

**CINEMA AND MARXIST AESTHETICS: LUKÁCS,
BENJAMIN AND ADORNO**

by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this project is to provide an historical and philosophical interpretation of the significance of the cinema as an important medium in creating our social reality. This interpretation will use as its foundation the Marxist aesthetics of Georg Lukács, which then leads to the different assessments of popular culture found in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. At the same time, we will provide historical context by considering various key or paradigmatic episodes in the history of cinematic culture. My argument is that the cinema is the medium most evocative of the 20th century in terms of its social dimension as a mass art form and in its contribution to the reification of our consciousness. Yet it also retains a certain potential as an emancipatory cultural form, one that can change the modern social reality that it has itself played a significant role in creating.

Keywords: Cinema; Motion pictures; Marxist aesthetic; Lukács; Benjamin; Adorno

Subject Terms: Motion Pictures; Film; Motion Pictures – Political aspects; Motion pictures – History; Avant-garde (Aesthetics)

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important components of modern film theory, indeed of any modern cultural analysis, is Marxism. Although Marx and Engels wrote their major works before the invention of film, their analyses of culture, politics, law and state in terms of exchange relationships, forces and relations of production have evolved over time and remain significant in terms of contemporary debates and discussions. In particular, their insistence on the concept of social totality, defined as the elevation of our interior reality in conjunction with a sense of order and purpose in the exterior world, which has been drawn out and emphasized by Georg Lukács. Of course, any model of cinematic totality would attempt to describe a complex whole, a grand theory perhaps, which may not be possible due to the wide range of influences and interpretations. However, if it is understood that society itself has a dynamic organization and structure, then, in the Marxian sense, it may be that cinema can be regarded as part of a social process specific to its particular historical context.

Marxist theory is essentially a historical materialist view of the world. In other words, our world and our history are products of how humans have created the material culture we all live in. Thus, the creation of our material existence is not due to some higher or mystical power, but due to people and their activities, primarily their modes of production. Since Marx's time, the predominant mode of production is capitalism, and thus capitalism shapes the socio-economic development of humankind, commodity

production, and the distribution of social resources. In order to address the contradictions of capitalism, many of which are a function of property relations, Marx forged a dialectical materialism that sought concrete social change through the rise of the working class that due to the inevitable decline and fall of capitalism would eventually synthesize into socialism. Therefore, rather than the traditional interpretation-dominated criticism of cinema, a Marxist analysis would seek meaning through its criticism of capitalism and theory of social change, which would then consider cinema as a component in the forces that determine the consciousness of social beings.

In Marxist terms, the general populace is alienated from the material culture it has produced because the conditions of capitalism have created a situation that alienates labour. This alienation occurs in a twofold manner: the worker is alienated from the things that he produced (where the surplus value becomes the capitalist's profit) and the worker is alienated from himself (because he has become a commodity himself, something to be sold in the marketplace). This can be extrapolated to humanity in general, where human beings have lost their connection to what it means to be human, the connections to one another and the very meaning of existence. Rather than seeking meaning and fulfilment, the social forces of capitalism and the necessity of labour in order to exist now determine human life activity. In other words, human life is no longer about living but about surviving, where people become slaves in a relentless system of profit maximization. Capitalist economy, therefore, is a gigantic enterprise of dehumanization that transforms human beings from goals in themselves into instruments

and means for money-making and capital accumulation.¹ The question then becomes, why don't people rise up and resist this dehumanization? In part, the answer is that people do not see themselves as dehumanized because their social reality is veiled by illusion and their social being informed by a false consciousness.

According to Marx, our social being is a result of, and defined by, the struggle between two classes in opposition, the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeois (capitalists). In 1845, Marx and Engels wrote:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.²

In other words, the economic base of material production determines how we develop other social formations, including politics, law, religion, philosophy, science, as well as cultural and ideological activities, which Marx called the superstructure. The ruling class controls the economic base and consequently the cultural and ideological products, which in turn creates ideology that supports the ruling class and controls the

¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Introduction by Ernest Mandel (1976). Translation by Ben Fowkes (1976). Appendix translation by Rodney Livingstone (1976). Vintage Books. New York. 1977. Pg. 65.

² Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. "The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 9.

ideas and belief systems of the working class. This includes the proposition of the determining base and the determined superstructure, where “determine” no longer implies an external force, as found in theology, but rather in men’s own activities.³ In short, it is not consciousness that determines our existence, but our social existence that determines consciousness.

Marx was convinced that the cause of the alienated worker was of paramount important for the whole future of humankind. However, ideology masks the objective reality of society by creating illusions. These illusions, as found in the cinema, support a kind of false consciousness, which can allow people to deal with the harsh reality of their existence by distancing themselves from reality. Thus, the alienated worker, or viewer, is further alienated from their conditions of life through the illusion that they are not alienated. This becomes a kind of double distancing from reality, which Walter Benjamin contends is a combination of dream and reality, often marked by idealism and an artificial vision of future happiness. In other words, workers are deluded into believing they are not being exploited, and the illusions that support this delusion are created by the very system that does the exploiting, namely capitalism.

The task of cultural forms, in particular mass cultural forms, is to appeal to individual subjects objectified by ideological formations, allowing them to remain convinced that they are still subjects within that ideology. Therefore, if the individual subject is unaware of their dehumanization, or if they feel incapable of making any change, then the goal is to pierce the layers of phenomena to try to raise awareness by

³ Williams, Raymond. “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pgs. 130-133.

revealing how these phenomena are only an illusion that hides the basic forces and contradictions that the capitalist mode of production creates. One of the problems is that the capitalist mode of production creates a material totality that is also reproduced in man's thought. This is primarily due to the nature of commodity production, which occludes a view of our social reality by generating a social relation between people that appears as a relation between people and things. The value of a thing is no longer indicative of its use-value but of its exchange-value, values that are now reflective of our social reality and our social being. In other words, under capitalism, a system of generalized commodity production, people are in the grip of a false consciousness where they have the illusion of being confronted by things when in reality they are confronted with specific social relations of production. Marx calls this phenomenon the fetishism of the commodity.⁴

Marx writes that the commodity "appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."⁵ By definition, the commodity is a thing that satisfies some human need, whether material or otherwise, "from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference."⁶ Thus, there is nothing particularly mysterious about a thing or its use-value. Marx offers the example of a wooden table, an ordinary, sensuous thing. However, as soon as the thing emerges as a commodity, it transcends sensuousness. In an example rife with cinematic imagery, Marx contends that the wooden table now evolves grotesque ideas out of its wooden brain that are "far more wonderful

⁴ Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Pg. 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 125.

than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”⁷ The transformation from thing to commodity is so extraordinary that Marx claims that to find an analogy, “we must take flight into the misty realm of religion.”⁸ All manner of mysterious properties are now attributed to the commodity, many of which reflect the social relation between people transformed into “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁹ Marx imagines that if commodities could speak, they might say that their use-value is only of interest to people, but it does not belong to them as objects. What does belong to them as objects is the relation between themselves merely as exchange-values.¹⁰ If we extrapolate this relation back to people, then we have the very nature of social relations in capitalist society, a relation between people based on exchange-values just like things. Consequently, the voice of the object is a concept that will engage both Benjamin and Adorno.

Capital presupposes that goods are not being produced for direct consumption (barter) by the producing communities, but are sold as commodities, things that are valued differently from simply their use-value to include surplus-value; that the total labour potential of society has become fragmented, just as private property is the fragmentation of social labour. Thus, the transformation of the product into a commodity means not only that the commodity takes on values that are no longer indicative of its use-value, it also means that human beings are now transformed into the producers and consumers of commodities where our values are no longer indicative of human fulfilment and meaning. Nonetheless, we are the possessors of commodities and commodities are

⁷ Ibid., pgs. 163-164.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 165.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 165.

¹⁰ Ibid., pgs. 176-7

things that lack the power to resist man, so in order to facilitate the process of exchange, we, the guardians of the commodities, must take them into the marketplace. Thus, the circulation of commodities is the starting point of capital and all its historical and social consequences.¹¹

Dialectics implies that every phenomenon has an origin and an end, hence is material. Capitalism is a system and, like anything, must have a beginning and an ending. However, the capitalist mode of production has shown a capacity of adaptation and self-reform may reach far beyond anything that Marx envisioned. If so, then the inevitable decline of capitalism, which is inherent due to its contradictions, may not lead inevitably to socialism, but instead to barbarism.¹² Nevertheless, cultural forms may provide hope against the dehumanization of humankind by challenging the imposed beliefs behind the illusions and false consciousness of our modern social reality. However, for Marx, art can only exist in a stunted form in a bourgeois society. This brings on the question of which cultural forms would be most effective for the task of emancipation. Lukács would support realism as a cultural countermeasure that attempts to penetrate the illusions obfuscating the underlying reality. Another means would be modernism, as maintained by Adorno, which sought the liquidation of bourgeois idealism through demythification, a process that sought to destroy these same illusions.

In this epoch of late capitalism, the cinematic medium stands as the most evocative of the 20th century in terms of its social dimension as a mass art form, its technological components and capitalist modes of production, and in its contribution to

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 247.

¹² Ibid. pg. 86.

the reification of our consciousness. The question then becomes the following: to what extent is the cinematic form capable of freeing us from the dehumanization of capitalist society and challenging property relations, and to what extent is the cinema a coercive cultural form that justifies social domination. In addition, is the potential of the cinema as an emancipatory cultural form best served through its use of realism or modernism? Of course, it may be that the cinematic medium contains something of both the emancipatory and the coercive, and perhaps more than that, offering a social being the possibility of reconciling a multitude of disparate and contrary beliefs (syncretism) within the context of society while simultaneously contributing to the inevitable societal restraints that attempt to control one's views.

The cinematic form may also be regarded as the realization of our physiological predisposition to think in terms of images. Lacan maintained that language is structured like the unconscious. Jung theorized that the human mind possesses a predisposition toward images, ones that we may all share in our collective unconscious.¹³ In which case, it may be that the unconscious structure of language is made conscious through the living experience of images. Benjamin would support this same conviction in his view of film when he suggests, “we discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.”¹⁴

¹³ Frey-Rohn, Liliane. *From Freud to Jung – A Comparative Study of the Psychology of the Unconscious*. Translated by Fred E. Engreen and Evelyn K. Engreen. Forward by Robert Hinshaw. Shambhala Publications. Boston. 1974. Pg. 94.

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” (1937) *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 117.

The subconscious connections between language and images also support the assertion that film stands in much closer proximity to the novel than to the theatre. The film and the novel stand on either side of the creative vision, one made manifest through images, the other through words. Like the novel, the cinema presents us with a view of an action controlled by the director (writer) at every moment. Our eye cannot wander about the screen, as it does on the stage. Also, like the novel, cinema is able to manipulate time and space by jumping from one place to another, one action to another, yet maintain a comprehensible narrative flow. These jumps also create a form of narration, just as the continuity of juxtapositions implies, “Meanwhile...” or “Then this happened...”

In her 1961 essay “A Note on Novels and Films,” Susan Sontag claims that the cinema is a kind of pan-art, with “its own methods and logic of representation, which one does not exhaust by saying that they are primarily visual. The cinema presents us with a new language, a way of talking about emotion through the direct experience of the language of faces and gestures.”¹⁵ More importantly, the cinema is moving pictures, a new form of communication that combines our innate ability to visualize and the intrinsic structure of language within lived experience, both intrinsically linked to the demand for illusions and a compelling ideology. This may explain how in little more than a century our modern landscape has become so saturated with images that we may find ourselves taken to a place in which reality has lost its realness, dramatically changing the relationship between nature and our social reality, and the very structure of our consciousness.

¹⁵ Sontag, Susan. “A Note on Novels and Films” (1961). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Delta Publishing. New York. 1990. Pg. 243.

For Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno, the nature of our existing social reality and the creation of a new social reality are of the utmost importance. To create a truly beautiful world demands an emancipatory cultural form that can overcome the alienation and de-humanization found in modern bourgeois society, causing a revolutionary change that would mark the beginning of the aesthetic education of humanity. By doing so, art inherits the burden of reconciliation that religion can no longer fulfil in a secular society. Religion promises reconciliation in some future life, the next world, and art promises reconciliation within the course of history, the here and now. In the totally administered society, art still makes possible a certain kind of experience, not the experience of the reified world, but of lived experience, which in itself restores aspects of the spiritual. The question then becomes whether art attempts to represent something that civilized society once had but lost, a view held by Lukács, or if art serves as an impetus for something that is yet to come, a view held by Adorno and Benjamin.

The aim of this project is to interpret the cinema through the multifaceted lens of Marxist aesthetics in order to investigate the cinema's role as an instrument in forming our social being and, in turn, how our social reality created the cinematic form, including an analysis of the cinema's potential to change our social reality. I begin by establishing Lukács's conception of aesthetics, which will serve as a foundation for a Marxist interpretation of the cinematic form. This will be followed by a consideration of a number of works written by Benjamin and Adorno – which are in a kind of dialogue with each other and with Lukács - in order to present their very different perspectives of our social reality where, despite their differences, each had a certain kind of truth on their side. This will lead to a more complex, perhaps paradoxical, formulation of the modern

cinema's potential as an emancipatory cultural form. Where Benjamin sought a new world of dialectical images and a revolutionary mass art through the influence of Dada, Surrealism and the Russian avant-garde, Adorno believed that such a mass art was unattainable, given the nature of the industrial conditions of production that governed what he called the Culture Industry.

At the same time, I will provide historical context by considering various key or paradigmatic episodes in the history of cinematic culture, including the age of its invention in the 1880s, the early stages of its development as a cultural form, the Soviet avant-garde, Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, and the New Hollywood of the 1960s and early 70s. I will also consider the era prior to the invention of the cinematic form, which will establish the social and cultural context that determined the extraordinarily rapid rise of the cinema as a cultural form and help explain how the cinema came to play such a significant role in the determination of our social reality.

There are five chapters in this project. The first chapter considers Lukács's development of Marxist aesthetics as proposed in his pre-Marxist period of *The Theory of the Novel* (1914) and in his post-Marxist period of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). This will introduce Lukács's belief in the rise of the proletariat, his concept of reification, which expands on the Marxist concepts of dialectical materialism and the fetishism of commodities, and his hope for an emergent form of art, which, although Lukács did not consider it, may prove to be the cinema. According to Lukács, there are two possible paths to take into the future: one that leads to an opportunity for change or one that leads to ideological adaptation and conformity. The opportunity for change demands the raising of the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, which demands

an external source of revolutionary consciousness, which introduces Lukács's support of realism over modernism. In conclusion, I will establish the essence of the problematic through the consideration of the following questions: is the cinema the emergent form that Lukács hoped for, and, if so, what is the potential of the cinema as an external source of revolutionary consciousness and an emancipatory cultural form.

The second chapter will locate the origins of modern apperception through the genesis of the image-making technology, where apperception is the process by which individual experiences of the new are assimilated and transformed within perceptions of the past to form a new whole. A guide will be Benjamin's essay "Little History of Photography" (1931), and his exposé, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935).¹⁶ Through them, I will investigate the transformations in the urban landscape that brought about the destruction of the old world and the rise of modern society, the allure of phantasmagoria, the character of the *flâneur*, photography, and the changes in the perception of time. In so doing, I seek to illuminate how dialectical images are capable of altering our experience of time and liberating us from the reified world of convention through a consciousness-raising apperception. This will locate the sources of Benjamin's assessment of the cinema as an emancipatory cultural form.

In the third chapter, I will consider Adorno's response to Benjamin's exposé, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935) and establish the basis for Adorno's rejection of Benjamin's dialectical images as well as his rejection of the cinema as an emancipatory cultural form. I will also consider Adorno's variation on Lukacs's demand

¹⁶ There are three versions of the exposé: "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935), "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century – Exposé of 1939," and the final draft, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1939).

for an external source of revolutionary consciousness, which in turn supports his views on the role of the intellectual and the re-functioning of cultural forms, which in turn will support Adorno's views of modernism and the need for demythification.

In the fourth chapter, I will consider Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1937),¹⁷ which claims that the reproducibility of the cinematic form and its subsequent loss of "aura" supports the goal of demythification (or perhaps *remythification*) due to its ability to pierce the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity. In order to establish Adorno's response, I will consider his essay, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938). I will also consider elements of Adorno's subsequent work, including *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), co-written with Max Horkheimer, and *In Search of Wagner* (1952). In particular, I will consider the section in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* entitled, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." This will mark the apotheosis in Adorno and Benjamin's debate and their very different assessments of the cinematic form, which includes Adorno's polemic against the Hollywood popular cinema. Adorno determines that commodified cultural forms are not simply entertainment, particularly the popular cinema, but can serve goals of totalitarianism in their liquidation of the individual and the organization of the mass audience. I will consider Adorno's continuing defence of modernism as a means to provide a political intervention within bourgeois cultural forms, such as the Hollywood cinema.

¹⁷ There are two versions of this essay: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1937).

The final chapter will summarize the views of Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno in terms of the modern cinema as an emancipatory cultural form and its impact on our social reality. In particular, I will consider the paradoxical nature of the cinematic form where, despite Benjamin and Adorno's very different assessments, there are aspects of both the emancipatory and the ideological. However, just as capitalism must have a beginning and an ending, so the cinematic form is also in the process of change, its demise or reinvention a result not only of changing technology but also of apperception, where the profound changes in modern social reality are assimilated and transformed by our perceptions of the past. Defined by commodities and redefined by images, our social reality is the crucible of our own self-creation and holds the promise of the future. Ultimately, there are certain aspects of the unique philosophies of Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno that merge, not perhaps into a harmonious totality, but into a new cultural form that may initiate the Marxist goal to change reality and begin the aesthetic education of humankind, or at least the new formulation of that hope.

CHAPTER 1:

The development of Marxist aesthetics, as well as the social and historical context of pre-World War II Marxism, appears in Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1914) and *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukács asserts there are two possible paths to take into the future: one that leads to an opportunity for change and one that leads to ideological adaptation and conformity. The dilemma posed by this choice inspires Lukács's wistful hope for an emergent form of art that would urge us along the path to change, succeeding where the novel had failed, thus reconciling humanity in a new social reality. Although Lukács did not acknowledge it at the time, a new form had already arrived, one that would have the potential to change our social reality, perhaps even change our perception of reality itself: the cinema.

In this chapter, I consider development of Marxist aesthetics through Lukács, the use of critical realism, the hope for an emergent cultural form, the concept of reification, as well as the affirmation of the goal to change our social reality. Although Lukács did not consider the cinema in these works, his view of cultural forms, as well as the historical context of his writing that coincides with the early era of the silent cinema, will lay the foundation for an investigation of cinema through perspectives inspired by Marxist aesthetics and provide a basis to interpret Benjamin and Adorno's views of the cinema. In terms of an historical epoch, I will look at how the Soviet cinema after the October Revolution presented the opportunity for revolutionary reforms.

In 1914, the first American feature-length film was released, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a depiction of events during the American Civil War. Despite its blatant racism, the technical brilliance and vast scope made the film an enormous critical and financial success. Over three million people saw the film in its first year. The same year also marked the collapse of the European film markets due to the First World War, all except Germany, which maintained its own industry for reasons of both national pride and political propaganda. Consequently, the Hollywood studio system was able to establish the global dominance in film production and distribution that it has maintained for almost a century.

In the summer of 1914, during the outbreak of hostilities and prior to his conversion to Communism, Lukács began his first draft of *The Theory of the Novel*, subtitled *A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. According to the preface of the 1962 edition, Lukács recalls a mood of permanent despair and admits, somewhat apologetically, that he was not simply looking for a new literary form but for a new world. In seeking a general dialectic of literary genres, he became convinced that the problems of the novel form were the mirror image of a world gone out of joint. In order to initiate real change within our reality, a barren reality that no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art, we would need a literature that is “*creatively polemical*.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel – A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. First printed by P. Cassirer, Berlin, 1920. Hermann Luchterland Verlag GmbH, 1963. Translation @ The Merlin Press, 1971. M.I.T. Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. First MIT Press Edition, 1971. Pg. 145.

Lukács found hope in the subversive writings of Dostoevsky, which, rather than an immanent reconciliation of humanity through divine providence, suggest the possibility of human praxis.¹⁹ In fact, Lukács began by compiling a book on Dostoevsky, originally conceived in the form of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It would contain a series of dialogues where a group of young people withdraw from the insanity of war, just as the storytellers of the *Decameron* withdraw from the plague. Only now the modern version would convert the plague into capitalism, its toxic symptoms apparent in the pathological, the aberrant, and the deformed in modern culture, little of which Lukács found deserving of consideration as true art, which may explain his evasion of the cinema. Preferring the masterpieces of bourgeois realism, and later the products of socialist realism, Lukács would maintain an unrelieved hostility to modernism of all kinds where he saw only an expression of the decline from the heights of classical form.

Despairing for the Romantic ideal of a reconciled humanity, Lukács begins *The Theory of the Novel* with, "Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths," where, "the world is wide and yet like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars."²⁰ Lukács envisioned an integrated civilization such as classical Greece, where life and essence coexisted, and allowing humans to live their lives within a meaningful world. The modern era, unfortunately, was not such an age. The world and the self, the light and the fire, had become permanent

¹⁹ A familiar term in the Marxist lexicon, "praxis" can be loosely defined as a kind of self-creating action, which differed from the externally motivated behaviour produced by forces outside man's control. This would be an important term in the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. See Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination – A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. 1973. Pg. 4.

²⁰ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 29.

strangers. Rather than an integrated civilization, we have a problematical civilization, one that is distinguished by its opaqueness rather than its transparency, where its need for philosophy is in itself a symptom of our transcendental “homelessness.”²¹ Thus, having alienated ourselves from reality and unable to achieve totality, namely the unity of subject and object, we are filled with an unaccountable nostalgia for what we have lost. We exist somewhere between past and future, stranded perhaps, as Lukács wrote, evoking Fichte, in “an age of absolute sinfulness.”²²

The Greek epic form created harmony, according to Lukács, whereas all other forms have led to triviality and fragmentation. However, any form of art is bound to its historical moment. In order to recreate the epic form we would also have to recreate the historical moment, namely the social conditions that would allow the possibility of the epic. Thus, we find ourselves in a paradox where art offers the possibility of redemption, capable of remaking the world in its own utopian image, and yet a problematical world does not allow art to be strong enough to be capable of that remaking, and so we must always nullify the very form that might lead to its own reconciliation. Even the novel, which Lukács regards as the highest cultural form, fails to express the eternity within us, thus exposing a gap between the finite and the infinite that can be expressed only through irony. Ultimately, rather than a true illumination, all we are offered is a pessimistic anti-illumination.

Nevertheless, Lukács concludes *The Theory of the Novel* with his optimism for the works of Dostoevsky, where he perceives a new humanism that manages to bridge the

²¹ Ibid., pg. 29. Lukács quotes Novalis: “Philosophy is really homesickness, it is the urge to be at home everywhere.”

²² Ibid., pg. 153.

abyss between abstract idealism and romantic disillusionment. The possibility of transcending the limitations of the novel form now offered a faint glimmer of the renewed epic, an emergent form for a new world. However, whether this marked the end of the age of sinfulness, Lukács would only concede the slim possibility for a form drawn from material reality, yet capable of resisting “the sterile power of the merely existent.”²³

If we look ahead, we find that Dostoevsky’s novels have frequently been adapted for film, yet they have rarely had great success outside of Russia, the exception being his short stories, as found in such films as Luchino Visconti’s *La notte bianca* (Italy 1957). The longing and self-delusion of the film’s two main characters, where life is an ongoing reconciliation between the material and the ideal, the real and the illusion, is reflective of Lukács when he wrote,

Totality of being is possible only where everything is already homogenous before it has been contained by forms; where forms are not a constraint but only the becoming conscious, the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths of that which had to be given form; where knowledge is virtue and virtue is happiness, where beauty is the meaning of the world made visible.²⁴

²³ Ibid., pg. 153.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 34.

Motivated by a utopianism that he would later regard as both “highly naïve” and “totally unfounded,”²⁵ Lukács became convinced that the best hope for a worthwhile existence must begin with the disintegration of capitalism. The October Revolution provided an historical opportunity for revolutionary action, a proper historical moment that would allow the proletariat to see through the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity. Under capitalism, bourgeois society threatens to reduce everything, including social relations, to mere commodities; under Bolshevism, philosophical thought transforms into revolutionary action. After the October Revolution, Susan Buck-Morss notes that, “The revolution entered the phenomenal world of the everyday.”²⁶

Tsar Nicholas II called the cinema “an empty, totally useless and even harmful form of entertainment...no importance whatsoever should be attached to such stupidities.”²⁷ The Bolsheviks did not make the same mistake. In August 1919, ten months after officially taking over the government, the Soviet film industry was nationalized and placed under the New People’s Commissariat of Education. Thus, the cinema proved central to the construction of Soviet mass society, particularly for the new government in its efforts to codify cultural responses in order to legitimize itself and its methods, and to provide the widely dispersed and mostly illiterate audience with an accessible cultural form, enabling citizens to recognize themselves within the sweeping

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 20. Lukács would retract the ideas proposed in *The Theory of the Novel*, regarding his earlier sense of hopelessness and despair as a product of the very bourgeois subjectivity that he had sought, in vain, to critique.

²⁶ Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 42.

²⁷ Cousins, Mark. *The Story of Film*. Thunder’s Mouth Press. New York. 2004. Pg. 48.

transformations. The Russian cinema culture found itself in a unique position to reassess its future:

with Marxists holding state power, questions of entertainment versus instruction, traditional versus radical form, drama versus documentary, literary versus visual communication, native versus foreign (especially Hollywood) models, ethnic nationalisms versus national culture, religious versus secular culture, urban versus rural, and popular audience versus intellectual creators, were raised as practical as well as theoretical matters.²⁸

Initially, Lukács expressed moral reservations about the violence of the Bolshevik's seizure of power, reservations later exacerbated under Stalin's tenure, yet he joined the Communist Party in December 1918, establishing his lifelong and steadfast political convictions. If the class-consciousness of the proletariat rose to action on behalf of society as a whole, then there existed the possibility of a genuine reconciliation of humanity. Because it knew what it meant to suffer, and because of its own collective commodification as a source of labour power, the working class was the only class capable of true self-knowledge. Thus, any individual identity must be realized in the context of class, of social and historical environment, making the proletariat both subject and object of history. Consequently, Lukács ascribed an almost messianic power to the proletariat and his writing evolved from a social critique of bourgeois consciousness to an

²⁸ Kleinmans, Chuck. "Marxism and film." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford University Press. 1998. Pg. 107.

affirmation of the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat class, progressing from the moral shortcomings of “sinfulness” to the societal decline of “decadence.”²⁹

Lukács claimed that the major obstacle to revolutionary change is reification, which caused a distortion of our social reality and our modern social consciousness. One aspect of reification, as proposed by Marx, is the fetishization of commodity forms, of giving abstract, even transcendent, value to things. Under these circumstances, the operation of exchange no longer takes place as a relation between human beings, replaced instead by a relation between things. Specific to our age, this commodity-structure becomes the basis of the relations between people that in itself takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a “phantom objectivity.”³⁰ Although the bourgeoisie had endowed the individual with an unprecedented importance, at the same time individuality was annihilated by the economic conditions to which the individual is subjected. Therefore, bourgeois subjectivity is unable to change social reality because “even when it acts it merely modifies surface phenomena, leaving unchanged the fundamentally reified character of the ‘second nature’ in which it has enslaved all of humanity (including itself).”³¹ Thus, from the Marxist perspective, the cinema becomes a bourgeois cultural form that nullifies itself, diverting attention from the exploitation, violence and oppression of a capitalist society, even while struggling with its inability to strive towards the conscious reshaping of the world and reconciliation.

²⁹ Kadarkay, Arpad. *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics*. Blackwell. Cambridge, MA. 1991. Pg. 335.

³⁰ Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1971. Pg. 83.

³¹ Cutrofello, Andrew. *Continental Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge. New York. 2005. Pg. 240.

By making the distinction between modern society, which is socially and historically produced, and nature, which has its own history, ‘second nature’, which uses reification as its mode of change, attacks the presumption that the world in its present form is its “natural” state. Second nature, therefore, is Lukács’s term for the lived experience of modern society locked within its own historical moment, a problematical civilization estranged from nature and from reality. The result is the loss of freedom and a condition of dehumanization where the collective human vocation for creating a beautiful world gives way to the isolation of individuals transfixed by the sublimity of the abstract value of things, worshipping commodities like idols in lieu of the invisible God. Therefore, the reified structure of existence must be relentlessly disrupted by constantly renewed efforts on behalf of the proletariat so that the true nature of society is revealed. If the highest good for humanity can only be achieved through human praxis, then, as Lukács writes in his opening line of *History and Class Consciousness*, “Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic.”³² Thus, the central goal of the dialectical method is to transform the world and “*to change reality*.”³³

However, a problem arises in that isolated individual workers cannot achieve revolutionary class-consciousness on their own. The conditions of working-class people’s lives, their isolation from each other, their lack of organization, inhibits its emergence. Therefore, the construction of class-consciousness must come from outside the proletariat itself. For this reason, Lukács supports an external construction where political revolution serves as the means and social revolution serves as the end, which fits in precisely with

³² Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

his embrace of the Communist Party and Lenin's revolutionary socialism as well as his earlier inclination towards Dostoevsky's subversive radicalism.

To this point, shortly after the Bolsheviks nationalized the Soviet film industry, they commissioned a Cinema Committee, headed by Lenin's wife. The committee founded the world's first film school in Moscow and its primary purpose was to train filmmakers in order to produce "agitki" and "agitprop."³⁴ *Agitki* were newsreels edited for the purpose of agitation and propaganda, perhaps best known through Dziga Vertov and his *kino-pravda* (cinema-truth).³⁵ Agitprop (agitation-propaganda) are films designed to disseminate and promote Leninist reforms and new governmental programmes, which included literacy, personal hygiene, and anti-alcoholism initiatives.³⁶ The making of *agitki* and agitprop would become the theoretical and the practical training grounds for many of the important filmmakers of the Soviet avant-garde, including Eisenstein. His first film *Strike* (*Stachka*, 1924) proved to be revolutionary in both its impact on its audience and in its place in history as the first mass film of the new Soviet state. Eisenstein, a Marxist himself, would proclaim it "the October of the cinema."³⁷ Rather than *kino-pravda*, he wanted to employ a "kino-fist,"³⁸ replacing theatrical effects with cinematic shocks or stimuli that celebrated the spirit of revolutionary violence and the Bolshevik agitation for change.

³⁴ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 116.

³⁵ Vertov's political critiques also extended to contemporary cinema. His most famous work is *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), often recognized as a work of cine-poetry.

³⁶ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 103.

³⁷ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 127.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 126.

The two pioneers of the early cinema, Griffith and Eisenstein, exemplify the differences in the two cinematic paths followed by Hollywood and the Soviets, and perhaps the two Lukácsian paths of ideological conformity and the opportunity for change. Griffith sought a cosmic order found in the melodramatic struggle between Good and Evil, a struggle whose outcome provided an ideological cornerstone for the Hollywood cinema, one that privileged individualism, liberal democracy, bourgeois values, an American sense of manifest destiny, and the fabrication of the “American Dream.”³⁹ Contrary to the Hollywood cinema, and the path to ideological conformity taken by Griffith, Eisenstein discards the individual hero entirely; casting instead non-actors based on their natural expression and physique to represent not one person but a whole societal group, and in so doing he creates a non-individuated “character,” where, for example, the hero is the working class as a collective protagonist. At a time when Western directors portrayed the crowd as a negative image, because crowds run counter to the celebration of individualism, Eisenstein glorified the crowd as an organic force. Benjamin, who visited Moscow in 1926, would praise Eisenstein’s cinema masses as “architectonic,”⁴⁰ declaring that film was the only medium that could “transmit this turbulent collective.”⁴¹

³⁹ A term attributed to James Truslow Adams from his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*.

⁴⁰ Buck-Morss. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. Pg. 147. The term “architectonic” comes from Mikhail Bakhtin, who suggests identity does not belong merely to the individual but is shared by all. In the same way, he suggests modern stories incorporate “heteroglossia,” a weave of multiple stories. See Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Discourse in the Novel.” *The Dialogic Imagination – Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press. Austin, Texas. 1981. Pg. 301.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pgs. 147.

Eisenstein's aesthetic goal was to make the cinematic equivalent of Marx's theory of dialectical materialism. In fact, at one point Eisenstein wanted to make Marx's voluminous *Das Kapital* (1867) into a film, which he hoped would raise film into the realm of philosophy.⁴² Eisenstein, who had trained as an engineer, followed the Soviet ideal of the 1920s and adapted a constructivist approach that combined the creativity of art with the exactness of science. In order to maximize cinematic effect, not only did the apparatus need to be fully understood, but the film itself must be organized, and therefore, next to the actual filming itself, the most important aspect of creating a cinematic reality is the way in which a film is constructed, namely montage.

However, the enthusiasm for experimentation was hampered by the fact that Russia was under attack by Western forces, which severely restricted film supplies and equipment from entering Russia (raw film stock only began to reappear in 1922 after the signing of the Soviet-German trade agreement). One of Eisenstein's teachers, Lev Kuleshov, organized a workshop to produce "films without celluloid."⁴³ This was primarily an intellectual endeavour that involved writing, shooting, and assembling films entirely on paper, or re-cutting existing films to achieve different meanings. This intellectual work also included repeat viewings of Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), purportedly screened continuously until the film finally fell apart.⁴⁴ Kuleshov and his students used editing to create a process where logically or empirically dissimilar images are linked together synthetically to produce metaphors, that is, non-literal meaning. These

⁴² Ibid. pg. 155n6. Eisenstein also wanted to make Joyce's *Ulysses*, another unlikely prospect.

⁴³ Ibid, pg. 118.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 119. After Lenin saw *Intolerance*, he cabled Griffith to offer him the job of heading up the new Soviet film industry, which had only just been nationalized (Griffith declined).

experiments culminated with the idea that cinematic time and space are subordinate to the process of editing, or montage.

Montage could have very different applications. On one hand, the editing process of montage, a technical procedure, allowed for the creation of cinematic illusions and abstractions that can be spatial, physical, emotional and psychological. This would be the basis for the “seamless” illusions of the Hollywood “classical” style, also known as the “continuity” style, which fuses the various cinematic elements in such a way that all evidence of artifice is eliminated. On the other hand, the technique of montage, an artistic procedure, allowed for the negation of illusion by juxtaposing radically dissimilar images in such a way as to draw attention to itself as an artificial construction. This latter application would be the basis for Dadaism, Surrealism, as well as Picasso and Braque’s analytic cubism. The artists of the avant-garde, the Dadaists in particular, applied both cultural and political radicalism to their work. In particular, the Dadaists attempted to “shatter” the production relations of modern society, often using film-like effects to shock their viewers, causing Benjamin to ascribe to them the role of precursors who created the demand for film. For the spectator of the film, contemplative immersion is replaced by distraction and percussive effects, thus: “*Film has freed the physical shock effect – which Dadaism had kept wrapped, as it were, inside the moral shock effect – from this wrapping.*”⁴⁵

One of the influences on Benjamin was the Communist Dada artist John Heartfield, who also worked as a set designer for Brecht. Heartfield’s polemical montages gave expression to Benjamin’s view that art would no longer be based on ritual

⁴⁵ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” Pg. 119.

but on politics. Because montage counteracts illusion, and because its elements remain unreconciled rather than harmonized into a totality, Benjamin considered montage a progressive form that had “special, perhaps even total rights.”⁴⁶ He would use the technique of montage as the guiding principle behind the construction of his massive work, *The Arcades Project*. This same principle would also inform his conception of the “dialectical image,” where the elements within the image, both past and present, are unreconciled and do not fuse into one harmonious totality. This would become a point of difference between Benjamin and Adorno. Benjamin believed that the constellation of philosophical and historical concepts could be represented by a dialectical image, whereas Adorno did not, believing the dialectical image was “static” and “unmediated” and that these constellations could only be realized by dialectical argumentation.⁴⁷ Thus, in Adorno’s terms, the constellation required a rearrangement that revealed the unscripted relationships among established concepts, allowing for a new perspective that demanded a further mediation of unresolved differences.

Eisenstein’s use of montage was supported by a constructivist approach, as well as the machine culture and Taylorism of the day. He was influenced not only by Kuleshov’s experiments, but also Pavlov’s experiments with conditioned reflexes, Freud’s manifestations of the unconscious in forms of parapraxis (i.e. the Freudian slip), and stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold’s system of bio-mechanics, where actors imitate

⁴⁶ Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. First paperback edition. 1991. Pg. 67.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pg. 67.

the regular and repetitious actions of machines.⁴⁸ Through the interaction of form and content between the shots, and by the way one shot determined the meaning of the preceding or following shot, Eisenstein believed he could create a dialectical synthesis of idea, emotion, perception, that would, in turn, create an intellectual perception of revolutionary history. Montage, therefore, was a tool to address both history and art in a dialectical way.

Rejecting the political and artistic conventions of the past, Eisenstein turned more and more to the ideas of the Italian Futurists and the Russian Formalists. Both movements experimented with the notion of fragmentation and reassembly as a means of artistic construction – a methodology supported by Kuleshov’s experiments in editing. The Futurists held that literary works resemble machines in that they are the deliberate result of human activity in which a specific skill transforms raw material into a complex mechanism suitable for a particular purpose. In addition, a work of art may be a personal expression of the artist, expressed by means of images and symbols, but it can only be correctly evaluated in terms of its place in social and political history.⁴⁹

The Soviet Formalists deigned that the traditional means of cultural expression had become automatic, “covered with the glassy armour of familiarity,”⁵⁰ whereby the viewer no longer experienced any work of art in a truly significant way. In order to

⁴⁸ McDonald, Paul. “Film Acting.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford University Press. 1998. Pg. 34.

⁴⁹ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 118.

⁵⁰ Christie, Ian. “Formalism and neo-formalism.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Consultant Editors Richard Dyer, E. An, n Kaplan, Paul Willemen. Oxford University Press. New York. 1998. Pg. 59.

prompt “laying bare the device,”⁵¹ the Formalists employed defamiliarization, a modernist approach of “making the familiar strange (*ostragenie*).”⁵² Brecht would use the same technique in his epic theatre, just as Benjamin will later write about film that its “social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”⁵³ For the same reason, Adorno will defend this approach in modernism because of its capacity for demythification.

Eisenstein was not without his critics, many of whom felt that his dialectical montage was overly manipulative of its audience, even totalitarian, and only served to prove the limitations of his methodology. His critics found justification in the film *October (Oktiabr, 1928)*, where all narrative connections were abandoned to fully pursue ideas of intellectual and ideological relationships. The film failed to find an audience and was rejected as impenetrable, proving that the techniques of montage, like all technological and methodological advances in cinema, only succeeds when applied within some specific narrative or dramatic context. In addition, Eisenstein was accused of formalist error, which meant placing personal artistic experiment over socialist realism. During the purges of the 1930s, Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein were all denounced for formalist error, effectively ending their careers; Meyerhold was shot by

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 59.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 59.

⁵³ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” (1935) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 21.

firing squad. Thus, artistic innovation is subverted by political expediency in order to re-establish ideological conformity in the arts.

Despite the proper revolutionary moment and despite the external construction of cultural forms, the October Revolution failed to realize Marx's version of Communism, digressing from the Leninist emphasis on the Vanguard party as the embodiment of revolutionary consciousness to the conformity of Stalinism. The terms "avant-garde" and "vanguard" originated in the military, meaning an advance force, just as the cultural avant-garde aligned itself with a progressive view of social forces. Only now the avant-garde had become politicized and therefore, proving true to Lukács's conviction, the very form that offered reconciliation had nullified itself. Once the move ahead grinds to a halt, the utopian dream hardens into the reality of oppression. The vanguard now turns to violence followed by total administration, yet it claims that history is moving forward. Buck-Morss notes that if revolution is the "illusion of politics," as Marx claimed, then it is the illusion of history that makes it seem real. Thus, history itself becomes a dreamworld.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, Lukács looked to socialist realism to lead the way through the period of transition, grounded as it was in a concrete socialist perspective. For Lukács, the problematical nature of the historical present would continue in the decline of late capitalism. This decline is evident in the vast increase in the forms of reification with "their empty extension to cover the whole surface of manifest phenomena."⁵⁵ At the same time, there is an increase in the undermining of the forms of reification, "the cracking of

⁵⁴ Buck-Morss. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. Pg. 67.

⁵⁵ Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 208.

the crust because of the inner emptiness.”⁵⁶ The fact that these two aspects of reification are in such acute opposition not only signals the inevitable decline of bourgeois society, it also presents two distinct possibilities for the proletariat: either adapt ideologically and conform to the emptiest and most decadent forms of bourgeois culture or substitute its own positive elements for the empty husks of present social reality. These are the two Lukácsian paths into the future.

In order to achieve a genuine reconciliation of humanity, and since the social conditions of the historical moment mean that an integrated civilization is not possible, Lukács looks to realism. Realism is an emancipatory cultural form because it views the present as a becoming, offering a knowledge of existing reality that raises class-consciousness by providing insight into the social and historical totality and thereby allowing the possibility of transforming the world. Essentially, Benjamin shared this view, although his interpretation would include the metaphysical, and rather than simply seeing society as decaying, he sees this as a symptom of the secular productive forces of history, just as he sees that at the same time it is possible to discover a new beauty in what is vanishing.⁵⁷ Benjamin’s view also builds upon Marx’s claim that all history is in fact pre-history, as universal human history had not yet begun because we are still confined within capitalism and its repetitive cycles of inflation, depression and unemployment. For Benjamin, natural history is really “*ur*-history,” as opposed to

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 208.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, Walter. “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 146.

bourgeois prehistory which is in fact prehistoric, which would also support his optimistic views regarding the “new nature” of technological forces.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Adorno’s defence of modernism is based on his belief that “so-called socialist realism” had been debased into reportage, and that art should be “the social antithesis of society,”⁵⁹ always containing an element, negated of what it repulses. In Lukács’s view, this is only pessimistic anti-illumination that offers no alternative to existing ideology. It acquires meaning only by being the opposite of something, by saying no, where even its negation becomes a kind of denial of its own culpability.

In his 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács accuses Adorno of taking up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” described as “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.”⁶⁰ The following year, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963), Lukács would write,

Life under capitalism is, often rightly, presented as a distortion (a petrification or paralysis) of the human substance. But to present psychopathology as a way of escape from this distortion is itself a distortion. We are invited to measure one type of distortion against another and arrive, necessarily, at universal distortion.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Pg. 64.

⁵⁹ Adorno, Theodore. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Continuum. New York. 2004. Pgs. 8 and 11.

⁶⁰ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 22.

⁶¹ Lukács, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Translated from the German by John and Necker Mander. Merlin Press. London. 1963. Pg. 33.

In response, Adorno would accuse Lukács of sacrificing the critical vigour of his earlier works, where he correctly identified the problem of reconciliation, replacing it with the “lie” that the proletariat has succeeded in fulfilling its destiny as the subject-object of history in the Eastern bloc.⁶²

Lukács’s dismissive approach to modernism garnered many other critics, including Sontag who disapproved of “a narrow forcing of art *per se* into the service of a particular moral or historical tendency.”⁶³ Lukács garnered further disapproval in that he focused primarily on the novel and ignored or misunderstood modern forms of expression, in particular the cinema, which Sontag heralded as the only new major art form of our century. Even so, looked at in a modern light, Lukács becomes a partisan in the resistance against the totally administered society, a term used by Adorno, and “a monument to old-fashioned content-analysis.”⁶⁴ Even Sontag concedes in a 1964 essay that Lukács is “the senior figure living today within the borders of the Communist world who speaks a Marxism that it is possible for intelligent non-Marxists to take seriously.”⁶⁵ By advocating the possibility of some full and non-problematical representation of reality, which places “knowing the world back together with changing the world,”⁶⁶

⁶² Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 267.

⁶³ Sontag, Susan. “The literary criticism of Georg Lukács” (1965). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Delta Publishing, New York. 1990. Pg. 90.

⁶⁴ Jameson, Fredric. “Reflections in Conclusion.” *Aesthetics and Politics*. With presentations by Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson and Francis Mulhern. Afterword by Fredric Jameson. Verso Books. London. 1980. Pg. 203.

⁶⁵ Sontag. “The literary criticism of Georg Lukács” (1965). Pg. 82.

⁶⁶ Jameson. “Reflections in Conclusion.” Pg. 204.

Lukácsian realism would support a documentary and sociological approach to the cinema.

In conclusion, Lukács's development of a Marxist aesthetic is based on his belief in the rise of the proletariat, the character of reified forms, as well as the Marxist concepts of alienation, the fetishism of commodities, and the goal to change reality and transform the world. Realism, as opposed to modernism, is an emancipatory cultural form because it is able to pierce the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity, whereas modernism offers only pessimistic anti-illumination. The two possible Lukácsian paths into the future, ideological conformity or opportunity for change, are realized through the "outside" construction of cultural forms, which can be either hegemonic or revolutionary. Although the cinema is an industrial art that relies on an apparatus, suggesting, as Benjamin would, that the revolutionary potential for an autonomous cultural form can be achieved through technology, as envisioned by the Soviet avant-garde, it also invokes the potential for hegemonic control in support of the ruling ideology, where the revolutionizing is only in the modes of production.

The failure of the Soviet avant-garde, and of Eisenstein's later films in particular, was due in part to changes in the cultural and political atmosphere from hard-line Stalinism, but also due to its failure to attract an audience. The abstract representations of class struggles, as well as the lack of narrative and the numbing of continued shock effects, only endorsed the audience's preference for narrative clarity and cinematic illusion, as found in the rival Hollywood cinema with its classical style of 'seamless' montage. Thus, the cinema that aspires to create a new vision of the world, such as that of Eisenstein, is often unable to find a popular audience, while the illusionist spectacle that it hopes to

topple enjoys mass approval. In retrospect, the same might be said of the political situation, where the illusion of capitalist freedom is preferable to the reality of communist equality, which casts doubt on the ability of the cinematic form to effect real change in terms of political social reality.

In the next chapter, I will consider aspects of the pre-history of cinema in order to discover how the changes in apperception, where the profound changes in modern social reality are assimilated and transformed by our perceptions of the past, have informed our modern social consciousness. These changes will prove to be important factors in determining the logic of the construction of the cinematic form while providing fertile ground for its rapid development. To locate these changes, we must go back to the origins of modern social reality, which, for Benjamin, is Paris in the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 2:

Benjamin's essay "Little History of Photography" (1931), and his exposé, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935), explore the origins of the image-making culture and the genesis of our modern social reality. The nature of bourgeois subjectivity and its visual constructions are realized through the character of the *flâneur*, the allure of phantasmagoria, the transformations in the urban landscape, and the profound changes in the perception of time. The subsequent transformations in modern apperception offer insights into the logic of the development of the cinematic form, its early emergence as a commodity, and its potential as a hegemonic instrument in support of bourgeois subjectivity. However, by investigating these phenomena, I will also look to establish the basis for Benjamin's argument for the cinema as an emancipatory form and its potential to raise the consciousness of the proletariat and redefine our social reality.

Rather than a strict conceptual analysis, Benjamin approaches the nineteenth century as if a "new dream-filled sleep"⁶⁷ had descended upon society through the natural phenomenon of capitalism and its reified world of commodities. The new social reality amounts to a reification of consciousness that paradoxically combines aspects of dreams and reality to create what the founder of Surrealism, André Breton, called "a kind of

⁶⁷ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume by Rolf Tiedemann. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. Pg. 391 [K1a,8].

absolute reality, a *surreality*.”⁶⁸ In an effort to reconcile dreams and reality, the tangible and the intangible, the past and the present, political Marxism and the mystical, Benjamin invokes his concept of dialectical images. In these images, he found “the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, [which] is the paradigm of dialectical thinking.”⁶⁹ Accordingly, the phenomena of the collective dream must be dissected as patiently and minutely as possible, so that we, its heirs, can understand the ramifications and, finally, awaken from our dream-induced sleep. If film were truly an emancipatory form, then its dialectical images would serve as a means to this end.

Benjamin’s exposé includes the epochal figures of the *flâneur*, the collector, the prostitute, the gambler, as well as collected fragments from society such as photography, fashion, architecture, iron construction, phalanstery, the Haussmannization of Paris, and the bourgeois *intérieur*. Out of these archetypal figures and historical fragments, Benjamin intended to construct an “*ur*-history” of modernity, which suggests not only the notion of a history within history, of a second nature within the first, but also the idea that the modern is archaic, where the present construction of our social reality is infused by constructions from the past. Raymond Williams makes this distinction when he observes that the dominant culture contains elements of “residual” and “emergent” forms.⁷⁰

Residual forms derive from some previous social formation; emergent forms are new

⁶⁸ Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. The Free Press. New York. 1977. Pg. 125.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, Walter. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 43.

⁷⁰ Williams. “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.” Pg. 137.

significances and experiences not yet absorbed into contemporary practice. Williams suggests that the dominant cultural order is generally alert to any forms perceived as emergent, viewing revolutionary ideas with scepticism, yet this also suggests that new ideas permeated with the old will meet less resistance. In either case, as proposed by Stuart Hall, any new, problematic or troubling events, ones that breach our expectancies and run counter to our “common-sense constructs,” or our “taken-for-granted” knowledge of social structures, must then be assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to “make sense.”⁷¹ (Hall 169) I

The combination of residual and emergent forms allows Benjamin to write, “Each epoch dreams the one to follow,”⁷² where present social reality contains the dreams of the prior epoch, “the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life.”⁷³ Tapping into the dreams of the collective would provide the building material for new visual constructions, just as iron provides the building material for new architectural constructions. The visual constructions begin with panoramas, massive artworks that depict large-scale views of natural and historical events, a combination of the architectural and the visual, as well as the residual and the emergent forms.

⁷¹ Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 169.

⁷² Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 33. Benjamin is quoting from Jules Michelet, an article entitled “*Avenir! Avenir!*” (Future! Future!). Pg. 45n6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pg. 34.

The popularity of the panoramas coincides with that of the dioramas, *trompe l'oeil* entertainments, often called “miracle rooms,”⁷⁴ introduced by Daguerre in Paris in 1822. The dioramas offer a more theatrical version of the single-panel panorama, where the audience stands or sits on a slowly revolving stage as multi-layered panels and nuanced lighting reveal and transform natural vistas, such as moonlit night into sun-filled day, winter snow into summer meadow, rainbow after a storm, waterfalls. These representations of nature, along with the deceptions of deftly manipulated changes, prepare the way not only for photography but also for film. The panorama makes an architectural work of painting, while the diorama creates a spatial and temporal mobility, both critical transitions in transporting an audience of atomized viewers to an imaginary realm while offering a dynamic representation of closely observed reality. In the next half century, these same traits will provide the fundamental components for the “moving pictures” of the cinematic form.

While closely observed realism had already appeared in the literary work of writers such as Balzac and Flaubert, the panoramic literature, principally illustrated magazines, now proclaims a new social reality that is “socially panoramic.”⁷⁵ For the last time, the worker is isolated in the provincial setting of an idyll; soon he will become part of the masses set amongst the urban landscapes and fashions. At the same time, the synthetic representations of nature found in the panorama and diorama encourage the estrangement from nature within a reified world of conventions. Lukács warns that, “the

⁷⁴ Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. University of California Press. Berkeley, CA. 1994. Pg. 128. See also Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 45*n11*.

⁷⁵ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 35.

modern sentimental attitude to nature is only a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of a parental home."⁷⁶ To this point, the enslavement of a second nature, we find the panoramas and dioramas coincide with the emergence of the Paris arcades of the 1820s and 30s.

In the arcades, where past and present experiences come together, where the phantasmagoria provides the narcotic to induce the 'new dream-filled sleep' of capitalism, we find the origins of modern social consciousness. Part market-place and part dream-world, half-interior and half-exterior public spaces, the arcades are a combination of residual and emergent cultures that exist halfway between the archaic and the modern. The arcades also stand halfway between world exhibitions, "places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish,"⁷⁷ and the private collection, which serves as a kind of anti-exhibition. Its wares fall between the pre-commodified thing and the fetishized commodity, on the tipping point of commodification where "things are freed from the drudgery of being useful."⁷⁸ The arcades are also the first establishments to use gas lighting, extending the day for the growing population of urban dwellers in search of diversions.⁷⁹ Just as the panoramic view is extended and accelerated by the railway journey, so the arcade extends into rows of shops with an ever-growing view of commodities, offering, just as cinemas will in the near future, "a phantasmagoria which a

⁷⁶ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 64.

⁷⁷ Benjamin. "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Pg. 36.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 39.

⁷⁹ Gas lighting began in 1805, followed by the safer and brighter kerosene lamps after 1869, followed by electrical lighting in the 1890s. Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 123.

person enters in order to be distracted [...] surrendering to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others.”⁸⁰

The individual’s alienation is the origin of modern social being and the very opposite of Lukács’s hope for a return to the “happy age” with its social totality and the reconciling of life and essence, of inner soul and outer world. Instead, this alienation distinguishes modern consciousness with its lost unity between self and world, where the incapacity for truly experiencing any conciliation between inner soul and outer world lends itself to superficial action without praxis, without a social goal, where,

The complete absence of an inwardly experienced problematic transforms such a soul into pure activity. Because it is at rest within its essential existence, every one of its impulses becomes an action aimed at the outside. The life of a person with such a soul becomes an uninterrupted series of adventures which he himself has chosen. He throws himself into them because life means nothing more to him than the successful passing of tests.⁸¹

This action-oriented disengagement anticipates a society which is only actively engaged in the consumption of vicarious experiences, thereby creating a society that is

⁸⁰ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 37. The term ‘phantasmagoria’ went from German to English in 1802 and originally applied to optical illusions produced by means such as the magic lantern. Its negative connotations stem from Marx’s descriptions of commodity fetishism. See Adorno, Theodor W. *In Search of Wagner*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Verso Books. London. Second impression. 1985. Pg. 85n.

⁸¹ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 41.

“fundamentally *spectaculist*,”⁸² which also anticipates the future importance of the cinema. The consumers in the “society of the spectacle,” a term used by Guy Debord and the Situationist International group of the 1950s and 60s, have become separated from the reality of everyday life, lost in consumerist fantasies and media phantasmagoria. Debord warns that the spectacle is entangling its devotees in the clutches of consumer capitalism, replicating consumption fetishism, and helping capital to commodify all domains of social and everyday life. The society of the spectacle is a consumer culture whose function is to make history forgotten within culture: “In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development everything. The spectacle aims at nothing but itself.”⁸³

The idea of history lost within culture reflects Marx’s concept that the capitalist era is only part of prehistory, which also informs Benjamin’s concept of the arcades. Here, the light filters through dingy glass roofs as into an aquarium of primitive sea life, a fossil world, where shop signs hang like zoo signs, “recording not so much the habitat as the origin and species of captured animals.”⁸⁴ Initially, the arcades are the domain of the collector, the anti-exhibitor, whose Sisyphean task is to take possession of things in order to divest them of their commodity character.⁸⁵ However, the new social reality is realized

⁸² Debord, Guy. “The Commodity as Spectacle.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 120.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pg. 120.

⁸⁴ Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Pg. 66.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, Walter. “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century – Exposé of 1939.” *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume by Rolf Tiedemann. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. Pg. 19.

through the *flâneur*, the man of leisure, a mobile version of the collector, who is an observer of the marketplace. Just as the commodity is the object under its veil of reification, so “The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the *flâneur* as phantasmagoria.”⁸⁶ It is through the *flâneur*, the collector of images, that modern photography will come into its own, where the camera is deemed capable of making discoveries.

The invention of photography in 1839 preserves the images first seen in the *camera obscura*, an optical device known since antiquity. The daguerreotype is the first photographic image that does not fade and requires less than thirty minutes of exposure time. The realism of the photos is so startling that many believe the tiny faces are looking back at them.⁸⁷ The French government grants pensions to the pioneers of photography, including Daguerre, in exchange for relinquishing claims to private patents. The technology becomes public domain and guarantees its future ubiquity.

Like the naturalist novelist or artist, toting a camera instead of a basket or easel, the *flâneur* strolls the city streets to observe the panoramic surface of the crowd. The *flâneur* is a kind of “image-gardener,”⁸⁸ one who “goes botanizing on the asphalt,”⁸⁹ seeking the unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life, passing by the traditional landmarks to seek the refuse and detritus of modern society. The *flâneur*

⁸⁶ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 40.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, Walter. “Little History of Photography.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2. 1931-1934*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. Pg. 512.

⁸⁸ Evernden, Neil. *The Natural Alien*. University of Toronto Press. Second Edition. 1993. Pg. 97.

⁸⁹ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 270n49. The quote is from Baudelaire.

stands on the threshold of dream and reality, where the landscape opens up to him, “even as it closes around him like a room.”⁹⁰ Photography makes manifest the massive changes to the empirical, urban surface of reality as the small-scale timeworn Paris vanishes under the ceaseless replacement of the new. Benjamin likens these photographs to those of a detective collecting evidence at a crime scene.

The changes to urban reality appear in the “Haussmannization” of Paris, when Georges-Eugène Haussmann, a civic planner charged with the rebuilding of Paris during the 1860s under the commission of Napoleon III, anointed himself with the title *artiste démolisseur*, “demolition artist,”⁹¹ glorifying his grand architectural plans that razed working class neighbourhoods and forced the proletariat out of the city’s centre. In the process, more than half of medieval Paris was transformed. There are two opposing views of Haussmann’s changes: either he destroyed old Paris, or he created new Paris. Haussmann’s urban renewal may have sought immortality through architecture, but its immediate goal, Benjamin reminds us, is to provide access for troops should there be an insurrection. Yet when civil war does erupt in the Paris Commune of 1871, the city barricades are stronger and better secured than ever. The Commune only lasts some seventy days but manages to wreak an inordinate amount of devastation on the city, much of which is recorded by photographers. Although Benjamin suggests photographic montage as political agitation was introduced in 1855, where the subjectivity of its images is questioned in view of the new technological and social reality, it is after the Commune where photography comes into its own as an instrument of propaganda, when

⁹⁰ Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Pg. 417 [M1,4].

⁹¹ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 42.

photo-montages literally distort images in order to exaggerate the crimes of the Communards.⁹²

Another consequence of the Commune is the identification card. In 1854, an entrepreneur introduces the *carte de visite*, a calling card personalized with a photo, which soon evolves into the mandatory public document used for licenses, passports and other state regulated forms of identification and surveillance.⁹³ The use of photos for police purposes becomes widespread in the aftermath of the Paris Commune.

The burning of Paris, Benjamin writes, is only the worthy conclusion to the destruction that Haussmann began.⁹⁴ According to Marx, the failure of the Paris Commune marks the victory of mass culture and modern society, the last effort by the nineteenth-century proletariat to redeem a world that commodification had almost completely disenchanted.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Benjamin finds the new beauty in what is vanishing, the traces of a prior life, when the *flâneur*'s photographic images record all that is being lost, opening our eyes to "the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins before they have crumbled."⁹⁶

Photography also extends the sphere of commodity exchange, flooding the market with countless images, in particular the picture postcard and advertising. Benjamin will later warn that film, like photography, is the work of art most susceptible to becoming

⁹² Deedes-Vincke, Patrick. *Paris: the city and its photographs*. Bulfinch Press. Little, Brown and Company. London. 1992. Pg. 22.

⁹³ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 142. The entrepreneur is a portraitist named A.A.E. Disdéri, who came up with a technique of reducing the size of a picture and reprinting the negative cheaply.

⁹⁴ Benjamin. "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Pg. 43.

⁹⁵ Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 257.

⁹⁶ Benjamin. "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Pg. 44.

worn out.⁹⁷ Due to photography, the informational value of painting diminishes. The artists turn to colour, then to Cubism, in order to differentiate their work from photographs. Subsequent advances in technology allow for even faster exposure and development. Photographs that take minutes to complete their exposure in the 1830s, take only seconds by the 1880s. This speed allows for the “capture” of images, a kind of “guerrilla photography,”⁹⁸ where seeing turns to staring, creating estrangement from, rather than union with, the natural world. Similarly, the artists of today’s “Vancouver School”⁹⁹ have extended this estrangement by probing the social forces behind imagery. Their use of photoconceptualism extends staring into “staging,” where recreations of actual events explore social tensions, urban decay and industrial featurelessness. The political aspect of this work may be traced back to John Heartfield, mentioned earlier, whose subversive posters used the technique of photomontage that, just as film does, blurred the lines between reality and illusion by inserting reality fragments into the artistic creation. These works not only disintegrate the boundary between artistic semblance and empirical reality, but also between the cultural and the political.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Benjamin, Walter. “The Theory of Distraction.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 141.

⁹⁸ Evernden. *The Natural Alien*. Pg. 97.

⁹⁹ An informal term associated with artists including Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, Roy Arden, and Rodney Graham. Their various means of expression include photography, video and film.

¹⁰⁰ Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translation from the German by Michael Shaw. Foreward by Jochen Schulte-Sasse. *Theory and History of Literature, Volume 4*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 1984. (Twelfth printing 2007). Pgs. 73-80.

In the new social reality, where idleness is a demonstration against the division of labour,¹⁰¹ the slow-moving, self-possessed *flâneur* becomes alienated and dies, while the agitated, aggressive *badaud* dominates the urban landscape. The photographer becomes “an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno.”¹⁰² The camera’s impersonal gaze is that of the alienated man, an unblinking and restless mechanical eye. Jeremy Bentham understood the efficiencies of visual surveillance in 1791 when he envisioned the Panopticon as the model prison. The image-making process now takes a further step toward a society based on constant surveillance, adding a sinister component to modern social reality, when the camera becomes the efficient central eye of the Panopticon, where there are no shadows and nowhere to hide.¹⁰³ Behaviour is regulated not by rules or guards, but by one’s awareness of being watched, a purpose for which the camera is ideally suited. Michel Foucault argues that order is connected to virtue and punishment is connected to confinement.¹⁰⁴ The modern social order has used the Panopticon to expand on Lukacs’s view of man’s self-made prison where the role of the gaze intensifies to one of surveillance (super-vision), where man is the “observed spectator” and “the external look becomes an internalized and self-regulating mechanism.”¹⁰⁵ In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), Foucault contends that, “our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance... We are

¹⁰¹ Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Pg. 417 [M5,8].

¹⁰² Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Anchor Books. New York. 1990. Sontag. Pg. 55. See also Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 141.

¹⁰³ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 382.

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Vintage. New York. 1988. Pg. 63.

¹⁰⁵ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 406.

neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine.”¹⁰⁶ Looking to today, rebellion against the panoptic society is found in the work of the pseudo-anonymous British artist, Banksy, who applies stencilled graffiti pictures and slogans to public areas in a form that combines vandalism and subversion against the totally administered and observed society.

The regulation of human behaviour is also supported by the modern conception of time, where time becomes the authority by which we govern our lives. Benjamin describes how Haussmann’s razing of the old Paris is followed by fraudulent speculation on the stock exchange, a new form of gambling where the gambler plays the “phantasmagorias of time,”¹⁰⁷ converting time into a narcotic. The implication is that the modern concept of time is illusory as well as addictive and destructive. This perception of time is a critical component in the new apperception, which is of a hybrid nature, both external and internal. The development of railways in the 1820s, for example, would call for the adoption of standardized time zones and national time, exposing human beings to a relentless and ubiquitous presence of time. This external application of time, an ‘outside’ construction, enables us to “internalize and live with many different time notations, astronomical, biological, private and public.”¹⁰⁸ However, it also restricts the experience of individually endured time, the interior or private reality of *durée*.¹⁰⁹ The loss of this individual experience, of internal reflection, contributes to the modern

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pgs. 408-409.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 42.

¹⁰⁸ Gay, Hannah. “Clock Synchrony, Time Distribution and Electrical Timekeeping in Britain 1880-1925.” *Past & Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*. Oxford. 2003. Pg. 111.

¹⁰⁹ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 197. The concept of *durée* is taken from Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941).

alienation of humanity from itself and the reification of consciousness, conceding individual discourse in favour of a single, unified voice. As a result, Benjamin will argue that we need another way of thinking about time, one that overturns the linear progression of homogenous time.

The standardization of time is also the spatialization of time, which will have a number of consequences. Lukács quotes Marx saying, “Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the incarnation of time,”¹¹⁰ adding,

Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’ (the reified, mechanically objectified ‘performance’ of the worker, wholly separated from his human personality): in short, it becomes space.¹¹¹

As a result, time is converted into abstract, exactly measurable units of physical space because of scientific and mechanical fragmentation. Time is now quantitative and has a value placed on its units, hence, the abstract of time hypostasizes into a commodity form. Essentially, this is the dictate of the assembly line. Not only does the spatialization of time become a means of regulating the movements of humans and providing another controlling mechanism to the central eye, but also the general need for security is satisfied by taking the unknown future and quantifying it into both space and time, which supports bourgeois subjectivity and the promises of future happiness (abstract idealism).

¹¹⁰ Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 89.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 90.

In effect, by controlling time, we seek to resolve the ambiguity of our existence, an ambiguity that Benjamin finds “peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch,”¹¹² in particular to the images that assemble around the arcades. These images achieve the impossible; they stop the flow of time and bring “dialectics to a standstill.”¹¹³ Because they are dream images, containing both utopian and dialectical elements, and the dialectic inherent in images and the commodity form, Benjamin likens them to the prostitute, seller and sold in one. Although dialectics are at a standstill, the task now is not so much jump-starting a stalled dialectic but of rescuing the dialectical image from the dialectics of the commodity form, or, to put it another way, rather than going ‘outside’ the image to find the revolutionary construction, we have to look ‘inside’ the image itself. It is here, inside the image, that Benjamin will seek its true dialectical potential.

The new technology allows for smaller cameras and greater speed that enables the capture of “fleeting and secret images.”¹¹⁴ Every image causes a shock effect that momentarily paralyzes the associative mechanisms of the beholder. These shock effects reflect the growing fragmentation and frenzied pace of modern society. In order to maintain the *badaud*'s level of distraction, while allowing a commodity to retain its roots in novelty and deliver the requisite shock-effect, the exchange value of a product is increasingly bound to its newness. Independent of the use-value of the commodity, Benjamin contends newness is the quintessence of false consciousness and the commodity form, the full reflection of phantasmagoria, where even art begins to doubt its

¹¹² Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 40.

¹¹³ Ibid., pg. 40.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin. “Little History of Photography.” Pg. 527.

purpose and utility, making newness its highest value.¹¹⁵ Adorno will take this a step further: “The new is the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction, with its promise of undiminished plenitude.”¹¹⁶

Newness gives the appearance of change, yet, as Lukács argued, this is only the modification of surface phenomena, while the reified character of modern society remains essentially unchanged. Newness does not negate earlier artistic styles and motifs, but it negates traditions, thus ratifying the bourgeois ahistorical conceptions of art.¹¹⁷ Newness becomes a calculated effect. Fashion becomes the arbiter of bourgeois newness, prescribing the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped.¹¹⁸ The desire for newness, for fashion, translates to the insatiable appetite for images, which becomes, Sontag points out, a form of lust: “And like all credible forms of lust, it cannot be satisfied: first, because the possibilities of photography are infinite; and, second, because the project is finally self-devouring.”¹¹⁹ Paradoxically, fashion and newness do not reflect the vitality and flow of life, but only lead into further abstraction that takes us away from the social existence of human beings. The desire for newness succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic, the mannequin that stands in opposition to the organic, a melancholic interweaving of desire and death, which Benjamin connects to “the rights of the corpse.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 41.

¹¹⁶ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 21.

¹¹⁷ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. 37.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 37.

¹¹⁹ Sontag, Susan. “The Image-World” (1977) *A Susan Sontag Reader*. Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. New York. 1982. Pg. 367.

¹²⁰ Benjamin. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Pg. 37.

Photography itself is a devitalizing, past-tense medium, which we view “under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead but eternally secure.”¹²¹ Sontag claims that all photographs are *memento mori*.¹²² By freezing a moment in time, the camera embalms the image, the last vestige of the cult of remembrance with its images of dead or absent loved ones.¹²³ They serve as a reminder of the burden of life weighing on the living, the modern counterpart to the belief in ghosts, a “rationalized oblivion.”¹²⁴ Hence, the images ingest the fluidity of time and the vital substance of life, dishing them back out as the static, secure and morbid indices of mortality.

Nonetheless, Benjamin argues, we search a photograph for “the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”¹²⁵ Thus, influenced by Surrealism, Benjamin contends the dialectical image can defy its commodity form by offering a means of re-experiencing time. In other words, although the past is yet to be redeemed, the weight of its failures carried into the present, the possible redemption of the past also holds the utopian promise of a future redemption.

¹²¹ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. 69.

¹²² Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Routledge, London, 1999. Pg. 73. *Memento mori* is a Latin phrase meaning, “Be mindful of death,” a reminder that we all must die.

¹²³ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” Pg. 108.

¹²⁴ Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. “On the Theory of Ghosts.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Original edition: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Social Studies Association. 1944. The Continuum Publishing Company. New York. 2000. Pg. 215.

¹²⁵ Benjamin. “Little History of Photography.” Pg. 510.

The serial photographs of 1872 by Eadweard Muybridge, famous for his galloping horse photos, and those of animal locomotion by Étienne-Jules Marey with his 1882 invention, the “chronophotographic gun,”¹²⁶ provide the bridge between the static photograph and the animated film. The spatialization of time is realized as a series of static photographs that progress in equidistant units of time to create an impression of dynamic continuity. Audiences are already aware of the serial presentation of images through optical novelties such as the Phenakistoscope and the Zoetrope, both from the 1830s, which use rotating devices and a series of drawings to produce a crude form of animation. There are also lantern slide shows, comic strips, and animated picture shows such as Charles-Émile Reynaud’s *Theatre Optique*, which boasts a projection system that allows for the first presentation of moving images to an audience in Paris in 1892.¹²⁷

The illusion of moving images is possible due to the optical phenomena known as “persistence of vision”¹²⁸ where the brain retains an image cast upon the retina of the eye for approximately one-twentieth to one-fifth of a second beyond their actual removal from the field of vision. Also known as “flicker fusion” or the “stroboscopic effect,” this phenomenon would establish the optimal projection speed of 24 frames per second.

Due to the black spaces between frames, though we do not perceive it, the screen is completely dark almost half of the time we are watching a film. The gap between perception and comprehension suggests a physiological reason for the submissive spectator, perhaps the reason that caused Benjamin to write, “the public is an examiner,

¹²⁶ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pgs. 3-4.

¹²⁷ Usai, Paolo Cherchi. “The Early Years: Origins and Survival.” *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Oxford University Press. 1996. Pg. 6.

¹²⁸ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 1.

but an absent-minded one.”¹²⁹ However, another position holds that the viewer processes the “motion” in a motion picture the same way we process motion in the real world, namely on multiple cognitive levels, where perception is combined with reasoning and intuition.¹³⁰ In which case, this physiological gap suggests the fundamental narrative and cinematographic unit of film, namely action/reaction. Although, strictly speaking, as Deleuze will argue, this gap is actually delay-of-action/perception, which allows us to seek a deeper significance in a moving image, one that we all interpret independently.¹³¹ This same concept will prove to be an important factor in Benjamin’s later arguments regarding film’s ability to penetrate into reality.

The multiple images of the flexible celluloid filmstrip soon replace the single photographs from the earlier plate devices. By 1895, the numerous innovations in film technology are consolidated by the inventions of Thomas Edison with his assistant W.K.L. Dickson in the United States, and the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, in France. Audiences regard the short films as a photographic extension of familiar visual entertainments such as the diorama or vaudeville, whose function was “to *present* rather than to represent, to *show* rather than to narrate.”¹³² This early period from 1895 to 1903

¹²⁹ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). Pg. 33.

¹³⁰ Anderson, Joseph and Barbara. "The Myth of Persistence of Vision Revisited." *Journal of Film and Video*. Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 1993). Pgs 3-12.

<http://www.uca.edu/org/ccsmi/ccsmi/classicwork/Myth%20Revisited.htm>

¹³¹ Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, MN. 1986. Pg. 64.

¹³² Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 16.

is often referred to as “The Cinema of Attractions,”¹³³ where cinema at this early stage is a not-yet-fully-fetishized commodity designed to attract a viewer who is willing to pay for the privilege of looking. It is also a not-yet-fully-realized cultural form where the language of the cinema as an art form had only just begun. Filmmakers are not yet aware of the creative possibilities in spatial and temporal manipulation, and so, similar to photography, the perspectives of the camera and the projector and the viewer are one and the same. This may explain why both Marey and Auguste Lumière believed film was an invention without a future.¹³⁴ It is neither a science, as Marey hoped, nor an art, as Lumière wished, merely the latest incarnation of novelty turned commodity.

Although its potential as an artistic or scientific form may have been uncertain, its economic potential was immediately apparent. The Lumières made short films they called *actualités*, conceived as cinematic postcards or “documentary views,” such as the famous *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare* (1895). The first screenings took place on December 28, 1895 in a basement room at the Grand Café in Paris. Charging one franc per customer, the first day’s take was 35 francs. Within a month, the *Cinématographe* showings were earning an average of 7,000 francs a week.¹³⁵ Within two years, audiences in nearly every country in the world would see the train arrive at La Ciotat station. A century after the cinema’s invention, in 1986, the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky was still able to write, “The cinema’s progress towards self-awareness has always been

¹³³ Gunning, Tom. “Early American Film.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford University Press. 1998. Pg. 258.

¹³⁴ Ondaatje, Michael. *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Vintage Canada. Toronto. 2002. Pg. 88.

¹³⁵ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pgs. 9-11.

hampered by its equivocal position, hanging between art and the factory: the original sin of its genesis in the market-place.”¹³⁶

The Lumière’s basement screening room, *Le Salon Indien du Grand Café*, is a large room with an exotic décor, including pillars, palm plants, gaslights, patterned carpets and embroidered drapes. The café’s décor is as an extension of the luxurious bourgeois *intérieur*, just as the early movie palaces will be imitations of exotic architectural styles, both designed to make the average person feel like royalty. Benjamin described the nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic interior as comparable to the inside of a mollusk’s shell,¹³⁷ encasing the bourgeois individual with all their appurtenances. Benjamin could have been describing the movie houses when he wrote that they offered an escape from reality, a haven that provides the stimulus to intoxication and dream.¹³⁸ Part market-place and part dream-world, *Le Salon Indien*, just like the arcades, merges private space and public space, concrete social reality and optical illusion, a literal incarnation of double dreaming.

The early kino-parlours (1894-1903) stand halfway between the private screening room and the movie house, where Edison’s Kinetoscope allows only one viewer to look at a film at a time. The viewer had not entirely lost their sense of being in a public space. In addition, the direct address of the Cinema of Attractions allows the viewer to recognize they are part of an audience. In this sense, the cinema is not yet a fully reified cultural form, one that will support the complete illusion of bourgeois false

¹³⁶ Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting In Time – Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated from the Russian by Kitty Hunter-Blair. University of Texas Press, Austin. 2005. Pg. 99.

¹³⁷ Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Pg. 220 [I4,4].

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 216 [I2,6].

consciousness, because it still maintains its essential realism and its potential as an external cultural form to raise the consciousness of its largely working class audience. However, in the 1910s the cinema leaves its working class origins in search of a middle-class audience, a reflection of the increased urbanization of the population, changing leisure activities, and the rising affluence in modern urban life. At the same time, from 1907 to 1917, a new transitional cinema called “The Cinema of Narrative Integration”¹³⁹ saw films become a storytelling medium, converting from shorts to feature length films, from slapstick humour to complex dramas.¹⁴⁰ Charging more for admission (one dollar versus five cents), the transitory penny arcades, kino-parlours and nickelodeons are replaced by permanent venues, the movie palaces, which also begins the massification of the audience.

Two methods of production emerge. For reality subjects, a camera operator journeys to the subject, records the action, and then edits it together. This method supports a documentary and sociological approach to the cinema, along with Lukácsian realism, and is generally considered a secondary form due to its smaller budgets and audiences. For narrative films, often inspired by vaudeville acts or taken from literary sources, movie companies employ a director to stage scenes and a camera operator to record them. The division of labour and the standardization of the means of production accompany cinema’s transition into a storytelling medium. The creation of fantasy now becomes practical as commercial art and determines the nature of the construction of the

¹³⁹ Ibid., pg. 265.

¹⁴⁰ In 1907, 70% of films were comedies. By 1917, most films were dramas. See Pearson, Roberta. “Transitional Cinema.” *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Oxford University Press. 1996. Pg. 33.

cinematic form. It will not be long before, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, “For a few coins one can see the film which cost millions.”¹⁴¹

Filmmakers want the audience to identify with, and immerse themselves in, the cinematic illusion. As noted earlier, the Hollywood classical style aims for narrative clarity, a seamlessness that sutures all the elements of the film into a comprehensive and satisfying whole. The Hollywood classical style is also economical, a cinematic form that is reproducible and cost effective, allowing for standardization of both production and narrative, instilling “the criterion of efficiency.”¹⁴² The classical paradigm in the Hollywood film also favours a universal address to an audience that is specific in neither class nor gender, which now becomes a factor in the subsequent standardization of narrative and the film-factory methods of production.

For turn-of-the-century audiences, moving pictures were not only associated with photography but with theatrical venues, which invited filmmakers to replicate familiar genres such as costume dramas and vaudeville. Subsequently, audience expectations would define genre, while genre would standardize the audience. A genre is established when “visual, stylistic, and thematic concerns become formalized into an immediately recognizable system of conventions.”¹⁴³ Thus, a genre becomes a “brand name system

¹⁴¹ Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. Original edition: *Dialektick der Aufklarung*. Social Studies Association. 1944. Continuum. New York. 2000. Pg. 156.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pg. 129.

¹⁴³ Kellner, Douglas. “Culture Industries.” *A Companion to Film Theory*. Edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam. Blackwell Publishing. Malden PA. 2004.

against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle.”¹⁴⁴ Genre is not only about textual rules, it is also about social rules, and thus another means of not only commodification, but also reification.

The intuitive, trial-and-error pursuit of narrative clarity includes innovations such as continuity cutting, close-ups, and parallel editing, as well as expressive lighting, nuanced acting, reverse angle editing, and eye-line matching. The camera moves its perspective from that of the viewer/projector and becomes a non-human eye, one whose perspective can shift and change. In doing so, the camera assumes the position of the third person, an extension of free indirect discourse, the novelistic device first used by 19th century authors such as Jane Austen. The paradox of the objectivity of photography and the subjectivities of its maker and its audience caused avant-garde Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini to describe the cinema as “free indirect subjectivity.”¹⁴⁵ The demarcation between objective and subjective is forgotten, replaced instead by a camera-self-consciousness, a camera-eye view that merges concrete social reality and optical illusion, another incarnation of double dreaming and a radical change in apperception.

By 1896, all the basic technological principles of film recording and projection are available in existing machines, which, excluding synchronous sound, possess the same fundamental components as the modern feature film. The speed of snapshots has transferred to the spatialized and equidistant framework of the filmstrip, where the ribbon of frozen photographic moments flow together to give the illusion of continuous and

¹⁴⁴ Berry-Flint, Sarah. “Genre.” *A Companion to Film Theory*. Edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam. Blackwell Publishing. Malden, MA. 2004. The quote is from Fredric Jameson.

¹⁴⁵ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 9. See also Deleuze. *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*. Pgs. 72-73.

uninterrupted movement. Hence, the movement-image is also a time-image.¹⁴⁶ The series of instantaneous images move consecutively in time, integrating them into a simulacrum of real time and conscious experience. The filmstrip appears to restore the flow of time that the snapshot took away, yet it remains a ‘past-tense medium’ animated only by the illusion of movement and immediacy, in other words, its very newness.

It is in the filmstrip that Benjamin finds the dialectical structure of film, where the sequential nature suggests the assembly line in terms of both production and consumption, and the movement-time-image contains the unity of past and present.¹⁴⁷ Benjamin looks to Surrealism where “image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called ‘meanings’.”¹⁴⁸ Non-paradoxical meanings only support the false consciousness and abstract idealism that permeates society, producing, as already noted, a morbid kind of stasis or preservation, newness without real change, the maintenance of the status quo, an endless repetition where always-the-same is served up as novelty and fashion.

Benjamin’s dialectical images, however, offer liberation from this world of convention and its ossified synthetic structures, which Lukács describes as “rigid and strange [...] a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities.”¹⁴⁹ Dialectical images function

¹⁴⁶ Deleuze. *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*. Pg. 5. The terms belong to Bergson.

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin, Walter. “The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Pg. 94.

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin, Walter. “Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.” *New Left Review*. No. 108. March/April 1978. London. Pg. 48.

¹⁴⁹ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 64.

like switches that release “a flash of light”¹⁵⁰ and the “now of recognizability.”¹⁵¹ In doing so, these images act like shocks, just as Eisenstein sought to effect, “arresting the fleeting phenomena and starting thought in motion or, alternately, shocking thought to a standstill and setting the reified objects in motion by causing them to lose their second-nature familiarity.”¹⁵² Rather than a static and embalmed moment of time, the shock of dialectics at a standstill found in the photographic image, and the snapshot in particular, offers a violent and revolutionary interruption of the linear flow of time. Rather than homogenous “empty” time, we become aware of time filled by the presence of the now, where at any given moment we stand on the edge of history between the now and the possibility of a radically different future.¹⁵³

Dialectical images, therefore, are capable of altering our experience of time and liberating us from the reified world of convention through a consciousness-raising apperception. This is even truer for film than photography because of its technical means, which incorporates the close-up, slow motion and enlargement, enhancing the notion of delay-of-action/perception, so that we can now “see” again, piercing the commonplace, removing the veil from the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity, and recapturing a sense of *durée*. Thus, Benjamin regards the possibilities of photography and film as a “*profane*

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 143.

¹⁵¹ Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Pg. xii.

¹⁵² Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 106.

¹⁵³ Löwy, Michael. *Fire Alarm – Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. Translated by Chris Turner. Verso. London. 2005. Pg. 86.

illumination,”¹⁵⁴ a means of apperception to awaken the proletariat from the dream-sleep of alienation and de-humanization found in modern capitalist society. Therefore, film becomes an emancipatory cultural form.

In the next chapter, I will consider Adorno’s response to Benjamin’s exposé, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” and by so doing, locate fundamental differences that will ignite his debate with Benjamin. Where Benjamin believed that the aesthetic could provide some positive knowledge of society, raising the consciousness of the proletariat, Adorno believes the aesthetic must provide the negative, otherwise any cultural form will only support the status quo. Adorno’s view might be summed up thus: “Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin. “Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.” Pg. 49. Benjamin notes that hashish can also provide an introduction to profane illumination. See Benjamin, Walter. “Hashish in Marseilles.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2. 1931-1934*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. See also Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 126.

¹⁵⁵ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 6.

CHAPTER 3:

In his written response to “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Adorno is deeply critical of Benjamin’s exposé, certainly harsher than “the carping form”¹⁵⁶ in which he describes his own critique. In particular, Adorno is highly critical of Benjamin’s notion of dialectical images, in particular their lack of “dialectical coherence,”¹⁵⁷ the juxtapositions of which he often finds are merely contradiction. In this chapter, I will consider Adorno’s interpretation of unintentional truth, his defence of modernism as opposed to realism, his view that the intellectual and the artist hold the real potential to be the revolutionary avant-garde, and the re-functioning of cultural forms. I will also address Adorno and Benjamin’s opposing views on the rise of the proletariat, which will take us to Benjamin’s essay, “The Author as Producer” (1936). In so doing, I hope to examine the basis for Adorno’s rejection of Benjamin’s interpretation of the dialectical capacity of untheorized images and of the cinema as an emancipatory cultural form.

Adorno singles out Benjamin’s suggestion that “Each epoch dreams the one to follow,” which makes all the motifs of the theory of the dialectical image open to criticism because it places the dialectical image in the collective consciousness. In Adorno’s view, the concept of the collective dream had become “disenchanted and

¹⁵⁶ Benjamin, Walter. “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the Essay ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2002. Benjamin. Pg. 62.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 55.

commonplace,”¹⁵⁸ besides which the subjective nature of dreams forfeits any kind of objective authority. Dreaming is outside the bounds of material experience and those phenomena that are contingent, concrete and particular. A dreaming collective also erases the whole idea of differences between classes. In short, Adorno considers Benjamin’s version of the dialectical image, both in photography and film, as the simple and random juxtaposition of contradictory elements, and that any formulation that the new is permeated with the old is merely regression, and therefore, without concrete reflection and critical argumentation, the dialectical image will remain “*undialectical*.”¹⁵⁹

If “Each epoch dreams the one to follow,” then for the modern epoch, reification is the residue of dreams. To rectify this, Adorno suggests incorporating a complementary formulation where “Each epoch dreams of itself as annihilated by catastrophes.”¹⁶⁰ Instead of the reified world of utopian dream-images, it would be its obverse, the nineteenth century as a phantasmagoria-filled transition to hell. Rather than a dreaming subject as collective, it would be its dialectical opposite, alienation. Thus, the only sense of utopia to be found in a reified world of convention, where production forces rule the earth, is in the very absence of utopia.

Benjamin may have intended his collective dream as more of a gesture toward the proletariat rather than a regression to Jungian psychology, but it did skew the balance of the dialectical image in favour of the antirational. Adorno regards this as a violation of their joint commitment to demythification, which must present the necessary correlative to the antirational tendency and the return to myth caused by the disenchantment of the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 54.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pg. 54.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 58.

world through secularization. Adorno reminds Benjamin that, if anything, they must polarize and dissolve false consciousness dialectically and “not to galvanize it as a pictorial correlative of the commodity character.”¹⁶¹

For Benjamin, as noted earlier, the images that have assembled around the arcades exhibit a peculiar kind of ambiguity that indicate the transformative social relations and products that are peculiar to this epoch. He characterizes these images as that of dialectics at a standstill. Adorno argues that this ambiguity is not the translation of the dialectic into image, but the trace of that image, which itself still needs to be made dialectical by theory. Without the mediation of conceptual and critical reflection, namely theory, Benjamin’s attempts to reconcile dream and reality can only lead to a degeneration of theology into magic and Marxism into positivism.¹⁶² Adorno would be compelled to ask for an “extrapolation to extremes”¹⁶³ in order to sharpen and radicalize the exposé’s dialectic not just in terms of commodity character and alienation, which have been around since the beginning of capitalism, but to the specifically industrial production of commodities in the nineteenth century.

Adorno’s modernism and his interest in Freudian psychoanalysis would support the attempt to apprehend dreams and then make them accessible to conscious, rational

¹⁶¹ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 55.

¹⁶² Positivism is the theory that knowledge can only be acquired through direct experience and observation, which, although not metaphysical, is criticized for not considering the reified nature of social reality.

¹⁶³ Benjamin, “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno.” Pg. 62.

understanding.¹⁶⁴ Surrealism, however, collects the elements of dreams but without liquidating them. Indeed, Adorno would later argue that surrealistic images would be more appropriate for pornography. Adorno's hostility may be directed toward visual constructions themselves, a hostility that will carry over to his polemics on the Hollywood cinema, particularly when he claims that the bourgeois had reduced art to the merely agreeable and audiences find pleasure in the pornographic and the "culinary."¹⁶⁵

Fredric Jameson argues that the visual image itself is essentially pornographic, and pornographic films are only "the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body."¹⁶⁶ In which case, visual constructions are indeed wish-fulfilling as Benjamin claimed, where all is revealed through the image, although less in terms of residual culture and more in the realization of repressed needs and desires. Therefore, visual constructions are alienating, in line with Adorno's position, because of the inability of the viewer to realize those on-screen desires which are merely a function of attracting the viewer's gaze to the fetishized commodity. In effect, the consumers of today's mass art are simply commodity fetishists alienated from the

¹⁶⁴ Adorno incorporated Freudian psychology in his attack on rationalism in his 1926 *Habilitationsschrift* for his mentor Hans Cornelius, entitled "The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of the Mind." Adorno was struck by psychoanalysis as a cognitive model, with its goal of "disenchantment" of the unconscious by exposing the inner logic of its manifestations – Freudian slips, dreams, neurotic symptoms – and making them accessible to conscious, rational understanding." Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pgs. 17-18.

¹⁶⁵ Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." *Aesthetics and Politics*. With presentations by Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson and Francis Mulhern. Afterword by Fredric Jameson. Verso Books. London. 1980. Pg. 193.

¹⁶⁶ Mirzoeff. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Pg. 10.

products of their labour, the “temple slaves,”¹⁶⁷ as Adorno later calls them, now worshipping fetishized cultural commodities as idols. This implies not only the commodification of culture, but the culturalization of commodities. An example would be Andy Warhol’s work of the mid-60s to 70s, which revelled in the commodification of Hollywood and its movie stars. Similar to his commodified images, such as a Campbell’s Soup can or bottles of Coca-Cola, Warhol presents glossy images of Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor or Elvis Presley in spatialized “strips” of identical images, resonating between commodity fetishism and the cinematic assembly line.

Adorno is also critical of Benjamin’s notion of a nineteenth-century collective subject and its relation to the future as utopia, which would seem to promote the myth of historical progress, exactly what he and Benjamin were trying to dissolve dialectically. If history is constructed backwards by the dominant culture, as both Adorno and Benjamin believed, then history is only glorified as a higher truth in order to justify the suffering imposed upon individuals and society along the way. In Adorno’s view, history is a construction in the present that incorporates its own reconstruction of the past, while Benjamin’s view is that the reconstruction of the present reveals the constructions of the past. In either case, present history is only the chronicle of its own disintegration.

For Adorno, the lie of present history demands incorporating a dialectical consideration of both history through nature, which referred to the concrete, mortal and transitory history of the individual, and history through natural matter, which incorporates the world history outside of human control and not yet penetrated by reason.

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, Theodor W. “On The Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” *Popular Music: Cultural Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Edited by Simon Frith. Routledge. London. 2004. Pg. 333.

Both of these histories, of the individual and the world, determine each other. For Benjamin, the theme of the allegorical in history, found in the form of ruins and detritus, expressed “the decay and suffering of ‘first nature’.”¹⁶⁸ In a time of historical decay like the present, rather than a Lukácsian return to lost classicism, the allegorical offered more meaning, where ideas themselves have turned into allegorical “images.” Thus, Benjamin looks for clues in the dialectical image, writing that when an era crumbles, “History breaks down into images, not into stories.”¹⁶⁹ Adorno, looking perhaps more to the social and behavioural gaps and ruptures rather than the material ruins and detritus, found in the moments of transitoriness, where history and nature become sublated, “the irreversible one-time-ness of the historical fact.”¹⁷⁰ In our present situation, there is only the semblance of reconciliation because the level of productive forces is such that we could conceivably have paradise in the here and now, and at the same time we are constantly confronted with the possibility of total catastrophe.¹⁷¹

Benjamin intended that the dialectical image challenge the myth of historical progress by seeking to “brush history against the grain,”¹⁷² where the “very newness and modernity of the present could be made to suddenly release its significance when seen as archaic.”¹⁷³ However, by adding a metaphysical aspect, the redemption of the past, Adorno believed Benjamin replaced the myth of historical progress with an equally mythical concept, a kind of theologically influenced return to the lost Paradise. It may be

¹⁶⁸ Löwy. *Fire Alarm – Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. Pg. 56.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 68.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 57.

¹⁷¹ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 33.

¹⁷² Löwy. *Fire Alarm – Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. Pg. 47.

¹⁷³ Benjamin. “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno.” Pg. 58.

true that art, not theology, is the last refuge for the utopian impulse, yet Adorno remained convinced that any philosophy, including Marxism, lost its legitimacy when it overstepped the boundaries of material experience and claimed metaphysical knowledge. Only when art is autonomous, when it can escape its commodity character and its false idealism, can it make a political intervention.

Marx, as noted earlier, claimed art could only exist in a stunted form in bourgeois society. If art is an institution, then, as Bürger argues, it must neutralize the political content of the individual work.¹⁷⁴ Lukács confirms this when he states,

Under capitalism the scope of art is much more narrowly confined; it can exercise no determining influence upon the production of consumer goods and indeed the question of its own existence is decided by purely economic factors and the problems of technical production governed by them.¹⁷⁵

The question then remains how art can become autonomous, particularly the cinema with its genesis in the marketplace, in order to realize its potential as an emancipatory cultural form. For Adorno, the answer is modernism. Only modernism, with its negation of commodity character and false idealism, can achieve the autonomy necessary to make some sort of political intervention. Although Lukács would acknowledge its character of protest, this was still only pessimistic anti-illumination, which for Adorno was exactly the point. The modernist work of art is a kind of anti-art

¹⁷⁴ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. 88.

¹⁷⁵ Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 236.

that does not occupy the traditional place of a work of art and does not present a harmonious totality, but seeks the liquidation of idealism through a logic of disintegration, which in turn delivers the negation of the negation. This supports Adorno's enigmatic statement that, "Today the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all."¹⁷⁶

Taking a look to Warhol again, it may be that his films entirely reject the standardized Hollywood style with its narrative clarity and the "'abundance, energy, transparency, community'"¹⁷⁷ of its entertainment films. Warhol's *Empire* (1964) is an eight-hour static long shot of the Empire State Building, while *Blowjob* (1963) is an uncut 45-minute close-up of a man's face while he is being fellated. *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) and *Blue Movie/Fuck* (1968) deal with sexuality, homosexuality, and transvestism, testing, and frequently surpassing, the legal limitations of pornographic content. Despite the pornography, or perhaps because of the pornography, they are really more about alienation and self-alienation. Although many may not consider them great art in the traditional sense, these films may say much more about the social reality of our ossified world than more conventional films. Similarly, we may look to the world of music, where bands such as the Velvet Underground, managed by Warhol from 1965-1967, challenged conventional standards of composition. Velvet Underground was influenced by experimental composers such as John Cage, a student of Schoenberg, whose controversial work *4'33"* (1952) consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds

¹⁷⁶ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. 55.

¹⁷⁷ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 117. The quote is from Richard Dyer's 1977 article in *Movie*, "Entertainment and Utopia."

of silence. Rather than silence, the work is meant to emphasize the sounds that the listeners hear in their environment while listening to “nothing.”

Adorno is committed to the destruction of dogmatic constructions and replacing them with theories grounded in empirical experience, yet he could still approve of how Benjamin’s interpretation allowed the most common objects to release a significance that dissolved their reified appearance. Benjamin’s mystical impulse suggests that the subject needs to go into the congealed object where phenomena have a voice of their own. This amounts to a kind of anthropomorphism that reveals the strangeness of an object. In this sense, physical matter has its own existence, living and growing old and decaying, just as do ideas, theories, concepts, novels, and films, meaning that they are not mere subjectivity, and therefore contain a locus of truth. Although Adorno agreed that there is meaning to be found within objects, he suggests a different kind of truth, the *ars inveniendi*, which meant “literally the art of coming upon something, invention in the sense, not of making something up, but of discovering it for the first time.”¹⁷⁸ Like Freudian slips of the tongue (parapraxis), where truth surfaced as inconsistencies or unintentional truths, an object still manages to reveal its own subjective truth despite its objectification. In other words, all things have their hidden meanings and all cultural forms are a way to discover meaning, but Adorno argues that to recognize those meanings we must first penetrate the phenomena by making their truth cognitively accessible, which required intellectual labour rather than metaphysical magic.

¹⁷⁸ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 86. See Adorno’s concept of the ‘shudder’, which accompanies the recognition of the unintentional truth as an “apparition.” Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pgs. 118 and 286.

Truth may indeed lie in the material object, but it needed the rational subject to release the truth that it contained. On the other hand, Adorno did agree that this process also involved fantasy as an expression of the essence, those things beyond recall, but the interpretation still demanded intellectual labour. If the construction of meaning is undialectical in its positivism (direct observation), or remains metaphysical in its promise of redemption, without the exactness of critical distance and analysis, as Adorno viewed Benjamin's uncritical acceptance of film, then its meanings would not be crystallized, and its constructions merely fantasy, or, as found in the cinema, merely diversion or narcotic entertainment. In other words, because social contradictions have not been reconciled in reality, the utopian harmony of art must always maintain an element of protest in order to be, to use Lukács's term, creatively polemical. Although the autonomy of the modernist work may be illusory, it is also necessary to art's position in the modern social reality in order that it fulfil its role as "the social antithesis of society."¹⁷⁹ The difficulty of maintaining this level of autonomy and creative polemic is apparent in a recent commentary on the work of German artist Neo Rauch that stated,

Collectors are tumbling over one another to rate contemporary art higher and higher, in a frenzy that feels religious – the market as a medieval cathedral under construction, whose consumption of resources declares the priority of immaterial belief over practical needs. Inflated financially and,

¹⁷⁹ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 8.

through booming institutions, socially, art may never have been more esteemed while meaning less.¹⁸⁰

In order to accomplish its socially antithetical task, bourgeois forms must be constantly re-functioned into revolutionary constructions through the dialectical opposition of theory and praxis. The revolutionary role of the artist, therefore, is to transform dialectically the technical developments in his or her field by reversing the traditional function of cultural forms from ideological tools into tools of human liberation. Examples would be Brecht's epic theatre or Eisenstein's films, which re-function the traditional forms in order to shock and unsettle the audience to countermand the narcotic effects of the dominant dramatic forms where political issues are raised only to give the audience a sense of catharsis, sending them away purged of any fervour for change.¹⁸¹

However, as Bürger points out, there are problems with relying on shock. For one thing, shock is generally non-specific.¹⁸² Thus, even though the recipient may be shocked, there is no guarantee the recipient will change their behaviour in a particular direction. The recipient may even receive the shock as a provocation, causing them to resist change. In addition, as noted earlier, Freud suggests that consciousness defends itself from traumas by not allowing them to penetrate far enough to leave a permanent memory, another indication that the recipient is unlikely to follow through with changes in their life praxis. If shock diminishes with repetition, requiring increasingly violent

¹⁸⁰ Schjeldahl, Peter. "Paintings for Now – Neo Rauch at the Met." *The New Yorker*. 4 June 2007. p 96.

¹⁸¹ Kleinhans. "Marxism and film." Pg. 107.

¹⁸² Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. 80.

shocks, then the shock is merely consumed, a variation on newness, and the integrity of the recipient's shock value has been lost entirely. This situation is apparent in the modern cinema where the poetic visuals, stylistics and thematic often glorify the excesses of violence and alienation, yet without dialectical opposition they only contribute to the viewer's fatalistic and passive attitude toward those in power.

Lukács claimed the dialectical method was the road to truth and its truth-value did not depend on dogma or political effect.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, to be effective it did require, as Adorno demanded of Benjamin, an extrapolation to extremes. The purpose of this technique of dialectical juxtaposition is not so much to shock or to eliminate contradictions but to illuminate truth itself as contradictory. Instead of a harmonious totality or synthesis, therefore, Adorno saw no possibility of an argument coming to rest at an unequivocal conclusion. His rejection of any closed system, and his insistence that reality was fragmentary, meant totality itself is a false concept, leading him to claim that the whole is the untrue.¹⁸⁴ Rather than a return to past cultural forms and the promise of the lost Paradise, which in themselves mark the decaying forms of bourgeois thinking, Adorno contends that demythification must be articulated and intensified by seeking the gaps and ruptures of history.

For example, the Surrealists sought to find elements of the unpredictable in daily life (and the Situationists sought the bizarre) because chance happenings offer a sliver of freedom in the totally administered society. When art lacks the ability for political intervention, or even contemplative immersion (*durée*), detached as it is from the praxis

¹⁸³ Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 1.

¹⁸⁴ Jay. *The Dialectical Imagination*. Pg. 52.

of life, then chance becomes a symbol of freedom, because only chance is immune to the false consciousness and total reification of modern society. However, chance, like newness, can become a calculated effect that in itself is manufactured, where, literally, the more things change the more they remain the same.¹⁸⁵ If chance is not to become arbitrary, and therefore meaningless, the artistic production of chance requires the most painstaking calculation.

The French New Wave experimented with improvisation in their response to what they saw as the commodification and stagnation in the cinema, particularly the Hollywood cinema, by attempting a revolutionary cinema that was a “self-reflexive cinema, or metacinema – film about the process and nature of film itself.”¹⁸⁶ In March 1948, the French film critic Alexandre Astruc published an article on the *camera-stylo* (camera-pen) which promoted the idea that the cinema could become a means of expression that rivalled the novel and the filmmaker could achieve the status of *auteur* (author).¹⁸⁷ Thus, the Lukácsian hope for an emergent form based on the novel is upheld when the cinema breaks away from the status quo, along with its traditional storytelling and its tyranny of narrative, to explore new aspects of the audio-visual language. Consequently, the cinema becomes a re-functioned cultural form, one that is supported by the influential journal *Cahiers du cinema* (cinema notebooks), co-founded by Astruc and André Bazin, where a group of cine-literates attempt to reinvent cinema and detach it from its traditional structure and lack of truth.

¹⁸⁵ This line is from *The Leopard* (1962). Adapted from the novel, *Il gattopardo*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Directed by Luchino Visconti. Distributed by 20th Century Fox (USA).

¹⁸⁶ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 446.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. pg. 441.

The New Wave must clear the way for the emergence of a new language by throwing out the old. The antithesis of the “invisible” Hollywood classical style, New Wave films are distinguished by shaky, handheld camera shots, jump cuts (non-linear and/or mismatched edits), location shooting, natural lighting, improvised plot and dialogue, and non-professional actors. Shots are often framed in such a way that the filmmakers and the filmmaking equipment are visible, a variation on the shock effect that attempts to shake off the narcotic slumber and remind the audience they are watching a film, not partaking in some “found” reality.

Jean-Luc Godard, a lifelong Marxist, describes the New Wave as “a new relation between fiction and reality.”¹⁸⁸ Just as the Surrealists and Benjamin sought to reconcile dreams and reality, so Godard sought to refunction the cinematic form by envisioning a scriptless, plotless, actorless cinema, where, as he famously said, narratives had a beginning, middle and end, but not necessarily in that order. Characters are often drawn from the criminal underbelly of society, a condemnation of existing social reality, while improvisations allows the discovery of unintentional truths. Godard also sought the archaic in the modern by giving his films an awareness of their history, mediated through allusions or *hommages* (“quotations”) from past films, which serves as testament to the critical and historical components sedimented in the cinematic consciousness.

Godard’s work was indebted to Debord and the Situationists who had adopted Lukács’s belief in the rise of the proletariat and that reification was the primary obstacle to revolutionary change where the reified structure of existence must be relentlessly disrupted in order to undermine the commodity fetishism of the modern spectacle.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pg. 450.

Despite Godard's attempts at undermining the conventional cinema, Debord remained unremittingly hostile to both him and Hollywood. Debord would write, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."¹⁸⁹ Moving beyond the voyeuristic strolling of the *flâneur*, and in terms that recall Benjamin, the Situationists sought to recover the city from the repressive orderliness of Haussmannization and the modern sterility of Le Corbusier, seeking to build "only on the ruins of the spectacle."¹⁹⁰ In terms that recall Adorno's defence of modernist art as social antithesis, Debord's own ventures into cinema are described by Thomas Levin as "the mimesis of incoherence."¹⁹¹ Early films consisted of scratching or tearing the filmstrip (chiselling), and later films were more Dadaist-influenced and experimental, such as *Screaming for Sade* (*Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, 1952), where the screen was either white with expressionless voices or, for almost an hour of its one hour and twenty minutes length, black and silent.

In 1966, Godard wrote, "Cinema is capitalism in its purest form... There is only one solution, and that is to turn one's back on the American cinema."¹⁹² Following the Lukácsian directive that the disintegration of capitalism must come through a revolutionary dialectic, Godard's films launch an unremitting attack on Western capitalist society. However, just as Eisenstein's cinema failed to find a popular audience, so the novelty of the New Wave quickly wore off. Its innovations and techniques were absorbed

¹⁸⁹ Debord. "The Commodity as Spectacle." Pg. 117.

¹⁹⁰ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 426.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 423.

¹⁹² Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 453.

into mainstream cinema, particularly the New Hollywood of the early 1970s. The audience turned once again to narrative clarity and escapism, and once again, the efforts at an external construction to raise a revolutionary consciousness appealed more to the intellectual than to the masses. Similarly, the deviant and destructive energy of the Situationists would resurface in cultural phenomena such as punk rock. However, its political content did not travel with them and, as Dick Hebdige points out, subcultures are often converted into commodity forms, just as the Sex Pistols are signed to a record deal at EMI and punk fashion filters into the mainstream.¹⁹³

In his 1934 essay, “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin argues that a literary work is literarily correct only when it is politically correct, and vice versa.¹⁹⁴ Because a great literary work can only be great by virtue of its political value, the author as producer discovers his or her solidarity with the proletariat. For Benjamin, writing at a time when he was much influenced by his friendship with Brecht, a true work of art is an intellectual labour that supports the construction of consciousness of the proletariat. For Adorno, on the other hand, a work of art is an intellectual labour that appeals to other intellectuals and their attempts to articulate the truth of history, working to free their own

¹⁹³ Hebdige, Dick. “(i) From Culture to Hegemony; (ii) Subculture: The Unnatural Break.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pgs. 157-158.

¹⁹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. “The Author as Producer.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2. 1931-1934*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. Pg. 773. Originally presented to the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934. This was a Communist front organization, and therefore a supporter of the rights of workers. Pg. 781*n1*.

consciousness from the bourgeois veil of reification. Thus, the intellectual worker best serves the proletariat by remaining an intellectual.

Adorno, as noted earlier, did not subscribe to the messianic rise of the proletariat. It was not that he never placed hope in the proletariat, as did Marx, Lukács and Benjamin, only that he was fully aware of the difficulties in raising the consciousness of the working class. However, just as proposed by Lukács, he did agree on the necessity of an external construction to raise revolutionary consciousness. The difference is that Adorno argued it was the intellectual and the artist who held the real potential to be the revolutionary avant-garde because they were the ones who could release the hidden truth and the ones who would have to make the external construction by re-functioning cultural forms. Thus, following Marx's dictum that work includes manual labour and intellectual labour, the intellectual must do the revolutionary work.

According to Lukács, the intellectuals are the vanguard of revolution; according to Adorno, they are the revolutionary avant-garde. In other words, Adorno argues that the creation of a revolutionary modern art starts with the intellectual worker not the proletariat. For instance, although photography and film may be the source of unintentional truths, they are absorbed within lived experience and are therefore unable to pierce the reified bourgeois subjectivity because they are created and received within that very same subjectivity. Thus, Adorno argues, it is not so much the forms themselves that cannot serve the revolutionary purpose of raising awareness of the reality of bourgeois subjectivity, but the very inability of the subject to release the truth, unintentional or not, due to the reification of consciousness. However, rather than appealing to the proletariat at its present level of consciousness, as Benjamin sought through photography and film,

and Brecht through his epic theatre, Adorno took a third position of non-participation where valid intellectual activity was revolutionary in itself. Adorno would be accused of a melancholy withdrawal into pessimistic resignation and political hopelessness, a kind of “intellectual hibernation,”¹⁹⁵ a waiting for better times. However, Max Pensky calls this the “message-in-the-bottle” interpretation, because Adorno was in fact the embodiment of the “nonconformist intellectual” and the application of theory-as-praxis that “effectively undermined the traditional understanding of the antimony between the (politically committed) intellectual and the (politically aloof) academic mandarin.”¹⁹⁶

Made some eight years after Benjamin’s death, the Italian neo-realist film, *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, 1948), is a cinematic achievement made by intellectuals that could be considered both politically and literarily correct, the cinematic version of theory-as-praxis. It also fulfilled Lukács’s demand of being creatively polemical, while incorporating critical realism and socialist realism, and yet was modernist in terms of its minimalist and unsentimental style. Neo-realism sought a socially responsible cinema, one that rejected escapism and displayed a moral conscience for the reality of events, while its new cinematic style incorporated a semi-documentary approach that used non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and a newsreel-type photographic style. Neo-realism re-functioned the dominant form by rejecting the Mussolini-subsidized cinema, the *cultura popolare*, which were mostly melodramas, nationalist propaganda, or the

¹⁹⁵ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Pg. xxv.

¹⁹⁶ Pensky, Max. “Beyond the Message in a Bottle: The Other Critical Theory.” *Constellations*. Volume 10, No. 1. Blackwell Publishing. Oxford. UK. 2003. Pg. 139.

popular Hollywood-style genre films known as *telefono bianco*, or “white telephone films,” glossy entertainments with glamorous studio sets.¹⁹⁷

Bicycle Thieves was adapted to the screen by the Marxist screenwriter, novelist and journalist, Cesare Zavattini, who filled Adorno’s requirements of an intellectual and artist. In his essay *Some Ideas on the Cinema* (1953), Zavattini calls for an end to contrived plots, to fantasy and artifice, wanting instead to go into the streets to seek out a contemporary social reality. If Christ were alive today and had a camera, Zavattini states, he would not shoot fables, but reality, real people, real lives.¹⁹⁸ Essentially, Zavattini had two goals: a re-functioning of the cinema in service of demythification, and, in conjunction with Benjamin, a re-enchantment of reality. The emergence of neo-realism prompted Zavattini to write that the reality buried under the myths was coming back to life and had slowly re-flowered: “The cinema should never turn back. It should accept, unconditionally, what is contemporary. *Today, today, today*. It must tell reality as if it were a story; there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen.”¹⁹⁹

In their avoidance of the drama and gloss of mainstream cinema, the neo-realists adopted the *flâneur*’s photographic eye and sought the unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life. Contrary to the Hollywood mainstream cinema where any extraneous material would be rigorously removed, just as Hitchcock’s maxim demands that film is

¹⁹⁷ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 189.

¹⁹⁸ Zavattini, Cesare. “Some Ideas on the Cinema.” *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*. Edited by Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder, translated by Pier Luigi Lanza. University of Toronto Press. 2000. Pg. 30.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 31.

“creating life with the dull bits cut out,”²⁰⁰ Zavattini’s ideal film would be ninety minutes of the life of a man to whom nothing happens. Despite the fact that a Hollywood studio expressed interest in producing *Bicycle Thieves* if Cary Grant played the lead role, the director Vittorio De Sica chose to use non-professional actors. As Bazin points out, Cary Grant is very good at these kinds of roles, the humble man struck down by fate, but there was little doubt that by playing the role he would destroy the character’s anonymity, which is the whole point of the film.²⁰¹ Instead, De Sica cast an unknown factory worker, Lamberto Maggiorani, who had never acted before.

For Zavattini, the most important characteristic of neo-realism was the realization that the necessity of “story” is really a rejection of reality, requiring a work of imagination that superimposes “dead formulas over living social facts,”²⁰² and, as such, story constitutes a human defeat. In effect, “story” is the decline of storytelling, because the value of real experience has fallen in value, just as Benjamin recognized when he wrote that the art of storytelling was coming to its end.²⁰³ Zavattini claims that neo-realism is faulted for its portrayals of poverty, and for not offering solutions, particularly its endings which are particularly inconclusive. However, this fully supports Adorno’s rejection of the harmonized totality as merely false appeasement.

Zavattini sought the disappearance of story in order to make the screenplay, the screenwriter, the set, the actors, all of it to disappear, just as the French director Robert

²⁰⁰ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 191.

²⁰¹ Bazin, Andre. “Bicycle Thieves.” *What is Cinema? Volume II*. Edited and translated by Hugh Gray. University of California Press. 2004. Pg. 50.

²⁰² Zavattini. “Some Ideas on the Cinema.” Pg. 21.

²⁰³ Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” Pg. 143.

Bresson, an influence on Zavattini, wanted to strip away the “invisible hand”²⁰⁴ that directs everything that happens on film. Zavattini saw the cinema as the means to pierce bourgeois subjectivity, but found the mainstream cinema and its formulaic story, its world of conventions, had created a mistrust of reality. Consequently, the world must go on getting worse every day because we are not truly aware of the enchantment of reality.

Nevertheless, Italian neo-realism would fall into decline, failing to find an audience as the films moved further and further from narrative clarity, a fate similar to the earlier Soviet avant-garde and the following French New Wave. However, the essential techniques of neo-realism would inspire nascent national cinemas around the world,²⁰⁵ providing a Lukácsian social realism and documentary style that supported local culture and served as an economical and cultural alternative to the spectaclist Hollywood popular cinema and its purveyance of Western ideology.

Benjamin continued to express his solidarity with the working class and the Communist Party, perhaps a reflection of Brecht’s ongoing influence, even after Stalin’s summary executions and show trials of 1935 and 1936.²⁰⁶ The ghost of a failed revolution and the unfulfilled dream of a classless society could now be included in mounting

²⁰⁴ Cousins. *The Story of Film*. Pg. 252. The reference connotes Adam Smith and the “invisible hand” of market forces, which takes on an ominous tone when considering the violence and alienation in modern society.

²⁰⁵ The impact of the Italian neo-realists would inspire the filmmakers of emerging nations, notably the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), whose films include *Pather panchali* (*The Song of the Road*, 1955), and Iranian filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940), and his *Zendagi va digar hich* (*Life Goes On*, 1991), and *Zire darakhtan zaitun* (*Through the Olive Trees*, 1993).

²⁰⁶ Stalin’s “Great Purges” started in 1934. In August 1936, after months of preparations by the Soviet secret police, sixteen “Old Bolsheviks” were put on trial, admitting to all sorts of atrocities, and were subsequently executed. This paved the way for the mass arrests and executions of 1937 to 1938.

tragedies in the historical present. Benjamin maintained the affirmative character of his political position, convinced that in the event of war the Soviets would offer revolutionary support to the German workers. In 1939, however, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression (Molotov-Ribbentrop) Pact cancelled this possibility and profoundly disillusioned Benjamin.²⁰⁷ His writings would now move away from his Marxist political orientation and return once again to theological motifs. His final work “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” (1940) exemplifies a strange combination of theology and historical materialism, in particular his interpretation of the “Angelus Novus,” a painting by Paul Klee, that portrays an angel of history whose face is turned to the past where he sees wreckage upon wreckage hurled at his feet. A storm blows the angel into the future to which his back is turned: “This storm is what we call progress.”²⁰⁸

For Adorno, the failure of the Soviet revolution meant, “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.”²⁰⁹ Adorno’s lack of faith in the redemptive power of the proletariat was confirmed, supporting his claim that the proletarian movement had only led to the total administration of modern society. Consequently, the rift between Benjamin and Adorno would widen after the collapse of the Soviet political and social experiment.

²⁰⁷ Signed on August 13, 1939, the pact was both economic and political. Russia would supply food and raw materials to Germany, while Germany would supply manufactured goods. To avoid fighting a war on two fronts, Germany wanted Russia to stand by when it invaded Poland. In return, Germany gave Russia the Baltic states. The pact lasted two years, ending when Germany invaded Russia in 1941.

²⁰⁸ Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. Harcourt, Brace & World. New York. 1968. Pg. 260.

²⁰⁹ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 24. Adorno wrote this in 1966.

In conclusion, Adorno rejects any interpretation of the historical process through the dialectical capacity of untheorized images because they could only reveal meaning through critical distance and analysis. In which case, any revolutionary rupture must be supported through intellectual endeavour, which in itself is a revolutionary activity. Adorno supports modernism, as opposed to realism, because its negation offers the revolutionary potential for unintentional truth, a sliver of freedom in the otherwise totally administered society. Modernism also presents a means for the re-functioning of cultural forms, as found in the narratives of the French New Wave and the stylistics of the Italian neo-realists. Eisenstein, Godard and Zavattini would all fit into Adorno's concept of the intellectual and artist who attempts to re-function the aesthetic processes.

A question now arises over the priority of contemplation over praxis. Adorno later came under fire for this same issue, unfairly as we have noted earlier, when conducting seminars at the Institute for Social Research.²¹⁰ Although certain cinematic movements attempted theory-in-praxis, such as the Italian neo-realists and the French New Wave, and more radically the Situationists, these movements were often short lived. If the artist and the intellectual are to be the revolutionary avant-garde, and if they cannot find a popular audience, then who precisely were the intellectual avant-garde going to lead. If only avant-garde intellectuals care to understand the re-functioned cultural forms of other avant-garde intellectuals, and if interpretation of these cultural forms required specialized training, which in all likelihood would be unavailable in an educational system run by a bourgeois society primarily interested in perpetuating its own dominant culture, a culture

²¹⁰ The Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), also known as the Frankfurt School, was founded in Germany in 1923. It was known for its social philosophy, notably its critical theory of society. Max Horkheimer was the director after 1930.

incapable of emerging from its own commodification and reification, then the whole concept of intellectual and political praxis must remain unrealized. Benjamin attempts to provide an answer when he suggests that the proletariat assumes control of cultural forms through the changes in modern apperception and technological reproduction.

In the next chapter, I will consider Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1937), which further extends the concept of the dialectical image from the still photography of the nineteenth century to the moving pictures of the twentieth century. The modern techniques of reproduction, as found in the cinematic form, allow works of art to lose their mystical "aura" and thereby gain a potentially revolutionary significance. I will also examine how Adorno's subsequent writing will oppose many of the views proposed by Benjamin's essay. This will mark the apotheosis of Adorno and Benjamin's debate and their different assessments of the popular cinematic culture.

CHAPTER 4:

In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1937), Benjamin claims that the reproducibility of the cinematic form and its subsequent loss of “aura” support the goal of demythification due to cinema’s ability to pierce the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity. Benjamin submitted an early draft of the essay to Horkheimer in 1936, who agreed to publish it in the Frankfurt Institute’s journal. Benjamin delayed sending a copy to Adorno, who, after he finally had the chance to read it, was highly critical.²¹¹ Adorno’s response can be found in an essay entitled “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), also published in the Institute’s journal, and a work co-written with Horkheimer, *Dialectic for Enlightenment* (1944), and a subsequent work *In Search of Wagner* (1952), which all serve to refute many of the claims made in Benjamin’s essay.

Not only will this mark the apotheosis in Adorno and Benjamin’s debate and their different assessments of the cinema as an emancipatory cultural form, it will also serve as Adorno’s polemic against the Hollywood popular cinema. For his part, Benjamin argues that the technological reproduction of cultural forms gives back to humanity the capacity for lived experience that technological production threatens to take away. Adorno, on the other hand, argues that commodified cultural forms are not simply entertainment,

²¹¹ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 146. As Buck-Morss words it, Benjamin had managed to tread on all ten of Adorno’s intellectual toes.

particularly the popular cinema, but serve the goals of totalitarianism in the East and totally administered society in the West with their liquidation of the individual and the organization of the mass audience. In conclusion, I will consider Adorno's continuing defence of modernism as a means to provide a political intervention within bourgeois cultural forms, such as the Hollywood cinema, where any hope for an emancipatory form has been all but extinguished.

One of the distinctive features of photography and film, as the title of Benjamin's essay indicates, is the ability of modern technology to reproduce rapidly and in quantity those very images that they produce. In doing so, reproducibility removes distinctiveness, extracting sameness even from what is unique. At the opposite end of the technological spectrum would be the ancient Greeks, who, due to the primitive state of their means of reproduction, produced singular pieces of art that they sought to instil with "eternal values."²¹² Prior to mass reproduction, therefore, the work of art is transcendental and imbued with an "aura,"²¹³ which served as a kind of halo or mystique. The revered work of art becomes fetishized, its accessibility often limited to the privileged few, namely the ruling class. The eternal values associated with the object are beyond any material attachments, including the temporal, so aura becomes a "strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."²¹⁴

²¹² Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Pg. 109.

²¹³ Benjamin distinguishes between an artificial and an authentic aura. An authentic aura is not some "clean and tidy spiritual beam of magic, as the vulgar mystical books portray and describe it," but more like van Gogh's later work, "the aura is painted into all things," not only in particular things, but all things, and changing with every movement the thing makes. Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pgs. 127 and 275n38.

²¹⁴ Benjamin. "Little History of Photography." Pg. 518.

Due to its reproducibility and accessibility, hence its capacity to be not-eternal, film is essentially lacking in aura. As a result, film is the antithesis of a traditional work of art. The latter is a singular static work created by a single artist in one particular period yet imbued with eternal values; the former is a dynamic collaboration for the masses that can be constantly reinterpreted, rewritten, re-shot, re-edited, and reproduced. Rather than a singular image, a film is composed of a very large number of images and image-sequences, all created by a group of specialists, including writer, director, actors, producer, cinematographer, and editor. These specialists are in a position to intervene at any time in order to improve the film in any desired way during the entire creative process from initial concept to final cut. This capacity for improvement and change links film to “*its radical renunciation of eternal value.*”²¹⁵

Benjamin even warns against seeking to annex film to the traditional concept of art, which would attribute elements of cult to the cinema, in other words, eternal values. As was the case with photography, when many of those alarmed by the appearance of the new technology sought to maintain a fetishistic and anti-technological concept of art, they “undertook nothing less than to legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning.”²¹⁶ Rather than asking how or whether photography and film are art, Benjamin argues, the question is really how photography and film have changed our concept of art.

The viewer is actively engaged in the camera’s movement across the visual field, and the fragmentation of time and space through montage, which is consistent with the

²¹⁵ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Pg. 109.

²¹⁶ Benjamin. “Little History of Photography.” Pg. 508.

shock-like collisions and the acceleration of time that we find within our modern social reality. This is also consistent with our physiology and the constant motion of the eye, which is no longer the static viewer/camera/projector perspective, but the rapid jumps from one fixed point to the next of “saccadic movements.”²¹⁷ The total image produced by a painter presents a vision that is atemporal and static (a dilemma which the Cubists, and the Impressionists before them, already under threat from photography, attempted to remedy), whereas the cinema uses the technique of montage to present fragments, moments in time and space, manifold parts assembled by the new laws of apperception.²¹⁸ Unlike the painter who maintains a natural distance from reality, the cinematographer is an extension of the *flâneur*'s photographic eye, piercing the mirage of bourgeois subjectivity like a scalpel, penetrating deeply into the tissue of reality, so deeply in fact that we forget about the apparatus that took us there.

The image of a scalpel evokes *Un Chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929), which depicts a woman's eye sliced open with a straight razor. The film was a collaboration between filmmaker Luis Buñuel and Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí. An avant-garde non-narrative collection of brutal, erotic, incoherent images, Buñuel called the film “a despairing, passionate call to murder.”²¹⁹ Buñuel's goal as a filmmaker was to use sexual pathology as a metaphor for the distortions in bourgeois culture: “Necrophilia,

²¹⁷ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 7. The word “saccadic” is from the French for jerk, *saccade*. These movements of the eye were discovered by Émile Javal in 1878.

²¹⁸ An early example of Cubist dynamics would be Marcel Duchamp's “Nude Descending a Staircase: No. 2.” (1912); an example of cinematic fragmentation and stylization are the ‘saccadic’ movements of the handheld camera and jump cuts of the New Wave.

²¹⁹ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 309.

sadomasochism, fetishism, cannibalism, and bestiality were for Buñuel at once both cause and effect of the mass psychosis that we call Western civilization.”²²⁰

Benjamin returns to the concept of penetrating the object to find its truth, where cinematic techniques allow the camera to reveal the hidden in the familiar, hence, “we discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.”²²¹ As he would later seek through the technique of montage in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin sought to bring “thought fragments” into view as images. Arendt compares this work to a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea to bring to the surface that which was once alive and has now crystallized into a new form.²²²

Despite the self-alienation of the audience, and without the need for intellectual labour, the technological aspects of film still allows the viewer to pierce, and potentially negate, bourgeois subjectivity, revealing the essential meaning and truth hidden within the language of things. Thus, the reproducibility and accessibility of photography and film counter the rituals and the cult value of the fetish and emancipate the work of art from its parasitic subservience. The democratic levelling of reproduced works of art, particularly film, now fulfils its revolutionary significance and stands as a significant step in the process of dymythification.

Benjamin argues that the emergence of present-day masses and their growing desire to “get closer” to things, to possess them in their immediacy, will result in their

²²⁰ Ibid., pg. 578.

²²¹ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Pg. 117.

²²² Arendt, Hannah. “Introduction.” *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. Harcourt, Brace & World. New York. 1968. Pgs. 50-51.

overcoming each thing's uniqueness. The authenticity of a thing is its quintessence, its duration and its situation, only now technology allows the cathedral to leave its site to arrive at the art lover's studio and for music to be recorded and enjoyed in the privacy of one's home. Technological reproducibility "extracts sameness even from what is unique,"²²³ thus the creation of sameness leads to the destruction of aura. The masses discard the traditional rituals and cult values associated with art, until, "The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film."²²⁴ In fact, the accessibility of film now means that, "Any person today can lay claim to being filmed."²²⁵ As a result, film transfers control from the cultural producers to the masses, thus allowing the masses to confront the omnipresent apparatus of modern society, and gain equilibrium within their lived experience, which in turn supports the raising of revolutionary consciousness and the rise of the proletariat.

Their champion will be the film actor. Similar to the athlete, the film actor has his or her performance broken into fragments, then it is measured, repeated and judged before selection. Benjamin calls this a "test performance."²²⁶ These tests are similar to the standardization and Taylorization of the work process on the assembly line. However, just as a sports fan watches their hero overcome tasks set by natural ability, one more remove from Lukác's alienated individual whose life means little more than the successful passing of tests, the audience member now watches the film actor, standing in as their own mirror-image, as he or she confronts the apparatus of modern society and

²²³ Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Pg. 105.

²²⁴ Ibid., pg. 116.

²²⁵ Ibid., pg. 114.

²²⁶ Ibid., pg. 111.

retrieves their humanity. In doing so, the transfer of authority occurs, moving control from the cultural form to the audience itself. Thus empowered and invested, and not unlike a sports fan, the audience member becomes a quasi-expert in their judgment of films and performances. In effect, the audience is endowed with the capacity for conceptual and critical reflection.

In this way, film performs an important social function in establishing equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus, not only in terms of the presentation of him or herself to the camera, but also in terms of presenting their changing environment by means of the apparatus. Film, therefore, becomes the true training ground of modern apperception. For example, mass psychosis is prevented by cinematic presentations of psychosis. Collective laughter can be a curative for societal ills. Even contemplative immersion (*durée*), which has degenerated under the bourgeoisie, is now restored because the audience views the cinema in a state of distraction, such as found in the appreciation of architecture. This also supports the raising of modern consciousness through “*habit*,”²²⁷ the gradual mastering of tasks while being distracted.

Despite reproducibility emancipating film as a work of art, now controlled by the masses, Benjamin cautions that there can be no political advantage to this control unless film is free from its capitalist exploitation. Cinema, as noted earlier, has been a commercial venture almost from its inception, placing it squarely within the realm of capitalist enterprise. One of the symptoms of capitalist exploitation, for example, is the aura of celebrity that overshadows the potentially liberating “test performance” of the film actor that returns control back to the cultural producers by having the actor take on

²²⁷ Ibid., pg. 120.

the reified character of a thing. The cult of the movie star restores bourgeois subjectivity and, as Benjamin words it, “the putrid magic of its own commodity character.”²²⁸ The counterpart to the cult of the movie star is the cult of the audience. Confusing the boundaries between their internal psychological world and their external social environment, audience passivity is a result of the illusion of its own empowerment, which, in Benjamin’s terms, only “reinforces the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the clear consciousness of the masses.”²²⁹

Radio and film not only change the function of the professional actor, but also the politician. The result is “a new form of selection – selection before an apparatus – from which the champion, the star, and the dictator emerge as victors.”²³⁰ Mass sporting events, rallies, and ceremonies are now filmed, allowing the masses to come face to face with themselves. The potential for cinema as propaganda and mobilizing the masses, already initiated by Lenin and Stalin, would now be further exploited by Hitler and Mussolini. In particular, the pseudo-documentaries of Leni Riefensthal, *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and *Olympia* (1938), presented virtuoso cinematic feats that idealized Hitler and the Third Reich. Any efforts to aestheticize politics, according to Benjamin, must culminate in war, because only war allows “for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations.”²³¹ And mass movements, particularly war, are extremely well suited to the camera. Consequently, the aestheticization of

²²⁸ Ibid., pg. 113.

²²⁹ Ibid., pg. 113.

²³⁰ Ibid., pg. 128n23.

²³¹ Ibid., pg. 121.

politics is the aestheticization of violence, enabling humankind to experience its self-annihilation as “a supreme aesthetic pleasure.”²³²

For Benjamin, there is only one solution to counter the aestheticization of politics: art must be politicized. As opposed to the aestheticization of politics, the politicizing of art offers the possibility for taking the Lukácsian path to change because it offers the potential for political intervention. For example, Benjamin praises the films of Chaplin, who had become the greatest comic by incorporating the greatest fears of his contemporaries. In particular, Chaplin counters the forces of fascism through parodies such as *The Great Dictator* (1940) that shows the comedy in Hitler’s gravity, playing up the feminine cast of the Little Tramp that leads to “Hitler’s diminished masculinity.”²³³ In which case, the viewer’s self-alienation, their absent-minded reception, their very distraction, can still be highly productive. By virtue of its reproducibility and its presentation of images the cinema becomes dialectical in its piercing of reality, with or without intellectual labour. In other words, the cinema possesses the inherent capability to instigate a demythification. Therefore, the revolutionary destruction of bourgeois subjectivity would occur automatically because, paradoxically, it is still possible that a highly productive self-alienation is receptive to the presentation of social reality by means of an apparatus, and therefore the revolutions in technological reproduction rather than the active efforts of the artist as subject would negate the bourgeois forms.

²³² Ibid., pg. 122.

²³³ Benjamin, Walter. “Hitler’s Diminished Masculinity.” *Walter Benjamin/Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2. 1931-1934*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999. Pg. 792.

By locating revolutionary praxis within the mechanical technologies of art's reproduction, Benjamin separates the development of art from that of the rest of society. He is convinced that film contributes to the hope for the future by providing a means of shattering auratic cultural forms and instigating the renewal of humanity because, "its positive form was inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage."²³⁴ Thus, for Benjamin, film is the means to the politicization of art where, as Buck-Morss words it, "technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience that technological *production* threatens to take away."²³⁵

Adorno, however, did not find the argument convincing and his views remained diametrically opposed to those of Benjamin. As noted, Adorno maintains that revolutionary rupture must be supported through intellectual endeavour. In particular, a process of demythification demands a logic of disintegration through the active re-functioning of traditional and existing cultural forms. Otherwise, in the wake of fascism and the triumph of instrumental reason, in both the capitalist and the communist worlds, hope is simply helplessness, a form of escapism, where, "It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance."²³⁶

Adorno disagreed that the cinematic audience can register images in a distracted state, all the while submitted to shock-like stimuli, and yet somehow be provided with the capacity to mobilize themselves. In suggesting the raising of consciousness through the gradual mastering of tasks while distracted, Benjamin further diminished the role of

²³⁴ Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Pg. 104.

²³⁵ Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Pg. 268.

²³⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Pg. 144.

intellectual labour and studied contemplation in both the reception and the production of the cinematic culture. In addition, by maintaining that the production process of cinema transcends the division of labour because it is a collaborative process, Benjamin also removes the important distinction between artist and technician, worker and intellectual.

Adorno did agree that the auratic element in the work of art was in decline, but this was not due merely to technical reproducibility, but to the fact that modern cultural forms have renounced their autonomy and replaced it with marketability. Furthermore, by relinquishing the autonomy that is an essential component of art's own nature, by degrading art through commodification, modern art responds by degrading itself, by refusing to be either agreeable or beautiful. The autonomy that modern art seeks is not reproduction that simply destroys the work of art's parasitic reliance on aura, but art that also maintains the aura of the original while transforming it dialectically. The original truth is preserved and at the same time destroyed as it is transformed and brought into the modern. Otherwise, without the revolutionary dialectic, the process of demythification simply relapses into a new form of myth. Therefore, rather than a politicized art, as Benjamin advocates, we need artistic politicization. Politicized art will only succumb to aestheticizing politics, but artistic politicization requires a truly autonomous art, art that is entirely non-political, and can therefore offer a proper political intervention.

Benjamin sought equivalences between philosophy and image; Adorno looks to philosophy and music. Adorno's influences were the composers Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg,²³⁷ who rejected the notion of the bourgeois artist-as-genius and replaced it

²³⁷ In his younger years, Adorno aspired to be a composer and studied music with Alban Berg (1885-1935) in Vienna in 1925. Berg was a student of Schoenberg's and part of Vienna's cultural elite.

with artist-as-craftsman. Music requires intellectual labour. It has to be translated from written text into sound, which means it has to be interpreted in order to exist. The task of music, as it has been throughout human history, is to summon the essences that have drifted beyond our recall.²³⁸ Science destroyed language, which succumbed to the instrumental reasoning of the modern world, losing its beauty and purpose. Rather than Benjamin's cinematic scalpel that pierces subjective reality, music heals the wounds caused when "the anatomic scalpel has gashed the body of speech and by breathing into it the breath that may animate it with living motion."²³⁹ Therefore, music must do what language, including visual language, has failed to do: to produce an aesthetic effect rather than an argument. Music must revive the festering body of language and bring it back to life.

Music is in a position to accomplish this monumental task for a couple of reasons. First, Adorno argues that while the eye had grown accustomed to perceiving reality as a reality of objects, and hence of commodities, the ear did not adapt so quickly, so hearing lagged behind technology and remained relatively immune to its manipulation. To put it another way, the privileging of the eye evokes the pyramid, the construction, the signification, while the coils of the ear evoke the labyrinth, the internal, the hidden.²⁴⁰ Secondly, it is the very alienation of music, classical music in particular, which keeps it separate from both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, allowing it to provide a means to transcend the present consciousness. Rather than the distraction and shock-value of film,

²³⁸ Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. Pg. 99.

²³⁹ Ibid, pg. 99.

²⁴⁰ Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 229. The flight of Icarus is an attempt to escape the coils of the labyrinth by privileging the eye, only to fall to death after being betrayed by the sun. See pg. 229n66.

the tactile “missile”²⁴¹ with its dynamite of the split second, it would be through the contemplative immersion of the intellectual that we return to the internal experience of individually endured time, to the private reality of *durée*, and thereby recover our lived experience and the abstract boundlessness of the sublime. Adorno would write: “We don’t understand music, it understands us.”²⁴²

Rather than tracing the cinema’s genesis to photography, as Benjamin had, Adorno claims that the birth of film comes out of the spirit of music (even if Nietzsche failed to recognize it). Adorno cites as evidence a letter dated March 23, 1890 - five years before the first public screenings by the Lumière brothers and Edison - where a member of Wagner’s immediate circle suggests performing one of Liszt’s symphonies in a darkened room with a sunken orchestra and images moving past in the background.²⁴³ Adorno interprets the significance of this event as meaning that moving images came after music, and indeed the music of this epoch (such as Beethoven) evoked a new dynamics that found expression in the cinematic form. At the same time, mass culture, such as the popular cinema, imposed itself upon art from the outside, and in the process transformed art into a commodity. Thus, the emancipation of the work of art sets it free from its traditional moorings, yet it also leads to its enslavement, a nullification that “represents at once the immediate manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming.”²⁴⁴ Just as Odysseus is tied to the mast when he hears the Sirens, unable to free himself, succumbing but not succumbing to the Siren’s song, art can only awaken the

²⁴¹ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Pg. 119.

²⁴² Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. xii.

²⁴³ Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. Pg. 107.

²⁴⁴ Adorno. “On The Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” Pg. 325.

futile hope for redemption.²⁴⁵ Instead of an encounter with the sublime, art can no longer be beautiful, just as Odysseus strains to the terrible cries of Schoenberg's *Enwartung*, which is the remembrance of the forgotten song.²⁴⁶

Despite Benjamin's suggestion that film serves a revolutionary purpose by tearing away the ideological veil of reification, Adorno argues that today's mass music shows little of such progress in disenchantment. In fact, there has been a regression in listening, evident in the current musical condition of the masses, a symptom of reified consciousness, which Adorno describes as one of "degeneration."²⁴⁷ Rather than the logic of disintegration, whereby cultural forms are re-functioned to explode reified forms, the opposite had happened. Mass culture has only reinforced reified forms, which in turn has led to the organization of the mass audience, and consequently to "the liquidation of the individual."²⁴⁸ Adorno argues, in the harshest terms possible, that the liquidation of the active, questioning individual by the organization of the mass audience is a totalitarian accomplishment that compares to that of the Führer.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Pg. 27.

²⁴⁶ *Enwartung* (Expectation) is a one-act opera for solo soprano and orchestra. The monodrama is set in a forest at night where a woman is looking for her lover, only to find him murdered. Adorno writes: "She is consigned to the music the very same way as a patient is to analysis. The admission of hatred and desire, jealousy and forgiveness, and – beyond all this – the entire symbolism of the unconscious is wrung from her; it is only in the moment that the heroine becomes insane that the music recalls its right to utter a consoling protest." Adorno, Theodor. W. *Philosophy of Music*. Sheed & Ward. London. First published in U.K. 1973. Paperback edition. 1987. Pg. 42.

²⁴⁷ Adorno. "On The Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." Pg. 326.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 334.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 332.

Adorno supplies an illustration by turning to the music on the radio where he claims the selections to which we are subjected have nothing to do with quality, their measure taken in terms of success as a commodity. The music industry's formula, like that of the film industry, is to find something that is successful, then to promote and plug the same thing over and over again, with the result that music is made into "a kind of social cement operating through distraction, displaced wish-fulfilment, and the intensification of passivity."²⁵⁰ The consciousness of the listener is rarely engaged and the performance of classical music on the radio, for example, has caused a regression in listening because it is increasingly difficult for listeners to hear it as music: "When they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or to a bikini."²⁵¹ At the same time, the radio voice penetrates the private sphere of the bourgeois *intérieur*, where freedom is limited to switching the station. Despite its attributes of the ethereal and the sublime, music is merely the background noise for the general distraction of modern life. The regression of listening, like the regression of viewing, is only another aspect of the failure that pervades every aspect of culture.

In terms of the liberation of revolutionary consciousness through technological reproducibility and innovation, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the reality is the exact opposite. Because millions participate in the mass culture, it is alleged that the reproduction technology and processes require constant innovation to serve the

²⁵⁰ Jay. *The Dialectical Imagination*. Pg. 192.

²⁵¹ Adorno. "On The Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." Pg. 332.

consumers' needs. In fact, this only serves to give the consumer the illusion of control over the cultural process, while tightening the noose of manipulation:

A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their levelling element shows its strength in the very wrong which it furthered.²⁵²

Mass culture - and the popular Hollywood cinema in particular - offers the subjective appearance of overcoming alienation, all the while leaving the objective, social reality of human alienation intact. As exchange-values destroy use-values of human beings, it only furthers the disguise of exchange-values as an object of enjoyment. Thus, the cinema is simply a new form of bourgeois idealism, little more than narcotic or circus-like distraction that can only offer an illusionary gratification, in which the consumer regards himself as the successful or savvy consumer of culture, blithely unaware that he has reified himself.

The commodity fetishists of today's mass art display a masochistic passion that recalls Lukács's self-imprisonment, where the consumer's behaviour corresponds to "the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love."²⁵³ This masochistic passion reinforces the urge to 'get closer' to things, to use Benjamin's term, which we do by holding an object at close range as an image or as a reproduction, baiting the powerful lure of the visual culture. The compulsion here, Adorno writes, is "not to

²⁵² Horkheimer and Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Pg. 121.

²⁵³ Ibid., pg. 333.

leave anything as it is, but to lay hands on anything that crosses one's path."²⁵⁴ However, nothing is truly new. The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing, where the machine simply rotates on the same spot: "Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear."²⁵⁵ Adorno sums up the situation: "The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from."²⁵⁶

In order to maintain the appearance of newness and the growing market for its wares, capitalism requires the manipulation of taste in conjunction with the pretence of individualism, which only leads once again to the ideological adaptation and conformity found in the liquidation of the individual:

In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned.²⁵⁷

The culture industry must "hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society."²⁵⁸ Other than those few artistic works, such as the dissonant twelve-tone compositions of Schoenberg, which give voice to anxiety and the terror of the

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 336.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. pg. 134.

²⁵⁶ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 32.

²⁵⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Pg. 154.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, pg. 138.

catastrophic situation, Adorno dismisses the temptation to rescue the work of art through a progress of disenchantment, as if the auratic might give way to something more profound. For Adorno, “All attempts at reconciliation, whether by market-oriented artists or collectively-oriented art educators, are fruitless.”²⁵⁹ The loss of the work of art’s aura, which Benjamin represented as the possibility of a revolutionary mass art, Adorno sees as nothing more than the fetishization of the new, another component in the hegemony of the culture industry. Progress becomes regression; enlightenment becomes myth.

The “culture industry” has a specific social function, namely providing ideological legitimacy to the existing social reality and of integrating individuals into the framework of its social formation. The industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production causes the fusion of culture and entertainment, which, as Adorno and Horkheimer word it, “leads not only to a deprivation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement.”²⁶⁰ This can only merge into the calculated *fun* of the culture industry. The pessimistic denunciation of the popular culture follows the validation of rigorous high modernist art as truly revolutionary (i.e., the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg), which reignites the debate between high art and popular culture, leading to calls for a socially committed cinema.

Adorno criticized Benjamin for underestimating the subversive potential of autonomous works of art and overestimating the laughter of the proletariat in the movie theatres. Adorno also argues that the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) and the autonomous pretensions of *l’art pour l’art* are merely diametrically opposed attempts to

²⁵⁹ Adorno. “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening.” Pg. 348.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 143.

achieve the same thing, namely to escape from their commodity character. Ultimately, these attempts proceed by concealment of the poetic aim, which, in the case of the total work of art, only “strives toward the ideal of the absolute phenomenon which the phantasmagoria dangles so tantalizingly before it.”²⁶¹ Consequently, the entanglement of the banal is as total as the flight from it, forcing the work of art into a ceaseless battle to reinvent itself to counter the constant threats of commodification.

The Hollywood studio system evolves into a vehicle of ideological conformity and adaptation on a mass scale where, in Adorno’s view, the possibility of a revolutionary art piercing the veil of bourgeois subjectivity grows ever dimmer. Hollywood further nullifies its own potential as an emancipatory form by instigating the Production Code, also known as the “Purity Code” or, to put it facetiously, the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” Adorno and Horkheimer note that the self-imposed code means the industry now submits to the vote that it has itself inspired. The code restricts the cinematic portrayals of violence, profanity, nudity, licentious behaviour, racism, unpatriotic acts, drugs, drunkenness, and the like. In other words, it will not present the reality of society under late capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer’s pronouncement is that, “It calls for Mickey Rooney in preference to the tragic Garbo, for Donald Duck instead of Betty Boop.”²⁶² The political consequences appear soon after the implementation of the Production Code where, in response to accusations of immorality, a list of undesirable Hollywood personalities is compiled and they are banned from working in the industry. This blacklist of moral transgressions is the precursor to the blacklist of political

²⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 98.

²⁶² Horkheimer and Adorno. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Pg. 134.

transgressions that leads to the McCarthy trials of the 1940s and 50s, which sought to root out Communists in the film community. With financial losses and careers at stake, the fear of reprisals led to a degree of self-regulation and censorship that proved more effective than any government body might have imposed.

The backlash from the conformist McCarthy era finds momentum in 1952 when the state of New York halts the release of *Il miracolo* (1948), claiming its secular depiction of Christ is sacrilegious. The film is a segment of the Italian film *L'Amore*, directed by Rossellini, co-written with Federico Fellini, adapted from a play by Jean Cocteau. Independent American distributor, Joseph Burstyn, takes the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. Two years earlier Burstyn refused to make two minor cuts to De Sica and Zavattini's *Bicycle Thieves* to accommodate the Production Code, yet the film was still shown in first-run theatres and went on to win the 1949 Academy Award for Best Foreign Picture. This time Burstyn succeeds in gaining protection under the First and Fourteenth Amendments, and, for the first time, movies attain the legal status that regards them as "a significant medium for communication of ideas."²⁶³

The legal status of Hollywood popular culture was first established in 1925 when the US Supreme Court declared the exhibition of motion pictures to be "a business pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit [... and not] as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion."²⁶⁴ Consequently, movies were not protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and were not classified as a cultural expression but as a public entertainment, which put cinema in the same category as

²⁶³ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 428.

²⁶⁴ Maltby, Richard. "Censorship and Self-Regulation." *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Oxford University Press. 1996. Pg. 235.

circuses, vaudeville or magic shows. This would maintain the cinema's connection to its origins as a parlour game and novelty, but failed to take into account its communicative potential as a new form of language.

Paradoxically, it is in the McCarthy era, one of the lowest points in Hollywood's creativity or integrity, when the cinema is finally recognized as both public entertainment and cultural expression. Consequently, the court rulings lead to the erosion of the self-imposed Production Code and challenge the sovereignty of the traditional Hollywood system, leading to a revolution in the moral climate and content of American cinema. The "New Hollywood" of the 1960s and early 70s, sometimes referred to as the "American New Wave" or the "post-classical Hollywood," spans the years from 1967 to 1982. In a twist of revisionism, film theorists now regard many of the earlier studio films as freer forms of cultural expression. For example, the works of Ernst Lubitsch and Billy Wilder often dealt with problematical themes within familiar genres, as in the films *To Be or Not To Be* (1942) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945), which dealt with Nazism and alcoholism.

Despite the early promise of the "independent" films of the New Hollywood, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Graduate* (1967), cultural control does not go the masses. Instead, during the 1970s, the control moves from the studio mogul to the multi-national corporation, conforming to the larger social strategy and the economic bottom-line, strengthening the corporate and political control of cultural production. The universal criterion for merit would now be realized, as Adorno and Horkheimer worded it, by "conspicuous production [where] the varying budgets in the culture industry do not bear the slightest relation to factual values, to the meaning of the products themselves."²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Pg. 124.

Adorno and Horkheimer anticipate that the increase in commodification of the culture industry can only lead to the devaluation of culture where, “aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit since they were gathered together as culture.”²⁶⁶ Many of the genres that had previously existed on the fringes of the cinematic world, such as pornography, would now become mainstream. A flood of “psycho-slasher” films glut the market in the wake of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Made for \$400,000, the film grosses \$50 million. By 1981, “slasher” films comprise sixty percent of all domestic American releases and twenty-five of the fifty top-grossing films.²⁶⁷ Graphic violence soon seeps into every cinematic genre, becoming a standard feature in both films and television, its depiction of gore and mutilation also initiating a new category of Academy Award in 1981: Best Makeup.

In terms of society’s overall reaction to the explosion of pornography and violence within the image-making culture, and the post-modern pervasiveness of these images and its waning effect, Jameson would write,

its own offensive features – from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism – no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have

²⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 131.

²⁶⁷ Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. Pg. 869.

themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official culture of Western society.²⁶⁸

Modern societies have substituted commodities for genuine works of art, and professed enlightenment while using them as a means of mass deception. Humankind, instead of entering a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism, where real life is indistinguishable from the movies, where everything has been appropriated for the purposes of mechanical reproduction, and “the culture industry can pride itself on having energetically executed the previously clumsy transposition of art into the sphere of consumption.”²⁶⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that the Marquis de Sade offers a “more intransigent critique of practical reason”²⁷⁰ by repudiating all traces of the eternal values and moral sentiment of bourgeois subjectivity. In which case, dissonant art, including pornography and ‘slashers’ reminds us of all that art has lost.

In terms of its social antithesis, modernism, even when it does not contain any consciously political intent, can still be progressive and provide a political intervention. To further support this claim, Adorno suggests that cultural forms contain an “inherently collective objectivity,”²⁷¹ where the artist’s individual voice is more importantly a part of the whole of humanity, and that in itself is why the work of art is the form that must carry the “burden of art’s eloquence.”²⁷² We may apply to ‘slashers’ what Adorno wrote about Beckett’s works, where content can no longer be identified with reason: “The darkness of

²⁶⁸ Jameson. “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Pg. 485.

²⁶⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Pg. 135.

²⁷⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Pge. 94.

²⁷¹ Adorno. “Commitment.” Pg. 180.

²⁷² Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 265.

the absurd is the old darkness of the new. This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning.”²⁷³ The notion that art should contain a message, or meanings, regardless of whether or not it is politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world, suggesting once again the contention that a harmonious totality is merely false appeasement, and that rationality initiates a mechanism of control. Still, no matter how relentless the work, there is always pleasure even in the most sublimated work of art, because there is always a message, a hidden “it should be otherwise.”²⁷⁴

The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts, contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for an instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite.²⁷⁵

In conclusion, where Benjamin found the technological reproduction of cultural forms gave back to humanity the capacity for experience that technological production threatened to take away, Adorno argues that modern cultural forms have only served in the liquidation of the individual and the organization of the mass audience, a totalitarian accomplishment that compares to that of the Führer. Thus, for Adorno, the structure of domination itself is the primary evil, the cause of world wars and its attendant horrors such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. His claim that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric pays homage “to that which has been reduced to silence.”²⁷⁶ Although Adorno

²⁷³ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pg. 27.

²⁷⁴ Adorno. “Commitment.” Pg. 194.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 189.

²⁷⁶ Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 267.

would later become ambivalent on this claim, allowing that it was only through art that, “suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.”²⁷⁷ In this way, rather than attempting the beauty of the transcendent, the experiences of victims can be used to create a negative work of art, a work that becomes part of the consumption of a world that caused the victims’ experience in the first place. Thus, the artwork’s necessary, albeit illusory, autonomy is the key to modernism’s social character and its task to be ‘the social antithesis of society’. In so doing, modernism becomes an artistic politicization, where the goal is to summon the essences that have drifted beyond our recall and renew “the promise contained in the age-old protest of music: the promise of a life without fear.”²⁷⁸

In the final chapter, I will consider Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical view of the Enlightenment. In contrast, we will also consider Benjamin’s optimism for the future, in particular his hopes for the unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*. I will also consider some of the developments in the modern cinema as well as the thoughts of a few contemporary thinkers. In so doing, I hope to summarize the views of Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno in terms of a Marxist aesthetic and the potential of the modern cinema as an emancipatory form and its impact on our social reality.

²⁷⁷ Adorno. “Commitment.” Pg. 188. See Schoenberg, Arnold. “A Survivor from Warsaw. Op. 46” (1947), an orchestral piece about a Jewish survivor of a Nazi concentration camp.

²⁷⁸ Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. Pg. 156.

CHAPTER 5:

Visual constructions have proved an important step in the reification of modern social reality, becoming the crucible of, and for, our own re-creation. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry.”²⁷⁹ Thus, the subjective experience of film has exploited our latent image-making schemata, enhanced in the immediacy of lived experience, whereby ever more extravagant technological means are used to make the cinematic experience as vivid and visual as possible. Yet by its very use of technology, and its sheer immediacy, the image-making culture transposes and objectifies the entire world and everything in it, where images are now incorporated into the very fabric of everyday life.

In the society of the spectacle, Debord writes, the image is the final form of commodity reification. Lived experience now takes place in a reified world stratified with layers of image/commodities and society as a whole had been transformed into a gigantic spectacle.²⁸⁰ Thus, the world-as-image has triumphed over our sense of the real, our place in history, even our sense of place, where, as Baudrillard words it,

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being,

²⁷⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Pg. 126.

²⁸⁰ Debord. “The Commodity as Spectacle.” Pg. 121. See also Jay. *Downcast Eyes*. Pg. 429.

or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.²⁸¹

Ultimately, all reification, as Adorno and Horkheimer contend, is a kind of forgetting.²⁸² In which case, modern society may be approaching a period of mass amnesia, a society so acutely disconnected from lived experience that we allow ourselves to fall into a Dark Age where much that has made us successful will be forgotten.²⁸³

The question now becomes, if we move beyond the image, what lies ahead?

Mass culture does not provide a “well-fitting garment for the world,”²⁸⁴ at least not in the sense that Lukács meant, answering the question how can life become essence. Instead, the philosophy of security, as Lukács called it, with its instrumental reasoning, its prison world of material and temporal control, has vacuum-sealed our social reality. Thus, the culture industry has enslaved men in far more subtle and effective ways than the crude methods of domination practiced in earlier eras, making full use of the image-making culture to lull its victims into passive acceptance. If the proletariat can not experience reality, then there is little possibility they would ever interpret the social truth that reality contained, nor could they ever become aware of their own objective position. Here is the fundamental contradiction of capitalist-industrial culture: it engenders

²⁸¹ Baudrillard, Jean. “The Precession of Simulacra.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 453.

²⁸² Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Pg. 230.

²⁸³ See Jacobs, Jane. *Dark Age Ahead*. Random House Canada. 2004.

²⁸⁴ Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Pg. 30.

ideological conformity and adaptation, but without social solidarity.²⁸⁵ The result, as Bruno Latour acerbically observes, is that we now live in the most non-revolutionary of societies imaginable: the tolerant society.²⁸⁶

Benjamin, quoted in Lukács, seeks a link between the annihilation of history and modernist allegory: “history appears, not as the gradual realization of the eternal, but as a process of inevitable decay. Allegory thus goes beyond beauty. What ruins are in the physical world, allegories are in the world of the mind.”²⁸⁷ Thus, Benjamin tries to bring history into the present through the dialectical image. Only by looking to the past, by brushing history against the grain, can we keep alive “a *weak* messianic power,”²⁸⁸ that offers the hope against hope for the redemption of the past and the reconciliation of humankind. In those frozen moments of time, dialectics at a standstill, Benjamin argues that it may not in fact be revolutionary change in terms of motion that we’re seeking, but its opposite, where “revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.”²⁸⁹

In his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, which Benjamin referred to as “the theatre of all my struggles and all my ideas,”²⁹⁰ he looks again to Fourier and the collective, as he did in “Paris, the Capital of the Twentieth Century,” and the

²⁸⁵ Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Pg. 261.

²⁸⁶ Latour, Bruno. *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?* Translated from the French by Charlotte Bigg. Edited by John Tresch. Prickly Paradigm Press. Chicago, IL. 2002. Pg. 19.

²⁸⁷ Lukács. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Pg. 41.

²⁸⁸ Löwy. *Fire Alarm – Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. Pg. 30.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pgs. 66-67.

²⁹⁰ Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Pg. x.

Harmoniums, who were inspired by children's play as "the utopian model for emancipated activity."²⁹¹ As an audience we are distanced from nature, yet when we are immersed in play we fulfil one of Marx's notions of aesthetic pleasure.²⁹² Benjamin found in the consciousness of children an unspoiled creative spontaneity, perhaps the only surviving vestige of un-reified consciousness before bourgeois education manages to badger it out of existence. The redemption of this creative spontaneity in a new cultural form, perhaps the cinema, is crucial in that it represents the essential connection between perception and action that distinguishes revolutionary consciousness. Most importantly, the child can do something an adult cannot, to discover the new anew.²⁹³

Earlier technology sought mastery over nature, whereas the new technology seeks the interplay between nature and humanity, thus realizing Benjamin's concept that the true function of film is to train human beings to deal with the changing apperceptions within the vast apparatus of modern society. The shared experience of the cinema, including the filmmakers who learn from each other's work, now offers "the first 'global vernacular' of modern experience."²⁹⁴ For Benjamin, the new urban-industrial world had become fully re-enchanted, as in the ur-forests of another era, where we must go out and search for meaning because myth is alive and everywhere. Despite Adorno's dismissal of the collective dream and the re-mythification of the world, Benjamin sought the redemption of mythification. If so, it will be through the technological reproductions of

²⁹¹ Löwy. *Fire Alarm – Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. Ibid., pg. 76.

²⁹² Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Pg. 107. See also Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 229.

²⁹³ Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Pg. 274.

²⁹⁴ Buck-Morss. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. Pg. 156.

the image-making culture that we are reintroduced to the natural world, thus demanding a reconceptualization of the relationship between culture and nature.

Adorno, for his part, remains the “nonconformist intellectual” whose theory-in-praxis will leave a lasting legacy of radical enlightenment. Adorno will maintain that the task of the truly committed work of art must be to strip away the artistic conjuring that is content to be a fetish and refuse to become “an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political.”²⁹⁵ Thus, the cinematic form awakens the hope of redemption, its aesthetic a special object of pleasure, yet it is absorbed by an immobilized audience, where “aesthetic contemplation remains disinterested – just as, according to Freud, dreams require the motor paralysis of sleep to enable otherwise repressed desires to express themselves.”²⁹⁶ The paradox of all art is expressed by fetishization, the paradox that something is made for its own sake, yet its need to be new binds it to the ever-same. By definition, the new wants non-identity, yet intention will always reduce it to identity.²⁹⁷ Adorno writes in the opening lines of *Aesthetic Theory* (1966), “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”²⁹⁸

Today, movie attendance is a quarter of what it was in its peak year 1946, when it was over 90 million people weekly, and the total US and Canada populations were half of what they are today. More and more films are now made outside the traditional structure

²⁹⁵ Ibid., pg. 177.

²⁹⁶ Cutrofello. *Continental Philosophy*. Pg. 267.

²⁹⁷ Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Pgs. 22-23.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 1.

of what was once recognized as the Hollywood system, challenging prior claims of American cultural imperialism, typically regarded as a kind of worldwide cultural standardization, as in the “Coca-colonization and McDonaldization”²⁹⁹ of cinematic culture. The new globalization (perhaps more accurately called “westernization”) and its world system media suggests the inevitability of some form of cultural hybridization. This includes the prospective convergence of the cultural industries with telecommunications and information technology, by which all those cultural forms perpetuated by all the different peoples of the world will become separated from existing practices and recombined into new forms.

Although hybridization may imply richness and variety of cultural influences, there is also the danger that the very process of hybridization demands that differences conform to the technology that initiates the process, and in so doing the cultural relationships could soon be described in terms of “an affirmation of *similarity*.”³⁰⁰ In other words, we may take the Lukácsian path to ideological conformity and adaptation, a world of conventions, where we find the processes of cultural hybridization coalesce into homogenization, a kind of unified world culture, of which the image-making culture – and its audio-visual language - may prove its most significant, and yet most conformist, component.

In his essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (2006), Arjun Appadurai writes, “The world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic,

²⁹⁹ Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. “Globalization as Hybridization.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 658.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 672.

theories of rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other.”³⁰¹ Yet there remains something of Benjamin’s conception of the archaic and the modern, which itself “lends the text an extraordinary sense of déjà-vu and a peculiar familiarity.”³⁰² Perhaps this is the realization of Benjamin’s attempts to give voice to the silent murmuring, to find the profane illumination, where we transverse the hermeneutic circle, seeking the whole through the parts. Perhaps then, as Roland Barthes words it, “alongside each utterance... offstage voices can be heard,” voices that are woven together in the heteroglossic text and thus embody “the plurality and the circularity of the codes.”³⁰³

To describe our world as rhizomic suggests that our cultural forms are now structured less like the hierarchal tree of knowledge and more like an organism that has no central point, interconnected by living fibres, with no particular origin, no definitive structure, no formative unity. It is also much harder to uproot as it does not start anywhere or end anywhere. New cultural forms such as those found in the new media, which may still seem little more than technological novelties could prove to be the new art forms of the twenty-first century, relegating film to the secondary status that vaudeville or opera have today. The accessibility and reproducibility of the new media

³⁰¹ Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 585.

³⁰² Jameson, Fredric. “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell Publishing. Malden MA. Revised Edition. 2006. Pg. 585.

³⁰³ Bhaskar, Ira. “‘Historical Poetics’, Narrative, and Interpretation.” *A Companion to Film Theory*, Edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam. Blackwell Publishing. Malden, MA. 2004. Pg. 392.

evoke not only Benjamin but also Zavattini, who foresaw a day when anyone could have a camera, when one person could be the sole author of a film, and then the cinema will finally become a creative medium as free and flexible as any other.

As for the proletariat and the external construction needed to raise revolutionary consciousness, perhaps we are no longer raising a revolutionary consciousness, but rather revolutionizing the raising of consciousness, a paradoxical transformation of our social being marked by both rapid changes in awareness combined with an inability to constitute any form of social praxis. With globalization, we move not only from the local to the global, but the global to the local. The proletariat itself is only a placeholder for the trans-individual who, with the availability of the new and ever more portable technology, creates his or her own cultural forms.

Perhaps this will be the Lukácsian coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths, or the pearl divers of Benjamin's whose discoveries bring their rich and strange discoveries to the world of the living, or Adorno's music that emits from the coils of the labyrinth. Perhaps each of these creations becomes an artistic monad, one particular note in the universal, a form of critical self-reflection that might, as Adorno words it, cause the second Copernican revolution, an axial turn that reverses subject and object, so that non-identity becomes the basis of knowledge.³⁰⁴ To put it another way, the true aesthetic of a cultural form is not the aesthetic that we apply to it, but exists within the cultural form itself. To paraphrase Adorno: we don't understand art; it understands us. In other words, the primacy of the object trumps the primacy of the constitutive subject. If so, we may unlock the historical

³⁰⁴ Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. Pg. 83.

dynamic hidden within objects, and, as Benjamin promised, release the silent murmuring congealed inside, where the object longs to transform itself, seeking a sensual happiness within its own body. As we have become objects to ourselves, perhaps those voices will be ours.

The cinematic form has proven its capability of raising our awareness of the dehumanization of capitalist society and challenging property relations, yet it has also justified social domination through its contribution to the reification of our consciousness. However, the cinema is also part of the material world and may be in decline just as late-capitalism is in decline, only to be replaced by another emergent form, a new technology or apparatus that must seek its own emancipation, demanding a resilience that may already be realized as images are replaced by codes. Ultimately, our social reality is the crucible of our own self-creation and as such holds the promise of the future, where today adds its own burdens to the task of reconciling the past, demanding that Marxism, and its goals to change reality and begin the aesthetic education of humankind, must also reinvent and reformulate itself in the realization of those hopes.

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