activism is the subordinate-instigated approach devised to voice their grievances, demand change, and keep the power-block in check. However, activism is by no means countenanced or condoned by the power-block regardless of its peaceful strain. Protests are usually demonized by media coverage, condemned by politicians for their alleged disorderly conduct aiming at disturbing public safety and tranquillity, or cracked upon by the police.

5-5 Sports and the Marxist Theory

Although Elias and Dunning attributed the current form and traits of the extremely regulated sport to the civilizing process peddled by modernism, the figurational sociology's rejection of the reductionist paradigm imparted by Marxism is contentious. The Marxist perspective does justice in explaining the cataclysmic shift that sport and leisure have undergone from their outset. Not only did sport change through the rationalization of the rules and control of violence outbursts, but it also transformed into a lucrative business through the commodification of the games wherein athletes are deemed wage labourers. The drive of capital accumulation and the capitalist ethics in the sporting spectrum are given little momentum in the figurational approach. It is, by all means, valid to assert the close connection between professional sport and capitalism. Such a connection is evident in the lucrative sport-related industries, mainly sports clubs, agents and promoters, sports equipment and sportswear manufacturers, sponsors, sports magazines, sports media, advertisers. Athletes and fans engage in a contractual relation as both avail themselves of mutual advantage: Athletes exploit their skills for profit and achieve social mobility, and fans, as consumers, derive pleasure and entertainment from the riveting performance of the professional and, therefore, escape their mundane of their capitalist-imbued lives (Rowe 106).

From a Marxist standpoint, the athlete, under capitalism, is a proletariat whose labor is exploited by the power-block for the means of life. Although the economics of sport, akin to all popular cultural genres, established a reward structure, the reward structure produces and perpetuates a hierarchical paradigm insomuch as the wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few elite, namely the clubs' owners, sponsor,

advertisers, media companies. Not only does the structure of power asymmetry and inequality figure between athletes and sports elites (entrepreneurial individuals and organizations), but it also transpires between highly privileged and disadvantaged athletes (Rowe 107). Evidently, white male athletes enjoy a wide array of privileges- ranging from wage gaps, favorable contracts with advertising companies, to crucial game positions- than minority athletes including females. The long-hailed material improvement and social mobility rest uneasily with the reality on the ground:

Few attain the heights they wanted to conquer and even fewer surpass them. An unstoppable motivation and unbreakable commitment are valuable, perhaps essential, assets to success in sport and this is why so many possessors of these achieve some level of distinction. But titles are, by definition, reserved for only a very small elites and, while blacks are always well-represented among the elite of all sports in which they compete, there are never enough championships to go round (Cashmore 91).

Under capitalism, athletes' performance is relegated to wage-labour wherein the athlete is alienated from his productive activities, the product of his labor, his fellow athletes, and his future aspiration (Ritzer 21). Indeed, Alienation is a core tenet of the Marxist approach that manifestly figures in the sports industry. The product of the athlete's labor is the property of the capitalist who owns the means of the production. More tellingly, the athletes and the teams are transmuted into a commodity that is sold and purchased in the market. Furthermore, Marxism is a class-based theory, that is, it interprets social reality in terms of class struggle for power. With respect to sport, the capitalists constitute the upper class that economically exploits the working class, to wit the athletes, by paying them wages and suppress them

politically by ending their contracts shall they voice their opposing views (Scambler, *Sport and Society* 146).

Elite athletes are transformed into a brand marketing the corporations' product they represent. Their labor does not end by the end of the game; it is extended to marketing campaigns and photo shoots. They are recruited to be the face of leisure corporations like Nike, Pepsi, Converse, and KFC owing to their idolized personas; however, those very corporations would immediately end their contracts should they engage in scandalous or controversial acts. As much as they were worshiped for their unmatched athleticism, they could readily be degraded by their fans and, therefore, their stocks will suffer dramatic devaluation so much so they might be suspended by their clubs and dropped by their agents and sponsors. One clear example of athlete's stock devaluation is world champion Mike Tyson fiasco. Tyson scandalous trial for rape in 1992 that culminated in a prison sentence diminished his career despite his impeccable corporeal skills. A more recent example is Gwen Berry's activism that sparked backlash during the 2019 Pan American Games in Peru that resulted in her suspension, and subsequently the International Olympic Committee banned exhibiting "gestures of a political nature, like a hand gesture or kneeling" (International Olympic Committee 3). Although this case will be thoroughly analysed in the following chapter, it suffices to mention that she incurred financial ramifications for her controversial act, activism, as *Nike* unannouncedly dropped her and the USA Track and Field Foundation (USATFF) offered her less grants than her fellow track and field athletes did. Indeed, such stigmatized activist campaigns or personal fiascos do affect the athletes' marketability and hinder their career. The intersection of athlete superstars and sport-related commodities is exemplified in the NBA mega star Michael Jordan who expressed his apolitical dogma as the journalist who asked him

whether he would endorse Black Democrat candidate Harvey Gantt for North Carolina's senate race of 1990 or the segregationist white Republican Jesse Helms. He unhesitatingly replied, "Republicans buy sneakers, too" (Washington). Jordan was cognizant of the lucrative reality of his brand, and he was unwillingly to damage it by wading into political issues. Astonishingly, Michael Jordan's brand, his Jordan shoe, "earns him \$330 million a year" (Voorhees); a number that enormously surpasses his yearly NBA earnings. His brand is estimated to rank the second on America's shoe brand list ahead of Adidas, Puma, New Balance and the rest of reputable brands (Voorhees).

On sober reflection, one can assert the efficacy of social media in boosting activism both on and off the playing field. Athletes whose media appearance was permutated with a political overtone were denied media coverage. Nonetheless, social media granted them a platform that reached fans across the globe. Indeed, the 2010s witnessed an emboldened category of athletes who had no qualms about losing their brands in the pursuit of social justice. The NFL former quarterback Colin Kaepernick is a testament to corporation' greed wrapped in social justice veneer. Colin Kaepernick on the field activism lost him his career; he was benched during the height of his controversial activism until he opted out of his San Francisco 49^{ers} team. He was not signed thereafter to play again. The negative financial ramification cast his career in a negative light. Much to his dismay, Nike and Disney, his decade-long sponsors, did not drop Kaepernick. On the contrary, Nike signed him to the famous 2018 endorsement deal that his opponents thought would plummet Nike's stocks. Although the campaign #NikeBoycott was trending on *Twitter*. It resulted in a 3 percent drop of Nike's stock in September of 2018, "the campaign created \$43 million worth of media exposure for Nike. By the end of September, the stock had seen a 5

percent increase and a \$6 billion increase in value (Abad-Santos). The contract Kaepernick signed was not a philanthropic act on the part of Nike, but a calculated move planned by apt campaign managers. The giant corporation profiteered over the back of Kaepernick who lost his NFL earnings, an estimated \$50 million (Schmidt)

In order to obtain some purchase on the topic, the study draws on the figurational paradigm to circumscribe its scope of focus to the interdependencies of and conflict between the various social figurations. Elias's figurational sociology centers around the idea that the appropriate approach to understanding the dynamics of human societies should not be reduced to the structure-agency dualism, along other hitherto contentious dichotomies such as nature-nurture, individual-society, work-leisure, rational-irrational, mind-body, to name but a few. According to the figurational perspective, modern-day sport is the derivative of the process of the sportaization of pastimes. That is, pastimes have been rationalised, commercialized, and professionalized in conjunction with the civilizing process that swept Europe and led to the parliamentarization of political conflict and, eventually, to the establishment of the nation-state. Figurational sociology does not strip individuals of their agency but, nonetheless, acknowledges the power asymmetry between the different figurations. It accentuates the power asymmetry and tension reflected in sport in relation to gender, class, race, religion- to name but a few.

6- Athletes' Activism through the Figurational Prism

Sport, as a social institution and a popular cultural form, is best scrutinized through the application of an invaluable sociological model known as "jigsaw model". The jigsaw model takes various versions, and given the exigencies of the current study, the "logics-based" version is the most suitable and most resonant. As the name

intimates, the jigsaw model solicits to dissect social phenomena into separate pieces in order to put together a thorough and comprehensive account of the whole picture. From a logic-based perspective, said separate pieces are accounted for in terms of logics induced by relations and figurations. Logic refers to the impetus that instate and preserve social coherence and causal potential²⁹ of social structures. Those mechanisms are allegedly generative in that they generate specific relations whose inner working is manifest in its bearing on different figurations. To illustrate this point, Scambler provides the example of the regime of capitalism as the logic that shapes the class-based relations between figurations whose impact materializes in everyday one-on-one dealings to multinational corporations' complex transactions (Scambler "Sex Work Stigma" 1085-1086). Accordingly, applying the jigsaw model to sport entails illustrating how the logic of capital and its attendant class relations, the logic of the state or mode of regulation and the relations of command, the logic of patriarchy and its gender-based relations, the logic of tribalism and its concomitant relations of ethnicity, and finally the logic of status and the relations of honor penetrate the sporting culture (Scambler *Sport and Society*169). The cumulative analysis ought to amalgamate the jigsaw pieces to form the overall portrayal of contemporary American social reality.

6-1 Command Relations

Sport has emerged as a result of a crucial historical juncture that radically morphed the status quo, both economically and politically. The establishment of the capitalist system disfigured the social and cultural spectrum as well; not only did it

²⁹ Causal potency is a phrase usually used in legal contexts to indicate the potential of individuals, actions, or events to cause damage or effectuate a particular outcome. Broadly speaking, the phrase denotes the strength and ability of certain structures or causes to produce a result or lead to specific consequences.

regulate the mode of production, but it also affected the social structure and cultural practices. It gave birth to modern-day nation states or parliamentary polities with their “ideological state apparatus” and “repressive state apparatus.” French scholar Jean-Marie Brohm expands on French Marxist Louis Althusser’s theory of “ideological state apparatus” and “repressive state apparatus” to study sport. Brohm defines sport as “the product of a[n] historical turning point’ rather than “a transcendent entity, over and above historical periods and modes of production” (Brohm 175). Brohm contends that sport is part of the “ideological state apparatus” in that it persuade rather coerce individuals through the false illusion of freedom of will it inculcates in people. Sport is undeniably oppressive as it reproduces the class disparities between the bourgeoisie- the entrepreneur of and profiteer from the industry- and the subordinates- the workers or direct producers of labor, such as athletes, stadium and gyms staff, factory workers producing sporting apparels, and consumers or the fans: “reproduces bourgeois social relations such as selection and hierarchy, subservience, obedience etc;...spreads an organisational ideology... involving competition, records and output; and...transmits on a huge scale the general themes of ruling bourgeois ideology like the myth of the superman, individualism, social advancement, success, efficiency etc” (Brohm 77). Sport serves to keep the subordinate aligned with the state’s ideology; however, the states will resort to repression through violence shall the subordinate defy the status quo. The United States’ infamous mass incarceration rates and blatant resort to police violence to squash defiance and crack down on protest prompted many celebrities to rail against this relation of command- American athletes are a case in point.

LeBron James, a household name and an NBA megastar, have no qualms about using his sporting as well as digital platform to assert his agency as a fully

participant citizen and a staunch advocate of human rights. Uncensored by mainstream media, James effectively used his social media platform to address controversial issues, and his activism succeeded in forming a catalyst for his fellow athletes and fans alike to reflect on their neutrality and silence in the wake of burgeoning racial polarization and wealth gap. James coupled his on the field protest and online activism through hashtags and tweets. Following the fatal death of black teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of the police in 2012, James, along with the his Miami Heat fellow mates, staged an on-the-field fleeting act of protest as they donned hoodies³⁰, and posted the picture on social media to attain online visibility and, therefore, garner a wider audience outside the confine of the stadium. Protests, marches, and hashtags helped raise awareness about systemic injustices and racism and demanded the arrest and prosecution of George Zimmerman, the officer responsible of shooting Martin dead. He donned the iconic “I Can’t Breathe” shirt in 2014 Cleveland Cavaliers- Brooklyn Nets pregame to protest the killing of Eric Garner who was put “in a banned chokehold” while being arrested by NYPD officer (Hayat et al. 905). The slogan “I Can’t Breathe” was reiterated in countless street ptotests and marches and turned into a hashtag that was trending for weeks.

Power grab is no longer in the hands of big media corporations that choose whom they should silence and to whom they ought to give voice. Cognizant of their prolific fan base and unlimited digital reach, athletes avail themselves of the bipartisan platform they come to establish to approach issues that were hitherto deemed sensational and taboos. Media can no longer dodge their protests on the

³⁰ Hoodies have become a symbol for the murder of Trayvon Martin as he was shot by the police while wearing a hooded sweatshirt. His death spanned nationwide protests known as a “Million Hoodie March.” Hoodies have mixed connotations: a subculture fashion statement of teenagers who have their school names and mascots emblazoned on them, hip-hop dress that has been incorporated into mainstream culture, or an outfit worn mostly by criminals and thugs.

playing ground by pointing the camera away or discredit their stance on the pretext that it is misinformed and, therefore, invalid. The political dialogue is no longer monopolized by the elite who set the guidelines and contour the framework within which the narrative should be restricted. With a fan base of 52.8 million followers on twitter, 149 million on Instagram, and 251 on Facebook (Shekhar), James voiced grievances pertinent to social ills and economic malaise that affected mostly Black America and people of colour at the hand of the repressive state apparatus, the police. His feud with former President Donald Trump on X –formerly known as Twitter– sparked outrage amongst republicans and news anchors so much so he was asked to “shut up and dribble” despite his celebrity status and his career-high and franchise record. Mainly, Fox News’ Laura Ingraham aired her scathing criticism against James and Kevin Durant, Phoenix Suns’ player, for engaging in political commentary, however allegedly uninformed they are: "You are great players, but no one voted for you... so keep the political commentary to yourself, or as someone once said, shut up and dribble" (Galily 2). Criticism was levelled against James for calling Trump “a bum” in a tweet (Armstrong and Butryn 26)–claiming that politics and sport should not mix,- but those very critics condone and flaunt athletes’ endorsement of their favourite candidates. James and Durant addressed Ingraham’s disparaging comment and condescending depiction of athletes as “dumb jock, ignorant, and barely intelligent” on Emmy-Award winning sport podcast *Uninterrupted*: “We will definitely not shut up and dribble... I will definitely do that... she did the best thing to help me create more awareness... I get to sit up here and talk about social injustice, equality" (Galily 2).

James’s digital activism vis-à-vis Muhammad Ali’s on-the-field protests and incessant engagement with the Civil Rights Movement is relegated to the status

“slacktivism”; that is “political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants.” A shallow practice that is tantamount to “middle class wet t-shirt competition” (Wicks 79). The term is a portmanteau “slacker and activism” coined by Dwight Ozard and Fred Clark in 1995 to encompass young people’s small and personal scale activism consisting in liking and sharing post, starting fundraiser on GoFindMe site and hashtags addressing political or social conjunctures to affect social change. Slacktivism is so named for its passive endeavour as opposed to conventional activism- marches, sit-ins, encampments, government building shutdowns, and boycotts. This argument has some merit to it in that James’ digital activism seems more like “a message of consideration rather than revolution” because a street demonstration might hurt the appeal and revenue of the “LeBron James brand” (Hayat et al., 906). Athletes are accused of chasing clickbaits and monetization of their accounts through their digital activism instead of substantial genuine protests. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the broad platform digital media provide for users to engage in political dialogue and interaction between the powers that be and the masses- unlike the traditional on-way media that publish carefully curated news and control the narrative (Cable 170).

Undeniably, James activism list is long and rich and should not be reduced to clickbaits and hashtags. Besides his on-the-field protests, he donated millions of dollars to his hometown of Akron, Ohio, paid University fees to students, opened his own school *I Promise*, produced documentaries and engaged in public service announcement on the behest of then candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton (Bunn).

6-2 Race Relations

Sport-based activism, albeit undermined by the media and historians who tend to focus on high-profile conventional political campaigns held on official platforms, has been rife on and off the playing field. Athletes use their platform to challenge the status quo, its enacted disenfranchising policies and practices, and subvert barriers levied on the sporting arena and society writ large by race, gender, religion, and class. Perhaps amongst the historically most prominent sport activism was spearheaded by African American athletes. Chief of whom are gold medallist Jesse Owens whose win in the 1936 Olympics in Germany constituted a symbolic protest against the Aryan supremacy and a testament to racial equity, three-time heavyweight boxing championship's winner Muhammed Ali held activism against racial discrimination and vociferous anti-imperialist stance in 1966- opposition to the Vietnam war that resulted in his expulsion and financial sanctions,- and Olympic medallists John Carlos and Tommie Smith's "Black Power" salute during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico that resulted in their suspension and eviction from the Olympic village.

Much to their chagrin, during the 2019 Pan American Games in Peru, American athletes- hammer thrower Gwen Berry and fencer Race Imboden- found themselves indicted and penalized for breaching the code of conduct. Punching her fist into the sky to impart a staunch political posture: "stand for all the injustices that are going on in America and a president who's making it worse," and taking a knee during on the medal stand to shed light on "racism, gun control, the mistreatment of immigrants," (Griffith) Berry and Imboden had to face the wrath of the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) as they were placed in probation for a year (Boykoff 8-9). Subsequently, the International Olympic Committee corroborated the

USOPC decision asserting that is attuned to the IOC's brand of neutrality and apoliticism. As a result, the IOC banned exhibiting "gestures of a political nature, like a hand gesture or kneeling" (International Olympic Committee 3) to insure that "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" (International Olympic Committee 90). Displaying trappings of nationalism- through brandishing the national flags of the Olympians and playing their respective anthem- has always been inherent to the Olympics, and for the IOC to embrace apoliticism can be deemed hypocritical (Edwards 85). Imboden received the IOC guidelines to ban protests with much dismay stating:

I find it funny to silence the people who are upset instead of fixing the system that is upsetting them... If anything, this platform for change hopefully is the catalyst and example people take to see that the power still remains with the people of promise and the people that are doing work, not the people that are running the system (Weisfeld).

The protests staged by the forgoing Olympians symbolize an act of racial harmony: Imboden, a 30-year-old white, and Berry, a black woman, protesting inequality, racism, gun control, and mostly Trump's polarizing presidency given that the Peru Olympics took place in 2019 during Trump term of 2016-2020. Surprisingly, a white man who is relatively privileged and born with a head start speaks out on the behest of disadvantaged minorities to address political upheavals: "While I'm very blessed to feel like I had a place and I had a moment to speak and to hopefully positively change some peoples' minds, especially those that follow me, look up to me, that's really important... [But] I did it because of the things that I see that are

horrible for other people” (Weisfeld). Imboden explains that his reason for kneeling “at an international competition is because the country that I represent doesn’t reflect me anymore. It doesn’t reflect the people within it” (Weisfeld). Trump’s rhetoric against minorities emboldened the police to racially profile them and shoot them for minor inconveniences. Imboden addressed in his protest police brutality that claimed many black American lives; mainly that of George Floyd who was suffocated by a police officer who pressed his knee on Floyd’s necks for over 9 minutes, Breonna Taylor who was shot 6 times in her apartment, and Jacob Blake who was shot 7 times in his back and in front of his children. For all intent and purposes, these instances, akin to countless cases of police total disregard for black lives and little to no accountability for their crimes accentuate the link between gun violence and racism. Among his off the playing field activism, Imboden is engaged with the largest anti-gun violence organization, *Everytown*, “hoping to fix a country where there are more guns than people” and public service groundwork in New York registering people eligible to vote (Weisfeld).

Gwen Berry protested a system that is rigged in favor of the powerful few. A black female highly-accomplished Track and Field athlete who is a three-time US Indoor Champion gold medalist, 2013, 2014, 2016, and a gold medalist of the 2014 Pan American Sports Festival and the 2019 Pan American Games. Endowed with her personal experience at Mississippi Freedom School wherein she learned about Black history, her upbringing in Ferguson, Missouri, a city that is predominantly black, her father’s military service in the illegitimate Iraq war (Scoby) and accessorized with such a reputable accolade, Berry felt empowered and qualified to make a statement as she accepted the gold medal on the 2019 Pan American Games’ podium. She endured verbal insults and financial exclusion in the aftermath of the protest. Berry lost

roughly 66% of her income as she was denied access to grants proffered to fund athletes' careers, she lost sponsors, and the giant corporation Nike abruptly ended her contract with her (Kilgore).

Evidently, track and field athletes are not famous as the NFL or NBA players, yet Berry rose to fame in 2019 owing to her act of protest on the podium as the national anthem was played. Berry, rightly so, took issue with racial inequity and wealth gap, believing that racial tension is inextricably linked to the reproduction of inequality and exclusion. She solicited to draw attention to those social predicaments through activism: "You can see the racial wealth gap, you can see voter suppression, you can see that Black communities don't have resources, like grocery stores, water, and access to public transportation" (Burtka).

Black athlete activists have joined and yet empowered the prominent movement that is dedicated solely to police brutality against and racial profiling of black people: Black Lives Matter. BLM is a sociopolitical movement launched in 2013 by three black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi as a result to the police sheer disregard to black lives and the total impunity they are accorded by a system that is inherently racist: "as a call to action in response to the state-sanctioned violence and anti-Black racism" (qtd in.; Brown and Foxx 61) in the US and world-wide. The movement was ignited by the murder of Trayvon Martin- whose killer George Zimmerman was acquitted- and grew nationwide in the aftermath of the death of countless black men and women: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, George Floyd, to name but a few. The movement is decentralised in the sense that its decision-making and planning are not consigned to a central authority and headquarter; rather, they are trickled down to smaller units.

Similarly, the logo and trade mark are not exclusively owned by any organization. Owing to social media, the movement gained momentum as the hashtag #Black Lives Matter sweeps the internet and becomes trending each time the police unlawfully kills a black American.

6-3 Religion Relations

Fast forward to 1996, the NBA Black American Muslim star Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf staged his scathing criticism of the predominantly Islamophobic thrust endemic to the American society. Abdul-Rauf chose to stay seated as the American anthem- “a symbol of oppression, of tyranny-“ was played as a symbolic act of protest to bring light to the plight of the Muslim community in the West (Fuller 123). Although freedom of religion is enshrined and protected by the American Constitution, Abdul-Rauf was discredited and shamed by the League and fans alike on the pretext of his un-American demeanor: disrespecting the American national identity, i.e., brandished by the Star-Spangled anthem and banner. That standing for the national anthem is antithetical to Islamic teaching attests to the tension the athletes undergo in their endeavour to balance out their professional exigencies and their personal convictions. Nonetheless, taking a stand comes with strings attached. Abdul-Rauf paid a heavy price for deliberately and overtly opposing the established authority of the industry; he was momentarily suspended, his playing time minimised, until he eventually parted ways with the league. Although the Basketball League reached a compromise with Abdul-Rauf that allowed him to pray with his head during the anthem, his career in the NBL was already obsolete (Aziz). Suffices it to say, sport-based activism in a time of extreme racial tension sparked heated debates pertinent to the dialectic of patriotism-the right to protest, and resistance-restriction. It unravelled

the secular strains of the industry that is biased against Islamic tradition and practices despite the fact that freedom of religious practice in the workplace is protected by the Constitution.

6-4 Gender Relation

In a venue deemed a male preserve in eons, women strove to draw their territory and assert their meritocracy as valuable practitioners of sport. Women sport has been trivialized on the pretext that it is not as performatively appealing and lucrative as its male counterpart is. Sport is by a continuum of the social structure; thus; gender discrimination is as ostensible on the playing field as it is in every workplace. Famous for her 1970's "Battle of the Sexes"³¹," Billie King Jean, the former American former world n1 tennis player, initiated the dialogue about unequal pay based on gender discrimination not only in the sport industry but also across the country. Accessorized with and empowered by renowned accolades- 39 Grand Slam titles: 12 in singles, 16 women's doubles titles, and 11 in mixed doubles, a member of the US team in seven Federation Cups and 9 Whitman Cups for 3 years, the US captain in the Federation Cup (Ware 42), Jean emphatically voiced her discontent with the status quo: "It was very clear that I unless I was Number 1, no one was going to listen to me...If God gave me this gift, I was going to do everything in my power to make this world a better place" (M. Smith 115). In the run-up to the 1973 Wimbledon, she organized a gathering of 63 players in London's Gloucester Hotel, founded the Women's Tennis Association, and threatened to boycott the US Open if female

³¹ Battle of the Sexes is 1973 tennis match that pitted Billie King Jean against professional tennis player Bobby Riggs who assumed quick and swift victory against an unfit rival. Jean won the match easily, and her symbolic victory served to shed light on women's rights and gender equality.

athletes did not receive equal prize to their male counterparts (Chang). Indeed, both male and female singles winners were awarded an equal prize, \$25,000 (Ware 115).

Although Jean did not actually brandish a banner for gender equality in education, her athletic performance helped raise consciousness about the American social constructs and norms that relegated women to second-class citizens. The struggles and challenges female athletes had to incur during the time of the enactment and implementation of the law placed female athletes at the center of the broader American political and social life. Title IX attests to the materialization of liberal feminist precepts of equal opportunity and gender equity in everyday practice inasmuch as Jean was invited to testify before congress in favour of the Women's Educational Equity Act in 1973 (Chang). Title IX, a US civil rights law, was enacted as an addendum to the 1972 Education Amendments to outlaw discrimination against the beneficiaries receiving federal funds on the basis of sex: "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Ware 48).

The fight for "equal pay for equal work" is an ongoing struggle in modern-day America. Female athletes are still engaging in a staunch advocacy, lawsuits, and incessant protests to assert women's worth on and off the playing field. The US Women National Football Team (USWNT) succeeded in subverting the capitalist system that enshrines and reproduces gender pay gap claiming that males' sport industry makes more revenue than females': "the USWNT earned more money from its male equivalent reaching the knockout stages of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar than it did from winning its own tournaments in 2015 and 2019" (Woodyatt).

Consequently, the Federation agreed to a “new 50-50 split in the way it pays men and women competing for the US national soccer teams, meaning both sides will receive the same pay and prize money, including for participating at World Cups” (Woodyatt). Fundamentally, this female athletes’ win does well to encourage American women to achieve gender equality in their respective workplaces.

6-5 Misogynoir and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class

Black female athletes’ struggle is twofold: they are discriminated against based on their race and gender. They constitute the epitome of racism and sexism victimhood. Black female athletes are susceptible to anti-blackness and misogyny in the sport industry so much so there are degraded, bereft of the recognition, and stigmatized. Unsurprisingly, the sport industry is a succinct reflection of the American social zeitgeist; Black women are undervalued on and off the playing field. Their achievement is discredited because of their alleged masculine physique- that should disqualify them from competing against white feminine athlete- and unprofessional ghetto looks. The tennis superstar Serena Williams’s career provides a textbook case of US Black female athletes’ plight.

In a territory that is historically deemed a wealthy white people reserve, presided over by white male referees and entrepreneurs (Schultz 340), Serena managed to be the world-s top earning athlete and deservedly earned numerous titles, mainly one of Time Magazine’s “100 Most Influential People” of 2010 and 2014, Sports Illustrated’s “Sports Person of the Year” of 2015, and Nike’s “Greatest Athlete of All Time” of 2016 (Cocozza). Additionally, she was adorned with 2 Olympic gold medals, ESPN ESPY awards, 23 Grand Slam singles titles, and NAACP Image awards. A proud African American woman, she unabashedly celebrated her culture

through her attire and hairstyle. Serena's fashion statement did not sit wet the white culture-imbued sport; media outlets depicted her and, by implication, Black female athletes as "trespassers whose presence undermines the cultural integrity of women's tennis" (Douglas 5). The elitist and exclusionist nature of tennis marginalize Blackness, black culture, and black body. In this fashion, Serena, on the behalf of her fellow black women, used her platform to unmask the economic exploitation and moral denigration of Black athlete bodies (Douglas 4).

Williams's presence on the tennis court symbolizes the clash between "the ghetto" and "the suburb", that is the collusion between Blackness and whiteness: Serena Williams (and other Black (women) celebrity performers) can and do simultaneously signify 'the ghetto' and 'the suburb' as two intersectional symbolic spaces where differential discourse on class and 'race' are (re)produced" (Ifekwunigwe 132). She, nonetheless, centers her ghetto-centrism at the centre of the white and wealthy tennis locus to benefit from this very lucrative industry and climb the social ladder using her Black athleticism and aesthetics.

Williams is met with the athleticism-aesthetics conundrum as she is by and large on the top of her game, yet she is criticized for her low-brow aesthetics in a corporal arena. Ironically, sport journalism outlines and perpetuates a "racialized and sexualized sporting female aesthetic" (Ifekwunigwe 134) instead of disseminating a substantial sporting analysis of the game. Cultural norms and accentuated and contested in sports; the power interplay of gender, race, and class are manifested and simultaneously deconstructed by countercultural ideals. Williams's fashion statement started in 2002 as she donned a full-body black attire during the 2002 US Open Tournament. The attire made an appearance during the 2018 French Open

Tournament where it was met with disdain and scorn. Not only did the outfit defy the dress code of the sporting associations- wearing white skirts,- but it was also inextricably linked to the “fictional uncolonized African country popularized in Marvel’s Black Panther Film” (Allen 137). Williams was banned for not conforming to the standards instated to appeal for a white audience (Martin 91). Former tennis legend Billie Jean King shared a post on her X account to call out the sexism endemic to tennis in the aftermath of Williams’s ban from the French Open Tournament.: “the policing of women’s bodies must end. The ‘respect’ that’s needed is for the exceptional talent @serenawilliams brings to the game. Criticising what she wears to work is where the true disrespect lies” (qtd in., Mandell).

Donning the catsuit was intended to turn Williams’ body into a site of power and agency. Although the catsuit was banned by the French Tennis Federation, Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) in 2019 enacted new measures to modernize the dress code by allowing “leggings and mid-thigh length compression shorts without a skirt or a dress during matches” (Aziz). Albeit a minor act of change, the modernization of the dress code constitutes a first step towards a more progressive and pragmatic approach to the Tennis industry.

Black natural hair is stigmatized and still banned in schools and workplaces. It is considered inappropriate and unprofessional because it does not conform to the Eurocentric standards of beauty. Professional Black women are met with the conundrum of either conforming to the mainstream white culture and styling their hair in conjunction with European norms or celebrating their culture by embracing black hair aesthetics. Unapologetically, Williams styled her hair in braids or beads and flaunting her black identity (Allen 136).

6-6- Activism's Ramification and Achievement: Colin Kaepernick as a Case Study

NFL former quarterback Colin Kaepernick's career was brought to a halt owing to his vociferous activism and staunch advocacy of social justice. His activism may no longer be displayed on the playing field as he opted out of his former team San Francisco 49ers and was never signed to a new club, but he transmuted his symbolic kneeling protest to his community and digital platform. He donated \$1 from his personal earnings to disenfranchised communities; that generous donations addressed an array of social grievances: namely, homelessness, education, prison reforms, minorities-police relations, women's reproductive rights, and inmates' right. In collaboration with celebrities and athletes, he launched his #10for10 project- a name he coined for the endeavour wherein a celebrity would donate \$10,000 to fund a cause of his or her choice; a donation that would be met with another \$10,000 granted by Kaepernick. In partnership with the black hip-hop singer T.I, Kaepernick help fund organizations in Huston to obtain the needed building material and labor ("While you were arguing about the anthem"). More to the point, Kaepernick's donation addressed the systemic racism that warrants the incarceration of thousands of minorities without convictions; he solicited to purchase parolees suits for them to be employed after incarceration and funds suits seeking prison reform (Willingham).

Athletes' activism may not inflict direct legal proceedings, but it did galvanise people's consciousness and garnered wider public support owing to the unlimited outreach of the digital platforms. It further educated the advantageous segments of society that are unaffected by racial and gender bias and violence. Furthermore, over time, athletes succeeded in gaining small wins, namely granting equal prize money for male and female athletes, holding police officers accountable for their unlawful

ruling, raising funds to cover university fees, lawsuits, and daily expenses of the marginalized, building schools in marginalized communities, encouraging communities who usually abstain from voting to cast their ballots for the candidate who is more aligned with their interests, raising awareness about the importance of gun control regulations.

While not directly impacting legal proceedings, it raised public awareness and discourse around issues of racial bias and violence. This act exemplified how prominent athletes can use their platforms to challenge norms, influence sociopolitical conversations, and intertwine sports with civic engagement against discrimination, aligning with the civilizing process of promoting social empathy and a more equitable society.

Conclusion

The study of popular culture has developed into a vital area of inquiry within cultural and media studies, illuminating the complex intersections of power, ideology, and everyday life. Its intellectual roots can be traced to the British Cultural Studies tradition, particularly the work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, who foregrounded the lived experiences and creative expressions of ordinary people. This culturalist approach treated culture as a meaningful and contested site, challenging elitist distinctions between "high" and "low" culture. Building on this foundation, Marxist theorists further interrogated popular culture as a domain imbued with ideological struggle, where capitalist systems reinforce dominant values through mass media and commodified forms of leisure. In contrast to such deterministic perspectives, John Fiske introduced a more optimistic and agency-centered framework. He contended that popular culture is not simply dictated from above by media institutions but is actively reshaped and reinterpreted by its audiences. For Fiske, popular culture arises from the ongoing tension between institutional incorporation and everyday resistance. Consumption, in this sense, becomes an active, creative practice—a site of cultural negotiation, pleasure, and subversion.

Popular culture is inherently oppositional and contradictory; it is neither intrinsically liberatory nor wholly oppressive. Its deep entanglement with media creates a symbiotic relationship between the popular and the industrial. While it often resists the top-down imperatives of the culture industry, popular culture cannot exist independently of media culture, which provides the raw material for its expression. As such, it functions as a complex, multi-layered domain in which the status quo is simultaneously reinforced and challenged. This status quo—rooted in profit-driven, exploitative, and commodifying logics—relies on ideological mechanisms that standardize content and suppress originality and creativity. Yet the commodified

nature of media does not preclude the possibility of resistant meanings; on the contrary, it is the very ground upon which symbolic struggles are waged. Despite the intentions of capitalist forces, cultural texts are not univocal—they are polysemous, open to diverse interpretations and counter-hegemonic readings. This inherent openness renders popular culture participatory, as it invites audiences to engage critically and creatively with the texts imposed by dominant power structures.

With the rise of digital media, the participatory nature of popular culture has been significantly amplified. The evolving mediascape has opened up virtual spaces where individuals can construct meaning, form communities, attain celebrity status—often without the financial backing or institutional endorsement of traditional power structures—and express dissent through their own platforms. On Twitch, for example, gamers not only engage in entertainment but also deliberate on political and economic issues. Similarly, anti-establishment commentators and citizen journalists broadcast independently via streaming platforms, offering alternative narratives that challenge the credibility of mainstream media, which many now view with skepticism. Political satirists and comedians increasingly turn to YouTube to critique politicians and public figures—filling a vacuum left by mainstream journalists who, due to self-censorship or institutional pressure, have abdicated this critical function. These grassroots media practices disrupt the top-down authority of legacy broadcasters and contest the epistemic dominance long maintained by elite cultural institutions.

Social media users are creatively capturing moments from their everyday lives and pairing them with favorite or nostalgic songs, often leading to the revival or renewed popularity of older tracks. This illustrates how digital platforms enable popular culture to be both highly participatory and hyper-personalized. Users

recommend and promote their favorite TV shows, critique rebooted films—such as the live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*—and even organize campaigns to boycott or "cancel" celebrities. In this regard, social media platforms have become vibrant arenas for communal expression and cultural negotiation. However, digital media is not without its drawbacks. Personal data is routinely harvested and sold to advertisers, fueling what is known as surveillance capitalism. This practice poses significant threats to freedom of expression, as platforms often monitor, censor, or suppress dissenting voices—either by suspending accounts or demonetizing content that challenges dominant narratives. In response, users have begun developing alternative strategies to distribute their content, circumvent algorithmic filtering, and escape the "filter bubbles" in which they are confined. These dynamics underscore the adaptability of popular culture as a site of ideological struggle. Cultural hegemony, in this context, is never fully achieved but continually renegotiated through a complex interplay of coercion and consent.

Despite centuries of entrenched hegemonic power structures—statism, classism, sexism, elitism, and tribalism—the American public continues to resist these forces through cultural participation in both physical and digital spaces. These acts of resistance often yield small yet significant and symbolic victories: from collectively “canceling” public figures who have proven unworthy of their cultural influence, to pressuring mainstream media to abandon self-censorship and more openly critique the status quo, including through news coverage and subversive film narratives. Furthermore, digital technologies and the internet have transformed the dynamics of cultural production and consumption. Ordinary individuals are no longer merely passive recipients of media content; they have become *prosumers*—both producers

and consumers of cultural artifacts—thereby reshaping the terms of cultural engagement from the ground up.

Upon sober reflection, the study of popular culture should adopt a dialectical approach—one that acknowledges its entanglement within capitalist power structures while also remaining sensitive to its potential for bricolage, contradiction, and transformation. Popular culture is not merely a mirror of prevailing social norms; it actively participates in shaping, reinforcing, and challenging them. It thus emerges as a vital analytical lens through which to interrogate the mediation of ideology, power, and resistance in an era marked by digital immediacy, transnational cultural flows, and the increasingly porous boundaries between the political and the popular.

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