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The Idea of colonial Industry in Jean Godefroy Bidima and the Critique of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the concept of culture industry developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno had a decisive influence on Jean Godefroy Bidima's critique of black African modernity. Drawing on some of his writings, I seek to demonstrate how Bidima's philosophical endeavor inherits the concept of culture industry and applies it to the modern context of black Africa, where it is transformed into the concept of colonial industry. In both cases, the same critical perspective is at play, namely to formulate a broad critique of how cultural products (artworks in Horkheimer and Adorno, and philosophy in Bidima) are deprived of their substance to align with the mystification of the masses. The critique of the culture industry, which serves in Adorno as a fundamental criticism of the production of modern art and its decadence into mass production serves, revisited in Bidima, as a critique of the modern black African philosophical discourse. With the light provided by this connection, I propose a rereading of Bidima's critique of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, the latter being presented as a promoter of a "discourse of mastery" in black African modern philosophy.

Keywords: culture industry, colonial industry, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, discourse of mastery, decolonization

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La idea de industria colonial en Jean Godefroy Bidima y la crítica de Fabien Eboussi Boulaga

Resumen: En este artículo, sostengo que el concepto de industria cultural desarrollado por Max Horkheimer y Theodor W. Adorno tuvo una influencia decisiva en la crítica de Jean Godefroy Bidima a la modernidad del África negra. Basándome en algunos de sus escritos, intento demostrar cómo el empeño filosófico de Bidima hereda el concepto de industria cultural y lo aplica al contexto moderno del África negra, donde se transforma en el concepto de industria colonial. En ambos casos, está en juego la misma perspectiva crítica, a saber, formular una amplia crítica del modo en que los productos culturales (las obras de arte en Horkheimer y Adorno, y la filosofía en Bidima) se ven privados de su sustancia para alinearse con la mistificación de las masas. La crítica de la industria cultural, que en Adorno sirve como crítica fundamental de la producción del arte moderno y su decadencia en producción de masas, sirve, revisitada en Bidima, como crítica del discurso filosófico moderno negro-africano. Con la luz que proporciona esta conexión, propongo una relectura de la crítica de Bidima a Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, presentando a este último como promotor de un “discurso de dominio” en la filosofía moderna negro-africana.

Palabras clave: industria cultural, industria colonial, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, discurso de dominio, descolonización

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1. Introduction

It is unlikely that Jean Godefroy Bidima would consider himself a critical theorist. It is probably a safer assumption to say that he is a mere *discussant* of this current of thought. Nevertheless, his commerce with Critical Theory, and foremost with the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers, had a decisive influence on his philosophical ideas, whether it concerns how analyzes with modernity in general or African modernity in particular. From this perspective, it is clear that Bidima's thought shares the same objective as Critical Theory in the broadest sense, namely: "the emancipation of the Subject" (Bidima, 1993, p. 16),¹ as the native of Mfoumassi himself writes when defining the problematics of his seminal 1993 book.

Although he distances himself from Adorno, whom he accuses of "negativism", by which the latter is said to absolutely negate the category of "possibility", I maintain that Jean Godefroy Bidima's reading of black African modernity is shaped and guided by Adorno's thought, especially by some of the central ideas of his general aesthetic theory, among which the most important for Bidima is certainly the concept of culture industry in its relation to the description and the criticism of mass deception. I am therefore interested in showing how Bidima transposes this Adornian critique to the context of modern black Africa, whereby the concept of culture industry receives a new form, namely that of colonial industry.

Additionally, I will show how the concept of colonial industry allows for a more consistent rereading of Bidima's critique of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, concerning his diagnosis of the collusion, in *Muntu in Crisis*, of the philosophical "discourse of mastery" and domination.

2. The Concept of Culture Industry

The concept of Culture Industry (*Kulturindustrie*) was first used by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their book *Dialektik der Aufklärung* to describe the reduction of cultural goods to mere commodities. According to the authors, this situation is directly linked to the industrial manufacturing of cultural goods, the result of which is twofold, but refers to an identical state of affairs where alienation plays a central role. Indeed, by alienating culture, the culture industry produces "mass culture", while the audience is alienated through "mass deception". The concept of culture industry is thus meant to capture this particular system of deception advanced cultural/bourgeois society. As a system, the culture industry is both at the basis and the end of the situation described and criticized by the authors, to the extent where alienated cultural goods

¹ I am responsible for translating all the excerpts from this book.

are thought of as alienated and are to be received as alienated products before any concrete alienated experience of them.

The main effect—at least the first to be mentioned by Horkheimer and Adorno—of the culture industry on cultural goods and their audience is standardization. Indeed, the system of the culture industry, on the one end, standardizes the production of cultural goods as it standardizes, on the other end, their reception. Now, where production and reception are rigorously calculated and anticipated by a transcendental *ratio*, individuals are left only with unfreedom, which is another way to express their conformity to the system of their oppression. But an important feature, even magical to some extent, of the culture industry is to prevent oppressed individuals from feeling oppressed. In fact, they even have to be grateful to this system since it is doing them a favor. As noted by Kant, “It is so comfortable to be immature” (Kant, 1996, p. 17),² that is, to leave to someone or something else the difficult task of thinking or even choosing for ourselves. By taking charge of this difficult task, the culture industry frees the individual from the burden of performing the unity of apperception that Kant and his schematism imposed to them. This “secret mechanism” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 98), which was in Kant the active contribution that he still expected from the subject in relation to the manifold and with regard to the production of knowledge, is no longer performed within the psyche but from without, by the industry, before any perception. The unraveling of this secret is the culture industry’s “first service to the customer” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 98). This first service comes with a second one that ensures the after-sale service, namely that of releasing the individual from the strict and demanding duties that Kant imposes on the subject who is now—this point is particularly emphasized by the authors—a sheer consumer whose active contribution in the production of the object of their consumption is no longer needed, as “For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 98).

Adorno has previously addressed this issue of standardization in a seminal essay in 1938, in which he argued that the decline of musical taste³ goes hand in hand with “the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all” (Adorno, 2001, p. 30). From there, Adorno draws a conclusion that remains valid with regard to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely that “If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen” (Adorno, 2001, p. 30). The standardization of listening, and at large, of the reception of works of art (as prototypes of cultural goods), is the symptom of the standardization of

2 Translation slightly modified.

3 Adorno sees music as the prototype of art in general (See Adorno, 2002a). Therefore, his remarks on the “musical taste” apply ultimately to artistic taste as such.

individuals, of human beings themselves, a situation for which Adorno has a name: reification.⁴ In short, mass culture produces and reproduces mass deception to the extent that both are rationally entwined: “The consciousness of the mass listeners is adequate to fetishized music” (Adorno, 2001, p. 45), and fetishized music is produced in adequation with the consciousness of the mass listeners. In the system that emerges from this vicious circle—namely the culture industry—standardization and reification reinforce each other to rationally impose unfreedom on the subject. As Adorno points out: “Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception” (Adorno, 2001, p. 46). This view is emphasized and densified in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.

What is finally solved through mass deception, is what Karl Marx considered the driving force of historical materialism and the corresponding dialectics, namely the opposition between society and the individual, or in other words, the opposition between the general (or the universal) and the particular. In the culture industry, both interests converge, or more precisely, one is authoritatively silenced. The reign of the culture industry is therefore the reign of reconciliation, of “Totality”. It does not only affect the arts, but the world as a whole. As such, the criticism of the culture industry ultimately leads Horkheimer and Adorno to criticize the generalized system of falsity from which it stems and by which it is made possible, namely the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*).

3. Bidima’s Lessons from Critical Theory

This section highlights the two lessons Jean Godefroy Bidima learned from his encounter and dialogue with Critical Theory. It will be then easier—at least, hopefully—to see how these lessons (one general and two specific) led him to develop a particular understanding of philosophy in general and modern black African philosophy in particular.

3.1 The general Lesson from the Culture Industry

Bidima broadly agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno’s diagnosis of the systematic and generalized character of the culture industry. He also generally agrees with their

4 On the importance of this concept in Adorno, see the remarkable work of Gillian Rose (2014, p. 55 ff.). Recent studies on the subject include Blanton (2017), Lijster (2017), and Thompson (2020).

criticism. For Bidima, too, there is a need to criticize the vast ideology of modernity, its *lie*, by which it has proved incapable of providing humanity with the happiness it promised. And the philosophical and practical basis of this promise was—as for Kant—emancipation. The general lesson Bidima draws from Critical Theory is that, usually, promises of emancipation practically lead to more unfreedom. He was—and still is—therefore interested in confronting this standpoint with the modern black African context, where the same old modern European promise of emancipation accompanied the legal decolonization of African countries.

As with the culture industry, this promise seems to have been captured by a rigid system of power that echoes Horkheimer and Adorno’s “Totality”. And this situation is not a mere coincidence. Instead, it flows from some principles that more or less brutally command obedience and submission to the established rule. However, whereas Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis is primarily concerned with cultural goods, and specifically artworks, Bidima focuses on philosophy. This does not detract from the initial inspiration and how it leads to the critique of society as a whole. In fact, philosophy is itself a cultural good which has been struggling against standardization, reification, and submission to the falsity of totality, that is, generalized unfreedom.⁵ As such, the driving force of Bidima’s critical enterprise, as it originally stems from his book *Théorie Critique et modernité négro-africaine*, is to understand how philosophy not only participated in mass culture but reproduced itself as a product of that very mass culture, particularly in modern black Africa. Here—but this is also valid in other contexts—philosophical thinking is reified into “philosophy books”. It enters the circuit of the culture industry as a product intended for consumption, a merchandise. Bidima is aware of this situation that his own book cannot avoid (Bidima, 1993, p. 9).

Overall, Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of culture industry provides Bidima with a philosophical framework and model to initiate and handle the criticism of “figures of domination” (Bidima, 1993, p. 9). He then seeks to “apply” this critical framework and model to “black African modernity”. But this is only the big picture. A closer inspection that examines where and how this general lesson is concretely enacted as a driving force in Bidima’s philosophical work reveals that the latter does not longer relate to Horkheimer and Adorno, but more specifically to Adorno’s account of the culture industry, and in particular how to address it in society according to the Frankfurt master. In this respect, the specific lessons, whose presentation will follow, play a much more decisive role than the general lesson, as they directly influence Bidima’s perspective on the philosophical and critical treatment of some “figures of domination” in black African modernity.

5 See, for example, what Adorno writes about the academic practice of philosophy in *Minima Moralia* (Adorno, 2005, p. 66).

3.2 The first specific Lesson from Adorno

Bidima's relation to Adorno's thought is ambivalent. The native of Mfoumassi seems at first glance—a view which is confirmed by the distribution of his book and the conduct of his argumentation with regard to Critical Theory—to adopt the Manichean divide between the “negative” voices of Critical Theory represented by (the late) Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno (and to *some extent* Walter Benjamin), and the “positive” voices of the same movement, represented by Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas.⁶ However, after affirming Adorno's “pessimism” and “negation of the possible”, Bidima nevertheless relies on some of Adorno's key concepts, notably negativity and imagination, in his attempt to “reinvest” (as he puts it) Critical Theory with the stated goal of paving the way for a *Docta Spes Africana*.⁷

In *Théorie Critique et modernité négro-africaine*, Bidima's account of Critical Theory is constructed around what he identifies as the “status of the category of the possible” (Bidima, 1993, p. 31). Examining this status in the first part of the book allows Bidima to formulate his criticism of Adorno's thought. This criticism, stated early in the book, follows from the observation that “in Adorno[,] the alliance between negativism and possibility turns out to be impossible” (Bidima, 1993, p. 31). Therefore, as mentioned above, Bidima casts Adorno in the “negative” trend of Critical Theory that argues for the “impossibility of possibility”. The reason for this is that, according to Bidima, Adorno's criticism is in reality a “pessimism” that permeates his entire philosophical thought. This conclusion, however, is adopted by default, so to speak, for lack of a better and definitive view about a particularly difficult thought that actively and consciously resists a univocal understanding.⁸

But Bidima is more assertive when he moves from his account of Adorno's treatment and critique of German idealism to Adorno's critique of culture. On this new issue, he affirms that “we witness his [referring to Adorno] negation of the possible” (Bidima, 1993, p. 44). However, Bidima halfheartedly tempers, this negation of the possible in Adorno is not a strict and unilateral view, but rather, at best, a “general tendency” (Bidima, 1993, p. 49). The remainder of the section directly devoted to Adorno—and his critique—in the book fleshes out this idea with one key argument, namely “the identity between Totality and falsity” (Bidima, 1993, p. 49), which plays a central role in Bidima's

6 This classical and Manichean way of presenting the “forms” of Critical Theory—supported and probably invented by Habermas (See Habermas, 1987)—is still in vigor in Axel Honneth, the most recent, and arguably most influential heir of the Frankfurt School (See Honneth, 2004, p. 337).

7 Bidima borrows the concept of *docta spes* (educated hope), which he applies to the African context, from Ernst Bloch (1996).

8 Bidima still maintains this view concerning Adorno and his relationship to utopia through art. The latter is said to be “paradoxical”, since Adorno ultimately “remains undecided” (Bidima, 2021, p. 89) as to whether art can truly lead to utopia. From there, Bidima suggests a new tripartite approach, to some extent similar to his bipartite approach of 1993. Within Critical Theory—a case is made for Benjamin—and in relation to art, Bidima (2021, p. 90) distinguishes between a theoretician of its alienation (Benjamin), a theoretician of its paradoxical character (Adorno), and a theoretician of its redemptive and utopian potential (Marcuse).

criticism of Adorno because it philosophically guides, in his view, Adorno's "historical pessimism", as it is noticeable, among other works, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

It is worth noting that Bidima's criticism of Adorno is based on a hesitation whose tension is arbitrarily resolved by a standpoint, namely the bias toward positivity and the security it grants regarding the construction of a Manichean image Critical Theory. From a dialectical point of view—which is that of Adorno and of Critical Theory in general—Bidima's remark about the difficulty of reducing Adorno's thought to a single one-sided set of assertions is infinitely superior to the other remark about the "general tendency" of his thought toward negativity and the impossibility of possibility. Questioning the reason for this undialectical choice of Bidima tackles the genealogy of his book, that is, the *conditions* under which its *knowledge* has been made possible.⁹ Highlighting this situation is the only way the reader can understand why Bidima, who carefully notes that a unilateral approach to Adorno's philosophy is highly problematic and hesitates therefore to follow such a path, finally surrenders himself, despite of his own words of caution, to the (French) mainstream of the philosophical reception of Adorno, choosing the "general tendency" rather than the "margins" of his critique of modernity.¹⁰ The obvious conservatism of this point of view, which stands as an internal refutation of Bidima's argument and the author's *general tendency* to be interested in the margins, speaks of the underlying conservatism that he (probably) could not avoid at the time and that still survives to some extent in his recent elaborations on Critical Theory and specifically on Adorno (see Bidima, 2021, p. 76). This conservatism, which takes the form of a dialectical rigidity that unfortunately collapses into a vulgar non-dynamic dualism (for or against possibility), is particularly noticeable in the author's remarks about the status of the category of possibility in Adorno's aesthetic theory. Whereas Bidima rightly points out that mimesis plays a key role in the process of reconciling nature with itself in Adorno, and that "the activity which achieves this mimesis is indeed art" (Bidima, 1993, p. 45), he almost immediately undermines this view by focusing only on the inflections where Adorno, in his theory, insists on the failure of art's

9 This question has been asked, notably by Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, but in a different context (see Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 149). It should suffice, for now, to simply note that *Théorie Critique et modernité négro-africaine* is drawn from Bidima's doctoral dissertation, written in French, at a (French) university, under the supervision of (French) professors. Moreover, the book is published by a French university press, and the author has benefited primarily from the support and expertise of (French) mentors. Although it has been edited for publication and thus "rewritten in parts" (Bidima, 1993, p. 12), the book does not escape the spell of (French) academia that reminds the reader of its academic origins. In short, the book cannot dispute its character of being a piece of ideology chained to the "Totality" of the (French) academia of its time. *Mutatis mutandis* and to some extent, the same is also true for the author who writes these lines.

10 In the francophone context, marginal efforts on the analysis of the category of possibility in relation to negativism in Adorno include Ricard (1999), Payot (2002), and to some extent Abensour (1982). To be fair, with the exception of Abensour's text, all of these works were published after Bidima's book. However, while this might explain, along with the genealogy of his book, why Bidima opted for the conventional knowledge in Adorno's French commentary in 1993, it does not explain why he still does so. Hence the need for a further explanation.

promise of happiness, especially with reference to music. In relation to Bidima's own hesitations, or more appropriately, precautional remarks, this condemnation of Adorno must be nuanced.

It is true that Adorno wrote that "Art is the broken promise of happiness" (Adorno, 2002a, p. 136).¹¹ However, this apparently pessimistic view—the philosophical shortcoming that fortunately discharges the reader from the patience and effort to labor Adorno's philosophical thought—is balanced by the fact that Adorno contends, at the same time, that the very possibility of happiness, which is also that of fulfilling aesthetic experience, is only "promised by its impossibility" (Adorno, 2002a, p. 136). By that, Adorno points out that art in general, and modern art in particular, is torn between integration and autonomy and survives only as a promise of emancipation of the hopeless, in a way that reminds us of the concluding sentence of Walter Benjamin's essay on Goethe: "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (Benjamin, 2004, p. 356). Art is the embodiment, however precarious, of this promise; it remains relevant as long as it has not been fulfilled, regardless of the generalized falsity of society/Totality.¹² In fact, the prevalence and generality of falsity are dialectically the reason as well as the justification for the existence and relevance of art, which is truly and fully art according to Adorno only insofar as it is revolutionary. Therefore, the failure of art is not the failure of *all* art but only the failure of the *administrated* and *reified* practice of art that has surrendered to society. But even in modern dark times, as was already the case in previous moments in history, excellent works of art resist this situation and their docile integration in the consumption circuit. Here lies the difference between two historically modern composers according to Adorno, namely Igor Stravinsky—whom Adorno associates with regression—and Arnold Schoenberg—whom Adorno associates with progress. However, despite the apparent rigidity of this distinction—which has been misleading to many commentators—the relation between regression and progress is in reality highly dialectical, as the two concepts finally prove to be entwined (see Adorno, 2002b; 2006). The alleged rigidity of the understanding of art is thus not on Adorno's side, but rather in the eye of the reader who struggles to "grasp" something he expects to be "the *true* identity of Adorno's philosophy" (Bidima, 1993, p. 33. My emphasis), as if the dialectical character of this thought was not *true* to itself and had to be (artificially and thus arbitrarily) stabilized—that is to say *resolved*—from outside. If Bidima admits that it is "impossible [at least for him] to be able to grasp the true identity of Adorno's philosophy", it is precisely because this positive attitude toward the latter is neither needed nor relevant, except for ideological purposes such as the pleasure of positively drawing dividing lines between the members

11 Translation slightly modified.

12 Yet, and this is worth mentioning, for Adorno, the fulfilment of the promise of art—in other words happiness—is not coming anytime soon. This does not mean at all that this goal is absent from its project as an emancipatory practice. See, for example, Alway (1995, p. 49 ff.).

of the Frankfurt School for the sake of a non-dialectical understanding of the internal dynamics of this group.¹³

In 1993, Jean Godefroy Bidima did not seem to be fully aware of this situation, or more precisely, he seems—probably for reasons concerning the conditions of production of his book as a work of knowledge—to be unable to fully articulate his reticence in formulating judgments that “quickly suggest a straightforward pessimism in Adorno” (Bidima, 1993, p. 35). Bidima’s refusal to understand what he nevertheless rightly identifies as Adorno’s “Negative Theology” (Bidima, 1993, p. 51), is testament to the fact that he seems insensitive to the utopian content of Adorno’s particular position regarding the category of possibility in art, to which he prefers Bloch’s concept of utopia and Marcuse’s understanding of art.¹⁴

However, although Bidima openly distances himself from Adorno because of the above-mentioned criticism, evidence suggests a different story that operates in the shadow of the official history narrated by the book, where the author *officially* opts—so to speak—for Habermas and especially Marcuse, at the expense of Adorno and Horkheimer. First, the abundance of nuances concerning Adorno’s alleged “pessimism” reminds the reader that the structural and Manichean divide that Bidima establishes within Critical Theory does not hold and finally condemns the commentator to ideology. The validity of the book as a whole is only preserved if the reader agrees to adopt an Adornian perspective toward the text as a “totality”, whose superstructure is internally challenged by its infrastructure. What is needed here, then, is an attention to detail, namely the marginal comments and remarks that negatively prevent the precarity of the totality from collapsing.¹⁵ Second, the reader has to concede that the author remains consistent with this line of thought in his writing, and that, as a result, the first part of the book refutes itself, which, again, rather than being a flaw, is consistent with Bidima’s philosophical approach to writing philosophy (Bidima, 1993, pp. 10, 202–205, 213, 281, 285, 294, etc.). In fact, Bidima’s text exemplarily provides the reader with “the elements of its own overcoming” (Bidima, 1993, p. 285). Now, this particular way of writing philosophy which favors negativity instead of positivity, that is the transparency of the text to itself, undoubtedly bears an Adornian stamp, as Bidima admits.

13 Of course, this is not to say that each member of the Frankfurt School is identical to the other, which is obviously false. The internal dynamics, even within the same period of time or generation, ultimately reflects internal differences in perspectives and points of view. Bidima, for sure, does not ignore this. What is problematic, however, is his positivist treatment of this situation, the ontologizing of its dynamics.

14 I must say that in order to observe and articulate an intimate (emancipatory) connection between the categories of possibility and utopia in Critical Theory, there is no need to dismiss Adorno. In fact, Adorno’s views on possibility and utopia are compatible with an emancipatory discourse about Critical Theory. See for this, among other works, McDonald (2011), Jütten (2019), Roessler (2022), and the more ambitious enterprise by McDonald (2019). The author has offered a “Précis” of this last work to French readers (McDonald, 2021).

15 This prerequisite, which reflects the *charity* of the commentator, is lacking in Eboussi Boulaga’s response to Bidima. I will come back to this below.

From there, it follows that while overtly very critical of Adorno, *Théorie Critique et modernité négro-africaine* ultimately rests on Adornian philosophical principles that retrospectively inform Bidima's own perspective. A third piece of evidence, on which I will focus below, confirms this last view. Indeed, Bidima's massive criticism of black African philosophical modernity broadly reproduces Adorno's massive criticism of Euro-American modernity. In both endeavors, the disentanglement of the concept of philosophy plays a decisive role. This point connects with the general lesson drawn from Critical Theory and the concept of culture industry, whose spirit survives in Bidima's writings.¹⁶

3.3 The centrality of the Critique of Philosophy as the second Lesson from Adorno

Bidima rightly notes that the central aspect of Adorno's critique of modernity concerns the concept of philosophy itself. He then extends his investigation to culture as a whole. This way of arguing is verified in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he and Horkheimer begin by criticizing the *Aufklärung* before turning to specific aspects of this concept that relate to culture. Bidima follows a similar path.¹⁷ However, unlike Adorno (and Horkheimer), Bidima's critical migration from the critique of philosophy to the critique of culture is undertaken in several other works. In fact, it unfolds through the publishing journey of the native of Mfoumassi.¹⁸

In *Théorie Critique et modernité négro-africaine*, Bidima offers the framework and the general aspect of his critique of black African modernity, emphasizing how the modern black African philosophical discourse—that is, the local manifestation of the *Aufklärung*—"which was intended to be a discourse of openness toward rationality and freedom, has turned into a sclerotic approach, an affirmative discourse" (Bidima, 1993, p. 136). This affirmative functioning of modern black African philosophy is not a characteristic of its own. Rather, insofar as philosophy is a cultural practice, which means it takes place in the public sphere, this character flows from the political

16 Let me remind the interested reader that they will not find any reference to the concept of "Colonial Industry" in the works of Jean Godefroy Bidima. As such, the formulation of this concept, its *letter*, is entirely my responsibility. However, with regard to the way I use it to capture how Bidima develops his critique of modernity from a general perspective, and more precisely, his critique of black African modernity, as it relates to philosophy, literature, the arts, and politics, its spirit is definitively not mine. What I seek to demonstrate now, is how Bidima's critique of black African modernity connects to Adorno's concept of culture industry, allowing by that the concept of colonial industry.

17 In a key passage that introduces to the second part of his 1993 book, Bidima (1993, p. 136) explicitly admits that he follows Adorno's negative method.

18 Bidima (2014) provides an excellent synthesis of Bidima's philosophical interests in culture and politics. Other texts provide detailed discussions of specific themes and notions, such as justice, democracy, arts, and the public sphere (see Bidima 1997;1998a; 1998b; 2009; 2011; 2015; 2019; 2021).

context surrounding this discipline. According to Bidima, this context is that of colonialism. Indeed, it is colonialism in the recent history of Africa that offers the evidence of “discourses and practices of repression” (Bidima, 1993, p. 137), whose aim was to “inhibit the blossoming of the non-identical in Africa” (Bidima, 1993, p. 137).

As Bidima rightly points out, to a large extent, the public sphere in postcolonial African states still lives a political life directly influenced by colonialism. Philosophy does not escape this situation that undoubtedly affects its concept. Far from being the discourse of emancipation that was expected, it turns out to be a “discourse of mastery” (Bidima, 1993, p. 173). This distance between the promise of emancipation and the reality of domination and control is the central nerve of the dialectic of “Enlightenment” according to Horkheimer and Adorno. The same dialectics is at work in modern black African philosophy according to Bidima, where this discipline, considered a rational discourse that promotes freedom, has reversed into its opposite to satisfy the general lie of false identity and the violence it rests on.

Therefore, in Bidima, as in Adorno, examining the decadence of the “enlightened” society starts with the critique of philosophy itself, exploring the ways and means by which this discipline has broken its promise. In both accounts of the *Aufklärung*, the enlightened society follows a historical moment of great darkness, and it is enlightened not by the reality of its enlightenment, but rather by this promise. In the African context, as Achille Mbembe (2021) has argued, the “dark night” in question here is that of colonization, about which decolonization was a promise of happiness. The survival of colonialist practices explains in part how and why this promise is broken. Now, what is this characteristic that philosophy in the modern African context inherits from colonialism? The answer lies in one word we can borrow from Mbembe, namely “Commandement” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 24 ff.).

In black African modernity, a large part of philosophy has proved to be the embodiment of this colonial principle. Whereas in Adorno and Horkheimer, domination is made possible and sustained by technical rationality to the point where they can write that “[T]echnical rationality today is the rationality of domination” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 95), in Bidima, philosophy fulfills this role of sustaining domination. In fact, Bidima ultimately proposes a transposition of this statement by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely that philosophical rationality today in modern black Africa is the rationality of domination. Thus, according to Bidima, much of modern black African philosophy has never ceased to be a vehicle of colonialism, that is, to participate in the falsity of its totality.¹⁹ With the framework provided by the colonial industry and its critique by Bidima, the case against Eboussi Boulaga appears in a new light that is worth presenting.

¹⁹ To a large extent, the same goes for black African art (Bidima, 1997; 1998a; 2019; 2021).

4. Landmarks for a Reinvestigation of the Case against Eboussi Boulaga

It is in his 1993 book that Jean Godefroy Bidima accuses Eboussi Boulaga of plagiarism. But since this accusation is obviously sensational considering the evidence provided by the critic, it is certainly not the most interesting point of view expressed about *Muntu in Crisis*. As such, it is unfortunate that in his response to Bidima, Eboussi Boulaga concentrates most of his efforts on this uninteresting point, while the strongest part of the criticism is left intact.²⁰ By “strongest part”, I mean the last three pages of the section “Citation and Deontology” devoted to Eboussi Boulaga in the book. These pages allow to put Bidima’s critique in perspective, regarding what I have said previously about the colonial industry.²¹

4.1 *Muntu in Crisis as a Work of “Philosophy”*

In these pages, Bidima, who first notes that “*Muntu in Crisis* seemed to us to be one of the rare works of African philosophy where we find a sketch of anatrectic (self-refuting) thought” (Bidima, 1993, p. 213), then regrets that, ultimately, the book does not go as far as expected in the fulfilment of this promise. In the end, Bidima notes with disappointment that “*Muntu in Crisis* declines this outlined opening and thus reflects the closure” (Bidima, 1993, p. 213).

What is at stake here is Eboussi Boulaga’s participation in the colonial enterprise of *commandement*, by which his book appears to be a colonial product. Bidima, therefore, points to the “patriarchy” at work in *Muntu in Crisis*, whereby Eboussi Boulaga prevents women, children, and even the people from expressing themselves. Even the “Muntu” of whom Eboussi Boulaga’s essay is about is invisible in the book, since the author, from the beginning to the end, is content to speak *about* them or, at least, to some extent, *on their behalf*, in which case the Muntu is the author

20 It is equally unfortunate that commentators of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga have mostly ignored Bidima’s criticisms, even when they claim to be discussing “Fabien Eboussi Boulaga’s conception of philosophy” (Kawahirehi, 2021, p. 17. My translation) by pointing out precisely what Bidima criticizes, that is, the tendency to transform philosophy into a discourse of mastery instead of a discourse of emancipation. I am aware of only one attempt to directly address Bidima’s critique of Eboussi Boulaga by Kasereka Kawahirehi (2000). Unfortunately, this text suffers from critical shortcomings, the most notable of which is arguably its inability to go beyond the question of the “style” to examine what is most important in Bidima’s critique, namely, the question of determining what the style—illusionistic or not—obscures.

21 Eboussi Boulaga is mentioned by Bidima as a particularly vivid example of the enactment of domination in modern black African philosophy, but Bidima’s critique applies to almost all modern black African philosophers. See, in addition to his 1993 book, his 1995 small book on black African philosophy (Bidima, 1995), whose scope is actually limited to black African philosophy from the mid-20th century onward.

himself. By this particular aspect, Eboussi Boulaga and his book rejoin the colonial enterprise characterized by the “mysticism of truth” (Bidima, 1993, p. 213). With this last expression, Bidima expresses how, since the 1960s, politicians and scholars have confiscated the speech for their benefit in Africa. This postcolonial practice echoes the colonial practice from which it takes its inspiration. Both have similar results, namely the reification of the subject. In this light, *Muntu in Crisis* is far from being a refutation of “philosophy” which, in this context shared by Eboussi Boulaga and Bidima, refers in proper to the colonial practice of this *discipline* as a discipline. And Bidima is right: *Muntu in Crisis* is the demonstration of Eboussi Boulaga as a philosopher in this colonial sense, as a master of speech who knows how to use and re-use its symbols to his advantage. Here, such a mastery is done at the expense of the native.²² This is what Bidima’s means by saying that *Muntu in Crisis* is a “system” of technical (that is philosophical) rationality. In this sense, the last sentences of *Muntu in Crisis*’s preface²³ in which the author asks (the reader? himself?) whether his enterprise deserves to be regarded as “philosophy” is nothing but a joke (see Eboussi Boulaga, 2014, p. 3). From the very outset, and even more so in the conduct of Eboussi Boulaga’s argument, *Muntu in Crisis* proves to be at the highest point a work of “philosophy”, which also explains why its inclusion in this private circle has never been seriously doubted, except by some obviously incompetent readers. Competent readers, however, unanimously received *Muntu in Crisis* and its author as members of the philosophical society. This also explains why Bidima’s accusation of plagiarism misses its target: in *Muntu in Crisis*, the explicit absence of citations tactically aligns with the abundance of references to “philosophers”—mostly, male, white, European, and dead—and is the active demonstration of Eboussi Boulaga as a master of philosophy.²⁴ Bidima, who notices this second point, fails to consistently relate it to the first one. The active demonstration of this mastery implies, in the philosophical discourse of *Muntu in Crisis*, the rejection of the Muntu from the realm of philosophy, to which responds, ultimately, their inclusion after a necessary purifying dialectics.²⁵

22 This is also the case at a more general level, relatively to the construction of the “universal” history of philosophy.

23 In the English rendition of *La crise du Muntu*, the original preface is changed to an “introduction”, whereas the “preface”, which is actually an outdated introduction to the book, is now written by Kasereka Kavwahirehi. The least to be said about this curious redistribution is that it is puzzling, especially for someone who is familiar with the original work. And this is far from being the only issue with this “translation”.

24 Kasereka Kavwahirehi, who notes that Eboussi Boulaga’s evocation of Socrates is a “suggestive” image in *Muntu in Crisis*, misses what role Socrates truly plays in the philosophical economy of the book. Eboussi Boulaga’s Socrates is far from being only the traditional and canonical “mixture of seriousness and lightness” (Kavwahirehi, 2000, p. 297. My translation) mentioned by the commentator. More importantly, Socrates is a canonical figure of “philosophy” and his evocation testifies to the mastery of he who is writing.

25 In *Muntu in Crisis* this dialectics takes the name of “dialectic of authenticity” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2014, p. 219 ff.). In a previous text, Eboussi Boulaga calls it the “dialectic of black African cultural identity” (see Eboussi Boulaga, 1976, p. 8 ff.).

In *Muntu in Crisis*, the philosophical tension between “African authenticity” and “philosophy” is resolved, in the manner of Hegel, by the falsity of the positive reconciliation in the totality. A closer inspection reveals that this situation is not a matter of “intellectual honesty” as argued by Bidima (1993, p. 215). Rather, it is a matter of submission to the colonial industry, which would otherwise have hindered the inclusion of *Muntu in Crisis* in the realm of “philosophy”. Bidima is thus mistaken about Eboussi Boulaga when he claims that *Muntu in Crisis* “violates the codes of the tradition established in philosophy” (Bidima, 1993, p. 215). In reality, the book is faithful to them, but in the colonial sense. And this situation finally explains why, from the moment it went off the press—and perhaps even in its very idea—*Muntu in Crisis* was prevented from the danger of failure. This is not anecdotal.

Security is the ransom that the culture industry pays to mass products for their loyalty. It is the guarantee of their success as merchandises. The same is true for the colonial industry, whose power of seduction, that is, of domination, remains intact in *Muntu in Crisis*. Indeed, as far as established “philosophy” is concerned, there are no controversial statements in this essay: every sentence is lucid, well-polished, so much that the book as a whole gives the impression of a well-tempered philosophical symphony from which any dissonant note is rigorously prepared and systematically resolved. And this act of exclusion at work in *Muntu in Crisis* does not concern, as Bidima argues, what relates to “philosophy”. On the contrary, it prevents what is not “philosophy” from entering it. The book and its author manage and succeed in preserving the purity of their discipline and this success is at the same time their greatest failure. The severe criticism that Eboussi Boulaga addresses to any African attempt to usurp the title of “philosophy” appears under a new light: it serves a conservative purpose in *Muntu in Crisis*. This is where the “authoritarianism” (Bidima, 1993, p. 215) at work in Eboussi Boulaga’s essay must be noticed and denounced. By this, the author compromises with African political practices reminiscent of colonization: the “silencing” (Bidima, 1993, p. 215) of the native, whose voice is identified as the “voice of the other” (Bidima, 1993, p. 215), a dissonance in the harmony of “philosophy”. Now, this so-called harmony is obviously false, no matter how strongly it is proclaimed by the positive thinking and the corresponding dialectics. In *Muntu in Crisis*, its decisive interest is to secure the identity of the book as a work of “philosophy”. Nothing is left to chance, and the counterpart of this situation, which is also the price that the author has to pay for such a security, is the very impossibility of possibility. This paralysis of the category of possibility by which Horkheimer and Adorno characterize the culture industry is verified in the historical attitude of the readers toward *Muntu in Crisis*. With this last remark, one reaches the point, noted by Bidima, where this essay is not only the product of a mystification but also its vehicle.

4.2 The Relationship of Muntu in Crisis to Mystification

Indeed, Bidima rightly points out that the traditional reaction to *Muntu in Crisis* has been the paralysis of the critique that has led to the mystification of masses in their relationship to this book. By emphasizing this point in the opening paragraphs of his critique of Eboussi Boulaga's book, Bidima captures the concrete situation where the impossibility of critiquing the book reflects the atmosphere of fear that surrounded its publication and (non-)philosophical reception, especially in the African context.

Although Bidima is clearly exaggerating when he writes that *Muntu in Crisis* has never been criticized,²⁶ he is nevertheless right in noting that for the vast majority of scholars in the African philosophical context of his time—which, to some extent, tries to survive today—criticism was not envisioned as the main approach to Eboussi Boulaga's book and more broadly to Eboussi Boulaga's thought. On the contrary, what was emphasized was the reader's ability to surrender to the mastery expressed in *Muntu in Crisis* and to Eboussi Boulaga as a master of philosophy. To this extent, the main task of the reader of this book was its hermeneutics, from the point of view that what remains at the end of the philosophical task undertaken in *Muntu in Crisis* is the scholastic reading of the Master.²⁷ In fact, as with the culture industry, the extreme rationalization of which *Muntu in Crisis* is the expression, favors and to a certain extent commands outside of its process, the extreme irrationality by which the expected reader is turned into a mere consumer, especially—and that is because of “philosophy”—if they are a Muntu, for the reason that “philosophy” has mostly been—and this is still valid to a large extent today—the reduction of indigenous peoples to silence.²⁸ It is surprising that Eboussi Boulaga, who lucidly noticed this philosophical discrimination by pointing to “racism” as “one of the historical limitations of many philosophies” (Eboussi Boulaga, 1977, p. 127),²⁹ ultimately creates a discourse that follows the same philosophical pattern of exclusion, which is undoubtedly a colonial

26 One of the first philosophers to openly criticize *Muntu in Crisis* was Marcien Towa. He expressed his concerns about the book in 1985, at the occasion of a lecture he gave at the Lycée Classique in Bafoussam. This lecture and the debate that followed were later published in *Zéén*, the philosophical journal of the Kwame Nkrumah Philosophy Club at the École Normale Supérieure in Yaoundé. The same texts have been published posthumously in Yaoundé (see Marcien Towa, 2015). For the most part, Bidima's criticism radicalizes Towa's views on Eboussi Boulaga's book.

27 See, for example, the section of the book *Philosophes du Cameroun*, devoted to Eboussi Boulaga, and the debate that followed the presentations (Njoh-Mouellé & Kenmogne, 2006, pp. 271-357). The most recent systematic examination of Eboussi Boulaga's thought, a “dossier” in the 164th issue of the *Journal Politique Africaine* edited by Nadia Yala Kisukidi, adopts a similar attitude toward the author (see Kisukidi, 2021).

28 As an illustration, in *Muntu in Crisis*, no indigenous voice is heard, unless mediated—and thus actively silenced—by Eboussi Boulaga himself, who, to be sure, speaks at least as much as a philosopher as an indigenous person (see Eboussi Boulaga, 2014, p. 6).

29 As *Muntu in Crisis* (Eboussi Boulaga, 2014, p. 124) reads differently from the French original, I translate directly from *La crise du Muntu*.

procedure, since the natives are not expected to participate in “philosophy”. This discipline is precisely given to them under the category of repulsion, on the model of proximity without reciprocity. In such a context, the contact with *Muntu in Crisis* sanctifies the fetish character in philosophy and the corresponding pathology, namely the regression of the reading. By that, the book ultimately proves to be a piece of administrated thinking, notwithstanding its critical claims regarding the administration of philosophy as an institution. In fact, insofar as the book participates, as an exemplary representative, in the symbolism of domination that it openly denounces, there is room for an internal criticism of *Muntu in Crisis*, contrary to Bidima’s view. But the critic is nevertheless right: the propensity to systematicity, which he calls the “systematic spirit”, rejoins, in the positive and totalizing process of the mystification of the masses, the “spirit of the system” (Bidima, 1993, p. 214. My emphasis), that is, domination itself, and, in the African context, colonial domination. And as a basic practice of mystification, colonialism is accompanied by brutality. This latter category completes the construction of the image of Eboussi Boulaga as an authoritarian philosopher.

A first way of testifying to this is the philosophical framework of *Muntu in Crisis*, the participation of the book in the colonial concept of “philosophy” relatively to its treatment of the indigenous. Another way is by paying attention to the reply of Eboussi Boulaga to Bidima’s criticisms. In this reply, the reader discovers Eboussi Boulaga’s unjustified brutality, which begins with the refusal to retain from Bidima what seems to be the most important, that is, certainly not the accusation of plagiarism, which is, as I said, by far the weakest aspect of his critique. At the end of this outburst of violence that is “*Adversus Bidimam!*”, in which Eboussi Boulaga abundantly insults his critic,³⁰ central aspects of the criticism mentioned above are unfortunately left untouched: for example, nothing is said about the refusal to quote and the authoritative treatment of the Muntu. Sadly, Eboussi Boulaga’s reply is written as if the author wanted to make an example of his victim, in order to prevent any possible future misconduct against him, an attitude that takes on its full meaning in relation to the uses and reuses of punishment in (post-)colony.³¹

30 Eboussi Boulaga writes that Bidima “rambles” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 95), that his critique stems from a “delirium of interpretation” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 103) based on “his bazaar erudition” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 103), which “is a flicker of phrases, words, notions gathered at random from a directionless wandering, in the small happiness of the fads, mundanities, and ‘philosophical’ gossip” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 103). All in all, Bidima’s criticisms and more broadly his thought, are nothing more than “buffooneries” of a “pamphleteer” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 125). Bidima’s book rests on a “disjointed set of banalities, derisory abstractions” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 138). In a word, Bidima adds “nothing” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 139) to the existing corpus of black African philosophy. Hence Eboussi Boulaga’s conclusion: “Let him ‘get out of the way’ then!” (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011, p. 142. All translated excerpts of this text are my responsibility).

31 See, on this issue, general works by Pierce & Rao (2006), Bosworth & Flavin (2007), and Lydon (2023). Rotich (2021) emphasizes the role of punishment as a pedagogical tool in the acquisition of colonial languages (such as “philosophy”) in post-

In retrospect, and with regard to Bidima's criticisms, this reply justifies the critic's position and legitimates his concerns. It is precisely as if Eboussi Boulaga was reminding his critic of the attitude he should never have abandoned, namely awe and fear, when dealing with his books, and especially *Muntu in Crisis*. And Eboussi Boulaga's violence reminds anyone interested in following this dangerous path that deviates from the expected and traditional obedience and submission to the Master that they are on the wrong track. By that, Eboussi Boulaga who was surely thinking of confronting Bidima, was instead comforting him.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to show how Jean Godefroy Bidima's critique of black African modernity is directly influenced by the concept of culture industry developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. Bidima's treatment of black African modernity allowed me to draw a parallel between the concept of culture industry and the one I suggest calling colonial industry. In both endeavors, the mystification of the masses and their domination is at stake. As such, Bidima follows the critical path of Horkheimer and Adorno, whether it be the analysis of African philosophy or African art.

With these new lenses, I have suggested a reinvestigation of Bidima's case against Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, where what is debated is not the accusation, too massive to be relevant, of plagiarism, but rather the connection that emerges, in *Muntu in Crisis*, between the exclusion of the natives from the realm of "philosophy" and Eboussi Boulaga's treatment of the Muntu.

With this rereading, Bidima's critique of Eboussi Boulaga will appear—At least, I hope so—in a new light, where the accusation of plagiarism is only the pot at exaggeration of a general and more legitimate concern about the collusion, in *Muntu in Crisis*, of the colonial impulse for domination and philosophical mystification. The conjunction of these two factors establishes this book as a representative of the mass deception that is the colonial industry—where Bidima's diagnosis of the neutralization of philosophy echoes, the African context, Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) diagnosis of the neutralization of culture. It is therefore not surprising to note, as Bidima does, that *Muntu in Crisis* has paved the way for the cult of personality of its author, an attitude which flourishes in the shadow of the individual's capacity to exercise critical thinking. As such, the concept of colonial industry, like its German counterpart, primarily serves the critical understanding of the reality to be subverted.

colonial schooling. The example provided by "*Adversum Bidimam!*" proves—albeit afterward—that Eboussi Boulaga's practice of philosophy as a discipline needed to be decolonized, which here means detaching it from the patriarchal relationship to youth (Eboussi Boulaga is older than Bidima), the Gospel (he was once a priest), and violence (he lived under colonialism until he was a young adult). On this question of decolonizing discipline, see Michaelson & Durrant (2020).

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