*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film.* Daniel Mourenza. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Pp. 250.

The book *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film* by Daniel Mourenza provides an in-depth analysis of Walter Benjamin's discussion on cinema. Mourenza argues that Benjamin's intellectual development springs from an interest in the aesthetic dimension of cinema. Moreover, Mourenza contends, Benjamin's aesthetic focus raises questions regarding what he called "first" and "second" technologies. In the former, technology masters nature; it is imperialist in relation. In the latter, which is non-instrumental in outcome, the relationship between nature, humanity, and technology are intertwined via his notion of innervation (Mourenza, 49). The author concludes by reflecting on today's new media technologies through the lens of second technology.

The book is divided into five parts. The first chapter, "Anthropological Materialism and the Aesthetics of Film," presents the interesting and often complex web of ideas regarding Benjamin's cinema aesthetics. One of the key concepts discussed is anthropological materialism. This, Mourenza writes, is "a type of materialism whose point of departure is the physicality of the body – when the "body" is not restricted to the individual" (28). As the definition suggests, anthropological materialism sidesteps traditional categories of subject and object. Instead, Benjamin's account of material and subjective experience assumes a "collective body" (*Kollektivleib*). On the collective body, Benjamin writes:

> In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal, into this life of the body of mankind, and thereby into this annihilation and fulfillment. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed.

> Ultimately, everything that subserves humanity's happiness may be counted part of its life, its limbs (33).

Benjamin's notion of the collective body, therefore, represents a synthesis between subject and object, living and non-living, as different contexts where the collective "sensorium" is created (28). This idea is further developed in "To the Planetarium," the last entry in *One-Way Street* (1928) where Benjamin describes technology as engaged in organizing a "physis."[1]

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* ("*Work of Art"*) (1935–39), Benjamin expands on his account of technology and its relationship to human experience. He accounts for this relationship via the nomenclature "innervation," which is the process of inculcating knowledge, values, or indeed a new perspective, into a person. In Benjamin's analysis, cinema is a process through which this innervative process is discernible. Benjamin focuses on laughter as an example of the innervative process in film. But Benjamin does not see all films as equally innervative in their output; hence the Soviets, according to Benjamin in "Moscow Diary" (1926–27), were successful at innervation, whereas the Germans, during the Weimar Republic, were not.

In the essay on Schmitz, and later the "Little History of Photography" and *Work of Art*, Benjamin presents the idea of the "optical unconscious," which involves the relationship one has with photographic images (73). Upon seeing an image, Benjamin argues via his innervation model, a new perceptual consciousness is created; he names this new consciousness second nature consciousness. This optical unconsciousness recreates experiences from the external world, providing the individual with an array of new experiences to contemplate.

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1. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 95.

Chapter 2, "Soviet Film: The Giant Laboratory of Technological Innervation," focuses on Soviet cinema. Benjamin first visited Moscow in December 1926 when he visited his lover, Asja Lacis. The trip would inspire numerous essays, including "The Present Situation of Russian Film" (1927), "A Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," and "Moscow Diary." These essays had a major influence on Benjamin's "Author as Producer" (1934) and his famous *Work of Art*. During his visit to Moscow, Benjamin recognized the Soviet governments proactive approach to technology – which, as Mourenza notes, began in 1918 with Vladimir Lenin and later Leon Trotsky, who had organised a conference on Taylorism. This interest in technology by the Soviet State led to their cinefication (*Kinofikatsiia*) policy; this was a government policy that reinforced the importance of technological interaction for the wider population.

While in Moscow, Benjamin was actively engaged in the debate surrounding the shift from revolutionary to technological transformation. Though supportive of the technology side of this debate, Benjamin did hold some reservations. He refers to the science fiction writer Paul Scheerbart and argued that Russian cinema would benefit by incorporating more humour and irony into their films. For example, in his essay "On the Present Situation of Russian Film," (1927) Benjamin argued that the films produced for Soviet audiences tended to be averse to self-criticism, lack aesthetic acuity, and show a lack of attention to foreign films. Consequently, Soviet films could use a dose of the American slapstick aesthetic, like those that starred Charlie Chaplin.

In the essay "A Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927), Benjamin responded to a review the essayist and critic Oscar A. H. Schmitz had written about the Soviet film *Battleship Potemkin*. In his response, Benjamin argued that Schmitz's review was bourgeois in that he treated the film as if it were merely a book. In so

doing, Benjamin argued, Schmitz was being "tendentious" by not recognizing the differences between literature and film. As Benjamin writes, film, unlike literature, "is the first medium that makes the depiction of class movements in collective spaces possible" (102).

Chapter 3 is titled "Film and the Aesthetics of German Fascism." The motivation for this analysis is based on Germany's bungled (*Verungluckte*) reception of technology. Broadley, this is the view that Germany had wrongly interpreted the reception of technology during the time of the Weimar Republic. In other words, there was a conscious tendency of understanding cinema in terms of the politicalization of art. Mourenza's analysis of this reception focusses on several of Benjamin essays, including "Theories of German Fascism," "Experience and Poverty" (1933), and later "The Storyteller" (1935). "Theories of German Fascism" critiques the writings of Ernst Junger, a radical right-wing intellectual of the Weimar Republic. Junger was the editor of a collection of essays which would one day become the blueprint for Nazification procedures. Benjamin's analysis of Junger focuses on his essay "Total Mobilisation," which argues that social and technological progress is propelled by a Spirit (*Geist*). In so doing, Benjamin argues, Junger transposes the war theatre for the "*art pour art*" philosophy. For Junger, according to Benjamin, victory in war requires greater amounts of technological development which in turn generates greater social innervation.

Next, Mourenza discusses Benjamin's account of the "aura" of National Socialism. He notes, first, that National Socialism exploits auratic or "romantic" features of art. National Socialist propaganda finds this auratic element, i.e., "the most profane cults of beauty," in the everyday life of the nation (128). Hence, the most innocuous contexts – for example, soldiers marching or images of the setting

sun – are depicted as moments that capture a hidden yet radiant beauty. Cinema, Benjamin argues, deploys a similar auratic quality more broadly, and is evidenced in its depiction of the movie star in particular.

Mourenza returns to the essay "A Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," which outlines the major differences between Benjamin and Schmitz on the issue of the politicization of art. For Benjamin, films have an architectonic quality which clearly articulates class struggle. Whereas Schmitz sees films as ignoring the class struggle of possessing a compact mass, and a monumental quality or an ornamental aesthetic. In arguing this, Schmitz, Benjamin argues, treats art as an end in itself, thereby arriving at the politicization of art.

The films of Leni Riefenstahl – a prominent director and producer championed by the National Socialists – are also noted by Benjamin for their auratic scenes. Krakauer notes examples of these auratic scenes in her work, for example how she depicts the fall harvest, parades of workers, and even the reception of Hitler. When questioned about her style of filmmaking, Riefenstahl upheld the "*art pour art*" philosophy by insisting on the romantic view of the artist and not on the visceral impact the art might have on the audience (137). Via Benjamin's analysis, we learn that the National Socialists were interested in using film to stress the aestheticization and ritualization of the public sphere. According to the literary critic Rainer Strollman, the aestheticization of politics that Riefenstahl represents is the opposite of Benjamin's pursuits, and indeed represent Benjamin's worse fears about the use of art and film in modernity.

Chapter 4, "Charlie Chaplin: The Return of the Allegorical Mode in Modernity," examines Chaplin's relationship to technology. Benjamin agrees with a well-known magazine

on cinema, *Cahiers du cinema*, and argues that Chaplin is best understood as an auteur who is in control of his performances, and not an actor who merely follows instructions. Furthermore, Chaplin distinguishes himself in terms of *Gestus*, a term coined by Bertolt Brecht to represent cinematic fragmentation – the American actor Buster Keaton was an example of this type of attitude that the actor gives to the audience.

The final chapter, "Mickey Mouse: Utopian and Barbarian," examines the Disney character Mickey Mouse. Benjamin's writing on Mickey Mouse is found in: *Mickey Mouse* (1931), "Experience and Poverty," *Work of Art*, "The Destructive Character" (1931), and finally in his essay on "Karl Krause" (1931). Mourenza notes that Benjamin was fixated on the possibility of overcoming "the centrality of the human figure and, more importantly, individual subjectivity in bourgeois humanism" (197). Benjamin, seeing this possibility realized in the character of Mickey Mouse, described him as a barbarian, the *Unmensch*. In doing so, Benjamin argued that Mickey Mouse represented a positive incarnation of these two concepts. In short, for Benjamin, Mickey Mouse represents the union of nature and technology. This promise of technology, intermixed with the collective "*physis*," manifests a strong reaction from the audience in the form of a blanket of laughter which comes over the audience and in turn provides therapeutic comfort. This experience inside the movie theatre is summarized by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* when he discusses the nature of dreams:

> Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day – a dream that shows us its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which

> the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man.[2]

The idea of collective laughter was rejected by Theodore Adorno who viewed the theory as similar to "bourgeois sadism."[3] Yet, Benjamin remains steadfast that Mickey Mouse achieves a collective understanding, and that laughing acts as a solution for our contemporary malaise. Mickey Mouse, the friendly *Unmensch*, or barbarian, is one to be mirrored.

In conclusion, Mourenza presents a coherent analysis of Benjamin's cinema aesthetics. Even if, as the author notes, many of Benjamin's ideas on cinema are presented a touch late. For example, *Battleship Potemkin* had already been widely discussed for over a year before Benjamin's remarks; and Chaplin's films were already following a plot-centred storyline. Despite not being on the cusp of these concepts, Benjamin's breadth of analysis remains impressive. Equally impressive are Mourenza's final observations, which turn on new-media technologies and ask if new-media should be adapted to the development of second technologies. Insofar as cinema remains a contentious subject matter where opinions about its content, style, and social impact are constantly debated, Benjamin's aesthetics remains continuously relevant.

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2. Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 4 vols,* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), 734–735.
3. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 227.