

Material Film

by Hugo Salas

Hugo Salas was born in 1976 and is based in Buenos Aires, where he writes on and teaches film.

I think images are worth repeating
Images repeated from a painting
Images taken from a painting
From a photo worth re-seeing
I love images worth repeating, projecting them upon
the ceiling
Multiply them with silk screening
See them with a different feeling
Images/Images/Images/Images

– Lou Reed and John Cale, “Images” in *Songs for Drella*

With the aim of revealing that, contrary to accepted wisdom, the civilisation of their time was far from a cultural chaos – that its whole culture was strictly organised in terms of similarity and the consequent subjection of the individual to capital – in the second chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1) Adorno and Horkheimer analysed the functioning of the 'culture industry,' which they depicted as a complex system of separate devices: press, radio and movies. This article does not aim to discuss, or comment on, the notion of the culture industry, apart from its relevance to current debates about cinema; therefore, it won't consider problems related to radio, popular music or magazines.

Adorno and Horkheimer clearly state that as cinema is considered part of the culture industry, it cannot be an art. Consequently, its materials can only be read in terms of their cultural function, never in their own specificity. In short, cinema is denied any chance to be an autonomous sphere like the other arts. The subtlety of Adorno's approach to literature and music and the revolutionary strength he attributes to the work of art completely disappear when he thinks about cinema, where he finds only the reproduction of the same, mass production. For this he has been severely attacked, and the statement “Adorno didn't understand film” has become a commonplace. Some people argue in conciliatory fashion that the analysis outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is restricted to industrial film production (i.e. 'Hollywood'), as opposed to other 'art' and 'essay' cinemas (generally preferred by cultural commentators) which could be understood in the terms outlined in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In this brief essay, I hope to demonstrate that both the above positions are just as misguided as that of considering Adorno and Horkheimer's



Marilyn (Andy Warhol, 1967)

remarks on cinema still completely valid.

At the moment *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written, there was no mistake in claiming that film is not an art, for it was not (2). Far from having gone through the process of autonomisation necessary for it to be constituted as such, until 1940 cinema – in Adorno and Horkheimer's brilliant formulation – was only disguised as art. Initial theories and criticisms of cinema were either apologies or works of prescriptive poetics (3) with the aim of winning social legitimation for their object: arrogating for cinema the status of art by the mere act of speech, while the medium's specificity remained undefined. On the other hand, except in a few cases, production remained within an industrial *modus operandi*. In fact, even most of the avant-garde cinema of this period was industrial – for instance, German expressionism and the Soviet cinema, the latter in addition directly bound to the political power of government (as happened in the other arts before autonomy and democracy). The sole apparent exception, the cinema produced by the avant-garde artists who settled in Paris in the '20s (what Noël Burch calls the “first avant-garde”), cannot be considered a full moment of autonomy, insofar as autonomy appears in it (and in its critical apologetics) not as a historical process but as principle and essence, an assertion that falls into a moment of ideological falsehood similar to the one described by Peter Bürger (4) in pondering *l'art pour l'art*. Moreover, in this moment cinema is not an autonomous art, but acquires the status of art just because it is considered an extension of other arts (5).

What Adorno and Horkheimer couldn't anticipate was the impact that the Second World War would have upon cinema and its relationship with society. This ethical break was related not only to the misery and horror endured by the countries where the war was staged, but also to the role played by cinema itself during the conflict, both as an instrument of Nazi-Fascist propaganda (where its brutality exposed what was latent in the “good revolutionary intentions” of the Soviet production system – the dark relations between cinema and State) and as an insensible recording instrument of the concentration-camp horrors. It could be thought that these two issues do not relate to cinema's aesthetic specificity (and therefore, autonomy) but to its social and ideological function. Nevertheless, cinema's 'enrolment' in fascism and its ability to record a human body as a mere alienated exteriority – as no more than another material – were the two faces of the heartless gesture with which cinema indicated to humanity its splitting apart. If Eisenstein had somehow speculated that man might be no more than a line or a point in the plan (and that's one of the reasons why his essays always seem to be about to make an interesting proposal about sense *in* film), these cruel images didn't even discuss it; they implied it, they assumed the question was covered.

Hence it is possible for us to understand the importance of Italian neo-realism beyond its immediate social significance. As Gilles Deleuze (6) observes, by introducing a different character, *le flâneur* (7) this cinema shifts its focus from representation of action to representation of the perceptual experience. And since it could think about any optical-sonic space of experience, cinema, being itself one such space among others, could then become self-conscious (perhaps in more than one sense).

Prior to that moment, talking about the autonomy of cinema is meaningless, and it's important to note that the second major moment of this complex transformation happens

almost at the same time, when the *nouvelle vague* reflects on the historicity of that optical-sonic space. So, while discussion in Italy was restricted to Ethics because the problem of representation was about how to represent a (historical) present, discussion in France turned to Aesthetics, since only a study of materials and their use in time provided a solid base for thinking a history of representation. Thus the films and critical interventions of the *nouvelle vague* represented a definitive loss of innocence and of belief in the supposed transparency of images.

This process, which lay outside the horizon of Adorno and Horkheimer, may not lead us to question the notion of the culture industry, but it surely problematises the inclusion of cinema in that industry. Constituting cinema as a defined specificity, the *nouvelle vague* conferred upon the cinematic materials what Bakhtin (8) has called a “double orientation.” That is, materials don't only signify in relation to the ideological environment from which they have been taken but also, and mostly, by virtue of the internal rules of the series into which they have been incorporated. This new signification implies a mediation that cannot be explained by or through the notion of the culture industry. Pretending that the chapter “Culture Industry” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is still valid *today*, without pondering the problem anew, paradoxically implies – since it neglects the historicity of the materials involved – adopting a not-very-Adornian perspective. At the same time, accusing Adorno and Horkheimer of not having understood cinema because they didn't 'realise' this or that film was a work of art is a complete mix-up, since those films couldn't be works of art, couldn't have any aesthetic value, *before* this process, that took place fifteen years later, gave it to them in a valid retrospective way (9). That's why Adorno and Horkheimer aren't mistaken when they think of the culture industry as a concrete means of producing domination.

When Debord, in 1967, formulates the problem once more in terms of spectacle and simulacrum, he falls into a theoretical and historical mistake, as the circulation of the word 'spectacle' in itself links directly to the conciliatory version that produces an antagonism between a cinema that might be thought as part of the culture industry and another that might be thought as art. All this came from taking too literally the operation performed by the *nouvelle vague* in introducing the figure of the *auteur* – an operation the character of which was never hidden insofar as it was openly referred to as a *politique* – as a justification for understanding particular instances of filmmaking as a creative act (10). But in their whole work (either films or criticism), the *nouvelle vague* never left the problem of Industry aside. On the contrary, they not only insisted upon the industrial nature of the cinematic production process (as an indispensable condition that, at the same time, plots against the *auteur's* creative freedom), but also established the most industrial cinema, the one of the big studios, as the paradigm of the Classic in cinema, the degree zero, the tradition with and against which cinematic *écriture* could be possible. This cancels every possibility of splitting art from industry, as well as that of bringing them together in the improbable concept of 'industrial art.' Thus the process of autonomy described problematises the straightforward inclusion of cinema in the culture industry, but doesn't entirely rescue it from there either.



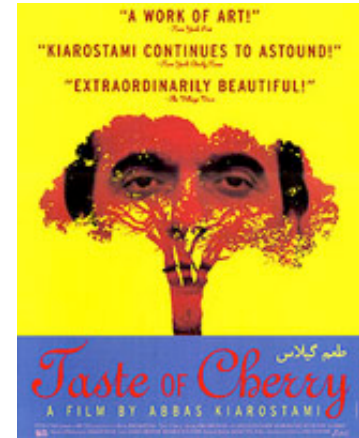
And we are not dealing here with a problem of 'degrees.'





Terminator II

Assuming that *Terminator II* (James Cameron, 1992) belongs more to industry and less to art than *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1998) (or *vice versa*) is a very serious and unthinking mistake. The tension between what cinema has as part of the culture industry without belonging to it entirely, and what cinema has as art without completely



belonging to it either, is the foundation of any film,

because it goes beyond the production conditions of a particular movie to be the very condition of cinematic materiality as such. In 1940, to again give Adorno and Horkheimer their full due, it is true that mass production, advertising, the exhibition of box-office figures and the use of the star as merchandise in the film industry represented the truth that cinema was no more than business. Today, on the contrary, all these practices are the means whereby the industry tries to suffocate the 'something more' than business that menaces and revolts against the industry's domination of cinema's very material, and that's why those old practices have achieved their paroxysm (e.g. some majors buy the rights of particular films to ensure that these ones *won't* be distributed (11)). On the other hand, the ideological falsehood of the antagonism between industrial and art cinema has done nothing but make it easier to administrate what could have escaped, transforming it into a market that, another falsehood, pretends to be an anti-market (the festival circuit, 'alternative' distribution, cinemathèques, and so on). This 'critique' has decided not to confront the oppression of industry, but proposes a pact: you administrate the industry, and we'll administrate the art (as a non-governmental organisation). Nevertheless, the critics that have supported (and a lot of them still do) this neo-liberal position – based on a Romantic conception of art, society and criticism itself – have often neglected their own position *inside* the culture industry, and the ineluctable fact that with this pact they do nothing more than work as mediators, sanctioning through their work (every day more corporate, incidentally) the overall administration of cinema in both illusory senses: as industry and as art.

But if cinema is not completely either an art or an industry then what can it be? How can we understand such an 'intermediate' representational system, and how do those characteristics condemned by Adorno and Horkheimer become opaque, no longer a simple expression of domination but a space of conflict in themselves? I believe there is someone who has thought about this problem in a very stimulating and serious way, someone whose work has been regrettably oversimplified by readings that may be understood as an institutional attempt to constrain the revolutionary force of his proposals (even branding them frivolous). I am talking about Andy Warhol. Keyword is pop.

What stands out first about the work of pop is that, unlike the work of art, it can't really belong to anybody; it is an object that resists being possessed. This is assured not only by its multiplication to infinity (and beyond) but also by a more subtle internal logic. Whereas

the work of art points to a subject outside itself – its author – pop is always claimed by two external subjectivities, the artist and the star. The first produces it (doesn't create it, remember Warhol's 'Factory') and the second embodies it (12) but neither of them can put forward the pretense of ownership, since the artist can produce the work only at the price of his complete absence in it, his obscurity, his entire fading, whereas the star, giving her body, pays for presence and myth with death – the constant physical mutations of the stars are reincarnations, futile attempts to run away from death. The sole way artists have found to avoid their fade inside the work has been through excessive ideological production outside the work (mostly based, of course, on the notion of the *auteur*) or, in a stratagem that goes from Godard to Allen, occupying also the star position outside and inside the work.

However, this object stronger than subjects, that belongs to nobody but the social subject (13) seems to let itself be handled by everyone. It's a trap: pretending to be suitable for all uses, the work of pop ensures its circulation, which is fundamental, insofar as the work of pop recognises itself as being not immortal (as the work of art) but perishable, ephemeral. The work of pop doesn't triumph by lasting – in fact, lasting inflicts the cruelty of making a work of pop become a work of art, as it happened with Warhol at the Museum of Modern Art. The work of pop succeeds through its extension; it's a chewing-gum bubble that swells all it can before bursting. In this way it mocks capitalism, since it abuses the exchange system in order to selfishly circulate without ever being accumulated, capitalised. Once someone keeps it for him or herself, the work of pop no longer exists.

At the same time, pop's supposed naivety allows it to say seriously what in other contexts would be not only ridiculous but also obscene, in the sense Barthes gives to 'obscenity' in *A Lover's Discourse*. Born from marginality, minorities and disenchantment, pop opposes to the world and nature a celebratory practice. When Warhol picks up as procedural what Adorno maybe hated the most, i.e. the repetition of images, he gives this practice back all its cruelty by playing down its importance, considering it happy. That the work of pop runs out in the gesture is not only a lazy idea, but also a falsehood: trying to deny it in order to console oneself for the impossibility of possessing it. The work of pop is not conceptual; the work of pop does not transcend its materiality; it is in the pure experience of its materiality that the work of pop plays. It is a furious exposition and scathing laugh that menaces society continually by taking to the point of the unbearable all that Adorno and Horkheimer condemned in the 'culture industry,' but furthermore, in a double gesture, celebrating it. That's why pop can guiltlessly generate fortunes in seconds or make them vanish equally fast, since it doesn't respect even money. Its praise of fame is fundamental to the nihilistic morality that prevents it from supposing that this society would allow humans to preserve any value at all.

But now, what parameters could be defined for the attribution of value to pop? Until now, every time this has been considered, 'value' has been seen as a function of fashion and advertising. But this fails, because while it explains the circulation of the work of pop, its extension, the value and the circulation of the work of pop are not the same – we should remember here that pop laughs at the exchange value. And laughs at everything, but thinks about itself seriously, attributing value to its works by virtue of their emotional impact on the perceiver, and not a frivolous value, but a precise aesthetic value that must not be

confused with the German Idealist notion of aesthetic value. Mainly because the work of pop's value is not a function of its existence but of the capacity for *jouissance* (14) it proposes to the perceiver. Just as a hit song hasn't aesthetic value because of its existence but because of its capacity of being experienced, even physically (i.e. danced to), when we refer to cinema we should consider that a film's value is intimately bound to the *delectation scopique* (15) it provokes, which must not be taken for a hedonist category, an annulment of conflict. In this capacity for *jouissance* is encoded the importance of pop in contemporary culture, because there it sets its cynical facet aside and, exposing itself as *pas-tout*, redeems man. It is also there where its anti-institutional character becomes most vivid, for as a product of the social subject it turns directly to man, neglecting the institutions that try to regulate its circulation and enclose its sense.

Nevertheless, the major problem with the work of pop is its extreme contingency: before its extinction (that is part of its project and hence a desirable event) it is in danger of being transformed into a work of art. This is not a defect of pop, but a consequence of the value-attribution system in society and the work of its institutions. Even so, perhaps the best works of pop are those which, having reached the highest pop value, resist this danger with greatest efficiency.

Going back then to the tension between the 'culture industry' and art, it must be said that every film, at its premiere, is pop. Art is, when talking about cinema, an *a posteriori* and somehow annoying addition to film that reverses its whole signification. The attribution of 'artistic' value to a particular film is related more to the urge to neutralise what every movie has of the corrosive, outrageous, indecent and rude, than to the effective recognition of the film's place in the history of filmmaking practice. The most disgusting ideology is that of those movies that betray their pop character and, with the narcissistic object of assuring themselves immortality, pose as art from the first moment of their production. Accordingly, the worst film criticism is that which believes its purpose to be discovering works of art.

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Endnotes:

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944], trans. John Cumming, Continuum, New York, 1991. ▲
2. To avoid misunderstandings – even if I think it is clear throughout the article – I would like to make explicit the conception of art working here. From a materialist perspective – which must be the perspective if the subject is the Frankfurt Institute – 'art' is not an essence, nor a form. Art cannot 'be' in some objects and objects cannot 'be' art, for it is not a quality. Art is a particular kind of cultural experience, a cultural way of relating to some objects (and not others). Accordingly, it hasn't always existed, it is not eternal. Quite the opposite: it has a history. We could – and should – describe how our society has come to this particular kind of relation with these objects we call 'works of art.' So, when I refer to the process of autonomisation

- of cinema, I'm trying to describe how cinema has come to be thought as an art by Western culture. I'm well aware this process surely involves some other relevant phenomena – for instance, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and the invention of the TV. But I choose two privileged moments because I am interested in stressing that this process in cinema appeared mainly not as a problem of 'language' opacity (as happened in literature) but as a problem of the relation between representation and values. ▲
3. Not even Arnheim's *Film as Kunst* [1932] which comes closest to an attempt to construct a material aesthetic, escapes this observation. As usually happens in film theory, the failure is due to a philosophical assumption (Arnheim's notion of art as deviation from reality) that is not discussed as a problematic inside the theory. See Arnheim, *Film as Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1957. ▲
 4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1984] trans. Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984. ▲
 5. The definitions of cinema as “architecture in movement” (Elie Faure) and “music of light” (Abel Gance) are clear evidence of it. ▲
 6. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* [1985] trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Athlone, London, 1989. ▲
 7. It is also interesting to note how here Deleuze – through Benjamin – produces an operation that reads neo-realism as modernism in film. ▲
 8. In *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* [1928] signed by Pavel Medvedev, trans. Albert Wehrle, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973. ▲
 9. In fact, attributing retrospective value to some films because of their inclusion in a particular conception of the history of cinema was one of the *nouvelle vague's* main and most notable activities. ▲
 10. If one wishes to derive a theory from the *nouvelle vague* criticism, one must be alert and recognise that the *auteur* is a subject that basically appears as a possibility arising from certain concrete procedures performed on the materials, more a theoretical gap than a full subject. Unfortunately, this theoretical gap was covered later with biographical and psychological notes. ▲
 11. As Jonathan Rosenbaum repeatedly exposes in *Movie Wars* (Wallflower Press, London, 2002) – a book that, on the other hand, is evidence of the severe lack of theoretical reflection about the production conditions of both cinema and its own practice that currently affects film criticism around the globe. ▲

12. It would be interesting too, following Lacanian theory, to consider that there's only one subjectivity in pop, constituted by an Ego where the word has its place and production (*Je*), the artist, and a terminal imaginary Ego (*moi*), the star. Nevertheless, this *Ichspaltung* would not be that of the *auteur* but that of a radically different entity: the social subject. Then it becomes clear that the notion of *auteur* produces a dark confusion, as it displaces the Ego (*Je*) to *le-nom-du-père*. ▲
13. Rosenbaum, 2002. ▲
14. Taking the term strictly from Lacan's opposition between *plaisir* and *jouissance*. Throughout this essay the reader should have in mind the close relation between *jouissance*, angst and death. ▲
15. The reader will easily notice here my debt to Christian Metz and his *Le signifiant imaginaire* even if I read his work through a completely different notion of the subject and its relation to society. See Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* [1977], trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982. ▲

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