Myths of Popular Culture

Maurice Vambe*,[1] and Katy Khan*,[2]

[1]*Department of English Studies department, UNISA, South Africa*

[2]*Department of Communication Science, UNISA, South Africa*

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore some critical moments in the formation of 'popular' culture studies. This objective is not exhaustive, cannot be exhaustive in the space of a single article, since popular cultural studies have grown into an academic industry which not even five live-times of academic work by any individual can exhaust! This article is therefore, a rapid but hopefully, provocative view of understanding popular culture. The article uses the concept of myth to problematize some aspects of the debates of popular culture in some works by the Frankfurt school, the pioneering work of E. P Thompson, Stuart Hall and in the case of Africa, the work of Njabulo Ndebele. None of these works claim to be canonical in their treatment of popular culture. However, the problem identified in this article and therefore to be addressed is that there still remains a certain condescending theoretical attitude in the definitions of what is popular by works indicated above. To be sure, each of these writers on popular culture have evolved from previous standpoints and yet it is still important, particularly from an African perspective where the popular is still viewed as inferior, to trace the genealogy of this mistrust of the popular. We argue that myths and symbols of popular culture should be viewed as social constructs; they do not represent the interests of everyone in the community in the same way, for ever.

INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING MYTHS

Myths are as old as mankind, and are narratives that give symbolic expression to a system of relationships between man and the universe [1]. Myths also represent collective identities and preserve and transmit the paradigms, the exemplary models, for all the responsible activities in which men engage [2]. The 'exemplary models' or charters that become myth are often depicted through the figure of animals and human beings [3]. Myths are neither created and understood by the 'collective' in the same way for all times. Rather, 'myths may be understood as a functional existential metaphor' [4]. Myths may wish to crystallize and symbolize harmonious human relations but they are also recognized as unstable carriers of the metaphorical meaning of human existence. This fact means myths are 'imaginary, and arbitrary' [5], allows individual interpretations 'for while a community may often express its identity through its mythologies, it is also true that individuals may often find themselves locked in struggle with their community as to the meaning of such myths' [6]. The 'subjective' aspect of myths can allow social groups to ' authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict and validate' their rule [7]. To assume that myths only amount to false consciousness is to miss their creative dimensions as narratives that have the potential to authorize their own meanings containing conflicting grammars of

values: a fact that enables them to draw attention to the constructed-ness of social narratives, definitions of concepts and political ideologies in the study of popular culture.

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The Frankfurt school studied popular culture in the context of the commodifications of intellectual property, and also at a time when there was need to understand how the people were responding to the pain brought about by the capitalist relations [8]. However, their understanding of popular culture has continued to provoke creative debates in academia. Theodor Adorno and Max Hoekheimer set out to reveal ways in which the emergent capitalist society in Europe sort to reform popular culture from above, so as to make it pliant and in line with the demands of the new moral ethics of a capitalist order. The two authors argue clearly that while enlightenment was brought about by man's disenchantment with the world, it also created more disappointment because of its failure to spread the fruits of its technical innovations to the laboring masses. Adorno and Horkheimer believe that although enlightenment projected itself as a force of reason, it tirelessly worked to suppress other forms of rationality that it dismissed as myths or false consciousness. For the duo, popular culture was amenable to the influences of dominant narratives. Adorno and Horkheimer's work on mass culture is vast and probably more sophisticated than how we have summarized their efforts. However, the two could not extricate themselves from stereotyping the ordinary people's culture that is imagined as a terrain that is easily infiltrated by the dominant values and distorted to suit

*Address correspondence to these authors at the Department of English Studies, UNISA, South Africa; E-mail: vambemt@unisa.ac.za

Department of Communication Science, UNISA, South Africa; E-mail: Khankb@unisa.ac.za

the interests of the elite class so that what the people read, buy, listen to, consume and enjoy is already manipulated and debased from within. It is assumed that in music, once, 'a musical and / or lyrical pattern has proved successful it is exploited to commercial exhaustion, culminating in 'the crystallisation of standards [9]. For Adorno, popular music encourages passive listening which in turn promotes standardization of cultural tastes. However, this is not the case as the analysis of the Shona song, "*Sendekera*" from Zimbabwe below by Tambaoga shows;

Ivhu iri ramunoona machinda ndiro rinonzi Zimbabwe

Kana mvura ikanaya gore rino tichazadza matura

Iwe neni tine basa, rekushandira nyika

Zvinodadisa kwazvo, Ivhu ravaredu

Ngava gumbuke zvavo, vanewaya, Isu tave kufara

Ndiyoka hondo yeminda, hondo yegutsa ruzhinji

Ndiyoka hondo yevanhu, Hondo yekuwana hupfumi

Huyayi tibatane nhasi, Tose tinzi Mushandira pamwe

Ndiyoka hondo yeminda – Sendekera

Hondo yegutsa ruzhinji – Shandira nyika iwe mwana wevhu

Zvinodadisa kwazvo – Sendekera

Ivhu rava redu – Shingirira iwe mwana wevhu

Ngava gumbuke zvavo – Vane waya?

Isu tave kufara – Tsungirira iwe mwana wevhu

Ivhu riye rauya – Sendekera

Rauya zvachose –Sendekera

Mhururu Zimbabwe – Sendekera

Vakuru gadzirai ramangwana, vadiki vawane basa!

Vadiki tarisai nhaka yenyu, vakuru maita basa!

Iye woye , Iye woye

Ivhu iri ramunoona machinda ndiro rinonzi Zimbabwe

Kana mvura ikanaya chete gore rino tichazadza matura

Shingirira iwe mwana wevhu

Tsungirira iwe mwana wevhu

Sendekera iwe mwana wevhu

Iwe neni tine basa

rekushandira nyika

Zvinodadisa kwazvo

[English translation]

This land that you see is called Zimbabwe

If rain falls in abundance

We shall fill silos with grain

You and me should work for the country

It gives all of us pride.

They can be sad but we are happy

This struggle for land is one for and by the majority

This is a people's war,

A war to gain economic wealth

All, come so that we are one

This is the war for land

A war for the good of the Majority

This gives all of us pride

The land is now ours

Let them be sad for they are mad

We are all happy

That land we fought for has come

It has come for good!

Zimbabweans should celebrate

Elders, should make provisions for tomorrow

The youth should witness what greats feats the elders have performed.

This land you see is Zimbabwe

Rain should fall so that we reap abundantly

Strive on Zimbabweans

Be committed Zimbabweans

You and me should work hard for the Country

It gives all of us pride [10, p. 49].

The power of the lyrics (words) in this piece is that through them, the singer specifies and localizes 'land' as constituting that which every singer must sing about. This agenda-setting is a form of official censorship. What does not mention Land cannot, in the ruling ZANU PF's eyes constitute local content. When the song was created in 2000 at the beginning of the land invasions in Zimbabwe, the government handsomely rewarded Tambaoga for creating songs that they effectively exploited in their violent campaigns, appropriating the song to further their narrow ideological interests of nationalizing previously white-owned land. Furthermore, one can argue that popular music is amenable to manipulation by the dominant social order. For example the punch line *kana mvura ikanachete gore rino tichazadza matura'(If it rains this year, we will harvest more and fill all our silos)* presents a rather apologetic stance. From the surface of ZANU-PF political rhetoric, the truism of the statement is that shortage of rain is at the centre of Zimbabwe's problems, and that once rain falls, the country will emerge from its economic and political quagmire. The official understanding of the song reflects the Zimbabwean authorities' desire to deflect the populace's anger with the promise of plenty in future, to which some Zimbabweans could have bought into because rain is very important to the mass of Zimbabwe's population who depend on agriculture.

However, to say that popular aspirations and official meanings do sometimes converge is different from suggesting that the populace cannot move beyond these state-sponsored meanings. In fact, in the song, Tambaoga, could be satirizing officials for advocating a facial argument in the face of huge tasks that the country's leadership have to face up to. Popular classes do have the capacity to listen differently to *Sendekera* and show how the song is not necessarily praising the oppressive government of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. In *Sendekera*, moments of 'disobedience' against official narratives of land, war and freedom are implied through the 'insolent' repetition of the language of plenty in the line *hondo yegutsa ruzhinji, isu tave kufara(The masses are happy with the struggle for land.* Amidst daunting poverty, the sinister conduct of government ministers who loot what is remaining on previously owned white farms is clear when the singer splits his voice, not the lyrics, to scat the meaning of his sounds so that part one, which is rhetorical, addresses the absent or present audience who attribute it to power. Part two of his voice, which is ironical, appeals to the listener who draws a rather subverted meaning, directly opposite the wish of those abusing the power [11].

The subversive capacity of the popular classes to undermine official values is never only performed as a frontal confrontation with authority. The Frankfurt theorists underestimated this dimension of popular classes to oppose the vulgarity of official values using the very intellectual resources borrowed from the authorities. In fact, Frederick Cooper proposes a useful and flexible point for rethinking 'myths' in colonial African history when he suggests that the discrimination or refusal of blacks by whites to have full ownership of wealth in a colonial context actually forced the popular African masses to adopt 'complex strategies of coping, of seizing niches within changing economies and of multi-sided engagement with forces inside and outside the community' [12, 26] enabling small scale African producers to secure 'overseas connections which they firmly held on to at the expense of fighting oppression they had planned to 'contest'. The concept of the popular allows a wide range of human agency to be manifested because people are motivated to act by diverse and sometimes contradictory interests. In other word, in rethinking the popular, emphasis should be placed on the fact that there is no single or unitary political voice through which the aspirations of the popular classes can be articulated. This highlights the point that there is a difference between 'unity' that the popular classes can achieve easier than attaining 'uniformity' of thought among the popular classes. This perspective that demystifies the concept of the 'popular' as a uniform political terrain is emphasized by Francois Bayart who reminds us that the production of a political space is an

> "ensemble of actors, dominant and dominated, and on the other hand it is in turn subjected to a double logic of totalitarianizing (sic) and detotalitarianizing (sic)…[and in that space "the 'small men' also work hard at political innovation and their contribution does not necessarily contradict that of 'big' men'[13].

The implication of Bayart's statement is that the political agency of popular classes is not debased, and that 'small men' can also manipulate 'big men'. For this to happen it means that there is some threshold of acceptability, some kind of 'mutual contract' in which leaders in power have to fulfill the basic minimum of the interests of the popular classes, so as to secure the purchase of their votes. Gramsci corroborates this view of the popular class as positive when he suggests that

> Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed…that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind (even if] ...such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential [14].

The complicated responses by the popular classes to life's terrifying social possibilities are uneven. Some people from the popular classes challenge the systems of powers and others conform to the dictates of authorities while others still reveal an intermixed dialectic of challenging and conformity at the same time. The popular or subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified. Their responses to political processes initiated by society's elites are influenced by 'active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own [and] the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character' [15].

QUESTIONING CULTURALISM AND THE MYTH OF THE POPULAR CLASS AS A COHESIVE WHOLE

It is possible, however, that critics of popular culture can work against it by projecting this class as a cohesive strata. For example, E P Thompson wrote his classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class* at a time when academia was frowning at popular culture as morally and spiritually uncouth [16]. In a bid to reverse the terms by which the popular was discussed Thompson challenged the assumption that the people are passive onlookers of the stage of history. The insistence of Thompson's work is that people participate in the 'making' of their own identities and that they are present movers of history. His emphasis was a necessary theoretical intervention and project to recuperate popular narratives and present them as a social exercise of re-writing history from below. Thompson emphasized the human agency of poor workers in social struggles for their own good. In his understanding, the popular classes are not intellectual ciphers, or a group of people who are easily manipulated by power but are able to generate their own values and at the same time appropriate those values made available by the capitalist system.

Credit should be granted to Thompson for having retrieved the various positive narratives of the English working class, and in the process showing the 'hidden scripts' that constituted the lived experience of the popular classes. Furthermore, within the Marxist and Hegelian debates on the nature of the creation of human consciousness, Thompson's work makes readers more aware that consciousness is created within and not outside social processes of struggle with nature and with other social groups. While Thompson is certainly not the first to make this point in the history of English historiography, he succeeded in manifesting the contradic-

tions of industrialization showing that the popular is in fact the product of its own struggles. When we read Raymond Williams [17] and Terry Eagleton's [18] neoMarxisms we are aware that the theoretical precedent to these materialist thinkers are in large measure probably shaped by Thompson's work.

However, Thompson's intellectual idealism accorded the popular working classes of England with extraordinary capacity to defy capitalism. In the process of doing so, Thompson ended up rehashing a pernicious myth of the popular classes as a social stratum always clear about its historical struggles, engaged in struggle for a better society. Such a characterization of the popular classes amounts to mythologising their potential. It underestimates the fact that popular classes can be co-opted to further the interests of upper classes. Thompson fell into the problem of 'culturalism' [19]. This is an ideological position that unconsciously and sometimes consciously refuses to come to terms with the fact that some people within popular classes oppress not only their wives and their children, but others of their class as well. Thompson's uneven understanding of popular agency arises from the fact that he overstressed the role of human agency – 'human experiences, human values – at the expense of structural factors' [20]. The fact is that the 'emergent' cultural aspects of the ordinary is manifest in that social classes experience moments of ideological lapses that cause them to cling to some aspects of the dying traditions at a time when the same emergent social formation is inaugurating new cultural values [21].

Expressed differently, if the sin of Frankfurt School's theories was to create and popularize myths of the popular as easily infiltrated and then dominated by the elites, the failure of Thompson's approach is that he created myths of poor workers as exclusively authored without the use of resources made available by elitist cultural traditions. Thompson's project was uncritical though in favour of 'the people'. This position is as dangerous as the one that is against the values of the people in that in both tendencies, the popular classes are abstracted from concrete realities, objectified and rendered powerless within elitist paradigms. Thompson's exclusivity means that the elites do not count. But as Cabral [22] argues, we should not underestimate the contributions that the elites have made in the liberation struggles, and also in analyzing the uneven development of social experiences. In other words, a formulation of people's urgencies that fails to reveal how, the people can appropriate cultural resources from the elites and then reshaped them for the people's interests, can actually diminish the people's creativity. These problems in understanding the 'popular' have continued to blur human agency of the people and appreciation of the potential in the people to historically err when creating new values for a new society.

STUART HALL: DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTHS OF THE 'POPULAR' IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Stuart Hall has forced practitioners in cultural studies to rethink some notions of popular culture. His work is a critical reaction to culturalism and those myths that are hostile in their description of popular classes. Hall debunks the myth that popular classes are 'cultural dupes' [23] who have to bend to every political change, and who in matters of aes-

thetics can't tell what they are being fed on. He suggests that dominant cultural industries have the capacity to infiltrate the cultural sensibilities of the ordinary people. Hall maintains that the relationship of the popular classes to the dominant class is not simply one of containment or resistance. Rather, there are 'lines of 'alliance' as well as lines of cleavage' [24], between the dominated and the dominators. The lives of popular classes are informed by a constant dialectical struggle 'in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield: a battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained, but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost' [25, p. 460]. However, a critical appraisal of Hall's argument brings us back to the myth that popular classes are passive onlookers of the making of history. It is equally, an argument that seems uncomfortable with the philosophical underpinnings of cultural critics who popularize the myth of the working class as a unitary voice which is constantly engaged in a struggle to realize aspirations, uniformly.

The second project in Hall's interest in popular culture that has become useful in undermining myths of the popular is his desire to deconstruct 'the popular' [26]. To him there is 'no whole, authentic, autonomous 'popular culture' which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination' [27]. By this, he seems to suggest that popular culture can be subjected to the powers of cultural implantation by dominant voices, besides being syncretic and hybrid, and that its authenticity derives from its capacity to handle diverse discourses informed by different and often contradictory motivations. Furthermore, he also seems to suggest that popular cultural struggles '…take many forms: incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, and recuperation' [28].

This mode of reasoning about the popular lends itself towards reading popular culture in multiple ways including demystification of the popular whose actions can be attributed to different and sometimes conflicting human motivations within and without the class itself. In other words, with such an erudite argument it appears almost impossible for anybody to fault Hall of complex simplifications of the agency of popular culture and how it has been studied.

Although our summary of Hall's intervention in popular cultural studies sounds simplistic, we are aware that Hall has in his works constantly worked to nuance and refine his theories of popular culture. Yet, despite his sterling work, a closer look reveals a desire to deconstruct the 'popular'. Summed up, Hall's project creates a new mythology which inadvertently looks upon the popular as a theoretical category that is perpetually unstable to a point where its identity is rendered barely recognizable. For example, Hall discusses popular classes' operational provenance as that of resistance, incorporation, obeisance and cultural implantation. Far from the description of the popular showing its complexity, one feels that there is a way in which Hall's articulations fix the popular classes as at best opportunistic. In his understanding of the 'popular' as people, and popular culture as field of study, anything goes for the popular classes, depending on the imperatives of the day. This mode of depicting the popular classes is a stereotype whose power lies in its capacity to deny the popular classes any human principles belying the

actions they engage in. Hall can then be said to be caught up and festooned by the labyrinth of his own argument which reinforces a pernicious myth about the 'popular' as a category created despite itself or remotely unaware of its on manipulation of narratives of power

> The culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes; this is the area to which the term 'popular' refers us. And the opposite side to that – the side with the cultural power to decide what belongs and what does not – is, by definition, not another 'whole' class, but that other alliance of classes, strata and social forces which constitute what is not 'the people' and not the 'popular' classes: the culture of the power bloc [29].

In this narration of the popular and the people, Hall risks creating stereotypes that neatly segment the categories of power and powerlessness. Mbembe [30], for example, believes that the popular classes can be involved in cheap imitations of power when it joins in the parody of the ruling class with the result that the popular classes and the elites are powerless to act. We would argue that the conviviality expressed by the popular classes can partake of the aspirations of those that seek to dominate them and at the same time the popular classes reject those values that are popularized by the ruling classes but which work against the interests of the popular classes. In the end John Storey avers that Stuart Hall's position on popular culture and what is 'popular' about this culture to say

> (It)seems to drift very close to the teaching strategy they condemn – 'opportunist' – in that they seem to suggest that because most school students do not have access, for a variety of reasons, to the best that has been thought and said, they can instead be given critical access to the best that has been thought and said within the popular arts of the new mass media: jazz and good films will make up for the absence of Beethoven and Shakespeare' [31].

NJABULO NDEBELE AND THE POPULAR AS ACT OF 'REDISCOVERY OF THE ORDINARY'

The intellectual research on the popular in Europe have directly and sometimes indirectly influenced how African critics have come to understand and explain popular culture. In the context of South Africa, Njabulo Ndebele attempts to debunk the myths surrounding the study of popular cultural productions by exploring the two phases in the production of black literature in the struggle against Apartheid. The process of rediscovering the ordinary entails a critique of the written mythopoesis through which ordinary people represent themselves in fiction. Commenting on black-authored popular fiction's treatment of black-white relations in Apartheid South Africa, Ndebele writes:

> We were shown in this literature the predictable drama between ruthless oppressors and their pitiful victims; ruthless policemen and their cowed, bewildered prisoners; brutal farmers and their exploited farm hands; cruel administrative officials in a horribly impersonal bureaucracy, and the bewildered residents of the township, victims of that bureaucracy; crowded trains and the terrible violence that goes on in them among the oppressed [32].

The power of this protest literature described above is that it constructs images of the dominator and the dominated based on the spectacle of excess. In the spectacle of 'imagistic excess' that Ndebele critiques, white people's domination of black people is depicted as overwhelming. On the other hand, the black people's condition of 'victim' is portrayed as rendering them overwhelmingly powerless. For Ndebele, these two images embodied in the 'spectacle of excess' actually participate in an insidious process of myth-making of which one stereotype is that of all Whites in South Africa are implicated in the cruel machinery called apartheid. The other myth and stereotype is the presentation of all blacks as possessing even levels of consciousness of their situations of victimhood. The net effect of these myths in South African popular fiction of the 1970s is that they prevent us from understanding the dynamics of power and powerlessness occurring within the white and black communities of that time.

Ndebele is right to suggest that popular fiction emerging from popular (ordinary) black South African writers responding to conditions of political stress can, in fact reveal 'entrapment of resistance in an unreflective rhetoric of protest [that] could easily be one of the sources of reactionary politics even among the oppressed'[33]. A major implication that arises from this observation is that even when the subalterns are speaking, it cannot always be guaranteed that what they are saying work only to further their material interests. It is possible for the 'ordinary' or the voice of the popular classes to be infiltrated by the dominant sensibilities. Ndebele's contribution suggests that in the context of South Africa, the popular classes were far too behind in terms of possessing necessary intellectual tools to comprehend the ways in which capitalism that they struggled against configured itself and in the process also reshaped the identities of black mine workers in South Africa. His is a call to adopt new theoretical tools in the face of capital that is constantly recreating itself in new ways. More importantly, Ndebele's work deconstructs the narrow tendency in South African writing that searches only for visible and institutionalized moments of resistance to apartheid hegemony. This exercise is useful because it allows readers to imagine that there are other intellectual sites on which the ordinary or popular classes can elaborate their agendas for effective resistance.

In 'Rediscovery of the ordinary', Ndebele analyses some of the fiction that emerged in the 1970s, attempting to break out of the myth of black South Africans as perpetual sufferers or strugglers. Reading the popular short story, '*Man against Himself*' by Joe̎l Matlou, Ndebele meets a character who; after receiving a pay from the mines ruminates on the significance of life and actually ends up deciding to take the money home to his wife. On the way, the male character meets a beautiful women and begins to appreciate life even more

> When I saw the beautiful girls I thought of my own beautiful sweetheart, my bird of Africa, sea water, razor: green-coloured eyes like a snake, High wooden shoes like a cripple; with soft and beautiful skin, smelling of powder under her armpits like a small child, with black boots for winter like a soldier, and a beautiful figure like she does not eat, sleep, speak or become hungry. And she looks like an artificial girl or

electric girl. But she was born of her parents, as I was [34].

The appreciation of beauty, particularly human physical beauty, can in this story, be taken as an acknowledgement that ordinary people or the populars have lives to live not always circumscribed in the simplistic dialectic of power and powerlessness. What the popular classes appreciate covers the broad canvas of what their lives offer. The creative ways in which the people deal with these situations in real-life situations define the content of what is 'popular' in people's social struggles. That is why we agree with Ndebele when he concludes his analysis of this story by noting that the school of criticism which favors explicit political themes will be exasperated by the seeming lack of direct political consciousness on the part of Matlou's characters.

For Ndebele then, the popular, or for that matter, acts linked to rediscovering the ordinary should make the readers understand the complexity of the human agency displayed by popular classes in their struggles to survive. The popular is not always organized around visible political resistance, though this is a significant part of self-inscription as a subject of history. The popular occurs in contexts that are not always 'political' in the narrow sense of the word. The popular reveals the ordinary people's capacities to organize their lives using their values and even those cultural resources borrowed from the very same classes that seek to vanquish and obliterate them. In other words, intellectual projects committed to debunking harmful stereotypes or myths of what is 'popular' in popular culture should proceed from an understanding the fact that:

> even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of normal social order. They will attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage their day to day family problems: they will resort to socially acquired behaviour patterns to eke out a means of subsistence. They apply systems of values under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitutes the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people [35].

To arrive at this complicated understanding of the functioning of the popular within cultural contexts, Ndebele, suggests that in approaching popular fiction, writers themselves need to 'free the entire social imagination…[and this]…means extending the writer's perception of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing'[36].

It should be noted that at the time, the anti-apartheid cultural producers were in three camps namely the non-violent, the Black Consciousness and the Africanist. The non-violent writers such as Athol Fugard, Ndebele himself spoke of creating a good rounded narrative, aesthetically. Because this suggestion meant compromising to western values of art and literature, the 'spectacle of excess' was to them a good antithesis which would tell the apartheid government forthrightly about its 'evil' system [37].

So the talk about 'rediscovery of the ordinary' at the time was very welcomed by the non-violent producers and writers, some of whom got ruthlessly attacked by the other camp for being part of a race that oppressed black people. On the other hand, it was spat upon by some of the activist-writers

mentioned above. However, an important question to Ndebele, is when and how do we know that now we are dealing with the 'entire' social imaginary of the oppressed? This is a valid question as Mbembe observes that the popular is a social and intellectual category constantly shifting in its meanings. 'Popular' fiction and popular songs are often related to what the people have created. At the same time, it also rings true that the 'popular' also appropriates the technological products made available by the industrial revolution. This should not surprise us because, after all, it is the popular classes' labour that make the technological advancement possible, and this is what myths about 'the popular' underestimate.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the article was to reveal the extent of the stereotypes and myths surrounding the subject of the 'popular' in Western as well as African intellectual discourse go by firstly demonstrating the semantic instability of the word 'myth'. In literary studies, myth is often equated to a collective worldview to which every one in the society accents. We showed that this understanding of myth notoriously essentializes complex realities that could be interpreted differently, even by people belonging to the same community. Starting with the Frankfurt School, the article did not intend to reflect on all the intellectual work by them. Instead we focussed on how they created the myth that popular culture is degraded from within since the popular classes can easily be manipulated by dominant discourses. In order to modify this trend in understanding popular culture we turned to E. P. Thompson's work. In this work the popular classes were depicted as having the same purpose in life, and as having created themselves in the process of struggling against life. We critiqued this understanding for being uncritical of ways in which the popular classes operate. We argued that it is a position that underestimates the different subjectivities that inform the politics of the working class, as a result weaving a myth of this class of people as possessing a unitary voice of consensus.

Turning to Stuart Hall's understanding of popular culture, we noted that generally, Hall acknowledges the multiple responses that popular classes can register in contexts of political contestations. However, we argued that Hall also created a mythology of ordinary people as 'opportunistic' and without firm principles. The article then discussed Njabulo Ndebele's conception of the popular, as depicted in some South African popular fiction. While we agreed with most of what Ndebele had to say about the popular or ordinary people, we wandered whether he, too, was not adopting an 'absolutist' perspective when he argues that to understand the people's cultural creations and identities, we need to free the people's entire social imaginary. We contested this claim's assumption that at any one given time, it is possible to sample the entire social imaginary of the popular classes. We concluded the article by suggesting that myths about the 'popular' in cultural studies have a long genealogy; they can be harmful, but the mere fact that these myths abound, probably point to the complexity of the identities of the popular classes as well as the complex ideological interests informing different definitions of the common myths around the study of the 'popular.'

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