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Toward an Anarchist Film Theory: Reflections on the Politics of Cinema

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Abstract

Cinema, like art more generally, is both an artistic genre and a politico-economic institution. On the one hand there is *film*, a medium which disseminates moving images via the projection of light through celluloid onto a screen. Individual films or “movies,” in turn, are discrete aesthetic objects that are distinguished and analyzed *vis-à-vis* their form and content. On the other hand there is the *film industry* — the elaborate network of artistic, technical, and economic apparatuses which plan, produce, market, and display films to audiences. Since its inception, both the aesthetic and political aspects of cinema have been subject to various forms of theoretical analysis which have been subject to critique in turn. In this paper I offer a brief survey of these analyses and critiques followed by a sketch of an alternative approach to film theory. Drawing upon the ideas of Foucault and Deleuze, this “anarchist” film theory seeks to present a viable critical methodology while at the same time elucidating the liberatory potential of film.

I. The Politics of Film Theory: From Humanism to Cultural Studies

Prior to its emergence as a distinct academic discipline in the 1970s, film studies could be roughly divided into two distinct but closely-related camps: humanism, which analyzed cinema in terms of its promotion of, or opposition to, classical Enlightenment values (e.g., freedom and progress), and various schools of formalism, which focused on the formal, technical, and structural elements of cinema in general as well as of individual films.¹ As Dana Polan notes, humanist critics frequently vacillated between skepticism toward cinema and pro-

¹ For an excellent overview of formalism in film theory, see (Andrews, 2000: 341–51).

found, even hyperbolic adulation of it (Polan, 1985: 159). To some, film represented “the death of culture for the benefit of a corrupt and debasing mass civilization” (ibid.).² To others, film did not kill culture so much as *democratize* it by destabilizing the privileged, elite status of art (cf., Cavell, 1981). Ultimately, however, “the pro and con positions merge in their common ground of originary presuppositions: they understand art as redemption, transport, utopian offer” (Polan, 1985: 159).

Like the pro-film humanists, formalist critics emphasized the artistic depth and integrity of cinema as genre. (This is especially true of *auteur* theory, according to which films are expressions of the unique ideas, thoughts, and emotions of their directors; Staples, 1966–67: 1–7.) Unlike humanism, however, formalism was centrally concerned with analyzing the vehicles or mechanisms by which film, as opposed to other artistic genres, generates content. This concern gave rise, in turn, to various evaluative and interpretive theories which privileged the *formal* elements of film (e.g., cinematography, editing, etc) over and above its *narrative* or *thematic* elements (cf., Arnheim, 1997, 1989; Bazin, 1996, 1967; Eisenstein, 1969; Kracauer, 1997; Mitry, 1997).

In contrast to the optimistic humanists and the apolitical formalists, the Marxist critics of the Frankfurt School analyzed cinema chiefly as a socio-political institution — specifically, as a component of the repressive and mendacious “culture industry.” According to Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, films are no different from automobiles or bombs; they are commodities that are produced in order to be consumed (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1993: 120–67). “The technology of the culture industry,” they write, “[is] no more than the achievement of standardization and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of work and that of the

² See, for example, Leavis (1952). On Leavis’ dismissal of cinema and mass culture more generally, see Mulhern (1979).

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social system" (ibid., 121). Prior to the evolution of this industry, culture operated as a locus of dissent, a buffer between runaway materialism on the one hand and primitive fanaticism on the other. In the wake of its thoroughgoing commodification, culture becomes a *mass* culture whose movies, television, and newspapers subordinate everyone and everything to the interests of bourgeois capitalism. Mass culture, in turn, replaces the system of labour itself as the principle vehicle of modern alienation and totalization.

By expanding the Marxist-Leninist analysis of capitalism to cover the entire social space, Horkheimer and Adorno severely undermine the possibility of meaningful resistance to it. On their view, the logic of Enlightenment reaches its apex precisely at the moment when everything — including resistance to Enlightenment — becomes yet another spectacle in the parade of culture (ibid., 240–1). Whatever forms of resistance cannot be appropriated are marginalized, relegated to the "lunatic fringe." The culture industry, meanwhile, produces a constant flow of pleasures intended to inure the masses against any lingering sentiments of dissent or resistance (ibid., 144). The ultimate result, as Todd May notes, is that "positive intervention [is] impossible; all resistance [is] capable either of recuperation within the parameters of capitalism or marginalization [...] there is no outside capitalism, or at least no effective outside" (1994: 26). Absent any program for organized, mass resistance, the only outlet left for the revolutionary subject is art: the creation of quiet, solitary refusals and small, fleeting spaces of individual freedom.³

The dominance of humanist and formalist approaches to film was overturned not by Frankfurt School Marxism but by the rise of French structuralist theory in the 1960s and its subsequent infiltration of the humanities both in North America

³ This position receives one of its fullest articulations in Marcuse (1964).

and on the Continent. As Dudley Andrew notes, the various schools of structuralism⁴ did not seek to analyze films in terms of formal aesthetic criteria “but rather [...] to ‘read’ them as symptoms of hidden structures” (Andrew, 2000: 343; cf., Jay, 1993: 456–91). By the mid-1970s, he continues, “the most ambitious students were intent on digging beneath the commonplaces of textbooks and ‘theorizing’ the conscious machinations of producers of images and the unconscious ideology of spectators” (ibid.). The result, not surprisingly, was a flood of highly influential books and essays which collectively shaped the direction of film theory over the next two decades.⁵

One of the most important structuralists was, of course, Jacques Derrida. On his view, we do well to recall, a word (or, more generally, a sign) never corresponds to a presence and so is always “playing” off other words or signs (1978: 289; 1976: 50). And because all signs are necessarily trapped within this state or process of play (which Derrida terms “*differance*”), language as a whole cannot have a fixed, static, determinate — in a word, *transcendent* meaning; rather, *differance* “extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (ibid, 280). Furthermore, if it is impossible for presence to have meaning apart from language, and if (linguistic) meaning is always in a state of play, it follows that presence itself will be indeterminate — which is, of course, precisely what it *cannot* be (Derrida, 1981: 119–20). Without an “absolute matrical form of being,” meaning becomes dislodged, fragmented, groundless, and elusive. The famous consequence, of course, is that “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“There is no outside-text”) (Derrida, 1976: 158). Everything is a text subject to the ambiguity and indeterminacy of language; whatever noumenal existence underlies language is unreadable — hence, unknowable — to us.

⁴ For example, Barthesian semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

⁵ Of particular importance are Baudry (1986: 299–319), Heath (1976: 68–112), Metz (1973: 40–88; 1974), Mulvey (1975: 6–18).

itself does — at the intersection of mutually reinforcing forces of production and consumption.

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mainstream films. As we have seen, apparatuses of repression easily overcode both such strategies. By effectively dismantling rigid distinctions between producers and consumers, its films would be financed, produced, distributed, and displayed by and for their intended audiences. However, far from being a mere reiteration of the independent or DIY ethic — which, again, has been appropriated time and again by the culture industry — anarchist cinema would be self — consciously political at the level of form and content; its medium and message would be unambiguously anti — authoritarian, unequivocally opposed to *all* forms of repressive power.

Lastly, anarchist cinema would retain an emphasis on artistic integrity — the putative value of innovative cinematography, say, or compelling narrative. It would, in other words, seek to preserve and expand upon whatever makes cinema powerful as a medium and as an art-form. This refusal to relegate cinema to either a mere commodity form or a mere vehicle of propaganda is itself an act of refusal replete with political potential. The ultimate liberation of cinema from the discourse of political struggle is arguably the one cinematic development that would not, and could not, be appropriated and commodified by repressive social formations.

In this essay I have drawn upon the insights of Foucault and Deleuze to sketch an “anarchist” approach to the analysis of film — on which constitutes a middle ground between the “top-down” theories of the Frankfurt School and the “bottom-up” theories of cultural studies. Though I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that cinema can be used as an instrument of repression, as is undoubtedly the case with the contemporary film industry, I have argued at length that cinema as such is neither inherently repressive nor inherently liberatory. Furthermore, I have demonstrated that the politics of cinema cannot be situated exclusively in the designs of the culture industry nor in the interpretations and responses of consumer-subjects. An anarchist analysis of cinema must emerge precisely where cinema

In contrast to Marxist, psychoanalytic, and feminist theorists, who generally shared the Frankfurt School’s suspicion towards cinema and the film industry, Derridean critics argued that cinematic “texts” do not contain meanings or structures which can be unequivocally “interpreted” or otherwise determined (cf., Brunette & Wills, 1989). Rather, the content of a film is always and already “deconstructing” — that is, undermining its own internal logic through the play of semiotic differences. As a result, films are “liberated” by their own indeterminacy from the hermeneutics of traditional film criticism, which “repress” their own object precisely by attempting to fix or constitute it (Brunette & Wills, 1989: 34). Spectators, in turn, are free to assign multiple meanings to a given film, none of which can be regarded as the “true” or “authentic” meaning.

This latter ramification proved enormously influential on the discipline of cultural studies, the *modus operandi* of which was “to discover and interpret the ways disparate disciplinary subjects *talk back*: how consumers deform and transform the products they use to construct their lives; how ‘natives’ rewrite and trouble the ethnographies of (and *to*) which they are subject...” (Bérubé, 1994: 138; see also Gans, 1974, 1985: 17–37; Grossberg, 1992; Levine, 1988; Brantlinger, 1990; Aronowitz, 1993; During, 1993; Fiske, 1992; McRobbie, 1993). As Thomas Frank observes,

The signature scholarly gesture of the nineties was not some warmed over aestheticism, but a populist celebration of the power and ‘agency’ of audiences and fans, of their ability to evade the grasp of the makers of mass culture, and of their talent for transforming just about any bit of cultural detritus into an implement of rebellion (Frank, 2000: 282).

Such a gesture is made possible, again, by Derrida’s theory of deconstruction: the absence of determinate meaning and, by

extension, intentionality in cultural texts enables consumers to appropriate and assign meaning them for and by themselves. As a result, any theory which assumes that consumers are “necessarily silent, passive, political and cultural dupes” who are tricked or manipulated by the culture industry and other apparatuses of repressive power is rejected as “elitist” (Grossberg, 1992: 64).

A fitting example of the cultural studies approach to cinema is found in Anne Friedberg’s essay “Cinema and the Postmodern Condition,” which argues that film, coupled with the apparatus of the shopping mall, represents a postmodern extension of modern *flaneurie* (Friedberg, 1997: 59–86). Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Friedberg is not interested in cinema as an art form so much as a commodity or as an apparatus of consumption/desire production. At the same time, however, Friedberg does not regard cinema as principally a vehicle of “mass deception” designed by the culture industry to manipulate the masses and inure them to domination. Although she recognizes the extent to which the transgressive and liberatory “mobilized gaze” of the *flaneur* is captured and rendered abstract/virtual by the cinematic apparatus of the culture industry (ibid., 67), she nonetheless valorizes this “virtually mobile” mode of spectatorship insofar as it allows postmodern viewers to “try on” identities (just as shoppers “try on” outfits) without any essential commitment (ibid., 69–72).

This kind of approach to analyzing film, though ostensibly “radical” in its political implications, is in fact anything but. As I shall argue in the next section, cultural studies — no less than critical theory — rests on certain presuppositions which have been severely challenged by various theorists. Michel Foucault, in particular, has demonstrated the extent to which we can move beyond linguistic indeterminacy by providing archeological and genealogical analyses of the *formation* of meaning-producing structures. Such structures, he argues, do not emerge in a vacuum but are produced by

“liberatory.” Global capitalism is not the sole or even the principal locus of repressive power; it is merely one manifestation of such power among many. Ostensibly anti-capitalist or counter-hegemonic movements at the level of culture can and often do become repressive in their own right — as, for example, in the case of nationalist cinemas which advocate terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and the subjugation of women under the banner of “anti-imperialism.”

The point here, which reinforces several ideas already introduced, is that neither the American film industry nor film industries as such are intrinsically reducible to a unitary source of repressive power. As a social formation or assemblage, cinema is a product of a complex array of forces. To this extent it always and already contains both potentially liberatory and potentially repressive components. In other words, a genuinely nomadic cinema — one which deterritorializes itself and escapes the overcoding of repressive state apparatuses — is not only possible but in some sense inevitable. Such a cinema, moreover, will emerge neither on the side of the producer nor of the consumer, but rather in the complex interstices that exist between them. I therefore agree with Cohn that anarchist cultural studies (and, by extension, anarchist film theory) has as one of its chief goals the “extrapolation” of latent revolutionary ideas in cultural practices and products (where “extrapolation” is understood in the sense of actively and creatively realizing possibilities rather than simply “discovering” actualities already present) (Cohn, 2009: 412). At the same time, I believe anarchist film theory must play a role in creating a new and distinctively anarchist cinema — “a cinema of liberation.”

Such a cinema would perforce involve alliances between artists and audiences with a mind to blurring such distinctions altogether. It would be the responsibility neither of an elite “avant-garde” which produces underground films, nor of subaltern consumer “cults” which produce fanzines and organize conventions in an attempt to appropriate and “talk back to”

that the production of films is overwhelmingly controlled by a handful of media conglomerates, the interests of which are routinely protected by federal institutions at the expense of consumer autonomy, makes this abundantly clear. It also reinforces the naivety of cultural studies, whose valorization of consumer subcultures appears totally impotent in the face of such enormous power. As Richard Hoggart notes,

Studies of this kind habitually ignore or underplay the fact that these groups are almost entirely enclosed from and are refusing even to attempt to cope with the public life of their societies. That rejection cannot reasonably be given some idealistic ideological foundation. It is a rejection, certainly, and in that rejection may be making some implicit criticisms of the 'hegemony,' and those criticisms need to be understood. But such groups are doing nothing about it except to retreat (Hoggart, 1995: 186).

Even if we overlook the Deleuzian/Foucauldian/ACS critique — viz., that cultural studies relies on a theoretically problematic notion of consumer “agency” — such agency appears largely impotent at the level of praxis as well.

Nor is there any question that the global proliferation of Hollywood cinema is part of a broader imperialist movement in geopolitics. Whether consciously or unconsciously, American films reflect and reinforce uniquely capitalist values and to this extent pose a threat to the political, economic, and cultural sovereignty of other nations and peoples. It is for the most part naïve of cultural studies critics to assign “agency” to non-American consumers who are not only saturated with alien commodities but increasingly denied the ability to produce and consume native commodities. At the same time, none of this entails that competing film industries are by definition

historically-situated relations of power. Moreover, power produces the very subjects who alternately affect and are affected by these structures, a notion which undermines the concept of producer/consumer “agency” upon which much of critical theory and cultural studies relies. Though power relations have the *potential* to be liberating rather than oppressive, such a consequence is not brought about by consumer agency so much as by *other* power relations which, following Gilles Deleuze, elude and “deterritorialize” oppressive capture mechanisms. As I shall argue, the contemporary cinematic apparatus is without a doubt a form of the latter, but this does not mean that cinema as such is incapable of escaping along liberatory lines of flight.

II. Foucault and Film Theory

Tidy generalizations about Foucault are neither easy nor particularly worthwhile to make. Yet if there is a single pithy aphorism that captures the spirit of his project, it is Bacon’s “*Ipsa scientia potestas est*” — knowledge itself is power. Foucault’s perspective is of course very different from — indeed, in radical opposition to — the proto-Enlightenment scientism of Bacon, for whom knowledge is always *power to do*. As we shall see, knowledge for Foucault is rather *power to say*, on the one hand, and *power to be said*, on the other. This distinction underlies the metaphilosophical character of Foucault’s analysis, which repudiates the notion of transcendent “Knowledge” and instead focuses on the complex power relations which make possible, give rise to, and shape the very idea of knowledge(s).

For Foucault, all statements belong to a particular *discourse*, which is the set of all possible statements that can be articulated about a particular topic within a particular historical period (Foucault, 1994: 79, 158). Discourse defines the boundaries surrounding what can and cannot be *said*, and to this extent shapes or constructs what can be *known*, i.e., the object

of knowledge itself. Foucault's early works are principally concerned with the conditions of possibility ("historical *a priori*") that must be in place in order for certain statements (again, that which can be said) to actually emerge within a given discourse (ibid., 86–92).⁶ They are also concerned with demarcating and analyzing *discursive formations* – the historical ruptures and discontinuities whereby new forms of discourse appear and supplant older forms of discourse (Foucault, 1972: esp. Part II, chapter 2). Foucault refers to this mode of analysis as "archeology" (Foucault, 1994: xxii).

The point of the archeological method is "to grasp the statement in the narrowness and singularity of its event; to determine the conditions of existence, to fix its limits as accurately as possible, to establish its correlations with other statements with which it may be linked, and to show what other forms of articulation it excludes" (Foucault, 2003: 401). For Foucault, knowledge is not a *thing* (e.g., a particular mental state) but rather a *relation* between statements within a particular discourse – specifically, the relation of what can be spoken or thought to that which cannot.

Foucault's major works in the early period involve the application of the archeological method to a particular discourse. In *Madness and Civilization*, for example, he analyzes the discourse of madness *vis-à-vis* various historical institutions: the workhouse, the hospital, the asylum, etc (1965). The appearance of a new discursive formation (e.g., the discourse of madness or insanity) gives rise to a new institutional form (e.g., the asylum), a new knowledge form (e.g., psychiatry) and a new object of knowledge (e.g., the insane). By reflecting on the conditions of possibility which were necessary in order for particular

⁶ For example, statements about airplanes could not be uttered in the Middle Ages because the historical *a priori* condition necessary for the production, transmission, and intelligibility of such statements within discourse (*viz.*, the actual existence of airplanes) was not yet satisfied.

neurial desire (ibid., esp. 424–73). Deleuze would agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that the contemporary film industry serves a dual role as capture mechanism *and* as commodity. It not only functions as an object within capitalist exchange but as an ideological machine that reinforces the production of consumer-subjects. This poses a two-fold threat to freedom, at least as freedom is understood from a Deleuzian perspective: first, it makes nomadic mobility abstract and virtual, trapping it in striated space and marshaling it toward the perpetuation of repressive apparatuses; and second, it replaces the free-flowing desire of the nomadic with social desire – that is, it commodifies desire and appropriates *flaneurie* as a mode of capitalist production.

The crucial difference is that for Deleuze, as for Foucault and ACS, the relation between the nomadic and the social is always and already reciprocal. In one decidedly aphoristic passage, Deleuze claims there are only forces of desire and social forces (Deleuze & Guattari, [1972] 1977: 29). Although he tends to regard desire as a creative force (in the sense that it produces rather than represses its object) and the social as a force which "dams up, channels, and regulates" the flow of desire (ibid., 33), he does not mean to suggest that there are two distinct *kinds* of forces which differentially affect objects exterior to themselves. On the contrary, there is only a single, unitary force which manifests itself in particular "assemblages" (ibid.). Each of these assemblages, in turn, contains within itself both desire and various "bureaucratic or fascist pieces" which seek to subjugate and annihilate that desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 60; Deleuze & Parnet, 1987: 133). Neither force acts or works upon preexistent objects; rather everything that exists is alternately created and/or destroyed in accordance with the particular assemblage which gives rise to it.

There is scarcely any question that the contemporary film industry is subservient to repressive apparatuses such as transnational capital and the government of the United States. The fact

production companies (e.g., Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight Pictures, etc) and re-marketing “art films” (*ala* the Criterion Collection) than they would by simply ignoring independent, underground, avant-garde, etc. cinema altogether.

All of this is by way of expanding upon an earlier point — namely, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the extent to which particular films or cinematic genres function as instruments of socio-political repression — especially in terms of simple dichotomies such as “mainstream” versus “avant-garde.” In light of our earlier discussion of Foucault, not to speak of Derrida, this ought not to come as a surprise. At the same time, however, we have ample reason to believe that the contemporary film *industry* is without question one of the preeminent mechanisms of global capitalist cultural hegemony. To see why this is the case, we ought briefly to consider some insights from Gilles Deleuze.

There is a clear parallel between Friedberg’s mobilized flaneural gaze and what Deleuze calls the “nomadic” — i.e., those social formations which are exterior to repressive modern apparatuses like State and Capital (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 351–423). Like the nomad, the *flaneur* wanders aimlessly and without a predetermined *telos* through the striated space of these apparatuses. Her mobility itself, however, belongs to the sphere of non-territorialized *smooth* space, unconstrained by regimentation or structure, free-flowing, detached. The desire underlying this mobility is productive; it actively avoids satisfaction and seeks only to proliferate and perpetuate its own movement. Apparatuses of repression, in contrast, operate by striating space and routinizing, regimenting, or otherwise constraining mobile desire. They *must* appropriate the nomadic in order to function *as* apparatuses of repression.

Capitalism, however one understands its relationship to other repressive apparatuses, strives to commodify flaneural desire, or, what comes to the same, to produce artificial desires which appropriate, capture, and ultimately absorb fla-

institutional forms to emerge, Foucault uncovers a new form of discursive knowledge that has been constructed in history.

The early works seek to describe particular discursive formations (through “archeology”) but not to *explain* how and why they came about. Beginning with *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault turns his attention to analyses of how power relations produce knowledge within particular discursive formations (a method that he calls “genealogy”) (Foucault, 1995). To this end, he moves beyond discursive formations to a consideration of other forms of knowledge that are formed and constituted by power — viz., non-discursive formations and the formation of subjects. Non-discursive formations are practices through which power is manifested in particular forms (e.g., the prison, the asylum, the hospital, etc). Subjects (e.g., prisoners, madmen, patients, etc) in turn, are created through the process of being acted upon by non-discursive practices.

For Foucault, power is not and cannot be centralized in the form of a single coercive apparatus such as “capitalism.” It exists not only at the macro-level of society (e.g., in ideologies, governments, etc.) but also at the micro-level of subjects (as in disciplinary power) (ibid., 135–69). The invisible surveillance of the Panopticon reveals a form of power that is dynamic, ubiquitous, and diffuse (ibid., 195–228). It operates only in the relations of those to whom it applies. It can be exerted on individual bodies (anatomy-power) or entire populations (bio-power) (Foucault, 1990: 140). It is not an absolute force but rather a relationship that exists *between* forces — a set of actions or forces exerted upon other actions or forces, or upon subjects (2003: 137). It is the capacity to act upon *and* to be acted upon, thus is not only repressive but productive as well.

When Foucault says that power “opens possibilities,” he is referring specifically to the capacity of power to bring about new discursive and non-discursive formations and hence to produce new forms of knowledge. Because power is a mode of reciprocal affectivity, however, it not only produces knowledge

but is *produced* by knowledge in turn. The range of possible statements circumscribed by a particular discursive formation is shaped by power relations, but the visible manifestation of power relations (for example, at the level of practices and the forms these practices take in institutions) is in turn shaped by what can be said.

How does this reciprocal shaping take place? In the first instance, we recall that power makes actions possible and is made possible by them in turn. This is because all actions, once actualized by power, are related to other actions (hence other possible modalities of power). But to say, speak, utter, write, or communicate in any way is to perform a certain kind of action — namely, the action of producing statements within a particular discourse. Knowledge, then, is essentially the *power* to produce statements which are in turn capable of being related to other statements within a particular discourse. Truth for Foucault is simply the mechanism whereby this power is exercised:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements [...] Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and authorities that enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, 2003: 316–17).

In *Discipline and Punish*, as in the earlier archeological works, Foucault analyzes discursive formations surrounding the institutions of discipline and punishment. The change comes in his extending this analysis to non-discursive formations (practices) and, most importantly, to the power relations

who determines the standards for cinematic excellence, and how? As Dudley Andrews notes,

[...] [C]ulture is not a single thing but a competition among groups. And, competition is organized through power clusters we can think of as institutions. In our own field certain institutions stand out in marble buildings. The NEH is one; but in a different way, so is Hollywood, or at least the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Standard film critics constitute a sub-group of the communication institution, and film professors make up a parallel group, especially as they collect in conferences and in societies (Andrews, 1985: 55).

Andrews’ point here echoes one we made earlier — namely, that film criticism itself is a product of complicated power relations. Theoretical dichotomies such as “mainstream versus avant-garde” or “art versus pop” are manifestations of deeper socio-political conflicts which are subject to analysis in turn.

Even if there is or was such a thing as “avant-garde” cinema, it no longer functions in the way that Horkheimer and Adorno envisaged, if it ever did. As they themselves recognized, one of the most remarkable features of late capitalism is its ability to appropriate and commodify dissent. Friedberg, for example, is right to point out that *flaneurie* began as a transgressive institution which was subsequently captured by the culture industry; but the same is true even of “avant-garde” film — an idea that its champions frequently fail to acknowledge. Through the use of niche marketing and other such mechanisms, the *postmodern* culture industry has not only overcome the “threat” of the avant-garde but transformed that threat into one more commodity to be bought and sold. Media conglomerates make more money by establishing faux “independent”

for example, they must evince a simple plot structure, straightforwardly linear narrative, and easily understandable dialogue. With respect to the latter, they must avoid delving deeply into complicated social, moral, and philosophical issues and should not offend widely-held sensibilities (chief among them the idea that consumer capitalism is an indispensable, if not altogether just, socio-economic system). Far from being arbitrary, these conventions are deliberately chosen and reinforced by the culture industry in order to reach the largest and most diverse audience possible and to maximize the effectiveness of film-as-propaganda.

“Avant garde” or “underground cinema,” in contrast, is marked by its self – conscious attempt to undermine the structures and conventions which have been *imposed* on cinema by the culture industry – for example, by presenting shocking images, employing unusual narrative structures, or presenting unorthodox political, religious, and philosophical viewpoints. The point in so doing is allegedly to “liberate” cinema from its dual role as commodity and ideological machine (either directly, by using film as a form of radical political critique, or indirectly, by attempting to revitalize film as a serious art form).

Despite its merits, this analysis drastically oversimplifies the complexities of modern cinema. In the first place, the dichotomy between “mainstream” and “avant-garde” has never been particularly clear-cut, especially in non-American cinema. Many of the paradigmatic European “art films” enjoyed considerable popularity and large box office revenues within their own markets, which suggests among other things that “mainstream” and “avant garde” are culturally relative categories. So, too, the question of what counts as “mainstream” versus “avant garde” is inextricably bound up in related questions concerning the aesthetic “value” or “merit” of films. To many, “avant garde” film is remarkable chiefly for its artistic excellence, whereas “mainstream” film is little more than mass-produced pap. But

which give rise to both discursive and non-discursive formations. Thus, for example, Foucault discusses the non-discursive formation of punishment actualized in the institution of the prison.

Power relations, then, produce non-discursive formations at the level of practice (e.g., punishment) which are in turn made visible in institutions (e.g., the prison). Moreover, these practices produce new forms of knowledge (e.g., criminology) which in turn produce new objects of knowledge at the level of the subject (e.g., the criminal type). This reveals another of Foucault’s essential insights: that subjects are produced and shaped by power relations vis-à-vis becoming objects of discourse (e.g., study, inquiry, analysis, classification, etc) and practices (e.g., work, education, discipline, consumption, etc). To paraphrase W.V. Quine (and turn him on his head), to be is to be the object of a praxis and the subject of a theory. My subjectivity is exhausted by the power exerted on me by others and the world and the power which I exert in turn.

A radical consequence of this view is that subjects, strictly speaking, are not ontologically basic in the way they are for, say, Sartre. This does not mean that individual subjectivities do not exist for Foucault – they do. His point is that there is no preexistent human nature or essence which provides the ontological foundation of subjectivity. The body alone is basic; and bodies are constantly being created and re-created as subjects both by affecting other bodies and by being so affected. Capitalist power, for example, is manifested in practice at the level of institutions (e.g., shopping malls) and exerted upon bodies. This relation between the body and power gives rise to particular forms of subjectivity – viz., that of the consumer (whose body is affected by power) and, for example, the culture industry (which affects the bodies of others through power).

From a Foucauldian perspective, cinema is both a discursive and non-discursive formation: a mode of knowledge manifested concretely at the level of individual films *and* a mode of

power manifested concretely at the level of the film industry. The reciprocal relation between films and the film industry, in turn, produces a particular form of subjectivity — that of the viewer or spectator. Against both critical theory and cultural studies, Foucault would claim that the relation between films and spectators is neither wholly passive nor wholly active. The meaning of a particular film may be assigned to it by a particular spectator, but the spectator *qua* spectator is produced in turn by his or her viewing of the film. Moreover, the range of meanings ascribable to a film and the corresponding modes of spectatorship they produce are bounded by conditions of possibility — to wit, the complex network of discursive and non-discursive formations which produce both films and spectators.

All of this is by way of saying that: (a) cinema *as such* is not reducible either to its formal (i.e., discursive) or politico-economic (i.e., non — discursive) components; rather, both components produce and shape each other reciprocally; (b) the meaning of cinema is not reducible either to the production or consumption of cinematic objects; rather, meaning both creates and is created by viewer-subjects; (c) the particular forms which films take, the particular meanings which are assigned to them, and the particular modes of spectatorship which assign said meanings are mutually irreducible; all are produced by a complex network of power relations. To this we must add (d) that the power relations which give rise to cinema *qua* cinema are neither repressive nor liberatory *in and of themselves*. The extent to which cinema may be regarded as one or the other depends entirely on the political and socio-economic relations which affect and are affected by it.

As the history of cinema makes plain, there is no way to disentangle film from capitalism. On the one hand, Western capitalism gave rise to industrial technology, the market economy, the tri-partite class system, etc., all of which are conditions of possibility for the emergence of cinema. On the other hand, the

(Cohn, 2009: 413), he acknowledges that power actively affects both internal (subjective) existence as well as external (inter-subjective) existence. At the same time, by arguing “that this reality is in a continuous process of change and becoming, and that at any given moment, it includes an infinity — bounded by, situated within, ‘anchored’ to the concrete actuality of the present — of emergent or potential realities” (ibid.), Cohn denies that power (hence, reality) is a single actuality that transcends, or is simply “given to,” whatever it affects or acts upon. On the contrary, power is plural and potential, immanent to whatever it affects because precisely because affected in turn. From the standpoint of ACS and Foucault alike, then, culture is reciprocal and symbiotic — it both produces and is produced by power relations. What implications might this have for contemporary film theory?

At present the global film industry — not to speak of the majority of media — is controlled by six multinational corporate conglomerates: The News Corporation, The Walt Disney Company, Viacom, Time Warner, Sony Corporation of America, and NBC Universal. As of 2005, approximately 85% of box office revenue in the United States was generated by these companies, as compared to a mere 15% by so-called “independent” studios whose films are produced without financing and distribution from major movie studios. Never before has the intimate connection between cinema and capitalism appeared quite as stark.

As Horkheimer and Adorno argued more than fifty years ago, the salient characteristic of “mainstream” Hollywood cinema is its dual role as commodity and ideological mechanism. On the one hand, films not only satisfy but *produce* various consumer desires. On the other hand, this desire-satisfaction mechanism maintains and strengthens capitalist hegemony by manipulating and distracting the masses. In order to fulfill this role, “mainstream” films must adhere to certain conventions at the level of both form and content. With respect to the former,

that the latter is perforce a vehicle of oppression.) The best we can say, it seems, is that the cinematic form is particularly well-suited *as a medium* to being appropriated and used for oppressive purposes — and this for reasons which both critical theory and cultural studies have noted (e.g., its “virtual mobility,” its mass appeal, etc). The question becomes: how, if at all, is cinema being appropriated and used in the contemporary world, and what does this say about cinema in general?

III. Toward an Anarchist Film Theory

In his article “What is Anarchist Cultural Studies?” Jesse Cohn argues that anarchist cultural studies (ACS) can be distinguished from critical theory and consumer-agency theory along several trajectories (Cohn, 2009: 403–24). Among other things, he writes, ACS tries “to avoid reducing the politics of popular culture to a simplistic dichotomy of ‘reification’ versus ‘resistance’” (ibid., 412). On the one hand, anarchists have always balked at the pretensions of “high culture” even before these were exposed and demystified by the likes of Bourdieu in his theory of “cultural capital.” On the other hand, we always sought ought and found “spaces of liberty — even momentary, even narrow and compromised — within capitalism and the State” (ibid., 413). At the same time, anarchists have never been content to find “reflections of our desires in the mirror of commercial culture,” nor merely to *assert the possibility* of finding them (ibid.). Democracy, liberation, revolution, etc. are not already present in a culture; they are among many potentialities which must be actualized through active intervention.

If Cohn’s general view of ACS is correct, and I think it is, we ought to recognize its significant resonance with the Foucauldian *tertia via* outlined above. When Cohn claims that anarchists are “critical realists and monists, in that we recognize our condition as beings embedded within a single, shared reality”

proliferation of cinema as a modern medium of communication contributed to the transformation of capitalism (i.e., from industrial capitalism to multinational consumer capitalism). It is therefore wrong to claim that cinema began as a “pure” art-form or “neutral” communication technology which was subsequently appropriated by the bourgeois culture industry for its own ends. Rather, the emergence of the culture industry is coextensive with the emergence of cinema and other modern art-forms/media.

In many respects cinema is more complicated medium than literature, say, because it relies upon a much wider range of communicative mechanisms (e.g., images, music, etc.). To this extent, it is difficult if not impossible (*pace* deconstructionist theory) to regard cinema as a special instance of written textuality, which in turn necessitates the use of altogether different (though not entirely unrelated) strategies in interpreting and analyzing films. For Derrida, again, written textuality is simultaneously dynamic and static. On the one hand, it is constituted by language, which for Derrida remains in a constant state of indeterminacy and play. To this extent written texts are dynamic; they “move.” On the other hand, they are static. A literary work, for example, is constrained by the boundaries of its *ipseity*, its physical “thinghood.” Neither the medium itself, nor the printed words that constitute it, are capable of actual motion in anything but trivial or metaphorical senses. This static dimension places the reader in a unique temporal and epistemological relation to written texts which does not necessarily apply to other media such as film.

At the same time, films are *interpretable*. That is, the viewer can and does attribute *meaning(s)* to films that necessarily contain conceptual — hence linguistic — content. These meaning(s), in turn, are subject to the same instability and indeterminacy that alternately plagues and liberates language generally. If language is truly the horizon of thought, there is no way to separate the visual and aural components of film from its

more straightforwardly textual components (e.g., spoken dialogue). All such components, whether considered individually or jointly, are always and already conditioned by the operation of language.

Again, this is not to say that cinema is somehow reducible to written textuality. Films, after all, are characterized in part by a *literal* dynamism that goes beyond their latent linguistic content. Among other things, they contain images and sounds that move in space and time, and this, in turn, produces movement and change in the perception of the viewer. Films include a static component that mirrors that of literary works insofar as they are produced via physical processes and displayed via physical media. But to state the obvious, one cannot view a movie merely by *looking* at a VHS cassette, a DVD, a film reel, or any other thing-in-the-world. The same is not true of a literary work, which exhibits a one-to-one correspondence between text and medium. To read one must have reliable vision and reliable cognitive faculties (viz., the various faculties associated with literacy). No further mediation is required. A film, on the other hand, must be *projected*, not only in the literal sense of being displayed via appropriate technology, but also in the sense of being foisted upon the world of ordinary sense perception. Put another way, the *content* of a film, as opposed to its medium, cannot be experienced as *immediately* as the content of a written text. Projection, therefore, is a *tertium quid* that is situated between medium and content. And it is precisely projection which makes a film *viewable* and *hearable* as opposed to merely *readable*.

All of this may seem obvious, but its significance should not be overlooked. To interpret a film, one cannot focus on particular images and sounds in isolation — that is, as static entities — nor even on the conceptual relations that exist among said entities. For example, one cannot ascribe meaning to the film by observing a still-frame from one scene and considering its relation to another still-frame. (The same is not true of reading,

in which a particular word or phrase can *only* be understood in relation to other words or phrases.) On the contrary, viewing a film requires an analysis of visual, aural, etc. *movements* that affect the senses differentially in space and time. It is the relation of said movements, more so than the discrete images and sounds that comprise them, which encapsulate the meaning(s) of a film.

Visual co-presence of images is not what affects the viewer so much as the dynamic relation of these images in space and time — that is, their *movement* within a scene, coupled with a wide array of other underlying factors (e.g., sound, cinematography, etc) which represent movement *in a particular way*. This movement, moreover, complicates interpretation; the content of images and sounds cannot be understood in themselves precisely because they are physically (and not just conceptually) dynamic, fluid, and unstable. For this reason, films undermine what Derrida calls “the metaphysics of presence” in a much more direct and troubling way than written texts do because they *literally* enact, represent, or perform their own deconstruction. Whereas written text involves relations among concepts, film involves *relations among relations*. (This is in part what Friedberg means when she refers to films as “virtually mobile”). In sum, we might say that the meaning of a film is twice removed from the conditions of possibility for interpretation, and this is partly what makes film such a complicated medium.

As was made clear in our discussion of Foucault, however, structural and phenomenological features of cinema cannot be divorced from the particular power relations which produce the cinematic form — and vice versa. Moreover, even if the power relations in question can be identified as “oppressive,” this judgment need not carry over to the cinematic form *as such*. (Marx makes a similar point about technology more generally; just because an oppressive mode of production such as capitalism gives rise to industrial technology does not mean