

has the princess "no function in the modern world," but she also suffers the indignity of ending up married to a "head waiter" rather than a fairy-tale prince. There is no escape from the disenchanting world, and this is the truth that Adorno's "realistic" Hollywood film scenario reveals.<sup>67</sup>

Adorno's comical spoof of a fairy-tale is accompanied by another "much more disturbing" dream. According to Adorno's dream protocol, he "had been given out to a child to torture, a delightful, twelve-year old boy. He had been spread out on a little apparatus that was positioned at an angle so that his delicate body was everywhere exposed." In his dream, Adorno proceeds to box and kiss the boy, then he "hit him on his buttocks until they went quite red." Finally, he "hit him hard in the testicles. At that he finally stretched his arm out to pick something up. It was a monocle that he inserted into one eye without making a sound."<sup>68</sup> The sexually abused child in the dream represents, of course, the monocle-wearing Fritz Lang. To Adorno's sanguine dialectic of regression, his American dream seems to offer a melancholy correction: the nightmare of regression—the repressed underside of progress, enlightenment, and reason—will always return, no matter how much Adorno and Lang seek to "reappropriate" regression as a reflective practice. Nonetheless, the image of a naked twelve-year old Fritz Lang tortured by a sexually aroused Adorno proves that in the context of the friendship between the director and the philosopher, even the most sobering lessons appear in the guise of comic relief.

67. Somewhat implausibly, Kluge reports that Adorno had indeed hopes of becoming a Hollywood screenwriter. See Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien*, p. 48.

68. Adorno, *Dream Notes*, p. 47.

## *Devices of Shock: Adorno's Aesthetics of Film and Fritz Lang's Fury*

Ryan Drake

Los Angeles, end of May 1942:

I dreamt I was to be crucified. The crucifixion was to take place at the Bockenheimer Warte, just by the university. I felt no fear throughout the entire process. Bockenheim resembled a village on Sunday, deathly quiet, as if under glass. I observed it closely on my way to the place of execution. I imagined that the appearance of things on this my last day would enable me to glean some definite knowledge of the next world. At the same time, however, I declared that one should not let oneself be seduced into ascribing objective truth to the religion practiced there simply because Bockenheim was still at the stage of simple commodity production. That aside, I was worried about whether I would obtain leave from the crucifixion to attend a large, extremely elegant dinner to which I had been invited, though I was confidently looking forward to it.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes*

Two critical yet comic elements, beyond the more obvious narrative of persecution, reveal themselves in Adorno's recorded nightmare. The first is comic because it so aptly displays his relentless critical impulse despite himself, the way in which theory invades the private sphere of his dreams: even in sleep, Adorno finds himself at once reading phenomena and on guard against a false transcendence from which they could, in the last instance, be deciphered.<sup>1</sup> The second is more patently absurd, yet perhaps

1. We should note that this is by no means the only overtly theoretical appearance within his dreams. Elsewhere, Adorno recalls from a dream the organization of a

more difficult to assess: that he should gain permission to interrupt an unspeakably cruel and final punishment, an essentially hopeless enterprise, in order to enjoy an opulent feast. This moment of release, with its added hope of sensuous gratification, appears discordant with the severe tone of Adorno's writings on late capitalism, its generalized culture of resignation to what its inhabitants are "presently being fed."<sup>2</sup> The nightmare of crucifixion here is not, I suggest, emblematic of social privation and neglect, as one might expect under the historical circumstances of a German-Jewish refugee in the process of "adjustment" to American life during the war, but of endless cultural consumption in the mode of paralysis: "barbarism has now reached a point, the possibility of escape to a dinner being cut off, where it cannot stuff itself full enough of culture. Every program must be sat through to the end, every best-seller read, every film seen in its first flush in the top Odeon."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Adorno could not have asked for a better vantage point from which to analyze this cultural dynamic than during his extended stay in the United States, where he was frequently counted among the guests at celebrity dinner parties.

If Peter Hohendahl is correct in characterizing the émigré's period of social adjustment as a "traumatic experience,"<sup>4</sup> not merely with regard to new customs and a new language but also to the intensification of resources for collective social control already familiar to him from Hitler's rise to power, it is nonetheless the case that more than a morbid curiosity or a dutiful scientific resolve drew Adorno close to the center of the culture industry in Los Angeles, an industry that he described as so administratively all-encompassing, particularly in its manifestation through movies,

constellation of stars in terms strikingly similar to the way in which he describes the logic of his written work. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 35.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981-82): 204.

3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), pp. 118-19.

4. Peter Hohendahl, "The Displaced Intellectual? Adorno's American Years Revisited," *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 85. In support of Hohendahl's claim, a letter to Walter Benjamin, written just prior to his departure from London in 1937, reflects Adorno's ambivalence about the prospect of fleeing to "an America where the waves of crisis are obviously gathering pace in a most disturbing manner too." Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), p. 229.

that it scarcely permits dreams at all.<sup>5</sup> His intimate friendship with Fritz Lang, who had left Germany upon being asked by Joseph Goebbels to direct the German Film Institute in 1933<sup>6</sup> and who had met with relative success as a director in Hollywood, appears to constitute something of a reprieve from the scathing critiques of film as an aesthetic medium that he published along with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Drawing from the latter, commentators have tended to attribute to Adorno a wholesale rejection of film as little more than a vehicle of naked bourgeois ideology, in contrast to Walter Benjamin's more optimistic—albeit qualified—approach to cinema's emancipatory potential. Indeed, Adorno's numerous assertions to the effect that the sound film contributes to the "stunting of the mass-media consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity"<sup>7</sup> appear only to further the long-standing picture of the zealous critic carefully guarding himself against this most dangerous and American of infections. Yet in Detlev Claussen's recent biographical study, a section of which is devoted specifically to the unlikely friendship with Lang, Adorno is described as a "passionate moviegoer" from a young age whose ostensible "contempt for the film as an art form is contradicted . . . by the esteem in which he held Lang."<sup>8</sup> In addition, attempts to explain what appears to be a softened stance on cinema during the time of his German repatriation, in such works as "How to Look at Television" (1954) and "Transparencies on Film" (1967), typically overlook the more complicated perspective visible elsewhere, for example, in Adorno's favorable profile of Charlie Chaplin as early as 1930.<sup>9</sup>

Straightforward solutions to this perceived discord between personal complicity in and theoretical condemnation of the motion picture industry have an equally sedative effect: either Adorno's formidable critique of film as belonging to a larger "medium of undreamed of psychological

5. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Books, 1972), p. 125: "Art for the masses has destroyed the dream but still conforms to the tenets of that dreaming idealism which critical idealism balked at."

6. Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group), p. 15.

7. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 126.

8. Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), pp. 164, 172.

9. Published originally in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 22, 1930.

control"<sup>10</sup> is overstated, and cultural conditions are not nearly as dire as he would have us believe (hence there really is no nightmare, so why not indulge?), or he internalized the transparent nature of the industry's deception to the same degree in which he depicted it (since the crucifixion will take place regardless, why not look forward to the dinner party in the midst of it?). In this leveling effect, cultural affirmation—not incidentally, the most damaging aspect of film for Adorno—plays itself out all over again. This essay seeks to bypass the familiar narratives of consistent hypocrisy and an eventually exhausted theoretical hysteria in order to hold in view the question of film's status as an art form, and to do so with Adorno's connection to Lang in mind. To this end, I will take up a particular work by Lang, namely, *Fury*, his first U.S. film and what has been called a "fully dialectical fable on the nature of American populism,"<sup>11</sup> as a prism through which we might catch sight of the paradoxical notion, in Adorno's thinking, of a film of resistance.

Resistance and autonomy are intertwined, if not synonymous, terms in Adorno's work, applied as frequently to objects of art as to human subjects. For it is precisely through the former, as Benjamin observed,<sup>12</sup> in its eventual extrication from unquestioned use value in its "ritual function," that the latter actually might be guided toward that self-directedness that is categorically assigned yet practically denied to humans at the level of the base as well as that of the superstructure. At the risk of oversimplifying one of the dimensions of Adorno's theory of art for our present purposes, I shall characterize this aesthetic denial as accomplished by a system of artistic products primarily in their complicity with the logic of commodity fetishism, wherein the illusion of singular, irreplaceable objective existents is projected through the countervailing abstraction of ubiquitous, calculable exchange value. The illusion of qualitatively new forms of experience, embodied in the principle of the shock effect or the spectacle, which "captures" the consciousness of its audience, is the primary means whereby manufactured art products socialize the modern subject in the mode of the consumer. Thus, as a parallel to the advance of technology

10. Theodor W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1954): 216.

11. Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute Press, 2000), p. 227.

12. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 223–24.

propelled by the dynamics of a competitive market, the ever-renewed task of the culture industry is to reproduce the very values and norms through which a consuming public is maintained while at the same time meeting the ever-mounting demand for novel aesthetic provocation.<sup>13</sup> For Adorno, this "longing for the new"<sup>14</sup> characteristic of the modern age is really only the desire for what is packaged as new but which popular tastes have been trained to expect. Such ideological sleight-of-hand is accomplished through an increase in a pleasurable intensity of effects that is at once sensuously overwhelming and conceptually impoverished. Mass culture lends itself to a calculus of alternately inducing stimulus and tranquilization as forms of collective inclusion (pop culture as a means of "connecting" with the world and others) whose general pattern accords less with the nefarious aims of the individual entrepreneur than with the impersonal imperatives of what Horkheimer referred to as "the formalization of reason."<sup>15</sup>

Works that ascend, on the other hand, to the level of autonomy for Adorno are marked not only by their ability to create, in each particular case, specific rules of form suited to their aesthetic content,<sup>16</sup> but as well by an acknowledgment of their own essential semblance character, their status as mimetic objects mediated in their construction by human subjectivity. Such works therefore seek by means of technique to distance themselves from their subject matter at the same time that they provide access to it. Consistent with Clement Greenberg's narrative of modernity,<sup>17</sup>

13. The modern principle of the shock effect has its roots in the work of Baudelaire, in particular his essay on the illustrator Constantin Guys entitled "The Painter of Modern Life." For a more thorough account of this phenomenon in its historical context, see Susan Buck-Morss's extraordinary study "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Art-work Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 3–41.

14. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 32.

15. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974), pp. 36f.

16. Cf. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 228. Regarding the order of its construction in this sense, "every authentic artwork is internally revolutionary."

17. I have in mind here particularly Greenberg's famous essay "Modernist Painting," where he notes: "Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, [the fine arts] looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other activity." Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 4:86.

this acknowledgment in the medium of easel painting, for example, was manifest in the nineteenth century in an increased focus upon the material elements essential to its form, wherein the flatness of the canvas and the sensuous nature of the paint itself began to overtake the representational figures formerly evident through these elements. The abstraction from recognizable relations between objects or objects themselves, as well as the corresponding presentation of the "matter" of painting in avant-garde works of visual art, held a twofold advantage for undercutting the place reserved for them within bourgeois culture. Works could thus avoid the problem of affirmation that for Adorno necessarily attends figurative representation.<sup>18</sup> The aesthetic depiction of objective phenomenal content, no matter the producer's intent, retains an irreducible force of legitimation of the social conditions to which such content refers. At the same time, such works could actively interrupt the illusion of immediacy through which conventional forms of mimesis create a naively "realistic"—hence, affirmative—appearance of the world by accentuating their own elements of mediation. Such "serious" art objects—only ever autonomous in a qualified sense, given that they cannot be wholly removed from the social order against which they operate—invite opportunities for immanent critique of that order.

Film, the works of which are neither generated under the exclusive control of a single, independent artist nor able to escape from the figurative-representational nature proper to their form, therefore appears at first glance, from an Adornian position, ill-suited for the task of ultimately undermining the scheme of production upon which it rests. In fact, Adorno expressly indicates that the "photographic process of film . . . [which] places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous, techniques . . . is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art."<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, one of the burdens of the motion picture, in its attempt to achieve a measure of aesthetic autonomy,

18. This tendency on the part of artworks as such, and not simply representational ones, to sanction the current form of the subject's lifeworld is never fully neutralized, since even the negating power of revolutionary art invokes its correlate. Adorno enunciates this qualification at the start of *Aesthetic Theory*: "Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a priori toward affirmation" (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1).

19. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," p. 202.

would entail drawing the audience's consciousness toward those aspects of its formal composition that are typically united in increasingly seamless—and hence, implicit from the perspective of the viewer—fashion in its more commercial forms, namely, the projected interplay of "word, image, and music."<sup>20</sup> However, insofar as the various techniques unique to film (e.g., montage, superimposition, tracking) operate by way of the shock effect, these must be employed against themselves, as it were, in concert with applicable techniques borrowed from photography, music, and literature in order to solicit the audience's powers of attentive sensation without sacrificing meaningful content. The notion that film would be little more than "dependent art" was unlikely at best in the Hollywood of the 1930s, given the studio system's elaborate division of manual and intellectual (broadly construed) labor and the Great Depression's highlighting of the profit motive as the cinema's *raison d'être*. Yet, as Claussen relates a personal conversation between the two friends, it was Adorno who reportedly defended Lang's films as instances of autonomous art.<sup>21</sup> In the case of *Fury*, this characterization holds not simply because it meets the formal challenges of its medium, as I demonstrate below, but also because under Lang's direction, his film evinces an awareness (which Adorno mentions in the context of a critique of television, but which applies equally to movies) that "the social effect depends [not merely upon] its technical structure . . . [but also] upon the explicit and implicit messages"<sup>22</sup> that these works convey to their audience. This is not to assign to artistic production a technique of calculated moral responses; rather, it is to maintain in its objective content a self-conscious connection with the justice (or lack thereof) of the social whole from which it issues. For Lang, films could not simply present themselves as enchanting illusions, striking in their resemblance to actual social conditions; there had to be a tacit acknowledgment that, especially in America, they were complicit in the service of what Adorno called the "dreamless dream," namely "repossessing the entire sensible world once again in a copy satisfying every sensory organ."<sup>23</sup>

*Fury* achieves exceptional status in this sense to the extent that it takes as its subject matter an extreme case of the very condition of moral

20. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 124.

21. Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno*, p. 172.

22. Theodor W. Adorno, "Prologue to Television," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 49.

23. *Ibid.* On this point, cf. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 202.

and intellectual oblivion that cinematic effects had begun to exploit as a matter of course on the part of its audience. Given that films "incite the viewers and listeners to fall into step as if in a parade," as Adorno writes, "[i]t would not be incorrect to describe the constitutive subject of film as a 'we' in which the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the medium converge."<sup>24</sup> While Joe Wilson (Spencer Tracy) and his ostensible fiancée Katherine (Sylvia Sydney) figure as the protagonists of the movie, its principal character is a frenzied mob of outraged small-town residents seeking vengeance for a local girl who was kidnapped and, as is subtly suggested, sexually molested. Joe, who fits the broad profile of one of the criminals in question and who is held as a suspect in the town jail until he can be questioned by the district attorney, finds himself the target of a public lynching when the swarming townsfolk, unable ultimately to reach him in his cell, set fire to and eventually bomb the building before the National Guard can arrive. Presumed dead by all—including the audience—a disillusioned, half-burned Joe reappears on his brothers' doorstep to enlist their aid in bringing twenty-two members of the mob to trial for murder, secretly directing their collective fates from a remove mediated primarily through radio broadcasts, which at the time were a technological novelty. The center of *Fury*'s action, therefore, is a thoughtless aggression in infectious, collective form: in Adorno's words, "mimetic impulses"<sup>25</sup> seeking satisfaction in a spectacle of violence under the pretense of justice.

Originally titled *Mob Rule*, Norman Krasna's story seems in retrospect designed to conjure up associations with the treatment of Jews under National Socialism in Germany at the time of its theatrical release. Its more immediate inspiration, however, was drawn not from abroad but from an event three years prior in San Jose, California, in which a horde of approximately ten thousand local citizens stormed the courthouse and dragged two men being held for the kidnapping and killing of Brooke Hart into the town square, where they were hanged—the first mass-advertised lynching in U.S. history. The following day, along with several reports detailing the event, the *San Francisco Chronicle* printed a photograph of the crowd (men and women, dressed in clothes ranging from casual to more formal attire) forcing its way through the courthouse doors, a caption just above the image reading "Fury would not down."<sup>26</sup> *Fury* thus does not

24. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," p. 203.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 27, 1933. Whether the official title of the film was drawn from this caption is unconfirmed.

merely transpose the threat of an easily manipulated and desperate public fallen prey to agitators or fascist dictators foreign to American soil,<sup>27</sup> but instead serves as a reflection of a tendency already at work at home—a tendency that the big business of harmless amusement would sooner have its customers forget. *Fury* is, in its cultural assignment, a vestige of memory, a reminder of the potential sudden shift from an orderly, if repressed, state of society into barbaric oblivion, oppositional psychic forces juxtaposed in Joe's endearing habit of confusing the terms "memento" and "momentum" (an intellectual failing that establishes not only his inclusion among the ranks of the average, working-class man, but ultimately interferes with his intentions of remaining anonymous while manipulating the proceedings of the trial against his aggressors).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the image early in the film of a steam engine screaming along its tracks, breaking up the audience's view of a passionate kiss between Joe and Katherine, calls attention to the awesome propulsive force of collective human striving and in turn foreshadows the latter's menacing socio-historical character when it is unleashed without the guide of conscience.

As Adorno states, however, a viable aesthetics of film "focuses on the movement of objects,"<sup>29</sup> and in Lang's picture the title character shows its movement to be dialectical. The fury unleashed upon Joe transforms him as a moral agent. When he reappears after the media had pronounced him dead, he reveals that his outrage has been adequately stoked in the darkness

27. Photographs of the hanged men were used by Hitler's regime as propaganda against the United States ten years after the crime occurred, alleging that since Hart was Jewish, the lynching of his suspected murderers was evidence of America's general support for the Jewish people. Cf. Harry Farrell, *Swift Justice: Murder and Vengeance in a California Town* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), pp. 301–2.

28. Anton Kaes notes the dual sense of "memento" as "both a reminder and a warning" and sees *Fury* itself in its political double-meaning, to which Lang and Adorno, as foreigners in the process of cultural adjustment, would have certainly been especially sensitive. Kaes, "A Stranger in the House: Fritz Lang's 'Fury' and the Cinema of Exile," *New German Critique* 89 (2003): 50.

29. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," p. 200. Adorno credits this notion to the theoretical work of his former mentor, Siegfried Kracauer, about whom he had written a retrospective piece two years prior, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, *New German Critique* 54 (Autumn, 1991): 159–77. Although ambivalent in his critique, Adorno does commend Kracauer on his techniques of reception analysis, which serves to maintain the link between accountability for the state of culture and participation in it, a "moment of legitimacy [namely] outrage at the fact that countless human beings who ought to know better and at bottom do know better nevertheless abandoned themselves passionately to false consciousness" (p. 170).

of the movie theater, where newsreels re-broadcast, in an incessant loop, images of his horrific fate. His indignation is not limited to his specific group of offenders; it extends to audiences everywhere in the country, to the "average Joe" who responds to his lynching as if it were simply another instance of standardized amusement. Barking out orders between clenched teeth in the fashion of an impetuous director, he tells his brothers, who look at him as if he were a ghost, that he has spent the day "in a movie . . . watching a newsreel of myself gettin' burned alive . . . over and over again . . . the place was packed. They like it, they get a big kick out of seeing a man burned to death, a big kick!" In the cinema's own brand of realism, there seems no longer to be any meaningful distinction between the unfolding of real events and the composition of simulated ones; through the appearance of immediacy within their products, dream factories prove themselves adept at manufacturing community by accommodating nightmares as well.<sup>30</sup> "Concepts like sadism and masochism," Adorno writes, "no longer suffice. In the mass society of technical dissemination they are mediated by sensationalism, by comet-like, remote, ultimate newness. It overwhelms a public writhing under shock and oblivious of who has suffered the outrage, itself or others. Compared to its stimulus value, the content of the shock becomes really irrelevant. . . . Sensation has submerged, together with differentiation between qualities, all judgement."<sup>31</sup> The "we" that the motion picture cultivates and sustains is generated in a collective gasp robbed of cathartic power.<sup>32</sup>

If Spencer Tracy's Joe Wilson is an effective generic individual persona, the generic small town of Strand in which he is scapegoated has a special resonance with the role of film in American consciousness. As

30. Cf. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 206: "Immediacy, the popular community concocted by films, amounts to mediation without residue, reducing men and everything human so perfectly to things, that their contrast to things, indeed the spell of reification itself, becomes imperceptible."

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 237–38.

32. Adorno explicitly contrasts the catharsis of ancient Greek tragedy, which retains elements of understanding in its effect of wonder, with the empty forms of anticipation or even amazement relating to the modern viewer who is accustomed to Hollywood realism: "It seems pretty certain that those who saw the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus or Sophocles' *Oedipus* were not likely to translate these tragedies (the subject matter of which was known to everyone, and the interest in which was centered in artistic treatment) directly into everyday terms. This audience did not expect that on the next corner of Athens similar things would go on" (Adorno, "How to Look at Television," pp. 228–29).

Tom Gunning points out, this resonance would have been apparent for "audiences in the 30s . . . [given that] the Strand Theatre in New York City had been the first great picture palace in the United States, the standard against which all other theatres were judged, and dozens of theatres around the country were named after it."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, given the dearth of scenes in *Fury* of people at work, the impression Lang creates of this small town is that it is held together more through its leisure activities than through the organized labor that assigns each individual her place. Feeling more in harmony with one another by watching the same movie silently in the dark than through meaningful intercourse in the light of day, Lang's audiences were to be made aware of the mediating and superficially cohesive powers of film that stand in for the otherwise impoverished state of political discourse in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Under the assumption that, since seeing a given film is a matter of personal choice, one's engagement in the entertainments of culture is a reflection of individual freedom, the larger ideological community active through films and, *a fortiori*, the culture industry is not taken seriously in its function. Much like the lynching itself, film attendance proceeds in the spirit of "Let's have some fun!"

Joe's own naive ideology, his original belief in the social contract—the ostensibly just trade-off between sublimated individual impulse (hard work and patience) and socioeconomic reward (affluence and community approval)<sup>35</sup>—is now transformed into the pre-historic law, in his own words, "that says if you kill somebody you gotta get killed yourself," namely, simple, old-fashioned vengeance. While unable to free himself from a logic of equivalence (an eye for an eye), he plots to use the law, which he had formerly held in reverence, as a mere pretense to carry out his own form of satisfaction. Now driven by this concentrated impulse, the legally deceased Joe reverts to the brute vestiges of nature within himself:

33. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 226.

34. Of meaningful conversation in America, Adorno observes that people's "capacity for speaking to each other is stifled. It presupposes experience worth communicating, freedom of expression, and at once independence and relatedness. . . . [they] have taken recourse to elaborate games and other leisure-time activities intended to dispense them from the burden of conscience-ridden language. . . . Spontaneity and objectivity in discussing matters are disappearing even in the most intimate circle, just as in politics debate has long been supplanted by the assertion of power" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 137).

35. Theodore Rippey provides a compelling account of *Fury* along the lines of this—more recognizably Freudian—trade-off in "By a Thread: Civilization in Fritz Lang's *Fury*," *Journal of Film and Video* 60 (2008): 72–89.

animal instincts desirous of blood. In this sense, Lang's superimposition of chickens and other fowl together in a coop upon the montage of townsfolk engaging in apparently harmless gossip about Wilson on the lead-up to the horrific event applies not merely to the residents of Strand, but to Joe himself. In overcrowded conditions, such as those of agricultural mass production, chickens are known to collectively turn on and peck to death one of their own at the first sign of blood. This association comes to light more clearly in the tense scene out in front of the jail where the sheriff attempts to face the agitated crowd and assert the authority of his office: once the simulation of blood appears on the sheriff's face thanks to a hurled tomato, the massive gathering thereupon descends into a flurry of mindless violence. In working from this same desublimated destructive instinct, Joe unwittingly betrays that he is not immune from the very tendency that he so badly wishes to punish.

These startling scenes of seemingly "unhinged" psychic forces are not presented as contrary to modern administrated conditions of social life but rather as aspects proper to it. In Katherine's own mental breakdown at the spectacle of her lover disappearing behind flames and a barrage of stones from the onlookers, she too—if more overtly—joins the ranks of a larger audience that has been shocked into paralysis. The repetitive projection of this violence in the movie theater has its counterpart in Katherine's consciousness: she is left literally incapacitated, stuck in the moment of her trauma. Only the strike of a match, lit by Joe's brother Charlie—who himself needs the calming effect of his cigarette addiction in order, as he says, to "think"—shocks her back into a state of affairs that she can only then begin to process.<sup>36</sup> That a habit tied to compulsive consumption, the lighting of a match (the appearance of precarious control over a naked force of nature), rekindles Katherine's consciousness is a display of the resuscitative powers of industry in relation to the condition of nature within humans. Leisure time filled with amusements is precisely the "remedy" it prescribes for the individual who, in her perceptive organism, feels herself "burned out." Her exhausting experience, distilled into these moments of helplessness, corresponds to the vacuous subjectivity of the assembled masses, of which Benjamin wrote, in the same year that *Fury* played in theaters across the United States, that "its self-alienation has

36. Adorno notes the "compulsive" nature of the modern consumer in "Prologue to Television," p. 53.

reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order."<sup>37</sup>

Against such self-alienation, to which audiences are gradually rendered unable to pose any productive alternative, Adorno locates the task, proper to film in its technical aspect, of "wrest[ing] its a priori collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and irrational influence [in order to] enlist this collectivity in the service of emancipatory intentions."<sup>38</sup> Film must present itself to its viewers from a cautious distance, overtly gesturing to its constructed dimension. In relieving itself of the attempt to approximate the autonomy of other, pre-photographic art, film finds its unlikely opportunity to achieve a measure of autonomy. In particular, its own integration of music and moving images as guides to proper response are to be set into question. As *Fury* transforms into a courtroom drama in its second half, the presence of professional media influences moves more explicitly into the frame. Yet the movie itself begins behind glass, in a *mise en scène* of shop-window advertisements for bedroom furnishings of newly-married couples, and through this glass Joe and Katherine dream together of the paired slots reserved for them in respectable society once they can earn their way in. We return to this advertisement late in the film, which has been relocated from Chicago to Strand—a frozen, portable snapshot into which desires are projected. Composition of space is reduplicated on-screen as a failed pretense to intimacy, highlighting the falsity of the impression that the middle class is held together not merely by money and privilege but by the wisdom of discriminating tastes.

The obvious "composition" of particular objects in *Fury* is complemented by Lang's attention to the typical functions of music in films, in particular its supplementary role in smoothing over transitions between

37. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 242. Adorno takes up a similar position specifically in relation to the effects of popular film, stating that it "has succeeded in transforming subjects so indistinguishably into social functions, that those wholly encompassed, no longer aware of any conflict, enjoy their own dehumanization as something human, as the joy of warmth" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 206).

38. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," pp. 203–4. This notion anticipates Adorno's articulation in *Aesthetic Theory*: "The object of bourgeois art is the relation of itself as artifact to empirical society. . . . Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art" (p. 225).

one shot and the next. If, as noted above, the object *in motion* is at issue in film, the temporal dimension of a movie's narrative is as critical to its status as the spatial. Once Katherine departs for a job in another city, the passage of time—from October to the following May—that they must spend apart is first traced by the movement of Joe's thumb along the miniature columns of the calendar in his pocketbook, at which point the camera fades in to a tired Katherine grading examinations. The weight, as well as the hollow uniformity of the intervening duration, is figured in the stack of identical booklets at her elbow. Yet the melancholy music playing in the background as this visual transition occurs (beginning with Joe's counting of the months to come) comes to an abrupt halt when Katherine finishes the last exam and crosses her bedroom to turn her radio off. What the viewer is customarily led to assume is a cinematic convention—the presence of music to which she, but not the fictional characters on-screen, is privy—is undercut by the fiction itself; the music draws the viewer along with the semblance, only to be withdrawn from within that semblance itself. As it turns out, what the radio broadcast, aligned with the position of film, had been drowning out is the singing of an African-American woman as she hangs laundry in the yard down below Katherine's window, as her husband and son, we infer, enjoy the serenade nearby. Broadcasting does not simply project but, already concealing an ideology within itself, covers over the embodied voices through which both suffering and hope for an otherworldly transcendence (as the woman's folk song reflects<sup>39</sup>) are expressed. Thus, the presence of music is not shorn from the play of image but instead displayed, as it were, in its immediate and mediating positions *vis-à-vis* the viewing public.

This aesthetic transparency has its formal counterpart in Joe's later lonely wanderings about Strand, where the weight of his own impulse for vengeance begins to affect his own powers of sensation. Thinking that

39. Significantly, the song in question, "Oh, Boys, Carry Me 'Long," written by Stephen C. Foster in 1851, is a folk song with which much of the older audience would have been familiar as part of popular culture in incipient form. Though Barbara Menkel, in her study "White Law and the Missing Black Body in Fritz Lang's *Fury*" (*The Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 20 [2003]: 203–23), is correct in her observation that the singing woman is "coding her desire as a collective desire for freedom" (p. 217), she passes over a fact that might complicate her somewhat neat division between racial coding in music, namely, that the song is not a spiritual but a minstrel song. Here the musical and lyrical code is originally a projection of imagined suffering from a position of racial power onto the racially oppressed.

the celebratory band music emanating from a nearby bar (not incidentally named "The Business Men's Club") is live music, he enters in the hope of finding the immediate social contact that he suddenly craves. Present instead are tables and stacked chairs, an empty establishment, save the black bartender, his ear so close to a radio emitting jazz as to evoke discomfort. Such music, seemingly deployed from nowhere and broadcast everywhere, is all the more striking as a cue for human impulses at the point in which a pronounced snap of the dial plunges the scene into silence. Joe is startled; he'd expected general mirth, as the music had seemed to advertise. Seeing that the aural "performance" is a façade, he settles instead for the woodenness of a mere business transaction, its own awkward nature underscored by the feigned smile on the bartender's face as he serves Joe a highball. Even for the disillusioned hero of the film, spontaneous and simulated performances have begun to blur; their distinction for the new Joe, however, seems only to be that between outright aggression, on the one hand, and a lack of solace, on the other.

The ubiquity of broadcasts, and hence staged numbers, matches the ubiquity of products in the theater and in the shop window. Tucked between these moments in which music is exposed as cinematic ruse, we bear witness to a scene in which Joe, disturbed by the developments of the legal trial he had designed from afar, angrily snaps the sound off of his radio and hurls it to the floor. Of course, a smashed radio changes nothing in the course of events; Joe's pathetic surrender to errant impulses is an expression of the tightening of cultural forces around him rather than a respite from them. As his actions spell out, the splintering in question is psychological. Indeed, we learn in the barbershop conversation that proves the catalyst for building the momentum of gossip that there is a common-sense distinction to be made between oneself and one's "funny" impulses: "If you resist 'em, you're sane. If you don't, you're on your way to the nuthouse or the pen." Hector, the resident barber, confesses to his patron that over the past twenty years he has had numerous impulses to cut the throat of the person he was shaving. His selfhood, as Adorno would agree, seems at least in part defined and sustained by his ability to resist these urges, about which he remarks to his increasingly nervous cohorts, "It's like an itch—you gotta scratch it." As the film progresses, neither he nor Joe, nor the crowd of offenders who had joined the mob in Strand, seems ultimately to have any power of internal integrity against the resilience of programming.



In fact, the fate of personal and social life as bound up with mass-reproduced images and sounds is set into question as well through the relation between *Fury*'s internal narrative timing and its historical timing as a work. We discover, again in Joe's pocket calendar, that the story takes place in the present: his arrival in Strand to reunite with Katherine takes place the very month and year that the film is released in the United States, May 1936. For its original viewing audience, mob violence is framed in correspondence with the social conditions of the historical moment. The audience would have been aware that as the film transitions into a courtroom drama in which particular individuals are called to account for that violence, the story moves into a future that was bearing down upon them. Not simply legal but moral action would be called for on their part, a task at which other nations were failing and from which there would be no "delivery" via optimism in technological advances. The radio microphone, as Lang's close-up shot reveals, is present in the courtroom as well.

Accordingly, film, in its subversive potential, as Adorno writes, "is faced with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a mere documentary mode."<sup>40</sup> In its claim to be art, film cannot renounce its status as an object of popular culture whose technically choreographed world-unto-itself quality makes it inoffensive enough for mass consumption, nor can it abandon itself to its inherent fetish of the up-to-date report whose semblance of objectivity aligns it all the more with propaganda. Though Lang confessed a preference for documentary-style shots in *Fury*, even the documentary character of images within the courtroom narrative preserves a separation between strict realism and the dreamlike quality emblematic of the Hollywood film. The heart of Joe's plan of revenge upon his attackers through legal means is contained in his specific sensitivity to the presence of the media, won precisely through the repetitive interaction between various audiences and the same newsreels reporting his lynching. The sense of moral satisfaction to which *Fury*'s viewers are privy—and to which Joe is not—lies in seeing the confrontation between individual agitators and their reproduced images in court. The new technology showcased in these court scenes is film's "stop action" freeze frame, taking film apart by halting its motion, reverting it back to photography in order to examine it as a document. *Fury*'s audience is not treated to a repetition of the same footage, but rather is given new material that confirms the action that the audience has already seen. But

40. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," p. 203.

included in this material is, as Rippey observes, what is also evident to the audience, "close-up and low-angle footage that the newsreel crew could not possibly have shot."<sup>41</sup> Despite having already made eyewitnesses of his movie-house viewers, Lang nonetheless contrives evidence for a case about which they are already certain, and so portrays film's documentary aspect in tandem with the dreamlike narrative discontinuities through which sensational effects are customarily produced.

In this photographic element of film within the film, detached from its function of depicting objects in motion, the manufacture of shock itself becomes an object. Each member of the mob, having reclaimed his or her respective epistemological and moral position of individual subject, is forced to re-live the socially repressed events from this position, and is thus shocked at having to claim, before the country at the other end of the broadcast, the impulses to which his or her identity is attached. The self, whose command of past events, of taking in experience as such, becomes all the more enfeebled with each added level of shock, has no defense against these images of uncontrolled nature manifest from within. These defendants are caught within the vicious cycle that drives them between the extremes of narcosis and panic, yet which from either side weakens the capacity for critique and, hence, cultural rehabilitation. As the movie makes clear, their punishment, like the destruction of Joe's radio, changes nothing in the larger institutional dynamic.

That Adorno prescribes for film a subjective realism congruous with its dreamlike quality—that is, in fidelity to the individual's projection of unintended, discontinuous images of nature "consoling coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams... set off against each other in the course of their appearance"<sup>42</sup>—is evidence that, despite its failings and its administered character, film harbors within its medium opportunities for human spontaneity to prove itself in the service of invigorating its sensory life rather than damaging it. To attend to subjective experience of this kind, in which impulse and imagination disrupt affirmative representations of the world, it is necessary, as with *Fury*, to sever the elements of cinematic representation from one another in concert with the severance of psychological forces of which subjectivity is composed. In Lang's portrait of modern anxiety, the aspiration is not so much to recreate moving objects in a dreamworld, nor is it merely to offer up within America a sobering mirror

41. Rippey, "By a Thread," p. 72.

42. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," p. 201.

for recent historical events. Instead, it is to linger in the negative, aligning itself with the picture that Adorno offers of the suffering consciousness of time endured in the darkness by the insomniac whose inability adequately to process lived experience keeps his thoughts from settling: "The hours that are past as seconds before the inner sense has registered them, and sweep it away in their cataract, proclaim that like all memory our inner experience is doomed to oblivion in the cosmic night."<sup>43</sup>

## *Damaged Life as Exuberant Vitality in America: Adorno, Alienation, and the Psychic Economy*

Shannon Mariotti

In the aphorism "The Health Unto Death," in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Adorno issues a provocation and a challenge: "If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today's prototypical culture were possible," it would need to "show the sickness proper to the time to consist precisely in normality."<sup>1</sup> Investigating this unique form of illness would require questioning the traditional markers of health: "unruffled calm," an "unhindered capacity for happiness," "exuberant vitality," and even the "champagne jollity" of "the regular guy" and the "popular girl" (*MM* 58, 63). Hence, Adorno identifies a need to explore "the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind" (*MM* 59).

But psychoanalysis itself is no longer fit for the task of exploring this "sickness of the healthy." Like other members of the Frankfurt School, Adorno was deeply influenced by psychoanalysis:<sup>2</sup> critical theory sought to apply Freud's analysis of subjective psychology to a Marxian social critique of the repressive and dominating features of modern civilization.

1. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 58. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MM*.

2. Max Horkheimer declared "we are really deeply indebted to Freud and his first collaborators. His thought is one of the *Bildungsmächte* [foundation-stones] without which our philosophy would not be what it is." Joel Whitebook, "Fantasy and Critique: Some Thoughts on Freud and the Frankfurt School," in *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. David Rasmussen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 287. See also Joel Whitebook, *Per- version and Utopia: Studies in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

43. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 165.