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From Disneyization to Netflixification: Algorithms and the Production of Taste

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of cultural production and consumption in the 21st century through a comparative analysis of Bryman's concept of *Disneyization* and the emergent phenomenon of *Netflixification*. As digital platforms permeate diverse domains of cultural production and social activity such as education, sport, reading, and eating, a derivative cultural logic unfolds which partly imitates that of Disney's theme parks, and partly develops from larger trends in algorithmic capitalism based on the production of user subjectivities and taste. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the culture industry, the paper argues that *Netflixification* is both a continuation and an intensification of earlier trends in cultural commodification: it draws from the model Bryman described, and adapts it to the technological conditions of the algorithmic age in order to present the form of pseudo-engagement capitalism generated in audiences to then exploit them through an algorithm-based production of taste. The paper outlines key features of both *Disneyization* and *Netflixification*, summarises research to-date on the intersections of culture and algorithms, and develops a refined theoretical framework for understanding the implications of *Netflixification* within the broader context of digital capitalism.

Netflix; audience engagement; platform capitalism; algorithmic capitalism; commodification

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Disneyization, Cultural Industry, and Taste

Changes to capitalism are as frequent and comprehensive as is its grounding in technologies. Today, the cultural logic of late capitalism has evolved from the spatially immersive environments of Disney theme parks — spaces that spurred consumption through their spatial, semiotic, and emotive composition — to the algorithmically curated libraries of digital streaming services, in which users are encouraged to resort to the given platform's solicitations in the process of navigating the complex selection of cultural products. This article studies the analogies between what Alan Bryman described in his seminal work *The Disneyization of Society* (2004) and what has emerged as a functional model platforms use to attract, entertain, and exploit their users today. This model is part of what I shall call here "the Netflixification" of culture — the increasing imitation by cultural environments of the epistemological and marketing practices employed by Netflix and other digital enterprises.[1] To present the nature of the transition from Disneyization to Netflixification, I want to rely on a tripartite theoretical framework grounded in critical theory (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]), media studies (Striphas 2009, Striphas 2015), and cultural economy (Srnicek 2017, Nassehi 2024, Elliott 2024). These and other sources point to the increasing reliance of the culture industry on the production of consumer competences and tastes in the pursuit of profit on the one hand, and in an attempt to instil in audiences an illusion of agency on the other.[2]

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1 The use of the term "Netflixification" is by no means intended to suggest that it is Netflix and Netflix only that is the agent and source of the changes and capitalist, technological, cultural and cognitive operations described here. Conversely, there are numerous platforms that imitate Netflix's strategies, and develop their own, to pursue similar, or different goals. Still, however, in the popular and academic discourses alike, the prominence of Netflix as a streaming platform and a media business has, metonymically, made it a standard reference point and a key agent to look at in the broader landscape of media-and-tech companies. Accordingly, while Netflix serves as the primary example in this analysis, the argument addresses a wider range of platform strategies and practices.

2 This "illusion of agency" is the defining paradox of contemporary cultural capitalism. It signifies the replacement of relative interpretive freedom with a managed, pre-structured form of participation

Alan Bryman claimed in 2004 that the organizational principles of Disney theme parks had increasingly infiltrated sectors beyond entertainment (for instance, retail, education, and leisure), transforming them into hybrid spaces of themed consumption and performance. He noted that Disneyization involves the extension of Disney-style theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labour into broader societal contexts. He identified four core dimensions of Disneyization, which I would like to define with him, and refer to the context of digital culture we are exposed to in 2025. With such foundations laid, I will then be able to explain how "Netflixification" is a relevant development originating from the state of affairs Bryman defined.

The first dimension of Disneyization is "theming" — applying narrative or visual motifs to spaces or experiences, such as jungle-themed restaurants or fantasy-style resorts. "Theming provides a veneer of meaning and symbolism to the objects to which it is applied", Bryman writes. "It is meant to give them a meaning that transcends or at the very least is in addition to what they actually are. In infusing objects with meaning through theming, they are deemed to be made more attractive and interesting than they would otherwise be" (Bryman 2004: 15). Following the same logic, Bryman refers to Ritzer (1999), who claims that such strategies "enchant sites of consumption" and generate around them a persuasive aura of pleasure-assuring cues.[3] That aura, we might observe, is not only productive of singular consumerist desire but also of habit — fuelled by dopaminergic investment in the theme park or shopping centre, consumers develop a routine of returning to them in pursuit of gratification. In today's "Netflixified" culture, this logic of theming has migrated from physical spaces to digital environments, where algorithms, interfaces, and content architectures function as the new thematic organisers of experience. Streaming platforms, social media ecosystems, and e-commerce sites all employ narrative and visual motifs that generate coherence and affective appeal across their vast inventories. The "theme" is no longer a jungle or fantasy world, but a carefully curated atmosphere of intimacy, relevance, and personalization. Netflix's interface (like the interfaces of many other platforms), for instance, constructs an environment that feels tailored to the individual viewer, presenting collections such as "Because You Watched…," "Top Picks for You," or "Trending Now."

that presents consumption as creativity and choice as autonomy. In this model, the audience's acts of selection, evaluation, and interpretation — once understood as markers of individuality — become instruments of control, feeding the very systems that delimit their freedom. Platforms reward users with the impression of empowerment while subtly scripting their behaviours through algorithmic guidance and affective engineering. As a result, aesthetic pleasure and cognitive labour merge: the viewer's interpretive engagement becomes part of the economic machinery of data extraction and attention management. What critical theory once described as "mass deception" now takes on a more intricate technological form, in which spectators are invited to collaborate in their own subjugation. In short, the illusion of agency is not a residual feature of capitalist culture, but its most refined product — an aesthetic and epistemological mechanism through which the culture industry maintains control precisely by offering the semblance of interpretive and cultural freedom.

[3] Incidentally, Ritzer coined yet another relevant term whose ambition is to describe the immense pressure ever-transforming capitalism places on culture, individuals, and social groups. His *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) presents four key forms that pressure is exercised in: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. In the most recent edition (2021), Ritzer once again attempts to thoroughly update his book to respond to the conditions of digital society and digital capitalism. He also asks a pertinent question: "Is 'McDonaldization' still the best label?" (28).

These curated categories are not neutral classifications, but semiotic cues designed to thematize the very act of consumption itself as an act of personal discovery. In doing so, the platform transforms its algorithmic logic into an aesthetic experience — one that promises meaningful choice while concealing the mechanisms of data capture and behavioural control. This digital theming operates as a form of ambient branding: every scroll, thumbnail, and trailer reinforces the illusion of coherence within the endless flux of available content. As in the themed environments of Bryman's Disneyization, where architecture and décor promised immersion and enchantment, Netflix and analogous platforms deliver a seamless, affectively charged experience of belonging within an infinite cultural landscape. The user's screen becomes a site of a digital equivalent of a personalized theme park — an ecosystem of affective and cognitive stimuli calibrated to sustain engagement. In this sense, the enchantment of consumption has been virtualized. The dopamine-driven return that Bryman and Ritzer described now unfolds not in physical spaces of leisure, but in algorithmically animated environments where the pleasure of recognition, anticipation, and control substitutes for genuine autonomy of choice. Themed consumption in digital capitalism thus manifests as theming of the self: users are invited to inhabit their digital identities and desires co-produced by the platforms' aesthetic and computational design.[4]

The second dimension is "hybrid consumption" — combining various forms of consumption in a single space — e.g., shopping, eating, and entertainment — to increase dwell time and spending. Bryman describes this interlocking of various forms of consumption: "What we end up with under hybrid consumption are de-differentiated forms of consumption in which conventional distinctions between these forms become increasingly blurred to the point that they almost collapse. By 'forms of consumption' I mean such things as: shopping; visiting a theme park; eating in a restaurant; staying at a hotel; visiting a museum; going to the cinema; playing and/or watching sports; and gambling in a casino. With hybrid consumption systems, forms of consumption are brought together in new and often imaginative ways" (Bryman 2004: 57). "With hybrid consumption", he adds, "the master principle is getting people to *stay longer*". This paradigm takes an intriguing form not only in the practices of Netflix and other subscription-based services, which all make it increasingly difficult (either formally or cognitively) for users to stop using their services, and stop consuming. The hybridity of consumption modes is also evident in the manner in which some platform services (YouTube being the most prominent example) interweave the original content their users desire with commercial material they will have to consume to keep on watching, reading, or playing. When one combines the exposure of consumers to online advertising with the incessant nagging ecommerce businesses engage in in their persuasive newsletters, notifications, and offers consumers either have or have not signed up for, the hybrid landscapes of consumption seem to encompass almost the entirety of the digital.

[4] The notion of the production of identities is addressed in a compelling manner by, among others, Yasmin Ibrahim (2018), Nicholas Negroponte (1995), Zizi Papachrissi (2011) and Sherry Turkle (1995), who all explain how technological affordances (of platforms, of apps, of media and social media environments) contribute to the increasingly systematic expectations that individuals will curate and manage alternative digital identities. These identities are not automatically synonymous with either their non-digital selves or the identities reflected by or referred to by the data profiles constructed by Netflix and other platforms.

The third dimension, merchandising, consists in the promotion of branded goods tied to entertainment properties, turning media into a platform for endless commodification. "Merchandising becomes part of a mutually referential system of cross-promotion which can take in theme park rides, clothing, computer games, toys, television programmes, books, videos, and so on. It keeps the images in people's minds and acts as a constant advertisement for existing and forthcoming spin-offs". In the contemporary cultural landscapes, the applicability of these observations is particularly evident with the spectacular popularity of transmedial fictions and franchise universums that have garnered interest of mass multinational audiences not only on the grounds of aesthetic complexity or critical acclaim but through the multi-channel, multi-media developments these universums and fictions have presented themselves in. Today, it is not the matter of cross-promotion, as Bryman would have it, but of essentially transmedial nature of these popular cultural enterprises.

The fourth dimension Bryman writes about — the performative labour workers engage in by enacting scripted roles aligned with the themed environment, blurring the lines between service and performance — has been observed through a different theoretical lens and in analogous contexts in the seminal critical work by Arlie Hochschild (2012 [1985]) and the recent book by Rose Hackman (2023). Bryman wrote that "there is a growing trend for work, particularly in service industries, to be construed as a performance, much like in the theatre. The employee becomes like an actor on a stage. By 'performative labour', then, I simply mean the rendering of work by managements and employees alike as akin to a theatrical performance in which the workplace is construed as similar to a stage" (Bryman 2004: 103). Hochschild (2012 [1983]) would second this claim with her study of "feeling as clue". Hackman, in turn, offers further interesting contexts in her analysis of "emotional labour and attention work usually expected and extracted for free" (2023: 162). To observe the applicability of this dimension to the manner in which contemporary algorithmic culture produces taste, one would have to look at the effort users are asked to make to respond to the platform's requests for assessment — in surveys, questionnaires, and — more broadly — datafication of consumer experience. What at face value seems to be genuine interest in consumer's satisfaction and preferences, upon further investigation reveals a prescriptive intention: when users of digital platforms are asked to rate their experience of watching, reading, or playing a given text of culture, they are also encouraged to support the production of their user profile, and thus of the definition of what they endorse with their attention and choices. In algorithmic culture, such efforts are synonymous with unpaid labour — the labour users deliver to the owners of the platforms that study, measure, and rely on our judgements, decisions, and behaviour in the production and arrangement of their services and the content.

All in all, Bryman's categorisations seem to offer valid commentary not only to the rhetoric of Disney theme parks and analogous cultural experiences the author described in 2004, but also to a variety of phenomena of digitally mediated globalised culture that we are participants of today. While the four dimensions ought to be perceived in a different context, and their application in this article to the contemporary logic of algorithmic (digital, cognitive, surveillance) capitalism must depart from Bryman's formulations, it seems that Disneyization shares at least one aim with "Netflixification": an ambition to exercise control over consumers.

In this respect, both notions refer to Horkheimer's and Adorno's 1947 essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in which the two thinkers of the *Frankfurter Schule* argued that under capitalism culture becomes a tool of ideological control, producing standardized goods that pacify and manipulate mass audiences. All mass culture is identical, and the illusion of difference is a crucial part of its deceit, they claimed in a manner that remains salient today — in the age of digital platforms, where cultural products are tailored by algorithms but remain fundamentally homogenized for reasons no other than the subjugation of consumer autonomous choice and identity to the pursuits of the capitalist enterprise.

These features exemplify a form of cultural production that prioritizes immersion, spectacle, and consumption (rather than interpretation), often at the cost of relevance, creativity, and critical engagement. A fundamental aftermath of the consumer engaging with a Disneyized cultural environment is the aesthetic satisfaction this environment is designed to generate. If that satisfaction is systematically delivered by repeated cultural experiences of the kind, the consumer is likely to develop aesthetic judgements and preferences that would spur them to reengage in consumption of the given product or experience. Habitually reliant on a range of aesthetic measures and thematic preoccupations (and on the affective responses they generate), the consumer is encouraged to choose from a range of pre-defined (thematic, generic, schematic) cultural experiences that offer substantial gratification within the established aesthetic convention. The manufacturers of those experiences, in turn, draw economic satisfaction from the effective manner in which their offer matches the (conscious or subconscious) expectations of the consumer. While such an arrangement might be perhaps synonymous with a laudable business success, it is also generative of social-epistemic complexities that, when seen through a critical lens, might not seem altogether positive for those involved. In other words, through the Disneyization of culture and the systematic exposure to its products, the consumer develops a certain taste. Horkheimer and Adorno would declare that whenever taste is produced, it emerges as a means of "mass deception" — as an increasingly effective way of exercising control of what consumers do.

To apply this well-known claim to contemporary platform capitalism (and especially to those platforms that disseminate texts of culture) might seem incorrect to some. Isn't Netflix (and, by analogy, every streaming service) essentially diverse in its portfolio of TV series, films, games, concerts, and sports events, delivered to audiences of diverse demographics, in multiple languages, genres, forms, and aesthetic conventions? Platforms do, indeed, offer ever-growing complex libraries, and they do, too, offer new formats to increasingly large audiences. However, as I want to claim here, the diversity is illusory, because it falls within a regime of the culture industry Netflix (or any other platform) has employed in the production of aesthetic judgements that (are designed to) solidify into taste — the readiness consumers show for repeatedly making analogous decisions about what they buy, eat, read, watch, or listen to.

Since recurring and hybrid purchases, returning and "staying" customers, as well as hooked consumers are synonymous with increased profits, the production of taste (of aesthetic preference) has been a major preoccupation of capitalism for a long time. Digital capitalism has made it its central ambition, though: through the datafication of consumer identity, it has prioritised the observation, analysis, and exploitation of user

behaviour in order to replace user autonomy with an illusion of individual choice. In this context, Netflix's ultimate goal has not been to produce ambitious content, but to define user personas and, consequently, to produce consumer taste. To use a crude piscatorial metaphor, the immense portfolio of TV series, films, video games, and other forms of entertainment that Netflix (and analogous platforms) have produced or bought for their libraries function as bait; the hook is the attention consumers offer, and the final products — the data that is produced about their behaviour by algorithms as well as the reliance of audience on the platforms for the provision of satisfaction.

In reference to Srnicek's concept of platform capitalism (2017), Netflixification can thus be understood as a cultural manifestation of digital infrastructures that extract data and monetize the attention consumers offer to specific texts and products. In this sense, platforms are not merely intermediaries in the delivery of what consumers want; they actively shape the conditions of production and consumption, defining the parameters of what is imaginable and marketable — and perhaps how texts are watched, read, and experienced. Such an interpretation of their role is in line with Ted Striphas' broad notion of algorithmic culture, in accordance with which algorithms play a mediating role in cultural consumption and contribute to "the gradual abandonment of culture's publicness and the emergence of a strange new breed of elite culture purporting to be its opposite" (2015: 395). That is not to say algorithms restrict consumer choice entirely; on the contrary, they benefit from the relative freedom of choice consumers enjoy, while at the same time defining through their habitual behaviours the limits of the cultural landscape they desire to navigate. What we can observe in this complex territory, therefore, is a shift from passive reception to active yet managed engagement, in which user agency is bounded by the logic of platform design and of business policies.

With this theoretical synthesis in mind, we can now interrogate the intersections of algorithm, taste, and consumer identity in what I shall call the Netflixificaton of contemporary culture.[5]

Netflixification — 4 features

In relation to the term "Disneyization", the notion of "Netflixification" reflects a shift from themed physical environments to data-driven digital technosystems. I want to address four features of this phenomenon — four factors that the algorithmic production of taste relies on: personalization, instant accessibility, bingeable segmentation, and pseudo-engagement.

To say that streaming platforms tailor content to the needs of individual users through recommendation algorithms would be to miss the point. What platforms do, instead, is they create the illusion of personalization while reinforcing predictable consumption patterns. Gillespie observes, for instance, that algorithms are now crucial in

[5] Related phenomena have been addressed from a variety of theoretical positions and with the use of different academic and popular discourses. Pajkovic (2021) for example, focuses on the internal mechanics and ontology of algorithmic taste-making. Cohn (2019) describes the ideological character of algorithmic choice, while the excellent volume edited by McDonald & Smith-Rowsey (2018) highlights the degree to which Netflix's operations on algorithms constituted an industrial transformation. The present work, in turn, aims to present a critical-theoretical genealogy from Disneyization to Netflixification, framing algorithmic recommendation not merely as technological mediation but as a mode of capitalist aesthetic-behavioural control over taste, attention, and subjectivity.

determining not just what we see, but what we do not see. As instruments (or perhaps agents) of epistemic control, they affect a "a crucial feature of our participation in public life" (Gillespie 2014: 167) — that is, access to information. Elliott, in turn, describes the mechanics of algorithmic personalisation in the following manner: "Thanks to Netflix's renowned algorithms, the behavioural data of individual viewers is cross-referenced with thousands of different 'taste clusters' which organize customers based on their TV and film preferences. At the same time, Netflix content is widely tagged and divided into micro-genres ('period pieces', 'witty European TV comedies', 'Scandinavian TV dramas', 'escapist Reality TV') […]" (2024: 58). The resulting recommendations, in turn, seem to Elliott quite distant from an ideal of personalisation — they are, to him, "at once radically individualist and crushingly conformist" (2024: 58). It appears, however, that in the pursuit of removing "the irksome business of making a choice" from the user, and delegating it to the algorithm, Netflix (and analogous platforms in streaming, e-commerce, and social media) does not unburden the user at all. Conversely, the algorithm heavily relies on user activity in its capacity to organise the ever-growing library of texts. In other words, while it promises to personalize for the benefit and satisfaction of the user, it exploits for the benefit of its own. This is the pervasive logic of many other areas of culture, business organisations, and public services, which — employing similar mechanisms — promise a customized, tailor-made experience while conditioning it on the mining of personal data that they either employ to their own means or use to attract income from external entities.[6]

This illusory algorithmic personalisation is based on the instant accessibility of the services and products delivered in a given platform.[7] Since content is decoupled from fixed schedules, places, and infrastructures characteristic of legacy media, fostering continuous and ubiquitous engagement has become a major ambition of digital capitalism. With the technological affordances of cloud computing, streaming technologies, and networks, digital capitalism voraciously exploits the readiness of consumers to engage in consumption at any time, under any circumstances, on any device. Day or night, shows are watched, whether on home cinema systems, computers, or mobile devices. Shopping is done on personal screens. Food is ordered and delivered, and language classes run around the clock. While instant availability might seem to satisfy the desires of consumers who seek flexibility and expect the services to be adjusted to their indi-

[6] The intersection of identity and data has been productively discussed by Chenney-Lippold (2017), who writes of four aspects of "the making of our digital selves" by algorithms: categorization, control, subjectivity, and privacy. Rodriguez Ortega, in turn, offers commentary on how big tech companies "aim at mastering our bodies, minds and, perhaps souls, beyond our daily conscious hours, infiltrating our dreams and nightmares, as unrelenting companions that monitor our most intimate rhythms and ways, gathering information to ultimately deliver more and more stimuli that may appeal to us." He claims quite reasonably that such a state of affairs "is precisely the reverse of the utopia of unlimited choice these companies try to promote since their goal is that users internalize their indispensable presence in our everyday. In other terms, without them, we aren't ourselves; we need them to be us" (Rodriguez Ortega 2022: 137–138).

[7] The illusion of choice and the bogus personalisation that platforms present to be their contribution to the dissemination of culture in the digital age has been discussed by Sarah Arnold (2018), who describes the "datafication of the audience" Netflix engages in, and goes on to suggest that the platform's celebrated personalisation and participatory ethos are rhetorical covers for a regime of algorithmic control; the user's apparent autonomy is produced and delimited by the very system that claims to serve it.

vidual schedules, there is, again, another outcome to speak of. Forced to do immaterial (cognitive, unpaid) work of feeding algorithms, consumers support the formation of taste clusters that specifically reflect what they choose at a given time of the day, how much of it they watched, read, or played — and how complete or satisfying their experience is.

In a Netflixified culture, the monitoring of the satisfaction of users goes beyond the probing of conscious judgements in embedded survey mechanisms. Netflix and its followers produce content and services that are structured to encourage prolonged consumption sessions, minimizing cognitive friction and maximizing platform retention. The definition of satisfaction is thus synonymous with the proportion of how much of the offered material consumers have indeed watched, read, or played. A binge, the ideal mode of consumption for Netflix and other platforms (Jenner 2007, Jenner 2021, Broe 2019), reconfigures the temporality of television, creating a model of cultural experience that is both immersive and compulsive specifically because it is produced with the help of segmented narratives — highly eventful, tellable narratives (Schmid 2003, Hühn 2008) that delay cognitive closure to yet another episode, and then to yet another, and thus promote continuous consumption. The mechanisms of suspense, curiosity, and surprise characteristic of "gripping" narratives (Sternberg 1971) and compositional principles related to plot are the primary techniques effectively employed by bingeable narratives that inspire us to "read for the plot" (Brooks 1994) and never stop until prompted to. It seems only natural in this context that it is the TV series — a popular form that has recently manifested increasingly complex aesthetic ambitions (Mittell 2015, Wojtyna et al. 2022) but continues to exploit viewing practices and reception styles characteristic of seriality[8] — serves as a powerful vehicle for the production of taste in contemporary Netflixified culture.

Again, one could notice an apparent paradox here: how does an increase in compositional complexity and aesthetic ambitions of the TV series relate to the commercial function serialised narratives often serve? I want to address this question by commenting on the relationship between complexity and audience engagement.

Resulting from and coordinated with an updated strategy of "mass deception" is audience pseudo-engagement organised with the help of complex segmented narratives and large fictional worlds that boast intricate audience-character bonding mechanisms and plot-based engagement methods (see Mittel 2015, Wojtyna et al. 2022,

[8] The question of how the "bingeability" of narrative material is combined with the relatively high aesthetic ambitions of some prominent contemporary TV series is addressed in Wojtyna et al. 2022. In the third chapter of that book ("Segmented Experience, Uniform Experience", p. 63–85), I claimed that the "collision of engaging aesthetics on the one hand and enslaving capitalist mechanisms on the other seems symptomatic of the general reliance of culture on economies of attention and profitability" (Wojtyna et al. 2022: 65). In a discussion of two key texts (*True Detective* and *13 Reasons Why*), I commented on the complex combination of "bingeability" and complexity in the following manner: "With their compulsion to create compulsions, contemporary TV series have employed aesthetic means that are often significantly more complex, unstraightforward, and original than the means used by TV series in the pre-platform era. Still, however, even the most ambitious series — some of which we discuss here — fall victim to their own attempt to perpetuate themselves ad infinitum. […] By constructing texts that engage and encourage incessant cognitive effort, contemporary cultural industries subscribe to the long- term logic of capitalism. Nothing new under the sun, it seems, but the aesthetic means" (Wojtyna et al. 2022: 85).

Jenner 2023) in order to generate an apparently sophisticated ("premium", "quality") experience that used to be associated with high-brow culture rather than with "mere entertainment". To engage in the decoding, interpreting, and perhaps rewatching of a good show in pursuit of cognitive closure is an activity designed to reward the consumer-viewer with substantial satisfaction. If that experience can be systematically repeated (with further ambitious texts in the library of the platform that understands our needs so well), the viewer's engagement develops beyond the single interpretive act — beyond the consumption of a single text. Thus, taste is shaped, and so is desire.

The use of complex narratives is a strategy that might seem to partly absolve the exploitative practices of streaming services on grounds of quality. If what platforms offer is of high intrinsic value (artistic, thematic, or even political), the platforms might perhaps be likely to be "forgiven" their predation on user identity and behaviour. In other words, the mechanism could be considered transactional: if the narratives presented are complex and well-made (free of the insularity or low-budget mediocrity characteristic of some television productions before the age of streaming), consumers might be willing to accept the discomforts of being data objects (Cheney-Lippold 2017) or of the algorithms generating anxiety in them (Elliott 2024). The gradual increase in the complexity of the shows streamed by Netflix in its heyday (around 2010–2015) not only followed the ambitions of established services (like HBO) but built in audiences a systematic set of expectations concerning the quality of shows and the regularity with which they would premiere. Again, this rise in quality, as it translated into a rise in the popularity and status of the TV series form, has followed the process of the production of taste in audiences that, while learning to enjoy a good binge, have communicated their interest to the platforms.

Still, however, what is perceived as engagement resulting from the experience of complexity, remains part of a pre-configured cultural environment in which the consumer is guided to enjoy complexity. By employing storytelling techniques and artistic devices characteristic of high-brow culture and art, the TV series does not automatically free itself of its commercial, systemic character nor gain an authentically subversive character. On the contrary, like Boorstin's pseudo-events (2011), pseudo-engagement is symptomatic of our culture's readiness to supplant (*sensu* Baudrillard 1994) authentic experiences with simulations, superficial semblances in the form of images and artefacts that contribute to a never-ending capitalist spectacle (Debord 1990). This tendency continues to align with the general ambitions of capitalism that, having employed the technologies of the digital age, has even more effectively liberated itself from the fetters of materiality and now favours the dissemination of virtual derivatives and the scalability of immaterial operations over the distribution of physical objects and maintenance of brick-and-mortar local distribution facilities.

Personalisation, instant accessibility, bingeable segmentation, and pseudo-engagement not only shape consumption habits in a Netflixified culture but also influence cultural production processes, privileging narratives and formats that maximize superficial engagement: continuous watching, binge sessions, and the systematic return to the platform's attractions. Thus, they contribute to analogous ends which Bryman as well as Horkheimer and Adorno described in their respective works.

Conclusions: taste, anxiety, identity

This paper has used the term "Netflixification" to describe how streaming platforms (and, by analogy, their followers in other sectors of digital business and culture) shape contemporary cultural consumption and align with the imperatives of digital capitalism, in accordance with which user behaviour is quantified and monetized, and cultural preferences are turned into commodities that feed back into the production cycle. In this landscape, for production and distribution companies, the construction of audiences has shifted from demographic estimation to behavioural analysis, prediction, and indirect coercion. For audiences, the experience of consuming culture has been shown as designed to be rewarding but burdened with the critical awareness that following algorithmic recommendations is a form of unpaid labour delivered to the representatives of the culture industry.

This awareness points us towards further macrocultural implications of Netflixification. One such implication is the consumer anxiety brought about by the intersections of algorithm, choice, and taste. In his *Algorithms of Anxiety*, Anthony Elliott writes of Netflix as an "odd combination of endless options and automated coercion" to present a paradoxical image of platform capitalism as reliant on abundance (of content) on the one hand, and on scarcity (of privacy, of liberty) on the other. In his analysis of the impact "24/7 personalized entertainment worlds" have on our sense of well-being and consumerist satisfaction, he writes of the frustrations produced by the "guided pathways of viewing" and "the gnawing worry of boredom" (2024: 58–59) resulting from uncritical reliance on the platform in the selection and recommendation on cultural texts to be consumed. These problematic experiences prove that taste and choice are no trivial matters.

The production of taste is the production of subjectivity. Not only does capitalism solicit emotive responses in order to stimulate consumers to buy; it also defines the parameters of what is imaginable. It shapes our reading styles through the dissemination of cultural conventions, and it validates interpretive choices through its reliance on algorithms of gratification. While the mass deception capitalism has curated for so long is revealed in the welcoming, facile interfaces (that seem to be the generators of attraction), its lasting grip on the cognitive capacities lies elsewhere — in its didactic capacities. Combining the insidiousness and persuasiveness characteristic of propaganda with the soft-power of culture in an all-too-attractive body of technologically advanced platforms, streaming services and their imitators pursue ambitions characteristic of the digital cultural industry — to instil further the mass deception that, through ersatz forms of engagement not only contributes to the homogenization of culture but also narrows down the territories of autonomy, agency, choice, and interpretation, while reinforcing the ever-expanding architectures of datafication (Cheney-Lippold 2017), surveillance (Zuboff 2019), and oppression (Noble 2018). When taste is no longer a social construct, but a technological one, it hardly matters whether it is Disney parks or Netflix binges that deprive us of intellectual, cultural liberty. What matters is if we shall ever try to read (or live) independently again. If we do, these acts of reading will constitute acts of resistance — to platforms, to convention, and to the alternative identities we are encouraged to assume.

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