IRRITATINGLY INCOMPLETE:

THE ONTOLOGICALLY RECONSIDERED FILMIC IMAGE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to provide a novel understanding of the ontological structure of the filmic image. To do this, it first evaluates three ontological perspectives of the artistic image: the Platonic transcendental ideal, the Heideggerian historical and contextual provenance, and the challenge Walter Benjamin makes against these two grand traditions of aesthetics in his considerations of film. Ultimately, I argue that the filmic image does not promote or participate in any transcendental ideal, nor does it remain tired to the historical or cultural ground of its creation. With and beyond Benjamin, I argue that the radically untethered nature of the filmic image requires us to turn away from traditional notions of aesthetics that claim that an artistic image is an imitation of an idea, that is, a secondary result of a previously conceived idea, historical situation, or socioeconomic situation. Instead, I argue that the filmic image is a second with only an accidental first – by this, I mean that it is a work that need not adhere to the prior condition(s) that contributed to its creation, whether we describe that in terms of the transcendental ideals of Plato, the historical provenance of Martin Heidegger, or the material conditions of late industrial capitalism as described by Walter Benjamin. As such, the filmic image requires our deep aesthetic, social, and political consideration of it in order to ascribe for it meaning not just once, but in as many different ways as we authentically can.

I thus offer what I term an authentic existential comportment towards the filmic image. This approach, I argue, is successful because it (a) includes both past and future interpretations of the filmic image not as potential impediments to a fuller interpretation, but as necessary components of it and (b) recognizes that the task of interpretation when facing an aesthetic artifact such as the filmic image is never complete, and will always require further interpretation, further valuation, and further consideration. I then illustrate this approach by performing analyses of three films: F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (1924), Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have always offered their unwavering support: my parents, Chip and Jane Leckey, my brother Kevin Leckey, and my loyal companion, Arthur. It is also dedicated to my friends and colleagues who continue to astound me with their patience, encouragement, and willingness to provide me with coffee.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Situating the Problematic

How are we to understand the experience of film? What distinguishing characteristics does the filmic image have that distance it from other types of art such as theater, painting, photography, sculpture, and architecture? Does film even qualify as an art, and if so, can it be considered high art, or only low art? Many important answers to such questions are offered in current debates in both philosophy of film and film theory.

These answers come to us from a variety of schools of thought and theoretical approaches. For instance, realist approaches such as that perpetuated by André Bazin argue that film offers us an opportunity to perfectly hold a mirror to reality, objectively preserving the world without succumbing to the imperfect subjectivity of the artist. For the realists, film offers an alternative to the ultimate defeat of the degradation of time. Events, individuals, scenes, and accomplishments can be recorded in perpetuity, free from damage from the elements (as in architecture or mosaics), fading (as in painting), or alteration (as in literature). For realists such as Bazin, film is thus also the most democratic medium: it can capture the mimetic essence of its subject in order to make it available to anyone, anywhere. Realists are idealists in their belief in the mimetic nature of the image; for realists, the filmic image is the first image capable of capturing the world *as it is*, a perfect translation of the object onto the screen, unmarred by any deficiency in the skill of the painter or the vocabulary of the poet. As Bazin argues, in film the "inescapable subjectivity" of the artist fades away,[1] leaving nothing but the *objectif*.

Another array of answers come out of considerations of the question of authorship in relation to film. In literature, it is entirely possible for a single individual to author a work if she conceived, wrote, and edited it on her own. In film, even if a director wrote the screenplay, controlled cinematography, and edited the final version of the film – as we will see in Chapter 5 with Stanley Kubrick – hundreds of other individuals aided in the production of the film itself, including actors, set designers, costumers, actors, technicians, location scouts, assistants, advertisers, and promoters. To address these matters, Paisley Livingston argues in favor of the convention of attributing authorship to the director of the film. First, this establishes a "socio-cultural context or the proper target of critique and response,"[2] and second, because he defines an author as an individual who "exercises decisive control over the creative process and takes credit for the work."[3] Against this perspective, Berys Gaut argues that while the director often exercises decisive control in the way Livingston describes, any individual who contributes "a significant artistic difference to the work" to share authorship,[4] opening authorship to actors, cinematographers, and even composers. Still others such as Pauline

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[1] André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1,* tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

[2] Katherine Thompson-Jones, *Aesthetics and Film*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 45.

[3] Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophic Study*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2005), 88.

[4] Berys Gaut, "Film Authorship and Collaboration," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Kael argue that it is not possible for film to have an author at all given the complexity of collaboration required to produce a film.[5]

Other answers still come from out of the semiotic perspective, which is championed by theorists such as Christian Metz. This approach argues that film is a language, replete with a unique grammar and syntax; as Metz elucidates, "going from one image to two images is to go from image to language."[6] As such, Metz and others argue that it is entirely possible to analyze the meaning and message of a film by simply decoding the language. Any questions that can be asked of film as a work of art or as a medium can be found if one simply reads the film according to its unique language.

Film theorists and philosophers have also devoted much time and effort to answering questions related to the act of viewing of a film. For instance, Noël Carroll devised a system termed the 'Pluralistic Category Approach' through which film theorists devise different categories of film so that the viewer can then evaluate the quality of the film based on the criteria relating to that category.[7] Psychoanalytic theorists such as Metz employ the Lacanian notion of 'identification' to explain the phenomenon of a viewer feeling an emotional connection to a film character or situation.[8] The psychoanalytic perspective further permits theorists to identify archetypal motifs in film that can then be utilized to examine precisely why, psychologically, a viewer identifies with a film in the way that she does.[9]

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[5] See Pauline Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

[6] Christian Metz, "The Cinema: Language or Language System?," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, tr. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 67.

[7] See Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2008), especially Chapter 7.

[8] See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

Still other schools such as David Bordwell's classical perspective, feminist perspectives, and post-colonial readings of film exist and provide valuable answers to address many of the above questions relating to film. The perspective offered here does not seek to refute any of the existing approaches to film theory; in fact, it employs ideas from several of them in the evaluation of films in Chapter V. While these perspectives no doubt shed light on the phenomenon of film, it is my contention that they do not exhaust the meaning of our experience of film. Thus, I wish to expand considerations of the experience of film through a fresh start. The point of departure for this fresh start is a reconsideration of the ontological status of the filmic image.

In the first three chapters of this dissertation I begin by evaluating three ontological perspectives of the artistic image: the Platonic transcendental ideal, the Heideggerian historical and contextual provenance, and the challenge Walter Benjamin makes against these two grand traditions of aesthetics in his considerations of film. Ultimately, I argue that the filmic image does not promote or participate in any transcendental ideal, nor does it remain tied to the historical or cultural ground of its generation. The filmic image is in fact not authorized at all, and requires our free contribution of meaning in order to be interpreted. With and beyond Benjamin, I argue that the radically unthethered nature of the image requires us to turn away from traditional notions of aesthetics that claim that an artistic image is an imitation of an idea, that is, a secondary result of a previously conceived idea, historical situation, or socioeconomic situation. Instead, I argue that the filmic image is a second with only an accidental first – by this, I mean that it is a work that need not adhere to the prior condition(s) that contributed to its creation, whether we describe that in terms of the transcendental ideals of Plato, the historical provenance of Heidegger (or, for that matter, the German Romantics), or even in the material conditions of late industrial capitalism as described by the critical theorists. As such, the filmic image requires our deep aesthetic, social, and political consideration of it in order to find in it meaning not just once, but in as many different ways as way can.

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[9] See Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*.

While Benjamin swathes his consideration of the filmic image in a political valence, I take his considerations to also suggest that the experience of film has existential import. Through Simone de Beauvoir, the existential valence of this argument becomes clear: as existentially free individuals, we are required to take responsibility for our own existence; as members of an intersubjective community, the choices we make under that responsibility have far greater impact than our own personal judgments. Therefore, when engaging with the filmic image authentically, we must do so in a way that is true to our own historical, social, political, and aesthetic orientation, and, moreover, do so in such a way that opens up further possibilities for meaning and truth for those around us – not closes them off. This final existential consideration of our relationship to the image thus reclaims much of the pedagogical, contextual, and political import championed by Plato, Heidegger, and Benjamin, but in a newly productive way. This approach, I argue, opposes the ontology of the image presented by

Plato and Heidegger, but nevertheless dovetails with many of the considerations that arise from their ontologies. For instance, it preserves Plato's challenge to philosophers to work in tandem with poets, by calling for more active engagement in filmic interpretation from philosophers. Further, it preserves Heidegger's existential challenge for us to comport ourselves towards the work of art in such a way that it can disclose itself to us in its originary nature, but this approach requires a different type of comportment than that described by Heidegger. Finally, it remains faithful to Benjamin's search for elements of film that serve to bring viewers to an awareness of their social and political situation, not blind them to it – but this approach widens the expanse of that awareness so that it might include any situation.

The Ontology of the Filmic Image

The first step of the above brief overview takes place in the following three chapters, each evaluating a prior ontological understanding of the image. In Chapter II I examine the Platonic perspective of the image through a close hermeneutic reading of *The Republic*. I argue that Plato's call for removal of the poets in the utopia of *The Republic* belies his concern for what I shall refer to as the unruliness of the semantic potential of images. As I argue, in his epistemological and pedagogical stances, Plato acknowledges a dilemma of the poetic image. On the one hand, the young can be prepared for the intellection of true ideas – above all, the idea of the Good – by their mimetic pedagogical encounters with artistic images from a very young age. On the other hand, the exposure of the young to images must be strictly regulated, controlled, and limited because there is no necessary or even special connection between truth and image. Images are epistemically three times removed from the light of Understanding and Truth, and thus, as in a children's game of 'telephone,' harbor the potential to distort the Truth to which they refer. At best, this distortion redirects the uneducated soul away from rationality grasping the truth it offers. At worst, unregulated and distorted images possess the power to corrupt the soul to the extent that it only seeks the satisfaction of the appetitive component of our soul, ignores the needs and drives of the rational, and derails movement towards full education. Plato's concern is that the distortion of unregulated poetic image causes imbalance, first, in the individual soul, and then, throughout the entire republic. This is crucial given Plato's argument that the cultivation of justice in the souls of the citizens is not possible without an institutional regime that controls the image by subordinating it to an idea.

Ultimately, I argue that Plato believes that regulation will come from philosophers themselves – those lovers of wisdom who are capable of discerning the locus of true ideas within the murky realm of imagery. Relying on the analysis provided by scholars such as John Sallis, I argue that the solution to the false dichotomy between philosophy and poetry is demonstrated through Socrates' interpretation and performance of narrative poetry in both the *Republic* and *Phaedo*. I argue that despite Plato's concerns over the impoverishment of images as a whole, the artistic image can be pedagogically valuable if it is handled with appropriate consideration: specifically, philosophical consideration. I find evidence for this claim in *The Republic* as well as in the *Phaedo* in the form of fables translated from poetic images so that they that speak to the rational part of the soul without the aid of rhetorical persuasion. I thus argue that the

Platonic solution to the quarrel between philosophy and poetry is crucial for our consideration of our experience of the image: the image can be trusted as long as it is guided by philosophy to enlighten, awaken, and guide the soul towards meaning and truth. While I will argue that the Platonic idea of the image as needing to be necessarily tied to a transcendental ideal for this approach to work is not appropriate in considerations of the experience of the filmic image, symbiosis between poetry (or images) and philosophy is an important analogue for the existential approach I propose in Chapter VI.

In Chapter III, I perform another close hermeneutic reading, this time of Martin Heidegger's essays "The Origin of the Work of Art," "The Question Concerning Technology," as well as concepts from *Being and Time*. In his writings on the work of art, Heidegger worries that an improper understanding of our relationship to our fundamental ontology – namely, through the perpetuation of an impoverished metaphysics – we have lost touch with the nature and purpose of art – namely, through the perpetuation of an impoverished aesthetics. Both misunderstandings rise from a Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object, one that blinds us to our originary connectedness to Being. For the work of art, this comes mainly in the form of discussions of 'resemblance' and 'representation' – metaphysical terminology – rather than 'disclosure' or 'letting be' – existential and phenomenological terminology. Ultimately, Heidegger argues that art acts as one of the ways in which Being discloses to us the true character of the world.

The discussion delineates the three methods by which art discloses truth to us: first, by exposing the thingliness of a thing and the worldliness created by the experience of such a thing. As an example, I examine the Leonard Coen song "Hallelujah" as a work of art that exposes the thingliness of the song – the tempo, the musical structure, and even the chords as they are played – in our phenomenological experience of the song. Second, art exposes truth by disclosing a world for a people. By this, Heidegger means that the work of art exposes the qualities, operations, and values of a culture to the in-dwelling citizens, who might otherwise fail to fully understand the way their world works. This happens in the positive and fecund strife between world and earth: an ongoing interplay between earth, understood as the sensuousness of all things, and world, the historically inherited horizon of meaningfulness that comprises this always already-given sensuousness that *matter* for a given people in a given culture. I explore this interplay between earth and world through Günter Figal's example of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*, a private home located outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Such architecture explores the process by which an artist can see the always-already given sensuousness of being – the waterfall upon which the house is built, the forest surrounding and invading the home – as well as the meaning most important for the inhabitants and visitors of *Falling Water* – the ability to escape the technologically enframed city and live in an originary state as part of nature, if only for a brief time. Finally, art exposes a historical transformation of being as it is occurring, permitting us to usher both it and ourselves into a new experience of reality. In order to properly do this, we must be willing to be proper preservers of a work of art – an existential task that requires the viewer letting the work of art *be*. By this, Heidegger means that we must come to a work of art disarmed, unladen with instrumentalized preconceptions about its meaning and usefulness, and simply listen to what the work of art discloses.

In this, Heidegger contravenes the Platonic conception of art as always-already relating to a Form. Instead, it is a challenge of existential responsibility to the viewer/preserver of the work of art to both bring forth and fix in place a work of art. Without this work performed by the viewer, art cannot disclose truth. However, I argue that while this conception of art is more productive than any instrumental reading, and more successful in describing our experience of art than the Platonic reading, I ultimately argue that Heidegger's insistence on the historical boundedness of the work of art is inadequate in a description of our experience of film. Unlike the works of art under Heidegger's consideration, I argue that the filmic image cannot undergo world-decay: it remains always open, always ready for preservers to usher in its truth. I thus argue that we must understand and approach the filmic image not through Heidegger's systems, but as a new manifestation of art that emerges with the rise of late industrial capitalism.

In Chapter IV, I rely on Walter Benjamin's consideration of the social, political, and aesthetic phenomenon of the emergence of this new medium through his prescient essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility." Benjamin's primary target in this essay are theorists and academics who attempt to understand the phenomenon of the filmic image under the tradition of the philosophy of art as described in this project through the transcendental conception offered by Plato and the historical perspective offered by Heidegger. Benjamin argues that these theorists fail to understand the nature of the filmic image, the social and political role it holds, and, most importantly, the potential it poses for political progress. Instead, Benjamin sees these theorists as simply trapping the filmic image behind an aura – a restrictive quality of a work of art that distances the viewer from engaging with it authentically. This aura is the result of placement within a canon, a list of the works of art most important to and descriptive of the meaning of a culture – as well as theoretical and academic arguments and meanings as to what that importance and meaning entails. Therefore, destruction of the filmic aura is Benjamin's primary goal – to orient readers towards the political task of devaluing the prescribed meanings given by the aura, and seek meanings that speak to the artwork viewer's own social, political, and economic situation.

Further, I describe the way in which Benjamin's own use of literary montage in the "Work of Art" essay permits viewers to experience the constellation of factors that contribute to both the rise and auratization of the filmic image. The "Work of Art" essay is structured neither linearly nor dialectically, but performatively. Benjamin's performance permits readers to realize that the rise of urban commodity capitalism permitted the rise of a false perception of the world in which we live – a perception that is then amplified by mechanical and technological reproduction. At the same time, Benjamin argues that the same technologies that cover over the reality of our world are capable of, first, bringing that reality to light and, second, emancipating us from its control. Foremost amongst these is film, which, for Benjamin, constitutes the destruction of the aura of the work of art and the shattering of the canonical tradition. This is because film is first and foremost a reproduction, never an original; it possesses no original here and now, but exists in many different forms (thanks to editing) and many different locations (thanks to exhibition). In our experience of film, we view it not as part of a ritual, but as individuals, capable of determining meaning, importance, and value without bourgeois interference. For Benjamin, the most emancipatory genres of film are the cinema of attractions and montage because they highlight the creation of the film, the fragmentation of the final production, and the absence of any singular work of art. Thus, it is through montage and cinema of attractions that the auratic nature of film is most expediently destroyed. Further, these forms of cinema dissuade passive viewership, and encourage the recognition of reality that Benjamin believes film to be capable of providing.

Against Benjamin, I argue that the filmic image does retain an aura. Entire academic disciplines are devoted to attributing and maintaining the canon of films, and with each inclusion, an aura forms. Further, certain films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) have attained not only an aura but also cult-value. To watch these films is to watch them at a distance, burdened by prescribed meaning and interpretations. I thus argue that in order for film to achieve the political possibilities Benjamin sought, we must consider the challenge posed to us by the filmic image in our own era to be an existential challenge. I do this by arguing that we must first recognize that the aura that surrounds a work of art is a social construct, not an inherent quality of the work itself. Thus, we must take seriously Benjamin's claim in the third version of the "Work of Art" essay that truly artistic film poses "revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art."[10] Through these films, we can discover the reality of our age: that the auratic structure surrounding works of art must be resisted in order to achieve an authentic and personal experience of the filmic image.

Filmic Perspectives and Existential Challenges

Given Benjamin's own insistence on applying any aesthetic theories to specific works of art in order to test their validity, I devote all of Chapter V to precisely this practice. The chapter focuses on three films: F.W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (1924), Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Per the first section of this introduction, I rely on many different styles of film theory, analysis, and interpretation to examine these films – but I deploy them not to demonstrate the fungibility of these styles, but, instead, in order to highlight the existential challenge posed for the viewer in each film: do we wish to adhere to these definitive readings of the film, or do we seek to resist their meanings in order to foster our own?

In *Der letzte Mann*, I examine a challenge made to traditional narrative structures, cinematographic techniques, and audience tastes. The film is generically a tragedy, yet the story is told with almost no language, a rarity even in a silent film. Conventionally, tragedies include a fair amount of dialogue, monologue, or, at the very least, linguistic exposition. *Der letzte Mann* lacks all of these conventions, thus challenging the traditional belief that a narratively driven film must be told in a specific way. Further, the film is shot almost entirely from the subjective perspective, which forces the viewer to not just *see* the events in the film, but experience them with the characters. Several such pivotal scenes are highlighted with screenshots as illustrative examples of the success of this cinematic technique. Of further interest is the film's final sequence, most famously known as the "Improbable Epilogue," which I argue is a direct and irreverent critique on the desire for studio systems such as UFA to control audience tastes by providing them with films that they want to see, not, as Benjamin would argue, the films that they need to see. I argue that the sudden interruption of a generic tragedy with a happy ending is both a shock meant to expose the active passification of viewers as well as an opportunity for viewers to glimpse the rapidly codifying film industry shaping the world around them. Finally, I argue that the excessive and bizarre laughter in the final sequence of the film functions as a social corrective, understood through both Hegelian Wit and Bergsonian laughter. Taken together, all of these unusual elements of the film classify it not as a classical silent tragedy, but as a deeply critical film that seeks to attack the auratic tradition which attempts to subsume it.

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[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), §10, 261.

In my analysis of *Inception*, I deviate from a theoretical reading of the film in order to examine the current auratic climate of film as a cultural phenomenon, following Benjamin's example in his "Work of Art" essay. After highlighting the extraordinarily open realm for play and meaning in the film, I then examine the various meanings and interpretations that have been imposed on this single film by theorists and scholars. In this analysis, I discover that a wide-range of meanings delivered from myriad theoretical schools, disciplines, and scholars continue to be imposed on films – and many are delivered with a tone of finality. I therefore argue that active auratization is alive and well in today's society, despite Benjamin's warnings. Further, I examine another realm of meaning-creation surrounding the film: a realm composed of amateurs, cinephiles, and denizens of the Internet. I then pose – but do not answer – a question I deem worthy of further consideration: are the meanings and interpretations offered by the 'professional' film critics different in any way than those offered by the 'amateur' critics? I conclude by suggesting that while *Inception* qualifies as a film capable of eliciting reactions and interpretations from audiences, whether these reactions or interpretations are existentially authentic is open for further consideration.

Finally, in my consideration of *The Shining* I examine several complex challenges to traditional aesthetic conceptions of the image. First, using materials gathered from The Kubrick Archives at the University of London, I examine the status of the adapted image in its transition from Stephen King's novel *The Shining* and Stanley Kubrick's filmic version of the same name. I suggest that while the filmic image does not provide the same kind of exposition that the literary image can convey, the filmic image offers a type of exposition that is far more open for interpretation than its literary counterpart. One example of this openness is that it demands active imaginative consideration of the film by the audience – while King's careful explanation of the events in the narrative close off possibilities for meaning and interpretation. This is seen most clearly in the highly ambiguous ending to the film as presented in the two-hour American release of 1980. Further, I consider the processes of auratization, de-auratization, and re-auratization of an image through the transformation from best-selling novel to deconstructed screenplay to ‘final’ release of the film. At each stage, I question the authority of the granted aura: does it come from the author/*auteur*, the literary/filmic critics, or the audience? This question, too, is ultimately left for further consideration. Finally, I argue that the films directed by Stanley Kubrick carry with them an aura that is particularly hard to resist, and thus revisit the existential challenge I posed at the conclusion of Chapter IV: is it possible for us to watch a Kubrick without any preconceptions as to its importance, quality, or meaning – or, is the entire *oeuvre* of Kubrick’s work too firmly entrenched in the auratic tradition?

Moving Towards an Untethered Image

In Chapter VI, I offer an intervention into this long history of art and film theory not as a challenge or rejection to the previous approaches, but as a fresh perspective. In this, I do not offer a specific theoretical framework – classifications, specifications, processes, or techniques – by which one ought to engage the filmic image. Rather, I argue that the filmic image can best be understood through proper comportment towards it: an existentially authentic comportment that does not solely take into consideration the viewer’s own projects, but the viewer as a member of a community undergoing projects.

Before describing this approach, I first examine the considerations of film offered within critical theory, specifically from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I argue that while their theory does an exemplary job of diagnosing the state of cultural and aesthetic objects under the reign of late industrial capitalism, the prognosis offered is difficult, exclusionary, and often contributes to the problem. As a result, those who elect to follow the critique of the filmic image offered in "The Culture Industry" (as well as all other works of art created under the aegis of mechanical reproducibility and consumer culture) might not be able to experience the fullness of film as a personal phenomenon because they refuse to acknowledge film as capable of aesthetic qualities – a turn that Adorno makes later in his life. If we follow Adorno in this turn, I argue, we can find that his conception of critique is not that different than the free interpretation offered by the existentialists; it is simply too narrow in its formulations.

This existential approach I offer in Chapter VI is largely derived through the consideration of the ethics of Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir is under consideration for two primary reasons: first, she arguably places more emphasis on the responsibility of making free choices in an intersubjective context than many existentialists, and second, she provides a series of examples of attitudes commonly adopted to avoid both personal authentic engagement with the world and the challenge of integrating one's own individuality with that of a collective of other free individualities. In selecting de Beauvoir as the primary theoretical source for our existential comportment towards the filmic image, I do not wish to suggest that she is the only existentialist capable of aiding us in this project. Certainly, considerations from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectic Reason* or his *The Family Idiot* can and should be used to augment our understanding of a proper existential comportment towards the image. Further, Heidegger's notion of being-with and the expansions made upon his idea by Hannah Arendt would provide more elucidation and aid to us in our quest. Further still, considerations from Miguel de Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life*, John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, and the thought of Gabriel Marcel are crucial to fully understand the existential challenge posed to us not just in relation to art, but also in relation to life. Existentialism is a vast, complex, and ever-evolving realm of thought: however, given the confines of this project, an existential comportment towards the filmic image that heeds the wisdom of each of these scholars is doomed to be, like the filmic image itself, irritatingly incomplete. Thus, while de Beauvoir provides our initial understanding of a proper comportment towards the image, a fuller description honed with the aid of the aforementioned thinkers and others must exist in its own project. Here, I provide a preliminary outline for an existential comportment towards the filmic image. Thus far, I believe that this preliminary understanding maximizes individual freedom while maintaining a conversation with other views and scholars. This approach, I argue, is successful because it (a) includes both past and future interpretations of the filmic image not as potential impediments to a fuller interpretation, but as necessary components of it and (b) recognizes that the task of interpretation when facing an aesthetic artifact such as the filmic image is never complete, and will always require further interpretation, further valuation, and further consideration. Similarly, a fuller understanding of this comportment will require further interpretation, further valuation, and further consideration, and will require its own project. Thus, I conclude the dissertation with a description of the questions, concerns, and further considerations this project raises, as well as a detailed research program designed to address these issues.

I estimate that it should take about fifteen years for me to complete this research program. I welcome any colleagues who wish to join me.

CHAPTER II

PLATO AND THE TRANSCENDENT IDEAL OF IMAGERY

Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with the ethical and, in this, pedagogical potential of popular – that is, at once culturally celebrated and commercially successful – film. The scope of this claim will ultimately lead us to consider twentieth century philosophers such as Heidegger and Benjamin as well as current film. The orientation for this project remains shaped, however, in no small part by concerns that arose at the outset of Western thought, long before film's emergence. In this chapter, I will focus on the orientation given to my project by Plato's recognition of the relation among ethics and politics, truth, and the peculiar ontological valence of the artistic image.

In the *Republic,* Plato argues that the cultivation of justice is not possible without an institutional regime that subordinates the image to the idea. The broader outlines of the argument supporting this claim are well known. In the course of ten books, Socrates and his interlocutors discover that the most important aspirations of ethical and political life are intimately bound up with the potentials – and dangers – of the poetic image; the condition for the possibility of the first two rely on the proper form and content of the third. Justice in a city must be disseminated by just leaders who can only become just through education and cultivation. The primary mode of education, especially from a young age, is through poetic images, especially the imagery depicted in oral performances. Crucial for this chapter is Plato's famous – or, perhaps, infamous – argument that in order to ensure the purest education for these just leaders, the imagery they encounter must be stringently controlled. Because images leave too much room for interpretation of the Just ideal they must be scrutinized for censorship. In this way, Plato is among the first to recognize the unruliness of the semantic potential of images, and their resulting semantic potential for free play. As I shall argue, Plato's call for censorship belies his concern for what I shall refer to as the unruliness of the semantic potential of images. Plato recognizes, on the one hand, that the youth can be prepared for the intellection of true ideas – above all, the idea of justice – by their encounters with artistic images. But, Plato argues, on the other hand, the exposure of the youth to images must be strictly regulated, controlled, and limited because there is no necessary or even special connection between truth and image. Images, in their very being, harbor the potential to distort, mislead, and lie and therefore also corrupt the soul. Without regulation, control, and limitation, images are as likely to elicit untruth as they are truth. Ultimately, as will be demonstrated, that regulation will come from philosophers themselves – those lovers of wisdom who are capable of discerning the locus of true ideas in imagery. We will see this demonstrated through Socrates' interpretation and performance of narrative poetry in both the *Republic* and *Phaedo*.

This chapter will thus not only establish one important genealogical origin for Western understandings of the ontology of the image but also elucidate the need that arises from this approach for a proper political, social, and ethical orientation towards the image. In addition to the epistemological, political, and normative analysis offered from the *Republic*, I will draw from the *Phaedo* to provide illustrations of the type of acceptable poetry Plato has in mind during his statement of the possibility for the return of the poets at the conclusion of the *Republic*. The properly educational image is one that is strictly regulated in what is imitated: only regulations of virtuous, rational, and good actions can be permitted. As such, properly educational images of the kind permitted in the *Republic* are those that serve as a stepping-stone to Truth. Finally, it is important to note that while in this chapter I establish the Platonic perspective and import of the image, one of my ultimate aims in this dissertation is to drawn on and modify Plato's pedagogical claim in order to offer an existential perspective in Chapter VI.

The Republic

Of the many insights found within the *Republic*, the one with which we are above all concerned here is that the achievement of justice within the *polis* requires a citizenship governed by ethical leaders. This observation, made within the first book of the *Republic*, thus launches a consideration of the nature of justice: not simply the question of justice as such, but also the introduction, cultivation, and maintenance of justice in the soul. In order to best pursue this line of questioning, Socrates and his interlocutors craft a just city "in theory" in order to examine "what sort of thing justice is in a city."[1] By building the city first as a macrocosm, they create an analogy through which they can evaluate the nature of justice in individual souls by "observing the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger."[2]

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[1] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 369a.

This argument is contingent on the structure of the human soul. Plato, as we know, contends that there are three parts: the rational, which deals with reason and is guided by wisdom; the spiritual, which deals with emotions, and must be controlled by courage; and the appetitive, which hungers for physical and fiscal pleasures, but must be controlled by moderation. These correspond to the three classes of citizens in the city: the guardians, who rule; the auxiliaries, who aid the guardians and defend the city from both without and within; and the craftsmen, farmers, and tradesmen, who produce the goods the city needs. In a just city, the three classes will live in harmony: they will respect their place and subsequent responsibilities, attend to their duties to the best of their ability, and the guardians will ensure that all classes are balanced in power and happiness. Correspondingly, the just individual is one in which her tripartite soul is in harmony: the rational part of her soul guides her in wisdom, the spiritual protects her with courage, and the appetitive is kept in check through moderation. Lack of justice in an individual is caused by disharmony in the soul. We know that this is of utmost importance to Platonic philosophy, as one of Socrates' few normative dictums throughout the Platonic *oeuvre* deals directly with this claim:[3]

> I think it is better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me,

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[2] Plato, *Republic*, 369a.

[3] Cf. Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research* 3, No. 3 (1971), 439.

> than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, even though I am only one person.[4]

Maintaining harmony within the city (at the macrocosmic level) and the individual (on the microcosmic level) is an ideal that underlies the whole of the *Republic*. As we know, it is only the pursuit of wisdom that can safeguard against falling into disharmony, and thus the education of the guardians becomes a primary focus of the *Republic*: the question Socrates now addresses is the proper education required to achieve harmony on both levels.

Given the lengthy discussion in Book I of the nature of just and unjust rulers, it is unsurprising that the question of what kind of individual is best suited to rule an ideally just city emerges quickly. Not just anyone can serve as a guardian to the city – a specific set of skills is required: guardians must, at once, combine "philosophy, spirit, speed, and strength."[5] This is interesting, given that all other citizens of the city excel in only one *τέχνη*: the craftsmen are expected to tend to their craft alone – not dabble in multiple fields. This ensures the highest degree in excellence in every occupation, and thus the highest quality of resources for the city. It is only the guardian who can seemingly wield several *τέχνη* in order to simultaneously serve the city "gently" and protect it against its foes fiercely. Proper education (*παιδεία*) is thus necessary in order to ensure the proper formation of the guardians' souls.

In this, Socrates agrees that education requires training in both the body (through gymnastics), in the soul (through music), and a constant eye on maintaining proper accord between the two.[6] In order to maintain that accord, cultivation of the rational component of the soul through music becomes the focus of the *Republic*. In this, it is crucial to recognize that, for Plato and the Greeks of his time, music refers to much more than it does today. As we know, music or μούσα does not specifically refer to spoken poetry or music performed with an instrument, but to a "union of song, dance, and word to which the Muses gave their name."[7] Ultimately, to say one possesses μούσα is to say she has mastered all nine arts, each associated with one of nine muses. The importance of μούσα in Athenian society cannot be understated. As Murray and Wilson explain,

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[4] Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 482c.

[5] Plato, *Republic*, 376c.

> Μούσα shaped the way individuals and communities lived and sought to reproduce themselves. It was a medium through which ideals of behavior were developed and enforced – the morality of individuals and collectives, notions of proper or ideal corporeal types, political principles and pragmatics.[8]

Taken together, μούσα requires knowledge of all nine arts: epic poetry, history, music or song, lyric poetry, tragedy, hymns, dance, comedy, and astronomy. Depending on the myth, the origin and number of Muses varies, but Plato's understanding is that there were nine, each associated with one of the arts listed above, respectively: Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Erato, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania.[9] Of course, the kind of individuals capable of devoting time and study to each of these arts are those who are unburdened by work and the drudgery of daily existence – the wealthy aristocrats. Plato develops an appropriation of this Greek aristocratic ideal by stating that

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6. Plato, *Republic*, 411.

7. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson, in *Music and the Muses: The Culture of* Μούσα *in the Classical Athenian City*, ed. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

8. Murray and Wilson, 2.

9. For fuller descriptions of each Muse, cf. Pierre Danet, *A Complete Dictionary of the Greek and Roman Antiquities*, (London: King's Arms, 1700).

to be an educated individual – regardless of one's class – is to be one who is harmonious through balance of the cultivation of all these arts. In his appropriation of this Greek ideal, Plato may be understood to uphold a stricter standard than those current in his contemporary Athens in that he not only demands balance within the soul as achieved through the study of music, but that his understanding of music is much more nuanced and restricted, as is his understanding of citizens' access to it. Ultimately, Plato considers these nine arts, while as important in education, politics, and ethics as described above, to be similar in one respect: they are all poetic, or, more properly, as the Greek word suggests, fabricated images. Although the Athenian ideal is content to praise the Muses, Plato's contribution is to demonstrate that while their offerings do foster opportunity, they are, first and foremost, *essentially* mimetic.

As the argument from the *Republic* details, children learn through stories, music, and poetry from their earliest days – long before the training of their body begins. Some of these stories, Socrates contends, are true, and some are false – but they all begin to shape the soul in youth, when "it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it."[10] Thus, it is imperative that in order for the city to have the most just guardians – and, consequently, the citizens to be guided by justice – the stories, songs, and poetic images that children experience must be strictly regulated. As such, future tales must be censored, and most of the current stories in circulation must be discarded.

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[10] Plato, *Republic*, 377b.

Specifically discussed are tales about the gods behaving unjustly, as it would impose an impression of justified immorality into the minds of the guardians that may become indelible:

> The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear.[11]

Examples from Homer illustrate Socrates' concerns: the unjust reap wealth and happiness, the just suffer unduly, lies masquerade as truth, and all of these lessons stem from the behavior of the gods, which Socrates deems far from godly.[12] As a god is the epitome of goodness, honesty, steadfastness, and power, they cannot be shown to be cruel, deceitful, mercurial, or weak. Such poetry presents the ideals of Greek civilization – the figures to whom the youth look for guidance, strength, and emulation – as capable of not simply acting unjustly, but benefiting from their unjustice. Such stories, it seems, are precisely the kind that led Thrasymachus to argue so fervently in favor of the benefits of the unjust life.[13]

Socrates thus posits two rules to guide proper poetry concerning the gods. First, poetry must be clear that "a god isn't the cause of all things, but only of good ones".[14] Secondly, the gods "are not sorcerers who change themselves, nor do they mislead us by falsehoods in words or deeds".[15] Both mandates are designed to prohibit poets from depicting the gods, the pinnacle of goodness, wisdom, and grace, as the sources of evil in the lives of mortals. They must be preserved as models of behavior for the guardians, and serve as representatives of the Good. Given these considerations, Socrates declares that they must "supervise the storytellers" to ensure that only stories of honesty, goodness, and kindness are told to young minds.[16]

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[11] Plato, *Republic*, 378e.

[12] Cf. Cooper, 1018: "The first three quotations are from *Illiad* xxiv.527-32. The sources for the fourth and for the quotation from Aeschylus are unknown."

[13] Cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book I.

[14] Plato, *Republic*, 380c.

[15] Plato, *Republic*, 383.

As the argument develops, further suggestions and restrictions emerge. While epic poetry fell under attack in Book II, given its ability to tell false tales about the gods, it still offers some pedagogical possibilities in the form of history lessons, as we will see in Book X. In Book III, Socrates turns his attention to dramatic poetry as a far more dangerous poison to developing souls. As we know, poetic images incite imitation, and Plato believes that education happens through mimesis alone:

> Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes […] Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.[17]

Here, it will be helpful to delve more deeply into Plato's conception of imitation. Imitation is always aimed at a higher idea – an original – that it reflects. Higher quality imitations of the original allow greater access to the truth of the original. Likewise, if the image is not an accurate representation of the original, or if it is misleading in any way, then full understanding of the original will be lost. As John Sallis explains, "it may be said that an image must be such as to announce the original, to let it become manifest."[18]

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[16] Plato, *Republic*, 377b.

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 518c-d.

However, the difference between the original – or in Plato's terminology, the Form – and the image, is not simply a matter of precise imitation: the image is not simply a shadow or a reflection of the original, while the original is a truer version of itself. It is an ontological difference: the original is the thing itself, and the image always lacks wholeness, completeness, and full truth. Sallis explains the distinction through the terminology of "showing":

> When something shows itself "in the original," it shows itself as it is. But when it shows itself "in an image," it does not simply show itself as it is but also shows itself *as it is not*. Showing through an image involves a concealment, a negativity, and, presumably, this is why Socrates says that he means "by images *first* shadows": a shadow exhibits this negativity most strikingly, since in its shadow a thing shows itself as lacking everything except shape.[19]

Understood in this way, poetic imagery is an attempt to rely on a sensible figure to permit access to something purely intelligible – an attempt that is always-already falling short of its goal. The image, understood only by the senses, is the gateway by which the idea, understood only by the intellect, can be addressed, questioned, and studied, but never fully understood. For Plato, there is a direct and irrevocable connection between the sensible and the intelligible: the sensible grants access to the intelligible, but the intelligible can only be explored by the rational part of the soul, not by the senses. Proper poetic imagery can provide aid towards a higher ideal, but it must then allow the rational to step away from the image and seek the ideal itself.

Education, then, is a matter of finding the best images towards which the youth can direct their attention. By best, Plato means images that lead us towards virtuous

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18. John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 419.
19. Sallis, 419.

ideas and speak to the rational part of the soul. This is problematic, given the sheer ubiquity of poetic images that do *not* seek to address the rational, but rather serve the spiritual or appetitive. Thus, the task of finding proper poetic images is crucial: as Socrates asserts, we learn by imitating whatever we experience from our earliest age. Later imitations build on the ones we developed first, thus cementing our belief that these behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes are the correct way to live. If a child is exposed to images expressing only justice, virtue, moderation, and courage, it will become second nature to her as she grows into an adult. Eventually, an entire culture begins to reify these ideas through shared μούσα, as with the Athenian model, and this imitation is continued. Plato's contention about education is that it is always possible, through the rational part of the soul, to redirect our sight towards poetic images that are closer to the original – images that offer a "showing" that offers the closest connection to the transcendent, just, and true idea. While this redirection can take place on the smaller scale – a better painting of a brave hero, a better poem extolling virtue – it is ideally always on its way towards the ultimate original, "that which is the brightest thing there is, namely, the one we call the Good."[20]

Thus, Plato's belief in the essentially mimetic nature of education is the impetus behind the restrictions placed on poetry, especially on depictions of the gods. The young will especially imitate those they feel to be strongest, bravest, and best, and thus the gods must only be shown in the best possible light.[21] On a less celestial level, depictions of mythical heroes, historical figures, and persons of authority must be shown to be "people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free."[22] Given that education begins and ends with imitation, Plato argues that the objects available for imitation must be strictly controlled – as such, poetic imagery must be close to the original to offer unfettered access to ideals conducive to cultivation of justice: moderation, courage, and rationality. If any representations of human "illiberality or baseness" behavior are presented, then there is a risk that it will allow imitations of such behavior to "settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought," destroying any hope for cultivating a just society.[23] Thus, both the content and style of poetry must be restricted.

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[20] Plato, *Republic*, 518c-d.

[21] Cf. *Republic*, Book III, 391e.

Three types of poetry are considered as evaluations of this claim: tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry. With epic poetry, mitigating the dangers of imitation is first of all a matter of removing any speeches and reducing the tale to bare narrative.[24] Once done, it becomes a matter of removing inappropriate content. For example, stories that contain tales about the terrors of the underworld must be eradicated; for fear that they will instill a fear of death, either for oneself or for family and friends.[25] Such fears could result in outbursts of lamentation and weeping, both which discourage moderation and instill an overwhelming amount of emotion in the soul, from which "a violent change of mood is likely to follow."[26] The same is said of laughter, which produces similar mercurial temperaments, and should not be preferred as right and proper behavior. Any content that depicts lying, immoderation in food, drink, or sex, ought to be removed for the same reason. This, as Socrates contends, is because the appetitive is "the largest part in each person's soul and is by nature most insatiable."[27] Such content listed above speaks directly to the appetitive, and can be powerful enough to override the control of the rational and spiritual parts of the soul.

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[22] 22. Plato, *Republic*, 395c.
[23] 23. Ibid, 395d.
[24] 24. Ibid, 394b.
[25] 25. Ibid, 386b-388.
[26] 26. Ibid, 388e.

Stylistically, Socrates takes a stronger approach. As above, epic poetry can be remedied by simply striking out offending lines. While the censored images still remain imitations, the dangerous element of imitation has been mitigated by redacting instances of imitation that are bad for the soul. What remains are the brave and honest words of the work; only then will the imitation will be worthy of both poet and listener. The result is pleasant, simple, and wholesome poetry with an even measure and beat.

Comedy and tragedy, on the other hand, pose a greater danger. In order to craft the most enjoyable performances, the performers of both comedy and tragedy must play many parts – they must be immoderate in their behavior, so as to elicit laughter from the audience, they must lament wildly, so as to depict deep emotion and despair. Further, the music accompanying such poetry is dramatic, ever changing, accompanied by expertly imitated sound effects and backgrounds. Given Socrates' dictum that each member of the city ought only devote herself to one skill, and pursue that skill to the best of her ability, witnessing an individual talented in imitating so many things – "thunder, the sound of wind, hail, axels, pulleys, trumpets, flutes, pipes, and all the other instruments, even the cries of dogs, sheep, and birds" – will instill a false idea in their minds: that of pursuing more than one τέχνη. If the people of the city are to be best suited for each of their tasks then neither tragedy nor comedy can be allowed within the city walls:

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[27] Plato, *Republic*, 442.

> If a man, who through clever training can become anything and imitate anything, should arrive in our city, wanting to give a performance of his poems, we should bow down before him as someone holy, wonderful, and pleasing, but we should tell him that there is no one like him in our city and that it isn't lawful for there to be.[28]

Such poets will be sent off to another city, to peddle their art elsewhere. Instead, it is best if the citizens "choose to employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person."[29] These poems may only be performed in the Dorian and Phyrgian modes, and be performed with the aid of only lyres, cithara, and pipes.[30] The resulting poetic and musical mode is simplistic and in direct connection with Socrates' decree that the guardians imitate only one thing.[31] As a result, "their music should involve oneness of style, mode, and rhythm, in contrast to music involving wide variation."[32] The larger point, Sallis argues, is that "there should be a fundamental oneness running throughout what they imitate and their way of imitation, the result of which would then be to make the soul one with itself."[33] This variety of imitation is thus of "the sort of fine and good character that has developed in accordance with an intelligent plan."[34] The same is mandated of all artistic images: painting, architecture, and other crafts must adhere to a simplistic style and "strike [the citizens'] eyes and ears like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason."[35] As a result, all imagery – poetic or otherwise – that does not instill harmony in the beholder is cast from the city. The full implications of the move in Book III will not become clear until our analysis of Book X of the *Republic*, but for now we can see in Plato a deep concern that improper images can have a deep and irreversible impact on the developing minds of the guardians.

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[28] Plato, *Republic*, 398b.

[29] Ibid, 398b.

[30] Ibid, 399-399e.

[31] Ibid, 394e.

[32] Sallis, 361.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Plato, *Republic*, 400e.

The *Phaedrus* offers another iteration of this concern. In this dialogue, Plato believes all artistic imagery is simply an imitation of a greater idea – an unbreakable connection to a higher thought that cannot be changed once it is written, carved, or built. As Socrates explains, only "a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener can defend itself [and know] for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent."[36] All artistic images are simply shadows of a "living, breathing discourse," incapable of responding to the viewer or defending against attacks.[37] While Book III details heavy restrictions on the type of images that should thus be allowed in the city, further consideration of the nature of images versus understanding will result in an all-out attack in Book X.

In Book X, the critique of mimesis becomes explicit and expands across all fine arts. Almost immediately, Socrates returns to his concern above expressed from Book

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[35] Plato, *Republic*, 401c.

[36] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 275d.

[37] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d.

III, this time claiming, “all [imitative] poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it”.[38] We see in this final Book the clearest championing of philosophy over poetry, not just a restriction of particular kinds of poetry, but a diatribe against imitations of any kind.

In this final book, two main claims emerge. The first is that imitations – whether in poetry, painting, or sculpture – are always three times removed from the Truth, and thus deceive the beholder. Socrates gives as example a bed; the truest version of a bed is the Form of Bed, made by a god, the second truest is the physical manifestation of a bed, made by a skilled carpenter, and the third truest is the painting of a bed, made by a skilled painter. As we saw in the *Phaedrus*, the beholder of the painting is faced with a flat, one-dimensional representation of the bed. While the painting indelibly points to the Form of which it depicts, it does so mutely, in a muddled and shallow sense. If the beholder is a philosopher, that is, a lover of wisdom, she will be unable to probe it for further information about the nature of beds, and leave poorer for her interaction with it.

The analogy is then extended to poetry. As delineated in the *Ion*, Melpomene (the muse of tragedy) inspires Homer to craft the *Illiad* – Homer’s version is thus once removed from the truth known only to Melpomene.[39] Ion, greatest interpreter of Homer, then performs the *Illiad* for an audience, and this performance becomes twice removed from the truth. The audience then witnesses the poem, and their experience of it is like

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38. Plato, *Republic*, 595b.

39. Plato, *Ion*, trans. Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

that of the painting – it is thrice removed from the truth, muddled, an imitation of an imitation. Any topic thus presented in the play, even if it adheres to all the strictures outlined in Books II and III, does not arise from an understanding of the topic but simply a shadow of that knowledge:

> This, then, is what I wanted to get agreement about when I said that painting and imitation as a whole produce work that is far from the truth, namely, that imitation really consorts with a part of us that is far from reason, and the result of their being friends and companions is neither sound nor true.[40]

This brings us to the second major claim from Book X: poetic imagery, especially that found in tragedy and comedy, incite a riot of appetites in the soul. The imagery is not only capable of lying, but of activating the appetitive, of encouraging the audience to ignore rationality and give in to their physical and emotional desires. For example, tragedies expose the audience to negative emotions but do not provide them with any training as to how to rationally keep these emotions in check. The sight of wailing, lamentations, and tearing of the hair, even if only on the stage, speaks to the weakest part of the soul, encouraging it to imitate that behavior. Socrates is clear that there is no shame in suffering sadness at a loss, but moderation ought to be employed to accept the loss and move forward in life. But such performances eschew such concerns and encourage the appetitive and spiritual to overpower the rational:

> Like a painter, [the poet] produces work that is inferior with respect to truth and that appeals to a part of the soul that is similarly inferior rather than to the best part. So we were right not to admit him into a city that is to be well-governed, for he arouses, nourishes, and strengthens this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one, in just the way that someone destroys the better sort of citizens when he strengthens the vicious ones and surrenders the city to them. Similarly,

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[40] Plato, *Republic*, 603b.

> we'll say that an imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and by gratifying the irrational part [of the soul].[41]

The same argument is made about comedy. When we hear an immoral joke performed on stage, we assume that the joke is something we are permitted to think when outside the theater. It overpowers our rational sense of propriety and permits us to relish in the immoderation of others – the antics of the buffoon or drunkard may elicit roars of laughter in the crowd, but it also awakes the desire to eschew moderation and join them in unrestrained revelry. Not only do these images lie to the audience about what is true and just, they speak directly to the part of the soul most easily influenced: the appetitive. Socrates' concern is that this disharmony displayed in poetic image causes imbalance first, in the individual soul, and then, throughout the entire city.

Taken together, these two arguments combine to produce Socrates' ultimate claim against the poets: poets and their craft threaten the pursuit of wisdom, reason, courage, and thus justice by polluting the soul in such a way that it can no longer 'see' the proper path towards harmony. Poetry is simply more compelling than philosophy, and thus detracts from pursuit of virtue and justice. As Rosen argues, "whether or not poetry has reasons of it own that reason does not know, the charm of production, which in our own time we see most clearly in technology, is more powerful than the safeguards we set up against the production of dangerous artifacts."[42] Thus, poets cannot be permitted to exist in the city, regardless of what strictures are placed upon them. If they

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41. Plato, *Republic*, 605b.

42. Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 376.

are, then “pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason.”[43] Famously, the conclusion of the extensive dialogue results not only in the expulsion of all imitative artists from the city, but a declaration to the poets that “there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy,” one that cannot be easily resolved.[44]

The Return of the Poets?

As we recall from the beginning of this chapter, Plato argues that the cultivation of justice is not possible without an institutional regime that subordinates the image to the idea. As delineated above, many strictures are put into place in order to create such a regime, but Plato’s twin concerns about poetic imagery ultimately underlies them all. Mere lines after exiling poets from the city, Socrates declares that it is “just that poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself” from Socrates’ charges.[45] This statement ultimately amounts to the demand that any poetic image worthy of a place in the city must be guided by a true idea. This true idea must escape the twin claims from Book X: it must not lie, that is, it must not be thrice removed from the truth, and it must not speak to the appetitive, but rather to the rational part of the soul. The task Plato addresses, in consequence, is to find the poetic image guided by true ideas – an image only found in narrative poetry.

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[43] Plato, *Republic*, 607.

[44] Ibid, 607c.

[45] Ibid, 607d.

The possibility of poetry's return seems complex, but is given to us in the form of three examples: two from Socrates *within* the *Republic* itself, and one from Plato in the *Phaedo*. The *Republic* offers two fables from Socrates that both satisfy the demands for true poetic images detailed above. Before we review these two tales, we would be wise to keep in mind that the "*Republic* is a narrated rather than a performed dialogue."[46] As Sallis notes, "strictly speaking, Socrates is the only speaker in the *Republic* […] the entire *Republic* has the form of a Socratic recollection."[47] Further, as the opening lines tell us, Socrates is recollecting an event that occurred "yesterday," indicating that the narration Socrates offers is as fresh in mind as it can possibly be.[48] Finally, it is worth drawing a comparison between the *Republic* and Martha Nussbaum's reading of the *Protagoras* in that it "has no *action* of the sort to which we are accustomed to in tragic drama."[49] The *Republic*, from start to finish, is a dialogue between a few men sitting on the Athenian docks. Nothing *happens* except in words, and even then, most of them are "deliberately flat and unadorned."[50] Recalling our earlier discussion of Plato's arguments against tragic poetry, it is interesting to consider that the examples of appropriate poetry for ethical teaching are assiduously *not* tragic, while still having been written by an author who "is said to have given up a promising career as a tragic poet to write them."[51] In essence, Plato had to invent a form of poetry that would satisfy the pedagogical and ethical criteria laid out in the *Republic*, while refraining from using the existing poetic styles (tragic, comic, or epic), or resorting to the style of "scientific and ethnographic inquiry exemplified for us in the treatises of the Hippocratus corpus."[52]

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[46] Sallis, 314.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Plato, *Republic*, 327a.

[49] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press ,1986), 130.

[50] Ibid, 130.

[51] Ibid, 126.

The first fable appears in Book III as a Phoenician story about the proper arrangement of the classes of citizens.[53] Socrates tells a tale about the origin of the people of the city, their internal constitution as golden, silver, iron, or bronze, and their proper place in relation to their mother (the earth) and their city. Socrates is hesitant to tell the story, admitting that he "[doesn't] know where [he'll] get the audacity or even what words to use."[54] After hearing the story, Glaucon agrees with Socrates that this would be a wise story to tell the citizens as it "would help to make them care more for the city and each other."[55] Further, they hope to disseminate this poetic image through mimesis, the only form of education, according to Plato. When neither Socrates nor Glaucon admit of knowing any way to make the citizens *believe* the story as it is told to them, Glaucon suggests that "perhaps there is [a way] in the case of their sons and later generations and all the other people who come after them," that might give weight to the story, and Socrates consents to leave the matter to "wherever tradition takes it."[56] Thus, the noble lie will be passed down in story, told to children at a young age, and spread throughout the city through mimesis. Thus, I argue, this proffered myth is for Plato, at least, a possibility for the redemption of poetry: poetic imagery guided by a true ideal that speaks only to the rational parts of the soul. Long before Socrates has fully laid out the criteria for a poetic image guided by true ideas in the *Republic*, he gives us one such example, hidden in plain sight.

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[52] Nussbaum, 123.
[53] Plato, *Republic*, 414c.
[54] Ibid, 414d.
[55] Ibid, 415d.
[56] Ibid, 415d.

Consider now the second fable of the *Republic*, the tale of Er that describes life after death and the immortality of the soul.[57] This story is told immediately following the mandate that poetry redeem itself before it may be permitted back into the city. However, like the Phoenician story, the story is meant to further cement the pursuit of justice and wisdom by describing the punishment and pleasures of life after death. Those who are unjust in their life suffer punishments befitting their transgressions, while those who live justly and wisely are permitted to walk a heavenly path. This, too, speaks to the rational part of the soul: it explains the reasons for living a just life, and offers an explanation for the continuation of the soul after death. Though it might be argued that the articulated punishments may incite fear, and thus speak to the spiritual part of the soul, Woodruff argues that Socrates' involvement in what he terms "The New Learning" stipulates that his understanding of punishment is that its aim is only ever "to educate or improve people in virtue, never to harm them."[58] Thus, the ideal guiding this story is of the highest truth – pursuit of the Good. Socrates simply states: "if we are persuaded by me, we'll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and we'll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way."[59] Despite his earlier claim that he does not wish to write poetry himself, Socrates has done just this in his two noble lies: he has crafted two stories meant to "lead [citizens] unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason."[60]

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[57] Plato, *Republic*, 614.

[58] Paul Woodruff, "Socrates and the New Learning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 106.

[59] Plato, *Republic*, 621c.

Importantly, recall from Sallis that these two fables are not as removed from the truth as a cursory reading of the *Republic* would suggest. It is not our reading of Socrates' recollection of a fable – at least three times removed from the truth. It is simply Socrates' narration, with an added ironic element of attribution to another source for the ideas. This tactic is not unique; we see in the *Symposium* wherein Socrates attributes his final speech to Diotima despite the fact that "[the speech] is too closely related to the earlier discussion to be anything but Socrates' own work."[61] As Woodruff argues, this is not accidental on either Socrates' or Plato's behalf. Though Socrates was a master of the "art of words," his speeches and fables "did not have the standard rhetorical aim of persuasion.[62] He elaborates,

> For all their intoxicating beauty, Socrates' speeches […] represent sources that are not present and cannot explain themselves or defend their views. They throw brilliant ideas and images up for discussion, they challenge their readers to hard thought, but they are not persuasive of either Socrates' audiences or Plato's readers.[63]

Instead, the sole goal of the fables told by Socrates in the *Republic* is to "make people think more deeply about growing in virtue, and at the same time to care about what they think."[64] This echoes the larger purpose of the Socratic dialogues, according to Nussbaum: "like the spectator of a tragedy, the dialogue reader is asked by the interaction to work through everything actively and to see where he really stands, who is really praiseworthy and why."[65] Socrates' inclusion of the two fables are not simply part of his political program in the *Republic*, they are offered up as a poetry "constructed to supplant tragedy as the paradigm of ethical teaching."[66] These fables offer poetic imagery that is, first, told to us directly from Socrates, second, aimed solely at the rational part of the soul, and third, designed to foster development of virtue in his audience.

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[60] Plato, *Republic*, 401d.
[61] Woodruff, 107.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

Of further importance is the structure of these two fables or *mythos* in relation to the larger work of the *Republic*. As Sallis argues, the opening word of the dialogue – *κατέβην*, "I went down," – and the concluding tale of the book are the same: tales of descent out of the city/into the underworld in order to acquire knowledge and truth. Sallis explains,

> Once this *mythos* that is enacted from the very beginning of Book I is brought into view, the connection between the beginning and the end of the *Republic* comes to light. The *Republic* ends with the myth of Er, which relates how Er was allowed to descend into Hades, to journey through the underworld, and to return to the world above. Thus, the *mythos* which Socrates begins to *enact* in what is recounted in the first sentence of the *Republic* is the same *mythos* that is *told* at the end of the dialogue after the enactment has been completed.[67]

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[64] Woodruff, 107.

[65] Nussbaum, 127.

[66] Nussbaum, 129. For a fuller argument of the historical situation of tragic poetry as the primary mode of ethical education in Plato's time, cf. 122-133.

[67] Sallis, 316. Emphasis is retained from Sallis.

Sallis correspondingly argues that the entire *Republic* is an ascent from an unjust city into one built on justice.[68] During this ascent, the connection between poetic imagery, truth, and just polis becomes explicit, and is elevated as one of the key components of the successful city. This "enactment," then necessarily includes Socrates performing the kind of poetry that would be permitted back into the city: poetic images guided by true ideas.

This enactment is found again in the tale credited to Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo*. As we know, Socrates has been sentenced to death, and this dialogue details the final day and discussion of his life. The dialogue opens with Socrates explaining that his daemon had instructed him to write poetry in his final days: "'Socrates,' it said, 'practice and cultivate the arts.'"[69] Following this advice, he wrote out many fables of Aesop, and poems to a god, before realizing that he "must compose fables, not arguments" in order to practice poetry.[70] What ultimately ensues is a detailed philosophical argument in defense of the immortality of the soul, both before and after death, as well as a description of the afterlife, reincarnation, and the process of recollection. While the descriptions of these events are given in the form of fables in the *Republic*, the *Phaedo* treats them with far more care and philosophical finesse. Cooper notes that Socrates does not behave as usual in this dialogue, and asserts that "Plato seems to take particular pains to indicate that *Phaedo* does not give us Socrates' actual last conversation or even one that fits at all closely his actual views."[71] Further, the philosophical ties of the *Phaedo* are far closer to the *Republic* than the Socratic dialogues, suggesting that these are Plato's ideas, not Socrates'.[72] The similarities between the fable told at the end of the *Republic* and the description of life after death in the *Phaedrus* are astonishing, and suggest that while they may not reflect Socrates' own views on the immortality of the soul, they certainly suggest Plato's perception of the potentiality of poetry. In the *Republic*, the fables told are meant to guide the citizens towards a path of philosophical truth. In the *Phaedrus*, we find Socrates doing the same thing: telling a fable, as his daemon demanded, that will guide his colleagues about the best way to approach death – not just his, but eventually their own. Socrates may admit that he wrote down a few fables before his death, but the true depiction of poetry in the *Phaedrus* is the fable he tells of life after death shortly before he drinks the hemlock.

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[68] Sallis, 319-320.

[69] Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 61.

[70] Plato, *Phaedo*, 61b.

Considering these three examples, we find that poetry *can* redeem itself. In fact, it is the very "function of [these myths] to reunite in a harmonious totality the moral and cognitive objections to poetry, but in such a way as to vindicate its nature as not just an adjunct or servant but an integral part of philosophy itself."[73] These myths do this by speaking directly to reason, imbuing virtue, and being guided by true ideas – in each of these cases, by the lover of such ideas: a philosopher. The *Phaedrus* offers a discussion of a prayer, a palinode, that a poet can utter if he discovers he has uttered a falsehood in a poem. In the *Phaedo*, as in the *Republic*, we find that no such palinode is necessary if

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71. John M. Cooper, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 49.

72. Cooper, 49.

73. Rosen, 357.

the poetic image is interpreted or offered by a lover of wisdom: a philosopher, or a poet particularly inspired by the truth. Guided by truth and not fame, virtue and not wealth, the fables and poems delivered by a philosopher are the only possible redemption for the quarrel between poetry and philosophy. In the *Republic*, Socrates takes both the Phoenician story and the tale of Er and corrects their flaws. He puts them in narrative structure, removes any appeals to emotion, and delivers only what speaks to the rational soul. Similarly, in the *Phaedo*, Plato takes the Phoenician story from the *Republic* and blends it with his own theories about life and death, producing a fable worthy of a place in the just city.

For the purposes of this project, we will rely on the most current, and most commonly accepted, reading of Plato's internal struggle between the importance of poetic imagery and the importance of philosophy. Rather than view them as sparring opponents, we ought to view them as both working to enlighten, awaken, and guide the soul. Despite his critiques of purely imitative imitators, such as Ion, Plato respects the power poetry has to impress ideas upon the soul – the poetic images simply need to be carefully chosen, specifically composed, and deliberately delivered. Further, he invites philosophers to do for poets what prophets do for gods – translate their meaning, separate the truth from the falsity, and find application for it in our world. Ultimately, for Plato, poetic imagery can contain truth, as long as the image always connects to a higher Form. Crucially, identifying that truth requires careful examination, consideration, and explication by philosophers.

Art After Plato

As we have seen, Plato ultimately argues that poetic images are simultaneously the most powerful threat and greatest resource in ethical and political education. In the wrong hands, poetry shapes the souls of both children and adults away from virtuous behavior, thus infecting the city with immoderation, cowardice, and ignorance. In the right hands, it can serve to show the path to a higher good, to a realm of true ideas that will ultimately result in moderation, courage, and wisdom for anyone who encounters it. While this chapter has focused primarily on the *Republic*, evidence for this claim can be found in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, *Ion*, and *Symposium*.[74] As it is clear that the importance of poetic imagery in the development of the examined life permeates the Platonic oeuvre, those philosophers who seek to understand art have inherited a sacred task.

If, as is argued above, philosophers are the ultimate palinode for any form of artistic expression, then their input on art – poetry, literature, painting, architecture, music, dance, and film – is crucial. Though Plato's ideal *polis* may only exist as a city in theory, the mission of philosophers to pursue the examined life for themselves and their students remains a perennial responsibility. The description of the rhapsodes and poets given by Socrates in the *Ion* is no different than many of the artists of today: many are simply motivated by fame, wealth, or the romantic notion of divine inspiration. Following Plato, the task for some, then, may be to sift through these artists and their work in order to find pieces that embody a truth worthy of uncovering and explicating.

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[74] For a full list of these references, cf. Elizabeth Asmis, "Plato on poetic creativity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 338-364.

The task for *this* dissertation is different: the next chapter will turn to Martin Heidegger's claim that the truth disclosed in art is tied to its immanent historical provenance as a contrast to the Platonic ideal that the poetic image is tethered to a transcendent idea. In turn, my project will take film as a prime example of an image that integrates but also move beyond these at times contrary insights from both Plato and Heidegger. The filmic image, as I shall argue, is at once directed towards an ideal or ideals, without being necessarily tethered to it/them, while being grounded in its immanent historicity and materiality – its auratic nature. Yet the filmic image's unique properties permit it to remain open to the viewer and offer a greater "showing," to borrow Sallis's terminology, of the human experience. As arguably the most popular contemporary art form, film is the modern day poetry, attracting crowds of all ages by the millions. Films have taken the place of the stories and fables told to children in ancient Greece – they instill beliefs and attitudes from an early age, and are equally capable of improving the soul as they are at appealing to our appetitive natures. Nussbaum notes that for Plato, "dialogues, then, unlike all the books criticized by Socrates, might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity."[75] To paraphrase her important and apt observation, this dissertation will argue that films, especially those featuring montage, unlike all the images criticized by Plato, might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity by offering a wide array of semantic play and interpretation for each viewer.

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75. Nussbaum, 127.

CHAPTER III

HEIDEGGER’S ‘POST-AESTHETIC’ ARTISTIC IMAGE

Introduction

Martin Heidegger’s account of the work of art, and, with it, the artistic image, is famously difficult to understand, but ultimately stands as one of the greatest attempts to consider the question of being in its relationship to the work of art. For Heidegger, the work of art is the space wherein truth is disclosed: truth that informs us about our world, truth that is disclosive thanks to the manner in which it is created and preserved, and truth that, ultimately, drives forward the unfolding of Being, that is, history itself. As we will see, Heidegger depicts the image as being essentially connected to the historical conditions that create it – so much so that if those conditions are removed or forgotten, the truth indwelling the image can fade away entirely.

This chapter will depict Heidegger’s understanding of the image primarily by undertaking a hermeneutical reading of Heidegger’s essays “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “The Question Concerning Technology,” as well as excerpts from *Being and Time*. It will then argue that while this ontological understanding of the image suffices for the artistic media Heidegger discusses – poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music – it is insufficient to describe the filmic image, which is not necessarily bound to any historical or material origin, but instead detaches from that origin, becoming a second with an accidental first.

Overcoming Modern Aesthetics

As we know from *Being and Time*, Heidegger's overall project is to set aside what he views as a derivative notion of metaphysics, one that no longer adequately diagnoses or aids the human condition. In *Being and Time* and other essays, Heidegger works to expose the primary or primordial engagement with the world with, in, and through man's relationship to Being. Against the prior Western history of metaphysics, Heidegger asserts that the ultimate concern of philosophy is in fact that of Dasein's relationship to Being. In building his analysis, he asserts that what distinguishes Dasein (literally, there-being or 'a being who is there') from all other beings is the fact that "in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being."[1] That is, we are creatures that *care* about our experience in the world, about our relationship to other beings and other things. With this, the essential task of Dasein is to face the ever-present possibility of choosing "to be itself or not to be itself," to live authentically in relation to Being, or to turn away from the nature of Being and fall into inauthenticity.

While Heidegger's early work addresses these questions on the basis of an existential analytic, some of his later works examine these concerns in reference to our experience of art. In his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger asserts that we have lost touch with the nature and purpose of art, just as we have done with the nature of our being. Thus, just as Heidegger laid out the fundamental ontology of Dasein in *Being and Time*, his work in "The Origin of the Work of Art" as well as "The

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[1] 1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), §4, 11.

Question Concerning Technology" seeks to return to the originary relationship between Dasein and 'things'.

We must note that Heidegger speaks in these essays of overcoming aesthetics, of moving beyond "the rootlessness of Western thought" and towards an understanding of the work of art that is authentic, meaningful, and existential.[2] This rootlessness begins in a simple error of translation: with the transition to Latin terminology Heidegger sees a simultaneous movement away from a Greek understanding of the way art shapes our understanding of the world, the operation of our culture, and our relationship to Being. In its place rises an aesthetics based on "resemblance" and "representation"; a part of the subject/object dichotomy that plagues Western philosophy and occludes ontological difference. Just as the Cartesian distinction asserts that Dasein is somehow removed from Being, the history of Western aesthetics posits the work of art as separate from Dasein. In so doing, Heidegger asserts, aesthetics on "the usual view" closes off our relationship to the work of art; "it does not lay hold of the thing as it is in its own being, but makes an assault upon it."[3] By positing art as an object separate from the viewing subject, the history of aesthetics has only managed to produce a derivative or ontic understanding of the meaning and operation of art. Thus, aesthetics, as it has been understood for centuries, must be deemed an antiquated term. If the origin, meaning, and truth of art is to be reclaimed, then, we must learn how to return to a phenomenological experience of art. This experience would reject the enframed view of art perpetuated

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2. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 149.

3. Heidegger, "The Origin," 143, 151.

through the centuries: that which characterizes art as viewed by a *subject* that necessarily experiences the *object* of art as external and unconnected from the subject. Instead of viewing our relationship to art as an opposition, Heidegger will assert that it is in fact a revealing that can only happen when we usher in the meaning of art just as Dasein ushers in Being. A work of art is first and foremost a thing, and a thing must be permitted "a free field to display its thingly character directly."[4] This requires a movement away from the subject/object dichotomy and a movement towards our originary experience of art: as a disclosiveness of Being that we experience phenomenologically. In order to enter this free field for art to expose truth, the misunderstanding and derivation of art must first be overcome.

The Way Art Works

For Heidegger, art is not simply an object in the work, but an event that is "the becoming and happening of truth."[5] Art is one of the ways in which Being exposes the true character of the world, and it does this by disclosing truth in three distinct ways: by orienting us towards the world, by orienting us towards the operation of art itself, and by exposing a historical transformation of Being to which we must reorient ourselves. If we wish to avoid actualizing Hegel's concerns about the pastness of art, we must understand each of these becomings and happenings of truth in full.

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4. Heidegger, "The Origin," 151.
5. Ibid, 196.

Firstly, art demonstrates to us the way that it is in fact "the becoming and happening of truth."[6] This claim is not one Heidegger simply makes, but argues it can be found present in the artwork itself, if one only looks closely. This claims rests on the vehement rejection of the representational model of art – art mimics reality – which grew out of the Plantonic perspective that art participates or demonstrates an essence or form.[7] Heidegger's example is a poem from C. F. Meyer entitled "Roman Fountain":

> The jet ascends and falling fills
> The marble basin circling round;
> Thus, veiling itself over, spills
> Into a second basin's ground.
> The second in such plenty lives,
> Its bubbling flood a third invests,
> And each at once receives and gives
> And streams and rests.[8]

Heidegger is clear that this poem is not a description of a specific fountain; it is different in kind than Jacobo Sadoleto's 1506 poem that simply describes the sculpture *The Laocoon Group* (2nd century BCE) upon its arrival to the Vatican. He is also vehement that is does not in any way attempt to capture the 'essence' of a Roman fountain. Rather, truth is happening in this poem in that it exposes both the thingliness of a fountain and the worldliness created by the experience of such a fountain. For Heidegger, art opens a clearing in which "beings as a whole are brought into unconcealment and held therein."[9] This quality of art is best found in the process of its creation.

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6. Heidegger, "The Origin,"196.
7. Ibid, 162.
8. Ibid, 163.
9. Ibid, 181.

For Heidegger, “the work is distinguished by being created so that its createdness is part of the created work.”[10] We can imagine the creation of Meyer’s poem within the poem itself; Meyer sits by a fountain, is struck by its beauty, and creates: he “lets something emerge as a thing that has been brought forth,” namely, the truth of the fountain.[11] We might see this clearer in another example – a song by Leonard Coen entitled “Hallelujah” from his 1984 album *Various Positions*:

> Well it goes like this,
> The fourth, the fifth,
> The minor fall and the major lift,
> The baffled king composing; Hallelujah.[12]

The lyrics of the song correspond directly to the musical accompaniment; they name the chords as they are played, as well as the progression of the bridge. This is more than a description of the song being played – more than mere representation of a process – it is, like “Roman Fountain,” a disclosure of the process of creation of art, as well as a preservation of the unconcealment required to create the art. Further, it depicts the often “baffling” experience of entering into the clearing and seeing being – in this case, the process of creation – unveiled. The composer is baffled that is able to unveil “a secret chord” that he could play and “please the Lord” – baffled that the creation of a work of art holds seemingly divine power. In his assessment of Meyer’s poem, as well as my description of Cohen’s song, it is clear that the true work of art enables us to “discover

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10. Heidegger, “The Origin,”189.
11. Ibid, 185.
12. Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah,” in *Various Positions*, Columbia, 1984.

and experience the createdness explicitly in the work," not outside it, as a subject to an object.[13]

The second way that art allows truth to happen is by defining a world for a people. The phrase defining a world means that art exposes the important qualities, operations, and values of a culture to the in-dwelling citizens, who might otherwise fail to fully understand the way their world works. Heidegger's example is a Greek temple, precisely because it "cannot be ranked as representational art," but must be understood in terms of the happening of truth it permits. In itself, it discloses nothing; it simply a building standing on a rock. However, when the temple was built on the rocky out-cliff, it transformed that ground from mere rock to *earth* - to a native ground that enables nature to reveal itself as what it is.

The distinction between earth and world is crucial to understanding Heidegger's perspective of art. For Heidegger, earth constitutes "the natural in general in contrast to the historicity of the world," not simply the site of granite upon which something can be built.[14] It is one side of the boundary between nature and culture, between the concealed and what can be disclosed through the work of art. Earth is the place where the "emerging and rising" of being is sheltered so that things "can enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are" without interruption.[15] In other words, earth is the place where the sensuousness of all things that is not brought into being by human beings but was always already given, even in everything that we produce, such that through it, world-creation is made possible.

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[13] Heidegger, "The Origin,"190.

[14] Günter Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*, trans. Jerome Veith, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 158.

[15] Heidegger, "The Origin,"168.

Heidegger defines world as "the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people."[16] Put more simply, world is that which tells a people what matters; what is important in life, what is unimportant, what is right, and what is wrong. World is what allows a people to distinguish between the something and the nothing. The building of the temple brings the earth into relief, makes it visible as a realm that is "continuously self-secluding," but it simultaneously establishes a world which rests upon it and discloses the secluded truth from it.[17] World and earth are "never separated," but always engaged in "strife."[18] By this, Heidegger denotes a positive notion of strife, one in which "the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their essential natures."[19] Building this work of art, the temple, begins a constant and ever-escalating process of seclusion and disclosure, of revealing truth about the world and then instilling it into the earth:

> The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground. […] The temple, in its standing there, first gives things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.[20]

When the polis experienced the temple, all of the qualities of their being were made clear to them. It was a place for communion with the gods, for reflection on the virtues and vices mandated to them by custom, and for carrying out the sacred rituals of life. All

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16. Heidegger, "The Origin,"174.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Heidegger, "The Origin," 168.

of these things were revealed to them by the world of the temple, and then reified by the earth of the temple:

> It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people.[21]

The temple does not offer this meaning and connection; it *demands* it. It is a native ground for letting the god be the god, for letting the world be the world, as long as there is a god and world to "be kept abidingly in force."[22] The strife between earth and world is the place where art *works* in the sense of bringing meaning into being.

This experience of this temple is not one in which we moderns can partake. Following the inevitable movement of time, this temple has undergone world-decay – the world it described no longer exists, and another has taken place. Were we to visit it, the world we would experience is one of ruin, loss, and historical antiquity – the original "world of the work that stands there has perished."[23] Though those elements have decayed and "can never be undone," if we consider it as it was without world-decay, we can see the way the temple-work was done for the Greeks.

We would be well served to consider the strife between earth and world within a modern example offered by Günter Figal: Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*. For Figal, *Falling Water* is "an architectural masterpiece," not simply because of its design and site placement, but because of its relationship between earth and world. As Figal delineates at length, every aspect of *Falling Water* “shows nature solely by *showing itself naturally*.”[24] The boundary between earth and world is highly in strife in this house. While in the house, it is never clear that you have absconded from the nature surrounding it: the sound of the waterfall, the movement of the leaves, and the smells of the forest through the open window blend seamlessly with the rock walls and wood paneling. Standing on one of the four credenzas, it is not clear that you have left the house; the home and the site blend so well into one another that the boundary between earth and world becomes almost entirely blurred:

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[21] Heidegger, "The Origin," 167.

[22] Ibid, 169.

[23] Ibid, 166.

> The house comes from out of nature and leaves it; it stands outside of nature, marking a boundary, and has at the same time taken nature up into itself. The house comes to appearance in this open transition […] it shows itself as natural and yet not as nature.[25]

The world of *Falling Water* is one of nature; it is impossible to escape the fact that the house has its existence “in stone, in wood, in color, in sound.”[26] For Figal, *Falling Water* explains the inseparable connection between earth and world far better than the Greek temple. It is a work of art that discloses the truth of the natural beauty surrounding and indwelling the house – and this truth is not possible without the “historical world opened up by the work” of the house itself.[27]

Finally, we can see why Heidegger argues that “*all art*, as the letting happen of the advent of truth of beings, is as such, *in essence*, poetry.”[28] Poetic naming, as we recall from “The Question Concerning Technology,” is crucial in understanding and

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24. Figal, 156. For a full treatment of the house, cf. 152-157.
25. Figal, 156.
26. Ibid, 159.
27. Ibid.
28. Heidegger, “The Origin,” 197.

navigating our world without falling into enframing. Art is the act by which we name things as they truly are, just as Adam does in Genesis 2:19:

> The poetical brings the true into the splendor of what Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls *to ekphanestaton*, that which shines forth most purely. The poetical thoroughly pervades every art, every revealing or essential unfolding into the beautiful.[29]

For Heidegger, art does not simply reflect our historical situation, it *discloses* it to us. It names our world for us, and in so doing, it is inextricably bound up with the earth, world, and strife from which it arises.

If we return to Meyer's poem, we can find an illustration of the final way Heidegger believes art works: it exposes a historical transformation of Being and allows us to usher both it and ourselves into a new experience of reality. The three tiers of the fountain can be understood as what Heidegger identified as three major foundations or beginnings in which "a new and essential world irrupted."[30] If we imagine the water from the fountain as Being, we can watch it usher forth throughout the centuries:

> This foundation happened in the West for the first time in Greece. What was in the future to be called Being was set to work, setting the standard.[31]

This corresponds nicely to Meyer's first two stanzas: "the jet ascends and falling fills/ the marble basin circling round."[32] But this initial setting into work of Being was not a finite act, but one of necessary movement forward, of constantly ushering in new Being:

> The realm of beings thus opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God's creation. This happened in the Middle Ages.[33]

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[29] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 340.

[30] Heidegger, "The Origin," 201.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Heidegger, "The Origin," 205.

[33] Ibid, 201.

Again, we see Meyer's poem at work: "thus, veiling itself over spills/ into a second basin's ground/ the second in such plenty lives."[34] But Being cannot be held back for long, and yet another epoch emerges, the modern epoch:

> This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning and during the course of the modern age. Beings become objects that could be controlled and penetrated by calculation.[35]

To finish Meyer's poem, we can clearly see that while Being may be circling the third basin at the moment, it has no intention of stopping it's "spilling over" at any time: "and each at once receives and gives/ and streams and rests."[36] Whereas above we relegated Meyer to the kind of meta-exposition of the creation of art that we can see in Cohen, we now see that Meyer's poem is aiming for a higher level still. Cohen focuses on the creation of a single song; Meyer describes the transition from one epoch to the next. For Heidegger, these movements happen solely as a result of art as the unconcealment of being:

> Whenever art happens – that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again. History here means not a sequence in time of events, of whatever sort, however important History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entry into that people's endowment.[37]

Here, all three tasks of art come together into one: it is in the poem and the song that we are able to understand the setting-to-work of truth that art enacts. It is in the Greek temple and *Falling Water* that we can see that architecture is the work of seizing our world and working towards its unconcealment. While it is true, for Heidegger, that art is necessarily bound up with its historical and material conditions – if it were not, the Greek temple would not have suffered world-decay – it is also true that art is the necessary condition for the possibility of history itself:

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[34] Ibid, 205.
[35] Ibid, 201.
[36] Ibid, 205.
[37] Heidegger, "The Origin," 201-2.

> Art is historical, and as historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work. Art happens as poetry. Poetry is founding in the triple sense of bestowing, grounding, and beginning. Art, as founding, is essentially historical. […] Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history.[38]

Crucially, there is yet another task for us in our relationship to art. Just as we saw above the importance of creating art, it is necessary for us to preserve it as well. Preservation, for Heidegger, is the deceptively simple act of "letting the work be a work."[39] In our modern positivistic age, the tendency to encounter a created work and then instrumentalist it, categorize it, quantify it, and otherwise enframe it has become *de rigueur*. As will be discussed at length in Chapter V, philosophers and film theorists are some of the worst to perpetuate the instrumentalization of art. Undoubtedly, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the socioeconomic conditions surrounding today's culture industry is partly to blame. However, Heidegger insists that we must resist the urge towards instrumentalization. The proper comportment towards a work of art – and a necessary component to the disclosure of its truth – is preservation:

> Preserving the work means standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work. This "standing-within" of preservation, however, is a knowing. […] Knowing that remains a willing, and willing that remains a knowing, is the existing human being's ecstatic entry into the unconcealment of Being. […]

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[38] Heidegger, "The Origin," 202.

[39] Heidegger, "The Origin," 191.

> Preserving the work, as knowing, is a sober standing-within the awesomeness of the truth that is happening in the work.[40]

When we stand on the credenza of *Falling Water*, we preserve the work by being *present* for the truth of the interaction between nature and natural. When we stand before a Jackson Pollock, we preserve the work by basking in the truth of the strife between representation and non-representation. To preserve a work of art, we must be willing to listen to it, with all its historicity, and hear its truth – not impose our own upon it. Without that preservation, Heidegger argues, the truth of the work can never fully shine through.

The Meaning, Source, and Creation of Art

Given the extended considerations above, it behooves us to offer a summary of what we have learned thus far. First, for Heidegger, art is not tied to transcendental ideas, nor does it seek to represent any essence. This is made exceedingly clear in his hyperbolic reaction to the idea:

> But then, where and how is this general essence, so that artworks are able to agree with it? With what essence of what thing should a Greek temple agree? Who could maintain the impossible view that the Idea of Temple is represented in the building?[41]

Thus, Heidegger contravenes the Platonic conception of art as always relating to a Form. Further, Heidegger does not ascribe to the notion of genius popularized by the moderns: his lengthy discussions of letting be, ushering in, and preservation directly contradict any notion that the artist is intellectually superior or divinely inspired to the extent that art can only be created by unique individuals possessing either superior skill or unique vision.

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[40] Heidegger, “The Origin,” 192.
[41] Heidegger, “The Origin,” 162.

Heidegger argues that art is a matter of allowing truth to come forth into the world, and carries with it a responsibility on behalf of the creators and the preservers to find an earth that can support a world. Art happens because artists can recognize the patterns of Being and usher them into our world from "the withheld determination of historical Dasein itself."[42] As discussed above, great art is capable of thrusting Being forth into a new era, a new way of understanding the world in relation to Dasein:

> There certainly lies hidden in nature a rift-design, a measure and border, and tied to it, a capacity for bringing-forth – that is, art. But it is equally certain that this art hidden in nature becomes manifest only through the work, because it is lodged originarily in the work.[43]

Here we see art described in teleological terms; art lies hidden in nature, awaiting its emergence. With Hegel, Heidegger argues that this *telos* cannot simply unfold of its own accord; there is real work that must be done in order to make it happen. This work is a combination of both the creation and preservation described above. We are responsible to Being for both bringing forth and fixing in place truth as well as allowing it to reveal itself as it truly is:

> Thus the "fixing in place" of truth, rightly understood, can never run counter to the "letting happen." For one thing, this "letting" is nothing passive but a doing in the highest degree in the sense of *thesis*, a working, and willing that in the present essay is characterized as the "existing being's ecstatic entry into the unconcealment of Being."[44]

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[42] Ibid, 200.
[43] Ibid, 195.
[44] Heidegger, "The Origin," 208.

It is thus up to us to create a ground for work, to listen to the call of Being, and to authentically enter into a relationship with each work of art so that we can let it be as it is. The responsibility placed upon Dasein in “The Origin of the Work of Art” to engage with historically bounded and history-driving works of art is as strong if not stronger than the authenticity demanded of Dasein in *Being and Time*.

Reaching Back to Look Forward

The Heideggerain delineation of the ontological structure of the image contributes a necessary component of existential responsibility to the artistic work. As has been argued, Heidegger vehemently believes that art is the unfolding of truth and the harbinger of epochal shifts, but only if we are willing to engage in the creation and preservation of it. Given this, Heidegger’s account, like Plato’s, is problematic when applied to the filmic image for two reasons.

First, Heidegger is insistent that art is historically bounded. As we saw through the example of the Greek temple, if the historical ground of the work is lost, world-decay sets in and the full meaning of the work is lost to time, never to be re-experienced. As will be argued through Benjamin, film does in fact have an element of this historical grounding as well as this historical unfolding: films are deeply connected to the material and technological apparatus of their construction, to the historical circumstances surrounding their inception, production, and premier, and to the intent of the director, actors, cinematographers, and hundreds of others who *work* to create the work. However, film can be detached from this ground – from what Benjamin will call an aura

– and, in its detached state, we can unveil truth despite having no understanding of the initial strife between earth and world that created it. This is to say that film, once complete, can be a world without being bound to an earth. Truth can be gleaned from film without risk of world-decay; it is as if it is a brand new temple each time the film begins to play, and the viewer is able to access myriad truths that correspond to the viewer's world, not the world of the film. We saw in Chapter II that the Platonic depiction fails to fully describe the filmic image. The filmic image does reach for a higher truth, but ends up being always incomplete, refusing to point to any one specific Form. Similarly, Heidegger's depiction of the image is too limited in both the available meaning and access to that meaning to accurately depict the filmic image. Heidegger may be correct in that film is created in the strife between earth and world, but film is detachable from this strife, permitting the viewer to enter into a clearing whose ground is the viewer's world, not being as such.

Second, for Heidegger, film is essentially technologically created and thus inescapably enframed. The world to which it belongs will always be haunted by what Horkheimer and Adorno term the culture industry. As such, Heidegger's concerns over the devaluation of meaning through the instrumentalization of the work of art expands beyond art into the world as a whole: habituating ourselves to instrumentalization in art ultimately discourages us from seeking authentic truth in the first place. Thus, just as Heidegger describes the "setting in" of art in an art installation that limits the "letting be" of the work itself, film is always-already "set in" the world of technology, instrumentalization, capitalism, and commercialization. Though Heidegger does not speak to this point directly, it is possible he would argue that film lacks a clearing in which we could allow truth to emerge – it is always-already enframed, never capable of being disclosed.

Still, film does possess a quality that Heidegger argues all great art possesses, one that is essential for the unfolding of Being:

> It is precisely in great art – and only such art is under consideration here – that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge.[45]

As we will see through Benjamin, the question of authorship (or artistry, for Heidegger) becomes almost impossible to discuss in film. Colloquially, the director is given authorship of any given film, but hundreds and often thousands of individuals contribute to the production of a single film, and the influences that make up the earth of the film are innumerable. We can easily imagine Van Gogh in his studio painting the same pair of shoes over and over again and label him an *artist* endeavoring to capture the truth of those shoes. However, how do we classify the location scouts who spent months searching for the best hotel in Colorado in which to shoot *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980) – are they artists? Do we consider the prop manager in charge of sharpening and polishing the thirty-plus axes for Jack's rampage in Act III of the film to be an artist? Or is the only artist responsible for the film the great Stanley Kubrick, genius auteur? Heidegger argues that authorship or artistry "remains inconsequential," to the truth of the work, and "destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge."[46] In film, authorship is not inconsequential, remnants always remain, and the work emerges all the same. At base, Heidegger’s account of the creation and preservation of art is simply inadequate as either a practical or philosophical description of the creation of the filmic image.

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[45] Heidegger, "The Origin," 166.
[46] Heidegger, "The Origin," 166.

The issue is not an ontological one, but an existential one. Just as Heidegger challenges us to engage in the act of letting a work be, we must acknowledge, with the aid of Benjamin, that the filmic image is one such art that ushers in a new way of being. With this, we must be willing not only to resist the technological and instrumental elements of the filmic image, but the auratic constructs surrounding it. We must be willing to let the filmic image be while clearing a new ground for that very being. This existential challenge, too, forces us to acknowledge that film does owe its existence to specific historical and material conditions – but not solely those. Further, we must be willing to acknowledge that the immense dissemination of authorship in the creation of a film is a powerful challenge to the Platonic notion that a single Ideal is present for our intellect to discover – but, again, the filmic image does not usher in that single truth. In these disclosures, we will see that what Benjamin teaches us about the filmic image – and ultimately about all auratic artwork – is that these elements of the work of art are ontologically accidental. It is our existential and political responsibility to seek out authenticity in the filmic image – a task that can only be accomplished if we view it as a fully liberated image, one that is infinitely open for meaning creation in relation not just to the world of the film, but to the phantasmagoric world of the viewer.

CHAPTER IV

BENJAMIN AND AESTHETICS AFTER FILM

Introduction

Walter Benjamin's prescient essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" is at once optimistic and pessimistic; at once a work of aesthetic theory and political theory. What it is not, according to Miriam Hansen, is an essay that is "'about' film as an empirical phenomenon, nor, for that matter, about any other, preconstituted, given object."[1] She argues that it is a performative piece, one that deigns to provide a description of the aesthetic and theoretical state of film in the 1930s in favor of "the structural role [of] film as a hinge between the fate of art under the conditions of industrial capitalism and the contemporary political crisis, which pivots on the organization of the masses."[2] Benjamin's essay is included in this project not for its invaluable resources on film theory (for which there are innumerable other options), but rather because his concerns about the need for changes to aesthetic theory after the rise of film speak directly to the concerns of this project. Like Benjamin's essay, this project is not "about" film. True, it features an entire chapter devoted to the analysis of films, but only to serve a higher concern: the ontological status of the image after the emergence of cinema.

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1. Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 85.
2. Hansen, 85.

As we have seen thus far, the discipline of philosophy has perpetuated roughly two "paths" in relation to the ontological structure and treatment of the image. The first, the Platonic perspective (as explored in Chapter II), views the image as always in service of a higher truth – a transcendental ideal towards which the impoverished image reaches, but only the enlightened mind can unlock. The second, which is treated here with reference to Heidegger but which no doubt involves echoes of the German Romantic perspective, views the image as primarily grounded in its origin: it dwells on questions of historical context, authorship, ability to expose the truth of a given *zeitgeist* to its denizens, and allow them phenomenological access. Frustratingly, though cinema has been in existence for over a century, the philosophy of art continues to struggle to place the filmic image in one of the above broad ontological traditions. I argue that it is not until Benjamin that a theorist has been able to clearly, presciently, and performatively explain the shift that prohibits the filmic image from ever belonging in either of the two roughly sketched aesthetic traditions above. The shift, of course, is the rise of mechanical reproduction in the age of industrial capitalism. Even then, Benjamin's work has been misunderstood, misused, and demands our further attention.

The reason for this failure of theory to adequately describe the phenomenon of film and other mechanically reproduced works of art is twofold: first, a simple matter of historical anachronism, the second, a deep-seated distrust of the instrumentalizing power of technology. In our discussion of Plato, we dwelled on the notion of mimesis, of imitation and reproduction. Yet, as Benjamin rightly points out, the Greeks were limited in mechanical reproduction of artworks to "casting and stamping."[3] Thus, the question of mechanical reproducibility (as we now understand it) is not under consideration by Plato – except the claim that reproduced works such as "bronzes, terra cottas, and coins" are lower categories of the image,[4] unworthy of consideration. We should recall Sallis's explanation that all imitations and reproductions are "by images *first* shadows,"[5] an existence *via negativa,* not representations of the original thing. Further, recall that arduous exercise of the intellect is required to move beyond said shadows in order to access the masked ideal. The image drops away quite quickly under the Platonic heritage, and thus film, which consists of literally thousands of images, falls under the same universal position Plato holds: any imagistic representation – technologically reproduced or otherwise – cannot directly depict truth.

Secondly, Heidegger's concerns over technology are so fraught that in his writings on aesthetics he does not even consider mechanical reproductions such as the photographic image – let alone the filmic image – to be works of art. For Heidegger, technology is essentially *gestellen*, preventing us access to the work of art in its true fullness. Heidegger thus views mechanical reproduction as an entirely separate existential challenge than that posed to Dasein by the work of art. Others who distrust technology and its ability to instrumentalize, compartamentalize, and otherwise separate beings from Being have pursued similar lines of thought, most notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Neil Postman. Their work and the work of their heirs has perpetuated the dogma that anything technologically created or reproducible is automatically suspect as an authentic work of art, and arguments otherwise generally end up mired in political debates. We will return to this claim in detail in Chapter VI.

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[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), §VIII, 27.

[4] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §VIII, 27.

[5] John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 419.

It is with Benjamin, then, that we must proceed in order to clarify the ontological status of the image after the advent of mechanical reproduction – our focus, with Benjamin, will be on the filmic image. We will discover that the filmic image often appears to reach towards a transcendental truth, but, contra Plato, the image is either irritatingly incomplete or frustratingly ambiguous in regards to which truth it seeks. Further, we will discover that the historical origin of the image, what Heidegger calls the *ground* of the image, contributes a great deal to the production of a film. However, we will argue that the filmic image cannot lose this ground – it cannot suffer what Heidegger refers to as "world-decay" in which the meaning and value of a work of art dissipates with the passing of time. Filmic images, it will be argued, are timeless: they carry with them the context of their creation, but they continue to generate meaning despite the loss of their world. As we will see in Chapter V, knowledge of the Weimar Era in Germany is not necessary to generate meaning from a viewing of *Der letzle Mann* (Murnau 1924) even though the Weimar Era, the social, economic, and political elements which characterized it, and the relationship of the film to these elements – in short, the ground or world of the work of art – have faded into the past, and thus suffered world-decay.

Finally, it is with and against Benjamin that we will discover that the auratic nature of the image – a nature that Benjamin argues can be destroyed with the rise of mechanical reproduction – is very much alive and well in the filmic image. An aura, for Benjamin, is a special quality of specific works of art. A work of art acquires this aura as a result of becoming important to a society or culture, of being part of the core elements of what constitutes what Heidegger would call the world of that people. For Benjamin, an artwork does not spontaneously acquire an aura, but is given one by those who control cultural capital: theorists and academics. A work of art deemed crucial enough to a culture is thus entered into a canon, a list of works that describe the culture in its truest form. However, once admitted into this canon, the work is surrounded by an aura that prevents direct access to it in its originary nature: to use Heideggerain language, it is no longer possible to let the work be. Instead, the reader of canonical works of literature finds herself at a distance from the work in-itself. Instead, she is confronted with a litany of prescribed meanings, interpretations, and historical implications. Similarly, films have been rapidly admitted into similar canons, and acquired similar auras, since the invention of cinema. Benjamin's main purpose in the "Work of Art" essay is to destroy the aura and thus open works of art to interpretative free play beyond economic and cultural restrictions. However, I argue that Benjamin's political goals cannot be achieved until the acknowledgment of and deep consideration of the aura surrounding an image is undertaken in an existential valence. If we as the demos can rise to the personal and individual demand for authentic engagement with the filmic image, we can finally find for the image an unprecedentedly open "scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]"[6] that permits authentic viewership.

Art, Reproducibility, and Aura

For Heidegger, art does not simply reflect our historical situation, it discloses it to us. For Benjamin, art belies our historical situation, but in a different way: the work of art has the capacity to "encode information about its historical period,"[7] specifically social, political, and economic information. This encoded information can then be revealed to viewers through details in the artwork, permitting them to understand the circumstances of their own world. This claim derives from Benjamin's underlying concern throughout "The Work of Art" essay: the claim that "modern media – as genres and as individual works – affect the changing human sensory apparatus."[8] This is to say that we may create the innovations of our time, but ultimately, our creations change our capacity to perceive the world – they widen the realm of what we *can* perceive in the world and ultimately permit us to view socioeconomic realities that are otherwise hidden from us. As Michael Jennings notes,

> Underlying all of Benjamin's thought is the conviction that the seemingly most obvious things – who we are, the character of the physical environment in which we live – are in fact denied to us. The world in which we live has, for us, the character of an optical media device […] "phantasmagoria."[9]

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[6] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," fn23.

[7] Michael Jennings, "The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et. al., trans. Edmund Jephcott et. al., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9.

[8] Jennings, 9.

[9] Jennings, 11.

Unlike Heidegger's claim that our anxiety and potential inauthenticity towards existence is bound up with our thrownness, Benjamin's deep political beliefs drive him to argue that our inability to correctly perceive, understand, and act in our own world is due to "urban commodity capitalism."[10] The closeness of city life, the speed offered by railways, and the frenetic exchange of information offered by telegraph and telephone all have distinct impacts on the way we perceive the world: we look less for the slow and detailed and more for the fast and glossed over. Frustratingly, our ability to notice our own place in the world is often overshadowed by the image of the world itself, visible for the first time (at the time of his writing) as a connected whole rather than a series of discontinuous communities. What Benjamin sees in operation is a complex reciprocity: while technology is capable of *blinding* us to the reality of our world, it is also technology that is capable of making us *aware* of our world. As Benjamin elaborates in *The Arcades Project*,

> For the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time… Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it; each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability.[11]

With the rise of urban commodity capitalism comes the technology – specifically the technology of artistic reproduction – that permits us to understand commodity capitalism. For Benjamin, the full awareness of commodity capitalism is not available to us *until* the rise of mechanical reproduction and the art of film; it is these two technological innovations that are teleologically linked to the knowledge of their surrounding and supporting material conditions. In order to fully understand the ramifications of this claim, we must first understand Benjamin's argument regarding the mechanical reproducibility of the image.

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[10] Jennings, 11.

[11] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.462-463, Convolute N3,1.

At the opening of the second version of "The Work of Art" essay, Benjamin offers a brief history of artistic reproducibility, noting that "in principle, the work of art has always been reproducible."[12] Copies made by hand were produced for pedagogical or financial reasons. Both the woodcut and moveable type have made the written word easily and quickly reproducible for hundreds of years. Yet what hindered these early attempts is the need for the human hand to perform the reproduction, either with the paintbrush, the setting of the type, or the carving of the woodblock. It is not until photography that mechanical reproducibility "free[s] the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction,"[13] tasks that had been formerly relegated to copper plating or lithography. This freedom from the tedious task of hand-engraving the lithographic plates allowed images to surpass the speed of the printing press and keep pace with the speed of human speech – and bring us into the next age of technological expression.

Each innovation lays the groundwork for the next innovation. In each of these technological advancements, Benjamin argues, the next technology lies latent: "just as the illustrated newspaper lay hidden within lithography, so the sound film was latent in photography."[14] This process of innovation latent in previous innovation reaches a pinnacle with photography, which for the first time enables the reproduction of "all known works of art" [15] – a task that had formerly been impossible for media such as architecture, music, and large sculptures. In photography, and later film, *any* work of art can be reproduced and disseminated beyond its spatiotemporal location. The larger focus of the "Work of Art" essay, then, is to "study the impact […] the reproduction of artworks and the art of film are having on art in its traditional form."[16] As we have said and will examine further, the impact is unprecedented in the history of the philosophy of art.

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[12] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §2, 20.

[13] Ibid.

Traditional forms of reproduction, understood as those reproductions done without the aid of technology, always lack one thing: "the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place."[17] The original work of art is the only thing capable of preserving its here and now, as well its history and tradition; in this, it presents its own authenticity. This authenticity ensures that the work of art surrounded by glass in the museum is the "same, identical thing"[18] that has always persisted since its conception, despite changes in physical condition, ownership, or geographic location. Further, it ensures that the work of art on display is not a forgery, but is the same painting or sculpture over which a Genius labored to create something truly Beautiful, truly Art. A copy of Vincent Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* will wither under the authenticity of the authentic *The Starry Night* if placed side by side: the true shining forth with its variety of owners, traditions, and cultural value; the forgery lacking any such gravitas.[19] What the genuine *The Starry Night* possesses that the forgery lacks is authenticity: "the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition."[20]

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[14] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §2, 21.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 21.
[18] Ibid.

With technological forms of reproduction, something revolutionary occurs. The authenticity, and thus, the work's cultural and historical authority, is *not* preserved – it "eludes" the reproduction.[21] The authority, the tradition, and the *aura* of the work of art, are shattered by technological reproducibility: "by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence."[22] Creating a believable forgery of *The Starry Night* is laborious and requires talent; taking a photograph of it is instantaneous and requires almost no technical skill. We can understand the full ramifications of Benjamin's idea if we explore the notion of the aura.

An aura is only ever post-scripted to a work of art; it is applied to a work of art once it has been accepted into a "time-tested canon," surrounded by other auratic works.[23] The aura is described by Benjamin as "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance [*eine Ferne*]."[24] As indicated by the translator, *eine Ferne* suggests "both a distance in space and time and something remote, however near it may be."[25] This tension between nearness and distance is found in the "psychological inapproachability – an authority – claimed for the work on the basis of its position within a tradition."[26] We stand before Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and yet feel a distance: not because we are prohibited in our spatial closeness by a velvet rope – we are not – but because this work has been venerated as one of the highest examples of post-impressionism created by the genius Van Gogh. This is crucial, given that "for Benjamin, integration into the Western tradition is coterminous with an integration into cultic practices."[27] We stand as close to the painting as we can, and yet feel a distance from it, created by the ritual surrounding it: the ritual of entering the museum, the ritual of the hush when viewing the paintings, the ritual of preparing oneself to view greatness – all created by the placement of this work of art in the canon.

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[19] Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36¼". New York, The Museum of Modern Art: Painting and Sculpture.

[20] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 22.

[21] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 21.

[22] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 22.

[23] Jennings, 14.

[24] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §4, 23.

This ritual, Benjamin argues, is no different than the magical and religious rituals surrounding the earliest known works of art. These rituals are always in service to what Benjamin calls "cult value": a statue of Venus served as a religious idol for the Greeks as much as an elk cave painting served as a magical totem for hunting.[28] The cult value of the statue and the painting both comes in its service to a ritual: prayers to a higher power in the hope of material or spiritual reward. Importantly, this ritual is "highly changeable" and can even become secularized. [29] In this, Benjamin is against the Heideggerain conception of "world-decay"; simply because the original value of the work of art is no longer available, it does not preclude any further valuation – it takes on new valences. We now view a statue of Venus as an exemplar of Greek sculpture, and a cave painting as an archeological artifact. The religious element of each has been lost, but the aura, the uniqueness and ritual nature of the work of art, remains: "in other words, *the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its basis in ritual.*"[30] Our rituals may change: we no longer endure the religious rituals (proper sacrifice, cleanliness, prayers) in order to behold the statue of Venus – instead we indulge in the rituals of the museum (monetary sacrifice, orderliness, hushed reverence). Despite the alteration of the ritual, the uniqueness of the work remains – and so does its authenticity.

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[25] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," fn 5. A note from Edmund Jephcott, translator.
[26] Jennings, 15.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §5, 24.
[29] Ibid.

With the rise of technological reproducibility, this long history experiences an ontological shift. The tether between ritual and the work of art is broken by the ability to replace an original with a reproduction: "for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual."[31] By transforming the original *The Starry Night* into a mass of reproductions – photographs, calendars, mugs, reprints, even rugs (all available at the museum gift shop) – the auratic strength of *The Starry Night* is broken. Nowhere is this more evident, Benjamin claims, than with the rise of photography and the art of film in which no original, no "here and now," can ever be found. As Benjamin argues, "to ask for the 'authentic' print" of a photograph is nonsensical.[32] Similarly, to ask for the 'authentic' print of a film is nonsensical – film *begins* its existence as a "mass existence" and can never be a "unique existence."[33] In this, art may be untethered from ritual, but it has a new master: "exhibition value."[34]

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[30] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §5, 24.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §5, 25.

Benjamin is explicit about the cause and resulting ramifications of this transition: he states that the "whole social function of art is revolutionized[;] instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics."[35] Benjamin views the two reasons for destruction of the aura as, initially, positive. First, technological reproducibility, such as taking close-up photographs of a sculpture or painting, can "bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens but not to the human eye."[36] This allows us to better understand the initial production of the original – what kind of pigments were used to create the colors of a painting, or where the marble was collected to create a specific sculpture. Second, this kind of reproducibility can "place the copy of the original in situations in which the original itself cannot attain."[37] Paintings and sculptures can tour museums and widen their cultural influence – this is not so with architecture. Yet, with photography and film, Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water* can be made visible to those unable to travel to Pennsylvania, and London's *Big Ben* can be viewed and experienced by those unable to travel to London. As Benjamin elaborates:

> Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its

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[33] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 22.
[34] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §6, 25.
[35] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §5, 25.
[36] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 21.
[37] Ibid.

> site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room.[38]

Democratically speaking, technological reproducibility is a nearly utopian ideal: it widens the range of influence for any given work of art almost infinitely. Before, most of the cherished works of art were only available to those who were, first, aware of the existence of such works of art, and second, possessed the means available to travel to view the works. The first condition requires a higher level of cultural education; the second requires a higher level of economic class. It is through technological reproducibility, Benjamin argues, that members of the lower classes are first privy to the higher levels of culture, not just in the sacred location of the museum, but "in his or her own situation."[39]

For Benjamin, the capability of technology to reproduce any artwork whatsoever is not simply a pedagogical or cultural issue. It constitutes a "shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity."[40] In short, it constitutes the destruction of the aura of the work of art, and with that, the "comprehensive liquidation"[41] of the traditional aesthetic notions of genius, the beautiful, and the work of art itself. As Jennings elucidates, this claim is a challenge to the entire history of aesthetics:

> Benjamin's idea is of course a scandal and a provocation: he offers a frontal attack on the very notion of the iconic work of culture, the product of great

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[38] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §3, 22.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

> genius that by its very nature shifts our understanding of human nature and human history.[42]

Benjamin's underlying political motivations fuel this element of the argument: the bourgeoisie (including academics) historically maintained access to cultural works and determined their value and quality. With the rise of mechanical reproducibility, the masses could now gain access to and potential authority over what constituted the "iconic" work of art and the classification of "genius." For Benjamin, the importance of alerting the masses to such an opportunity is crucial and pressing: technological reproducibility arose at the same moment of socialism and fascism, and his hope for the destruction of the traditional notion of aesthetics was coupled with a deep concern that the bourgeoisie would fight back by manipulating the very technology capable of political emancipation.

Here, Benjamin's recognition of the rise of positivism is crucial to consider. Once the technological reproducibility of the work of art is made possible, "the work of art becomes a construct [*Gebilde*] with quite new functions."[43] In a moment that dovetails perfectly with Heidegger's own concerns about the rise of technologically driven positivism, Benjamin elaborates: "among these [functions], the one we are conscious of – the artistic function – may subsequently be seen as incidental."[44] Immediately following his belief that the masses now had access to art *as* art, and not just as objects, Benjamin realizes that the same technological innovations that opened up these new opportunities could just as easily relegate them to simple products understood only by their exhibition value. With this in mind, let us reconsider our experience in front of *The Starry Night*.

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[42] Jennings, 14.

[43] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §6, 25.

[44] Ibid.

Under cult value, the experience described above is valid: we can feel the aura of the painting, and with it, the dichotomy it creates between viewing subject and viewed object. The image is available to us, but coyly – refusing to reveal itself completely. A chasm of tradition and historical importance separates us from it. Under exhibition value, the experience of *The Starry Night* is altogether different. We stand before it, but not with fresh eyes; this painting, we know, is one of the most recognizable in the world, and we already have an experience of it – what it looks like, who painted it, what it *means* for art – before we even enter the museum. It holds a central location in the museum, one that maximizes its exhibition. It is listed on The Museum of Modern Art's website as one of the star attractions. In short, it might be said that whereas before we have come to the painting to pray before the secularized cult of Beauty and Art, we now come in service to urban commodity capitalism. The artistic functions of the painting – the movement from impressionism to expressionism, the specific brush strokes, and the mood it elicits from the viewer – are all secondary to other concerns. It becomes an object to be considered according to its caption, an object to be looked at so that one can *say* that they looked at it. As with photographs, the transition to technological reproducibility transforms the artwork from an open field of play to an object towards which "free floating contemplation is no longer appropriate."[45] One looks at *The Starry Night*, and then moves along the tour towards the expressionist section. It is not accidental that visiting a museum bears more resemblance to a Taylorized factory line than a walk in the woods – it is the result, for Benjamin, of technological reproducibility and the resulting rise of positivism.

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[45] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.

Despite the negative threats of the massification of art, the decay of the aura has a highly positive political consequence in Benjamin's argument. For the first time, the "sense of authenticity, authority, and permanence projected by the auratic work of art [which] represents an important cultural substantiation of the claims to power of the dominant class"[46] is challenged. The destruction of the aura "enables a reception of a very different kind in a very different spectatorial space," it is in the cinema that it is finally possible to create "a political body through simultaneous collective reception" of a work of art.[47] This possibility, Benjamin claims, is impossible with auratic art – we enter the museum laden with preconceptions given to us by the bourgeoisie, and stand at a distance both from the work of art and from our fellow humanity. We are alone, both artistically and politically. In the cinema, our individuality transforms into a camaraderie; we stand in an entirely different relationship to the work of art, one in which we are not one, but a multitude collectively experiencing the one.

Film, Montage, and Emancipation/Manipulation

Benjamin's remarks on the filmic image are famously conflicted. On the one hand, he views film in a highly positive light:

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[46] Jennings, 15.
[47] Jennings, 15.

> *The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily.* Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.[48]

It is in film that it is first possible for members of the proletariat to discover the nature of the world that Benjamin believes is hidden from them, especially their economic and political place in it. With the destruction of the aura, film enables viewers to meet it head on, to fully absorb the pedagogical instructions it offers. Yet this optimism is mediated by a deep concern for the potential for film to be co-opted by the fascist and capitalist powers that control it; at best, to distract the audience from their political responsibilities, and at worst, to offer a different set of political directions entirely.

Benjamin's worry about film's inherent capability for manipulation begins with his remarks on photography. It is photography that first delimits "free-floating contemplation" on the part of the viewer.[49] Photographs "unsettle the viewer," making her feel as though she must discover "a particular way to approach them".[50] This ambiguity makes captions crucial; captions tell the viewer what is being photographed, but can also offer a secondary line of information. As we see with Eugène Atget's photographs, the caption of the photograph does not always belie the true political importance of the image. As an example, consider a 1913 Atget photograph that features an image of a shoemaker's shop, flanked by two strings of shoes for sale, above which sits an ornate filigree balcony. The photograph is entitled "Balcon, 17 rue du Petit-Pont"

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[48] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §6, 26.
[49] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.
[50] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.

– a confusing caption for a viewer whose eye finds two-thirds of the frame to be filled with strings of working-class shoes for sale. For Benjamin, this is an example of a photograph whose caption is tailor-made for exhibition value – a tourist or wealthy patron may appreciate the detail on the balcony, and purchase the photograph on those grounds alone. Such a viewer would miss the political valence of the photograph – it could be read as a depiction of the struggles of the proletariat artisans during the industrialization of Paris. In this way, Atget has produced a "crime scene," "photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence," while covering over that political movement with the use of a caption.[51] The viewer is then left to determine whether the photograph is actually *about* the balcony, or rather provides evidence for the crimes committed against the proletariat by industrialization and commoditization.

It is illustrated newspapers that begin to shift this paradigm by offering captions that are "precise and commanding"; they tell the reader exactly what they are looking at, and, importantly, *what it means*. Notably, these captions are written by journalists who possess an authority to determine in what way the photograph relates to the 'important' news of the day. The photograph is separated from the artist and becomes a specific object: evidence for a positivistic claim. Here we can see how the artistic function of the image becomes incidental to the commercial or social importance of the image. The journalist captions the image according to social or political concerns, not aesthetic concerns. The entire valuation of photography changes when placed in a newspaper: Atget's photographs would be deemed worthless, while a crisp photograph of a politician becomes highly valuable. This transition ultimately amounts to manipulation of the viewer. In newspapers, viewers are, first, limited in what images they can see, and second, limited in what they can understand them to mean. Both the caption and the placement of the image on the page prescribe the meaning of the image in a highly controlled way. For Benjamin, the fullness of this control is achieved in films, "where the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images."[52]

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[51] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.

Benjamin argues that narrative-driven films control the range of meanings available to the viewer in the same way that a caption controls the understanding of the content and meaning of a photograph. However, it is the filmic montage that resists a predetermined prescribed understanding of the film, and, for Benjamin, is the sole means through which film can be considered a work of art.[53]

Important here is Benjamin's early fascination with the cinema of attractions: "a type of cinema experience patterned on the variety format, that is, the programming of shorter films (interspersed with or framed by live performances) on the principle of maximum stylistic or thematic diversity."[54] Benjamin argued that the frequent changes of format, style, and genre heightened distraction, disallowing passive viewership in the audience, thus potentially offering active viewership. As these films gave way to narrative-driven full-length features, Benjamin found the possibility for active viewership alive in another format: montage. The work of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga

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52. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.
53. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §10, 29.
54. Hansen, 86.

Vertov (whose work is referenced in the third version of "The Work of Art" essay) and others convinced Benjamin that the "Soviet montage film, celebrated by leftist writers of the twenties as a model for realizing at once the cinema's aesthetic and political potential,"[55] was the ideal format for free-floating contemplation. Films such as Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) feature scenes that are not connected by any narrative thrust or stylistic consistency. Rather, they gather together a collection of images that represent a *situation* present in the era, and leave it to the viewer to discern meaning. The viewer finds herself surrounded by suggestions of meaning, a sense of being *in a world*, but abandoned. It is entirely up to her to determine how the various images relate to each other, and what the collective whole of the film *means*. In montage, any predetermined meaning is lost in the fray.

Hansen argues that Benjamin became so convinced that montage was the only successful format through which film could be identified as an emerging artistic medium that he wrote "The Work of Art" essay in the style of a montage:

> Framed by a preface and an epilogue, the essay (in its third version) consists of fifteen discrete sections or theses, which highlight, from distinct vantage points, different aspects of the problem posed in the title, the question of art under conditions of technological reproducibility. It could be argued that these sections are arranged to suggest alternating camera setups.[56]

Benjamin's essay has historically been fraught with conflict as to how to define its structure: it is often deemed dialectical, nonlinear, or simply confusing – but against these categorizations, Hansen's argument is convincing. As Benjamin well knew, the montage is produced at the discretion of the director and the editor, who select from "a very large number of images and image sequences" [57] to create the final version of the film. Similarly, Benjamin selects from a large number of topics, perspectives, and versions of his theoretical considerations to make not one, but three iterations of "The Work of Art" essay. Hansen continues,

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[55] Hansen, 87.

[56] Hansen, 88-89.

> Thus, we might think of [the sections of the essay] as master shots taken from the larger perspectives of, respectively, the institution of art and the aesthetic, including film; reproduction technology and changes in human sense perception; and the political formation of the masses. We could trace this design through more detailed textual moves patterned on cinematic devices such as closer framing, parallel editing, or superimposition – the whole essay could be considered an example of modernist literary and artistic practices predicated on cinematic montage.[58]

To further Hansen's argument, consider that in its nearly infinite possibilities for editing, film possesses a quality entirely inaccessible, or at best, undervalued, in the previous millennia of aesthetics: the "capacity for improvement."[59] The director and the editor are free to choose which shots and sequences will appear in the final version of the film, as well as the order in which they will appear, and even the music that will accompany it. This work is infinitely revisable, and it is this capacity for film that enables the production of multiple versions of the same film – different lengths, different degrees of violence or sexuality, even different languages, depending on the marketability of the film. It is important to recall that none of these versions exists as the unique and

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57. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §8, 28. Benjamin here offers an example to further his point: "To produce *A Woman in Paris*, which is 3,000 meters long, Chaplin shot 25,000 meters of film."

58. Hansen, 89.

59. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §8, 28.

authentic version of the film – no such version exists. In the same way, scholars have resigned themselves to declining to identify the “real” version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility:” each version is different, with revisions and deletions made to reflect changing considerations about the political and aesthetic situation, discussion and argumentation with Adorno, intended audience, and political goals. Despite the difficulties that this literary format poses to scholars, “the model of the cinematic montage offered Benjamin a mode of representation or, more precisely, presentation that would yield meanings the individual “views” did not have in themselves.”[60] As with filmic montage, this opens up the space for play in the essay (*Spiel*) that encourages readers towards discussion, not direct conclusions, and maximizes perspectives, not prognoses.

Finally, this structure is highly successful in confronting another traditional bourgeoisie mode of control: the intellectual academy:

> [The essays’] mise-en-scène targets intellectuals who refuse to recognize the impact of fundamental changes in the material conditions of production and reproduction on artistic practices and who perpetuate a cult of seemingly autonomous aesthetic effects, or, worse, revive these effects in heroic and military contexts.[61]

Benjamin found intellectuals most guilty of perpetuating the old aesthetic ideals despite the changing material and historical situation. Though they may lack economic capital, they possess a great deal of cultural capital, and their dismissal of film as a potentially revolutionary art form is inexcusable, for Benjamin. In order to address them, Benjamin composed his essay in order to resist the traditional linear, or even dialectical, structure of philosophical argumentation. As Hansen has argued, the essay presents a constellation of historical situations, aesthetic concerns, and evaluations of film. As such, Benjamin's contemporary critics were forced to wade through the various intersections presented to them by the essay(s), and respond to Benjamin's claims not as singular points or arguments, but by addressing an emerging historical situation – which is precisely the intended reaction. The scholar reading the essay finds herself in the same place as the viewer of the montage: she feels as though she is in a world, but one that lacks any singular predetermined meaning or prognosis. It is one thing to dismiss Benjamin's political argumentation, or his claims regarding film, or even his oft-equivocated use of the terms aura and masses – but to ignore the entire situation as he describes it is tantamount to burying one's intellectual head in the sand. As I will argue, the academic temptation to turn away from the demand of the changing aesthetic tradition continues to persist to the present day.

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[60] Hansen, 89.
[61] Hansen, 90.

Filmic montage is highly successful for Benjamin's purposes, but the format quickly faded out of theaters as the studio system shifted towards narrative-driven genre films. Though true montage is now a rarity, the vast artistic manipulation made available by the process of film editing remains – and Benjamin worries that this process could all too easily be co-opted by nefarious political means. Unlike with writing, painting, or even photography, film does not easily permit just anyone to engage in its production. Benjamin notes that the "letters to the editor" section of a newspaper allowed any individual capable of literacy to engage in the social and political movements of their time.[62] As he puts it, “at any moment, the reader is ready to become a writer.”[63] This is not so with film, as the expense, required technical expertise, and distribution of the finished product are far higher than the simple act of writing a letter to the editor. At any moment, for Benjamin, a viewer is *not* ready to become a producer.

Despite advances in technology, the productive power of film resides in the hands of the few, and “the capitalist exploitation of film obstructs the human being’s legitimate claim to being reproduced.”[64] This claim to reproduction, we recall, is crucial to the ability of the masses to “understand themselves and therefore their class.”[65] Instead, what results is that “the film industry has an overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays.”[66] As narrative-driven films began to rise in popularity, the opportunity for engagement with film in forced distraction – either through the fragmentation of the cinema of attractions or the required deciphering of the montage – began to fade. The masses, in turn, began to watch unchallenged, thus losing their opportunity for social and political awareness.

Further, their reactions to the image are “regulated” [67] by the fact that they are received not by an individual, but by a mass. Hansen notes that while Benjamin is ambiguous about his use of the term throughout all versions of the essay, other writings indicate that he considered the modern mass as characterized by “acts of consumption and reception," as with Marx, but driven to these acts by desire, not production, as with Georg Simmel.[68] This is clearest in a comedy, where a joke that might not be humorous to a single individual becomes riotous to all as the contagious laughter spreads throughout the crowd. The crowd becomes a mass not due to any exchange or production, but because each individual gives in to the *desire* to belong, to enjoy, and to be happy. They are not a mass of workers, but a mass of viewers or spectators. Here, Benjamin's repeated connection between film and sports is fruitful.[69]

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[62] Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” §13, 33.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” §15, 36.

During a recent trip, I found myself in a layover in an airport. To pass the time, I ordered a glass of wine at a bar near my gate and read a book. The bar was packed with travelers from a wide array of social, political, economic, and geographical backgrounds. Each of them (with the exception of myself) was fixated on a basketball game on television: the Cavaliers versus the Golden State Warriors. This particular game was game seven of the NBA Championship, the deciding game of the title. I watched as every individual of the bar transformed into a single mass, cheering and hugging each other – all total strangers – while they watched the Cavaliers win. The enthusiasm was palpable and contagious – even I put my book down and watched, joining the mass. The experience I had watching sports mirrors the way cinema draws the viewer out of herself and into a collective. This collective is easily manipulated by the "shock value" of film: "the successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator".[70] Both the denizens of the bar and the viewers in the cinema desperately await the next play, the next scene, the next laugh, or the next cheer – but do so thoughtlessly. These are precisely the type of concerns found in the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Postman: that audiences will become too easily pacified by the efforts of the culture industry to create the kind of films geared at economic success, not critical consideration.[71]

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[68] Hansen, 95.

[69] For references to sports, cf. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §10 (in relation to actors), §13 (in relation to viewers as "quasi-experts").

Despite this, Benjamin believes that mass viewing can still foster political awakening and emancipation. Film has the ability to offer a completely unencumbered reproduction of not just the artistic image, but the image of reality itself:

> The presentation of reality in film is comparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.[72]

In the second version of the essay, Benjamin argues that the distance preserved by the aura between the work of art and the viewer is destroyed in film. With film, the viewer is permitted not only full access to reality, but a deeper access than previously available. The equipment of film is capable of not just recording reality, but "*penetrating*" it, and then immediately covering over the means by which it performed this penetration. The connection Benjamin makes between the cinematographer and the surgeon is clear: both are able to "intervene" in a situation with the intent of not simply reproducing it, but enhancing it, making it more clear, more visible. Similarly, both leave behind a clean

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70. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §17, 39.
71. This project will offer a fuller analysis of these considerations in Chapter VI.
72. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §14, 35.

and orderly reminder of their presence – the scar, for the surgeon, and the edited film, for the cinematographer.

By the third version of the essay, however, Benjamin's stance on the revolutionary power of film shifts. After considering the pervasiveness and power of the studio system, he added a crucial statement to the essay:

> So long as moviemakers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule the only revolutionary merit that can be ascribed to today's cinema is the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art.[73]

One of the most important of these criticisms of the traditional concepts of art is the rejection of the covering over of the penetration of reality as described above. While it is true that most films act as surgeons, leaving behind only a pale memory of their intrusion, some films "lay bare the device," to employ Viktor Shklovsky's phrase. They do this by refusing to cover over their presence in the penetration of reality, revealing to the viewer the operation and limitation of the camera, the demand for traditional narrative structures and the corresponding possibilities left on the cutting room floor, and the very process by which films are conceived, produced, and presented to the public. Each time a device is left bare, the viewer is granted the opportunity to look *beyond* the aura surrounding the film, and if she is willing, to reenter that world created by a montage – the world in which meaning creation is again open to her.[74]

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73. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), §10, 261.

74. For a fuller examination of examples of films which "lay bare the device," or, to use Linda Hutcheon's term, participate in complicitous critique, see my article "Capra's the Matter with Capra: *Sullivan's Travels* as Narrative and Textual Complicitous Critique," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 34.1 (2017).

Secondly, it is crucial to criticize the idea that art must be viewed or received in a specific manner. The advent of film has brought with it a "*different kind of participation*" from the viewers, one that many critics find "disreputable."[75] Benjamin elaborates,

> Among these critics, Duhamel has expressed himself most radically. […] Duhamel calls the movie "a pastime for helots, a diversion for the uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries…, a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence…, which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles.[76]

The claim that film audiences engage in their viewership with neither concentration nor intelligence does not perturb Benjamin. While he maintains, as he did in the first and second versions of the essay, that shock value is capable of awakening the masses to the reality of their political and socioeconomic situation, he also stresses the importance of an awareness that can be acquired by the distracted viewer – "through habit."[77] Benjamin admits that the political task at hand is difficult, and "individuals are tempted to evade such tasks," but argues that "art will mobilize the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses."[78] The art form most capable of this mobility is film. Even the distracted viewer is slowly mobilized by film, in that she "absorbs" the work of art into herself, digesting it so that she might later understand it. By way of example, Benjamin notes the way that architecture has always been easily absorbed by the masses – even a distracted person can walk from the front door of their home to the kitchen light in the dark without mishap: the space of the architectural artwork has been internalized. The possibility for distracted masses to successfully absorb the vital information about industrial capitalism and its influence on their daily life is politically crucial. To drive home the point, he concludes the essay (all three versions) with a striking reference to war: while the fascists continue to aestheticize politics through war, "communism replies by politicizing art," specifically film.[79]

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[75] Benjamin, "Third Version," §15, 267.

[76] Benjamin, "Third Version," §15, 267-68.

[77] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §18, 40.

[78] Ibid.

The Challenge to/from Benjamin

We have seen that Benjamin's motivations in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" are primarily political: his aim is to illustrate the way in which film enables a revolution of traditional political, economic, and aesthetic categories. Further, his recommendations – the "urgent demand" for the "expropriation of film capital" for the proletariat, and his praises – "collective laughter" as a "preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis" – are all keyed to a political end.[80] While this project is not explicitly geared towards these political ends, it joins Benjamin in seeking to challenge traditional aesthetic categories in order to open up a space for existential awakening and authentic engagement with the filmic image. Further, I argue that if this existential engagement can be actualized, the political and economic goals Benjamin outlines will be far more accessible.

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[79] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §19, 42.

[80] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §13, 34; §16, 38.

In 1939, Benjamin is already worried that theorists and critics are attempting to place film within a canon, and thus, to "attribute elements of cult to film."[81] Though he finds auratization to be happening "with a striking lack of discretion" [82] in the 1930s, his disgust at those small movements would be terrifyingly amplified were he with us now. Film theory has created a canon of its own, a collection of classic films that are surrounded by history (the circumstances of its production, premier, and release) and tradition (the reputation of the director, social and political impact, number of awards won or lost). Despite Benjamin's best theoretical efforts, certain films qualify as having an aura; true, as we have said, the uniqueness of a film is nonsensical, but a viewer cannot watch *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) without a preconditioned awareness of its importance, influence on later films, and firmly established place in the film-canon. Such a viewer stands at a distance from the film, unable to experience it on her own terms.

Further, as has been noted above, watching such a film in the cinema regulates the viewer's reaction to the film, and the habits that Benjamin hoped would liberate the masses have attained a cult-like, if not religious, quality. The cult-value of film intensifies with a film such as *Metropolis*; to view it in a theater would be a rare event, and thus it attains the same level as other works of art: "certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level."[83] This is to say that film retains an aura to this day, and resides within a tradition that often interferes with the viewer's ability to engage with a film with free-floating contemplation.

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[81] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §9, 29.

[82] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §9, 29.

[83] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §6, 25.

Whereas Benjamin's motivation for detaching the filmic image from the service of ritual was primarily political – it liberates the film image from the power of the dominant class – we must argue here that the continued presence of the aura for some films is not a political problem, but an existential problem. What Benjamin's analysis shows is not that film has no aura – all works of art considered by experts acquire the kind of history and tradition that constitute an aura – but that these auras are *social constructs*, not inherent qualities of the image. For us, the important result of Benjamin's argument is that while the filmic image may possess an aura, myriad and consistent efforts have been made by film auteurs to engage in the "promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art."[84] The task for the viewer is not to slowly become activated in her distraction, but to seek out the films that allow her to resist the regulating influence of the aura and view the image, unfettered.

We find the resources to succeed in this task in Heidegger. As discussed in Chapter III, the task of the preserver of the work of art is to let it be what it is, not what we *want* it to be. In this, Benjamin's aura is simply a product of Heidegger's they-self; both stand in the way of an authentic and meaningful experience of the artistic image. For Heidegger, we hear a call that draws us back into authenticity, for Benjamin, we recognize that the auratic structure surrounding works of art is fabricated, and must be resisted. As we recall, one of the main targets of "The Work of Art" essay are intellectuals, and as professional intellectuals and academics, that call is even stronger: it echoes with phrases such as “publish or perish,” and pushes us to instrumentalize, categorize, and auratize films rather than simply letting them be, letting them *speak*. The analysis of Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) in Chapter V will address this point much more fully.

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[84] Benjamin, "Third Version," §10, 261.

A further consideration is about the reception of the filmic image. For Benjamin, mass viewing is the only way to view a film, a point he bemoans in a footnote:

> Shortly before film turned the viewing of images into a collective activity, image viewing by the individual, through the stereoscopes of these soon outmoded establishments [Kaiserpanoramas], was briefly intensified, as it had been once before in the isolated contemplation of the divine image by the priest in the cella.[85]

Today, we have technologies that imitate but technologically surpass the Kaiserpanorama, and the list is lengthy: smart phones, tablets, laptops, home television entertainment systems, screens set into the back of airplane seats, and other personal viewing devices. Each of these devices offers unprecedented clarity and can be augmented with headphones that offer theater-quality sound. For the past decade, the technology needed to approximate the “contemplation of the divine image” has existed – and been extensively employed. We can here recall that in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger harbors the hope, per Hölderlin, that “But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also,”[86] meaning that technology may one day provide an emancipation from the technologically enframed works of art. Theoretically, that technology currently exists: through the use of these advanced Kaiserpanoramas, regulatory influence of the crowd in the theater can be avoided entirely, permitting viewers to engage with the untethered filmic image, free to provide interpretations and meanings to the film without the influence of history or inherent ideals. What is worrisome is that these possibilities could be, for Heidegger, further enframing, and for Benjamin, simply another danger of late-capitalism. These possibilities could simply amount to expensive personal cinemas that do not individualize, but instead form the same amalgamation of the masses to create a larger cinema to house a larger audience. Worse still, no matter how clear the image on the screen or how close the device is held to the face, the audience is no closer to the auratic works displayed on their screens.

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[85] Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” fn30, 52.

[86] Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Friedrich Hölderlin Poems and Fragments,* trans. Michael Hamburger (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), 462-463.

Perhaps this potential failure is just as well: Hansen argues that Benjamin is less worried about theoretical considerations about "the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power, and still less… any on the art of the classless societies,"[87] and far more about the way in which his current technological situation can help predict the state of art as it continues to advance beyond his death.[88] Here, this analysis is crucial. We live in an era where access to virtually any film is available at virtually any time. Further, it is theoretically possible that viewers can easily become producers, as Benjamin hoped: anyone with a smart phone and relevant software can write, direct, and distribute their own film via the Internet. The difficulty level of interacting with new modes of art and communication has dropped to that of writing a letter to the editor – theoretically.

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[87] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §1, 19.
[88] Hansen, 89.

Benjamin characterized his current aesthetic, economic, and political situation via a series of dichotomies or antinomies throughout the artwork essay:

> […] distance versus nearness, uniqueness versus multiplicity and repeatability, image versus copy, cult versus exhibition value, individual versus simultaneous collective reception, contemplation versus distraction.[89]

Given our current technological situation, it is crucial to consider whether any of the above advancements have aided in closing the distance between variations on the clash between aura and masses. What can be said at this point (and will be fully discussed in Chapter V) is that at the time of this writing, certain films have sought to challenge the above dichotomies through a variety of critical methods. It is up to us as both viewers and scholars to identify these films and see them for what they are: agents of ontological and aesthetic change.

Though we have strayed from the 'auratic' interpretation of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" to make an argument in favor of existential authenticity, we should recall Benjamin's insistence on applying any aesthetic theories to specific films in order to test their validity:

> Benjamin very clearly recognized that the qualities he detected in the new media are necessary but in no way sufficient conditions, always requiring actualization through specific works.[90]

Benjamin himself devoted several essays to considerations of specific works, among them the films of Charlie Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, and Soviet *auteurs*.[91] As such, the next chapter will explore this new conception of the filmic image through the lens of three films: F.W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (1924), Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).

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[89] Hansen, 91.

[90] Jennings, 13.

[91] Cf. Benjamin, "On the Present Situation of Russian Film," "Chaplin," "Chaplin in Retrospect," and "Mickey Mouse," all found in Jennings, Doherty, and Levin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*.

CHAPTER V

CRITIQUE FROM THE FILMIC IMAGE

Introduction

Since the time of Walter Benjamin's death in 1940, the filmic medium – and with it, the filmic image – has advanced beyond the cinema of attractions, Soviet montage, and formalist styles about which Benjamin wrote and over which he worried. As argued in Chapter IV, Benjamin's hopes that it would be in film that the traditional aesthetic aura could be shattered have not been realized as of the present day. Indeed, the opposite has occurred: the medium of film has accrued its own auratic nature, including the intellectual experts (academic departments devoted to the study of its creation and theoretical components), great masters (lists of revered directors and cinematographers), and cultural currency (lists of the "Greatest Films of All Time" are available in virtually every genre) that an aura entails. As Hansen notes, Benjamin was not blind to the fact that "the media of technological reproduction were lending themselves to reactionary political forces," not the emancipatory and revolutionary forces he had sought.[1] She elaborates,

> He discerned attempts to resurrect the technologically extinguished aura in liberal-capitalist film production, whether in the cult of the movie star or in the art film's more elevated efforts at re-auratization, encapsulated in Max

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[1] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 88.

> Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) and Franz Werfel's praise for the film.[2]

Benjamin knew, up until his tragic death, that his admonitions regarding the changing aesthetic climate were not being heeded – either by his intellectual contemporaries or by the audiences he wished to liberate. However, what we might consider his final resort towards aesthetic change in the third version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" permits us an avenue through which we can explore the possibility of continuing his work of challenging traditional aesthetic modes of thought: "the only revolutionary merit that can be ascribed to today's cinema is the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art."[3] Our task, then, is to identify films that promote such criticism of traditional concepts of art, evaluate them, and discern the way in which they grant us the existential opportunity to resist the auratic pull towards singular meaning, historical provenance, and cultural currency.

In this chapter, we will evaluate three such films, presented not in chronological or theoretical order, but so as to emulate Benjamin's organization of "The Work of Art" essay. The three films form a constellation of different approaches to film, each offering a glimpse into the operation of the filmic image, particularly its critical function. The first, F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (1924), will act as an example of the simplest challenge to traditional modes of art: traditional narrative structures as imposed by industry standards and public tastes. In our examination of the film, we will see that

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[2] Hansen, 88.

[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), §10, 261.

Murnau is not only an early critic of the rapidly standardizing narratives of cinematic production, but also a critic of the power of the studio system to control and restrict the creativity of the films he could produce. The second film, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), will offer an opportunity to evaluate a film that offers a linear, though layered, narrative, but lacks any clear predetermined *meaning*. Further, our analysis of this film will extend to a consideration of the current state of intellectual engagement with film, and provide evidence for the continued and repeated attempts to auratize films by ascribing to them intellectual, cultural, and historical meaning that the film itself refuses to provide. Finally, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) will offer an opportunity to examine several complex challenges to traditional aesthetic conceptions of the image. In our evaluation of this film, we will find (a) the distinction between the literary image and the filmic image in the adaptation of a novel into a film, (b) the refusal to provide clear meaning by eschewing exposition and narrative closure, (c) the processes of de-auratization and re-auratization, and (d) the existential challenge posed to the viewer wishing to resist the aura surrounding both the film and its director, Kubrick. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate that while the constellation of problems Benjamin described may still exist, myriad films resist the auratization of the filmic image and endeavor to categorize themselves under new ontological categories.

Anti-Auratic Narrative: F.W. Murnau's Der letzte Mann *(1924)*

This section will consider F. W. Muranu's *The Last Laugh* (1924)[4] in order to discern the way in which auratic convention can be challenged by the alteration of an expected narrative formula: the happy ending. Further, it will argue that the formal structures of this film, structures mimicked by American auteurs such as Alfred Hitchcock, heighten and augment that awareness. In *Der letzte Mann*, Benjamin's aforementioned hope for the loss of "free floating contemplation" in photography and film is challenged:[5] the viewer cannot help but be controlled for almost the entire film, both by the thrust of the narrative and the use of the subjective camera perspective. What marks *Der letzte Mann* as a critical film is the conclusion to the film – a conclusion that mocks traditional narrative and mythological conventions as described by Joseph Campbell, and permits the viewer to recognize these conventions for what they are: social constructs. As we will see, Murnau's film thus constitutes the "shock" sought by Benjamin, one that has "a strategic significance, as an artificial means of propelling the human body into moments of recognition" of her own subjectivity – both as it is, and as it could be.[6]

For the purposes of this section, we will evaluate the way in which Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* utilizes cinematographic strategies to highlight challenges to traditional

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4. *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau (1924; New York, NY: Kino Lorber Films, 2003), DVD.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechnical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), §7, 27.

6. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies: Volume 3*, ed. Philip Simpson, et al., (London: Routledge, 2004), 129.

narrative structures, as well as the genres of tragedy and comedy. We will discover that the formal structure, innovative cinematography, and deployment of laughter within this film serves as an early yet ideal example of a film actively critiquing the traditional aesthetic categories in such a way that it encourages viewers to do the same.

Der letzte Mann (1924), directed by F. W. Murnau, written by Carl Mayer, and filmed by Karl Freund is “arguably the most fruitful collaboration in German silent film.”[7] Erich Pommer orchestrated the collaboration of Murnau and Mayer and instructed them to “invent something new, even if it’s crazy!”[8] Crazy though it might have seemed to audiences, it “proved a major hit in the US” and brought Murnau into the Hollywood spotlight.[9] Interestingly, Alfred Hitchcock was filming *The Blackguard* (1924) on a neighboring set in UFA studios while Murnau shot *Der letzte Mann*. Hitchcock spent an inordinate amount of time watching and learning from Murnau’s use of the camera, and later claimed,

> *The Last Laugh* was almost the perfect film. It told its story even without subtitles – from beginning to end entirely by the use of imagery, and that had a tremendous influence on me.[10]

For critics attempting to place filmic imagery in traditional aesthetic categories, it is often simpler to consider film to be a blend of previously existing (and vetted) media such as the result of combining theater and photography, or literature with painting. In

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[7] Hans-Michael Bock and Michael Töteberg, “A History of UFA,” in *The German Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 131.

[8] Bock and Töteberg, 131.

[9] Ibid.

[10] James N. Bade, “Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* and Hitchcock’s Subjective Camera,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23:3, 257. Note that the US release of *Der letzle Mann* in 1925 was titled *The Last Laugh*, not the direct translation of “the last man,” and both titles are used here.

Der letzte Mann, this comparison is not possible. What little language exists in the film is shown on a few close shots of documents (and a cake) and one inter-title; otherwise, the entire film is absent of either spoken or subtitled dialogue, and is told entirely through the ordering of images. While not as open as *Man with a Movie Camera*, this film does challenge viewers to discern the events depicted – as well as their meaning.

The overarching narrative of the film is simple: an aging hotel porter is demoted from his beloved position of power on the day of his daughter's wedding and relegated to the post of a washroom attendant. Prior to his downfall, he enjoyed a prominent place in his community, the opportunity to hob nob with the hotel guests, and the respect garnered by his beloved uniform (fig. 1).

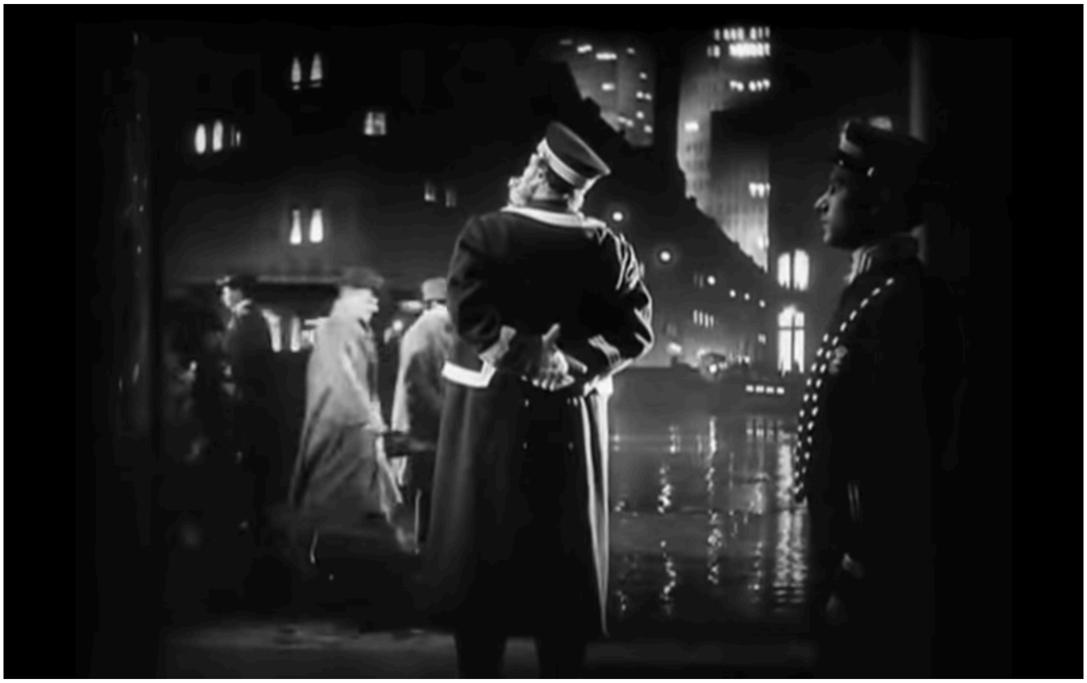

Figure 1: The Porter proudly surveys his domain. Reprinted from *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau, 1924. Kino Lorber Films, 2003, DVD.

After his demotion, his entire life changes: his entire community, including children and old women, mock and despise him, he receives nothing but apathy from his boss, and he is invisible to the guests who once respected him. As Sabine Hake argues, the Porter was highly identifiable for Germans recovering from the loss of the First World War, the resulting economic depression, and the political changes of the new regime. The tragedy he suffers is made more powerful because it adheres to Joseph Campbell's description of modern tragedy:

> The magnitude of an art of tragedy more potent (for us) than the Greek finds realization: the realistic, intimate, and variously interesting tragedy of democracy, where the god is beheld crucified in the catastrophes not of the great houses only but of every common home, every scourged and lacerated face. And there is no make-believe about heaven, future bliss, and compensation to alleviate the bitter majesty, but only utter darkness, the void of unfulfillment, to receive and eat back the lives that have been tossed forth from the womb only to fail.[11]

In his work, Campbell traces the same mythological archetypes across eras, cultures, and languages, and argues that each individual knowingly or unknowingly lives "the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story."[12] The tragic paradigm traced above is the modern tale of loss without hope for redemption – and this is the narrative depicted in most of *Der letzte Mann*. Faced with a catastrophe of personal identity, the Porter is rejected by his family, cast out of his community, is seen in the 'final' shot of the film slumped on lonely stool in a darkened bathroom (fig. 2).

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[11] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: Third Edition* (Novato: New World Library, 2008), 20.

[12] Campbell, 1.

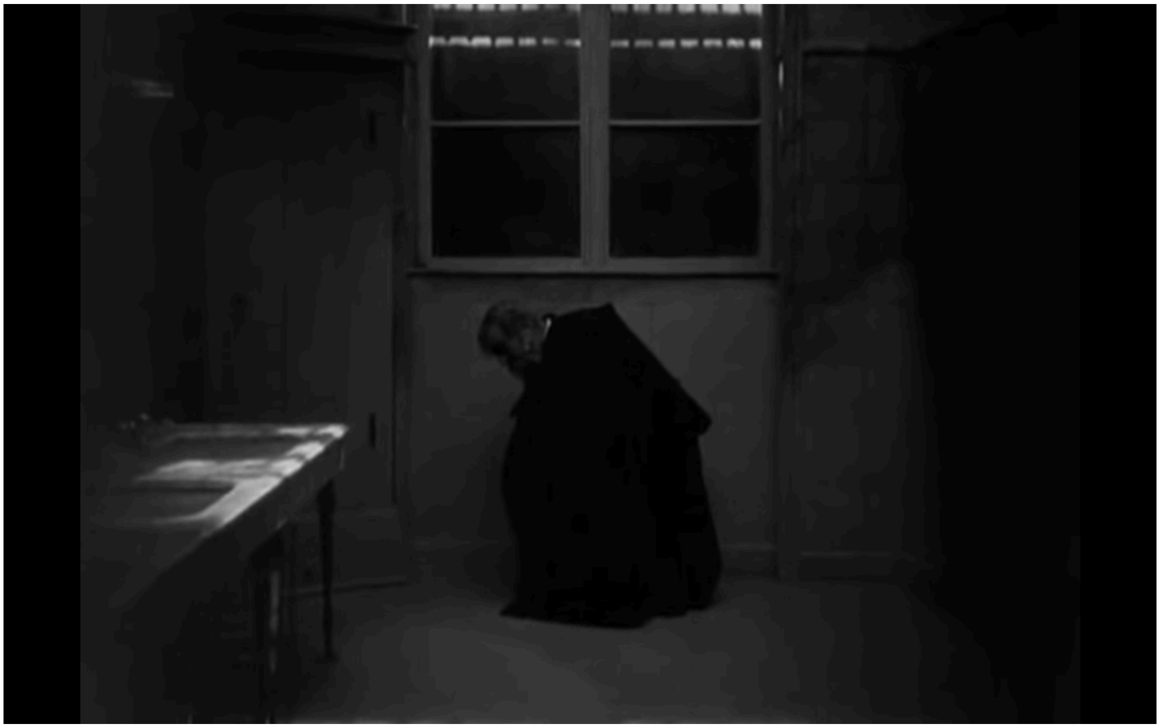

Figure 2: The Porter is left alone to fade into obscurity. Reprinted from *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau, 1924. Kino Lorber Films, 2003, DVD.

For older viewers, the Porter "provided not only a figure of identification with their own suffering but also a figure of distanciation through which to move beyond the political legacies of the past."[13] The film further permits viewers to identify with their own reality in that "no character bears a name" but is referred to as generalized categories:[14] The Porter, The Daughter, and The Aunt. As Christian Metz argues, these neutral masks simultaneously enable viewers to distance themselves from generic social roles while obliging them to recognize in them their own subjective – and instrumentalized – engagement with the world.[15] Already, we see that the film has opened up the opportunity for viewers to experience their reality through film in the way that Benjamin desired, at least psychoanalytically.

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[13] Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 115.

[14] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Cagliari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 101.

This narrative is told via an array of innovative cinematographic techniques. Murnau manipulates the camera to transform it into a subjective observer rather than an objective observer. As James Bade has observed, Murnau's use of the camera allows us to experience the story "completely in the first person, subjectively, the way the old doorman saw it and felt it."[16] This places the audience in a position to directly engage with the events of the film – and, as we will see, to feel the impact of the auratic destruction much more strongly.

From the opening sequence in which the camera descends into the hotel in and through a glass elevator, the audience finds itself very much 'within' the film. Pausing to survey the lobby, the camera/audience makes its way through the grand revolving door of the hotel and steps into the rain with The Porter. This technique forces the audience into a direct visual engagement with and internalization of the world of the film from the very outset. There are few reprieves from this unrelenting subjective perspective regardless of how distasteful the audience may find the events as they unfold:

> Near the beginning of the film, when the old porter comes in to work and enters the hotel through the revolving door, he enters the left-hand side of the revolving door and looks through to the right-hand side of the revolving door where the new porter is on his way out. The camera shows us then what the old doorman sees from his point of view, moving behind the new doorman as he walks out.[17]

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[15] See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

[16] Bade, 63.

[17] Bade, 259.

The audience, with the Porter, is brought into an abrupt encounter with an imposter wearing his “beloved uniform.”[18] There is no flight from this encounter available to the viewer aside from looking away from the screen. The film aggressively confronts the viewer with this information, forcing her to internalize the emotional impact it holds for The Porter (fig. 3).

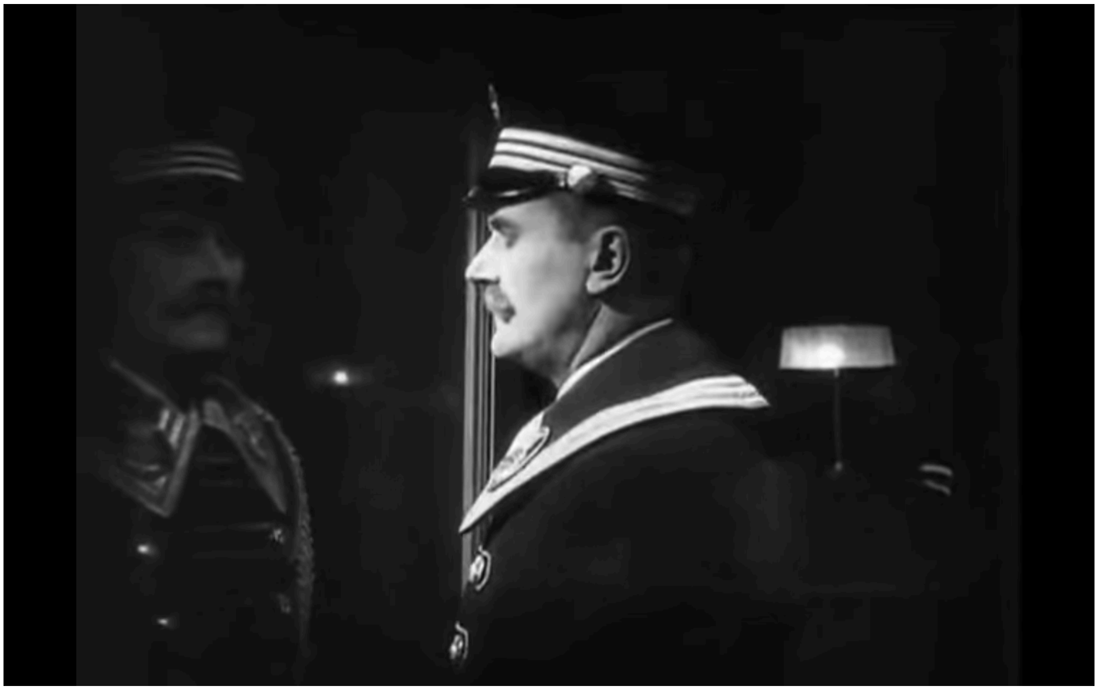

Figure 3: Encountering the new Porter through the old Porter’s eyes. Reprinted from *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau, 1924. Kino Lorber Films, 2003, DVD.

For Benjamin, this is precisely the kind of activation and awareness that film should offer to its viewers: a direct and unavoidable engagement with a social, historical, or political situation. Whether we wish to read the film's message as a consideration of masculinity (with Sabine Hake), of class conflict and the need for social reform (with James Bade), or psychological aversion to a national identity crisis (with Siegfried Kracauer) the film prohibits idle engagement from the subject. There is no possibility of shifting focus, as in Atget's "Balcon" photograph; the viewer must live through the eyes of the Porter, or turn away from the screen. Even if we argue, against Heidegger, that the historical circumstances surrounding and influencing the creation of the film are detached from the final image, we can still experience the film in an authentic way: through the shared understanding of tragedy, as described by Campbell. The absence of dialogue, the limited markers of time period, and the ambiguity of the characters take what could have been a specific and highly driven narrative – to which it is difficult to relate – and instead transforms it into a depiction of loss, struggle, and despair: universal themes.

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[18] Hake, 117.

Further, as Bade argues, in scenes not involving the doorman directly, the viewer retreats from her privileged subjective position and resumes an objective perspective. *Der letzte Mann* offers minor plot developments in wide shots: the daily work of the women and the dismissal of the previous washroom attendant unfold from a comfortable distance. Major plot developments, such as the Aunt's discovery of the Porter's disgrace unfold subjectively. Though there are no captions to direct the viewer's attention as in the Atget photograph, the alternation between subjective and objective perspective is far more effective. Had the film been shot entirely from an objective perspective, the viewer would retain the option to disassociate with the film – it is, after all, just another tragedy.

Rather, the movement between the two perspectives creates a pedagogical montage, an opportunity for viewers to experience these two forms of seeing. The first sixty minutes of the film thus can be read as an instruction in the dance between authentic, engaged experience and passive, removed spectatorship.

For the first sixty minutes of the film, the audience is instructed in a specific rhythm. They have mastered the art of moving between subjective and objective perspectives, individual experience and social issues. Given that "*The Last Laugh* had been a world success,"[19] we might well conclude that the first two thirds of the film manages to activate the subjective involvement of the audience as a whole. Viewers, as we remember from Benjamin, are activated by *desire* – and *Der letzte Mann* offers them what they want: to feel, authentically.

After the death of the Porter, this rhythm is shattered. The first intertitle of the film appears, declaring the fairy tale conclusion that the Porter did not die, but rather inherited a fortune through a nearly impossible turn of events: a wealthy stranger died in his arms. Here, Murnau lays bare the device for the first time in the film: he explicitly states in his intertitle,

> Here, our story really should end, for in actual life the forlorn old man would have little to look forward to but death. The author took pity on him, however, and provided quite an improbable epilogue.[20]

This intertitle exposes the operation of cinema in a number of ways. First, it interrupts the flow of the narrative to address the audience directly. In breaking the fourth wall, Murnau prohibits the audience from fully sinking into the unreality of the film – it shocks them to attention, reminding them that they are in a cinema, viewing a film that has been fabricated by an author.

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[19] Kracauer, 147.
[20] *The Last Laugh*.

Second, it directly critiques the conventions of classical cinema. The first two-thirds of the film adhere to these conventions: characters are developed, plot is advanced, and dramatic resolution is achieved. The alteration of the narrative by abruptly adding an improbable epilogue to a film that had otherwise concluded its narrative arc shocks the viewer out of the established rhythm – and violates all conventions of classical cinema. For Benjamin, this shock is an opportunity for the viewer to recognize the operation of filmic technology at work in her world – an operation that is far too often covered over. Further fragmenting is the sudden and almost complete disappearance of the subjective perspective: an opportunity for the viewer to consider whether the film is describing *her* world at all. In seeking an explanation, we might turn to a brief consideration of the fragmentation deployed in earlier cinema, such as Chaplin:

> Chaplin's exercises in fragmentation are a case in point: by chopping up expressive body movement into a sequence of minute mechanical impulses, he renders the law of the apparatus visible as the law of human movement – "he interprets himself allegorically".[21]

By "chopping up" the film into two discrete parts, one replete with subjectively felt melodrama, the other dripping with farce, *Der letzte Mann* performs the same exposure of the operation of the film that Chaplin performs of the human body. An expositional fragmentation is at play, one meant to juxtapose the reality of the preceding narrative and the unlikeliness of the fairytale conclusion to bring the two into sharper relief. In this fragmentation, *Der letzte Mann* demonstrates the power of film to manipulate the emotional state of the audience in the same way that Charlie Chaplin's erratic movements in *Modern Times* (1936) demonstrates the power of Taylorism on the human body.[22] The film jolts away from gloom and despair over the death of the Porter and offers up a panacea instead – but one that is unsuccessful. This is because in addition to critiquing cinematic and narrative convention, *Der letzte Mann* also critiques the convention of tragic drama. As Campbell elucidated above, a tragedy *ought* to end in "utter darkness [and] the void of unfulfillment."[23] Instead, *Der letzte Mann* offers up a "fairy tale of happiness ever after,"[24] one filled with unending epicurean pleasures. This shift is so jarring, Campbell explains, because such an ending "cannot be taken seriously; it belongs to the never-never land of childhood, which is protected from the realities that will become terribly known soon enough."[25] To attach such an ending to a film that spent sixty minutes depicting terrible realities must be read as a critique on the viewer's desire for another film convention: the happy ending. We find this in the bizarre occurrence of laughter in the final sequence. As I will argue, this laughter is not directed at the Porter, but is in fact directed at the audience as a Bergsonian corrective mechanism.

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[21] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 203.

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22. *Modern Times*, directed by Charlie Chaplin, (1936; New York, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD.
23. Campbell, 20.
24. Campbell, 21.
25. Campbell, 21.

As we know, Benjamin cites “collective laughter” as a “preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis” in that it allows the audience to experience their impulses vicariously through the screen.[26] Done properly, Benjamin argues, “films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies” that might otherwise emerge in inappropriate avenues of society.[27] This method is particularly effective given the unifying nature of laughter. Laughter invites participation, eliminates isolation, and unites disparate opinions. While it is entirely possible that the 1924 German audiences benefitted from this release after identifying so strongly with the situation with The Porter, I argue that to claim that this is the *only* purpose of the improbable epilogue would constitute an auratic reading that closes off other interpretations.

For the sake of *Speil*, we ought to consider a brief history of philosophers concerned about the importance, use, and impact of comedy and laughter to determine what other role this laughter plays in the film. We might begin at Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, specifically the distinction made between Comedy and Wit. Hegel takes up this distinction in the context of French court life, but his point can help our reading of *Der letzte Mann* as well. For Hegel, Comedy seeks to highlight the irrational masquerading as rationality, to identify discrete and unique elements of life that are represented as universals and charge this identification as false.[28] Conversely, Wit does not claim to have the same importance as Comedy. The targets of Wit are not as grand as religious orders or social structures. Wit, rather, delivers a diagnosis of

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[26] Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” §16.

[27] Ibid.

[28] G. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), §744.

Spirit's metaphysical bankruptcy. It serves merely as a tool of reflection, accurately reporting to itself the values of its time that have dried up or become useless. As Hegel says:

> Wit exists in the universal talk and destructive judgment which strips of their significance all those moments which are supposed to count as the true being and as actual members of their whole, and is equally this nihilist game which it plays with itself.[29]

Wit neither seeks to destroy what is already crumbling, nor to build a new artifice upon the ruins of its previous home; it is simply the recognition and reporting of a situation to a subject.

Wit tells us what conditions are at operation in our world by highlighting them in an ironic and often derisive way. Wit does not offer solutions to us, but rather identifies a fault so that the subject might then begin the task of evaluation and correction. Wit, in short, seeks to provide the same understanding that Benjamin sought to provide about the changing aesthetic situation in "The Work of Art" essay. Under this reading, we will understand the final scene of *The Last Laugh* to belong within the realm of Hegelian Wit.

Extending this analysis is Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*. In his essay, Bergson argues that laughter is a social corrective "intended to humiliate" those who fail to maintain the adaptability required by modern society.[30] Laughter serves a specific sociological function for society in "avenging itself for the liberties taken with

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[29] Hegel, §521.

[30] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Lexington: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 70.

[modern society].”[31] Those who are laughed at are given an invaluable lesson as to what kind of behavior befits a modern man.

We might find in the work of Buster Keaton the best example of Bergsonian laughter. Keaton’s *The Navigator* (1924), in particular, exemplifies the “inflexible” and oblivious individual who finds himself beset on all sides by mysterious mishaps.[32] In a famous scene, Keaton flees a miniature cannon that has become inadvertently attached to his foot via a length of rope. In stone-faced befuddlement he runs, eliciting from the audience a laugh. This laughter is a social corrective that admonishes Keaton for failing to be a proper navigator of the modern world – we laugh, ‘It’s tied to your foot!’ To be a modern navigator, we know, Keaton must remain flexible, aware, and up-to-date, or the dangers the befall him will not be so comedic.

An entirely different tone of laughter can be found in the Weimar era films. This laugh is not as gentle, not as good-natured. This laughter is derisive, condescending, and almost punitive. Consider *The Blue Angel* (1930), Josef von Sternberg’s classic film about the ill-fated marriage of a gymnasium professor and a burlesque performer.[33] The most sustained and uncomfortable episode of laughter in the film is during the marriage proposal. In his proposal, Emil Janning’s Professor assumes the solemn air of a man making an eternal vow. Marlene Dietrich’s character, Lola Lola, responds with twenty seconds of raucous, derisive laughter. She laughs to the extent that the film offers

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31. Bergson, 71.

32. *The Navigator*, directed by Buster Keaton, (1924; New York, NY: Kino Lorber Films, 2002), DVD.

33. *The Blue Angel*, directed by Josef von Stemberg, (1930; New York, NY: Kino Lorber Films, 2001), DVD.

nothing but discomfort and pathos for the Professor's unrecognized humiliation. When the Professor does not acknowledge Lola Lola's correction, their ill-advised union ends in his demise. Indeed, not heeding the realities of modern society has heavy ramifications.

To return to the film under consideration, we can find three instances of corrective laughter in *Der letzte Mann*. The first two occur in the first segment of the film, and are directed at the Porter, highlighting his social failings. This laughter is fairly straightforward, but no less painful for the subjectively integrated viewer. First, the Porter meanders along the street on his way to work, still drunk and disheveled from the festivities of the previous night. As he stumbles towards the hotel, the professional men and women with whom he shares the street openly and unabashedly point at his appearance and laugh. When faced with the specter of the new Porter in the distance, the old Porter becomes horrified at his publically displayed situation and finds his humiliation reflected in the faces of the laughing pedestrians. Objectively, we watch as he cowers in fear against a building, unable to assume control over his plight. Subjectively, the viewer watches as the world twists and distorts into unrecognizable faces and shapes as she shares his total disorientation.

In this instance of laughter, the social corrective is obvious. For the first time in the film, his fungibility within society is manifested externally. His distraught psychological state matches his disheveled hair, his economic impotence is mirrored in his drunken stagger, and his inward humiliation is experienced publically. With the laughter of each passerby, a lesson is instilled: you have fallen from your place of grace and you do not deserve the company of proper citizens.

The second occurrence of laughter serves as part of the montage function to mirror the subjectively felt humiliation on the street. His return home is greeted not with the respectful salutes of the beginning of the film, but rather with the derisive laughter of the previously doting female denizens of the tenement. Objectively, the viewer observes his walk of shame back to his apartment. Subjectively, she is offered a chance to experience the unmediated derision delivered from his former friends and family as if it were her own.

The third occurrence of laughter is different in kind from the first two. In order to adequately address its importance and impact on the subject, we must consider the historical context of the film's production. Though *Der letzte Mann* was produced during UFA's golden age, symptoms of financial difficulty were beginning to emerge. UFA's efforts to mount breathtakingly expensive films that strove to be "gargantuan" in scope drove the company deeply into debt,[34] leaving it prey to a rightest takeover. Rather than revise their production tactics or desired products, UFA elected to receive financial assistance from Hollywood. Through "a $4 million loan signed with Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer," Parufamet was formed, and UFA remained financially solvent.[35] The deal was eventually revealed to be Faustian: because German studios were contractually obligated to import American films and screen them in their own studios, American films quickly infiltrated and overtook the German scene.

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[34] Bock and Töteberg, 133.
[35] Ibid.

Perhaps most offensive to German tastes was the American penchant for fairy tale endings of the kind unceremoniously attached to the conclusion of *Der letzte Mann*. Viewed holistically, the first sixty minutes of the film forces the viewer to subjectively experience a lapsarian narrative that viewers might consequently internalize. While the first section forces the viewer to relive their current financial and social crises, the epilogue expands to include an even wider glance at their predicament.

Given these historical considerations, we can guess at Murnau's message in this film, as Heidegger might describe it: the film industry as a whole is now at the mercy of the whims of auratic tradition governing popular tastes. *Der letzte Mann* offers us a caricature of the capitalist and fascist forces Benjamin most feared. They are depicted through the objectively viewed Porter, as the nouveau riche who dine inappropriately, dress ostentatiously, and lack self-control (fig. 4). The laughter of the other patrons in the restaurant is not directed at any character or circumstance within the film, but rather at the audience itself (fig. 5). This is Hegelian Wit in action, brutally exposing the historical, financial, and social situation to the astonished subject. Further, this is precisely the kind of revolutionary critique Benjamin sought in cinema. Even if we remove the historical provenance of the film and watch *Der letzte Mann* with an untethered eye, the laughter of the film resonates deeply on a mythological level: we know that such a happy ending is inappropriate, and we know that we should not want it attached to this tragedy – despite what cinematic convention conditions us to believe.

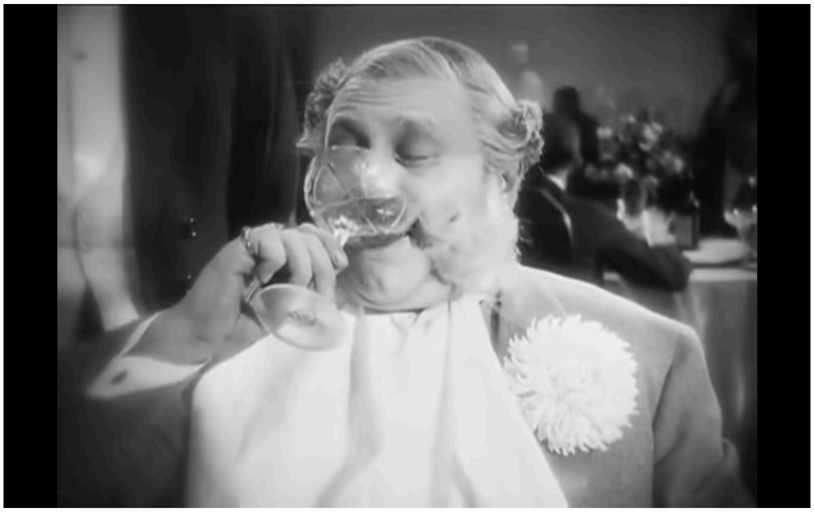

Figure 4: The Porter as the nouveau riche. Reprinted from *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau, 1924. Kino Lorber Films, 2003, DVD.

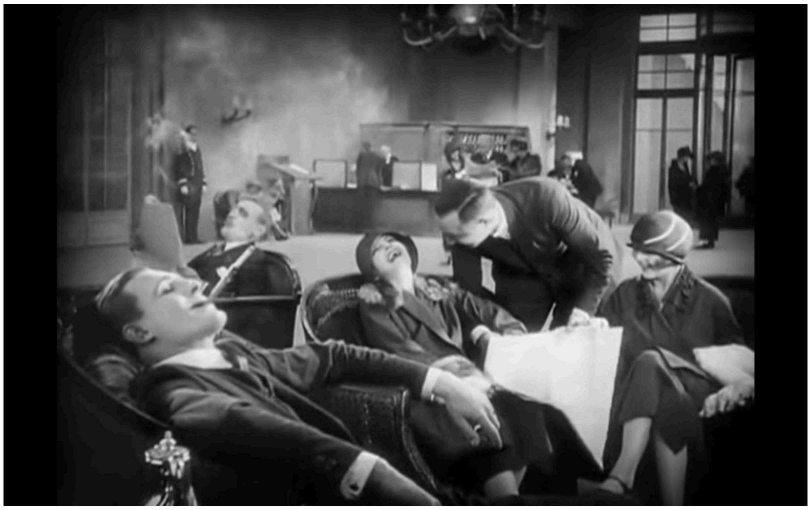

Figure 5: The improbable epilogue's laughter. Reprinted from *The Last Laugh*, directed by F. W. Murnau, 1924. Kino Lorber Films, 2003, DVD.

In the final scene, a beggar is welcomed into The Porter's cab with these newly powerful individuals and the viewer is granted a subjective glimpse at the situation through the eyes of a beggar. The residual shock of the fragmented narrative forces the viewer into a position of distrust of this new subjective perspective. Watching subjectively, the viewer is offered no assurance that the kindness of these newly powerful men will not quickly dry up and deposit the beggar at a street corner a few blocks away. Simultaneously, the German audience subjectively experiences the same threat from the influx of American capital in their struggling economy. History proved these concerns to be accurate, as only a few years later the impact of Parufamet deal "drew the company deeper into crisis" only a few years later.[36] Reading the film historically, ala Heidegger, this final act of laughter can be further read as a warning to German audiences against precisely this kind of control before Murnau absconded to Hollywood to avoid the nearly Platonic levels of control emerging on the film industry.[37] Thus, it is an ideal example of Benjamin's desire to use film to inculcate viewers against the threat of capitalism by exposing and heightening their own subjective experience of their situation. Read contextually, *Der letzte Mann* offers audiences an opportunity to experience a new political and economic danger from a subjectively inhabited narrative in the hopes that they will begin to consider methods of resistance. Even without the historical context granted in this reading, *Der letzte Mann* challenges aesthetic traditions in hopes of exposing reality, precisely as Benjamin hoped.

Inception*, the Challenge to the Platonic Ideal, and Auratization*

As we have seen, the challenges to cinematic and aesthetic tradition began early in filmic history with *Der letzte Mann*. Moving forward nearly a century, we will discover through Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) that the challenges to aesthetic tradition continue to appear even in popular and successful Hollywood box office hits.[38] This section will evaluate the way in which *Inception* resists the Platonic demand for an image to reach towards an ideal; yet, as I will argue, the film resists clear meaning imposed from either the audience or the artist. Further, this section will consider whether Benjamin's primary targets in his "Work of Art" essay – intellectuals – have managed to resist the desire to auratize works, and ultimately argue that the situation remains, at best, unchanged.

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[36] Bock and Töteberg, 133.

[37] Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 398b.

Inception (2010) is a film willing and able to adhere to Gunning's cinema of attractions in its many cinematically beautiful and perfectly choreographed action sequences, but that is not the only reason it has attracted the attention of film scholars and general audiences. *Inception* is a film unwilling to provide the viewer with answers crucial to the conclusion of the plot: it refuses to distinguish between dreams and reality and it refuses to provide a simple and easy conclusion. As Mark Fisher argues, "Nolan's work is *about* duplicity; it is itself duplicitous, drawing audiences into labyrinths of indeterminacy."[39] In this way, *Inception* embodies David Jenemann's description of a film that instigates frustration or concentration in the viewer which then "provide[s] the irritant against which subjectivity could react."[40] Such films, Jenemann argues, shock the viewer out of simply following along with the film, and forces them to engage deeply with it, seeking meaning and critical understanding of an enticing but elusive text.

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[38] *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan, (2010; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2010), DVD.

[39] Mark Fisher, "The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*," *Film Quarterly* 64.3 (2011): 37-45, 37.

[40] David Jenneman, "Below the Surface: Frankfurt Goes to Hollywood," in *Adorno in America*, ed. David Jenneman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 107.

Understood through Benjamin, such films challenge the traditional expectation that an image has a meaning – and in this challenge, they encourage the "critical deciphering" required of active viewers of films.[41]

Nolan himself admits that the film was created with ambiguity in mind. In one of many interviews he gave about the film, he explains that "the ambiguity is very much a part of the substance of the film," given that the film is about the blurry distinction between dreams and reality.[42] Throughout the film, Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) struggles with not knowing whether he is dreaming or awake. This motif is amplified by the continual creation of increasingly complex 'levels' of dreams, causing the viewer to identify with Cobb's own frustration, feeling uncertain which parts of the film are real and which are dreams.

The concluding scene of the film has garnered the most attention from critics, viewers, and scholars. In the final scene, we witness a spinning top, a totem that allows the dreamer to know if they are awake or asleep. Cobb's totem works in such a way that if he is in a dream, it will never fall over – it will simply perpetually spin. Throughout the film, we have witnessed Cobb spin this totem, and see his relief when it topples to a stop. Yet, in the final scene, as the camera focuses on the spinning totem, the screen cuts to black before we, the viewers, have a chance to witness the outcome (fig. 5.6). As a result, the driving question of the film – what is real – is left unanswered.

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[41] Hansen, 197.

[42] Robert Capps, "Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity," *Wired Magazine*, 29 November 2010.

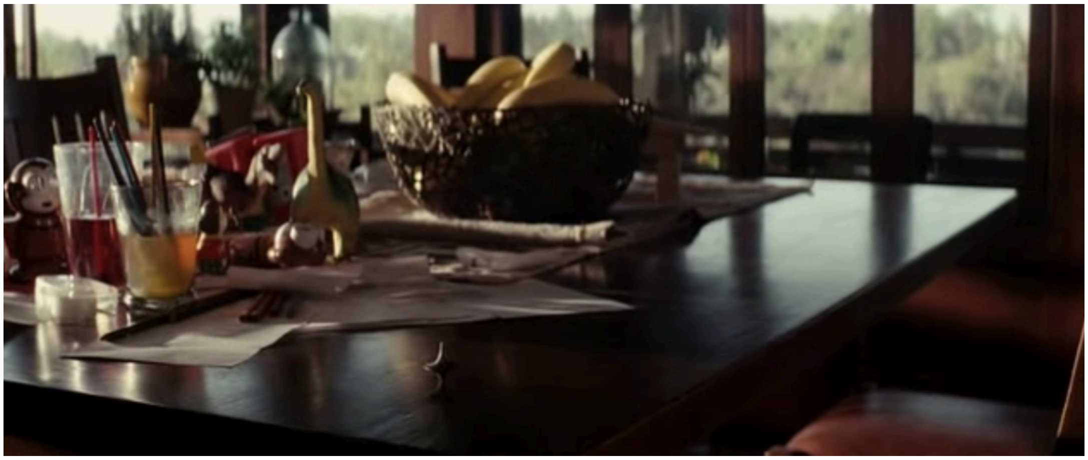

Figure 6: The spinning top of the final scene. Reprinted from *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan, 2010. Warner Brothers, 2010, DVD.

In this way, *Inception* remains an open text, a film that offers a multitude of interpretations for the viewer. While authorial intent traditionally plays a role in any work of art, the primary author of this film is comfortable with permitting his viewers to open the film to additional readings and interpretations:

> One of the things you do as a writer and as a filmmaker is grasp for resonant symbols and imagery without necessarily fully understanding it yourself. And so there are interpretations to be imposed on the film that aren't necessarily what I had in my head.[43]

Already, we see Nolan resisting the auratic demand that *he* place meaning on the image he created, simply because he is the film's lead artist. In this, Nolan not only resists traditional auratic notions of meaning, he resists traditional auratic notions of authorship: as the author, he presumably knows precisely to which Truth this image relates. Unlike

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[43] Capps.

Socrates' move to shift the responsibility for such knowledge to another source as we saw in his fables in the *Republic* and in the *Symposium*, Nolan simply refuses to comment on the Meaning of the film. As we will see in our evaluation of *The Shining*, most directors would not relinquish such an opportunity for clarification and ownership of meaning.

Both the essential ambiguity of the film and Nolan's unique acceptance of this ambiguity has garnered an immense amount of attention in both the academic and amateur spheres, and the opportunity to impose interpretations on the film has been rabidly seized. In the next two subsections, I will explicate and consider two different realms of this interpretation: first, the realm of professional academics – those individuals for whom it is their responsibility to be active viewers and impose meaning on a text. I will argue, following Benjamin, that while the diversity of meanings generated by the academy is a positive sign towards emancipation, the certainty with which each meaning is proposed is as troubling as it is emblematic of the traditional auratic structures we are seeking to avoid. Second, I will explore the world of amateurs, those who, as Jenneman notes, found their subjectivity activated by the irritant of the ambiguity and formed communities devoted to decoding the film. The determination as to whether either group constitutes the kind of authentic viewership that would enable a liberation of the filmic image will, ultimately, remain unanswered.

Film criticism, analysis, and interpretation has been an active field since the inception of the medium. Within a critical perspective, scholars responsible for engagement with film do so with a great responsibility, as described by Jean-Luc

Comolli and Paul Narboni: “the essential part of the work [of interpreting the ideological content of films] obviously takes place in the theoretical articles and the criticisms.”[44] As such, the articles considered in this section are those taken from the most respected journals, written by the most respected scholars, offering, ostensibly, the most accurate understandings of the Truth of *Inception* as a filmic image.

Inception has received a large amount of attention from scholars, including numerous individually published articles in scholarly journals that seek to provide for it an ideological, philosophical, narrative, or filmic interpretation. Michael J. Blouin’s article “A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*” provides a post-colonial analysis of the way in which depictions of Japan in the film “both fortify and de-stabilize Western subjectivity.”[45] Stefan Brasse offers an analysis of the psychological and physical trauma experienced by the characters of *Inception*, as well as “whether trauma can only be psychologically categorized or be analyzed as cultural trope, in his “Of Half-Remembered Dreams and Unanswered Mysteries: The Trope of Trauma in *Inception* and *Alan Wake.*”[46] In addition to these articles, there are dozens of essays written and published about the formal, theoretical, and technical qualities of the film, which, due to space constraints, I shall not list here.

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[44] Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” *Screen* 21.1 (1971): 27-26, 35.

[45] Michael Blouin, “A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*,” *Extrapolation* 52.3 (2011), 318.

[46] Stefan Brasse, “Of Half-Remembered Dreams and Unanswered Mysteries: The Trope of Trauma in *Inception* and *Alan Wake*,” *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 15.1 (2014), 1.

In addition to the scholarly sample above, an entire collected text, *Inception and Philosophy*, has been published. This work contains twenty-two individual essays offering philosophical interpretations of the film. These range from essays surrounding the meta-question of the film, if it was all just a dream[47] and whether the top continues spinning,[48] the ethics of technologically enabled dream sharing,[49] the nature of dreams,[50] religious interpretations of the film,[51] and assorted additional considerations that did not fit in any previous category. Importantly, this text is part of the "Philosophy And" series, a series designed to collect philosophical essays regarding cultural objects that might be of interest to the armchair philosopher. Previous publications include *The Matrix and Philosophy* (2002), *Star Wars and Philosophy* (2005), *Breaking Bad and Philosophy* (2012), and most recently, *The Princess Bride and Philosophy* (2015).

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[47] Cf. Ruth Tallman, "Was It All a Dream: Why Nolan's Answer Doesn't Matter"; Jason Southworth, "Let Me Put My Thoughts in You: It Was All Just a Dream"; Andrew Terjesen, "Even If It Is a Dream, We Should Still Care"; and James T. M. Miller, "The Unavoidable Dream Problem" all in *Inception and Philosophy*, ed. David Kyle Johnson. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc: 2012.

[48] Cf. Katherine Tullmann, "The Parable of the Spinning Top: Skepticism, Angst, and Cobb's Choice"; Dan Weijers, "Reality Doesn't Really Matter"; Bart Engelen, "Why Care Whether the Top Keeps Spinning?" all in *Inception and Philosophy*.

[49] Cf. Daniel P. Malloy, "How to Hijack a Mind: *Inception* and the Ethics of Heist Films"; Adam Barkman, "*Inception*, Teaching, and Hypnosis: The Ethics of Idea-Giving"; John R. Fitzpatrick and David Kyle Johnson, "Inception and Free Will: Are They Compatible?"; Albert J. Chan, "Honor and Redemption in Corporate Espionage" all in *Inception and Philosophy*.

[50] Cf. Ken Marable, "Shared Dreaming and Extended Minds"; Lance Belluomini, "Morally Responsible Dreaming: Your Mind is the Scene of the Crime"; Michael J. Sigrist, "Dream Time: *Inception* and the Philosophy of Time"; Charles Joshua Horn, "Dream and Possible Worlds: *Inception* and the Metaphysics of Modality"; Keith Dromm, "Do Our Dreams Occur While We Sleep?" all in *Inception and Philosophy*.

[51] Cf. David Kyle Johnson, "Taking a Leap of Faith: A How-to Guide"; Clint Jones, "Limbo, Utopia, and the Paradox of Idyllic Hope"; Scott Daniel Dunbar, "Unlocking the Vault of the Mind: *Inception* and Asian Philosophy" all in *Inception and Philosophy*.

I draw attention to these works not as a superficial gloss over the importance of these scholarly contributions, but to demonstrate the sheer breadth of meaning scholars have found in the film *Inception*. While Nolan may be willing to relinquish some authorial intent over the meaning of the film, scholars have taken a *carte blanche* approach to interpreting the film – as they do over many filmic works. This work, too, adds to the list of scholarship seeking to find meaning within the film: in this case, the possibility of the film intentionally lacking a specific meaning so that it might open the space for free play and interpretation that has been demonstrated from this meager sampling of scholarship.

While each of these authors have made valuable contributions to the meaning surrounding the film, one major problem persists: most of these essays are impenetrable to the general public, and would thus be considered a component of the traditional academic mode of scholarship – one that is structured to limit access, not open it. Were a viewer seeking resolution to one of the major ambiguities in *Inception* to turn to any of the articles listed above, they would likely find themselves reading a foreign language, full of technical terms and esoteric goals far removed from their comparatively parochial interests. Unfortunately, this is precisely the issue that Benjamin bemoaned in 1939: academics, in their quest to open new interpretations, have forgotten to do so in a way that makes their interpretation easily disseminated to those who need it most.

To give an example, here is a crucial claim from Blouin's argument in his essay "A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*":

> Dreams of Japan, re-constructed by (as well as re-constructing) the virtual realm, begin to accelerate into a blur in which points of reference are lost. A Hegelian

> metaphysics, fundamentally based on causality, is gradually undone by this chiastic logic. The certainty of dream and reality fades, first between Japan and the United States, then within the very precepts of cultural difference. What originates as simulated Otherness exposes, for Nolan, the uncertainty of all subjectives.[52]

Blouin's argument is sound: a post-colonial reading of *Inception* exposes the failure of Hegelian teleology to bring us to a utopian future; further, we can see the cultural and historical tensions between Japan and the United States, as well as the blending of the two aesthetics throughout the film, as evidence for this claim. Observant viewers will note that the depictions of Japan in *Inception* are, as argued, idealized: they are the tourist's version of Japan, not the actuality of a modern Japan. This being said, despite, or perhaps because of, Blouin's argument, this article will escape the grasp of ninety-nine percent of laymen who attempt to read it. The passing reference to Hegel, the idea of Otherness, and the simple matter of a highly elevated vocabulary makes this impenetrable to all but the most well-versed scholars.

Further complicating the problem is the issue of accessibility. I discovered this article through a scholarly database to which I have access as a member of a major research university. Most individuals, especially the casual viewer, do not have such access – nor are they likely aware that such access is a thing to have – or a thing to want. Unless this article appears in a Google Books search, it is unlikely that the average viewer of *Inception* would be able to even locate the article. If located, and understood, it is unlikely that an academic article would read a response from a layperson on the meaning purported in that article, let alone publish it. The limited access, both physically and intellectually, adheres directly to the methods of control exerted by the bourgeois conception of aesthetics. Only a select few may access the work itself, fewer still may seek to understand it, and fewer still are permitted to remark on its meaning. Benjamin demanded that intellectuals are responsible for identifying the power structures that control individual freedom, make them apparent to the public, and seek to expose hegemony where it exists. None of the above scholarship is capable of achieving that requirement.

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[52] Blouin, 319.

Perhaps a middle ground exists, one that straddles the boundary between esoteric academia and masses seeking meaning: the articles listed from the *Inception and Philosophy* text. The "Philosophy And" series, as previously mentioned, is geared less towards other scholars and more towards the pop-intellectual who, though not engaged in professional scholarship, still harbors interests in the examined life. If we consider accessibility, these books generally constitute a majority of shelf space at any big-box bookstore in the Philosophy section, and are popular as gifts for those who have either a passing interest in philosophy or in the topic under consideration. In short – they make excellent gifts for any nephew or niece majoring in philosophy. As for impenetrability, the articles in *Inception and Philosophy* fare better than those found in the scholarly journals. Southworth's article, "Let Me Put My Thoughts In You: It Was All Just a Dream" address the most contested question about the film: whether Cobb dreams throughout the entire film. This article is written simply, accessibly, going so far as to explain the principles in use rather than drop the phrase "Hegelian metaphysics" on the reader on move on:

> The principle that will be most helpful to us is the principle of charity. In a nutshell, the principle says that when a statement is ambiguous and thus has multiple interpretations, we should choose the interpretation that is most charitable. That is, we should choose the interpretation that is kindest to the author of the statement. Not only is this principle "nicer" than one that would choose the unkind interpretation, but using it gets great results. (Southworth 37).

This is all eminently readable prose, carefully written for the non-scholar, with just enough grammatical bite to challenge the lazy reader. It explains not only the ideas in use, but the reason for their use, as well as the advantage that such approaches have over other, less accessible approaches. This article, as others like it, is of the quality Benjamin sought: intellectuals actually working to expose the nature of this new image, and explain its operation to the masses.

However, this article is fifteen pages long – a brief essay for a scholar, but an eternity for the average reader. Here, we can consider the concerns of both Allan Bloom and Neil Postman about the decline of reading not only in the general public, but amongst university students – a decline they both attribute to the rise of television and Postman's Age of the Spectacle. Whether the reader will persevere throughout the entire article in order to find the answer is unknown – though both Bloom and Postman would argue no.[53] To apply the principle of charity mentioned above, at best, we might get a reader who skims over the more intricate passages to find "the answer" lurking at the conclusion of the essay. I am inclined to relegate these concerns to those voiced by Benjamin's critics who resisted the rise of a new aesthetic understanding, and consider such articles to be literary pedagogy.

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53. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* for their full arguments, which exceed the scope of this project.

With this in mind, we must question how successful these articles – both the scholarly articles and the more accessible articles – are at generating viewers willing to engage in the authentic existential responsibility of viewing a film beyond auratic convention. The first group fails completely to satisfy Benjamin's demand, and actually pose the danger of dissuading viewers from watching the film by presenting the filmic image as just another auratic and thus inaccessible form of art. The second condition pertains specifically to the scholarly articles, given that they require at least a Master's degree in literary analysis to comprehend. While they may be written for other academics, they do so in such a way to make a clear Other – the general public – who is excluded from that discourse, as well as meaning creation. Despite the continued efforts of scholars to auratize film, I argue that in the 'pop-intellectual' articles we find a space of meaning creation that provides the tools necessary for further meaning creation – and thus, Benjamin's specifications for aesthetic revolution.

There is yet a third realm for finding, creating, and imposing meaning on filmic texts: the Internet. As Wexelblat quaintly notes from his 2002 perspective, "The World Wide Web (or simply the Web) adds a new media dimension to fan activity" and offers a space for meaning creation outside the scholarly journals discussed above.[54] In the next section, we will explore the kinds of meaning found within discussion boards, chat rooms, and blog posts surrounding *Inception*, and suggest that the interaction between fans presents the opportunity for a much higher degree of active viewership and critical engagement than that found in many of the aforementioned scholarly articles. This is all made possible precisely because it is ruled by the general public, guided by erudite scholars, and written in language readable by the general public.

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[54] Alan Wexelblat, "An Auteur in the Age of the Internet: JMS, Babylon 5, and the Net," in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins, et al., (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2002), 212.

Barbara Klinger notes that the intervention of aesthetic technology into the home enhances the experience of any film, raising it to the level of art.[55] Here, I will modify her claim, arguing that the intervention of contemporary technology into the home enhances the *critical* experience of the film, raising it to the level of an object worthy of study, even if only by amateurs. The ivory tower has produced a fair amount of scholarship regarding the world of fans: some treat it as ethnography, analyzing them as they would a group of odd indigenous individuals; some take it much more seriously, arguing that their work arising from interaction with the texts merits a title of authentic authorship, not derivative work. Here, I will draw from considerations of Derek Johnson and José Van Dijck to demonstrate, contra Horkheimer, Adorno, and others, that the possibility for authentic engagement with film beyond the auratic realm does exist.

One such popular online space is *CinemaBlend*, an online discussion community devoted to argument and interpretation of not just *Inception*, but countless films, television shows, and other cultural artifacts. The discussion board under consideration here was started by four authors from *CinemaBlend*'s staff on 16 July 2010. Since that time, 7,344 comments were added to the article, offering viewer's alternate perspectives and challenging the initial reading offered by the four staff members.[56] As fans in the comments section make particularly compelling arguments, the article is revised to incorporate them into the main text preceded by an *Alternate Theory* tag or *New Information* tag.

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[55] See Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home Theater*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

For example, the initial reading of the article proposes: "Cobb is still in the dream and the top does indeed keep spinning after the credits roll."[57] Immediately following this paragraph an alternate theory tag is inserted, offering a new interpretation from a commentator simply identified as Aaron:

> In the opening moments you get a glimpse of Leo's hand. Specifically, he's wearing his wedding ring. Now, if you follow the rest of the movie keeping an eye out for this you will notice that he only has the ring on when he's in the dream world. At the end of the movie he isn't wearing the ring. If the ring only appears when he's in a dream and he's not wearing at the end of the film, that could be confirmation that, in fact, the top does stop spinning after the credits and Cobb is at last in the real world.[58]

We might note here that such a reading of the film is only made possible by the kind of frame-by-frame analysis mentioned by Nolan. In order to decode such a small detail like the wearing of a wedding ring, the film must be viewed repeatedly, rewinding and pausing frequently, in order to search for the relevant clue. Certainly, the scholars in the preceding section engaged in the same kind of viewership, but they are expected to – it is, quite literally, their job. But to find this kind of dedication from amateurs is startling – and encouraging, from a Benjaminian perspective.

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[56] This number is accurate as of my latest visit to the site on 8 September 2016.

[57] "Inception Explained: Unraveling the Dream within the Dream," *Cinemablend*, last modified August 8, 2010, http://cinemablend.com/new/Inception-Explained-Unraveling-Dream-Within-Dream-19615.html.

[58] *Cinemablend.*

Ironically, these observations are made possible because of the culture industry's constant production of new entertainment devices. In resolving the ambiguity of the final scene, fans used their computers or digital players to go frame by frame, seeking clues. This is not only not unusual, but expected; immediately after the film's release in theaters, Nolan remarked on some of the less convincing fan theories, not faulting the intelligence of the fans for their misunderstanding, but rather their uncontrolled experience of viewing the film in the theater. Once the film becomes available at home, he argued, "the misunderstanding or misremembering" can be alleviated through "the Blue-ray [through which] people will be able to check, say, the ages of the kids."[59] Fans did not fail Nolan's observation, and discussion boards are filled with individuals explaining their interpretation based on a frame-by-frame reviewing of the film.

Further, the "ring theory" offers not just an alternative perspective from that originally offered by the authors of the discussion, but ends up becoming a point of contention amongst the continued contributions:

> Ivan in the comments below suggests that it's still possible that the entire movie could be a dream because the totem may only work to ensure you're not in someone else's dream. "Think about it. YOU know your totem's trick exactly so if you were in your own host dream then you could replicate it perfectly. It is only when you are in someone else's dream that your totem does not behave in it's trick form since that host cannot architect it so [sic]. This is why nobody knows the trick functionality of anyone else's totem!"[60]

This theory, championed by a group strongly opposed to the idea that the ring is the totem, proposes that the operation of the totem is compromised due to the fact that it might be a dream that Cobb created. The discussion on this point continues extensively in the comments.

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[59] Capps.

[60] *Cinemablend.*

Of course, not all comments are as thoughtful or directed as the ones I have included above. As with any online discussion board, the one on *CinemaBlend* features its fair share of petty disputes, insults, and simply off-topic statements:

what are you talking about chest piece???? Do you mean chess piece?[61]

This may not be the level of critical engagement we are seeking, but it does indicate a passionate drive to find meaning, to the point that those who are obscuring the conversation must be controlled – through insults, if necessary. While lacking the grammatical and syntactical grace of the scholarly articles mentioned above, this individual poster certain treats *Inception* as the "object of devotion" described by Benjamin in the "Work of Art" essay – and is willing to fight to preserve it.

Further, the sheer size of the discussion gives evidence for the existence of an entire population of individuals actively engaging in decoding the film in order to find, create, or impose meaning on a text. While it is entirely possible that these same individuals could and would read Southworth's article in *Inception and Philosophy*, that lonely enterprise is a difference in kind, not degree from the experience of the online discussion board. These individuals work together and challenge one another – they do not simply read an article and accept it – or the film – as automatically true. In this way, they have accepted the challenge posed by *Inception* in a purer form than many of the academic scholars: they are working together to create meaning, not simply accept it from an author: whether that authority is the text, the author, or a denizen of the Ivory Tower. In short, they are accepting Plato's challenge to view philosophy and poetry as symbiotic, not a quarrel.

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[61] *Cinemablend.*

Derek Johnson, in his "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Conservative Hegemonies of Fandom," explores the hegemonic power structures of another fanverse: the fanfiction surrounding the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* television show. As his research indicates, fans not only actively seek to create meaning within and beyond the diegetic world of *Buffy*, they engage in "ongoing struggles for discursive dominance" to the extent that "relationships among fan, text, and producer are continually articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated."[62] Drawing from his research of fan communities, discussion boards, and reactions from the producers of the show *Buffy*, Johnson produces an analysis of the arguments between fans not as antagonistic, but as an overall "process by which judgments" are created, established, and disestablished.[63]

This detour is included because it highlights another unique element of the film *Inception*, as well as Christopher Nolan as auteur. The interaction between fans and author in *Inception* is not as fraught with hegemonic domination as Johnson found present in the *Buffy* universe. While Johnson notes that "whether through interpretative, legal, or narrative measures, fan activity is discursively dominated, disciplined, and defined to preserve hegemonies of cultural power at local or institutional levels,"[64] Nolan seems far more amiable towards different interpretations of his work, and will only comment that he "has an answer" as to the nagging question of *Inception*, but declines to offer it up, explaining that the filmic image itself is meant to be ambiguous in order to encourage discussion: "the film does not specify one way or the other."[65] For a high profile director such as Nolan, this simple act of refusing to provide a clear meaning to his film constitutes a clear critical attack on the traditional notion of authorial meaning. As such, while *Inception* challenges the tradition of unilateral meaning within a filmic image, Christopher Nolan himself challenges the auratic power of authorial intent.

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[62] Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Conservative Hegemonies of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray et al., (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 286.

[63] Johnson, "Fan-tagonism," 291.

Kubrick's The Shining *and the Resiliency of the Aura*

Stanley Kubrick is amongst the best-known filmic auteurs; his work spans decades, attracts cult followings, and is heavily researched and considered from theoretical positions. An entire archive is devoted to his work, located at the University of the Arts, London, and contains thousands of documents, props, photographs, personal correspondence, and other elements of Kubrick's life and career. The mass amount of academic work pertaining to Kubrick and his work, as well as the establishment of an archive specifically devoted to his work, places Kubrick and his films firmly within the filmic canon. Kubrick himself carries an auratic quality – mythologies of his work and exaggerations of his capabilities abound, ranging from rumors of his eccentricity to an entire documentary based on wild theories about the creation of *The Shining,* Rodney Ascher's *Room 237*.[66] Even the artifacts of Kubrick's life carry an auratic feel – having visited the Kubrick Archive myself, I can attest to the distance I felt when handling documents *he wrote*, photographs *he took*, and scripts that *he wrote*.

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[64] Johnson, "Fan-tagonism," 299.

[65] Capps.

This section will address several considerations regarding Kubrick, his legacy, and his film *The Shining*.[67] First, we will consider the different capabilities of the literary image and the filmic image through the act of adaptation: *The Shining* is an adaptation of Stephen King's novel by the same name, but the screenplay was written by Stanley Kubrick and Diane Johnson, given that Kubrick famously "refus[ed] to read King's adaptation of his own bestseller."[68] In so doing, we will be able to see (a) how the same story changes when viewed through a filmic perspective instead of a literary perspective, and (b) the process of de-auratization in Kubrick's dismantling of King's book and re-auratization in the reception of the film. Second, we will consider the way in which lack of exposition included in the film (especially the shorter two-hour US release) heightens the ambiguity of meaning in the film, refuses narrative closure, and forces the viewer into a position of active viewership. Finally, we will consider the immense existential challenge to resist the aura surrounding both Kubrick and *The Shining*, and consider

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66. *Room 237*, directed by Rodney Ascher, (2012; Orland Park, IL: MPI Home Video, 2013), DVD.

67. *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, (1980; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2010), DVD.

68. Eliza Pezzotta, *Stanley Kubrick: Adapting the Sublime* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 28.

whether it is possible to truly read such a film in an authentic manner. In the course of this analysis, I will reference theorists who have published work on Kubrick and *The Shining*; however, the primary source of information for this section is original research conducted at the Stanley Kubrick Archives at the University of the Arts, London.

Once Kubrick determined that his next project would be *The Shining* in 1977, he spent three months "working through [Stephen King's] book, writing notes, crossing out sections, considering further reading and research and thinking about what would work on film."[69] His annotations in King's book are fascinating and ubiquitous – they span nearly every page.[70] These annotations fall into three different categories: first, considerations of how to translate the core ideas of the novel into a filmic format; second, his considerations for revision and expansion of the central story; and third, his utter distaste for King's literary ability to tell a story.

In the first category, we find comments that directly relate to practical concerns during filming, such as a note on page 148, "topiary and wasps are probably such an effort."[71] King's book features two lengthy scenes involving 'living' animal topiary and the reanimation of a nest of wasps – two scenes that would be costly, time consuming, and require immense coordination to enact on film. Such revisions then demanded alternate considerations of how to tell the story itself, as Kubrick notes: "remember: if you take out topiary scenes, Jack has not experienced anything yet – not even the wasps."[72] Filming locations were also under consideration as Kubrick read King's work; on page 65, Kubrick underlined King's phrase "the whole valley floor was spread out below them," and added next to it the marginal notes: "isolation," and "where is there such a view?"[73]

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[69] *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives*, ed. Tatjana Ljujic et al., (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 285.

[70] Kubrick, Stanley. Papers. The Stanley Kubrick Archive, SK 15/1/1-3. University of London, UK.

[71] Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 148.

Secondly, Kubrick is clearly considering ways to translate the literary image into a filmic image as he reads and annotates King's work. This proved to be a difficult transition, as Kubrick himself admits. In a letter dated November 8, 1992 to David Cornwell, better known as John le Carré, British author, Kubrick summarizes the difficulty of making such a translation:

> Unhappily, the problem is still pretty much as I fumbled and bumbled it out to you on the phone yesterday. Essentially: how do you tell a story it took the author 165,000 (my guess) good and necessary words to tell, with 12,000 words (about the number of words you get to say in a two hour movie, less 30% silence and action) without flattening everybody into gingerbread men?[74]

By 1992, Kubrick had already adapted several literary works into films, most notably Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1962), a collaboration with author Arthur C. Clarke on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and of course, an adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980). Each of the literary works listed above are just as lengthy as Cornwell's text, and yet, I argue, none of the films' characters have been flattened into gingerbread men as a result of their adaptation into film.

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72. Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, note inserted between 252-253.

73. Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 65.

74. Kubrick, SK/1/2/4/1/1/137.

Each of the above adaptations merits its own consideration, but due to space constraints, I will only consider the adaptation Kubrick performed on King's book. King's version of *The Shining* is 160,863 words long, yet the two-hour release of Kubrick's *The Shining* features 6,818 spoken words, if you include words overheard from television and radio announcements. What is important to note here is that Kubrick evidently found 154,045 words *to not* be "good and necessary words to tell" as part of the image of the film. [75] Kubrick's annotations in King's novel speak to this point explicitly in the following marginalia: "what is going on now. what is Jack doing – this book is inadequate,"[76] and on another page where Kubrick crosses out a large section of exposition explaining the hotel's desire to absorb Danny's psychic powers with the annotation "??? I don't think we should even know what they want."[77] In addition to expressing confusion and dissention with King's literary decisions, there are also annotations that critique his literary abilities in the simple notes of "idiotic dialogue" or "dumb."[78]

In addition to the massive deletion of dialogue, scenes that would be too costly to shoot, and elements of the book Kubrick deemed unnecessary, the translation from literature to film is made possible because the filmic image can show in seconds what it takes pages to explain. For example, King's book makes frequent references to the weather surrounding the hotel, highlighting the isolation and claustrophobia the characters are feeling. Kubrick even notes that it will be necessary to "keep cutting to the blizzard – they [the characters] should frequently look out the windows to check the weather."[79] However, this repeated checking featured in King's text and suggested by Kubrick is accomplished in two separate, 5-second exterior long-shots of the hotel, almost invisible through the heavy snow (fig. 7).

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[75] Kubrick, SK/1/2/4/1/1/137

[76] Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 375.

[77] Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 405.

[78] Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 340.

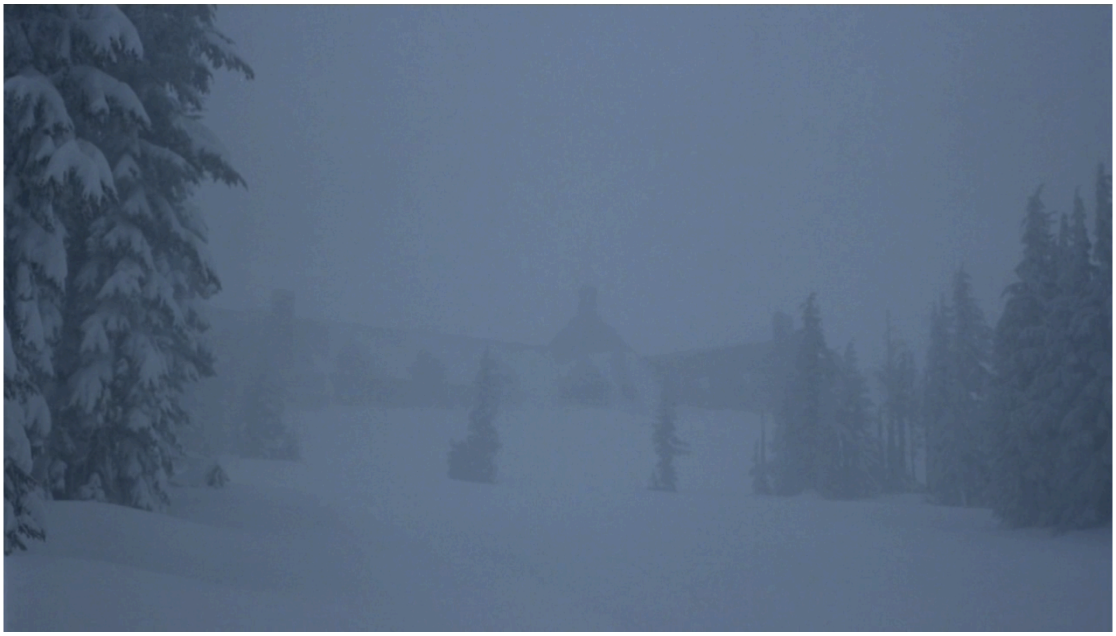

Figure 7: Snowbound. Reprinted from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980. Warner Brothers, 2000, DVD.

Further, the passage of time is not necessary through extended dialogue or references to the weather, but made implied by the use of vague title cards – THURSDAY, or SATURDAY instead of a character awkwardly remarking that it has been several weeks, as King has happen frequently in the novel. The viewer sees that time has passed by the change in the lighting to reflect the arrival and accumulation of the snow outside, the subtle changes of the moods of the characters, and the progression of the film itself (fig. 8). All of this information is available in a single glimpse, eliminating the need for hundreds of words of exposition.

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[79] Kubrick, SK/15/1/3, 386.

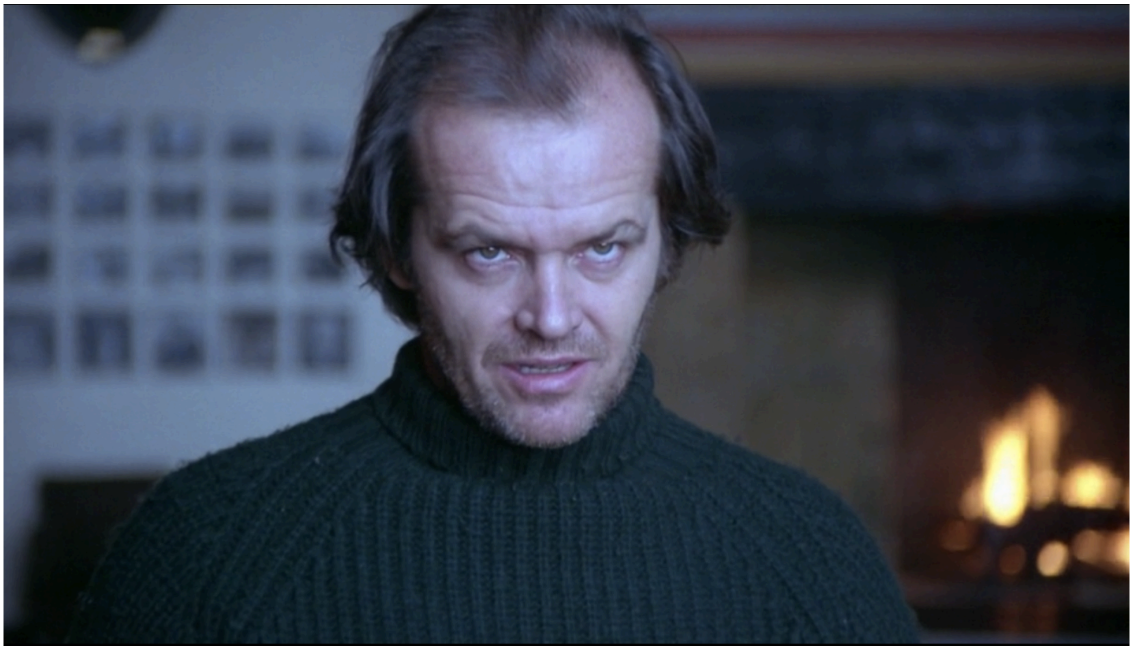

Figure 8: Visual cues mark time's passage. Reprinted from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980. Warner Brothers, 2000, DVD.

Such translation from words to images not only do not flatten characters – as we clearly see in Nicholson's face – but actually heighten the emotional content of the film. This is due in part, I argue, to the fact that no one individual can claim responsibility for the translation of the literary story to the images on the screen. Kubrick and Johnson co-wrote the screenplay, but many of the scenes were improvised or simply invented by the actors during production. As Pezzotta notes, Kubrick followed Konstantin S. Stanislavsky's method:

> When the actors were ready to play, the director wanted them to know their lines perfectly and to have understood their roles. They should not only have learned their dialogue, but also have been able to live their characters' lives, to feel their emotions. If, despite these conditions being satisfied, the scene was not interesting and/or coherent with the other sequences, the scene, according to the filmmaker, must be rewritten with the actors' help.[80]

Certainly, this was true on the set of *The Shining*, where Kubrick wrote "new versions of the script almost every day," not as explicit stage directions, but as "suggestions to be developed in front of the camera."[81] As we see in some of the photographs during production, conversations between Jack Nicholson and Kubrick were common in the midst of a scene – the two of them reviewing dailies, attempting to work out how the characters would behave in a specific scene, and suggesting lines or movements that might best convey their collective intentions.

As I argued in Chapter IV, the question of authorship here is almost impossible to address from a traditional aesthetic standpoint. Stephen King wrote a novel that was then examined, annotated, and revised by Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick then recruited Diane Johnson to assist him in drafting scene summaries, treatments, and multiple scripts with evolving different endings. A team of location scouts, prop scouts, set designers, costume designers, and talent scouts were then mobilized to contribute to the physical elements of the film. Further, the actors were consulted on a daily basis as to how each scene ought to progress, and how the characters ought to behave. Finally, the film was edited with the help of specialists, and then several different versions were released, each varying in length, content, language, and in accordance with requests for censorship. In trying to identify The Artist in this process, we ought to feel as Benjamin did – standing amongst a constellation of situations and theoretical concerns, economic and practical problems, all directed at – but none directly responsible for – an end goal. If we accept that Murnau laid bare the device of crafting a narrative for the audience in *Der letzte Mann*, allowing viewers a peek into the operation room of Benjamin's surgeon, we must consider an examination of Kubrick's adaptation to be a full fledged invasion of the surgery theater. It is possible in films to glimpse the revolutionary criticism that Benjamin sought – and *The Shining* certainly has some of its own to offer – but to truly challenge the traditional aesthetic categories unable to accommodate the filmic image, we must consider the act of creating the film itself as part of the filmic image – a part that is consistently ignored in the aura surrounding it.

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[80] Pezzotta, 28.

[81] Ibid.

Each edited and released version of the film covers over all of the work done by hundreds of individuals to create the filmic image. The artist, according to traditional aesthetic categories, is credited as Stanley Kubrick, an accreditation that ignores the work of the crew, cast, and Kubrick's co-screenwriter.

Yet, as we watch the film, the dismantling of the aura surrounding King's book – the motivation for its writing, its success as a book, King's belief in its specific truth – *also* had to be neglected, if not destroyed, in order to produce the film. In its place forms another aura, the aura of the film *The Shining*. Here, we should remember Heidegger's claims that in order to properly *preserve* a work – to let it be – we must first acknowledge the creation of that work. While Heidegger's argument is focused on the creation of a much smaller scale work, for instance, a poem by Hölderlin, it can be extended to consider the massive effort required to create a filmic image. The creation of *The Shining* was not simply limited to the historically bound considerations of one individual, it was a widely disseminated effort to transform an idea into a series of images – piecemeal – which we then quaintly refer to as a singular work.

Given our considerations of the process of adapting, creating, and ultimately producing *The Shining*, it is only appropriate now to consider whether the filmic image that results provides any further critical challenge to the traditional aesthetic image. We have already glimpsed some of the possibilities: knowing that Kubrick cut 154,045 words from King's original vision, we have a privileged perspective on the amount of exposition that was removed. However, the removal of exposition heightens the ambiguity of the film – both in its ultimate 'meaning' and in our understanding of it as it progresses. The latter component is natural, given that it is a genre film, a thriller with supernatural qualities, and that very classification opens up the realm of play for viewers. As in Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), determining what images *not* to show can be more powerful and more emotionally provocative than the images you decide to show.[82] In *The Bad and the Beautiful*, a producer turns a low-budget thriller into a hit by deciding to not show the poorly made costume of the "Cat Man," and instead leave it to the viewers' imagination (fig. 9). Similarly, Kubrick's decision to not show certain events or provide relevant background information (for instance, explore the scrapbook that details the history of the hotel) permits the viewer to remain engaged with the film, seeking meaning and explanation, even if it is not present.

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[82] *The Bad and the Beautiful*, directed by Vincente Minnelli, (1952; Atlanta, GA: Turner Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

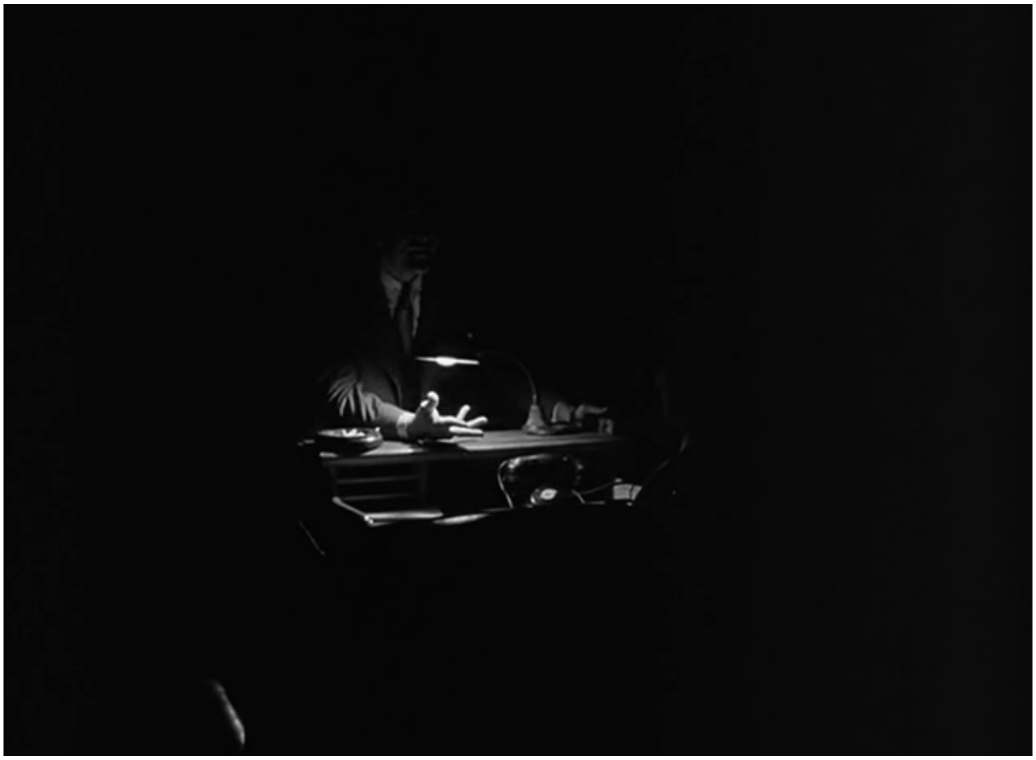

Figure 9: Limiting the spectator's range of visibility. Reprinted from *The Bad and the Beautiful*, directed by Vincente Minnelli, 1952. Turner Home Entertainment, 2002, DVD.

In *The Shining*, similar limitation is used to prevent the viewer from really seeing what horror happens to Danny when he enters room 237. King's novel explains it in detail, but the film leaves us with an image of the open door, and then a cut away to the next scene (fig. 10). The next time we see Danny, he is almost catatonic, covered with bruises, with torn clothing. For the film viewer, what happens in room 237 – about which we have been warned – is left entirely to the imagination of the viewer. We know what is in the room from Jack's experience with "The Bathtub Lady," but what Danny endures is never shown – limiting the viewer's visibility, but maximizing the potential for Benjamin's "free-floating contemplation" – in this case, 'free-floating horror'.

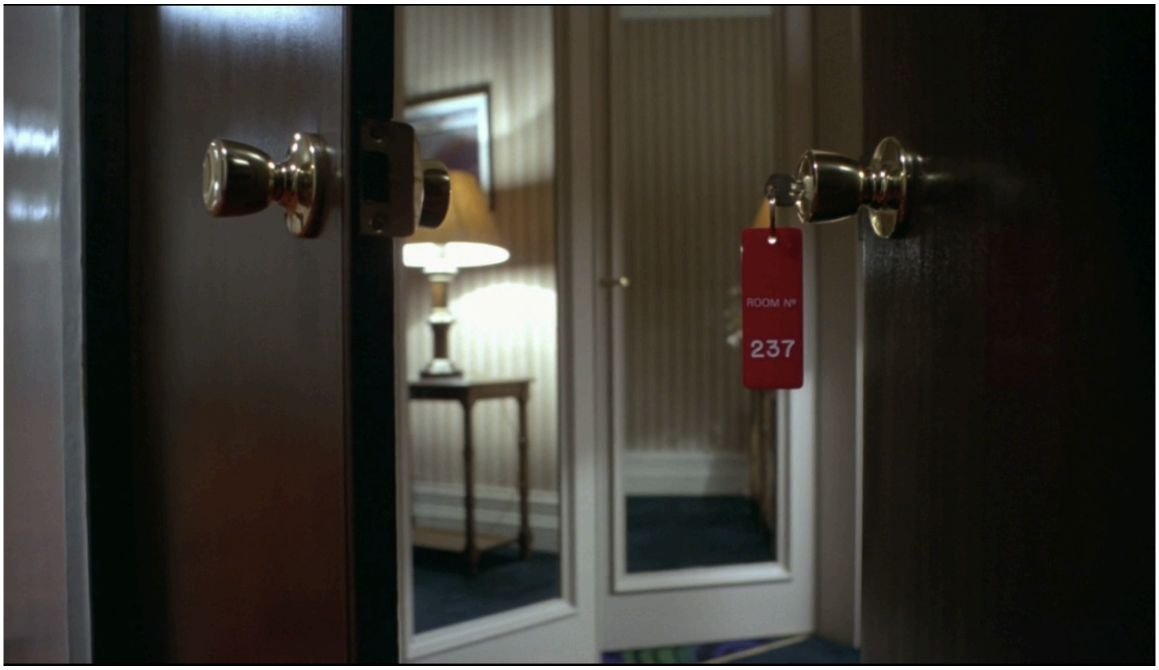

Figure 10: The mysteries of room 237. Reprinted from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980. Warner Brothers, 2000, DVD.

Further, the true nature of Danny's psychic power is never fully explained, except in a short conversation with Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers). When Danny needs to utilize those abilities in order to call Hallorann for help, our knowledge that this is happening is not told, but rather revealed through a series of images, highly controlled in the way that Benjamin discussed: "the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images."[83] We see Hallorann lying prone on his bed, eyes unfocused (fig. 11), and then we cut to Danny, shaking with effort, foaming at the mouth (fig. 12). The following scene, Jack's encounter in room 237, cements our understanding of what has occurred: Danny has realized that the hotel is unsafe, and is calling for help. It is the control of these images through editing that permits us to extract meaning from the scene, even though it is not explicitly given.

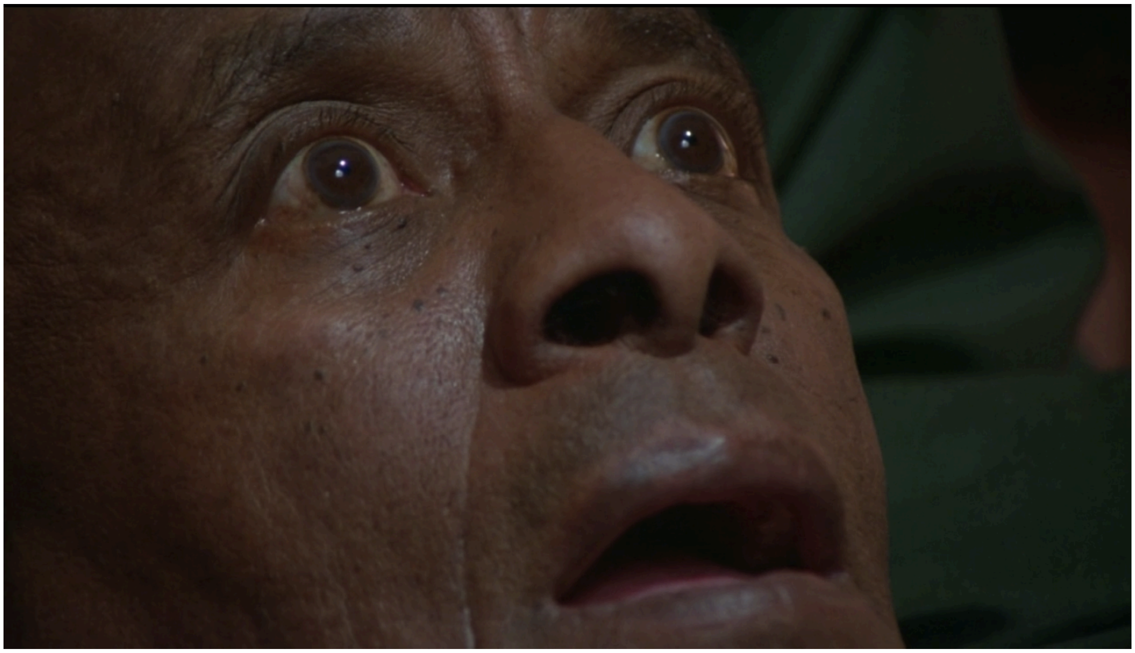

Figure 11: Hallorann receives a message. Reprinted from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980. Warner Brothers, 2000, DVD.

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[83] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," §7, 27.

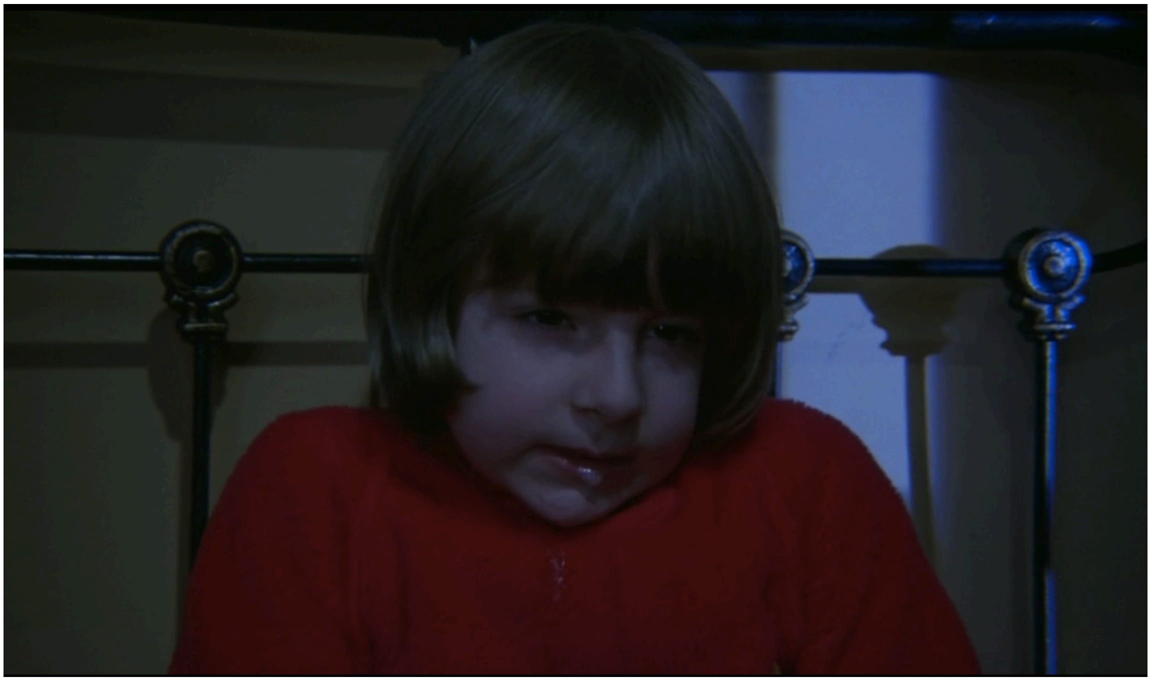

Figure 12: Danny sends a message. Reprinted from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980. Warner Brothers, 2000, DVD.

Scenes such as this are carefully controlled to provide just enough exposition without imposing full understanding on the viewer. Through the lengthy process of pre-production and production, many other scenes of direct exposition were cut such as the explanation of Jack's unemployment, the scrapbook which details the morbid history of the hotel, and a final scene wherein the hotel manager, Ullmann, meets with the recovering Wendy and Danny in a hospital in Boulder. Cutting these expository scenes ultimately created a film that continually withholds meaning from viewers, eliciting their desire for understanding, while occasionally shocking them with something horrific, such as the elevator gushing forth blood. Under Gunning's reading, *The Shining* would certainly qualify as a cinema of attractions – and for Benjamin, this is precisely the kind of film that enables viewers to feel as though they *need* view the film authentically, to learn for themselves what it, if anything, ‘means’.

Conclusion

Film, as we may wish to surmise on the basis of the preceding discussion of these three films, still falls under the category defined by Plato as mere shadows:

> All artistic images are simply shadows of a “living, breathing discourse,” incapable of responding to the viewer or defending against attacks.[84]

Even montage film, Benjamin’s greatest hope, is not a living, breathing discourse once it is released into theaters. It has greater malleability in that it can always be further edited, reshot, and reworked, but it is still a blank partner in a conversation. Though it may still be a shadow, it is one that is incomplete – irritatingly so. The dissemination of authorship, heightened ambiguity, and power for metacinematic critique demonstrated in the above three films may not offer a conversation to a specific viewer, but it does enter into a larger conversation with a culture of viewers. Film is viewed *en masse*, theoretical articles are conducted in journals situated in an academic community, and even online realms offer a world wherein viewers can critically consider a work of art through dialogue. While all of these characteristics of film are possible for other forms of images – painting, literature, sculpture, architecture – it is the technological reproducibility of film, and thus its vast dissemination across socio-economic, cultural, and political boundaries, that characterizes it as the most potentially critical and emancipatory medium to date.

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[84] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d.

We might have to cede the first point to Plato, but only on the grounds that the filmic image is precisely the kind of image that encourages the dialogue between philosophy and poetry. As we recall from Chapter II, Plato's belief in the potential for poetry and philosophy to work in tandem to enlighten, awaken, and guide the soul is fulfilled in film. The images in the films evaluated above are very carefully selected, specifically composed, and deliberatively delivered. As we saw with Kubrick, the creation of a film is a process that can take years from conception to premier, and each step is guided with care and consideration, not simply from one artist, but by hundreds of artists, each playing a valuable role. The result, as I have sought to demonstrate, are three films that present filmic images worthy of the category of art *and also* demand intellectual, and, eventually, philosophical consideration from the viewer. It is up to us to do as Plato demanded, but with a slight revision: rather than act as prophets who translate the exact will of the gods, we ought to be guides for those who wish to interpret the intellectual and philosophic value of these films for themselves. Against Plato and Heidegger, there may not be a single Truth lurking within the confines of these three films, but there are truths, simply waiting to be existentially chosen and seized.

Further, as Heidegger argued, the history of Western philosophy has posited the work of art as separate from Dasein, preventing any authentic engagement with it. As we have seen, the immersive activity of film is not a panacea, as Benjamin worried, but in fact a clearing in which the viewer may enter into authentic relationship with the filmic image, an opportunity for "standing within the openness of beings that happen in the work."[85] What is occurring in film now is that many films, many works of art, are waiting for their preservers, as Heidegger would argue:

> However, if a work does not find preservers, does not immediately find them capable of responding to the truth happening in the work, this does not mean that the work may also be a work without preservers. Being a work, it always remains tied to the preservers, even and particularly when it is still only waiting for them, only pleading and preserving for them to enter into its truth.[86]

Our task, then, is to find these films lacking preservers, and open them up for aesthetic and philosophical play. In other words, we must "see the riddle" of the art as it exists for us in today's world of the image.[87] Once we see it, and once we discover the films in need of preservation, the existential challenge of authentic viewership and the pedagogical challenge of perpetuating Benjamin's efforts to disseminate this viewership begin.

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[85] Heidegger, "The Origin," 192.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Heidegger, "The Origin," 204.

CHAPTER VI

TOWARDS AUTHENTIC VIEWERSHIP

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we considered a constellation of films as well as a constellation of techniques for understanding and interpreting those films. As we discovered, while the existing techniques are useful for providing an understanding or an interpretation, especially for professional scholars, they all fell short of adequately addressing the phenomenological character of film: an image that is not directed at any specific Platonic ideal and is untethered from its historical provenance. This chapter seeks to move towards an understanding of the resulting existential challenge posed to us by the filmic image: if it does not have a first in the form of an Ideal or a historical origin, the existentialists argue that we must work to give it meaning, value, and importance.

In this chapter, I will not offer a specific framework for theoretical considerations of film. I will not champion specific techniques of observation or analysis that will best permit us to decode some specific list of exemplary films. Rather, I will argue that the filmic image – any filmic image – can best be understood through proper comportment towards it: existential authenticity, as understood through Simone de Beauvoir. Before we can arrive at a full understanding of this comportment, I argue that we must first consider an important counterargument to this entire project: the critical theorists' considerations of film as part of the culture industry, specifically read here through Max

Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. First, I will elucidate the critical theorists' convincing and well-argued diagnosis of the dominant system of their era – what they deem the culture industry. Then, I will elucidate the prognosis commonly accepted by critical theorists, here explained through the work of Theodor Adorno: critique. Ultimately, I will argue that the critical theorists offer prescient concerns about the philosophical, intellectual, and personal value of art in a late capitalist consumer society; however, I find in the later works of Adorno an opportunity to expand beyond these concerns and find for film a true aesthetic ground. In order to realize this ground, I argue, we require not the critical capacities of the critical theorists, but the interpretive capacities of the existentialists.

I will then offer a preliminary description of a properly existential comportment towards the filmic image. Drawing from de Beauvoir, this comportment is one that necessarily concerns others in the process of interpretation, enhances the freedom of those also engaging in this project, and preserves works of art even if they are not initially productive or desirable given that they may, one day, prove to be fruitful. For this final consideration, I will discuss de Beauvoir's treatment of the work of the Marquis de Sade in order to show the range of possibilities made available through this particular comportment towards the image. Finally, I will stress that this attitude towards the filmic image is not offered as the *only* proper method for authentically engaging with the filmic image, nor is de Beauvoir the only existentialist or theorist who can offer us the theoretical underpinnings to support such a comportment. As detailed in the introduction, in order to fully attain a proper existential comportment towards the image, we must be willing to continually evolve this comportment by integrating the wisdom and considerations of many other thinkers. Still, I argue that this preliminary comportment towards the filmic image is successful: it dovetails approaches already championed by scholars, theorists, and amateurs, with existential challenge to approach all phenomenological experiences authentically first, as individuals, and second, as members of a larger community of thinkers.

Beyond the Culture Industry, Towards Existentialism

As I have argued, the filmic image is a second with an accidental first – by this, I mean that it is a work that need not adhere to the prior condition(s) responsible for its own existence, whether we describe that in terms of the transcendental ideals of Plato, the historical provenance of Heidegger, or in terms of the material conditions of late industrial capitalism as described by both Benjamin as well as Horkheimer and Adorno. For the purposes of this chapter, we will parlay our understanding of the filmic image as a second with an accidental first into existential language. As Sartre argues, humans are creatures for whom "existence precedes essence."[1] Here, he means that we are born into existence *tabula rasa*, without a predetermined essence, and must then create our own essence through the continuous process of making decisions and then enacting them. For Sartre, man is unique in that he "first exists; that is, that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so."[2] Man must project himself into the future, Sartre argues, because it is there that projects can be undertaken that will enable him to craft his essence. His consciousness of this activity, Sartre further argues, causes a fair amount of anguish at the weight of responsibility, given that the meaning of his own life, and by extension, the lives of everyone around him, hinges on these decisions and enacted projects.

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[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kukla (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

Similarly, I seek here to understand film as a thing for which “existence precedes essence,”[3] that is, film is thrust into existence, and any predetermined essence that aided in its creation falls away, leaving it open for interpretation that might create, form, and elaborate its essence. Both Plato and Heidegger have a conception of the initial event of creation: for Plato, the creation of a work of art is the always-inadequate result of attempting to approximate a Form; for Heidegger, it is the result of the work of creating and preserving, of ushering into being that which describes, critiques, or elaborates being from out of a historically inherited context of meaning. In film, as we have seen, the process of creation is messy, laborious, time consuming, and requires hundreds of individuals to enact. For instance, in Chapter V, Kubrick’s *The Shining* was thrust into existence through the efforts of myriad individuals, each of whom helped create it while either maintaining or adhering to an understanding of what the film was going to be: that is, its plot, its genre, its reputation, and even its meaning. While each of these artists necessarily possessed at least a partial preconceived essence about the film while they were creating it, once the film was released, those essences fall away, leaving an openness for interpretation and meaning that can only be filled by the viewer. Thus film, like man, must first exist before it can acquire or adopt an essence. In this analogy, I do not wish to suggest that film is identical to man: film is not conscious of its own projection into the future nor does it seek to undertake projects in order to enact its own essence. What I wish to suggest is that although film does not possess the agency and action of man, it is a freer and more open thing than Sartre's paper knife – both the film and the knife require a prior essence for their coming to be, but only the film can eschew that initial essence.

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[2] Sartre, 23.
[3] Sartre, 20.

Thus, it is here that I depart from both Plato and Heidegger. Film is not, as Plato's approach would suggest, tethered to a transcendental idea given to it by an auteur, director, or screenwriter. Nor, as Heidegger's approach would lead us to think, is film tethered to the historical provenance surrounding the film's creation. In this chapter, I will argue, moreover, that film is not inextricably bound up with the material conditions of its technological reproducibility, as argued by critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. If we are to take film as a phenomenological experience seriously, we must see these three types of essences (and any others not here considered) as accidental to the image as such. In the same way that Sartre argues that man is condemned to the responsibility to choose what he shall be against any external conditions, I argue that we are condemned to the responsibility to interpret a film beyond and often against any preconceptions about its meaning. To cast this in Heideggerian terminology, film demands of us that we simply let it be. As we know from Chapter II, letting be is a process that can only be achieved by proper comportment towards the work of art. In this chapter, I will argue that the proper comportment is existentialist, specifically as we can understand this comportment through a consideration of the theories of Simone de Beauvoir.

In making a parallel between the existential understanding of human life and the aesthetic importance of the filmic image, I hope to demonstrate that the same kind of openness, freedom, and responsibility required by the authentic individual for her own authentic creation is required by the filmic viewer in order to move towards authentic viewership. As I will elucidate, existential creation is messy – and the weight of the responsibility of creating one's own essence is often unbearably heavy. The same applies to this comportment towards the filmic image. Understood with Sartre, the temptation to fall into inauthenticity when faced with an existential decision is tantalizing. Understood with Heidegger, the call of the they-self is constant and unending. Understood with Benjamin, the temptation to rely on auratic tradition – authoritative meaning offered by experts on film theory, knowledge of historical provenance that might elucidate ambiguities, even a film's presence or absence in the canon itself – is not simply omnipresent, it is actually encouraged by urban commodity capitalism.

As difficult as this existential weight may be, however, we ought to be glad that it is an unbearable weight and not an unbearable lightness. Film continues to fascinate us because it demands our contribution of meaning to it and our interpretation of it. Here, we find the possibility for a turn away from the concerns of the critical theorists. If Horkheimer and Adorno are correct to assert that film is simply drivel that is mass-produced by the culture industry in order to distract us, then film would not matter, existentially. We might continue to fill critical journals, stacks of books, and online forums with our attempts to analyze and interpret the filmic image, but it would simply amount to intellectual labor that is compatible with the furtherance of the culture industry. Despite how much work we accomplished, we would not feel as though our analyses of films were still somehow incomplete – that we still had not captured the fullest expression of the phenomenological experience presented to us by these films. We would be satisfied, not dissatisfied: the culture industry provides us with fodder meant to distract and control, and we interpreted that fodder in a way that further distracts and controls. Yet, we feel as though the matter is incomplete – irritatingly so.

This feeling, I posit, is due to the fact that there is an existential weight to film, a weight that resists Seneca's maxim that *"Prima quae vitam dedit hora, carpit."*[4] This line from Seneca discloses a primary component of existential thought: the life of humans is always-already being seized back by that First which loaned life to us. We are always-already dying. However, I posit, perhaps aesthetic works can continue to live on in a way that our physical inhabitance of this world cannot. This happens through our continued taking up of these works, interpretation of them, and interaction with them. In this act of continued interpretation and critique, we do not let any First (transcendental ideals, historical provenance, or economic and social conditions) that contributed to the work of arts creation – whatever gave it 'life' – take it back. We cannot let it fall into world-decay, nor, as I will now argue, can we permit it to simply become recycled back into the culture industry that produced it. To do so – to let the work die – is to effect the closure of future meanings for the work.[5] Before we can move towards this conception of the proper existential authentic comportment towards the filmic image, we must first consider the critical perspective of Horkheimer and Adorno.

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[4] Seneca, *Hercules Furens*, in *Three Tragedies of Seneca: Hercules Furens, Troades, Medea* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909) Act III line 874, 55.

As we have seen through Benjamin, the rise of late industrial capitalism and mechanically reproducible art poses a deep threat (though also promise) to society. Accompanying the new social and economic situation is the rise of what Horkheimer and Adorno term "the culture industry." In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, they argue that the culture industry is all-encompassing:

> All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce.[6]

Deepening this problem is their assertion that the "trash" produced by the culture industry is desired by the modern masses. This is a problem that may be seen to be anticipated by Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World*, namely, that the worst threat facing us in the future is not Orwell's Big Brother preventing us from thinking, but a mass dissemination of meaningless amusements that will replace our need to think with a need for entertainment. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, all of the various forms of amusements produced by the culture industry – radio, television, film, music, and architecture – adhere to a "relentless unity" in which everything seems different, but is essentially the same.[7] Further, this relentless unity is structured so that any distinctions that could be made between different instantiations of this unity are not actual differences of kind, but rather variations on the same theme. These differences, then, create distinct hierarchies of products within the culture industry: it offers romance films which appeal to an audience solely seeking emotional escape and also documentaries geared towards those seeking the illusion of intellectual engagement with their world. In manufacturing slight differences of the products of the culture industry, the producers have ensured that "something is provided for everyone;" every taste, every whim, every level of education, "so that no one can escape."[8]

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[5] The above line from Seneca's tragedy is included in de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, which she finds in Michel de Montaigne's essay "Que philosopher, c'est appredndre à mourir." In its French version, the line from Seneca is preserved exactly, but in many English translations of Montaigne, as well as the English translation of *Ethics of Ambiguity*, the lines are incorrectly transcribed from the original Latin and thus an inadequate translation is offered such as the one in M. A. Screech's translation: "Our first hour gave us life and began to devour it" (Montaigne, 103). I offer an interpretation of the Seneca that we might find more accurate: "Fortune/fate which at the first loans us life, in the end, recalls it back again." This translation reverberates more strongly with the sense of recalling a monetary loan that by right (*dedit*) is owed back to the lender, not with the sense provided by Screech of life being metaphysically devoured as soon as it begins. Screech's translation, I argue, accords more strongly with a traditional metaphysical perspective, while the translation I offer accords more strongly with an existential perspective.

[6] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

What Horkheimer and Adorno describe amounts to a contradiction of the modern world. There exists a systemic apparatus that provides an unending series of pre-selected choices to the consumer; however, the consumer must, by her presence in the world, continue to make choices within that mass of similarity. In so doing, the culture industry seeks to transform individual consumers into unwilling objective participants that simply exist to reify the system itself. For Horkheimer and Adorno, film is the most nefarious

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7. Horkheimer and Adorno, 96.
8. Ibid, 97.

element of this industry in that it completely inhibits the consumer imagination through strict control of genre, type, style, and narrative structure. As a result, the spectator is "denied any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination."[9] They elaborate,

> Anyone who is so absorbed by the world of the film, by gesture, image, and word, is unable to supply that which would have made it a world in the first place […] The required qualities of attention have become so familiar from other films and other culture products already known to him or her that they appear automatically.[10]

The "interchangeable" details of the films, radio broadcasts, television shows, and pop songs become so familiar to the viewer that in the culture industry, there is no need to seek new projects – they all appear presented before her as equally interesting, if entirely identical, options.[11] A further danger for Adorno is the threat of false consciousness, wherein the recognition of a contradiction within society forces the subject back upon herself, unable to do anything other than continue to participate in the consumptive nature of the culture industry. It is this attitude that Horkheimer and Adorno seem to ascribe to all members of the culture industry in their essay, especially in their descriptions of the way in which the culture industry presents models of behavior that are then grotesquely imitated:

> 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

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[9] Horkheimer and Adorno, 100.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Horkheimer and Adorno, 98.

> apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry.[12]

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the young girl imitating ideal social behaviors as learned from the culture industry is an unfortunate result of the system in control. For de Beauvoir, as for many existentialists, this behavior "arouses contempt" because we recognize that this young girl is responsible for wiling herself,[13] but is instead choosing to "make [herself] blind and deaf" to her own freedom.[14] As de Beauvoir argues, "to exist is to *make oneself* a lack of being; it is to *cast* oneself into the world,"[15] regardless of how stringently controlled that world might be. Deepening this problem is that even if the consumers of the culture industry fall into false consciousness like the young girl described above, they are in that position because they have accepted the commodification of their own aspirations. Thus, the culture industry is for many individuals a closed system – they may achieve the experience of contradiction and find in themselves a possibility for critique, but find themselves unable to follow through with the critique.

Given these considerations, it is easy to believe Horkheimer and Adorno when they assert that any film produced under these conditions should not matter to us – it is, as they see it, always the same film or something like the same film, just with a slightly different ending or a slightly different cast of movie stars. Identical items do not merit separate considerations. We might well wonder if it is at all possible for the

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[12] Horkheimer and Adorno, 136.
[13] de Beauvoir, 43.
[14] Ibid, 42.
[15] Ibid.

"revolutionary criticism" that Benjamin believed could direct the masses towards awareness of such a system of control to exist within the culture industry[16] – let alone make itself visible to viewers amid the identical cultural artifacts it produces. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the history of cinema is replete with films that challenge traditional styles, conventions, and genres. Given this consideration, I suggest we examine the turn Adorno himself makes away from the commitment to the idea that film lacks any artistic merit and is merely an operation meant to "impress the omnipotence of capital on the hearts" of viewers,[17] and towards a possible conception of an aesthetic ground for the filmic image.

Further considerations of Adorno, especially in his later writings, give us a possibility for productive engagement with aesthetic objects within the culture industry. In order to explore these possibilities, we must first understand his conception of experience as "the process of consciousness revising its criterion of truth."[18] That is, we have an experience when we realize that society has presented us with contradictory beliefs, both of which are offered as true. The culture industry is replete with these kinds of contradictions: for example, films released conterminously that tell a young woman that she must both be a Madonna and a whore.[19] The possibility for critique arises for Adorno when we recognize this contradiction:

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[16] Benjamin, "Third Version," §10, 261.
[17] Horkheimer and Adorno, 98.
[18] Brian O'Connor, "Introduction," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000). 15.
[19] In the case of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), this contradictory message can be found not only in the same film, but the same actress.

> Recognition of a contradiction compels us to revise the criterion, and in this instance it could lead to a revision of society itself since the criteria misleads us about the antagonistic nature of society. Once revealed to consciousness this contradiction could no longer be tolerated.[20]

Once we recognize a contradiction in society, we must then exercise our resistance to that contradiction through the power of critical thought. For Adorno as well as Horkheimer, there is an unending need for critical thought, especially in a society that seeks so strongly to "dominate individuals and mould them to the purposes which effectively contribute to the preservation of society."[21] This is their prognosis to their diagnosis of the culture industry: recognition of contradictions and seeking out of experiences that permit us to critique and eventually revise society. Adorno even finds the most "exemplary models of experience in philosophy and art, […] spheres which are not totally encompassed by the needs of society."[22] As an example, Adorno finds in composer Arnold Schoenberg "something uniquely apt about the dissonant, atonal qualities of [his] music," given that it exists in a society that is itself, "contrary to appearances, dissonant."[23] Such a contradiction can only be faced through careful thought, specifically understood as:

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[20] O'Connor, 12.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] O'Connor, 17.

> Thought as such, before all particular concerns, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it; this is what thought has inherited from its archetype, the relation between labor and material.[24]

Critical thought about the contradictions posed before us is, for Adorno, the best approach to navigating and improving the conditions of our existence in the modern world. Without it, we simply fall back into "the reduced experience of a reified consciousness," unable to resist or alter the conditions of our existence.[25]

This being said, we might well wonder what constitutes a work of art, for Adorno. Within the culture industry, every art-like artifact is always-already complicit in preventing thought. The examples of art that Adorno feels can produce contradictions which lead to thought, such as Schoenberg, are not components of the culture industry. Adorno's favorite examples, the works of Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and the compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven, illustrate his belief that art – true art – "is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it."[26] Art can only be successful, he argues, if it remains a movement of inner life, a psychic sublimation of the contradictions of society into a critical work. In the work of these artists, he finds "the sharpest sense of reality joined with estrangement from reality,"[27] a contradiction in itself that is productive of critical thought on part of the artist, the work, and the viewer. Yet, later in his life, Adorno altered his considerations on art to include film – albeit of a very specific variety. As Miriam Hansen elucidates,

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[24] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 68.

[25] O'Connor, 17.

[26] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 8.

[27] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 9.

> Exchanging the view of a paralyzing totality for a more particular, even partial angle, Adorno sets out to reflect on problems inevitably confronted by any film-maker who conceives of an alternative practice under the given social and economic conditions. This shift of angle re-opens areas of speculation which seem stereotypically blocked in Adorno's early work, for instance the question of an aesthetics specific to film as well as the issue of reception.[28]

In Adorno's "Transparencies on Film," he argues that an aesthetics of film might be possible, although his caveats and concerns are quite extensive. Adorno still derides the narratively driven films of Hollywood, but finds the basis for the aesthetic qualities of film in films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961). This is because this film, like others, expresses the necessary "subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character."[29] Adorno here is remarking on the fact that *La Notte* is not a traditional culture industry drama or romance; it is a bitter and depressing look at what the culture industry would typify a glamorous life filled with wealth, beauty, and power. Thus, Adorno finds in *La Notte* an example of a film that contains all of the content of the films of the culture industry, but contradicts it with its presentation of that content. In watching the film, we have an experience: we see the belief of the life that the culture industry wants us to want superimposed over the belief of what that life could actually be. Thus, such a film could be a "liberated film," one which "would have to wrest its *a priori* collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and irrational influence and enlist this collectivity in the service of emancipatory intentions."[30] Thus, Adorno abandons his claim that film must be excluded from the realm of art due to its technological origins, conceding that it just might be possible for film to offer critique in its own expositions of contradictions of modern life. Adorno concludes his brief considerations on film with a remark he intends to be ironic: "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."[31] If we remember that Adorno defines art as most importantly capable of exposing contradictions within society, then the films considered in Chapter V all qualify as candidates for art films precisely because they do not appear to be works of art. As we saw, *Der letzte Mann* is a scathing critique of the desire of the viewing public for a happy ending, *Inception* refuses to provide the viewer with any satisfactory ending, and *The Shining* eschews exposition at every turn. Each of these films is a contradiction within the culture industry: a box office hit that critiques the necessary components of a box office hit. I suggest that perhaps Adorno was too quick in dismissing the possibility that an aesthetic film can exist beyond the realm of the Italian art films and Soviet montage he lists in his essay. Thus, while I agree that the diagnosis of film in "The Culture Industry" is compelling and accurate for many readers, I posit that it is a diagnosis that Adorno himself sought to move beyond. Enacting this movement, of course, could be accomplished through the continual effort of finding contradictions and exposing them through critique, but I suggest a much more open, intersubjective, and free approach: existentialism.

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[28] Miriam Hansen, "Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966). *New German Critique*, 24 (1981), 187.

[29] Theodor Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," *New German Cinema*, 24 (1981), 201.

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[30] Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," 203-04.

[31] Ibid, 205.

The Existential Challenge

Film is an ambiguity: it can be a highly personal phenomenological experience, yet it is simultaneously the product of a constellation of social, historical, aesthetic, and political factors. As such, the question of the proper existential comportment towards film may be addressed in a productive manner through the work of an existential philosopher who embraces such an ambiguity of our existence: Simone de Beauvoir. In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir argues that man is an individual, but an individual that is firmly grounded in a constellation of social, historical, aesthetic, and political concerns:

> This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.[32]

The challenge for the existentialist, then, is to realize her own freedom in conjunction with the freedom of all other men. In order to do this, she must "realize [her] fundamental ambiguity,"[33] as an individual agent necessarily bound up within a culture constituted by other individual agents. Our task is to pursue a project that has real value for us – and in enacting that project we realize and establish that value.[34] This project, however, can only be considered an act of freedom if it is capable of "a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end."[35] That is, we can only claim to have undertaken a truly free project if that project enables further free movement for other beings.

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[32] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Kensington Press, 1976), 7.

[33] de Beauvoir, 9.

[34] de Beauvoir, 70.

We are here concerned about preserving existential freedom in examining both the ontological structure of the filmic image as well as the academic, critical, and personal interpretation of individual films. In order to realize these potentialities, we must recognize that each individual's ability to freely engage with film is bound up with every other individual's ability to freely engage with film. De Beauvoir simply states: "I concern others and they concern me."[36] In relationship to this project, I wish to modify this claim slightly: 'My interpretation of film concerns others and their interpretation of film concerns me.' We can only experience the fullness of the phenomenon of film as a second with an irrelevant first and an existence without a predetermined essence if we are willing to do so as a community of free individuals:

> In Plato, art is mystification because there is a heaven of Ideas; but in the earthly domain all glorification of the earth is true as soon as it is realized. Let men attach value to words, forms, colors, and mathematical theorems, physical laws, and athletic prowess; let them accord value to one another in love and friendship, and the objects, the events, and the men immediately *have* this value, they have it absolutely.[37]

For de Beauvoir, this value is always available to us as long as we seek it freely and with the considerations of others in mind.

Given the above considerations, I propose that de Beauvoir offers a successful preliminary theoretical basis for our existential comportment towards the filmic image precisely because she focuses so strongly on the ambiguity of our intersubjectivity. As I will elucidate, this is a consideration that must be included in our comportment towards film if we wish to break away from the academic tradition of solitary scholars ascribing definitive meaning to works, or the influence of isolated communities (such as Benjamin's bourgeoisie) that seek to govern the creation of and subsequent meaning of aesthetic artifacts. However, as I have elucidated at length in the Introduction to this project, de Beauvoir is not necessarily our only means of departure. Certainly, considerations from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectic Reason* or *The Family Idiot*, Heidegger's notion of being-with and the expansions made upon his idea by Hannah Arendt, considerations from Miguel de Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life*, John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, and the thought of Gabriel Marcel are all crucial to fully understand the existential challenge posed to us not just in relation to art, but also in relation to life. Under the confines of this project, it is simply not practical to include extensive considerations of each of these scholars. Thus, while de Beauvoir provides our initial understanding of a proper comportment towards the image, a fuller description honed with the aid of the aforementioned thinkers and others must exist in its own project.

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[35] de Beauvoir, 70.

[36] Ibid, 72.

[37] Ibid, 157-58.

De Beauvoir's existential perspective is first and foremost intersubjective. Like Sartre, she is an atheist, and thus rejects any philosophical description of humanity that predicates a God or higher power that governs our existence. As such, she argues that "man is abandoned on the earth," left alone to "bear the responsibility for a world which is not the work of some strange power but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well."[38] The world as it has previously been understood, as the creation of God or gods, understood through religion, or through the operation of Spirit unfolding itself, as through Hegel, is incorrect, for de Beauvoir. The world exists, and we in it; neither the world nor we have any predetermined essence or telos to guide or confine us. She cites de Montaigne to elucidate this point:

> Life in itself is neither good nor evil. It is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it.[39]

For de Beauvoir, this is the height of freedom. We come into a world totally free, able to create both our own meaning and the meaning of our world as we will it. As we are born without an essence or a purpose, we are, at core, an absence or lack of being. Our task, then, is to embrace this absence of being so that we can be "a disclosure of being,"[40] that is, the source from which being, meaning, and values exist in the world. If we comport ourselves properly towards the nature of our existence, we realize that in embracing our lack, we "wish for the disclosure of the world,"[41] for something to come forth so that we might be able to perform *work* on both the world and ourselves. This choice must be made freely, and if it is made, it is "the source from which all significations and all values spring."[42] For example, as free existential being whose essence is first a *lack*, I sought in the world a disclosure that demanded my work: exploring the full possibility of the experience of the filmic image. By seizing that work and enacting it by reading about it, thinking about it, and talking about it with others, I gave value to both myself and to the world. My choice and my work declare to the world that the filmic image has value: it offers a multitude of realms for meaning, and it opens up further work such as identifying specific examples of the filmic image that embody this possibility most fully.

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[38] de Beauvoir, 16.
[39] de Beauvoir, epigraph to *Ethics of Ambiguity.*
[40] de Beauvoir, 24.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

Of course, de Beauvoir acknowledges that the recognition of the self as an absence of being is often a terrifying event – so much so that some shrink from it. If, in determining that I ought to pursue the filmic image as a project that would become a component of my essence I suddenly determined that it was too difficult – that it would be easier to simply work off of the ideas of those who came before me, or, worse, to simply resign myself to the idea that film simply does not matter – I could turn away from that project freely. In so doing, though, I am *still* giving value to the world and those who live in it. By turning away, I am giving positive value to "laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, [and] impatience."[43] Even in my attempt to will myself *not* to be free, my choice and my action create real values in the world – values that impact those around me.

Here, de Beauvoir's analysis offers a distinctive description that gives distinctive voice to the relationship between my choices and the choices of others. Existential choices and their ramifications must be made with an understanding of intersubjectivity, that is, the interconnectedness of all individuals. As de Beauvoir said above: "I concern others, and they concern me."[44] Therefore, when we make a decision, we must make it with absolute authenticity, because we make it not only for ourselves, but, as Sartre would argue, "for all men."[45] Were I to turn away from the work of determining the philosophical ramifications of filmic image, I would not be simply making a subjective statement about an objective thing: 'what film means isn't worth my time'. Rather, I would be making a value statement that then becomes part of the world and impacts everyone in it: 'what film means isn't worth anyone's time'. Without a world of Forms, without the aid of Being, and without any God, my deceptively simple decision to either engage in this project or not engage in this project is not a mere matter of subjective preference – it becomes reality for myself, my colleagues, and my students.

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[43] de Beauvoir, 25.
[44] de Beauvoir, 72.

This kind of existential freedom thus raises a serious objection: in the absence of any ethical system or higher power controlling an individual, "can he not choose whatever he likes and act however he likes?"[46] For de Beauvoir, the absence of a God does not make the world run wild, rather, it forces to us to confront the conditions which do limit our choices, actions, and values: other people. If it were indeed the case that we could simply do whatever we wanted, we would be one of two things: gods or tyrants. If we believe ourselves to be gods, we are deluded because we neglect to see that those around us are impacted by our choices. If we believe ourselves to be tyrants, it is because we have recognized those around us, but do not recognize or accept their own freedom. What we must realize, de Beauvoir argues, is that our freedom is contingent upon the continuation of the freedom of those around us:

> And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a

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[45] Sartre, 23.
[46] de Beauvoir, 25.

> freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison.[47]

In this, de Beauvoir argues that despite the absence of any list of rules or laws, any system of punishment or reward, existentialism offers an ethics that is, for the first time, appropriate to the true nature of man. It acknowledges that we are free, not automatons set to follow a list of commands, and it acknowledges that our freedom carries with it a responsibility to make choices that enhance freedom, not limit it. In the above example, the choice I made to pursue the project enhances freedom: it liberates the filmic image from impoverished understandings of its ontological character, it draws the attention of professional philosophers and film critics, and it benefits the lives of the students in my classroom whose native language consists of images, not words. Without this project, all of those avenues of freedom and possibility are not simply unimportant, they metaphysically cannot exist.

Thus, it is from this existential perspective that we will consider a proper comportment towards the filmic image that approaches a fuller understanding of our phenomenological experience of it. First, against Plato and Heidegger, this comportment begins with the claim that neither we nor, as we will see, the image, has any pre-given meaning. Second, against the critical theorists, it demands that those who adopt it recognize that there is always an option for freedom even in the most confining and totalitarian systems. And third, it discourages the tendencies of theorists who ascribe meaning with an aim of closing off further meaning and further interpretations through its emphasis on intersubjectivity.

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[47] de Beauvoir, 91.

An existential comportment towards film is similar to all acts of existential freedom in that it begins, first and foremost, with the decision made by an individual to freely and authentically ascribe value to a phenomenon encountered in the world. As we know, "we cannot start by saying that our earthly destiny [in this case, film] has or has not importance, for it depends upon us to give it importance."[48] Thus, we must approach the film without any preconceptions about its meaning, importance, or value – in other words, embrace its essential lack – in order to work to provide our own interpretation, from our own perspective, according to our own projects.

De Beauvoir's understanding of facticity will enable us to see the path towards such an interpretation. In order for us to properly attune ourselves towards a film, we must first be willing to "assume" the form of its facticity, in this case, previous readings of the film, rather than fully "sacrifice or deny" those elements of it as a phenomenon.[49] Our efforts in this project thus far have all been aimed at one half of de Beauvoir's explanation of the existential challenge: "one does not love the past in its living truth if he insists on preserving its hardened and mummified forms."[50] As such, I must confess the difficulty I encountered in attempting to be gracious to these previous readings by "assuming" them into my own understanding of the films. My aim in this project is to demonstrate that a new perspective of the ontological status of the filmic image and a new comportment towards that image is necessary. In so doing, there are many opportunities for me to destroy, deny, or denounce previous descriptions of this phenomenon. There is also an opportunity for me to face the ambiguity of existentialism and determine whether I wish to embrace my freedom as sole individual, or as an individual connected to a larger whole. If I am to follow de Beauvoir, I cannot perform my project freely unless I permit others to perform their projects freely. A proper authentic existential comportment towards film thus must include the willingness to assume previous readings of a film within our own, or it cannot succeed.

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[48] de Beauvoir, 16.
[49] de Beauvoir, 95.
[50] de Beauvoir, 95.

In the previous chapter, I have sought to assume rather than sacrifice or deny previous interpretations of *Der letzte Mann*, *Inception*, and *The Shining* by including them in my own analyses of the films. I did not have to do this; I chose to do this, given the existential considerations we are here exploring. When we watch *Der letzte Mann*, we can choose to watch it in its mummified form: as an artifact of the Weimer Era that speaks specifically to the German people. However, if we are to approach film in its fullness of being, we will not simply reject that mummification, but consider it *while* we look at it with fresh eyes. Similarly, when we are faced with the myriad academic interpretations of *Inception*, we feel a hardness around them: they are the result of arduous labor by well-trained professionals, and do not easily give way to simple rejection. In order to love these films despite their inclusion in the canon, we must then be open to their facticity, even the elements of it that we do not believe contribute to a fresh reading. This, de Beauvoir argues, is because even those mummified forms act as an appeal towards a future of fuller interpretations and greater realms of freedom:

> The past is an appeal; it is an appeal toward the future which sometimes can save it only by destroying it. Even though this destruction may be a sacrifice, it would be a lie to deny it: since man wants there to be being, he cannot renounce any form of being without regret.[51]

This consideration of regret in relationship to watching a film and providing it with meaning is worthy of deeper consideration.

As we recall from our earlier discussions of existentialism, one of its primary tenants is that our freedom is contingent on the continued freedom of others. Thus, our free and authentic reading of a film is only made possible if we grant the freedom of others to do the same. In relation to the challenge I posed in Chapter V to push aside the auratic nature of the filmic image so that we might view it with fresh eyes, it seems inappropriate that we might feel regret at losing those qualities and readings we found so distasteful. However, if we are to be truly authentic in our engagement of the film, we must acknowledge that any prior reading, interpretation, or inclusion in the canon might have been done in a freely authentic manner, as part of an existential project. Therefore, we, as free individuals, must be regretful if we genuinely determine that they must be set aside in order to pursue our own project.

We have thus seen that a proper authentic existential comportment to the filmic image necessarily considers the interpretations and meanings that have been imposed upon it in the past. We will now include in that comportment the realization that our interpretation will have ramifications on the filmic image in its future. As de Beauvoir elucidates,

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[51] de Beauvoir, 95.

> Art reveals the transitory as an absolute; and as the transitory existence is perpetuated through the centuries, art, too, through the centuries, must perpetuate this never-to-be-finished revelation. Thus, the constructive activities of man take on a valid meaning only when they are assumed as a movement toward freedom; and reciprocally, one sees that such a movement is concrete: discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, painting, and books people the world concretely and open concrete possibilities to men.[52]

We have seen that we must assume the previous interpretations of film because all art, and here I add film to her list, is a "never-to-be-finished-revelation."[53] We now see that whatever reading we give to a filmic image, it must be one that is a movement towards freedom, not a closing off of possibilities. This speaks directly to the critiques against the existentialists that any meaning is possible and permissible. Existentialism understood as Sartre's radical freedom *does* permit any individual to perform any interpretation of a film and then act on that interpretation, especially if they do so authentically. Further, any work of art can be created with the same sincerity, the same belief, regardless of its impact on the community. We can find such an example in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935),[54] an arguably filmically beautiful but equally arguably extraordinarily dangerous piece of propaganda. The film is simple enough, it is a "documentary of the Nazi Party Congress" without any overt linguistic messages.[55] Yet the pure aesthetic power of the film has caused many critics to declaim it as the most powerful piece of propaganda ever created.

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52. de Beauvoir, 80-81.

53. de Beauvoir, 80.

54. *Triumph des Willens*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, (1935; Romulus, MI: Synapse Films, 2006,) DVD.

55. Anton Kaes, *"Metropolis* (1927): City, Cinema, Modernity," in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, ed. Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 176.

The problem we face, then, is this. In assuming our proper existential comportment towards film, we must recall that our freedom is contingent on the freedom of others. The creation of a work of art or an interpretation of a work of art that promotes the limitation of freedom cannot be considered to belong to our existential comportment towards film. The fact of the matter is that it is possible for an artist to create something, or for a critic to interpret something, in such a way that causes what de Beauvoir considers evil – the closing off of possibilities. Rather than let this consideration detract us from this approach, we must instead carry it with us as a positive component: if de Beauvoir is right, our engagement with the filmic image and our interpretation of it enables us to identify not only the successes of film – as sought in Benjamin – but also the failures:

> Men do not like to feel themselves in danger. Yet, it is because there are real dangers, real failures, and real earthly damnation that words like victory, wisdom, or joy have meaning. Nothing is decided in advance, and it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win.[56]

We might here imagine Plato to be proud. Approached properly, film is always available for new meanings, new interpretations, and new descriptions of the world – if we are willing to freely create and enact them. In this, art is no different than any other existential act or choice. We approach both with care and freedom, and then our chosen interpretation must be "manifested concertedly through patience, courage, and fidelity."[57] It must clearly be seen as a genuine choice and interpretation so that others can assume our interpretation as part of the development of their own.

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[56] de Beauvoir, 34.
[57] de Beauvoir, 27.

An element of de Beauvoir's thought that makes her further appropriate for the preliminary outline of this comportment is her own authentic existential engagement with works of art. In the example we will examine, we will find that she assumes the proper existential comportment towards the literary image. She approaches the image in the interest of promoting freedom and further interpretations, but does this while preserving the facticity of the work of art itself. Further, she fulfills the task posed to us by Plato at the end of the *Republic*: for philosophers to act as mediators between works of art and the masses by considering the work itself, interpreting it, and then determining whether the work is capable of producing future free meanings. De Beauvoir's efforts are particularly interesting in this respect because she performs this task not for comedies or tragedies, as we see in the work of Plato, but for the work of the infamous Marquis de Sade in her *Must We Burn de Sade?*

In the course of her lengthy essay, she not only offers a more fruitful understanding of the life of de Sade, but also finds in it an example of failed authenticity. De Beauvoir notes that de Sade's work is not to be venerated for its literary qualities nor for its philosophical weight: as she elaborates, "even his admirers will readily admit that his work is, for the most part, unreadable; philosophically, it escapes banality only to founder in incoherence."[58] Rather, she argues that de Sade is a prime example of the effort demanded of us existentialism, namely,

> Can we, without renouncing our individuality, satisfy our aspirations to universality? Or is it only by the sacrifice of our individual difference that we can integrate ourselves into the community? This problem concerns us all. […] Thus

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[58] Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn de Sade?* Trans. Annette Michelson, (London: Peter Neveill Ltd., 1953), 10.

> we find in his work the most extreme form of the conflict from which no individual can escape without self-deception. It is the paradox and, in a sense, the triumph of de Sade that his persistent singularity helps us to define the human drama in its general aspect.[59]

De Beauvoir's argument does not promote the ideas contained in books such as *Juliette*, nor does she condone imitation of their content. She does, however, find an example of what happens when an individual is unable to enact their projects within a community. In the case of de Sade, his contemporaries deemed most of his projects and desires illegal, and he spent most of life in prison after a series of attempts to fulfill them in reality. She argues that it is only in art that de Sade felt he could "make himself understood"; out of desperation, he "borrowed the literary forms and the tried and tested doctrines of contemporary society" in an attempt to synchronize his individuality with the collective.[60] Whether he succeeded in his quest is neither our concern nor that of de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir's argument is that the work of de Sade must be preserved because it exists as a courageous existential effort to enact a project against the confines of social opinion, religious doctrine, and legal doctrine:

> De Sade's merit lies not only in his having proclaimed aloud what everyone admits with shame to himself, but the fact that he did not simply resign himself. He chose cruelty rather than indifference.[61]

In the face of imprisonment, loss of title, social torment, and personal disgrace, de Sade did not turn away from his attempts to fulfill his project. His struggle between reconciling his own predilections with those approved by society "finds so many echoes today" that de Beauvoir insists on preserving his work as a warning to those who take

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59. de Beauvoir, *de Sade*, 11.
60. Ibid, 51.
61. Ibid, 89.

the path de Sade chose.[62] De Sade, she argues, was never able to fully integrate his desires into society – and given the content of works such as *Juliette*, we should consider this to be good: most of his desires constitute ultimate closures of freedom, such as death. However, the life and legacy of de Sade exists as an example of the dangers of not successfully navigating the existential path:

> If we ever hope to transcend the separateness of individuals, we may do so only on condition that we be aware of its existence. Otherwise, promises of happiness and justice conceal the worst dangers. De Sade drained to the dregs the moment of selfishness, injustice and misery, and he insisted upon its truth. The supreme value of his testimony is the fact that it disturbs us. It forces us to reexamine thoroughly the basic problem which haunts our age in different forms: the true relation between man and man.[63]

In her analysis of de Sade, de Beauvoir enacts what we have been searching for in our relationship to film: the insistence that a work of art is never complete, never exhausted of meaning, but can always offer us something more, and often something unexpected – even if it arrives to us in the form of something repulsive to most readers. However, she delivers this analysis much in the same way that we see Socrates translate the Phoenician story and the story of Er into fables: by removing the rhetoric, removing the emotion, removing anything that might incite the appetitive part of our soul, and speaks directly to our reason. De Beauvoir's existential approach is successful to the extent that, done properly, we are able to consider works of art such as de Sade as holding positive existential guidance, and thus the possibility for growth and projects, even if it is delivered to us as a warning.

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[62] de Beauvoir, *de Sade*, 89.
[63] Ibid.

Conclusion

We have now arrived at a conception of a proper existential comportment towards the filmic image. We might characterize it as follows. First, proper comportment acknowledges that the filmic image exists in an intersubjective context, and thus has been previously ascribed values and meanings which we might not find useful for our current project. However, in realizing the existence of these previous meanings, we must perform an act of existential graciousness in assuming into our consideration – at bare minimum – the persistence of these previous interpretations. In so doing, we not only permit previous interpreters and viewers their own freedom, we enhance our own.

Second, a proper existential comportment acknowledges that whatever reading we give to a film will have future consequences; our reading, like those that came before us, will belong to the facticity of the image and must be dealt with by future interpreters. By keeping this in mind, we can then work to ensure that whatever interpretation or value we offer the film, it is an interpretation or value that opens up future possibilities for meaning and freedom – not close them off. Our aim as existentialists is always freedom, never closure. Thus, if we grant a film value that disallows any future valuations, perhaps by labeling it a definitive interpretation, we have violated our freedom as well as the freedom of untold others.

Finally, a proper existential comportment acknowledges that the process of interpretation, valuation, and meaning is never complete. We may rejoice in this realization, and find in it an opportunity to offer myriad interpretations that seek to allow the filmic image to come into relief in its fullness. Conversely, we might shrink from this unending task, aware that our valuation and interpretation will only ever be one among many. If we heed de Beauvoir, we will rejoice, and not weep, because, as she argues,

> Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite.[64]

It is with this thought, then, that I leave you, in hopes that you might seek to practice proper existential comportment towards the filmic image as a method of permitting the infinite phenomenological quality of film to come forth.

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64. de Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 159.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In our initial attempt to determine the experience, distinguishing characteristics, and artistic status of film, we have stumbled across a much larger concern: the relationship between aesthetics and freedom. Throughout each chapter of this project, as we sought to uncover the history of the artistic image, we continually encountered another theme: the artistic image is equally capable of restricting freedom as it is of opening freedom.

In our evaluation of Plato, we discovered that poetic imagery is the primary source of education, and, in turn, the freedom for *eudiamonia.* We found in the *Republic* a challenge Plato poses to us as philosophers: to act as interpreters of poetic images for the viewers in the same way that priests act as interpreters between gods and the worshippers. We also discovered that poetry can be the source from which ignorance, impiety, and unhappiness can originate. If poetry, especially comedy and tragedy, are left to their own devices, Plato warns us that they will ultimately corrupt the souls of the youth and spread discord and unhappiness throughout the just city – a position which, in his ontology, is directly contradictory to freedom.

In our evaluation of Martin Heidegger, we discovered that the work of art is a disclosure of truth in the triple sense of bestowing, grounding, and ushering truth into being. By comporting ourselves towards the work of art in order to let it be, we can then experience a return to our originary nature, that of freedom. We also discovered that if we do not let the work of art be, or worse, enframe the work within a technological or instrumental understanding, we run the risk of not simply not accessing the truth of art, but of understanding our relationship to our society so that we might be able to live more fully within it. Even worse, without a proper comportment to the work of art, we will be unable to usher in new forms of being that could enhance our freedom and possibilities.

In our consideration of Walter Benjamin, we discovered that the tradition of auratizing works of art removes them from full access to the viewer, mummifies their meaning, and prevents us from interacting with the elements of culture which define our society. Whereas before, only the few could access the great works of art, now photography and film enable anyone to experience the echoing awe of the Sistine Chapel, the reverberating performance of a symphony by Beethoven, or simply the emotionally evocative image of *The Starry Night*. Further, we found in Benjamin that mechanically reproducible works of art harbor the possibility to enhance our freedom by permitting us to understand the operations of the society in which we live – not simply to navigate them, but potentially to revolutionize them. Simultaneously, the filmic image, for Benjamin, is more poised than any previous form of art to manipulate and pacify viewers into accepting social and political positions with which they not only do not agree, but do not benefit.

Though our initial efforts to uncover the ontological history of the image so that we might better ground the nature of the filmic image proved successful in these above chapters, we discovered something of equal importance. The essential relationship between works of art and the individuals who experience them is one that either enhances education, cultural knowledge, and personal growth – or stifles it. In other words, in the truncated history of art here offered in Chapters II through IV, we have not only traced the history of the ontology of the image, but also discovered that that history is one inextricably connected to the history of our own freedom or limitation of freedom.

This newly discovered larger concern bloomed fully in Chapter VI, in which we discovered that two factions at war over the meaning and importance of the filmic image – the critical theorists and the existentialists – actually share one major concern despite their many differences. Despite the bleak and nearly nihilistic admonitions of Horkheimer and Adorno in “The Culture Industry” and the often condemnably optimistic responsibilities bestowed to us by the existentialists such as de Beauvoir, Sartre, and others, both camps are deeply concerned with the film’s dual potential to either emancipate us or enslave us. Though this reading focused on the existential valence of Benjamin’s thought, it recognizes the prescience of Horkheimer and Adorno. While our ultimate conclusion about the ontological structure of the filmic image is that it is an image that is perhaps, for the first time, capable of being freed from transcendental ideals, historical provenance, or the material conditions of its creation, that freed image then poses to us a challenge of its own. As Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno all knew too well, film is equally capable of showing us the operations of the economic, social, and political structures in which we live (as well as their contradictions) as it us capable of leading us astray into false ideologies. In film then, as a truly emancipated medium, we may have discovered the greatest threat to freedom in the history of art: in film, the poetic rhetoric scorned by Plato can be rewritten and reshot to perfection; in film, the reinforcement of an instrumentalization of humanity feared by

Heidegger can be glorified not only on screen but enacted in process of casting, acting, editing, and promotion of the film itself; and in film the aestheticization of fascism finds its truest medium, as Benjamin feared.

At the same time, film can turn towards the Good the sight of far more individuals than Plato ever imagined in its educational and moral valences. Film can demonstrate to us the processes of creation and preservation, the strife between earth and world, and the ushering in of new being with more clarity and poetic force than any of Heidegger's artistic examples. Film can emancipate viewers by exposing the flaws of their society as well as the very narrative and conventional structures that restrict films' ability to do so. Film can do all of these things while cleverly skirting censorship, without the threat of world decay, and while permitting us to take it up again and again for further elucidation and emancipation. Thus, I posit a heavy existential responsibility to the reader: it is up to us as philosophers to act as a palinode to film: to ensure that what it utters is Good, True, and Just, and, above all, enhances freedom.

There are a number of responsibilities that now lie ahead. The first is to seek out films that enhance freedom and make them known to our colleagues, our students, and our friends. These films will undoubtedly appear under the category of every conceivable genre and stylistic variance. Thus, our first task is to simply act as interpreters to these films: to watch them, find meaning for them with others, and find ways in which they not only elucidate our concerns about life, but provide for us a method of addressing those concerns. Having performed this task in this project, I can assure the reader that it is largely enjoyable. This project gives in-depth evaluation to three films: *Der letzte Mann, Inception,* and *The Shining.* In addition to this work, I have previously given serious scholarly and pedagogical consideration to many more films including: *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937), *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1942), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1942), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), *Fargo* (The Coen Brothers, 1996), *O Brother Where Art Thou* (The Coen Brothers, 2000), *Burn After Reading* (The Coen Brothers, 2008), *The Secret of Kells* (Tomm Moore, 2009), and *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012). This is a good start, but existential consideration must be given to as many films as possible so that we might better understand the philosophical importance of this relatively (in terms of the history of philosophy) new type of image. Readings of films must not simply concern the ontological nature of the filmic image, but also the social importance of the film, the aesthetic qualities of its execution, its presence or absence in a canon, potential for educational or existential growth, and potential for indoctrination within a larger ideology. In short, it is time for us to begin to take film much more seriously as a phenomenon requiring philosophical consideration.

Secondly, a much more detailed analysis of the relationship between the critical theorists and the existentialists in regards to the phenomenon of film is absolutely necessary. In the far too brief analysis I provide, I believe I might have found a way in which two positions often considered contradictory can be sublimated into one position that both values critique and freedom of interpretation. Miriam Hansen has provided an excellent starting point for this analysis in her many works on Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Siegfried Kracauer. The work of Terry Eagleton, especially his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* and *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* will further prove invaluable. Finally, the addition of Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* to this list will enable me to develop the considerations of the small portion of this dissertation within a larger framework and ultimately into a larger project.

The final responsibility is that of deepening our understanding of a proper existential comportment to film. This project employed de Beauvoir due to her unique integration of ambiguity and intersubjectivity. However, no existential comportment would be complete without considerations from many other thinkers. Amongst these are Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, William James, John Dewey, Gabriel Marcel, Miguel de Unamuno, and Hannah Arendt. This is a project I will undertake in order to ensure that we approach the filmic image with as much authenticity, sincerity, proper judgment, and acknowledgement of our intersubjectivity as possible. If the concerns about the possible ramifications of a truly liberated filmic image as described above are true, we will need as deep a consideration of the best way to approach the filmic image as we can conceive.

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