ACCESS △

Thoughts on Film: Critically engaging with both Adorno and Benjamin

Laura D'Olimpio

The University of Notre Dame

ABSTRACT

There is a traditional debate in analytic aesthetics that surrounds the classification of film as Art. While much philosophy devoted to considering film has now moved beyond this debate and accepts film as a mass art, a subcategory of Art proper, it is worth reconsidering the criticism of film pre-Deleuze. Much of the criticism of film as pseudo-art is expressed in moral terms. Adorno, for example, critiques film as 'mass-cult', mass-produced culture which presents a 'flattened' version of reality. Adorno worries about the passivity encouraged in viewers. Films are narrative artworks, received by an audience in a context, making the focus on the reception of the work important. The dialogue held between Adorno and Walter Benjamin post-Second World War is interesting because, between them, they consider both the possible positive emancipatory and negative politicization effects of film as a mass produced and distributed storytelling medium. Reading Adorno alongside Benjamin is a way to highlight the role of the critical thinker who receives the film. Arguing that the critical thinker is a valuable citizen, this paper focuses on the value of critical thinking in the reception of cinematic artworks. It achieves this by reconsidering Adorno and Benjamin's theories of mass art.

Introduction

Much of the current philosophy of film literature pursues an optimistic approach that may be identified with Walter Benjamin's hope for the art of the masses. This optimism sees film as a vehicle for screening philosophical thought experiments, offering new perspectives on issues relevant to everyday life by engendering critical conscious- ness. If films allow for philosophical thinking, then they encourage social, political and economic critique of social norms. Yet, most popular films that are digested in large quantities are Hollywood or Bollywood blockbuster films that are generally criticized for depicting stereotypes and for eliciting formulaic emotions (Collingwood, 1969, p. 57). Theorists who conceive of cinema as a means of thinking must first reply to the objections that most films are formulaic and do not encourage active, intelligent or imaginative participation. Prior to the publication of Deleuze's cinema books (1986, 1989), theorists such as Adorno feared the advent of the Hollywood Studio film as akin to Nazi propaganda. Dismissed as elitist, Adorno's concern was that mass-produced and distributed artworks portrayed social norms as immutable reality. If the viewer's imagination cannot enter and engage with messages depicted through the filmic medium, then viewers cannot critique the moral and social status quo as screened; instead, they simply receive it and the depicted stereotypes are rein- forced. Audiences may be able to engage critically with such narratives, yet the focus on the reception of the narrative screened is worth considering

in further detail. In this paper, Adorno will be read alongside Benjaminesque theories of film, in order to focus on the critical attitude of the viewer, as well as the moral messages of the film. While there are many different stories being told in contemporary culture, the focus on the critical thinker, the interpreter of the narrative, is vital.

If critical thinkers are important for society and films as mass art can engender a critical reception, then Adorno's concern for uncritical ingestion of mass art would be valid. Although Adorno may have overstated his concern, his desire for critical reflection of mass art appears to be well placed and is a sentiment shared by Benjamin. As Hansen notes:

> Abandoning his defensive stance against the cinema as a mass media, Adorno can even conceive of a 'liberated' film which would have to 'extricate its a priori collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and irrational influence' and enlist it 'in the service of emancipatory intentions.' Benjamin would not have disagreed. (1981–1982, p. 192)

Film, as a technological art form, can be viewed and understood by many people virtually on first contact (Carroll, 2004, pp. 486–487) and can elicit powerful responses. The nature of these various responses is still under debate, but includes responding to the emotional quality of films, their images and realistic representations (Wartenberg, 2007, p. 5) that can depict various aspects of society, character and politics. Following Carroll, I shall use the term 'mass art' to refer to mass-produced and distributed artworks such as film. On Carroll's definition (1998, p. 196), film is art *qua* art, yet it may not be very good (both aesthetically and ethically). Following the influence of Deleuze, much of the current philosophy and film literature is optimistic with regards to the potential of films to explore philosophical ideas. The cinematic experience is powerful because it combines sensory input with story to convey social, political and emotional truths. Colman illustrates this in her claim:

> The audio-visual nature of certain cinema … achieves 'a victory' over th[e] heirarchization of modes and concepts of art. This is also a victory in philosophical terms for art as a political form that contributes something to the world. (2011, p. 253)

This idea that film can provide a social commentary and thus be meaningful, as opposed to mindless, is an aspect of the contemporary Deleuzean approach to film that reflects the optimism that emerges from Benjamin who celebrates the potential of films to screen ideas. Yet, the stronger claim that can be read from Benjamin's writings that critical detachment is somehow built into mass media because audiences watching films are distracted (Benjamin, 1969, p. 240) should be reconsidered. Adorno and Horkheimer warn of the less desirable aspects of cinema such as the passivity of its viewers and its economic motivation. These concerns need to be considered alongside Benjamin's celebration of cinema. Neither Benjamin nor Adorno and Horkheimer are completely correct; yet, both hold value and are relevant to reconsidering important ethical aspects of film spectatorship.

Osborne and Charles remark that, "the ecstatic character of Benjamin's political thought at the outset of the 1930s, sees technology appear on a political knife-edge between its possibilities as 'a fetish of doom' and 'a key to happiness'" (2011). Film, when fetishized, is focused on making money or promoting an ideology rather than telling stories as a narrative art form. Carroll notes, 'Perhaps the greatest anxieties about mass art concern morality' (1998, p. 291) and Benjamin points out that, for example, fascism can pervert the natural tendencies of mass art (1969, pp. 243–244). Yet there should be a reconsideration of the stronger claim that can be read from Benjamin, namely, that mass art has 'natural tendencies' that are emancipatory. We can see that film may be motivated by economic reasons as well as ideological ones when we consider the numerous sequels of, for example, *Fast and Furious* which are enthusiastically received by mass audiences.[1] It is useful to re-examine and juxtapose Adorno and Horkheimer's view with Benjamin's. In doing so, we are reminded of the ability film has to manipulate and be used as an economic and political apparatus, as well as a vehicle for harmless entertainment and, possibly, insight and even wisdom. Even though Adorno does not envision the potential and possibility of film in the way that Benjamin speculated and Deleuze celebrated, his concerns should not be dis- missed. Film, as an art of the masses,

embedded within society and used by social, political, moral humans, has the potential to be constructive *or* destructive.

Benjamin acknowledges the potential for mass art to manipulate, yet he contends that mass art is progressive in its ability to transform human perception, not by expressing or emblematizing it, but by encouraging its evolution (Carroll, 1998, p. 122). For Benjamin, film allows the viewer to stand outside of it, critically. This is due to the camera work as mediator between actor and viewer that 'permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor' (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 228–229). As an aside, the influence of Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein in this approach is critiqued by Adorno who is wary of Benjamin's use of these theorists in supporting a strong claim about the emancipatory power of film (Osborne, 2008, p. 63). From Benjamin, we learn that the power of film may be harnessed once we have recognized the mechanisms of the apparatus (Benjamin, 1991, pp. 107–108). As noted, Benjamin's theory does not discount film being used either to empower *or* to attempt to monopolize viewers with images depicted en masse. Osborne and Charles (2011) note that Benjamin's writings on film are justly renowned for their twin theses of the transformation of the concept of art by its 'technical reproducibility' and the new possibilities for the collective experience this contains, in the wake of the historical decline of the 'aura' of the work of art, a process that film is presented as definitively concluding. While this more traditional art aura regresses, there is also the chance, Benjamin suggests, of a newly liberated 'distracted' viewer who is progressive, keeping up with new, active filmic techniques (Markus, 2001, p. 17). Yet, Adorno's concern that the new media will lead to a dystopia or even the collapse of civilization should give us pause to think more deeply about the impact of mass art on viewers.

For Adorno, who is concerned with the aesthetic value of unique artworks, the loss of aura is not cause to celebrate; the technologically reproducible artwork is not as valuable because it does not challenge the viewer to actively engage with the picture of society it presents. In this way, mass artworks are unlike so-called 'high' or avant-garde artworks and thus, lack ethical as well as aesthetic value. Adorno and Horkheimer state, 'The double mistrust of traditional culture as ideology is combined with the mistrust of industrialized culture as a swindle' (p. 161). Adorno has been criticized as being elitist and his writings on jazz certainly do nothing to defend him from this claim (McCann, 2008, pp. 12–13). However, it must be noted that the sense of value to which he refers is not simply aesthetic, but also social and political. With the benefit of hindsight, if we acknowledge that Adorno was overly critical of the medium of film and overstated his ethical and social concerns with regards to the passivity of viewers, some of his critique is still salvageable and relevant to the con- temporary debate about film and philosophy. Furthermore, it is important to take the conversation in its context of Hitler taking control of Germany in the 1930s and the Nazi effort to eliminate avant-garde art that challenged the political picture of the Weimar Republic they wished to sustain. Having witnessed the effect of propaganda in Nazi Germany and moving to America to form the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer bore witness to the rise of the Hollywood Studio Film system in Post-Second World War America. Writing in the 1930–1950s, they worried about the ethical impact of the culture industry on society and the lack of diverse narratives being screened. While the current social and political climate is much changed, their focus on the moral impact of engaging with mass-produced and distributed products of a media industry is still of relevance today. The alleged lack of value (aesthetic and ethical) and the promotion of negative values (e.g. hyper-nationalism) of mass- consumed artworks require examination, even if not all films are guilty of Adorno's criticisms. Instead of dismissing Adorno as a naysayer whose critique of film restricts the possibilities for creative expression via a technologically reproducible medium, a re-reading of Adorno is timely with respect to the moral consideration and social importance of this popular form of art.

The writings of both Benjamin and Adorno are relevant in our technological society with its blurry lines between art, media and technological sharing platforms and social networking sites. We can value the different stories being told in contemporary culture, but we must also be mindful of

the context in which these stories are conveyed and received. If films are powerful tools for communication, then we may convey many diverse messages through the power of story. The viewer's uptake of such messages may be constructive or destructive, as the creative force has the potential for both. An obvious example of this is the fine line that separates propaganda from entertainment whereby we cannot always tell the difference in product or affect. Directors have the ability to encourage a positive (life-affirming) or a negative (life-denying) response to people, events and the earth itself: ranging from Disney and Michael Bay's proclamations of 'save the world!' to Lars Von Trier's attitude of 'let it all explode'. With this in mind, I propose we reconsider film spectatorship by re-reading Adorno alongside Benjamin.

Where is the Place for the Thinking Viewer in the Cinema?

This optimism of the power of film to think and encourage thinking is taken up by contemporary theorists like Thomas Wartenberg, who see film as a vehicle for screening philosophical thought experiments and offering new perspectives on issues that (may) have relevance to everyday life. Wartenberg claims that 'film is able to give philosophical concepts and ideas a human garb that allows their consequences to be perceived more clearly' (2007, p. 5) and, 'films can *make arguments, provide counterexamples* to philosophical claims, and *put forward novel philosophical theories*' (2007, p. 9). If films allow for philosophical thinking, then they are like some other so-called 'high' artworks, in that they encourage social, political and economic critique of social norms. If contemporary films depict diverse narratives instead of constructing a homogenous picture of social reality, then audiences are encouraged to think critically by imaginatively engaging with multiple perspectives, thereby alleviating Adorno's fear of passivity. Yet, Adorno's (albeit overstated) concerns are still worthy of discussion. Many, if not most, popular films that are digested in large quantities promote stereo- types with dubious moral values. Wartenberg is correct to claim that some films are philosophical, yet he gives examples of Hollywood blockbusters to support his claim though it is mostly these films that are subject to the Adornian criticism. Hollywood blockbuster films that are screened ubiquitously and make the most revenue are the kinds of mass produced and distributed works to which Adorno objects. Theorists who conceive of cinema as a means of thinking must still reply to the objection that most films simply do not encourage active, intelligent, imaginative participation with the stereotypes therein depicted. While this does not demolish claims that films can somehow 'do' philosophy, the acknowledgement that film may encourage critical reception must not discount the caution offered by Adorno.

Wartenberg acknowledges how realistic and convincing the depictions are through the filmic medium; yet, he doesn't acknowledge the criticism of this very same quality. For Wartenberg, the lifelike quality of films allows the viewer to be absorbed in the narrative. Yet, it is this same feature that results in many blockbuster films resisting imaginative engagement by presenting their story in a manner so all-inclusive that there is less room to imagine it differently. Most blockbuster films depict stories in approximately 90–120 min, tying up loose ends in order to leave a feeling of resolution with the viewer. The viewer is not given the time to reflect on the story while watching it, as they may do when reading a book, which adds to the sense that the story is immutable. A screened story is designed to be ingested as a whole, is usually less complex than a novel and invokes base emotional responses such as revenge, sadness, romance etc. without encouraging any critique of the context that elicits these feelings (Levine, 2001a, pp. 63–71). Film is almost always designed to be accessible. While this in itself is not a bad thing, accessibility often means that detailed argument is lost and 'watered down' due to the compressed nature of film. Admittedly, films do not have to be simplified in this manner, but many, particularly blockbusters, are and these are the most watched films. Even Wartenberg acknowledges that structural avant-garde films:

> are made for a small, intellectual audience, not for the huge audience that Hollywood films aim to reach. As a result, they are more hermetic, harder to watch and understand, and call for a very different type of attention than do standard fiction films. (2007, p. 117)

From Wartenberg's comment, it may be discerned that in contrast to avant-garde films, blockbusters are designed to be easier to watch and understand, precisely because they are targeted at large audiences. It is accepted that there are auteurs, who knowingly engage with philosophical ideas and portray them through film, yet cannot 'do philosophy' without the audience actively participating in the experience and reflecting on the ideas presented. The quote above also makes mention of the kind of attention called for, from the spectator, to appropriately receive the film. I would suggest that viewers watching films philosophically, and those watching philosophical films, are already critical thinkers, which explains their attraction to philosophical films requiring of them this 'very different type of attention'. A crucial aspect of film's *raison d'être* is to be seen, engaged with and received. If only some films allow for critique of social, political and economic norms and these films are attended by critical viewers, then how is film more generally a tool for thinking? It must be acknowledged that Hollywood blockbusters attract a large proportion of cinema-going audiences and these blockbuster films are unlikely to attract critical thinkers.

Wartenberg acknowledges this criticism and replies as follows with reference to Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936):

> Still, the objector might persist, even if you are right about that, viewers do not watch the Chaplin film for its philosophical insights, but for its humour. Although you might be able to squeeze some philosophy out of its portrayal of the assembly line, we are not interested in the film for that, but rather for Chaplin's amazing antics. Here, I can only agree that Chaplin's comic riffs are an important source of our interest in *Modern Times*. But I would go on to point out that the humour of the sequence I have been discussing is intimately bound up with the thought that the human being is functioning as a machine, mechanically … As I see it, you cannot separate the film's serious thinking about alienation from its comic portrayal in order to deny that the film involves a philosophically significant contribution. (2006, p. 30)

Wartenberg claims that in order to understand the film and appreciate its humour, you are already thinking about the philosophical concepts of human and machine. Yet, the viewer may not reflect on arguments about industrialization in order to laugh at the film and, as such, they may not be 'doing philosophy'. In order to be 'doing philosophy', surely the viewer has to be aware that they are thinking about the philosophical concept under discussion. If there is no reflection on a concept—in this instance, on the concept of mechanization and the human as automaton, then this is not an instance of philosophical thinking. Wartenberg is suggesting that to understand the humour, you also understand the concept philosophically, i.e. of human as automaton. However, if philosophical thinking is broadened out as Wartenberg here describes, then family resemblance is lost and any kind of mental activity that involves thinking becomes 'doing philosophy'. Philosophy, in this way, ceases to be recognized as reflective thinking that involves considering arguments, counter-arguments and responses. As we have already seen, Wartenberg acknowledges these elements are important to philosophy. While some films may be able to philosophize in this manner, if the spectator is not aware of the arguments being made, can it be claimed that the spectator is doing philosophy simply by laughing at the images depicted? Whether or not this claim is upheld, it returns us to Adorno's suggestion that the focus on the viewer is of relevance to critical engagement with mass art.

What We Can Learn from Adorno

Prior to the publication of Deleuze's cinema books, theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer feared the advent of the Hollywood Studio film as akin to Nazi propaganda. Dismissed as elitist, their concern was that mass-produced and distributed artworks portrayed social mores as immutable reality. If the viewer's imagination cannot critically engage with film, i.e. through montage or similar 'shock' techniques, then viewers cannot critique the moral and social status quo screened; instead, they simply receive it and it is reinforced. Concerned that technology within a capitalist frame- work

allows for mass-produced and distributed artworks to be formulaically churned out, creating a culture industry, Adorno claims in 'Culture Industry Revisited':

> although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious states of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage to the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object. (p. 13)

Adorno's hostility towards the culture industry is evident but times have changed and, as Thomas Wartenberg notes in the preface to his *Thinking On Screen: Film as Philosophy*:

> I am struck by a sense of arrival … for the field of film and philosophy. When I began to argue that films could be relevant to philosophical concerns, that claim was met with a rather stony silence in the world of Anglo-American philosophy.

Yet, amongst this relatively new-found enthusiasm for film by analytic philosophers, it must be acknowledged that much of mass produced and distributed art is primarily aimed at commercial success as opposed to encouraging critical spectatorship. Often appearing to promote equality and challenging the existing social, class and racial discriminations, when critically examined, the messages of most Hollywood productions is one of the status quo that encourages viewers to passively accept the depicted version of social values.

Defining values as generalized, with cross-situational dispositions acting in certain ways, Brummett claims that values can show through form in film, even without the medium being exclusively linguistic (2013, p. 62). Films convey values to the audience through the way they conclude a narrative; depicted images and scenes; and enhance mood through lighting, sound and visual effects (Brummet, 2013, p. 66). Relying on the notions of homology as tied to ideology, Brummett explains that:

> This idea of homology can be a way to understand how texts may appeal to values without ever linguistically articulating them. Predispositions to respond to and to judge, socially held guides for choices, all the things that values 'are', may be activated at a formal level. This is not the same thing as being brought to conscious awareness, because we are so often not fully aware of how form is working in our texts and our experiences. Like ideology, form is most powerful when it is most invisible, and that is most of the time. (p. 64)

Brummett suggests that we read films through their formal features in the same way we read and understand social contexts. Films are lifelike and viewers have a shared understanding of social expression which comprises non-verbal as well as linguistic conventions. As such, we communicate and gather meaning, including values, from film in much the same way as we do in everyday life. For example, the first scene in a romantic comedy where the protagonist meets or sees the character with whom they will eventually form a romantic relationship will be shot in a certain way with specific music and lighting and the body language of the characters will indicate to viewers that this is the relationship we are watching to see how it unfolds (which is, often, predictably). This ideal of a 'soulmate' may then play out in the film suggesting that the ideal relationship is one that overcomes odds and ends 'happily ever after'.

Adorno was concerned about the homogenizing effect of the culture industry which depicted specific social and moral messages. Adorno did not allow space for critical engagement with mass artworks. In creating products for consumer consumption, Adorno claims that the mass-produced and distributed artworks are all different, yet all the same, creating a homogenized product that is willingly ingested by the masses. Adorno explains:

> Illusory universality is the universality of the art of the culture industry, it is the universality of the homogenous same, an art which no longer even promises happiness but only provides easy amusement as relief from labour. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 7)

Adorno's concern does not apply to every film, yet there are certainly formulaic and homogenous stories told and re-told through mass artworks. If we consider the Holly- wood blockbuster romance

films and apply Brummett's technique of reading the patterned rhetorical messages throughout a few of them, we reach this same conclusion. Whereas Brummett claims the message is not explicitly argued for, he details readings of films that give rise to certain values embedded in the form of the films (p. 67). This is evident in romantic comedies that have a predictable plot line of girl meets boy, girl is not interested in boy, there is an event that causes them to have to work together in some manner and they eventually fall for each other, only being reunited and professing their love at the last minute after encountering a number of obstacles designed to separate them. The values of 'true love conquers all' and the idea of taking a 'leap of faith' as love is only truly love if you have to risk something in order to pursue it are common themes in such films. The interesting question is what, if any, affect do such stories have on viewers?

Certainly, Adorno overstates his claim and his view is too extreme, as evidenced when he writes that even those viewers attempting to engage with mass art actively or critically, are only ever enacting a pseudo-active voice and are doomed to ineffectual rebellion against such stories. Adorno writes, 'whenever they attempt to break away from the passive status of compulsive consumers and 'activate' themselves, they succumb to pseudo-activity (1997, pp. 52–53).' Adorno here is referring to acts of rebel- lion such as 'writing letters of complaint' that are ineffectual against the mass culture industry. These days, however, there is much power to be had in the voice of the dis- satisfied consumer who makes use of social media in order to express their perspective. The viewer can be critical and express an active voice. However, despite his lack of recognition of the power of the individual spectator, Adorno's belief that mass consumerism forms an economic urge to create easily digestible works for the lowest common denominator must not be disregarded. The 'rom-com' is a case in point. The viewer may be critical of the film's story, yet is likely to have the relevant emotions at the end when the couple finally overcome adversity and admit their love for each other. As the music swells, there is a close-up of two smiling faces and even the cynical viewer is moved. They may not apply this belief in soulmates to their own life, but they may feel the burden of the stereotype each time they are asked why they 'aren't married yet' or when they are 'going to settle down'.

Adorno first claimed in *The Culture Industry* that the masses seek and love the rules by which they are bound through buying in to mass cultural commodities and their associated ideals. It is certainly the case that the culture industry has acquired and maintained immense social, political and economic power. Even when we knowingly engage with products of this culture industry such as Reality TV, gossip magazines, sartorialist street style blogs and relentless twitter feeds, are we not still buying in to that machine? Adorno is wrong to claim that the viewer is almost always completely passive and cannot counter the narrative and its associated values screened. However, as Brummett details, the subtle messages of values and ideology are screened and do reinforce existing social values. Brummett explains:

> Values are rarely, if ever, explicitly articulated in the films, and if they are, is it in the context of arguments about how to deal with instant babies rage virus [i.e. science fiction or fantasy films that may have a clear ethic explicitly screened]—hardly the sort of relevance one encounters in everyday life. Yet I think the homology obtained across the films, the audience's experience of the strange urban context likely invokes a sense of values and their application. (p. 66)

Brummett's explanation of the homogenized messages and values that pervade films is tied to the understanding that films are created by social, moral and political people and companies. Likewise, there is an understanding of the seemingly obvious point that the reason viewers understand films is because they too understand the social context of which they are also a part. This more subtle reading of how film influences viewers is compatible with the ethical concern described by Adorno. Although Adorno's original thesis is too strong, his worry is still recognizable in film spectatorship today.

Adorno's point to be remembered is that films are created in a political, social and economic context and they influence the society which sustains them. One aim of Hollywood films is to keep

the attention of mass audiences in a bid to retain their economic contribution. One way this is achieved is by not challenging certain stereo- types that attract mainstream and widespread audiences. These stereotypes have imbedded values linked to ideological contexts. While there is room within the dominant capitalist ideology for diversity, capitalism seeks to remain dominant and there- fore does not allow *a great deal* of diversity. As Adorno observes, the value of creative autonomy is the expression of diverse perspectives. This idea is summed up by Osborne, who writes, 'the idea of creative autonomy here is an ethical idea rather than a substantive notion: a regulative ideal rather than an accomplishable goal' (2008, p. 9). Adorno uses the word autonomy, Osborne claims, as a speculative notion as opposed to a concrete goal. This is to say that the word is not formally defined, yet advocates striving for autonomy and creative expression as opposed to uniformity. The more the culture industry allows for diverse narratives and values, the more creative it is. This in turn allows for critical spectatorship.

Throughout his writings, it is evident that Adorno's thought evolves as reflected in his conversations and letters to Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. In 'The Culture Industry Revisited' (1975), Adorno slightly modifies his initial claim that audiences are completely passive, asserting that audiences do mistrust authority which allows them to distinguish between art (or mass art) and reality. Several years later when interviewed on the radio, Adorno seemed surprized that the masses were able to, 'critically assess the political and social implications of the event' (Hansen, 1981– 1982, p. 60), in this case, the wedding of Dutch Princess Beatrix to a German diplo- mat. He was forced to conclude that complete manipulation of the masses by those in power via the culture industry is not possible. Similarly, he acknowledged that the consciousness of the masses is (or could be) varied, multiple and dynamic.

This theoretical progress Adorno makes reflects the changes in mass art at the time he is writing, from the monopoly of the Hollywood Studio system in the 1930s and 1940s to the increased diversification in the industry. From my perspective, this progress also increases the plausibility of Adorno's ethical, political and economic concerns with regard to mass art. Although Adorno's conclusions are overstated and draw from a specific cultural context, his ethical concerns should not be so quickly dismissed. While it may not be the case that monopolising capitalist and consumerist forces will eventually ensure that we homogenize until we are devoid of individuality and distinction, the threat of being encouraged to passively ingest 'facts' from a variety of technological sources without critical reflection is a worrying prospect.

This prospect is grounds for acknowledging Adorno's later essay 'Transparencies on Film' as encouraging a subtle re-think of cinema as produced and displayed in an ideological context.

In this laters, Adorno claims:

In its attempt to manipulate the masses the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control. The ideology of the culture industry contains the antidote to its own life. No other plea could be made for its defence. (p. 202)

Films allow for diverse voices to be heard and screened, Adorno now acknowledges in 'Transparencies on Film' (1981–1982). In this way, the culture industry gives expression to repressed or minority values which could possibly rise up against the dominant ideology, if not given an outlet. Yet, even if various voices are depicted, it is the dominant values that are ultimately reinforced. For example, 'while intention is always directed against the playboy, the dolce vita and wild parties, the opportunity to behold them seems to be relished more than the hasty verdict (pp. 201–202).' In depicting these images, Adorno claims, the culture industry reinforces them. Adorno notes the complexity of the relationship between film and society. If technology and cinema go hand in hand, so too do accompanying social values. Adorno claims, 'There could be no aesthetics of the cinema, not even a purely technological one, which would not include the sociology of the cinema (p. 202).' In this way, cinema cannot be purely aesthetic; it must also link to society and with social concerns.

Continuing the Conversation with Walter Benjamin

When critiquing social, political and economic factors that influence the production and uptake of mass artworks, it is useful to read Adorno alongside Benjamin. Benjamin offers an optimistic account of the (politically, socially and personally) emancipatory potential of art as it develops technologically, even though he also recognizes that commodities may be fetishized when used for their economic value and political and social power. Osborne details Benjamin's attitude to mass art:

> Because modern experience just *is* technological it is right that art itself should be expressive of this. Art can serve as a means of mastering the elemental forces of a technological second nature. Photography and film accustom humanity to the new apperceptions conditioned by technology. Technological art—like film and photography—becomes the site of exploration of future relations between technology and the human. (p. 60)

Certainly this has been proven as technology continues to advance and our use of it builds upon existing modes of self-expression. Benjamin and Adorno agreed that, in comparison to Art proper, the technological reproduction of mass art strips the art-work of its 'aura' or unique artistic quality. Adorno argues that loss of the aura of a work of art results in the simultaneous erosion of the artwork's aesthetic value. Yet, this is not the case for Benjamin. As Osborne articulates, for Benjamin, 'contrary to Adorno, the end of the aura is not necessarily negative in its consequences' (p. 61). However, Benjamin is not offering a directly oppositional thesis to Adorno. Benjamin acknowledges that there are many social effects in response to mass art, one being that, 'the film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio' (1969, p. 224). Adorno and Benjamin both see the technologically reproducible artwork as historical and contextual. In this way, mass art will continue to evolve.

By reading Adorno alongside Benjamin and by acknowledging the power of films to be potentially constructive (allowing for autonomy) or destructive (fetishizing the product for ideological or economic means), we get a more holistic vision of cinema as a socially situated activity. There is a need to focus on the critical attitude of the viewer, as well as the moral messages of the medium. This is particularly apparent when we consider what is watched by the majority of consumers. Adorno and Benjamin both offer a historical account of art whereby their aesthetics require audience reception and are linked to experience. Film communicates ideas and values that are received by viewers. While there are many different stories being told in contemporary culture, the focus on the critical thinker, the interpreter of the narrative, is vital in order to form a thinking society.

Adorno's method sometimes appears paradoxical and his principle of negative dialectics suggests we know freedom through its negation and, likewise, autonomy when we are restricted. It is through the paradox of knowing what is not an example of freedom or autonomy that allows us to aim at what is and, Osborne points out, these terms are not defined in a positive or epistemic manner. Rather, the terms operate as paradoxes in order for us to work towards liberty and autonomy. Osborne writes, 'One cannot simply posit freedom as if it could be unproblematically known: one is better occupied on a more negative task, in diagnosing the forces of unfreedom' (p. 39).

While Adorno worries about Hollywood Studio films, Benjamin focuses more of the avant-garde, the films of Eisenstein. Benjamin's optimism may be partly a result of the artworks with which he engages. Osborne claims,

> Benjamin is diagnosing the progressive or at least redemptive potentiality of modern forms of mass art. Adorno's whole question seems to be quite different from this: to measure the modern culture industry in ultimately ethical terms, that is, in terms of its relation to the forces of critical self-reflection. Where Adorno sees regression, Benjamin sees possibility; but this is a difference that is the product of their differing critical styles more than anything else. (p. 62)

Osborne's comparison reveals that Benjamin and Adorno are not using the same methodology, nor are they offering oppositional arguments. Thus, they both offer useful ideas to contemporary theorists of film and philosophy. Indeed, Adorno's critique of Benjamin is useful in offering a subtle re-reading of both. Adorno laments Benjamin's lack of a dialectical perspective (p. 62). Adorno writes to Benjamin on 18 March 1936:

> In your earlier writings … you distinguished the idea of the work of art as a structure from the symbol of theology on the one hand, and from the taboo of magic on the other. I now find it somewhat disturbing—and here I can see a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian themes— that you have now rather casually transferred the concept of the magical aura to the 'autonomous work of work' and flatly assigned a counter-revolutionary function to the latter. (p. 128)

The question of whether the mass artwork is valuable as a tool to prompt critical thinking becomes tied to the idea that it does, or does not, have an aura. As seen in Adorno's quote above, the definition of what an aura is changes and is unclear. Benjamin defines 'aura' as 'A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be' (Benjamin, 1991, pp. 518–519). Deleuze echoes this definition in the concepts of time and space on which he focuses his Cinema books written in the 1980s. Fredric Jameson calls attention to the dialectic occurring between Benjamin and Adorno, explaining,
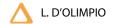
> Riposting against Benjamin's attack on aesthetic 'aura' as a vestige of bour- geois culture and his celebration of the progressive function of technological reproducibility in art as the pathway to a new appropriation of it by the masses - realized above all in the cinema, Adorno replied with a defence of avant-garde art and a counter-attack against over-confidence in commercial- popular art. (Bloch Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, & Adorno, 1977, p. 106)

For Adorno, the beauty of the work of art *qua* artwork is that it does not tie up its ideas neatly and instead challenges the receiver to view reality in its representation, replete with its tensions and discordance. If art allows the viewer to see that there are multiple perspectives, it encourages critical spectatorship. In this way, 'art is negative knowledge of the actual world' (1967, p. 32). Adorno here refers to the method of negative dialectics whereby one recognizes the paradoxes in society and can thus be a critical or active thinker. If mass art can allow for the same understanding, it fails to be limited to a homogenous status quo.

Jameson suggests that contemporary philosophers of film have much to gain from revisiting the conversation that occurred between Adorno and Benjamin. He concludes:

> The force of many of these arguments remains pertinent today. It is clear that Benjamin, following Brecht, tended to hypostasize techniques in abstraction from relations of production, and to idealize diversions in ignorance of the social determinants of their production. His theory of the positive significance of distraction were based on a specious generalization from architecture, whose forms are always directly used as practical objects and hence necessarily command a distinct type of attention from those of drama, cinema, poetry or painting. …Where Benjamin manifestly overestimated the progressive destiny of the commercial-popular of his time, Adorno no less clearly over-estimated that of the avant-garde art of the period. (Bloch et al., 1977, pp. 107–108)

The letters between Benjamin and Adorno between 1935 and 1939 reveal much of the strengths and weaknesses of both writers' theories. The publication of these letters in English in 1999 invoked resurgence in interest in both scholars, particularly Adorno, who has been somewhat neglected by philosophy of film scholars' attraction to the more optimistic writings of Benjamin. Adorno insightfully recognizes the 'psychogistic subjectivism and ahistorical romanticism' in Benjamin's work and notes the Spinozean influence upon Benjamin that could develop in one of two extreme directions: it can be taken as a primal nostalgia for unity with nature: an unbridled romanticism; or as a utopian vision of classlessness that lacks class (or 'taste') entirely (Bloch et al., 1977, p. 103). The problem being that both perspectives are ungrounded, floating in a de-contextualized space, not linked to social reality, time and place. In this way, both perspectives become overly subjective and emotive. This critical insight Adorno has into Benjamin's work is one reason we should reconsider

his critique of, not only Benjamin's optimism but of the contemporary approach towards philosophy and film as a technologically mass-produced and consumed med- ium (Bloch et al., 1977, p. 104). This is not to argue that we should adopt Adorno's negative critique wholesale either, but, as we wish to promote critical engagement in viewers of films, so too may philosophers critically engage with both Adorno and Benjamin.

Conclusion

As Bernstein has written, 'Adorno's is not so much an 'objective' analysis as a perspectival one' (cited in Osborne, 2008, p. 63). The perspectives offered by Adorno and Benjamin may give us cause to reconsider film and philosophy, particularly with reference to film spectatorship. Mass art is democratic in its accessibility and it is because of this social nature of film that we should celebrate what may be expressed through film and also be mindful of potential impact upon viewers.

Films may promote a critical response to society; yet, it may be that such films are already preaching to the converted. Teaching audiences to think critically is vital, particularly when other technological mediums are considered such as broadcast news, the internet, blogs and other social networking sites. Furthermore, there are practical implications and ethical concerns that mass untutored audiences, including children, are watching films that may contain unethical messages. In light of this, the focus on the critical viewer, with the educative notion of teaching viewers to be critical, is worth further consideration.

The concept of the value of the artwork, how it should be valued (aesthetically and ethically), its affect (its impact upon viewers, its critical reception as well as its production, including the intention of the author(s)) are all important issues. Where there is the potential for positive or life-affirming messages or affect being conveyed, there is equally the potential for the transmission of life-denying or nihilistic messages. If mass art encourages viewers to critique society, Adorno and Benjamin would claim that this is a good thing. However, where passive viewing is promoted, we must ask what values are being uncritically ingested and whether or not this has an effect on viewers and on society. Ultimately, I will conclude that we do not need censorship; rather, we need critical reception and a continued conversation. This is of utmost importance in a world where so much is uncritically ingested and mass messages are transmitted and seductively screened ubiquitously. To paraphrase Adorno, the art will only change when its audiences do. There is still a need for philosophy proper and philosophical thinking skills and they should continue to be applied to film.

Note

1. *Fast & Furious 5* is listed by Screen Australia as one of the Top 50 films in Australia ranked by reported gross earnings. Director Justin Lin is up to #6 (2013) with #7 due for release in 2014.

References

Adorno, T. W. (1967). *Prisms*. (Samuel and Shierry Weber, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press.
Adorno, T. W. (1975). Culture industry reconsidered. *New German Critique, 6*, 12–19.
Adorno, T. W. (1981–1982). Transparencies on film. (T. Y. Levin, Trans.). *New German Critique*, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema, 24/25, 199–205.
Adorno, T. W., & Benjamin, W. (1999). *The complete correspondence 1928–1940*. (H. Lonitz, Ed., N. Walker, Trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1997). The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In Adorno & Horkheimer (Eds.), *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
Benjamin, W. (1969). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. (H. Zorn, Trans.). In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217–252). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
Benjamin, W. (1991). *Selected writings*. (H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings, Eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bloch, E., Lukacs, G., Brecht, B., Benjamin, B., & Adorno, T. (1977). *Aesthetics and Politics*. (R Taylor, Trans.). Radical Thinkers Series. London: Verso.

Brummett, B. (2013). What popular films teach us about values: Locked inside with the rage virus. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 41*, 61–67.

Carroll, N. (1998). *A philosophy of mass art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Carroll, N. (2004). The power of movies. In P. Lamarque & S. H. Olsen (Eds.), *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art: The analytic tradition* (pp. 485–497). Oxford: Blackwell.

Collingwood, R. G. (1969). *The principles of art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Colman, F. (2011). *Deleuze & cinema: The film concepts*. Oxford: Berg.

Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema I: The movement-image*. (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. (1989). *Cinema II: The time-image*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hansen, M. (1981–1982). Introduction to Adorno, 'transparencies on film' (1966). *New German Critique, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema, 24/25*, 186–198.

Levine, M. (2001a). *Depraved spectators & impossible audiences: Horror and other pleasures of the cinema* (pp. 63–71). Special Edition on Horror: Film and Philosophy.

Levine, M. (2001b). A fun night out: Horror and other pleasures of the cinema. *Senses of Cinema, 17*. http://www.sensesofcinema.com

Markus, G. (2001). Walter Benjamin or: The commodity as phantasmagoria. *New German Critique, 83*, 3–42.

McCann, P. (2008). *Race, music, and national identity: Images of jazz in American fiction, 1920–1960*. Delaware: Associated University Press.

Osborne, T. (2008). *The structure of modern cultural theory*. Manchester, NH: Manchester University Press.

Osborne, P., & Charles, M. (2011). Walter Benjamin. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/benjamin/

Wartenberg, T. E. (2006). Beyond mere illustration: How films can be philosophy. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 64*, 19–32.

Wartenberg, T. E. (2007). *Thinking on screen: Film as philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Film bibliography

Armageddon. (1998). Dir. Michael Bay.

Fast & Furious 5. (2012). Dir. Justin Lin.

Melancholia. (2011). Dir. Lars von Trier.

Modern Times. (1936). Dir. Charles Chaplin.

The Matrix. (1999). Dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski.