

COMPLICITOUS CRITIQUE, A HOLLYWOOD TRADITION

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers film as a unique medium capable of inviting viewers to engage in an existential consideration of social, political, ethical, and intellectual problems. It addresses the limitations that existing scholarship place on the potentiality of film as a medium by arguing that these limitations are often the result of a failure to consider film's essential and self-conscious ability to be critical of its modes of production, the industry surrounding it, the ideas it expresses, and the audience that consumes it. Considerations from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno contribute to the creation of an alternative theoretical perspective, one which identifies film's critical capabilities and lays the groundwork for viewers to engage with and learn from the critiques offered by film. Further, this thesis demands renewed scholarly consideration of film as an opportunity for viewers to consider the political, social, and intellectual issues of their age in an authentic and individual ritual.

This thesis demonstrates the advantages of this perspective through formal and theoretical readings of *Sullivan's Travels* (Sturges 1941), *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), and shorter focused readings of connected themes found in *A Star is Born* (Wellman 1937), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Minnelli 1952), and *The Crowd* (Vidor 1928). These readings draw from established readings in order to elucidate the advantages offered by this new theoretical approach to film. Further, this thesis demonstrates the persistence of film's critical capabilities throughout Hollywood history by drawing connections between films from the Classical era and Postmodern era. Contemporary films under

consideration include *Fargo* (The Coen Brothers 1996), *O Brother Where Art Thou* (The Coen Brothers 2000), *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), *Burn After Reading* (The Coen Brothers 2008), and *Inception* (Nolan 2010). This thesis thus defends the position that film's unique ontological structure consistently enables it to invite viewers to join it in a critique of the cultural, economic, political, and social structures from which it arises. Further, film satisfies the same pedagogical demands placed on classic works of literature and painting, and enables viewers to engage in the work of existential self-creation so that they can become mature social and political agents.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those individuals in my life who have offered me their continued and unconditional support: my parents Chip and Jane Leckey, my brother Kevin Leckey, and my partner Alex Sahliyah. Thank you for your love, encouragement, and patience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis takes as its departure a specific perspective of film as an artistic medium. Film is and has always been a critical medium: a medium critical of itself, its own modes of production, the industry surrounding it, the ideas it expresses, and the audience that consumes it. While this idea has been raised by scholars in relation to specific films, this thesis endeavors to examine the way in which the ontological status of film is one that uniquely primes all films for the opportunity to offer the audience an opportunity to engage in social, political, ethical, intellectual, and philosophical critique of the world around them. Further, it argues that this opportunity does not simply occur in the postmodern era, as theorists such as Linda Hutcheon would argue, but can be readily found in the classical era (1917-1969).

This thesis employs a number of separate claims in order to build towards this overarching argument. In Chapter II, “Reviving Cinephilia,” I offer a detailed description of three philosophical approaches to film theory that limit the viewer and critics’ ability to engage with film. I discuss two different types of realist approaches to film – mimetic realism and romantic realism – and offer critiques on their narrow approach to what film is and what it can accomplish. Then, I criticize Walter Benjamin’s pessimistic perspective of film as manipulated reality, that is, reality that is always-already shaped and colored by the capitalist means of production required to create it.

Drawing from this analysis, the chapter then considers the way in which these philosophical approaches to the study of film have resulted in confining perspectives of film from the Classical Hollywood era in particular. This section takes as an example the work of David Bordwell, and elucidates several theoretical flaws and resulting limitations in his approach to reading classical film as, simply, classical. Finally, the chapter concludes with a suggested alternative to these ways of reading film constructed from the work of Walter Benjamin. This perspective liberates film from Benjamin's restriction of it as capitalist commodity, and raises it to the level of an individual ritual capable of offering an existential engagement with the film itself. This ritual enables viewers to engage with the film in a personal, critical, and intellectual manner, opening the opportunity to reflect on their personal, political, social, and ethical situation in an authentic way.

In Chapter III, "Film as Critical Pedagogy," I broaden the discussion by considering the placement of film in a larger intellectual, cultural, and educational context. I begin with a brief historical consideration of the ways in which film has been decried as ethically unsound, intellectually empty, and dangerous for the masses, and then connect these early concerns to those voiced by Allan Bloom in his *Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom's concern that film does not possess classical literature's ability to engage students in existential journeys of self-discovery, cultural awareness, or self-creation is elucidated with the consideration of another cinephobe, Theodor Adorno. Furthering this discussion, I draw in Neil Postman's critique of television and film from his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

In the course of the chapter, I argue that Postman's argument is based on an impoverished definition of the image, a theoretical flaw discussed in Chapter II. I also argue that film meets Bloom's criteria of emancipatory and pedagogical literature. Further, the pervasiveness of the medium permits students to engage with the kind of ideas Bloom wishes to disseminate in arenas outside traditional education, making film a prime candidate for students who lack the opportunity – or drive – to engage with ideas in the specific manner Bloom has laid out. I conclude the chapter by demonstrating that film, understood in this existential sense, does qualify as an aesthetic form under Theodor Adorno's definition. This discussion is aided with analysis of several avant-garde films from the 1930s.

In Chapter IV, "Complicitous Critique, a Hollywood Tradition," I draw together the theoretical considerations from the preceding chapters and apply them to the reading of several films. Under consideration are two main films, Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). While I read these films with the aid of ample scholarly literature, the unique contribution of my readings is a situation of these films within my larger ontological argument about the critical and self-conscious nature of film as a medium. To augment this analysis, I track themes, leitmotifs, technical processes, and narrative conventions through many films from the Classical Hollywood era including *A Star Is Born* (Wellman 1937), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Minnelli 1952), and *The Crowd* (Vidor 1928). Further, I explore the tradition of self-conscious exposition of filmic devices from the Classical era to those more frequently celebrated in the postmodern era by integrating readings of *Fargo* (The Coen Brothers

1996), *O Brother Where Art Thou* (The Coen Brothers 2000), *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), *Burn After Reading* (The Coen Brothers 2008), and *Inception* (Nolan 2010). In this analysis, I employ the existential approach to film discussed in Chapter 2 while demonstrating the pedagogical, critical, and aesthetic value of film as discussed in Chapter III. The result is a chapter that offers extensive demonstration of an ontological, formal, and theoretical perspective of film as self-conscious, critical, and capable of offering viewers existential engagement.

CHAPTER II

REVIVING CINEPHILIA

Since its inception, film has demanded the attention of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, film theorists, and literature scholars. As a medium uniquely tied to its technological modes of production, film is decried by the Critical Theorists as a mechanism of capitalism; as a technology capable of capturing, enhancing, and manipulating reality, film is hailed by media scholars as an art form capable of bringing reality to the viewer for her inspection and contemplation. Still, some previous approaches to film theory present myriad difficulties for those wishing to explore the contemporary potentialities of the medium. In this chapter, we will explore three philosophical approaches to film theory, and elucidate the limitations of each of these approaches. We will then consider the way in which these early efforts at characterizing film as a medium have influenced some of the scholarship surrounding the Classical Hollywood era (1917-1960), and the limitations to this approach. Finally, relying on the work of Walter Benjamin, we will explore an approach to film that permits the viewer to engage with film in a personal, critical, and intellectual manner, as a work of art capable of fulfilling Benjamin's emancipatory hopes for the medium.

II.1. Theories of Film

To ask whether film is a unique medium is to ask no real question at all. The field of film studies has established the unique nature of film as a medium since its early

inception; indeed, the very existence of a field of film studies demands acknowledgment that film is a discipline unto itself. Even so, the treatment of film – sometimes within film studies, sometimes without – is often marred by the failure to treat film *as* a unique medium. I wish to continue to challenge the assumption that it is appropriate to describe film, so distanced in its material, technological, and authorial production from other forms of art, as relying on the same formal devices of other forms of art.¹ As Gotthold Lessing argues, reading media as necessarily similar to other media – in his case, poetry from the lens of painting or painting from the lens of poetry – results in a profound limitation in adequately considering and analyzing the work itself:

[Critics] pronounce the shallowest judgments with the greatest self-assurance, and, in criticizing the work of poet and a painter on the same subject they regard the differences of treatment observed in them as errors, which they blame on one or the other, depending on whether they happen to prefer painting or poetry.

(Lessing 5)

With Lessing, I agree that each individual medium must be considered in its own specificity, according to its own talents and failures; to view painting through the device and convention of poetry is to forbid painting to speak in its own language, or be judged according to its own merits. Accordingly, film cannot be reduced to the status of a static image, as with painting or photography, nor to captured movement, as with poetry, nor to the collaborative effort between dramaturge (director) and the theater (studio) in which the play (film) will be performed (shot). To take the medium-specificity hypothesis seriously requires that film, too, must be evaluated uniquely. To begin, we

should consider three ways philosophy characterizes film as a medium, and consider the advantages and limitations of these approaches.

II.1.1. Film as Mimesis of Reality

First, film is viewed as a realist medium in the mimetic sense: an opportunity to perfectly hold a mirror to reality, objectively preserving the world without succumbing to the imperfect subjectivity of the artist. Realist approaches to film thus often compare it to photography. Nineteenth-century innovations such as the silver nitrate camera obscura offered the opportunity to record an image in and of itself, an imprint of an image suspended in a material substance infinitely more precise than anything created by pens or brushes. From the realist perspective, increasing innovations in photography transform the artist from an active creator to a passive operator of a scientific and technological marvel: a bystander to the ultimate defeat of the degradation of time. The connection to film is clear: materially speaking, film is a series of photographs, single moments wrested out of time. When multiple photographs are combined in rapid succession, the result is a medium capable of capturing an entire experience: a running horse, a dancing woman, or a speeding train.

For Walter Benjamin, this perspective of film as the ultimate scribe is the ideal candidate for mass dissemination of art, culture, and theater. Benjamin hopes that film might “meet the recipient halfway” by bringing the great works of art, music, sculpture, and architecture into the home of every individual, enabling cultural education for every socioeconomic class (Benjamin 21). Those who cannot access these cultural artifacts –

or, perhaps, those who do not wish to put forth the “concentration and devotion” of the art lover – can enter the solitude and darkness of a theater and watch the world expand before them (Benjamin 40). The rise of the early travelogue films and the German Kulturfilm demonstrates this particular potential of realist cinema. Early travelogue films “functioned as a means to transport viewers to faraway and exotic locations,” (Alter 197). For instance, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic* (1922) depicts the daily life of Nanook, a Canadian Inuk. Through the film, viewers are offered safe passage to the Canadian arctic so that they might witness a foreign and primitive way of life without leaving the comfort of their theater seats. This film was acclaimed for its ability to truly record life in the unforgiving arctic, and audiences flocked to experience the trials of Nanook.

On the surface, *Nanook* is a quintessential example of realist cinema: life, as it really happened, perfectly preserved on film. The formal qualities of the film follow this trend by employing the subjective perspective throughout the film so that “viewers of *Nanook* feel that it is their eyes, and not the camera’s, that are doing the seeing” (Christopher 381). However, early documentary and travelogue films did not necessarily uphold the same standards of precise documentation that the realists applauded. As Alter notes, “the term *documentary* was first used in photography in the late 1920s to refer to a type of photograph that documented or recorded “reality”; only later [1930s] was it applied to a “truthful,” “objective,” and nonfictional filmmaking practice” (Alter 197). Alter’s ironic use of truth and objectivity refers to the practice of staging dramatic components within travelogues and documentaries in order to prevent audience

boredom. In *Nanook*'s case, the walrus hunt is entirely scripted, including Nanook hunting with wooden spears instead of the guns that the Inuk had recently adopted (Christopher 387). Though the film still manages to serve Benjamin's wishes to bridge the gap between cultures by bringing the world to the viewer, it, like many realist films, fails to fully cover over the presence of the artist. There is always someone behind the lens who decides what is included – and excluded – from each shot, even at the expense of objective recording of reality. Realists are shown to be idealists in this respect; they may insist that film is preserving reality in-and-of-itself, but they fail to admit the presence of artistic composition and manipulation – the “inescapable subjectivity” of the artist that never fully fades away (Bazin 12).

II.1.2. Film as Romanticized Reality

Not all realists seek to view film as a mimetic record of reality; some desire to view film capable of transmitting ideas, thoughts, feeling, and experiences. This romantic approach to film desires to “preserve the immediacy of the feeling” of the artist and “[pass] it on – not the situation or thing which simulated it” (Greenberg 62). This romantic realism is seemingly embarrassed that a medium is even required for transmission of the feeling or idea; these artists bemoan the intervening Ionic rings and desire the immediacy of Form to simply appear within the world, unfettered by the impurity of an embodied work of art. This embarrassment results in tireless effort to deny the presence of the medium, the artist, or the words by covering it over, disguising the artifice employed to create it, and presenting the work not as fabricated, but as

manifested. Arnheim notes that the introduction of sound to film is successful precisely because it heightens the realism of the work, allowing the audience “to take part in exciting events as fully as possible [...] external events are shown concretely to the eye, and at the same time the thoughts, intentions, and emotions of the characters are communicated through words in the directest and most natural way” (Arnheim 226). By adding sound to film, the artist is able to remove the interruption of title cards and lessen the need for the audience to work at understanding the plot. Instead, it unfolds seamlessly, as realistic as if the audience was in the scene of the film experiencing the events themselves. Sound makes fights more exciting, speeches more dramatic, and the apparatus of the film less noticeable.

Importantly, Arnheim is viewing film primarily as an entertainment medium, an opportunity for excitement and escapism, nothing more. His reluctance to include it alongside literature, his vision of the ideal medium, is due to its inherent hybridization. Film offers the drama of theater, but lacks its presence; it approximates the passion of music, but it becomes degraded by mechanical reproduction; it actualizes the movement of poetry, but never as fully as desired. For Arnheim, the muddling of “purer forms” of art into hybrids, such as the introduction of sound into motion pictures, results in “an impressive decline of artistic excellence” (Arnheim 230). Unlike Greenberg, hybridization does not simply result in a removal from the artist’s feeling, but runs the risk of a “blundering” away from “the purity of goodness and truth” (Arnheim 230). For Arnheim, film can only ever be a medium of entertainment because its hybridization disallows any access to truth or goodness.

This romantic approach to film reaches an apex that flirts with parody when Aldous Huxley demonstrates the logical conclusion to romantic realism in *Brave New World*. Huxley's feelies are the ultimate aesthetic hybrid; they are capable of bringing the viewer's every sense into direct connection with the artwork, ensuring absolute excitement and pleasure without a modicum of truth or goodness:

The scent organ was playing a delightfully refreshing Herbal Capriccio – rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon [...] In the synthetic music machine the soundtrack roll began to unwind. It was a trio for hyper-violin, super-cello, and oboe-surrogate that now filled the air with its agreeable languor. [...] Sunk in their pneumatic stalls, Lenina and the Savage sniffed and listened. It was now the turn also for eyes and skin. (Huxley 167).

This trip to the feelies aptly depicts a fear of many early and contemporary aesthetic theorists: that film technology will encourage the already present inclination to “live a life of unreality and fail to attain the true nature of man and its fitting manifestations” (Arnheim 230). There is a powerful fear that each additional material sieve placed between the artist and the viewer perverts and distorts the image, making any ethical ideal, social commentary, or human truth inaccessible – it also results in a limitation of the possibilities of engagement with film. It forms the basis for the critiques offered by Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Neil Postman when they caution against film's ability to turn audiences into passive spectators: somnambulists who opt to absorb a fabricated reality rather than engage in, let alone improve upon, their lived worlds.

Neither the realist nor the romantic approach to film fully actualizes its potential as a medium. The realist approach idealizes the medium as a scientific apparatus, capable of capturing reality in-and-of-itself, but it either fails to consider the presence of a human element in the process, or it seeks to cover over the sullied purity of the caged *noumena*. The romantic perspective also seeks to cover over the presence of the artist – not to heighten its reflection of reality, but so that the work appears to be manifested and not created.

II.1.3. Film as Manipulated Reality

We have previously discussed Benjamin in terms of his romantic hopes for the democratic possibilities of film. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” Benjamin does argue that film harbors the potential to contribute to the spectator’s political emancipation, but simultaneously poses the danger of pacifying its spectator. Benjamin credits these twin potentialities of passivity and awakening to the unique formal qualities of film. By “replicating a work many times over, [film] substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence,” disallowing the audience from engaging with it in any meaningful way (Benjamin 22). Though film does have the potential to teach humanity how to engage with the expanding presence of technology, Benjamin worries that film will fall prey to propaganda, manipulation, and nefarious control.

Benjamin demonstrates this concern in his discussion of the distinction between photography and classic painting. For Benjamin, photography is a liminal stage between

the human labor required to produce previous visual media, such as painting, and the technological labor required for the production of film. A photograph stands between these two extremes: like painting, it requires that a single artist select and engage a single subject; like film, it necessarily requires technological apparatus for the production of the finished artwork. Benjamin is interested in the resulting differences of audience reception of a painting versus a photograph. A painting, he contends, permits the viewer to engage with it in whatever manner she chooses; however, in engaging with a photograph, Benjamin contends that “free-floating contemplating is no longer appropriate” (Benjamin 27). The subject of the photograph is mediated not simply through the artist but also through a mechanical apparatus, forcing the viewer to engage with the artwork on its terms, not her own. Here, we see Bazin’s “inescapable subjectivity” rear its head again, preventing direct access to the subject of the work by exposing the presence of the artist responsible for the artifact (Bazin 12).

The intervention of the artist in a photograph, and thus the corresponding controlled perception of the viewer, can be found in the use of captions that are often contradictory to the subject of the photograph. As evidence, Benjamin cites the photographs of Eugène Atget as quintessentially “demanding a specific kind of reception,” one that is suggested to the viewer through the addition of a caption meant to inform and direct the viewer to the artist’s intended subject in the composition. For example, a 1913 photograph features an image of a shoemaker’s shop, flanked by two strings of shoes for sale, above which sits an ornate iron filigree balcony (Figure 1).



27. *Balcon, 17 rue du Petit-Pont. (1913)*

Figure 1: Eugène Atget. "Balcon, 17 rue du Petit-Pont," 1913. George Eastman House. Web. *ArtStor*. 3 June 2015.

Upon first glance, the photo appears to be of the shoemaker's shop with an abundance of handmade merchandise for sale; just one shop of many on a busy Paris street. Atget elected to caption this photo "Balcon, 17 rue du Petit-Pont," thus titling the photograph after a seemingly accidental element of the composition. The balcony only occupies one third of the frame, and its bourgeois decoration contrasts sharply with the decidedly working-class nature of the other two-thirds of the photograph. Rather than dismiss the balcony as an unrelated element to the subject of the work, Atget's caption highlights it as the primary component of the photograph, and thus draws the viewer's attention inescapably towards it.

One argument for such a mislabeling is to increase the exchange value of the image, "to assure the potential buyer that he was getting what he wanted – a photograph of a rare old wrought-iron balcony" (Szarkowski 74). Labeling an unsold photograph was common practice when Atget entered the industry. Photographers were able to employ the "dry plate" system, a method that allowed many more photographs to be produced in a given day. Rather than rely on specific customer orders, "photographers [could make] photographs that no one had asked for, hoping to find the customer later" (Szarkowski 74). In constructing this caption, Atget is anticipating the specific sensibility of his future clientele while still preserving the more interesting, yet unnamed focus on the industrialization of the shoemaking industry, the decline of traditional cobbling, and the faceless menace of technological industrialization. Though, as Benjamin points out, Atget's photographed his surroundings "like scenes of crimes," the caption permits this damning critique to be overlooked in favor of an aesthetically

pleasing feature of the composition. Like many beginning artists in the age of mechanical reproduction, Atget frequently found himself at odds with his clients' shortsighted understanding of art:

He resisted working on assignment, since customers did not know what to photograph, presumably meaning that they did not know *exactly* what to photograph. They knew that the balcony was a subject, but not that the shoes were part of it. (Szarkowski 74).

Atget's oeuvre indicates a master at work, yet he believed himself to be a master at the mercy of the whims of popular taste. Atget straddles the perilous boundary between, first, producing a work of art that reflects and critiques his socio-economic zeitgeist, and, second, securing the necessary income to continue his work. The result is a work of art that makes a statement while simultaneously obfuscating that statement. The passive viewer can obey the caption and admire the balcony; but there is always the option to find within the photograph a second statement that demands further consideration.

For Benjamin, this masking of one idea behind another is exponentially heightened in film. He envisions film as eighteen composed photographs per second, each pregnant with a message other than that indicated in the caption. Due to this possibility, Benjamin optimistically insists that "film is the first art form capable of showing how matter interferes with people's lives" (Hansen 203). Film can demonstrate the truth of a historical situation in a way that is far more personal than a direct statement or philosophical treatise; it imparts this knowledge to the audience as part of collective entertainment. As mentioned above, Benjamin worries that there will always be

individuals who wish to “evade” the necessary work to understand “new tasks of apperception” (Benjamin 40). In this case, the work required is learning how to look beneath the captions – in a film, captions can take the form of dialogue, narrative conventions, contrived endings, and specific formal and stylistic choices – just as they did in “Balcon, 17 rue du Petit-Pont” (Benjamin 40). Those who can learn to view film in this active way, aware that captions are not always what they seem, will be able find in film social issues that might otherwise be ignored.

Just as Atget captioned his photograph in the hopes of attracting a wealthy buyer, Benjamin worries that the economic demands placed on film will result in the film industry acting on its “overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays and ambiguous speculations” (Benjamin 34). His concerns are echoed today by critics worried that the economic mandate of producing films has watered down any artistic value of films to pure spectacle. In a piece published in the *New York Times*, Susan Sontag aptly expresses this sentiment:

The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn’t demand anyone’s full attention. [...] The sheer ubiquity of moving images has steadily undermined the standards people once had both for cinema as art and for cinema as popular entertainment. (Sontag)

Certainly, Sontag’s diagnosis of the “death of cinephilia,” or the decreasing desire to see films as “unique, unrepeatable, magic experiences” dovetails with Benjamin’s own

concerns (Sontag). However, the other side of Benjamin's dialectic of film offers an optimistic possibility for philosophically liberating film from being considered as manipulative, sensational, or devoid of artistic merit.

II.2. The Classical Paradigm

We have thus far explored the downfalls to viewing film according to the realist paradigm. In order to deepen the consideration of film as a medium, we will now explore a specific era that is often read according to the realist paradigm: The Hollywood Classical Period.

David Bordwell's definition of classical film (1917-1960) follows the *modus operandi* of any classical era of art: it is artwork in which "notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response" are required (Bordwell 4). For film, this means that Aristotelian realism is the highest aim; a film is classical if and only if it contains a fabricated reality, with no trace of the filmic apparatus that formed it, and a clear narrative, conclusion, and message (Bordwell 3). Most importantly, the paradigm asserts that classical film does not seek to challenge or deviate from the aesthetic norms of its period as it is shaped and maintained by the material demands placed on film as an economic medium. The concern here is twofold: first, that classical film is essentially pure, unconcerned with challenging the ideals of its era; and secondly, that conformity ensures continued success. The cost of producing and exhibiting films is high, and any deviation from the formula understood by the audience will result in a box office flop.

Like Atget's photographs, film is a front-end investment: without the continued influx of profits, the production of future films cannot be assured. Thus, classical film becomes characterized as a period in which commercial success reigns supreme, and artistic, intellectual, and ethical concerns are either not present, or "subversive moments" in an otherwise cohesive oeuvre (Bordwell 81).

To give an example of the limitations inherent in Bordwell's attempt to broadly typify films in the era, consider his evaluation of film noir. While most of his work is marked by a profound attention to the formal aspects of film, film noir is defined as a type of rebellion against the above mentioned "norms" of classical genre, style, and tone (4). This not a positive movement "to define a coherent genre or style" but a critical effort "to locate in several American films a challenge to dominant values" (75). This ambiguous definition allows the critique to be found within a wide range of films: any film that seeks to attack "psychological causality," "heterosexual romance," "the motivated happy ending," or "a criticism of classical technique" is classified as film noir (75). Thus, film noir is found disseminated throughout a variety of styles and genres – westerns, detective dramas, melodramas, woman's films, and biopics – anywhere that "nonconformity" can arise within a Hollywood film (75). This broad and nonspecific category, according to Bordwell's analysis, serves to group together any films that critique the "American values prominent in mainstream Hollywood cinema" (76). Problematically, Bordwell does not indicate whether these are the values espoused by the narrative of the film, or the values held by classical Hollywood cinema as the canon he claims it to be (76). Alternate definitions of film noir offer a much clearer definition

of the style, and are able to agree on films that share specific stylistic characteristics other than mere nonconformity. These definitions also define as film noir films fiercely defended by Bordwell as classical, such as “*The Maltese Falcon* and *Citizen Kane*” (Schatz 233). While these films are formally classical according to Bordwell’s analysis, they have been read as stylistically film noir by a number of scholars – but not due to their critical stances on the “values” of classical film.

As we see in the case of Bordwell, the formal characteristics of films from this era are commonly discussed in terms of the development of other art forms, not in terms of film’s own development as a medium. While it must be the case that “before there are auteurs, there are constraints; before there are deviations, there are norms,” when it is applied to film, the origin of the “norms” in question is often taken from other media (Bordwell 4). The temptation to view film as necessarily following the early development process experienced by literature, music, theater, and photography is reasonable: film owes an undeniable debt of existence to these media. However, I reject the claim that the medium of cinema must necessarily be classified, critiqued, and appraised according to the same constraints and norms of other works of art: it is just as likely that film is the auteur or derivation arising from a previous history of aesthetic effort. This applies equally to its inception as it does to its contemporary work.

We need not look far for an example from early cinema that incorporates the innovations of other media in order to develop a new style of its own. For instance, Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) owes not just its style but also its psychological dimension to expressionist painting:

With its oblique chimneys on pell-mell roofs, its windows in the form of arrows or kites and its treelike arabesques that were threats rather than trees, Holstenwall resembled those visions of unheard-of cities which the painter Lyonel Feininger evoked through his edgy, crystalline compositions. In addition, the ornamental system in *Caligari* expanded through space, annulling its conventional aspect by means of painted shadows in disharmony with the lighting effects, and zigzag delineations designed to effect all rules of perspective. (Kracauer 69).

The use of painted backgrounds, spatially impossible buildings, and heavy shadows (Figure 2) allowed Wiene and Holstenwall to create a style that effectively “[rendered] the notions of sick brains” and elevated *Caligari* to its acclaimed status today (Kracauer 70). The choice to employ expressionism rather than Janowitz’s first choice of surrealism indicates a desire to connect to a school of painting that is very medium-conscious (Kracauer 67).

Expressionist artists are very concerned with the status of painting in a modern society, and their work attempts to challenge the boundaries of painting as it has previously been understood. Conversely, the surrealists sought to escape the modern world by mocking convention with absurdity. *Caligari* follows the expressionist creed much more closely by challenging the status of madness and the rise of psychiatry; thus, the use of expressionistic style enhances the film’s attention to the contradictions of modern medicine in a way that escapism could not accomplish. Against Arnheim, the hybridization of film and painting enhances the stylistic, artistic, and philosophic value of these films.



Figure 2: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene. 1920. Kino on Video, 2002. DVD.
The impact of expressionism in film.

We see this hybridization again in the incorporation of surrealist elements in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). While the surrealist creed is inappropriate to *Caligari*'s underlying message, surrealism successfully enhances the sense of bourgeois desire for escapism and rejection of reality in *Metropolis*. In the scenes in the Pleasure Gardens, we see that the sons of the city leaders live in a Bacchanalian paradise; they are blissfully unaware of the trials of the workers operating their great metropolis. When the now robotic Maria makes her sensuous appearance in the club, the superimposition of Dali-esque eyes on top of her gyrating hips elevates the commentary from one of ignorance to one of complete removal from reality (Figure 3). Just as the surrealists sought to escape from the trials of reality, the nightclub scene depicts the rulers' complete separation from the city below. The incorporation of surrealist elements is the vehicle through which this stronger message is able to emerge.

In the above examples, films incorporate art in order to enhance the underlying message of the film. The hybridization allows the film to further its own purposes by deepening the emotional and intellectual weight of the image while placing it in a larger artistic context. While homage is nothing new in art, the transformative power of media combination is uniquely powerful in film.



Figure 3: *Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. 1927. Kino International, 2010. DVD. A surreal screen of eyes takes over Maria's dance.



Figure 4: Eugène Delacroix, *Don Juan's Shipwreck*. 1841. Art, Archeology and Architecture Div., Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Web. *ArtStor*. 3 June 2015.
Romanticism cannot depict satire.

For an alternate perspective, consider Eugène Delacroix's *The Shipwreck of Don Juan* (1841). While this painting is a direct depiction of a scene from the second Canto of Byron's *Don Juan*, and is thus homage to the literary work, the Romantic style of the painting gives no indication of the satire running throughout the poem itself. Delacroix's work simply offers a different interpretation of Byron; unlike *Caligari* and *Metropolis*, *Don Juan's Shipwreck* does nothing to enhance the critical apparatus of the poem (Figure 4). According to traditional aesthetic theory, the pastiche of painting found in *Caligari* and *Metropolis* should not appear until film's post-modern stage, and certainly not within the early decades of film's existence. The permeation of expressionist and surrealist painting into the films is strong evidence of the continued development of film as a critical apparatus – development that is different than that found in painting, literature, music, and sculpture.

To make the claim that classical Hollywood film is nothing more than an attempt to produce the purist – and thus lucrative – conventions in film is an unfortunate underestimation of the auteurs of the time. As will be expounded at length in Chapter IV, numerous films can be read as attentive – and often acerbic – characterizations and critiques of the film industry and medium. Formally classical films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), and *A Star Is Born* (1937) enjoyed immense commercial, popular, and critical acclaim while still making themselves available as vehicles for challenging and developing the status of film.

It is important that these films contain tried and true conventional formulas, because as Lessing notes, if a format is too odd, the audience will resist it: “what they

see they do not like; and what the artist wants them to think, they do not know” (Lessing 64). A sudden deployment of a new film style is neither theoretically nor practically wise, and many a flop has been credited to a film being simply too strange for audiences. The classical Hollywood films are able to challenge the conventional rules of film precisely *because* they remain within the paradigm while challenging it. They are complicitous critiques: formally and stylistically structured so that they can “install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” in an attempt to call into question the film’s status as a medium (Hutcheon 2). Without the legitimization of the paradigm, the critical effect cannot be fully achieved.

This phenomenon is not restricted to film: in painting, the abstract expressionists had to resort to references to children’s paintings in order to support their theory of expression without representation, a theory decried as “too avant-garde” for popular tastes (Greenberg). In music, the legend of Schoenberg’s riot-inducing atonal performance in Vienna in 1913 continues to thrive, as does the controversy surrounding John Cage’s first performance of *4’33”*, a performance of silence that was misunderstood as a silent performance. Cage’s statement that “they [the audience] missed the point” precisely demonstrates Lessing’s claim that in order to push the boundaries of a medium, permutation is far more successful than reinvention or direct attack (Kostelanetz 70). Aesthetic novelty is not “a distinct and coherent alternative”: abstraction rather than representation, atonal rather than tonal, silence rather than music

(Bordwell 81). Development of a medium only happens in isolated incidents and large steps when seen through a long historical lens.

Aesthetic novelty could perhaps be demonstrated through a case study of Gregg Toland. David Bordwell and Andre Bazin argue that *Citizen Kane* is responsible for the unheralded use of deep-focus cinematography, a novel technique that simply appeared, fully formed.² Contrary to this perspective of novelty as virgin birth, Phillip Cowan argues “that these directors did not independently, or in some great conspiratorial gesture, begin using these new techniques simultaneously” (Cowan 81). He credits the “sole” and underappreciated effort of Gregg Toland for the conception, innovation, and development of deep-focus cinematography over a period of years, films, directors, and studios (Cowan 81). Toland’s efforts were not restricted to the specific composition, sequencing, or lighting of deep-focus cinematography; famously, Toland ensured that he captured the desired shot by grinding unique lenses on set if conventional lenses could not accomplish the task (Cowan).

Even so, Cowan neglects to delve into the filmic influences that shaped Toland’s work to craft deep-focus cinematography. The 1920s is replete with examples of scenes filmed in extreme depth to allow multiple levels of action. To return to *Metropolis*, the Moloch sacrifice scene is a superb example of an early precursor to deep-focus cinematography that shares the same aesthetic qualities. As with *Citizen Kane*, oversized sets allowed cinematographers to stage multiple levels of action in a single shot. Freder’s visit to the machine room features three levels of action: deepest is the head of the machine or Moloch in the vision, the middle level contains the operations of the workers

and the constant clouds of steam, and the shallowest level is the entrance to the steps where workers recover from their injuries, or, in the vision, march towards their doom. Aesthetically, this displays the same characteristics of deep-focus cinematography: a wide field in which the viewer is invited to choose their focus, rather than be restricted to a single subject in a close frame. Over the years, similar shots allowed cinematographers, like Toland, to develop lenses capable of capturing such a deep shot without losing clarity. This dedication to minor permutations and alterations of existing equipment and techniques over years is precisely the type of effort that contributes to the development of film – and the elevation of the most important and influential films of the classical period to the status of art.

II.3. Benjamin, Receptivity, and Ritual

Up to this point, we have considered three flawed philosophical diagnoses of film. Considering film as mimetic realism, romanticized realism, or manipulated reality ultimately degrades the possibility of engaging with film as an art form. As we saw in Sontag's diagnosis, the necessity to find a working philosophical approach to film is both timely and pressing. Reviving cinephilia is not just a matter of aesthetic pleasure; reawakening the public love of film can open an opportunity for critical, intellectual, and existential engagement with a work of art.

In order to do this, we must expand Benjamin's greatest hopes for film, found in the other half of his dialectic. We can do this by drawing from Benjamin's discussions of the engagement with art through habit, specifically as experienced in architecture: the

more audiences become acclimated to the aesthetic requirements of a technology, the greater the possibility that they will “absorb the work of art into themselves” in their distraction, and, like a parasite, any hidden message it might contain (Benjamin 39). This absorption is “a different kind of participation,” one that awakens the distracted audience through “shock effects” that strike each individual to the core (Benjamin 39). These shocks work to startle the individual into awareness and engagement with the film itself, thus opening them up to the possibility of engaging with a film meaningfully, as a ritual.³ Viewing film as a ritual allows us to assuage some of Benjamin’s pessimistic concerns.

Benjamin offers a consideration of ritual in his discussion of film-habit, but neglects to expand the argument to its most fruitful conclusion. He explicitly states that film lacks a traditional aura, and thus cannot be “an object of devotion” for the viewer. He neglects to consider the ritual behavior exhibited by the film-watching public from cinema’s earliest days. Viewers of all ages flocked to the cinema to view the latest attractions, premiers of films attracted well-heeled audiences, and celebrity culture reached a fever pitch. The popularity of the cinema became so widespread that it caught the attention of public interest groups who fought to decrease the attendance of women and children (Pearson and Uricchio).⁴ By the 1930s, the cult of film was firmly established, as evidenced by the popularity of amateur cinematography and fan magazines such as *Photoplay*. The cathedrals of the church of film – theaters – command ritualistic behavior such as specific times for viewing, “ritual posture” in the seats, and monetary offerings to ensure maintenance of the performance (Benjamin 39).

Film as a ritual performance offers each individual viewer the ability to choose his or her degree of engagement, from the distraction depicted by Debord to the absorption of the art lover in the gallery. Those seeking the pure shock value of film can find it in this space, and leave fulfilled by another session in the cathedral of cinema. For those who find that the shock value of film is too overt, and seek instead for an opportunity to engage with the film in a more cerebral manner, they, too, are welcome to do so. Against Benjamin, the cathedral of cinema does not unify viewers into an unthinking mass; it individualizes viewers. In the dark, viewers can choose to join in with the raucous laughter of the crowd, or remain silent. Alone with their thoughts, they can wait with bated breath for the murderer to be revealed; or they can consider the deeper implications of narrative at work. Just like any religious service, the degree of participation, degree of belief, and desired result are up to each individual parishioner; they are united in their presence in the ritual space, but deeply alone in their reception of the performance.

By opening up this space, we enable a movement away from the perspective of film as mimetic realism, romanticized realism, or fabricated realism. We can reject the notion of the audience as a mindless conglomeration, and instead consider the way in which film offers an opportunity for critical engagement to its viewers. We need not think of film's primary power as Socrates's gadfly: a sting that spurs individuals into action with a sudden jolt of violence, drama, or tragedy. Instead, we ought to consider film's similarities to the Socratic approach broadly construed: humble, friendly, and ultimately instilling an inescapable sense of doubt and wonder in the recipient. Like

Socrates, films engaged in complicitous critique do not claim to know or say anything beyond that of the average film; yet in them can be found breadcrumbs of doubt which open the possibility for knowledge, interpretation, and judgment to fall upon the viewer – if he or she is willing to undertake that responsibility.⁵

Similarly, our approach to film need not be an either/or: it is not necessary that we choose between fulfilling Huxley’s prophecy, or take up the Savage’s slogan: “I don’t think you ought to see things like that” (Huxley 169). Our familiarity and veneration for Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Mozart does not mandate that we treat cinema with shock or outright rejection. Film is a both/and: it can be both entertaining and express artistic truth; it can be both escapism and realism; it can both make us feel and make us think. Film is a space for engagement with art that is highly individualist, easily accessible, and in possession of the powers of many other media. The theory that there are works of art capable of all of these accomplishments is dismissed seemingly not because it is practically impossible, but because our theoretical framework has not yet made room for it. Films that present reality, truth, and entertainment are not as hard to come by as aesthetic purists might hope.

When a “well-known story, well-known characters,” or well known structure is at work in the artwork, the work can “make [itself] understood to [its] audience” and thus “arouse their interest” much more quickly (Lessing 64). Thus, a film that adheres to formally classical style can suggest a critique of the conventions, values, or medium of film without requiring “laborious reflection and guessing” on the part of the audience, as Cage experienced. Viewers are already immersed in the narrative, willing to “linger

before the work” longer than with a nonconventional or challenging work of art (64). Done properly, Benjamin’s greatest hope can be achieved: “the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality,” offering the possibility of critical engagement not only with the work, but also with the world (Benjamin 24). While these films will be read as offering dramatic critiques of convention and expeditions into new possibilities for the medium, it must be noted that they equally permit passive enjoyment. It is this willingness to not only be complicit in convention and commercialism, but to strive to excel at it, that allows the possibility of complicitous critique.

If we grant the theses that film as a medium (a) ought to be considered in its own right, not according to the standards and conventions of other media, (b) has existed as a medium interested in consistently and intentionally developing its artistic, social, and ethical capabilities, and (c) and has been dedicated to this pursuit from its inception, we can continue to increase the space for critical engagement with this medium, as film theorists have worked to do for decades.⁶ Further, if we accept that film offers a space for engagement with the image that does not relegate the viewer to a passive spectator, then we open the possibility of viewing film as an opportunity to engage with political, social, ethical, and intellectual issues, not simply as entertainment. Finally, if we posit, against Arnheim, that film’s hybridization actually heightens its ability to access purity, goodness, and truth in the human condition, and that the audience’s engagement is worthwhile, then locating specific examples of this kind of film is paramount. First, we must evaluate to what extent this new paradigm is required socially, not simply

academically. The next chapter will explore the social and cultural need for film's "[capability to] show how matter interferes with people's lives" by offering an existential opportunity to experience a critical viewpoint of sociological, philosophical, and ethical conditions (Hansen 203).

NOTES

¹ Broadly speaking, the medium-specificity hypothesis states that every medium must be judged according to unique aesthetic judgments, not according to the aesthetic considerations of any other medium. For instance, criticizing the imagery of a poem compared to that found in a painting is neither appropriate nor conducive to critical analysis of either medium. For further information regarding the medium specificity hypothesis, see Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* or Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*. For arguments that reject the medium-specificity hypothesis, see David Bordwell's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* or Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*.

² It should be noted that Bordwell hedges by noting that "a string of similar efforts" appeared around the time of *Kane*'s release (Bordwell 344).

³ Both Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen have performed ample work to demonstrate the ways in which this approach has proven successful. See especially Miriam Hansen's *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno*, and Tom Gunning's "Buster Keaton or The Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

⁴ These moral crusades will receive fuller consideration in Chapter III.

⁵ Cf. Sartre's consideration of *littérature engagée*, wherein the author bears the responsibility to produce a text in tune with the political struggles of her time, and the reader bears the responsibility to engage with the text as deeply as possible.

⁶ A discussion of the historical popularity and specific focus of film studies will be offered in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

FILM AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The early discussions of film and photography may seem quaint in today's digital world, given the advent of the Internet, globalized communications, streaming video, and satellite television. Indeed, many current debates about media ethics take their starting point from the Internet revolution, and offer considerations about the ways in which these new forms of entertainment and communication are accommodating, altering, and obliterating traditional modes of human communication.⁷

While these discussions are crucial in contemporary scholarship, many of them sidestep the question of where film fits into this digitalized, always-connected worldview. Certainly, film has developed narratively, technologically, and economically since the Hollywood Classical era, but the basic concept remains the same: viewers sit before a screen (either in the cathedral of a theater or in their own living room) and enter into an opportunity to engage with a film. The possibility that film might offer the same kind of critical engagement applauded in the nineteenth-century literary world is only beginning to merit serious and sustained consideration from philosophy.⁸ Thus, taking a cue from the work of Neil Postman, Allan Bloom, and Theodor Adorno, this chapter will evaluate the rise of anti-intellectualism, the permeation of visual media in today's culture, and the need for an avenue for critical engagement for the students who will someday constitute the public – such as the one offered in the act of watching a film.

III.1. The Decline of Critical Thought; The Rise of the Age of the Spectacle

We should not be surprised that with the rise of the film industry we also witness a rise in complaints about the resulting “dumbing-down” of the public. This is a familiar argument to aesthetic scholars: when the novel made its debut in the eighteenth-century, “the first literary genre that came into existence as a commodity,” the response from the English elite was moral panic (Vogrinčič 109). The novel was charged with being responsible for degradation of moral character, distraction from domestic responsibilities, and furthering the decline of the education of the public. Vogrinčič cites one particularly hysterical response in which the author claims to “have actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, *crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine*, while their children were *crying for bread*” (Vogrinčič 104). In short, the novel was roundly decried as the most dangerous idle occupation of the English lower and middle classes.

From our contemporary perspective, this moral panic is entirely unjustified; the importance of reading books – novels as much as the classics – is so crucial to the development of cultured, wise, and critically engaged students that without it “even the idea of the order of the whole is lost” (Bloom 58). Yet, as Vogrinčič demonstrates, the emergence of a new behavior, genre, or medium is almost always accompanied by “a heightened level of concern over the (supposed) behavior of a certain group or category, and the consequences that this behavior presumably causes for the rest of society” (Vogrinčič 106). Sociologists refer to this phenomenon as “moral panic,” or, more recently, “media panic,” to reflect the derogatory response that educators, artists, moralists, and politicians launch against an emerging medium. Although the term moral

panic was not coined until 1971 in relation to a sociological study of the fear of drug use,⁹ it is nothing new. A similar response can be found in Plato's *Republic* and *The Seventh Letter* against the rise of writing for education; and the emergence of the printing press produced not only mass concern about the availability of books to the lower and middle classes, but was also the condition for the possibility of Luther's protestant revolution.

Similarly, the fear that film is capable of encouraging the degradation of humanity dates back to the emergence of moving pictures as an entertainment venue. Complaints ranged from poor lighting and air quality in the theaters to truancy in school children, but they ultimately hinged on a concern over the moral impact cinema has on its viewers:

The exclusion of improper books from public libraries and circulating libraries is pretty closely attended to. Yet no group of libraries in the world have [sic] ever possessed the influence over susceptible children, and over all minds in the formative and impressionable stage, that the motion picture exerts today. It is probably the greatest single force in shaping the American character. ("The Moving Picture and the National Character" 320).

This concern grew so widespread in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century that in 1911, "the City of New York prohibited the admission of unaccompanied minors under the age of sixteen to any place where moving pictures were shown under a common show license" (Pearson and Uricchio 71). The emergence of a new medium changes the way in which humans view and interact with the world. Importantly, we

must remember that just as media panics accompany the emergence of each new medium, concerns about social, intellectual, and moral impact continue with the maturation of the medium in question. A reevaluation of the concerns expressed by philosophers against the educational and moral value of film will follow so that we might return to and deepen the original concerns about film expressed over a century ago.

Following Marshall McLuhan's mantra "the medium is the message," theorists have taken to criticizing the possibilities for critical intellectual engagement with a variety of visual media.¹⁰ Foremost among these is Neil Postman, whose *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is as relevant today as it was in its initial publication in 1985, and finds a place among many syllabi each semester. Further, Allan Bloom, whose *Closing of the American Mind* offers a Nietzschean account of the decline of culture as a result of the absence of reading, is providing inspiration for Arendtian analyses of the rise of the Last Man, as evidenced by the decline in social and political involvement in America.¹¹ Postman and Bloom, both of whom taught at the university level for most of their professional lives, both identify a decline in the critical thinking abilities of their students and arrive at complementary conclusions as to the cause: the rise of watching and the decline of reading. While each offers compelling arguments as to how the decline in reading is resulting in wide-spread moral relativity (Bloom) and the realization of the Huxleyan prophecy (Postman), this analysis seeks to consider the possibility that the decline in critical thought is not due to the inability to read, but rather the inability to read the medium en vogue: film.

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom's major concern is that the absence of an adequate education in reading classic literature and philosophy cuts students off from inheriting – let alone understanding – any cultural tradition. Bloom argues that without the strict core curriculum of the classics, students find themselves “seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash, insight and propaganda” (Bloom 64). The absence of classic education results in an identity crisis for most students; they are incapable of describing themselves narratively with any depth, and lack the skills required to navigate or contribute to the political and social life they enter into as adults.

Regardless of this missing element in their education, Bloom insists that his students instinctually seek a guide in self-interpretation, either in shallow literature (here, he cites *Catcher in the Rye* as an example) or in the commercially oriented world of Hollywood cinema. While shallow literature allows the opportunity to segue into “better writers [who] can help them more,” cinema disallows any growth (Bloom 63). All that cinema can offer is “interested moralisms [...] largely designed to further passing political movements and to appeal to simplistic needs for greatness – or to insinuating flattery of their secret aspirations and vices, giving them a sense of significance” (Bloom 64). This sense of significance, however, is not an authentic one; rather than embark on their own existential journeys of discovery, students faced with cinema frequently choose to adapt themselves to one of several pre-scripted identities proffered by the motion picture industry. This concern over the abolition of authentic individuality echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's concerns in “The Culture Industry.” For Horkheimer

and Adorno, one essential element of the culture industry is that “the mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same,” a position that he holds equally when discussing the difference in brands of automobiles as much as the distinction between Hollywood starlets (Horkheimer and Adorno 97). Horkheimer and Adorno and Bloom all worry that the narrative types found in cinema – not simply restricted to personality but also to narrative trajectory – have ceased to be mythological tropes, as observed by Joseph Campbell, and have become advertised products for consumption. Just like Bloom, Horkheimer and Adorno decry the culture industry, especially cinema, for restricting the individual’s ability to existentially shape him or herself. Instead, they offer “ideal types” that are presented as possible realities for the viewers:

The way in which the young girl accepts and performs the obligatory date, the tone of voice used on the telephone and in the most intimate situations, the choice of words in conversation, indeed, the whole inner life compartmentalized according to the categories of vulgarized depth psychology, bears witness to the attempt to turn oneself into an apparatus meeting the requirements of success, an apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry. (Horkheimer and Adorno 135-136).

Horkheimer and Adorno’s concern is that the monotony of the culture industry prohibits any alternative perspective from which to view the world. Women who previously might have harbored personal and professional dreams are instead restricted to the identity they see reflected back to them on the screen. For Bloom, this restriction is brought about as a result of a lack of other artistic mentors – no classic literature, drama, or narrative to

inspire a different direction. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this restriction is the manipulation of a larger culture industry. As Horkheimer and Adorno warn, the culture industry does not seek to nurture, but to restrict and amalgamate – and the industry is so skilled in its operation that the women neglect to recognize the shrinking of potential that they experience when presented only with the screen.

Similarly, Bloom finds the cinema to be vacant of any real intellectual or spiritual depth for his students. Rather than offer them an opportunity to engage with the timeless philosophical questions that can guide them to authentic self-creation, the cinema merely reflects back the present moment, “the here and now,” obliterating the traditions of the past and narrowing the promise of the future (Bloom 64). This disconnection from tradition prevents students from “[discovering] what is most serious about themselves,” what makes them unique, valuable, and worthwhile (Bloom 64). Bloom’s primary claims about the degradation of individual development and critical thought are appropriate, and dovetail nicely with Adorno’s early concerns about the Culture Industry as a whole. Though Bloom insists throughout *The Closing of the American Mind* that a classical education is the only method of rescuing the sinking ship of American intellectualism, Adorno’s later works offer a possibility for including film within that education – an opportunity that will be discussed at length in the next section.

III.2. *Écriture* and *Engagement*

Neil Postman classifies television as “the third great crisis in Western education”; the first was the transition to a written culture in Athens, and the second was the

invention of the printing press in the fifteenth-century (Postman 145). For Postman, television merits the title of crisis because it, like the two crises that preceded it, is changing not only the shape, speed, and structure of the world, but the way in which its human inhabitants think about and engage with the world. Here, Postman's language is perhaps a bit inflammatory; the word crisis holds the connotation of a state of emergency, a dangerous situation – in short, a panic. As argued above, these are not crises, but media panic about the paradigm shifts brought about by the emergence of a new medium. In reality, all that Postman is observing is a basic tenet of the medium-specificity argument: “each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility” (Postman 10). This claim, in and of itself, holds no danger: it only becomes problematic if the new orientation for thought is considered inadequate or insufficient in comparison to the previous orientation. For Postman, this is precisely the case: television is “a conversation in images, not words,” and thus deprives its audience of the possibility of engaging with complex concepts or philosophical ideas (Postman 7). Without these complex concepts or philosophical ideas, Postman fears that public discourse becomes “a form of baby talk” (Postman 155). Postman thus lambasts television as being responsible for the decline in public discourse, youth education, and waning American ability to engage in critical thinking for sustained periods of time.

My intention here is not to dismiss Postman's claims wholesale, but rather to suggest that his claims about television are founded on an impoverished conception of the image cultivated during the media panic surrounding the rise of television. Given

Postman's dedication to the art of reading and his desire for a return to a citizenship that is engaged in intellectual and political life, it is understandable that Postman vilifies the image, specifically photography. However, when he decries the vapid nature of the image, we must keep in mind that he has in his sights the most fragmented and spectacle-laden image system to his knowledge – television, not film. We need only reference Horkheimer and Adorno in "The Culture Industry" to find a similar argument: "the withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture" is easily traced back to the flickering images on the screen (Horkheimer and Adorno 100). These images, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, not only "deny the audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination," they actively "debar the spectator from thinking" at all (Horkheimer and Adorno 100). By following this line of argument, both theorists enter into an echo chamber of pessimism that does not easily offer an exit – unless we revise our theoretical approach to the photographic image, as Adorno did at the end of his life. Adorno's later writings, specifically "Transparencies on Film" and *Aesthetic Theory*, attempt to open a space for the possibility of a political and social engagement with film as an art form.¹² Using those efforts as a guide, a similar reevaluation of Postman is necessary. By reorienting Postman towards the photographic image, we can open the same space in his argument as Adorno opens in his own: the space wherein the viewer can become a reader of a film, and thus experience the same critical, intellectual, and political engagement that Postman applauds in the nineteenth-century reader.

Postman's main claim against images, specifically photography, is that it is only capable of presenting particularities: this coffee cup, this dog. Without the aid of language, "the photograph does not present to us an idea or concept about the world [...]" it cannot deal with the unseen, the remote, the internal, the abstract" (Postman 72). Given the discussion of the Atget photograph in the preceding chapter, we can see that a photograph does in fact capture a particularity, but in the same way that an act of naming captures a particularity. The photographer, like the linguist, elects a subject for naming, and in so doing, elevates it from the amalgamation of experience as specific, relevant, and intriguing. This selection does not happen, as Postman argues, as "a dismembering of reality, a wrenching of moments out of their contexts," but as part of a conscious decision to preserve, along with the historical context, a sliver of reality (Postman 73). In the Atget photograph, the particularity under consideration is the balcony above a shoemaker's shop. The broader conceptual message in the image is not detached from the photograph, but is also brought into play: to a viewer familiar with the historical and social context of the photograph, the commentary on the rise of the industrial revolution and the toll it is taking on artisan crafts is present within the photograph itself. Language is not required to elicit that conceptual element – and in the case of the Atget photograph, it actually works *against* the conceptual significance of the image. Rather, the careful viewer can find meaning within the photograph as easily as the careful reader "struggling with semantic meaning" can elicit conceptual value from a written sentence (Postman 50). For a viewer familiar with the social and historical context surrounding the photograph, the image really does speak a thousand words. This kind of reading is no

different than the knowledge required to understand the social conventions present in a nineteenth-century romantic novel, or the evidence of the rise of the wealthy mercantile class as seen in fifteenth-century portraiture. Images do maintain conceptual capabilities; like any other media, they just require a viewer capable of interpreting them.

Still, Postman fears that “[any image] can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently,” which makes removal from the aforementioned context possible – and with it, the removal of any conceptual content (Postman 73). However, I argue that this detachment is equally possible with the written word as with images. True, an image can be detached from its historical context and manipulated for purposes other than those which the artist originally intended. This idea of false representation or obliteration of context, however, is not the result of the rise of the image culture. Removing single sentences from paragraphs to misrepresent a position and repurposing theses for causes antithetical to the original document are centuries-old casualties of the written word. For a particularly ironic example, consider the famous seventeenth-century quotation attributed to Isaac Newton: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” This phrase, now cliché, was adapted from Bernard of Chartres, who is quoted by John of Salisbury in the twelfth-century as saying “We are like dwarves on the shoulders of giants.” This detachment from original context and repurposing elsewhere is not always negative, as Postman fears, nor is it confined to the realm of image. In postmodern theory, this kind of manipulation is not even considered a logical fallacy; it becomes pastiche, a way of integrating an artifact without bringing along undesirable

historical baggage. Though detachment from context does reduce the conceptual value of the original artifact in any medium, it is not confined to moving images, as Postman fears. As argued above, it often enables new generations to connect to tradition on their own terms, in their own native language.

Ultimately, Postman is assuming the same aesthetic hierarchy we saw in Arnheim: the reader of the text is shrewdly educated, practiced in protracted struggles with the written word, while the viewer of the photograph is incapable of anything more than a passing glance at a detached and meaningless particularity. As Greenberg notes, lobbying for an aesthetic hierarchy requires “an entrance into the politics of taste – to use Venturi’s phrase – from which there is no exit” (Greenberg 69). As Postman himself concedes, different media permit different modes of engagement; it is not a question of better or worse, but simply a difference of kind. Further, all that is required to engage an image conceptually is the same kind of training and attention Postman applauds in the nineteenth-century American reader:

The reader must come armed, in a serious state of intellectual readiness. This is not easy because he comes to the text alone. In reading, one’s responses are isolated, one’s intellect thrown back on its own resources. To be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community. Thus, reading is by its nature a serious business. (Postman 50)

To the trained eye, photographs and paintings speak of concepts and ideas as much as Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* speaks to a trained philosopher. Postman’s deep

concerns about America's ability to break away from their addiction to the "Now... This" way of entertainment may be entirely correct. As he puts it, the challenge is pandemic and inescapable: "Americans will not shut down any part of their technological apparatus, and to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all" (Postman 158). In order to reconcile the need for sustained public engagement in the social and political sphere with the fact that Americans have become addicted to the fragmented, shallow, and meaningless images of television, Postman suggests "the solution must be found in *how* we watch" (Postman 160). To that, I offer a response that Postman neglects to consider: the possibility of working to turn today's generation into readers of a different sort: readers of images, specifically in film. By rejecting his depiction of *all* images as necessarily particular, manipulative, and prohibitive of any content, we can open the space required to transform film into the role Postman imagines only books to hold: "an attempt to make thought permanent and to contribute to the great conversation conducted by the authors of the past" (Postman 70).

Educating viewers in the critical practice of viewing films is difficult, especially given Postman's apt analysis that most individuals seek to view films for sensation or escapism, and thus are practiced at not seeking deeper meaning within them. However, the difficulty inherent in seeking meaning in films actually protects the spectator against the passivity Benjamin and early Adorno imagine films to possess. As David Jenemann argues, any frustration or concentration involved "would provide the irritant against which subjectivity could react" and enforce its own reading upon the film (Jenemann 107). This would then allow the frustrated viewer to cease following the pedantic script

of the film, and engage in the “critical deciphering” required when engaging with *écriture* (Hansen 197).

Hansen arrives at this conclusion by evaluating Horkheimer and Adorno’s early claim that “dialectics reveals every image as writing, makes it readable in a language that is more than a mere system of signs,” by placing it in conversation with his later – and much less condemning – work on film in “Transparencies on Film” (Hansen 196). Though Adorno’s later thought “grants cinematic technique the status of aesthetic material,” and thus is capable of permitting intellectual, social, and political engagement with a work of art, he strictly specifies that this classification only applies to non-commercial film, such as the American avant-garde movement of the 1930s (Hansen 190).

As Horak argues, the first American avant-garde movement was chiefly concerned with film itself; the movement’s members viewed themselves “as cineastes, as lovers of cinema, as amateurs willing to work in any arena furthering the cause of film art, even if it involved commercial productions” (Horak 387). Contrasting this early movement with the well-known anti-commercialism and often politically oriented stance of the 1950s avant-garde movement, we find that the first practitioners were motivated first and foremost by their love of film. This passion generated an entire culture beyond the commercialization of Hollywood, producing “a network of exhibition outlets, including art theaters, galleries, and amateur film clubs, as well as film publications”; in short, a movement (Horak 387). Art houses began showing amateur films, at which “director and actors, stimulated by what they had seen in the theater and encouraged by

the reception of new work, would feel impelled to try their hand” at increasingly experimental film in a commercial setting (Horak 391).

Many of the directors and actors of this movement were not in the film industry by trade. The advancement of film technology “allowed every man and woman potentially to become a film artist” with innovations leading to cheaper, less complex, and more portable cameras and film (Horak 389). In a short perusal of the biographies of the major names of this movement, then, we should not be surprised to find painters, photographers, medical doctors, sound technicians, and film critics, all of whom were able to pursue a passion in film as a result of the much more accessible equipment. The 1930s movement, unlike the 1950s movement, did not reject the commercial status of film wholesale, and accepted financial assistance to pursue their work, wherever it arose. As a result, many of the commercially successful directors who had their start in avant-garde amateur work first worked with documentary film, government-sponsored film, and technical work involving scraps of other films, expanding their repertoire beyond the traditional Hollywood narrative structure. Thus, the very training of many of the directors in Hollywood did not start and end in commercial studios, as when Hitchcock learned his subjective camera perspective from observing F. W. Murnau on set.¹³ The avant-garde movement not only ran parallel to the films of the 1930s to the 1940s, it cross-pollinated, allowing novel techniques to emerge commercially, and commercial techniques to receive critique in the esoteric art houses of the avant-garde movement.

Consider James Sibley Watson’s short film *Tomatos Another Day*.¹⁴ This film features amateur actors acting out a script written by a dentist in a one-room set that was

shot and edited using a personal video camera. The film overtly mocks the overacting common in early silent films: the actors move with exaggerated deliberation from one stage mark to the next, and they speak their lines slowly and loudly to each other, often simply stating the obvious:

Woman: I have the strangest feeling.

Husband: What is it?

Woman: I am no longer alone in this room.

Husband: Good god! You're right! Neither am I!¹⁵

This short exchange is a mockery of sorts; Hollywood narratives that rely on overt exposition in the dialogue to expound the plot insult the intelligence of the viewer, assuming that they could not determine what is happening without such cues. This exchange, occurring after the departure of the woman's secret lover and the return home of her husband, is a high parody of this narrative device, delivering the movement of the plot to the audience with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. This film further attacks the production value of B-movies, especially the sound effects, all of which seem unnatural and forced, as when the woman accidentally sits on a wicker hat and produces a thunderous crinkling noise. The director, Watson, was a medical doctor by profession, but a member of the avant-garde "cineastes" of the 1930s. His motivation to create films such as *Tomatos Another Day* arose, first, out of love for the technical and artistic aspects of the cinema. In addition, he created this film out of concern that Hollywood was Shanghaing this nascent art form into becoming a primarily commercial, and thus vapid and inelegant, endeavor. At his own expense, he thus produced a film that

“ironically comments on the oververbalization of early sound film,” contributing to a critical engagement with the development of film as a medium (Hovak 397).

The avant-garde movement demonstrates an effort to engage in the work of crafting films as works of art *within* a commercial context. *Tomatos Another Day*, like many of the works of the movement, certainly satisfy Adorno’s aesthetic criteria for film as art, but they are too esoteric and obscure to pose any real critical attack on the Hollywood industry. Similarly, films such as *Rose Hobart* (1936) are simply too strange to attract mass audiences, and the pastiche demonstrated in the collage of scrapped footage from *East of Borneo* (1931) and scientific documentaries would be lost on the average Hollywood viewer. Thus, while the strength and influence of the avant-garde movement of the 1930s enabled the possibility of critique in Hollywood films, the critique must take place in the Hollywood films themselves in order to be successful at the level Adorno desires.

Still, Adorno’s demand for cinema crafted with aesthetic purposes in mind can still be found within the Hollywood system – if one only knows where to look. Despite his involvement in Hollywood, there is substantial evidence that Adorno cared little about the mass produced film, and neglected to consider the possibility that even though big-budget films produced by major production companies fell nicely into the classifications of the industry, they maintained the possibility for critique within their economically maintained parameters.¹⁶ As Hansen argues, there remains open the possibility that a film practiced in the art of “a poverty of means, a self-conscious abstinence from perfection, may be more likely to achieve artistic standards of its own”

(Hansen 190). What are dismissed as aberrations in the paradigm of David Bordwell – films that have “subversive moments,” but are not fully subversive films – could perhaps be seen as self-consciously abstaining from achieving genre or stylistic perfection in the hopes of preserving sociological, artistic, or intellectual meaning. This claim will form the basis for the analyses of the films found in Chapter IV.

In order to sustain this argument, one final component must be included. The film of which we now speak cannot retain its ritual component or possibility for engagement if performed via a cable television broadcast, fragmented by commercial interruptions and edited for content or time. Postman and Benjamin agree that in order to fully appreciate the nuanced value of a work of literature, music, painting, or film, the work must be permitted to exist as a complete and uninterrupted whole. While this analysis of Benjamin rejects the need for an aura surrounding a work of cinema, it does rely on a ritualistic space in which meaning can emerge, and to sustain this, the performance must remain uninterrupted. Without granting the work the opportunity to exist in its fullness, nothing of its truth, beauty, or critical commentary can emerge. In the same way, we must make the distinction that film can only be appreciated in its fullest form when it is viewed continuously, without distraction, in either the cathedral of the theater or the home altar of the living room.

The issue is not simply the distraction offered by the commercial interruptions; I argue that playing a film during a cable broadcast amounts to a translation from its original language. Most film auteurs design their films to be viewed on the forty-foot screen; mimicking the same performance to the 42” screen amounts to a mere difference

of degree. However, embedding *Casablanca* (1942) within a “Now... This” presentation so that Rick’s poignant comment to Ilsa, “We’ll always have Paris” is immediately followed by a brightly colored toothpaste advertisement is a translation in which the original meaning is not just lost, but destroyed.¹⁷ It is a difference of kind. Just as a translation of poetry from one language to another results in “a rough idea of the sense of the poem,” but loses “especially that which makes it an object of beauty,” placing a film within the context of television gives the viewer a rough sense of the film, but runs the risk of losing everything that makes it an object of beauty, truth, and meaning (Postman 117).

This gives viewers an option: either enter the space of the cathedral of the theater, or seize the opportunity offered by the technologies of DVD players, streaming video, and digital copies of the film to engage with the ritual in a private space. In reference to Postman’s justified concerns about the decline of intellectualism, the accessibility to this experience granted by these technologies is, for many individuals, more available and much more preferable than reading a book. Again, film is not an either/or between entertainment and enchantment: as long as we approach the medium in the appropriate ways, we can “[endow] it with magic,” and thus “gain access to sacredness” in the entertainment and engagement of watching a film (Postman 122). Film is now poised to rise to the apex Postman imagined possible for any aesthetic medium: “it sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty[;] and it is always implicated in the way we define and regulate our ideas of truth” (Postman 18).

As an educator, I must include the fact that reading both Bloom and Postman is *compelling*. When my students read *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, they describe their own experiences with television as fragmented, meaningless, and manipulative. All the same, they feel powerless to break away from it – assuming that they even consider the idea of breaking away as a plausible request. At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students the same questions Bloom asked his, and continue to experience similar results: most students do not have a book that “really counts” for them, nor do they have developed concepts of heroism or evil. These experiences I share with Postman and Bloom are disconcerting, and their attacks on television and film are thus compelling – at least at face value. More compelling, however, is the necessity to follow Bloom in his command that “education in our times must try to find whatever there is in students that might yearn for completion, and to reconstruct the learning that would enable them autonomously to seek that completion” (Bloom 63). Students, I think, yearn for a connection to the objective reality of their times; film, I argue, can give that to them. Thus, we have arrived at a position to consider the films themselves as *écriture* available for *engagement* in the ritualistic space of viewing a film. The concerns of Postman, Bloom, and Horkheimer and Adorno still pose a strong threat to cinema as possible avenues for artistic, sociological, and political engagement with the modern world, but there is now open the possibility that some films contain within them critical commentary about the medium, industry, and social importance of cinema related to “the objective spirit of its time” (Adorno 205). If this is the case, then a pedagogical project geared at allowing students the opportunity to seek out this meaning is necessary if we

are to take Bloom and Postman seriously. In the next chapter, formal, stylistic, and theoretical analyses of numerous commercial films will seek to demonstrate a non-ironic interpretation of Adorno's statement: "how nice it would be if, under the present circumstances, one could claim that the less films appear to be works of art, the more they would be just that" (Adorno 205). As I will argue, we can find these films present in the classical Hollywood era as easily as in the post-modern era. The next chapter will draw explicit connections between the complicitous critique found in classical Hollywood films and the complicitous critique found in postmodern films. Reading these films as complicitous critique allows us to see them as representing deeper philosophical, artistic, and sociological meanings. Further, discovering those meanings for self-development, critical thought, and intellectual growth is simply a matter of learning how to read the meaning within the films.

NOTES

⁷ For a discussion of the social ramifications of digital social media, see Naomi Baron's *Always On*. For a consideration of the way in which digital communications impacts ethical development, see the work of Shannon Vallor, especially "Social Networking Technology and the Virtues."

⁸ For notable scholars in this field, see Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1971), Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I* (1983) and *Cinema II* (1985), and Kathryn Thompson-Jones, *Aesthetics and Film* (2008).

⁹ Media panic is first cited in "J. Young, "The role of the police as amplifiers of deviance," in *Images of Deviance*.

¹⁰ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*. For an analysis of McLuhan from the framework of the digital age, see Robert K. Logan's *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan*.

¹¹ For this larger argument, see the work of Dan Conway.

¹² See Miriam Hansen's work for an extensive analysis of the way in which Adorno reorients his thoughts about film in his later writings.

¹³ For this and other anecdotes about the connection between Hitchcock and Murnau, see James Bade's "Murnau's *The Last Laugh* and Hitchcock's Subjective Camera."

¹⁴ For other films from this movement, see Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936), Emlen Etting's *Poem 8* (1932), and the work of Mary Ellen Bute such as *Synchronomy No. 2* (1936) and *Escape* (1938).

¹⁵ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Avant-Garde 3: Experimental Cinema, 1922-1954*. New York: Kino, 2009.

¹⁶ For an excellent analysis of the extent of Adorno's personal engagement with Hollywood during his time in California, see David Jenemann's full article "Below the Surface: Frankfurt Goes to Hollywood."

¹⁷ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Casablanca*. Dir. Michael Curtiz. 1942. Warner Brothers, 2012. DVD.

CHAPTER IV

COMPLICITOUS CRITIQUE, A HOLLYWOOD TRADITION

This chapter will draw on the theoretical considerations put forth in the preceding two chapters and explore the formal, narrative, stylistic, and intellectual qualities of films that are (a) consciously aware of their status as manifestations of a medium that is capable of producing art, (b) commercially successful, and (c) extend an invitation to viewers to enter into an existential consideration of the presence or creation of truth in their daily lives. Following the arguments set forth thus far, these three considerations must be met in this chapter in order to justify the orientation towards film I wish to offer.

First, following Chapter II, the films in this section must be medium self-conscious: they must be aware that while their commercial task is to entertain, they also must engage in an active dialogue with and advancement of the conventions and expansions of film as a medium. Second, contra Adorno, these films cannot be esoteric art films accessible only to the few; if Bloom and Postman are to be taken seriously, they must be films that have shown wide audience appeal, and thus invite viewers to participate in their content. Finally, these films must contain an element of complicitous critique that is strong enough to encourage select viewers to engage with them in a serious, contemplative, and existential manner, yet subtle enough that it does not stray too far from the standard formula, and, as Lessing cautions, frustrates the viewer from identifying any truth or meaning.

To begin this analysis, we will consider several films from the Hollywood Classical era. Developed analyses of *Sullivan's Travels* (Sturges 1941), *A Star Is Born* (Wellman 1937), and *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941) will provide evidence of complicitous critique within each film. Finally, in order to demonstrate the persistence of complicitous critique from the classical era to the postmodern era, I will provide connections to several contemporary films: *Fargo* (The Coen Brothers 1996), *O Brother Where Art Thou* (The Coen Brothers 2000), *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), *Burn After Reading* (The Coen Brothers 2008), and *Inception* (Nolan 2010).

Of specific interest will be the way in which these films challenge (a) the commercial production of films (*Sullivan's Travels*, *A Star Is Born*), (b) the tendency to offer neat conclusions for complex problems (*Sullivan's Travels*, *Citizen Kane*, *Inception*, *Fargo*, *Burn After Reading*, *Adaptation*), (c) the inability to escape fabricated narratives (*Sullivan's Travels*, *A Star is Born*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*), (d) our own attraction to spectacle and escapism (*The Crowd*, *Inception*).

IV.1. *Sullivan's Travels* and the Critique of the Hollywood Machine

Sullivan's Travels is read in today's literature as a screwball comedy; while it is perhaps a bit more "offbeat" than the screwball comedies of Capra, it is only quietly heralded as a highly irreverent critique of classical style (Schatz 109). While the film is included in most scholarly works considering Hollywood work in that era, dedicated work on the film as a unique moment is sparse.¹⁸ The absence of scholarship centering

on the film is curious, considering that the *New York Times* 1941 review hails the film as a “beautifully trenchant satire upon ‘social significance’ in pictures, a stinging slap at those fellows who howl for realism on the screen and a deftly sardonic apologia for Hollywood make-believe” (Crowther). It is not purely the content of the film that allows the careful viewer to arrive at such a conclusion. As will be argued, the formal structure of the film, narrative impetus, use of comedy, and fabricated happy ending all call into question the conventions of classical film while remaining well within its parameters. This film does more than simply “lay bare the device” (Bordwell 22) of making a film, a mere comedic strategy for Bordwell. Rather, it consciously raises the question of film’s ability to simultaneously offer an escape from the challenges of daily life and make a political, sociological, and artistic statement.

An early scene immediately demonstrates the “satire” at work in the film: famous director John Sullivan (Joel McCrea) complains to his producers that he wishes to make a change in his artistic vision. The kinds of film for which he has become famous are spectacle films, geared towards mass consumption, typified by our glimpses of one of his films in the opening scene: a daring hand-to-hand battle, a speeding train, a dramatic explosion.



Figure 5: *Sullivan's Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. 1941. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD.
Sully wants to expose the “sociological and artistic dimensions of film as an art form!”

What Sullivan instead wishes to accomplish is expressed in a brilliant speech only a few minutes into the first act (Figure 5):

Sullivan: I wanted to make you something outstanding, something you could be proud of, something that would realize the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is – with a little sex in it.

LeBrand: Something like Capra.

Sullivan: What's wrong with Capra?¹⁹

Though this dialogue is delivered in rapid, almost slapstick form, the question it raises is deep and important, and of particular interest to Hollywood during the late 1930s and prewar 1940s. As has been argued, this period was the golden era of the studio system, a time when films were produced according to strict narrative formulas, actors were cast according to types, and the most important component in the motion picture industry was the profit. Sullivan's desire to escape this system, like Capra's, mirrors the rise in amateur cinematography in the 1930s: film produced as a labor of love rather than purely for profit.

Frank Capra took this task seriously: he devoted his efforts to make film into “a sociological and artistic medium,” by striving to unify the audience's desire for escapism with their own felt responsibility for social action. As Capra mentions in his bibliography, films were able to “talk to *hundreds* of millions, for two hours – and in the dark,” presenting a prime opportunity for spreading social and political awareness (Moran 112). Though McBride notes that this story is likely a fabrication, Capra felt the

need to resist profit-driven escapism to the extent that almost all of his films after *It Happened One Night* (1934) present a strong social, political, or ethical component.

Rather than join this trend by producing his own version of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra 1939), Preston Sturges elects a subtler approach. *Sullivan's Travels* mocks such high-minded aspirations by juxtaposing a caricature of "motion picture producers whose notion of art is a little sex," LeBrand, with a comically naïve director seeking to change the world, Sullivan (Crowther). Even in this opening scene, we can see that Sturges is doing more than "holding a mirror up to reality" – he is holding a mirror up to the *attempt* to hold a mirror up to reality.

Despite this mockery, then, *Sullivan's Travels* does not simply make fun of films with messages; it also raises the same question: is it possible for films to "say something" to their viewers, or is it merely a medium of entertainment? Sullivan's drive to create *O Brother Where Art Thou* is the Benjaminian demand that film should offer viewers activation and awareness: Sullivan, like Benjamin, wishes to create a direct and unavoidable engagement with a social, historical, or political situation. Unlike Sullivan and Benjamin, *Sullivan's Travels* itself sees the error of such a blunt approach, and engages in a critique much more subtly.

Helpful here is Moran and Rogin's interpretation of the film with a particular emphasis on its relation to the Popular Front: one of the ways that Sturges uniquely enters this discussion is by "understanding the political as an angle of vision rather than an agenda for action" (Moran 110). Though the ultimate moral of *Sullivan's Travels* is to give people comedy and thus help them escape their troubles, the film has allowed us to

glimpse the particular problematic of Hollywood's attempt to serve as a mirror for reality by reflecting and recording this very effort. As in *A Star is Born*, the "glittering, tinsel, trivial, generous, cruel and ecstatic world that is Hollywood" is exposed as so well fabricated that it is capable of deceiving not only its consumers but also its producers ("A Star is Born" 1937). Both Sully and Vicki lose sight of the boundaries of Hollywood to the point that they become lost – figuratively, in Vicki's sense, and literally, in Sully's. The second act of *Sullivan's Travels* contains a series of narratives in which no matter how Sully tries he cannot seem to get away from Hollywood, metaphorically suggesting that such an escape, if possible, is always temporary and futile. The Aristotelian realism venerated by Bordwell is thus problematized: the possible production of *O Brother Where Art Thou* may be realist, but unless Sully can escape Hollywood, the reality it will project is an always-already fabricated narrative of what Hollywood believes reality to be.

In "The Culture Industry," Horkheimer and Adorno argue that for those acclimated to film, "life is made indistinguishable from the sound film"; in *Sullivan's Travels*, Sullivan experiences this to an exaggerated extent (Horkheimer and Adorno 99). Sullivan repeatedly displays "the familiar experience of the moviegoer, who perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left," except that his experience cycles through a series of "rigid invariants" of formulas for screwball adventures (Horkheimer and Adorno 99). *Sullivan's Travels* dramatizes the encroachment of Hollywood reality upon actual reality in these scenes, demonstrating the impossibility of escaping the fabrication of reality under the culture industry. In so

doing, it calls explicit attention to this phenomenon, depicting the potential for “those exposed to [film] to identify film directly with reality” as comically absurd – thus robbing it of its power in a Bergsonian sense (Horkheimer and Adorno 99).

Of particular interest about this trope is its relative anachronism in film history. This critique of the power of Hollywood to accurately display reality is commonly understood as beginning in postmodern film, as argued by Linda Hutcheon. Certainly, *Sullivan’s Travels* seems perfectly at home within the oeuvre of Joel and Ethan Coen, the filmmakers that actually succeeded in making *O Brother Where Art Thou* – as a comedy, in 2000. Like Sturges, the Coen Brothers’ films address serious topics with irreverent, dark humor: murder is discussed flippantly in *Fargo* (1996), government espionage is mocked in *Burn After Reading* (2008), and *O Brother Where Art Thou* (2000) offers a comedic look at the Great Depression.

In each of these films, we can find the same tension between the status of film as entertainment and film as socially or morally instructive that we see in *Sullivan’s Travels*. Importantly, they also share the addition of an overt placement of a moral at the conclusion of each film, one that often starkly contrasts with the atmosphere of the rest of the film. *Fargo* is a dark crime thriller featuring a plucky pregnant sheriff (Frances McDormand) attempting to solve the murder of a highway patrolman and locate a kidnapped housewife – whose kidnapping, it turns out, was orchestrated by mild-mannered husband Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) as a scheme to make money. Once the crime has been solved, Marge offers us a moral in the form of a cliché, “there’s more to life than a little money, ya know,” which is a strangely Pollyanna conclusion to

a violent and dark film.²⁰ In *Burn After Reading*, a film about government espionage, multiple accounts of murder, and blackmail, the concluding scene, a conversation between the two CIA Superiors, mocks the entire idea of a moral:

CIA Superior: “What did we learn, Palmer?”

CIA Officer: “I don’t know, sir.”

CIA Superior: “I don’t fuckin’ know either. I guess we learned not to do it again.”

CIA Officer: “Yes, sir.”

CIA Superior: “I’m fucked if I know what we did.”

CIA Officer: “Yes, sir, it’s, uh, very difficult to say.”²¹

By remaining within the formula for a happy ending, the film offers a moral while simultaneously calling into question the validity and the artistic appropriateness of offering a moral in a film at all. Less subtly, the mockery of a happy ending to *A Star is Born* finds the newly widowed Vicki attempting to make a bold declaration of her independence from studio manipulation by rejecting her stage name in favor of announcing herself as “Mrs. Norman Maine.”²² This would have been a touching tribute to her late husband had she used his given name, Hinkle, but in using his stage name in place of her own, this happy ending reveals itself to be an easily missed depiction of her continued naiveté about the studio system. Even though she is the one who “[drew] the winning lot,” she finds herself trapped in a false identity, joining her fans as they “rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself” – especially as Esther Blodgett is completely lost to her (Horkheimer and Adorno 116). In

this one statement, Vicki neé Esther presents herself as remaining as much in the shadows about her own position in the studio system as she has been stylistically throughout the early portions of the film (Figure 6) – she is not a liberated woman, free to make her own choices, but is trapped in a system she never fully understood. Importantly, those who wish to read the conclusions to *Burn After Reading*, *Fargo*, or *A Star is Born* passively may do so; but those who wish to look deeper will find harsh critiques of the desire for neat conclusions and easy morals.

Similarly, *Sullivan's Travels* offers a rather sentimental and pious moral: that “comedy is all that some people have” (Figure 7). This moral may work for an audience member seeking escapism, but it places them in an inferior position to the Hollywood executive graciously granting them reprieve from their miserable lives. This is found in the scene in the prison theater: at this point, Sully is one of the masses whose only hope is comedy, but the inevitable movement of the narrative removes him from the situation soon enough. His narrative loop is perhaps best described by Moran and Rogin as “self-reflexive entrapment,” given that his personal growth has been nothing more than acceptance of his task to make comedies for the people – the goal of the studio director and the producer the entire time (113).



Figure 6: *A Star is Born*. Dir. William A. Wellman. 1937. Kino, 2012. DVD.
Esther shown in shadow, demonstrative of her inability to understand her role in the Hollywood system.



Figure 7: *Sullivan's Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. 1941. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD.
Sully realizes that he wants to make comedy, to give the people what they want.

In this way, Sully's acceptance of his place in Hollywood is as deluded as Vicki's; his identity is just as preselected. Considered from this perspective, *Sullivan's Travels* has the same weight of a moral as *Burn After Reading*: whatever you are doing, make sure that it lacks any loose ends that might distract the general public from Bordwell's "American values" working their influence (Figure 8). This is a critique on not only the ability for Hollywood to present an accurate representation of reality, but more importantly, its desire to do so. Art for art's sake, from which Sully flees, and towards which he ultimately arrives, is presented in this film not as the "mindless artistry, which represents what is human against the social mechanism," but as the ultimate balm for those crushed within the social mechanism (Horkheimer and Adorno 114). While an early review faults the film because "Sullivan should have been more affected by his experience than he seems to be," this failure to fully appreciate his own position actually heightens the critique of the medium within the film (Crowther). Sully is so shocked by the glimpse behind the wizard's curtain that he must cling to the apparatus that protects him from a full understanding of the world. In Sully's own forced contentment at the conclusion of the film, we can glimpse our own desperate need for safety and security reflected back to us.



Figure 8: *Burn After Reading*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 2008. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD. Don't do it again, even if we don't know what "it" is.



Figure 9: *Sullivan's Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. 1941. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD. Sully laughs, despite himself.

In this way we can see both the contentment of Sully and the laughter of the prisoners (Figure 9) in the way that Horkheimer and Adorno see it, as “a parody of humanity [whose] harmony is a caricature of solidarity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 112). It is “wrong laughter” which “copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it,” just as Sullivan defects to his place amongst those agents at the conclusion of the film (Horkheimer and Adorno 112). Whereas Capra devoted his life to making films that would expose and thus ameliorate social ills, Sturges allows this film to consider the alternative, creating comedy not because “that’s all some people have,” but because it is all some people *want*. What Sully gains in his travels is the security in knowing that the “even more disturbing loss, the deprivation of Hollywood itself” is assuredly not going to happen as long as the audience, like the prisoners, keep filing into the theater (Moran 112). Sully spent most of the film trying to escape Hollywood, and when he finally needed to go back to it, it was always there, ready to welcome him into the warm embrace of an anonymous audience, joined together in the appearance of brotherhood and solidarity (Figure 10).

We must consider what kind of message this film offers readers, if at least on an unconscious level. If the film cannot hold up a mirror to the reality of Depression era America, for fear that the image may be too real, it can offer another glimpse into the mirror: our own faces, desperately seeking a distraction.



Figure 10: *Sullivan's Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. 1941. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD.
Sully becomes one of the crowd, safe in his blank laughter.



Figure 11: *Fargo*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 1996. Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2005. DVD.
An image behind a screen within an image frustrates this moral.



Figure 12: *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 2000. Touchstone Home Video, 2001. DVD. The audience, like the girls, is strung along by the narrative.

This tactic is strongly contrary to the classical style, which seeks at every turn to cover over the activity of fabrication and illusion. Further, what is reflected is as bleak a visage as the dénouement of *Fargo*: Graer Grimsrud reflected in the rearview mirror, separated from us by the screen of the cop car, on display as one who mistook reality for a farce (Figure 11). It is echoed in the final shot of *O Brother Where Art Thou*, where Everett's many daughters are dragged behind their parents on a string, jerked forward in the next misadventure of the family (Figure 12). The children, like the audience, must continue forward in the narrative, forbidden to stop and glance at the operation of the medium at work, metaphorically represented here as the sole push cart operator, a *deus ex machina* on rails (Figure 13). All of these echo the famous scene which began this trope, the ending scene of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) in which a theater of mindlessly laughing patrons enlarges almost to an impossible extent (Figure 14), lost in the mass of their own "medicinal" amusement (Horkheimer and Adorno 112).

As Lawrence Levine argues, while *Sullivan's Travels* offers a trite conclusion to an infinitely complex issue, "no final ending, no ultimate apologia could automatically erase the images of misery, despair, and hopelessness the film made available to the audience" (Levine 1391). A convenient happy ending cannot erase the images of the vignette in which Sullivan and The Girl wander through the hopeless victims of the Great Depression; the film thus has two possibilities for the viewer: "comedy is all some people have," and this is what the Great Depression looks like.



Figure 13: *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 2000. Touchstone Home Video, 2001. DVD. If one of the audience stops to consider the apparatus of the film, she is jerked back into line by the invisible narrative thread.



Figure 14: *The Crowd*. Dir. King Vidor. 1928. MGM/UA Home Video, 1989. Videocassette. The audience reflected back to itself.

In the same way, the Pollyanna conclusion to *Fargo* cannot erase the horrific images of Graer Grimsrud running his associate through a woodcutter. The film asserts these images as forcefully as it covers them over with narrative conventions and glib dialogue.

What is at work in *Sullivan's Travels* is a conscious challenging of the idea of film as possessing one reading, and thus, one goal: either education, or entertainment, or art, or commercialism. Sturges manages to accomplish this critique without deviating from the formally classical mode of cinema, and thus offers a critique disguised as comedy: comfortable, familiar, sellable, and effective. Reading the film in this way, as an “open text” opposed to the classical trope of screwball comedy, allows us to consider the way in which the “subversive moments” of classical cinema need not deviate from conventions in order to challenge them (Bordwell 81).²³

IV.2. *Citizen Kane* and the Fabrication of Filmic Truth

The above analysis of *Sullivan's Travels* seeks to consider the ways in which critique can be offered within a conventional narrative, characterization, and plot structure. In this section, I will consider the way in which *Citizen Kane* challenges the status of narrative authority within a film by deploying technical, structural, and cinematographic strategies that present a coherent and fluid narrative while calling attention to the fabrication of filmic truth.

The overt problem in *Citizen Kane*, the identity of Charles Foster Kane, is trite enough to be found in any film textbook, and easily enough summarized: “Kane’s

identity is complex... he is an enigma to the end, merely the retrieved and filtered memories of those who knew him or thought they knew him” (Simmons 138). The classical reading of *Citizen Kane* is as a film questioning the status of identity, of depicting the struggle to remember a man through the impact he left on the world as well as the people in it. The deep-focus cinematography of the film allows this important question to appear to the audience almost unencumbered. No mediation of a dialogue in the form of a shot-reverse-shot frustrates the viewer’s access to the minutest facial cue, and plot progression can take place in a “depth of focus [that] brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality” (Bazin 35). For Bazin, this filmic structure belies a greater sense of truth at work in the film; just as Mr. Thompson explores every available avenue to determine the meaning of Kane’s last words, *Citizen Kane* “is not trying to deceive us,” but “condensing time” so that we might explore the truth of the scene ourselves (Bazin 36). The film does not simply tell us about Kane’s character or legacy, but encourages us to explore the matter at our leisure.

From the moment that Kane’s snow globe shatters on the floor beside his deathbed, the film invites us to share in the recreation of the components of his life, to make it as whole and transparent as the beloved trinket. At least six narrative frames contrive to reproduce Kane’s life: a newsreel obituary that gives an allegedly objective viewpoint of Kane’s life; the journey of Mr. Thompson in his pursuit of the truth behind Rosebud and thus Kane; the several smaller narrative frames in the form of recollections and flashbacks initiated by other characters. There are also two sequences which place

the viewer in a “privileged, omniscient” position that are enframed by only the film itself: the opening scene of Xanadu, leading into Kane’s death, and the closing scene featuring the destruction of Rosebud and our departure from Xanadu (Fabe 81). As has been argued by numerous scholars, each of these frames suggests the inadequacy of authorship in its own way, and thus the film relies upon the viewer’s ability to construct meaning out of a haphazard collection of parts. By way of assistance, the six narrators provide increasingly relevant information until the conclusion of the film “reveals the final missing piece” and solves the riddle of Kane’s life (Fabe 83). Though this narrative device is noted as being “unusual and original to films,” and does not rest comfortably within the narrative structure described by Bordwell, it retains familiarity as it is “a narrative technique not infrequently employed by novelists” (“Citizen Kane” 2 May 1941). As a result, the narrative structure is novel, but not so disarming that it shirks convention; it is able to excite its viewers without hardening them against it.

Beyond this, the film criticizes the validity of authority and truth not just in *Citizen Kane*, but in any filmic text. This also classic reading seeks to consider the way in which the juxtaposition of the frames of the film is organized to place their validity in conflict with each other. For instance, the absence of sentiment in the newsreel, or the clouding of anger, guilt, narcissism, and idolization from each of the personal narratives is made more apparent by the need to continually move to the next narrative for more information. It is not solely the individual narrative’s inability to explain Kane’s last word that comes to the forefront in this movement, but also the personal bias clouding the trustworthiness of the narrative. The incompleteness of each narrative taken together

at once forces the viewer to make, not receive, a judgment about Kane, and works to problematize any conclusion that can be surmised. Not only is there no final truth presented in the film, but each piece of the puzzle is shown to be warped; this film not only refuses to provide satisfactory explanations, but it challenges the very conditions of the possibility of those explanations.

The use of flashbacks to unfold the narrative is not “a long outdated arty custom,” but rather the entire driving force of *Citizen Kane* as well as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Minnelli 1952). Adorno critiques the overuse of flashbacks, claiming that “these techniques are not grounded in the necessities of the individual works but in mere convention; they inform the viewer as to what is being signified or what needs to be added in order to comprehend whatever escapes basic cinematic realism” (Adorno 204). However, divagations in these two films are not misleading, divergent from the story, or tactless conventions employed to cover over the anticipated ignorance of the audience. Rather, they form the basis of both plots: it is through flashbacks and interventions in what would otherwise be two weak main plots that the main goal of each film is realized. Flashbacks and superimpositions are the means through which each film is actualized. Without them, *Citizen Kane* is a film about a reporter failing to make an adequate obituary, and *The Bad and the Beautiful* is a film about three individuals agreeing to sign another production contract – both immensely shallow storylines lacking any of the critical acclaim the two films have received. The use of flashbacks is not as dramatic fluff, but as a tactical and critical use to demonstrate the manipulation of filmic identity

in film itself. The story unfolds as the film determines it to unfold – and not according to any predetermined convention, as in a mystery or drama.

Further, the structure, sequencing, and shot construction of *Citizen Kane* all challenge the validity within film as a medium. Let us consider the first narrator at work, the newsreel, which does not announce the death of Charles Foster Kane until several minutes into the sequences – it first announces the death of “Xanadu’s Landlord” (Figure 15). While it is true, as one of the reporters notes, that “70 years of a man’s life – that’s a lot to try to get into a newsreel,” it might be supposed that five minutes into the newsreel is suspiciously long to omit any full photo of the deceased (Figure 16).

While these omissions immediately call into question the identity of Kane, they further call into question the authorial authority to *speak about* whatever identity Kane might possess as a character on screen. The newsreel created to commemorate Kane gives us a heavily stylized, seemingly objective, and well-documented perspective of his life. Polished as it is, we might be tempted to adopt it as truth if we were not immediately told to reject it by the lead reporter. This propels some viewers forward in the narrative, searching for the “something juicier” mentioned by the reporters, but it also permits some viewers to pause and consider the way in which any two-dimensional representation of an individual, regardless of how deeply or realistically it is shot, will fail to appear in its full truth.²⁴



Figure 15: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.
Obituary notice which omits the name Charles Foster Kane completely.



Figure 16: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.
The first mention of the title character, without an embodied image.



Figure 17: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.
The opening of the newsreel, presented as part of the film itself.



Figure 18: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.
Side shot of conclusion of newsreel, the traces of the apparatus highlighted by cigarette smoke.

The formal fabrication of this frame is overt and repeatedly signified. The sequence features visual bookends – the title of the newsreel (Figure 17) and the side shot of the end of the newsreel, from the perspective of the viewing room (Figure 18) – that jar the viewer into the realization that this section of the film stands apart from the larger narrative. Like *Sullivan's Travels*, the inclusion of a film-within-a-film immediately draws attention to the operation of the medium itself instead of allowing the viewer to simply sink into a story.

Further, it draws our attention to the ability of a medium to present truth to the viewer. This important scene in the living room was carefully constructed by Gregg Toland to metaphorically represent the possession or absence of truth. As noted by Phillip Cowan, “Toland explores many techniques which symbolized or represented the narrative in some way”; for instance, “some of his characters move from shadow into the light when they reveal the truth about themselves” (Cowan 88). In the viewing room, Thompson remains in the dark, silhouetted against the stark light of the truth of the rejected newsreel (Figure 19). Continuing this trope, Thompson performs his research with his back to the camera, obscuring his importance as anything other than another camera through which we can observe the stories available to us from Thatcher (George Coulouis), Bernstein (Everett Sloane), Leland (Joseph Cotton), Susan (Dorothy Comingore), and Raymond (Paul Stewart). In each search for truth, Thompson fades away (Figure 20) and allows individual perspectives to offer a narratively cohesive, but deceptively incomplete, recreation of Kane's life. It is not Thompson's truth we wish to come to light, but Kane's – and this movement never happens within this larger frame.

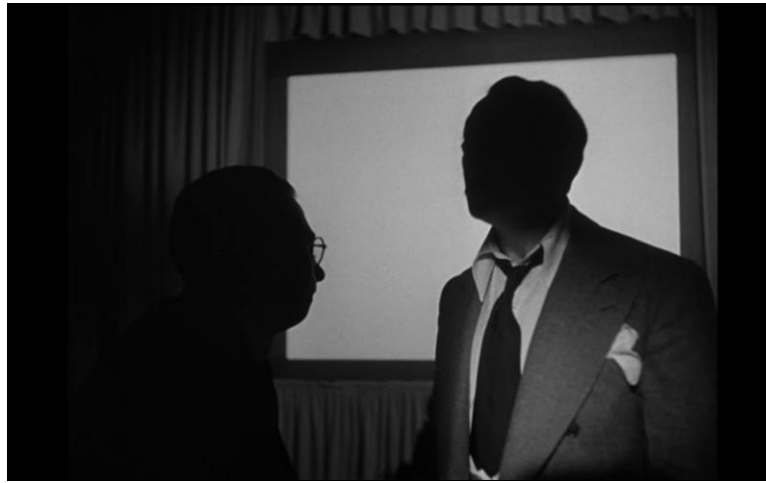


Figure 19: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD. Thompson in dark relief, suggestive of his inability to step into the truth of Kane.



Figure 20: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD. Susan's recollection of Kane, notable due to Thompson's presence in heavy darkness.

Kane's life is never presented to the viewer-in-and-of-itself, in any objective sense. It is always mediated by the "inescapable subjectivity" of one of the narrative frames, and thus, according to Bazin, is able to be called into question in the same way that the newsreel is immediately rejected as inadequate or incomplete (Bazin 12).

At the same time, the film does not overtly call these individual narratives into question. As their interjection into the overall narrative takes the form of flashbacks, and not overtly fabricated narratives like the newsreel, the audience is invited to explore these perspectives on Kane's life and take them at face value. Though fragmented from each other, they fit nicely into a series of narrative flashbacks, comfortably moving together towards a singular goal. The same structure is at work in *The Bad and the Beautiful*, which features a series of vignettes explaining the complicated history of an industry savant seeking redemption after a fall from grace. As in *Kane*, the identity of Jonathan Shields is not revealed until the first flashback of the film: before that, he is only identified as an infamous character by the fact that three characters refuse to take his phone calls or work with him again. The flashback sequences in *The Bad and the Beautiful* are similarly bookended by references to the operation of the medium, this time by a slow transition from a close up on an Oscar statue (Figure 21). Unlike *Kane*, Shields never appears in real-time in the film; he only ever appears in flashbacks, thus deepening the question of his identity, as well as the ability to speak, filmically, about his identity.



Figure 21: *The Bad and the Beautiful*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. 1952. Warner Brothers, 2002. DVD. Jonathan Shields introduced via a superimposition of his figure and an Oscar statue, thus placing him in direct relationship with the industry.



Figure 22: *The Bad and the Beautiful*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. 1952. Warner Brothers, 2002. DVD. Jonathan Shields demonstrating control over the picture by limiting the spectator's range of visibility.

One scene in particular makes a clear reference to Toland's motif of the light of truth: in a darkened viewing room, Jonathan Shields places only his hand under the light of the projector, indicating the power the camera has not only to present truth, but to obscure it (Figure 22). The camera does show us a variety of Kanes and Shields, each tinted by the memory of the narrator guiding the flashback, but it also obscures the Cat Man in order to hide the poor costuming and low budget. In both cases, the audience experiences the desired effect without seeing anything real: in *The Bad and the Beautiful* they fear the imagined, but not seen Cat Man, and in *Citizen Kane* they understand the fabricated, but not shown, Kane.

Deepening this larger structural and formal critique in *Citizen Kane* are a series of visual and vocal cues within individual narratives suggesting Kane's fragmented character. Thatcher's narrative recalls a conversation in which Kane declares, "trouble is you don't realize that you're talking to two people" (Figure 23). This trope of multiplicity is repeated again in Raymond's narrative, in which we are permitted to witness Kane walking past first one mirror, then between two gigantic mirrors, echoing his forlorn image endlessly, suggesting that while there might have been just two Kane's for Thatcher, there are an infinite number, all reflected through different mirrors or narratives (Figure 24). These tactics certainly displays Welles' "smugness about his cleverness," and are overt enough that the viewer cannot help but notice the "inventiveness, artifice, and playfulness" of the film's meaning (Simmons 142).



Figure 23: *Citizen Kane*. Kane explains to Thatcher that he is “talking to two people,” vocally initiating the trope of multiplicity within the narrative.



Figure 24: *Citizen Kane*. The trope of multiplicity is expanded with each new narrative.

This is one place in the film where the audience need not work to extract meaning from a sequence; these visual cues stylistically and bluntly indicate that whatever narrative has been presented is only one of many: there is no single understanding of Kane. Further, while these tactics are commonplace in contemporary cinema, they were yet another inventive and original critique of the validity of filmic narrative.

Finally, the contrived conclusion of *Citizen Kane* remains its largest critique of conventional cinema. Given that neither any single narrative nor any combination of narratives can provide a satisfactory explanation of Kane, the MacGuffin propelling the plot forward, the identity of Rosebud, is the audience's last resort. Importantly, this answer is given beyond any inner-narrative frame, though the "privileged, omniscient" perspective of the concluding shot (Fabe 83). The answer to the question of identity of Rosebud is given to us as Bazin's *objectif*, outside the frame of any subjective narrative, directly from Welles himself. This final shot is presented as the only agent capable of selecting from out of the chaotic remnants of Kane's life (Figure 25) the single object which can explain his deepest desires and wishes: a sled from childhood. It is with unrivaled authority that the camera, and the camera alone, is able to show us what the driving force behind Kane's obsession with power and money has been all along, represented in a single sled.



Figure 25: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD. An infinite array of possibilities for meaning, from which the camera identifies one.



Figure 26: *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD. The camera objectively presents us with truth, arbitrary though it may be.

This reading allows us to see the vision of cinema Bazin argues we wish it to have, that of “a recreation of the artist or the irreversibility of time” (Bazin 21). In this case, Welles has managed to allow the camera to recreate Kane in his own image, unburdened by the freedom of narrative interpretation or the alteration of memory. We can thus read the final shot as being the only true or objective shot in the entire film, the continuation of the project of Kane’s life with the greatest faith to the original project, and thus the greatest authority. Though the sled itself, like Kane, is lost to us behind the forbidding gates of Xanadu, the ever-penetrating lens of the camera that records the world around us without intent or alteration preserves the image of it (Figure 26).

For the passive viewer, the film has concluded and the answer is secured. The viewer can leave satisfied with the knowledge that Rosebud is a sled, possessed now with “a sense of closure for a narrative generated upon epistemological concepts of incompleteness” (Carlson 919). For the viewer wishing to engage more deeply, this final shot, above declared the height of realism, is itself trapped within the subjective, tainted by the “interpretation of the artist” – Welles himself (Bazin 21). The decision to identify the sled as Rosebud is, at base, “little more than a vague, sentimental light upon [Kane’s] character,” nothing more (“Citizen Kane” *Times*). As such, the film leaves viewers with the opportunity to question the truth within film itself, and leave feeling unsatisfied – either desirous of a tidier or approved analysis, or an ability to forget the realization that all narratives, not just this one, are fabricated. The deepest questions posed by *Citizen Kane* are not about identity, narrative structure, or innovation in cinematography; the

film is a serious and concerted evaluation of whether film can be truthful, or whether it is always, per *A Star is Born*, “for amusement only” (Figure 27).

In this way, *Citizen Kane*’s critique would find a welcome home amongst the postmodern films devoted to this same question. Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation* (2002) offers a similarly arbitrary conclusion, albeit with much more flippancy. In his attempt to transform Susan Orlean’s book *The Orchid Thief* (1998) into a successful screenplay, Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) becomes so overwhelmed with the task of making truth entertaining that the end of the film devolves into a story involving car chases, forbidden love, and drug trafficking. The film deviates so strongly from the original real world book that it cannot be read as anything other than a questioning of the ability of film to portray truth on screen. Certainly, this is the reading offered by Vartan Messier when he argues that *Adaptation* “is a film constructed as a series of fragmentary scenes that interweaves the arch-narrative of Kaufman’s struggle with repeated visualizations of his various screenplay attempts, self-reflexive snapshots revealing his own insecurities as a writer and an individual, and meta-commentaries on the writing process” (Messier 66). Though Messier’s argument makes important connections between the interaction of author and text, *Adaptation* in the context of this project serves to lay bare the entire device of crafting a project for the screen – including the sensational results when an effort at serious translation from book to screen is abandoned.²⁵ *Adaptation*, like *Citizen Kane*, shows the audience the cutting room floor, the trickery behind the scenes, and film’s ability to mislead the unwary viewer into realms of, respectively, fantasy and falsity.



Figure 27: *A Star is Born*. Dir. William A. Wellman. 1937. Kino, 2012. DVD.
Norman Maine's epigraph, but also a question under consideration by the film industry as a whole.

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) continues this line of meta-questioning. As the audience watches Cobb's totem spin in the concluding scene – a device designed to allow him to differentiate between dreams and reality – the question of whether Cobb is awake or dreaming, and thus, whether the film ends with truth or a lie, becomes a painfully sustained moment that is never resolved.²⁶ The film simply ends, without offering any answer to the micro question of Cobb's success, or the meta-question of film's ability to express truth or differentiate between reality and fabrication. Like each of the films considered in this chapter, *Inception* remains an open text, a film that offers a multitude of perspectives for the viewer. Some interpretations offer easy answers, yet the more important interpretation continues to ask whether and to what extent film can express truth, meaning, or reality.

It is my contention that the very act of raising this question elevates each of the films here beyond the level of entertainment, of amusement only, into the level of art – an art that challenges its own conventions, as well as its role as a critical, political, and sociological medium. In this way, these films both offer us an opportunity to enter into the space for *engagement* and respond to the *écriture* offered by the film. Though they may not be the esoteric art house films Adorno imagined in “Transparencies,” they certainly rise to the level of art by offering the willing audience an opportunity to critically engage with questions imperative to the continued development and perfection of the medium.

NOTES

¹⁸ To fully review the notable exceptions included in this chapter, see James Shokoff, “A Kockenlocker by Any Other Word: The Democratic Comedy of Preston Sturges,” Lawrence Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audience,” and Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin, ““What’s the Matter with Capra?”: *Sullivan’s Travels* and the Popular Front.”

¹⁹ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Sullivan’s Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. 1941. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD

²⁰ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Fargo*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 1996. Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2005. DVD

²¹ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Burn After Reading*. Dir. The Coen Brothers. 2008. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

²² All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *A Star is Born*. Dir. William A. Wellman, 1937. Kino, 2012. DVD

²³ Lawrence Levine is referencing Umberto Eco’s idea of an “open text,” one that invites viewers to interpret the text according to their own experience, understanding, and need.

²⁴ All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1941. Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.

²⁵ For a superb reading of the question of authorship in *Adaptation*, see Vartan Messier’s “Desire and the ‘Deconstructionist’: *Adaptation* As Writerly Praxis.”

²⁶ For a full discussion of the ambiguous ending of *Inception*, see Mark Fisher, “The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The theoretical considerations, pedagogical demands, and filmic demonstrations in this thesis all serve to address an often considered but still incomplete discussion in the study of theory of literature and cinema: the treatment of literature and cinema as serious, important, and capable of not simply being entertaining, but enlightening for those who interact with it. From the perspective of the academic world as a whole, this problem has been addressed and resolved numerous times – we might best mark these resolutions by the establishment of subdisciplines within the overall canopy of literature studies. Poetry struggled out from under the thumb of Plato and now flourishes in literature departments. The struggle for the acceptance of the novel, as discussed in Chapter II, is so distant to today's students that they must be taught about a time before it was considered standard college curriculum. Film, too, has flourished as a discipline and continues to receive the ample attention of scholars entirely devoted to its study.

True, each of these aforementioned arts enjoys a thriving discussion on the boundary between high art and popular culture. As Lawrence Levine notes, “scholars are members of a society in which popular culture is – and has been for some time – regularly distrusted and denigrated” (Levine 1371). Despite this initial distrust, over time The Line becomes myriad lines, each delineating areas of scholarship opened to accommodate the latest innovation from popular culture. This is, of course, a very complex debate involving economic disparity, cultural hegemony, and technologies of

power – a debate that remains to be solved by the scholars residing in those particular trenches.

What is at stake here is the fact that our perception of film as a medium becomes strongly colored by the generic, stylistic, and formal classifications placed upon it by scholars. Films classified as classical, realist, serious, or screwball become branded as *only* films of those categories. Their classification calcifies around them, sometimes preventing any other reading from penetrating the scholarly considerations surrounding it. Often, the new reading becomes an additional classification for the film: *Sullivan's Travels* becomes screwball *and* a critique of the Populist Front. Rarely, though, do film scholars take a moment to step back and consider the way in which film as a medium has been consistently challenging the categories placed on it by scholars, audiences, and often even itself. As this thesis has argued, one of the most important scholarly classifications that has been overlooked is that film, whatever type, is *critical* – critical about itself, the industry that produces it, and the audience that consumes it.

Vonnegut, in one of his more pessimistic moments, grants us a diagnosis of the uselessness of art, if it is not considered from the proper angle:

[Artists] use frauds in order to make human being seem more wonderful than they really are. Dancers show us human beings who move much more gracefully than human beings really move. Films and books and plays show us people talking much more entertainingly than people really talk, make paltry human enterprises seem important. Singers and musicians show us human beings making sounds far more lovely than human beings really make. Architects give

us temples in which something marvelous is obviously going on. Actually, practically nothing is going on inside. (Vonnegut, 164-165)

I agree with Vonnegut that films “make paltry human enterprises seem important.” As works of art, that is their purpose: to find what is essential in the mundane and elevate it for consideration. If we accept this elevation as an invitation, then the wonder, grace, entertainment, love, and marvel of life become “what is going on inside” in an existential sense. Vonnegut here is not wallowing in pessimism; he is inviting us to view art as a way for these “human beings,” everyday people, to connect to their culture, their ideas, their problems, and their dreams. It is only when art becomes something to be relegated to the scrutiny of scholars, something to be seen but not touched, watched but not lived, that it leaves us feeling empty.

This thesis approaches the problem from a theoretical, pedagogical, and formal perspective. It argues that films can and do invite viewers to engage intellectually, socially, politically, and philosophically. It demonstrates through careful readings of numerous films that the filmic apparatus is uniquely capable of drawing attention to its own operations, limitations, and capabilities. Most importantly, it argues that in the contemporary world, the act of viewing a film constitutes a rare opportunity to engage in an act of existential reflection: a moment to consider serious social, political, ethical, and intellectual issues without drowning under their weight. Given the concerns regarding anti-intellectualism and the declining interest in film studies discussed in this work, this final claim demands that further and deeper attention be paid to the existential

possibilities of film. The reinvigoration of interest in viewing films as critical, socially conscious, and philosophically powerful is not simply a suggestion – it is a mandate.

As this thesis has argued, film has reached out to viewers consistently and unpretentiously from the classical period to the postmodern period. In the interests of the academic world, this thesis employs films that have received a fair amount of attention from scholars. In the interests of reaching the largest audience, these films are also popular and successful. Existential philosophers and critical theorists are employed because they are interested first and foremost in the experience of the common person, the shared existence of the masses, the “human being” to which Vonnegut refers. These philosophical considerations form the theoretical groundwork for viewing film as uniquely suited to reaching these individuals in a time when the culture industry as a whole wishes to simply placate them.

While this thesis offers a unique and important contribution to the considerations literary and film scholars have offered before, as with most theoretical works, it raises as many questions as it resolves. Given the importance and relevance of the topic under consideration, these questions serve as a point of departure for additional research into the nature, reception, and scholarly status of film as a medium.

One of these questions concerns the ontological nature of the filmic image. In Chapter II, this thesis offers a consideration of three theoretical perspectives of the filmic image – realist, romantic, and idealist – and the inadequacies in filmic analysis resulting from use of these perspectives. Exploring other – often hidden – perceptions of the filmic image would expose the theoretical underpinnings of the various approaches to

cinema and allow scholars to open up more productive lines of discourse. For example, in Chapter III, it is demonstrated that Postman is working from an inadequate understanding of the filmic image: he incorrectly assumes it to be only capable of expressing particularities in a fragmented and dissociative manner. Resituating his argument around a conception of the image as capable of presenting abstract concepts in a complete and approachable manner allows us to consider his argument in an entirely different, and far more productive, light. Many other such misconceptions are lurking in film scholarship, and the field would benefit from critical and sustained consideration into resituating these arguments towards more productive readings.

Another important question concerns the existential component of the project. The Benjaminian analysis in this thesis restricts itself to the dialectic posed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction” largely as a result of the size and scope of the project. Expanding the research into *The Arcades Project*, *Illuminations*, and further study of Miriam Hansen’s efforts to expand Walter Benjamin’s thought would enable a deeper and stronger theoretical base for the main claims of the work completed here. Further, fruitful discussions might be gained by connecting Benjamin’s discussion of the aura to Martin Heidegger’s considerations of the nature of the work of art. Given that Heidegger was able to more fully address the problem of technologically reproduced works of art in his lifetime, his considerations about technology can help augment and anchor Benjamin’s own, often conflicted, considerations about film. Additionally, these explorations would be strengthened by further consideration of the necessary counterpart to film: the viewer. There is ample

scholarly work that explores the relationship between the film and the viewer, especially in relation to the author/reader distinction raised by both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Resituating these structuralist and post-structuralist considerations in relation to the existential framework laid out in this work will enable scholars to establish a relationship that empowers both the film and the viewer as agents working both in and against an overarching economic and cultural framework.

Finally, further discussions of film from the perspective I have laid out in this thesis are necessary. It is crucial to continue identifying and discussing films that demonstrate self-conscious awareness of their own operation within the filmic medium, especially when it comes to raising and discussing matters of social, intellectual, and philosophical importance. While this thesis restricts itself to two primary films, *Sullivan's Travels* and *Citizen Kane*, scholars ought to continue to explore films from the classical, postmodern and contemporary periods that exhibit elements of complicitous critique. As scholarly literature grows on the topic of films self-aware of their own capability to continually challenge and expand film as a medium, the claim that film is first and foremost critical will become increasingly evident to scholars and viewers alike.

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