



The culture of consumption and waste as a creative product

A cultura do consumo e o lixo como produto criativo

Iqani, M. *Garbage in popular culture: consumption and the aesthetics of waste*. Nova York: State University of New York Press, 2020.

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The cultural approach related to the context of the broad topic that encompasses the issues on the waste produced by society, the popular garbage, is still rare, especially in Brazil. However, this was the focus chosen by Mehita Iqani, Media Studies professor at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa, for her book “*Garbage in popular culture: consumption and the aesthetics of waste*”. Her work was published in 2020 by the State University of New York Press, officially released online by the author at the end of 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and has not yet been translated to Portuguese. The researcher is very knowledgeable in the consumption theory

approach, having previously published *Consumer Culture and the Media's Magazine in the Public Eye* (2012) and *Consumption, Media and The Global South: Aspiration Contested* (2016), both edited by Palgrave Macmillan, in London.

By acknowledging as still insufficient the academic discussions and policies on the role of the pre-consumption phase of the goods in the neo-liberal scenario of capitalism, with emphasis on how this role appears in media narratives the author presents the manners in which garbage seeps, through those narratives, into the popular imaginary, framing and defining a cultural discourse and the resulting practices. In a comprehensive manner,

the book tries to analyze what garbage represents within the contemporary hyper consumption, as Lipovetsky (2007) named this phase of extreme waste, which we may consider as a large part of the human productive actions that mark the Anthropocene (Veiga, 2019) – yes, the “excessive practices” of this hyper consumer “unbalance the ecosphere” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 13).

The central point of Mehita Iqani’s work explains the disciplinary interfaces between the global culture of consumption and its dantean volume of waste; the cultural policies related to garbage in the world society; and the media narratives that describe, tension, aestheticize, and propose a narrative of the action – through art, cinema, or entertainment – on this thematic interlacing. The author establishes an original contribution by presenting products of popular communication that address the issue of consumption, its residues and waste. Thus, it is through the production and symbolic creative practices of an intensive media culture that the reflections and discussions proposed in the book are built.

The researcher affirms that the creative interventions of artists who work with trash in the public or private sphere are “particularly powerful”, for, redefining the waste in their work, transforming it in a means for their works of art and means of entertaining, “these artists are making a statement both about the excess of rubbish in the social and natural world, and about the new possibilities for communication, reflection, and dialogue that are created through it.” (Iqani, 2020, p. 159). She understands that, through their “waste-works”, the artists, film producers, activists, journalists, designers and entrepreneurs remind us of the materiality of garbage, as well as emphasize how the human communication

can express different forms, including trash as a communicative modality, and, thus, as a means of construction of meaning in the world.

Iqani offers, in about 200 pages of the North American edition, an innovative contribution of great interest to scholars of the large and inter-disciplinary area of environment and development, as well as to whoever transits through the field of communication and of the media studies. The text interests also to readers who are just trying to know the set of cultural phenomena related to the cycle of the unstoppable consumption that has started in the world since the beginning of the 20th century and of the historic and the ever more accelerated production of garbage and its disposal on all corners of the planet. The torrent of waste derived from the consumption actions is endless, despite the discourses and practices stimulating the recycling, the “zero waste”, the reutilization of objects and their fragments which, devoid of the seduction aura that they exhibit at the moment of the purchase and of the consumption, become garbage, trash, refuse, scrap, rubbish etc. Such terms, often interchangeable in the common sense, have specific meanings from the point of view of theoretical, technical and functional conceptions.

Looking for answers for the question “Why does garbage matter?”, Mehita Iqani, who has already been a teacher in Creative Industries at *King’s College London*, from the triad globalization-consumption-media, places in these instances the starting point of the production process of waste of all types, so that one can reach the end point, through disposal, of this not virtuous circle. It is important to register that this end point is extremely relative: society does not know what to do with the atomic waste and faces the infernal cycle of the plastic

and oils thrown into the oceans and other bodies of water, and that seep into the organisms that live in these habitats, altering the whole food chain; the same nonsense is applied to the degradation of the electronic components and medicine residues in rural or urban waters and soils.

However, the book does not get into this ecosystem discussion, which is a much-debated subject. The text goes through case studies to the description, examination, and analysis of the mediations and actions in cultural instances considered popular, which show this pre-apocalyptic aspect through the consumption as well as the disposal, configuring creative scenarios in different aspects:

1) In the activisms and art-activism mediatized in narratives focused in the sub-categories of reduction, reutilization, and recycling of the trash, such as is the case of the social media key player in New York, Lauren Singer, the “Zero Trash Girl”, who highlights her routine as a consumer who does not generate any residue; emphasizes the example of art produced with the utilization of trash or recyclable/recycled materials, such as the multimedia art work by Francois Knoetze, from South Africa (in Brazil, we might mention the documentary “Extraordinary Trash”, on the work built with scrap of the artist Vik Muniz; or the initial paintings by the artist José Antonio de Lima, de Curitiba, Paraná, who uses scrap collected from the streets); also registers examples of recycling campaigns via Instagram and other social media.

2) In the consumption of luxury merchandise and types of hedonism, called by Iqani “pleasure narratives”, common in advertisement, magazines, and fashion shows or in popular types of entertainment in music events, such as the Glastonbury

Festival in the United Kingdom, or the Afrika Burn in South Africa, which builds temporary works of art in a semi-desertic space that, at the end, will be burned. One can also mention here Rock in Rio, in Brazil. It also highlights the practices of luxury tourism, which produce narratives on the types of pleasure appreciated by the richest consumers of the planet, describing how the trash generated by the practices of the “happy nihilism” (Iqani, 2020, p. 33) also appears in the media narratives that regret the “pollution” of beautiful landscapes, such as the tropical beaches, where mountains of trash are produced.

3) In narratives that use the binomial consumption of merchandise/services-production of trash, in a separate manner or together; and

4) in films such as *Deepwater Horizon* (2016), directed by Peter Berg – in Portuguese *Horizonte Profundo: desastres no golfo*, based on a real huge oil spill in the offshore platform in the Gulf of Mexico; and, we may mention the beautiful trilogy of Brazilian movies that exploit the landfills of the large cities: *Ilha das Flores* (1989), of Jorge Furtado; *Boca de lixo* (1992), of Eduardo Coutinho; and *Estamira* (2004), of Marcos Prado (Wolff, 2007); TV series about environmental disasters and devastation of nature, as well as journalistic and scientific documentaries on pollution caused by discarded plastic, oil and chemical product spills, contamination by toxic waste, in which there is a call for action (or inaction, according to the author).

Finally, she gives examples and reflects on how the trash is “mediated” and how the media narratives connect the consumption culture to the issue of socioenvironmental sustainability, which tries to minimize and balance the nature-society relationships and conflicts.

The well-prepared exploitation of these case studies on the media representation of the trash brings dynamism to the narrative, besides offering argumentative thoughts, as a basis for the information, data, and examples, which goes through the five chapters of the book. The author emphasizes that the cases studies lead to deep existential issues on how the subjectivity of the contemporary human being is increasingly defined by consumption/waste and how the public spheres are formatted by waste and its disposal. Thus, the exercise of imagining another world is proposed by the author: a world of consumption without waste, with a society that gives more value to ecology and which, from the moral point of view, to fulfill wished and needs (material, psychic, and existential) would fight against, or abandon, the work exploitation, the torture of non-human animals, and the pollution of the oceans. As such, the author adopts a coherent posture, however polemic, when she criticizes the current models of ethical consumption and of the anti-consumerist, which tend to choose the individual as a locus of change.

Iqani does not believe only in the individual changes, even if those who stand by them are engaged in collective movements. Her vision goes beyond and presents a necessary radicalism when she considers important to seek solutions to build a culture that permanently changes the power structures, what seems to be hard to conceive now, in a political and economic system based on the exploitation not only of nature, but also in the slavery of men and women controlled by an elite that appropriated itself of technologies and manipulates the financial markets.

At the end of this short review, it is important to remember that, as well as Néstor García Canclini

(2008), several authors affirm that consumption is a type of exercise of citizenship, but they also acknowledge that in the expanded framework of the effects of globalization, the consumption practices accelerate even more the social inequalities and the socioenvironmental injustices. In the wake of Iqani's focus, the consumption market based on "foundations of a culture of waste" (Santos, 2005, p. 103), "is not universalizing, nor homogenizing; it is [rather] a fantastic factory of riches and misery" as Deleuze has affirmed (1992, p. 213 *in* Santos, 2005, p. 103).

By developing the issue of the politization of consumption in a global culture context, Mehita Iqani advances to a focus of reflections in which "waste interjects not only into our material spaces and experiences, but also into our mediated lives and representational spaces" (p. 3). At the end of the reading, Iquani's question resounds – "would it be possible, someday, for us to live in a culture of consumption without waste?" – we remember that, earlier, Lipovetsky (2007) had already asked a similar question: "Who can tell how long it will be for a different awareness to raise, for new horizons to be born, new manners to evaluate the consumerist advance?" (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 368). In addition, this author remembers that this time has not arrived, but that this moment, product of a dated historical invention, will arrive someday.

If human society will see this future is not known, but, for now, the media narratives, as dominant types of modern cultural consumption, tell us and aestheticize past, present, and future narratives about the trash and waste of this small planet in a specific time of the human social history. In the final words of Mehita Iqani's book, she revisits the issue "whether and how the consumer culture will

be able to evolve to define of a new kind of freedom” (Iqani, 2020, p. 174) – one that would help the individuals to find pleasure and meaning in the material culture, while also drastically minimizing the devastation determined by their artifacts. Would this be a utopic question? If so, it is evident that this utopia is mandatory to oppose the pessimism of a world already culturally marked by waste, which continues blind and fast to its limits.

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