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Shooting at Clocks. The Montage of Time in Modernity

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1 Introduction

1.1 The weight of time

The impetus for this master's thesis came from the observation that in contemporary art – and the discourses that accompany and shape it – there has been a proliferation of critical engagements with the issue of time. Through various strategies and slogans – from *queer* and *crip time* to non-linear narratives and the exhortation to “decolonize time” – alternative temporalities are drafted, fabulated or performatively implemented. The notion of queer time addresses how queer ways of life unfold in ways that diverge from “straight” time and the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction, emphasizing the potentiality of a life unhinged from heteronormative conventions.¹ Artists and thinkers drawing on the concept of crip time grapple with the ways in which disabled, neurodivergent or chronically ill people experience time differently than the “abled.” Through experimental video montage or multi-channel video installations, numerous artists craft non-linear narratives that not only unsettle the conventional chronology of storytelling but also reveal how “History” itself is a fragmented and disjoint formation. Artistic practices that engage with post-, anti-, or decolonial movements and discourses denounce Western modes of timekeeping as a tool and integral part of the colonial project.²

Despite the divergence in aesthetic strategies and discursive horizons that these contemporary artistic tendencies make palpable, this master's thesis argues that the critical concepts of time discussed above share a common stance: they position themselves against an allegedly neutral “time.” The time that they oppose is precisely the notion of time as unidirectionally progressive and measurable according to a universal standard, which was brought to life in modernity. The artistic expressions are symptomatic of the present-day crisis in our experience of time and an urgency to challenge and rearticulate the categories and practices that sustain this notion of temporality. It is based on these observations that I pose the research questions: How did the “time” of modernity come about? What constitutes its

¹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005, 1f.

² These different artistic and discursive tendencies were exemplified in the works of art gathered in the exhibition *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management* (Artists Space, New York, May 17-28, 2023), which I co-curated as a Curatorial Fellow of the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. For more details on the artistic practices presented in the exhibition, see the accompanying catalog, *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management*, ed. Joshua Lubin-Levy. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2023.

specificity? To what extent can aesthetic practices either reinforce or undermine a prevailing understanding of time, or produce alternative concepts of time?

Instead of focusing on the most recent critical discourses on time that permeate the contemporary art world, I will seek to answer these questions by attending to earlier philosophical attempts at understanding the time of capitalist modernity. I believe that these can shed new light on the stakes of our present. The title of my thesis, “Shooting at Clocks,” alludes to an anecdote that Walter Benjamin narrates in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (1940). The anecdote recounts how, during the second French Revolution in 1830, insurgent Parisians were shooting at clock towers to symbolically bring time to a standstill.³ I understand this iconoclastic act as an attempt to disrupt the prevailing order by undermining its representations of time. The act of shooting at clocks points us to the constitutive relationship between timekeeping devices and the ways in which time is thought and lived, whereby representations of time become a political battlefield.

An attempt to philosophically and exhaustively tackle the question of “time” might seem audacious, or even vain, given that time as an object of inquiry traverses the history of philosophy. From the Ancient Greek question of being and becoming over the Kantian pure forms of sensibility to the temporal nature of both intentional consciousness in Husserl and Heidegger’s *Dasein*, time is a central category for ontology, epistemology and phenomenology. Yet, the issue of time has received less attention within political philosophy.⁴ This is, in part, due to how the philosophical tradition has long considered time as an ahistorical and universal category, rather than examining it as a culturally and historically situated construct. The aim of this master’s thesis is to demonstrate that time is an utterly political issue. Time is a central category for political philosophy since the conception of time is instrumental to how we understand and structure our existence – both the individual and the collective.

Rather than considering time as an ahistorical, naturalized and timeless form – a tendency of the history of continental philosophy that Adorno astutely described as an “Entzeitlichung der Zeit”⁵ – my master’s thesis attends to the writings of a number of philosophers and critical theorists who, since the turn of the last century, have meditated on how time as a historical formation is instituted through social, political and aesthetic practices.

³ See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 395.

⁴ Within the field sociology, however, one finds two prominent treatments of time in modernity in Norbert Elias’ *Über die Zeit. Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II* (1984/88) and Hartmut Rosa’s *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstruktur in der Moderne* (2005).

⁵ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 6. Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2020, 326.

While this master's thesis mainly proceeds through the close reading of texts, works of art also play a decisive role for my thinking about time. It was, after all, the desire to think and live time differently made manifest in artistic practices that urged me to critically examine the formation of the time of modernity. Like my main interlocutors – Lewis Mumford, Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and Jacques Rancière – I examine how conceptions of time become effective and materialize through representations, cultural practices and art. Throughout the different chapters of the thesis, I am interested in time as a structuration of our being, perceiving and thinking in the world which, seen as such, becomes an essentially political matter.

The subtitle of my thesis, “The Montage of Time in Modernity,” historically delimits the object of my inquiry to modernity and, through the notion of “montage,” suggests that this time is composite and construed. Montage, as an artistic technique, will also be a recurrent concern. By “modernity,” I do not have in mind the modern historical or philosophical époque, but rather the periodization often used in art history, which dates its beginning to the mid-19th century. This is also the historical moment in which industrial capitalism came to be the dominant mode of production, and the century in which photography and film appeared. At the dawn of industrial and capitalist modernity, time was perceived and lived in a new way – partly due to the late 19th century introduction of new technologies such as electricity, cable cars and trains, which drastically changed the urban landscape and the perception of speed. “Time was indeed felt – as a weight, as a source of anxiety, and as an acutely pressing problem of representation. Modernity was perceived as a temporal demand,”⁶ the cinema scholar Mary Ann Doane writes of the atmosphere in bigger European cities around the *fin de siècle*. Another emblematic example is found on the other side of the Atlantic in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which portrays the clash between the speed of the assembly line – an image par excellence of industrialized society – and the tramp who cannot keep up with it. It is the way in which time comes to be experienced and thought as a *problem* that makes the period of capitalist industrial modernity of particular interest for my inquiry.

In the thesis, I will trace and critically examine the qualifications of “modern” time as *abstract, divisible, homogeneous, linear, objective* and *progressive*, and attend to how this temporality has been represented, notably in cinema and other forms of culture in the age of capitalist modernity. Rather than developing a single, progressive argument, the thesis unfolds

⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time. Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2002, 4.

following an essayistic logic. In the three chapters that make up the main section of the thesis, different and completing philosophical investigations of the historical emergence and diverse manifestations of the modern conception of time as well as critiques of its ideological underpinnings are assembled in a montage.

1.2 Chapter overview

Following this introduction, the second chapter of the thesis, “Clock time,”⁷ examines Lewis Mumford’s genealogical account of the clock from its inception in the monastic routine to its use in capitalist society (2.1.1 & 2.1.3) and Karl Marx’s account of the relation between time, labor and value in the capitalist economy (2.1.2). Furthermore, I elucidate different types of temporal regimentation – the standardization of time (2.2.1), temporal discipline of the laboring body (2.2.2) and the logic of timesaving (2.2.3) in a discussion with various contemporary critical theorists and works of art. After an account of Henri Bergson’s critique of the tendency to spatialize time (2.4), I propose a reading of Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” – a text which prolongs the critique of clock time by imagining how its “homogeneous, empty time”⁸ can be interrupted – and foreground the messianic and revolutionary historical temporality that Benjamin proposes in its stead (2.5).

The third chapter, “Hegemonic temporality, the ‘culture industry’ and the work of art,” concentrates on the relationship between the dominant conception of time, time consciousness and the structuration of time in works of art and culture. The central question that I am raising is whether the treatment of time in works of art can reinforce or subvert a hegemonic temporal order. The point of departure for this inquiry is a passage in Theodor W. Adorno’s “The Schema of Mass Culture” (1942), in which he laments the dissolving boundary between culture and practical life (3.3), whereby the temporal structures of the products of culture industry intertwine with the historical, social and technical conditions of lived experience (3.5.4). I will elucidate Adorno’s claim that works of “mass culture” replicate a time without history (*geschichtslos*), a time that reproduces the “selfsame” (*Immergleiches*) through time akin to the

⁷ The chapter “Clock time” further elaborates on certain arguments that I developed in a catalog essay written during my curatorial fellowship at the Whitney Independent Study Program (see Johanna Thorell, “Measures of Time: Countering the Clock, Troubling the Timeline,” in *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management*, ed. Joshua Lubin-Levy. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2023, pp. 43-55). Whereas that essay centered on artistic engagements with timekeeping devices – notably Finnegan Shannon’s estrangement of the clock and Gerard & Kelly’s subversion of the timeline – this chapter rather investigates the cultural history of timekeeping and its philosophical underpinnings.

⁸ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

repetition in industrial production, thereby being the “very allegory of high capitalism,”⁹ as he critically writes of the variety theatre (3.4). Adorno’s pessimistic view on the “true impotence of art in relation to society today”¹⁰ will be contrasted with Benjamin’s more optimistic stance toward epic theatre and the politicization of film as an art capable of endowing the masses with awareness and agency (3.5).

The fourth chapter, “Disrupted narratives,” centers on the idiosyncratic conception of time and analyses of cinematic temporalities that Jacques Rancière puts forth in *Les temps modernes. Art, temps, politique* (2018). First, I will account for Rancière’s understanding of time as a hierarchical distribution of life forms – two different ways of inhabiting time – and his claim that this hierarchy of times is rooted in the conventions of storytelling that Aristotle outlined in *Poetics* (4.2.1). I will examine how this concept of time forms the basis of the narrative of modern history and historical progress (4.2.2), but also how alternative narrative forms and what Rancière calls the “power of the moment” can bring about a dehierarchization of time (4.2.3). Second, I will attend to Rancière’s comparison of different cinematic treatments of time in three films by Dziga Vertov (4.3.1), John Ford (4.3.2) and Pedro Costa (4.3.3) whose montage of temporalities, to different extents, interrupts the progression of narrative. Having foregrounded the “ghostly” and the “living dead” that appear in Rancière’s interpretation of the films of Ford and Costa, I will bring Jacques Derrida’s notions of the specter and the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present”¹¹ into a closing discussion, elucidating how the cinematic disjunction of times acts as a forceful aesthetic critique of the narrative of historical progress (4.3.4).

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein. London & New York: Routledge, 1991, 70.

¹⁰ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 63.

¹¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994, xviii.

2 Clock time

Horloge ! dieu sinistre, effrayant, impassible,
Dont le doigt nous menace [...]¹²

The clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the modern industrial age.¹³

2.1 From the monastic routine to capitalist society

2.1.1 Lewis Mumford's genealogy of the clock

A genealogical account of the time of modernity could have many beginnings. In this chapter, I will trace the advent of this temporal formation through the clock as one of its most prominent representations and technologies. Today, our temporal orientation around the standardized twelve-hour clock has become so naturalized and structuring of everyday life that one easily overlooks that its emplacement was a century-long process. Many of the timekeeping devices that we carry around or are surrounded by do not emit any audible or visible tick, yet we live at a cadence dictated by the clock. The rhythm and timbre of the measurable and standardized time that the clock embodies is by now second nature, a deeply ingrained habit. Starting from the observation that clock time is not a given but much rather a historical and cultural construct, this chapter asks: How, why and when were the habits of a life calibrated to clock time forged? This nexus of questions is but one of many that the public intellectual and architecture critic Lewis Mumford sought to answer in *Technics and Civilization* (1934), a seminal account of the development of the machine, wherein he ascribes the clock and the practice of timekeeping a pivotal role in the formation of Western capitalist society.¹⁴

To unpack Mumford's theorizing about the clock, I will begin by situating it in relation to some of the central objectives and assumptions of the book at large. The inquiry into the history of the machine brings Mumford to preface his project with a reconsideration of the standard narrative of the advent of modern, industrial civilization. While the onset of the

¹² Charles Baudelaire, "L'Horloge," in *Les Fleurs du mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 2015, 113.

¹³ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*. London: Routledge, 1934, 14.

¹⁴ *Technics and Civilization* is a fascinating and erudite piece of cultural history of technology that privileges speculation over the approach of conventional historians who would evidence their claims with concrete examples and historical sources. Mumford's interest in developing an overarching theoretical argument rather than a demonstration of historical facts is wittily crystallized when he writes: "But the legend [of the first modern mechanical clock], as so often happens, is accurate in its implications if not in its facts" (Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13).

“Machine Age” has generally been dated to the invention of the steam engine or the application of automatic machinery in textile industry in the 18th century, Mumford contends that

in Western Europe the machine had been developing steadily for at least seven centuries before the dramatic changes that accompanied the ‘industrial revolution’ took place. Men had become mechanical before they perfected complicated machines to express their new bent and interest.¹⁵

Furthermore, he specifies that “Before the new industrial process could take hold on a great scale, a reorientation of wishes, habits, ideas, goals was necessary.”¹⁶ With the use of *before* in both above-quoted passages, emphasis is put on a relation of antecedency, wherein a shift in human disposition precedes the technological development. The “becoming mechanical” or “reorientation” are not merely described as temporally preceding, but as a necessary condition for the industrial process. It corresponds to a “preliminary period of ideological and social preparation” which made people desirous and ready to use new mechanical instruments.¹⁷ Both claims amount to a critique of what Mumford sees as a widespread tendency to “attribute to the physical instrument itself the whole complex of habits and methods that created it and accompanied it.”¹⁸ Quite the contrary, Mumford holds that it is from a certain human disposition that a new machine is brought forth and put into use – not the other way around.

Another preliminary argument that Mumford puts forth concerns the extension of the machine’s reach in Western societies. Noting that neither mechanization nor regimentation are new phenomena, he argues that “what is new is the fact that these functions have been projected and embodied in organized forms which dominate every aspect of our existence.”¹⁹ Other civilizations – the Greek, the Arab and the Chinese, to mention only a few that appear in Mumford’s examples – developed a high technical proficiency and several machines long before the Northern European did. What demarcates the Northern European (*qua* Western) civilization, however, is that it came to “adapt the whole mode of life to the pace and the capacities of the machine.”²⁰ From the very outset of *Technics and Civilization*, the description of the European “mode of life” as subsumed to the rhythm of the machine thus echoes Mumford’s recurrent observation of a “becoming mechanical.” Both expressions voice how

¹⁵ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 3.

¹⁶ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 3.

¹⁷ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 4.

¹⁸ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 9.

¹⁹ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 4.

²⁰ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 4.

mechanization does not *per se* tend toward the emancipation of human beings, but much rather toward their increased servitude to the machine.

Rejecting the notion of any single point of origin, Mumford begins his revisited history of mechanical civilization in the manifestation of a new order in the general world view, which is tied to a shifting understanding of categories of time and space. Without giving any concrete historical example in which this general paradigm shift was instantiated, he hones in on the question of time and states that “The application of quantitative methods of thought to the study of nature had its first manifestation in the regular measurement of time; and the new mechanical conception of time arose in part out of the routine of the monastery.”²¹ What is noteworthy about this claim is that Mumford diagnosticated the emergence of a new conception of time qualified as “mechanical” long before the first mechanical clock actually occurred. This claim attests to Mumford’s general stance that the invention of a machine follows from a reorientation in habits, desires and ideas – in this case the monastic “routine.” It also invites to reflect upon the ambiguity of the adjective “mechanical,” which may describe either a device that is operated by a machine or, in the figurative sense, an action that is automatic or done without thinking. What made the conception of time “mechanical” did, in my view, not merely reside in the invention of timekeeping devices operated by a machine. The mechanical just as much speaks to a shift in the perception of time where the temporal measure – such as the punctuation spelled out by a ringing bell – came to appear as automatic, *as if* given. The nascent regulation of time slips into the domain of structures that are constantly upheld, although their very upholding passes unnoticed.

Mumford links the orientation of mind in Western monasteries at the dawn of the Middle Ages to a “desire for order and power” that he, in turn, posits as a response to the “uncertainty and bloody confusion” that had followed the fall of the Roman Empire.²² Against the doubt and unpredictability that reigned in the outside world, monastic life was led “under the rule of order.”²³ To exemplify the “regular measurement of time” in the monastic routine, Mumford alludes to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* – a sixth century book of precepts that sought to organize the monastic day into regular periods of communal or private prayer, reading, sleep, and labor – as well as Pope Sabinian’s seventh century decree to have the bells of the monastery rung seven times a day – later referred to as the canonical hours – marking the time for prayer

²¹ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 12.

²² Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13.

²³ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13.

at regular intervals.²⁴ Reiterating his overarching argument that the social milieu fuels technical development, Mumford contends that an instrument for striking the bells and one for remembering to do so were the “inevitable product” of monastic life.²⁵

It is in this practice of comprehensive regulation of time-sequences in the monastic routine that Mumford, at least in part, sees the cradle of capitalism. Similar hypotheses have already been put forth by others, which Mumford acknowledges in allusions to George Gordon Coulton and Werner Sombart, whose work in medieval history and the history of capitalism, respectively, both saw the Benedictines as the “founders of modern capitalism” with regards to the working order they established.²⁶ The great working order of the monasteries not only compartmentalized the day into sequences dedicated to different activities, but the punctuation of the day marked by the ringing bell also prescribed a shared cadence. The monasteries, in Mumford’s words, “helped to give human enterprise the regular collective beat and rhythm of the machine; for the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours, but of synchronizing the actions of men.”²⁷ Rather than evoking the monasteries, this description of human activity akin to a machine brings to mind an imagery of the synchronized movements of factory workers at the dawn of industrial capitalism.

The etymology of the English word “clock,” which derives from *clocca*, Medieval Latin for “bell,” suggests a continuity between the clock and the earlier timekeeping practices of bell ringing. Technologically speaking, the mechanical clocks were first created following the invention of the “verge escapement with foliot” which has been dated to the second half of the thirteenth century.²⁸ This invention marks a significant technological shift in the history of timekeeping, from the measuring of continuous process to the measuring of an oscillatory process:

In the water clock, the time-keeping is governed by the rate of the flow of water through a hole, and the regulating device is simply the hole through which the water flows. In the mechanical clock, the time-keeping is governed by an oscillator or escapement which controls the unidirectional movement of the

²⁴ Cf. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13.

²⁵ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13.

²⁶ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13.

²⁷ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 13f.

²⁸ Cf. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Clocks and Culture 1300-1700*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, 39. The escapement is the mechanism within the clock that controls its rate by letting a wheel train with teeth advance at a regular interval. In the alternation between the release and arrest of the wheel’s movement, it is the stopping of one of its teeth that gives rise to the ticking sound. For a thorough account of how the escapement functions, see Cipolla, *Clocks and Culture 1300-1700*, 111ff.

motive power and transforms it into a slow, steady and regular motion whose meaning appears on the face of the clock.²⁹

Whereas the liquid in the water clock could freeze, and the sundial required sunlight, the mechanical clock knew no meteorological limits: “summer or winter, day or night, one was aware of the measured clank of the clock.”³⁰ The introduction of the clock arguably brought about two significant shifts. First, the mechanical clock presented itself as self-sufficient machine, insofar as its mechanism no longer depended on the measuring of exterior phenomenon such as the flow of water or the movement of the celestial bodies. Second, and following from the first, the unlimited availability of time-telling paved the way for an amplified awareness of time.

How, according to Mumford, did the new timekeeping technology that spread in Medieval Europe concretely transform ways of relating to time? Bell towers either struck the hours or, by the fourteenth century, had dials with one hand indicating the time.³¹ When this visual component was added to the auditive signal, people no longer only *occasionally* knew what time it was as the bell rang; they could *constantly* tell time by reading the clock face. From the initial incentive to occasionally synchronize individuals for punctual actions such as worship, the practice of timekeeping developed into a constant demand for synchronicity, to always be *in* and *on* time:

The regular striking of the bells brought a new regularity into the life of the workman and the merchant. The bells of the clock tower almost defined urban existence. Time-keeping passed into time-serving and time-accounting and time-rationing. Eternity ceased gradually to serve as the measure and focus of human actions.³²

Mumford presents it as a paradox that the habits of timekeeping, which initially developed out of a religious desire to “provide for the welfare of souls in eternity by regular prayers and devotion,” would later be perfectly integrated in the workings of capitalist society.³³ Rather

²⁹ Cipolla, *Clocks and Culture 1300-1700*, 39.

³⁰ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14. In Mumford’s account, the clock is depicted as quasi unlimited in its application and function. Yet he fails to address the fact that early clocks were often inaccurate and out of synch, especially before tools for clock coordination had been invented, that is, systems where a “master clock” – called *primäre Hauptuhr* in German and *horloge-mère* in French – sent out signals to a network of secondary clocks, sometimes tellingly referred to as slave clocks (Cf. Peter Galison, *Einsteins Uhren, Poincarés Karten. Die Arbeit an der Ordnung der Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006, 28).

³¹ Cf. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14.

³² Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14.

³³ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14.

than a paradox, it would seem like an ironical fate – or perhaps even more accurate to speak of a *Zweckentfremdung* – in so far as the initial purpose of keeping time has become completely estranged as the practice developed. The paradoxical shift in the motivation to keep time becomes utterly flagrant if we compare a day of religious routine to one of wage labor. Instead of keeping track of time to perform tasks and rituals as part of the quest for eternal reward received in heaven, one measures the time spent on labor in order to trade it for a pecuniary reward: the wage. A brief excursion into Marx's writings allows to show how the capitalist economy, wherein wage-labor forms a cornerstone, necessitates the measuring of time.

2.1.2 A Marxian excursion: time, value, labor

One way of approaching the issue of time in capitalism is to consider the role it plays for the possibility of commodity exchange. For commodities to be exchanged, there must be an equivalence of value. How can – borrowing an example from Marx – one quarter of corn be exchanged for x hundredweight of iron? How can two commodities have the same exchange-value? For Marx, the fact that a given quantity of corn can be equated to a given quantity of iron “signifies that a common element of identical magnitude exists in two different things, in 1 quarter of corn and similarly in x [hundredweight] of iron. Both are therefore equal to a third thing, which in itself is neither the one nor the other.”³⁴ The exchange relation of commodities does not depend on their use-values. Rather, this third thing to which different commodities are reducible is the property of “being products of labour.”³⁵ Yet, it is not the concrete forms of labor that produce different use-values, but “human labour in the abstract.” Abstraction made of the use-values, “there is nothing left in [the products of labour] but the same phantom-like objectivity: they are merely congealed quantities of homogenous human labour, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure.”³⁶

If a commodity acquires a value through the abstract labor that is objectified in it, how is the quantity of the expended human labor-power measured? This is where the issue of time enters the picture since, as Marx notes, the quantity of labor contained in a product is “measured by its duration, and the labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days etc.”³⁷ Within the capitalist economy, labor-power not merely functions as an equal to the

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth & London: Penguin Books & New Left Review, 1976, 127.

³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 128.

³⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 128.

³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 129.

exchange-value of commodities, it is a commodity in itself, which workers must sell to the capitalists in order to sustain themselves. Elsewhere, Marx asserts that labor-power “is a commodity, no more, no less so than is the sugar. The first is measured by the clock, the other by the scales.”³⁸

In the capitalist constellation between time, labor and value, it would be wrong to say that labor-time is commodified. As a measurement of labor, time is much rather the condition of commodification of labor. The philosopher Peter Osborne makes clear that “It is labour-power that is commodified – producing abstract labour – with its average socially necessary form measured out in chronological time.”³⁹ Osborne emphasizes the fact that, in Marx’s critical account of the capitalist economy, it is not the actual time that a worker spends on the production of a commodity that defines its value, but the socially necessary labor-time (*gesellschaftlich notwendige Arbeitszeit*). “Socially necessary labour-time,” in Marx’s words, “is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society.”⁴⁰ Put differently, exchange values are produced through “abstract” human labor, which is “abstract” to the extent that it is reduced to quantitative units of socially necessary labor-time.⁴¹

Time also plays a central role in capitalist exploitation. The exploitation occurs when the capitalist makes a profit by extracting surplus-value from the worker, for instance by paying workers a wage for their workday that only represents a portion of the value they effectively produced during their shift. Despite the fact that capitalist profitmaking revolves around this exploitative organization of workers’ labor-time, Marx notes how – from the point of view of the capitalist – the workers would be stealing time if they do not exclusively work during their shift: “If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs time from the capitalist.”⁴² Marx’s critique of political economy contains a trenchant critique of the capitalist orchestration of time. It is, essentially, an economy of time wherein the majority of people, who must sell their labor-power in order to survive, are compelled to work and create value that partly – or wholly – benefits a few others, the capitalists, who have the temporal luxury of not working.

³⁸ Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital*. New York: International Publishers, 1934, 17.

³⁹ Peter Osborne, “Marx and the Philosophy of Time,” in *Radical Philosophy* 147, 2008, 18, italics in original.

⁴⁰ Cf. Marx, *Capital*, 129.

⁴¹ Cf. Osborne, “Marx and the Philosophy of Time,” 19.

⁴² Marx, *Capital*, 342.

2.1.3 The clock as the “key machine of the modern industrial age”

Clock time not only furnished a measure for labor-time and radically altered personal and collective practices of timekeeping. It also revolutionized industrial production to an extent which brought Mumford to argue that “The clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the modern industrial age.”⁴³ What made the clock and its technological features so groundbreaking for all industrial activity was that it enabled a “regular production and a standardized product.”⁴⁴ Regardless how and what was being produced, the sheer possibility of a precise regimentation of time altered the conditions of production. “In its relationship to determinable quantities of energy, to standardization, to automatic action, and finally to its own special product, accurate timing, the clock has been the foremost machine in modern technics.”⁴⁵

Put into service of industrial production, the clock above all appears as a tool for measuring and regulating other processes. Yet, accurate timing is not the only thing the clock produces. Seconds and minutes, too, can be considered products of the clock. Even if the division of time into the categories of hours, minutes and seconds predates the mechanical clock, I want to argue that clock technology does not merely mark the passing of hours, minutes and seconds as natural entities, it *performatively* brings them forth as measures of time that, in turn, come to structure our ways of life. Whereas the year, month and day are abstractions of the movement of the earth, it is worth mentioning that hours, minutes and seconds, which we have come to take for granted, are completely arbitrary entities. Mumford argues that seconds and minutes, as the “product” of the clock, “dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science.”⁴⁶

The contrast between the “given” and the socially and culturally instituted also comes to the fore when Mumford ponders upon the unbridgeable gap between the fluctuating time of human experience and the ever-regular time of the mechanical clock. Mechanical time is at odds with all the variations intrinsic to both astrological and bodily rhythms. Whereas the length of days steadily changes throughout the year and the solar time differs when one moves west or east, clock time always remains the same – this is the difference between “apparent time” and “mean time,” which refers to an average. In the uniform time of the clock, each unit

⁴³ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14.

⁴⁴ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 15.

⁴⁵ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 15.

⁴⁶ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 15.

of time is essentially fungible, each second is virtually identical with another.⁴⁷ Altered by excitement or rest, our pulse and breathing also vary throughout the day and is odds with the ever-same tick of the clock. As Mumford points out, daily undertakings and habits are increasingly regimented by the clock, to the degree that even eating and sleeping take place when it is prompted or sanctioned by the clock, rather than out of bodily needs.⁴⁸

The regime of the clock is so pervasive that “abstract time became the new medium of existence.”⁴⁹ Time is “abstract” insofar as it is dissociated from concrete experiences. Using the term “medium,” Mumford pictures abstract time as an environment in which we lead our existence. Thought in terms of a medium, time becomes an enveloping substance that we are existing in – thus exterior to us – rather than a feature of interiority.

2.2 Temporal regimentations

2.2.1 The standardization of time

The history of clock time is inextricably linked with the adoption of a world standard time. Materially and technologically speaking, it was the expansion of transportation and communication networks on an international and global scale that instilled the need for, and later the imposition of, a synchronized timekeeping in lieu of a multiplicity of concurrent chronometric systems. This process was, for instance, instigated by the North American railroad companies who, in 1883, introduced four time zones to put an end to the logistic confusion of dealing with thousands of local times at a time when most US cities still set their clocks locally to the movement of the sun. Another pivotal moment was the implementation of a “world standard time” by the International Meridian Conference in Washington D.C. in 1884, whereby the zero meridian was chosen, and the earth was split into twenty-four time zones. For the users of world standard time, it was no longer the position of the local sun at zenith that decided that it was midday but the clock at the Greenwich Observatory in London, which sent signals across the globe via submarine, telegraphic cables.⁵⁰

The standardization of time was met with objection among both urban elites, rural workers, and people whose local solar time or other timekeeping practices were at odds with

⁴⁷ The adjective “fungible” denotes that something is replaceable by another identical item, or a thing of equal value or utility. For example, money is essentially fungible: a ten-euro note is interchangeable with any other note of the same denomination.

⁴⁸ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 17.

⁴⁹ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 15.

⁵⁰ Cf. Galison, *Einsteins Uhren, Poincarés Karten*, 304.

standardized time.⁵¹ Protests against an imposed standard of time certainly arise in response to the uprooting of customs. Yet the refusal to adopt a novel metrics of time can also be understood as a resistance to the exercise of power that the imposition of a new temporal standard make manifest. Even without the imposition of a *new* standard, a long-standing temporal order may become the symbol of a hegemonic regime, whereby strategies of rearticulating and disarticulating time become central in the practical or symbolical overcoming of the current order of things. For instance, following the French Revolution, there was an attempt to discard the twelve-hour clock system in favor of “decimal time.” Also described as “revolutionary time,” the short-lived metrics of decimal time had ten hours per day, with hundred minutes per hour, and hundred seconds per minute.

In a short essay titled “The Refusal of Time,” the historian Peter Galison recounts how a French anarchist attempted to blow up the meridian.⁵² In early 1894, Martial Bourdin – a young refugee anarchist who was associated with an anarchist network in London – made his way toward the Greenwich Observatory with a self-built bomb. Yet, the bomb went off too early and he was found mortally wounded in the park of the observatory, killed by the assault that was aimed at the heart of globally synchronized time.

Artists, too, have deployed different strategies to subvert the standardization of time. One notable example is the work of Rasheedah Phillips, who together with Camae Ayewa form the Philadelphia-based collective Black Quantum Futurism. As part of her exhibition at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in the spring of 2022, Phillips organized the *Prime Meridian Unconference*, an event that explored the repercussions of the 1884 International Meridian Conference and the ensuing enforcing of a universal time standard. The organizer of the exhibition and the *Unconference* succinctly described the artist’s project in the following terms:

Tracing the ‘Protocols of the Proceedings,’ the written and unwritten political agendas and social agreements that underlie Westernized time constructs, Phillips examines the protocols by which dominant time structures regulate, catalyze, and perpetuate systems of oppression that deny marginalized people access to and agency over the temporal domains of the past and present, with a focus on Black communities in the US.⁵³

⁵¹ Ryan Gurney & Bliss Cua Lim, “The Culture of Time: An Interview with Bliss Cua Lim,” in *Octopus*, June 15, 2011.

⁵² Peter Galison, “The Refusal of Time,” in William Kentridge. *The Refusal of Time*. Paris: Editions Xavier Barral, 2012, 30.

⁵³ See Vera List Center, *Prime Meridian Unconference*. Apr 15–Apr 17, 2022, 2022, <https://veralistcenter.org/events/prime-meridian-unconference> (Accessed 2024-10-11).

In recent years, the “un-” has become a buzzword – or, in this case, a buzz-prefix – in academic and art-world parlance alike.⁵⁴ In everyday language, “to undo” means to untie, loosen or unfasten something, like a knot or one’s shoelaces. To undo is also to reverse or cancel the outcome or effects of a previous “doing.” Both meanings come together in Phillips’ striving toward temporal liberation from the Western time construct and the reparation of past injustices that have been carried out in the name of that construct. Drawing on discourses of Afrofuturism and Black Studies, the *Prime Meridian Unconference* wants to manifest how the imposition of Westernized time has caused and perpetuated systemic oppression, “denying Black communities access and agency over the temporal domains of the past, present, and future.”⁵⁵ What this anti-colonial practice foregrounds, is that colonization and imperialism cannot merely be regarded as territorial phenomena, for they also have a just as violent repercussion on the temporal orders that structure our ways of life.

2.2.2 Time-discipline and the laboring body

Through Mumford’s account, I have shown what importance clock time had for industrial activity in ensuring the regularity of production. Yet, clock technology was not merely applied to other machines, it was also used to regulate workers’ bodies. The clock’s relationship to labor can be regarded as paradigmatic of the machine in Western civilization in so far as the machine has not saved mankind from “servitude to ignoble forms of work,” but rather served the continuation or intensification of exploitative working conditions.⁵⁶ As a machine, the clock not only tethered individuals to a constant timeserving, but it also made their labor performance more controllable. In *Translating Time* (2009), film and media scholar Bliss Cua Lim observes that, for workers, the technology of timekeeping was from the very outset “experienced and resisted as a form of time-discipline, a means of controlling and standardizing the regularity, intensity, and length of periods of labor and intervals of leisure.”⁵⁷ The rise of labor regimes informed by precise time regimentation coincided with, and further fueled, the upsurge of factory and workshop discipline. Clock technology was used to mark when workers arrived

⁵⁴ The upsurge in the use of *unlearning*, *unthinking* and *undoing* comes to mind, but also book titles such as Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2015) and Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (2004).

⁵⁵ Time Zone Protocols, *Prime Meridian Unconference*, 2022. <https://timezoneprotocols.space> (Accessed 2024-10-11).

⁵⁶ Cf. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 105f.

⁵⁷ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, 10.

and left the workplace, for instance by means of so-called punch clocks with paper cards. Such semi-analogue machines through which workers themselves actively clock in and out are still in use, although many workplaces nowadays use digital devices that record the arrival and departure of their employees.

Beyond the supervision of the temporal outlines of the working shift, clock technology eventually came to pervade the labor tasks themselves as it was employed to measure the worker's performance in the execution of specific movements. The surveillance and management of the laboring body often involved the use of film and photography. Such temporal discipline is one of the central concerns of Kajsa Dahlberg's video *Reach, Grasp, Move, Position, Apply Force* (2015). In the video, the artist intersperses archival footage of early movement analysis with new footage of modern-day workers and interviews that attest to how film, since its early days, has been utilized to scrutinize and improve bodily movements. In a documentary vein and without any explanatory voice-over, Dahlberg's montage of early motion studies and the present-day evaluation of workers' efficiency with the so-called Methods-Time Measurement system (MTM) displays how film recordings of the body are compared to a normative measure of time spent on specific tasks.⁵⁸ *Reach, Grasp, Move, Position, Apply Force* playfully denounces how the camera itself performs as a "clock for seeing,"⁵⁹ by means of which manual labor can be captured, divided into minimal components, and studied to be rendered more efficient. Foregrounding the role of timekeeping in capitalist production and labor organization, Dahlberg's video – just as Mumford's analysis – suggests that any critique of capitalism must examine capitalism not primarily in terms of a shift in the mode of production but just as much as a new regimentation of time.

2.2.3 Timesaving and the pressure of speed

Despite the occurrence of manifold technological and ideological shifts in the ninety years that separates today from the publication of *Technics and Civilization*, Mumford's critical depiction of the habits around clock time remains utterly relevant. His insight that the divisibility and measurability of (clock) time paved the way for an economic stance to time – the habit of

⁵⁸ Developed in the United States in the 1940s, the Methods-Time Measurement system is used to study the methods applied and time spent by workers when they perform different manual tasks and to define a general time standard within which workers should perform the task.

⁵⁹ The phrasing "clocks for seeing" is borrowed from Roland Barthes who – in his reflection on photography that centers the relation to temporality – used this poetic formulation to describe the tick-like mechanical click emitted by the camera when the shutter goes off (see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, 15).

“saving time”⁶⁰ – particularly resonates with today’s imperative strive toward an efficient use of one’s time. From the onset of industrial modernity to neoliberal capitalism, the pace of life has inexorably increased. The pressure of speed that appears as a symptomatic, if not intrinsic feature of “modernity” is also experienced as a shortage of time. Despite the proliferation of new technologies that should help us liberating time that we spend on work or other daily undertakings, one still experiences a deficit of time. In a book dedicated to the phenomenon of acceleration, the German sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa points to the tremendous paradox that this development presents: “Wir haben keine Zeit, obwohl wir sie im Überfluss gewinnen.”⁶¹ The list of things one sets out to accomplish or is expected to do grows faster than the capacity to invent new tools for so-called “timesaving.”

In neoliberal capitalism, most people suffer from the pressure of speed inflicted by the capitalist drive to increase productivity and the accumulation of value. It is noteworthy that many individuals deliberately subject themselves to temporal discipline by using ever-new techniques of time-management to cope with the demand for increased efficiency. Time-management is ultimately a highly ambivalent form of “self-government” or a “technology of the self,”⁶² whereby supposedly emancipatory tools partake in the submission to a harmful temporal regime. As a practice of submitting oneself to the regime of the clock, timekeeping combines what Foucault called “technologies of power” and “technologies of the self.”⁶³ Whereas technologies of power “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination,” the technologies of the self

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Cf. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 17.

⁶¹ “‘Das Tempo des Lebens hat zugenommen’ und mit ihm Stress, Hektik und Zeitnot, so hört man allerorten klagen – *obwohl* wir [...] auf nahezu allen Gebieten des sozialen Lebens mithilfe der Technik enorme Zeitgewinne durch Beschleunigung verzeichnen können. *Wir haben keine Zeit, obwohl wir sie im Überfluss gewinnen*” (Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005, 11).

⁶² Cf. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton & Luther H. Martin. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, pp. 16-49. Foucault began his work on the “technologies of the self” in an inquiry on Ancient Greek practices of *epimeleia heautou* which – like *souci de soi* that Foucault uses in the French – can be translated as “care for oneself, concern with oneself” in English. Through the study of different technologies of the self, Foucault sought to examine how the “self” constitutes itself as a subject through different operations on their bodies, thinking, conducts and ways of being.

⁶³ Foucault made a distinction between four different types of technologies – technologies of production, of sign systems, of power and of the self – but maintained that they rarely function separately (Cf. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 18).

⁶⁴ Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 18.

Today, the efficient management of one's own time is presented as an indispensable "technology" in the neoliberal striving toward self-optimization and even marketed as a means of greater happiness and perfection. Yet it ultimately determines our conduct in a way that serve the ends of the capitalist system. In my estimation, present-day habits of personal time-management illustrate how one's relation to oneself is permeated by neoliberal forms of domination.

The imperative to optimize one's time is no longer limited to the sphere of work time, it has also given rise to behaviors that seek to enhance social time and rest. For the "entrepreneurial self," time is akin to an asset that one can invest and manage.⁶⁵ In line with what the art critic and theorist Jonathan Crary diagnoses of the "relentless financialization of previously autonomous spheres of social activity,"⁶⁶ an acute awareness of how time is "spent" encroaches on one's supposedly free or spare time. For freelancers or others with precarious working conditions or deregulated working hours, all time becomes potential work time. In his seminal essay *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Crary critically notes the dissolution of boundaries between work and non-work time brought about by the increased "temporal alignment" of the individual with the relentless workings of the financial market. Crary also shows how today's permanently operating communication and circulation networks have made possible a "broader and much fuller integration of the human subject with the 'constant continuity' of a 24/7 capitalism."⁶⁷ The imperative to do more, better, and faster permeates almost all spheres of our life with detrimental effects on both physical and mental well-being. Crary painstakingly depicts an anxious world, a world wherein seconds are subdivided at an almost molecular level to the benefit of capitalist accumulation.

2.3 Spatialization of time: Henri Bergson and *durée*

Across Mumford's musings on the clock, one finds a handful of critical observations wherein clock time is described in spatial terms. For instance, when people began to conceive of time as a collection of hours, minutes and seconds rather than a continuous flux of experiences, "time took on the character of enclosed space: it could be divided, it could be filled up, it could

⁶⁵ Cf. Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst. Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London & New York: Verso, 2013, 74.

⁶⁷ Crary, *24/7*, 74.

even be expanded by the invention of labor-saving instruments.”⁶⁸ Here, emphasis is put not only on the *divisibility* that the metrics of the clock furnishes time with, but also on how time comes to be perceived as an *container* that is *extensible* – three characteristics which pertain to space. Elsewhere, Mumford notes how the hand of the clock dial “translated the movement of time into a movement through space.”⁶⁹ Put differently, the flux of time is rendered in the abstraction of a line that the clock hand draws in space.

Arguably more deeply rooted than the entities of time enacted by the clock is the conception of time as *linear*. The habit of thinking time as a line also comes to the fore in colloquial expressions of many Western languages, wherein spatial distances are measured in terms of time (e.g., “the station is five minutes away”) and the past is referred to as situated “behind” us whereas the future lies “ahead.” Both visual and linguistic descriptions of time often resort to the spatial mediation of the line. The art and literature theorist W.J.T. Mitchell somewhat provocatively deemed it an inevitable fact that “spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot ‘tell time’ without the mediation of space.”⁷⁰ Yet, such an adamant stance prompts the question: Is it necessarily the case that one cannot perceive time outside of spatial forms? Or is this alleged fact not rather symptomatic of the fact that our historically and culturally contingent representations of time heavily shape the perception of time itself?

This is precisely one of the concerns addressed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson who, in his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), famously denounced a tendency to “project time into space” at play in mathematics, physics and ordinary representations of time.⁷¹ Bergson begins his inquiry into the deep-seated confusion of time and space by attending to the concept of number and the difference between two kinds of multiplicity, “that of material objects, to which the conception of number is immediately applicable; and the multiplicity of states of consciousness, which cannot be regarded as numerical without the help of some symbolical representation, in which a necessary element is *space*.”⁷² A number is a “collection of units,” a unity that covers a “multiplicity of parts which can be considered separately.”⁷³ Inscribed in the idea of number, Bergson claims, is that

⁶⁸ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 17.

⁶⁹ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14.

⁷⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory,” in *Critical Inquiry* 6(3), 1980, 542.

⁷¹ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910, 101.

⁷² Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, italics in the original, 87.

⁷³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 75, 76.

its parts can be juxtaposed in space.⁷⁴ Where material objects have clear contours and can be enumerated, the multiplicity of psychic states – feelings, sensations, ideas – permeate each other and can only be counted through an act of thought that “represent them by homogeneous units which occupy separate positions in space and consequently no longer permeate one another.”⁷⁵

Bergson is concerned with the ways in which the spatializing tendency of “reflective consciousness” influences our states of consciousness, endowing them with a “new form, which immediate perception did not attribute to them.”⁷⁶ This is where the perception of time enters the discussion as Bergson notes that “when we speak of *time*, we generally think of a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space, so as to form a discrete multiplicity,” a conception that is fundamentally untrue to the immediate experience of time.⁷⁷

For if time, as the reflective consciousness represents it, is a medium in which our conscious states form a discrete series so as to admit of being counted, and if on the other hand our conception of number ends in spreading out in space everything which can be directly counted, it is to be presumed that time, understood in the sense of a medium in which we make distinctions and count, is nothing but space. That which goes to confirm this opinion is that we are compelled to borrow from space the images by which we describe what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession; it follows that pure duration must be something different.⁷⁸

Against the reflective consciousness tendency to represent time in terms of space, Bergson takes pain to show that our experience of time, which he names duration (*durée*), is a “succession without distinction” of heterogeneous states of consciousness that permeate each other.⁷⁹ Bergson illustrates this succession without distinction with the experience of listening to the sound of hour striking on a bell, where the successive strokes – like notes of a tune – melt into one another and form a qualitative, evolving whole. Yet, as he later shows, one can also listen to the striking bell with a reflexive attitude, dissect the musical phrase and count each stroke of the bell as isolated occurrences.⁸⁰ In the latter scenario,

⁷⁴ Cf. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 85.

⁷⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 89.

⁷⁶ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 90.

⁷⁷ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 123.

⁷⁸ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 91.

⁷⁹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 101.

⁸⁰ Cf. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 127, my emphasis.

we set our states of consciousness side by side in such a way as to perceive them simultaneously, no longer in one another, but alongside one another; in a word, we *project time into space*, we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another.⁸¹

By contrast, Bergson defines pure duration as a “succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity.”⁸² The heterogeneity that defines duration stands in opposition to the notion of homogeneity, which is an attribute of space. “From the moment when you attribute the least homogeneity to duration, you surreptitiously introduce space.”⁸³

In sum, Bergson shows that when we think of time as a measurable and divisible succession of discrete moments, we ultimately confound it with the “empty homogeneous medium” of space.⁸⁴ This phrasing is significant in two ways. It is a critical reference to Immanuel Kant who, in the “Transzendente Ästhetik” of his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), conceived of time and space as the two pure forms of sensibility, which condition our experience.⁸⁵ Unlike Bergson, Kant claims that time is not derived from experience, it is given a priori as a condition of possibility of experience.⁸⁶ Time is thus separated from experience, which explains why it has been interpreted as an empty form that is to be filled with the manifold of experience. Secondly, Bergson’s phrasing anticipates – and perhaps influenced – Walter Benjamin’s critique of the conception of homogeneous, empty time as the foundation of the notion of historical progress, which I will return to in the next section.⁸⁷

Why is it, then, that we tend to spatialize time? For Bergson, the answer lies in the utility that objectified, spatialized time presents for social life and other practical purposes. Clock time is a simplification of time that allows us to measure and manipulate it. It may be

⁸¹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 101.

⁸² Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 104.

⁸³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 104.

⁸⁴ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 95.

⁸⁵ Kant defines time and space as “zwei reine Formen sinnlicher Anschauung, als Prinzipien der Erkenntnis a priori” (Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2019, 96 (A 22/B 36).)

⁸⁶ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 106 (A 30/B 46).

⁸⁷ In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin explicitly engages with Bergson’s philosophy of time and memory, but his brief remarks on the concept of “duration” are rather critical: “If Baudelaire in ‘Spleen’ and ‘Vie antérieure’ holds in his hands the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience, Bergson in his conception of *durée* has become far more estranged from history” (Cf. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 336.)

compared to Bergson's meditation on how words and language also simplify experience and emotions.

We instinctively tend to solidify our impressions in order to express them in language. Hence we confuse the feeling itself, which is in a perpetual state of becoming, with its permanent external object, and especially with the word which expresses this object. In the same way as the fleeting duration of our ego is fixed by its projection in homogeneous space, our constantly changing impressions, wrapping themselves round the external object which is their cause, take on its definite outlines and its immobility.⁸⁸

Just as the words we use for practical reasons in our social life cut and fix the fluctuations of our experience, the measures of clock time impose outlines and immobility on moments that evolve in time. Clock time warps the lived experience of time in a way akin to how linguistic description distorts a fleeting sensation. Turning pure duration into measurable time serves practical needs and the organization of social life. However untrue objectified time is to the experience of time, it nevertheless appears as a condition for *sharing* time with others. It enables the orientation around a shared measure of time, at the price of turning time into a spatial system of coordinates.

Another concrete illustration of the tendency to represent time as space is found in the timeline. Whereas the clock visually records the passing of time in real-time, the timeline is a ubiquitous representation of events in an already passed time, be it a chronological chart of the course of a personal biography or of "History" as the unfolding of a selection of major events. For the authors of *Cartographies of Time* (2010),

the timeline seems among the most inescapable metaphors we have. And yet, in its modern form, with a single axis and a regular, measured distribution of dates, it is a relatively recent invention. [...] As a norm, as an ideal standard of what history *looks like*, the timeline does not appear until modernity."⁸⁹

With regards to its pretension to furnish a totalizing overview and often teleological account of events, the timeline resonated with the ideas of the Enlightenment insofar as it "provided an intuitive visual analogue for concepts of historical progress that were becoming popular during

⁸⁸ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 130. In the translator's foreword, Pogson succinctly summarizes this central idea that runs through the book as follows: "Concepts break up the continuous flow of reality into parts external to one another, they further the interests of language and social life and are useful primarily for practical purposes" (Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, x).

⁸⁹ Anthony Grafton & Daniel Rosenberg, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, 14f., italics in the original.

the eighteenth century.”⁹⁰ Using the spatial mediation of the line, the historical time represented as the basis of the timeline is just as unilinear, abstract and divisible as clock time.

2.4 Countering the clock: Beyond “homogeneous, empty time”

Walter Benjamin’s “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (1940) is often considered a prominent expression of his philosophy of history. Also referred to as “Theses on the Philosophy of History” or *geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, the text unfolds in eighteen numbered paragraphs (theses I-XVIII) and two appended sections. The “Theses” meditate on the ideological underpinnings and sociopolitical consequences of two counterposed practices of historiography: historicism and historical materialism.⁹¹ Yet, the text is also a considerable contribution to a philosophy of time as Benjamin formulates a trenchant critique of clock time and counterposes a concept of historical time centered around the notion of “*Jetztzeit*.” It was through the critique of a certain temporal formation that Benjamin set out to dismantle the concept of progress that undergirded not only the historicist approach to history writing, but also the evil social and technological developments that shaped the historical moment in which he wrote the text. Benjamin was, at the time of writing, acutely affected by the rise of fascism and the politics of the Nazi regime. Driven into exile and stupefied by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – the 1939 treaty of non-aggression between Nazi Germany and the USSR also known as the Hitler-Stalin pact – he had realized how the social democratic ideology and his own political wing had become corrupted: socialism had failed to bring about the hoped-for revolutionary uprising of the masses and the end of capitalist exploitation.

Benjamin critically observed how the social democratic theory and practice fed of a vulgar-Marxist conception of labor as the “savior of modern times” and a dogmatic belief in the infinite and unstoppable “progress of mankind” – as if an improvement for the proletariat was the inevitable outcome of the course of history.⁹² Such optimism vis-à-vis progress would merely lead to a lack of initiative and passive *attentisme*.⁹³ If there is any lesson that history has taught us, it is that social transformation must be fought for, and that the proclamation of an automatic, continuous progress often but dissimulates the continuity of domination. The

⁹⁰ Grafton & Rosenberg, *Cartographies of Time*, 19f.

⁹¹ Cf. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391.

⁹² Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 393, 395. In Thesis XI and XIII Benjamin refers to the ideas of Joseph Dietzgen, a 19th century German philosopher and forefront thinker of Social Democracy who firmly believed in progress.

⁹³ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History,’* trans. Chris Turner. London & New York: Verso, 2005, 86.

concept of progress must thus be criticized, and this critique, as Benjamin notes in thesis XIII, must aim at its foundation: “The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a *homogeneous, empty time*. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”⁹⁴ At this instance, Benjamin neither elaborates on the meaning he assigns to “homogeneous, empty time,” nor does he give any clue as to the origin of this representation of time – it most clearly serves as a negative contrast to the alternative concept of time he will introduce in the following theses. Before I turn to the concept of *Jetztzeit*, I will elaborate on the origin of “empty” and “homogenous” as qualifiers of time and briefly outline the different traditions of thought that inform Benjamin’s rethinking of time in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte.”

Not unlike Bergson, Benjamin appears to critically draw on Kant’s definition of time as a representation that grounds all intuitions, a form that is given a priori, before experience. Kant reasons that one cannot consider appearances (*Erscheinungen*) without time, but one could consider time without appearances.⁹⁵ By turning time to a condition of possibility of experience, Kant separates time and experience, which results in the idea of time as empty, that is, empty of experiences. The philosopher Juan Manuel Torbidoni has also insisted that Benjamin’s notion of homogeneous, empty time is a critical node to Kant, suggesting that, for Kant, “time relates to the experience taking place in it much in the same manner as a container relates to its content: in both cases, the latter term can be removed without the former disappearing.”⁹⁶ Torbidoni also locates the idea of time as an endless homogenous progression in the following passage in Kant:

And just because this inner intuition yields no shape we also attempt to remedy this lack through analogies, and represent the temporal sequence through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series that is of only one dimension, and infer from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with the sole difference that the parts of the former are simultaneous but those of the latter exist successively.⁹⁷

Even if this passage provides a striking formulation of the linking of time to the idea of an infinite, linear progress, it does not give any further specification about the “homogeneous” quality of time. In my estimation, the homogeneity rather invokes the spatialization of time that

⁹⁴ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 394f., my emphasis.

⁹⁵ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 106 (A 31/B 46).

⁹⁶ Juan Manuel Torbidoni, “Blasting the Continuum of History: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Now-Time’ and the Recovery of Experience,” in *Thémata. Revista de Filosofía* 63, 2021, 160.

⁹⁷ Kant quoted in Torbidoni, “Blasting the Continuum of History,” 160f.; cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 109 (A 33/B 50).

Bergson criticized, on the one hand, and the fungibility of each instant in mechanical time of the clock, on the other. For the time measured by the clock, all seconds are identical.

Where Torbidoni insists on the Kantian legacy of the temporality that Benjamin sets out to criticize, sociologist Michael Löwy's *Fire Alarm* – a close reading of the “Theses” – foregrounds how Benjamin draws on a blend of German romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxism in a way that troubles any simple classification of his position. “Taking its inspiration from Marxist and messianic sources,” Benjamin’s concept of history “uses nostalgia for the past as a revolutionary method for the critique of the present.”⁹⁸ As if to highlight the seeming paradoxical nature of Benjamin stance, Löwy describes him as “a revolutionary critic of the philosophy of progress, a Marxist opponent of ‘progressivism’, a nostalgic who dreams of the future, a Romantic advocate of materialism.”⁹⁹ In short, Löwy locates Benjamin’s romanticism in the critique of modern capitalist civilization’s “disenchantment of the world,” “mechanization of life” and “reification of social relations,” but insists that it is a revolutionary romanticism – “not a *return* to the past, but a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian future.”¹⁰⁰ While some, like Bertolt Brecht, interpreted Benjamin as a materialist thinker using theological metaphors, and others, like Gershom Scholem, viewed him primarily as a Jewish theologian, Löwy argues that, in Benjamin’s writing, “Marxism and messianism are simply two expressions [...] of a single thought.”¹⁰¹ A concrete expression of Benjamin’s idiosyncratic merging of materialism and theology comes to the fore when he notes that “In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time.”¹⁰²

Across “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Benjamin seeks to articulate a relationship between the revolutionary moment and the notion of messianic redemption. “Redemption” (*Erlösung*) is utterly linked to historical time insofar it refers to a “reparation” for the despair and desolation of the past and the “historical remembrance of past victims.”¹⁰³ As Benjamin makes clear across the first couple of theses, it is not the arrival of Messiah who will bring about redemption. Rather, it is a matter of acting collectively “to rescue the defeated from oblivion, but also to continue and, if possible, complete their struggle for emancipation.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* trans. Chris Turner. London & New York: Verso, 2005, 2.

⁹⁹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 401.

¹⁰³ Cf. Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 30, 31.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 34.

The question of remembrance and the use of the past in the revolutionary present comes to the fore in thesis XIV, where Benjamin introduces the concept of *Jetztzeit*:

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.¹⁰⁵

Jetztzeit names a temporality wherein the past and the future are not exterior to the present as a before and an after in a linear development. The past and the future rather partake in the now as slivers of past and present possibilities. As Benjamin later specifies, the present thusly understood is a “now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.”¹⁰⁶ If the messianic – according to Benjamin – generally refers to historical remembrance and reparation for past injustices, then *Jetztzeit* names a present moment that might realize the “fulfilment of what could have been, but was not.”¹⁰⁷ History is not the a cumulative account of events that occur in the progression through homogeneous, empty time. It is not written once for all but always constructed with regards to the present. History is construed out of a past that is charged with the mark of the present, past moments that enter in constellation with the present situation. Benjamin elucidates how these constellations are produced by means of an intriguing analogy between fashion and history as citational practices. Citation takes an element out of its original context and puts it a new constellation. Robespierre appropriated an explosive moment from the past for the revolutionary project of his own present. This movement into the past in view of a future emancipation makes the revolution a “dialectical” leap.

In the following thesis, Benjamin gives an image of the irreducibility of historical time to the empty, homogenous time of progress by meditating on the difference between clocks and calendars:

What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in time-lapse mode. And basically it is this same day that keeps

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 397.

¹⁰⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 30.

recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance [*Tage des Eingedenkens*]. Thus, calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe, it would seem, for the past hundred years.¹⁰⁸

Revolutionaries are aware that their collective action will interrupt the continuum of history in so far as the revolutionary action sets out to break the time of progress which is also the continuity of domination. The new calendar that Benjamin refers is the short-lived Gregorian calendar that was introduced in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The first day of that calendar marked the day that France was proclaimed a republic by the National Convention, and all Christian holidays were replaced by holidays that commemorated civil events in the history of the republic.¹⁰⁹ In putting moments of the past in relation to the present, the calendar presents “history in time-lapse mode” (*als ein historischer Zeitraffer*). The *Zeitraffer* gives an image of a compression of the past, where the whole time that connects a moment in the past to the present is condensed in one focal node. It also echoes a formulation the Benjamin later uses: “Now-time [...], as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a *tremendous abbreviation*.”¹¹⁰ The contrasting comparison between the calendar and the clock is a testament to how historical time, as Benjamin conceives of it, is irreducible to the mechanical, quantifiable, eversible time measured by the clock. Within industrial capitalist societies – in keeping with Marx’s insight – clock time is the time *in* which, and *by means of* which, the exploitation of the working class takes place. In contrast to the anonymous and identical moments of the clock, the holidays of a calendar carry the face of a particular historical moment.

The thesis continues with Benjamin’s famous account of an incident that is said to have taken place on one evening at the onset of the July Revolution when insurgents were seen firing on the dials of Parisian clocktowers, a scene that a witness captured in a rhyme:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu’irrités contre l’heure,
De nouveaux Josués, au pied de chaque tour,
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

¹⁰⁹ Löwy notes that Benjamin must have had the Jewish calendar in mind: “The main holidays in that calendar are given over to the remembrance of redemptive events: the flight from Egypt (Pessach), the revolt of the Maccabees (Hanukkah), the rescue of the exiles in Persia (Purim). The imperative of memory – *Zakhor!* – is even one of the central elements of the ritual of the Jewish Passover: you are to remember your ancestors in Egypt, as though you had yourself been a slave in those times” (Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 91).

¹¹⁰ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396, my emphasis.

[Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour,
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,
Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still.]¹¹¹

With the forceful image of revolutionaries shooting at clock – an image that I borrowed as the title for this thesis – Benjamin depicts the revolutionary moment as an assault on the mechanical, ever-progressing time marked by the hands of the clock. For Benjamin, this collective action is the manifestation of a historical consciousness, which is nothing other than the awareness that they are about to bring the homogeneous, empty time to a halt, as it were. In describing the insurgents as “latter-day Joshuas,” Benjamin evokes the biblical figure Joshua who brought time to a standstill, with the help of God whom he had asked to stop the movement of the sun. Elsewhere, in a fragment contained in the text “Central Park,” Benjamin compared Baudelaire with the figure of Joshua, asserting that the latter symbolizes the interruption of the world as it is and its current developments: “To interrupt the course of the world – that was Baudelaire’s deepest intention. The intention of Joshua.”¹¹²

With the notion of *Jetztzeit* and other images of historical time, Benjamin puts forth a concept of temporality that breaks with the conventional understanding of history as continuous, linear progression. Unlike the historicist tradition who wrote history as a cumulative chain of causally linked events, Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* foregrounds moments of revolution and transformative rupture in a discontinuous history that remains under construction. Against the mechanical time of the clock, Benjamin ultimately counterposes a notion of time punctuated by arrests of the temporal continuum and revolutionary openings of history. Revolutions, Benjamin suggests, are not what fuels historical progress, but what brings it to a halt: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

¹¹² Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 170.

¹¹³ Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” 402.

3 Hegemonic temporality, the “culture industry” and the work of art: Structures of time in Theodor W. Adorno’s “Schema of Mass Culture”

3.1 Representations of time in the age of capitalist modernity

Whereas the past chapter examined the clock as device that both embodies and represents the time of capitalist modernity, this chapter concentrates on how time is structured and represented in works of art and cultural productions. The question of how to represent the unfolding of time is arguably as old as the arts of literature, music, and theatre themselves. In modernity, however, it gained new relevance – particularly with the invention of film, a technology that fundamentally transformed the ways in which time can be recorded and represented. It is noteworthy that cinematic time, insofar as it is generated through the projection of one image after the other, presents a certain structural analogy to clock time. Just like the clock, the cinematographic apparatus represents time and movement as divisible into uniform intervals, a time that is brought forth through a succession of isolated instants or frames. Film scholar Bliss Cua Lim rightly observes that,

Both in filming and projection, the cinema is a kind of clockwork mechanism, exposing and projecting immobile photograms at regular, equidistant intervals – say, sixteen or twenty-four frames per second – producing a convincing illusion for spectators, for whom the frozen frames, in rapid succession, appear to move.¹¹⁴

Hence, there is a tension between the technological mechanism that produces time out of discontinuous frames and the illusion of temporal continuity while watching a film. Taking both aspects into account – how the unfolding of time is *produced* and how it *experienced* – this chapter investigates how works of art and culture structure temporality and thereby make time experienceable for its audience. To what extent does the technological novelty of film differ from representations of time found in previously existing media such as theatrical performance, literature, and music? And how did the time represented in cultural productions in the age industrial capitalism relate to the temporal experience of modernity?

¹¹⁴ Lim, *Translating Time*, 10. Lim inscribes her comparison between the cinema and the clock in the lineage of Bergson who, in *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907), used the cinematograph as an analogy for the way in which human understanding habitually thinks of both time and movement as divisible into uniform intervals.

A central concern of this chapter is the question whether the way in which time is represented in works of art can reinforce or subvert a hegemonic temporal order. Put differently, how does the representation of time relate to the understanding and consciousness of time that prevails in any given society? These lines of inquiry were, in part, prompted by a passage in Theodor W. Adorno's "The Schema of Mass Culture," wherein the philosopher of the Frankfurter Schule examines how the structuring of temporality in products of the culture industry as well as in avant-garde artworks relate to time consciousness.¹¹⁵ Found in Adorno's estate and published in the third volume of his *Gesammelte Schriften* in 1981, the text in question is a manuscript dated to October 1942 with the full title "Das Schema der Massenkultur. Kulturindustrie (Fortsetzung)." The parenthesis suggests that Adorno wrote the text as an intended continuation to the "Kulturindustrie" chapter in his and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), which in the edition published by Querido Verlag in Amsterdam in 1947 ended with the mention "fortzusetzen," as if it were to be continued by the two authors.¹¹⁶ In the text, Adorno puts forth the thesis that the structures of time made manifest in the products of mass culture have intertwined with the temporal order that prevails in the historically, socially and technologically conditioned everyday experience.

3.2 Notes on time as a problem within Adorno's oeuvre

Prior to a close reading of Adorno's arguments on the inner temporal organization of cultural products in "The Schema of Mass Culture," I will briefly situate them in relation to some of his later writings, in which time appears as a philosophical issue. I believe this context will provide a clearer understanding of the stakes of his argument. In *Adornos Kritische Theorie der Zeit* (2020), Gabriele Geml astutely observes that "time" has a paradoxical status in Adorno's oeuvre. More precisely, Geml points to the seeming contradiction between Adorno's explicitly skeptical – at times even critical – attitude toward theories of time, on the one hand, and the fact that he himself returns to the issue of time throughout his writing, on the other.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ In the following, I will be citing from the English translation: Theodor W. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein. London & New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 61-97. Occasionally, I will be referring to the German original: Theodor W. Adorno, "Das Schema der Massenkultur," in *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3. Dialektik der Aufklärung*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981, pp. 299-335.

¹¹⁶ The "Editorische Nachbemerkung" offers an exhaustive account of the history and editorial treatment of the manuscript as well as its relation to the "Kulturindustrie" chapter and the authorial attribution to Adorno, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3. Dialektik der Aufklärung*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981, 336.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Gabriele Geml, *Adornos Kritische Theorie der Zeit*. Berlin: J.B Metzler, 2020, 17f.

Take, for instance, Adorno's remark on time in a 1957 radio lecture in commemoration of the poet Joseph Eichendorff: "While the streets of philosophy are echoing with the metaphysics of time, time itself, once measured by the steady course of a person's life, has become alienated from human beings; this is probably why it is being discussed so feverishly."¹¹⁸ What comes to the fore in this statement is a strong disapproval of the "metaphysical" treatment of time and a concern with the crisis of time in everyday experience. These two aspects of the statement are important to hold together since the problem that Adorno raises with regards to the "metaphysics of time" lies precisely in the fact that such an approach fails to grasp the palpable alienation that people experience vis-à-vis time. Geml convincingly argues that Adorno criticizes both contemporary theories of time and the philosophical tradition for conceiving time as "supratemporal" and "ahistorical," neglecting the socially and culturally mediated processes through which the naturalized, mechanical conception of time emerged and took effect in both society and individual time consciousness.¹¹⁹

However, in the recurrent comments that Adorno makes on philosophical conceptions of time, it becomes evident that his own interest in time regards the "alienation" of time that human beings increasingly experience in capitalist modernity. This proclivity comes to the fore in a section of *Negative Dialektik* (1966), wherein Adorno considers how Kant, Hegel and Bergson respectively conceived time. To begin with, Adorno critically observes how both Kant's and Hegel's philosophical systems "glorify time as timeless."¹²⁰ With regards to the latter, Adorno specifies that, "As [Hegel's] version of dialectics extends to time itself, time is ontologized, turned from a subjective form into a structure of being as such, itself eternal."¹²¹ Furthermore, "When Kant turns time, as the pure visual form and premise of everything temporal, into an a priori, time on its part is exempted from time."¹²² Despite their differences,

¹¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 75.

¹¹⁹ As Geml puts it: "Was Adorno der zeitgenössischen Zeittheorie, aber in einem umfassenderen Sinn den philosophischen Lehren von der Zeit insgesamt vorhält, ist der Umstand, dass Zeit in ihnen wesentlich nur in einem *überzeitlichen*, ahistorischen Sinn in den Blick gerät, wodurch die konstitutive Bedeutung von Zeit für die Weise unserer Weltwahrnehmung wie unseres Weltverhältnisses nicht in ihrem virulenten Sinn zu erfassen sei" (Geml, *Adornos Kritische Theorie der Zeit*, 18).

¹²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton. London & New York: Routledge, 2004, 332. "Sie verherrlichen Zeit als unzeitlich, Geschichte als ewig aus Angst, daß sie beginne" (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 325).

¹²¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 331. Adorno quotes Hegel: "Näher nun gehört das wirkliche Ich selber der Zeit an, mit der es, wenn wir von dem konkreten Inhalt des Bewußtseyns und Selbstbewußtseyns abstrahiren, zusammenfällt, insofern es nichts ist, als diese leere Bewegung, sich als ein Anderes zu setzen und diese Veränderung aufzuheben, d. h. sich selbst, das Ich und nur das Ich als solches darin zu erhalten. Ich ist in der Zeit, und die Zeit ist das Seyn des Subjekts selber" (Cf. Hegel, quoted in Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 325).

¹²² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 331. Adorno quotes Kant: "Die Zeit verläuft sich nicht, sondern in ihr verläuft sich das Dasein des Wandelbaren. Der Zeit also, die selbst unwandelbar und bleibend ist, correspondirt in der

Adorno holds that the Hegelian “ontologization” of time and the Kantian “apriorization” of time both amount to nothing less than a “detemporalization” of time.¹²³

Adorno is also critical of Bergson’s concept of *durée*, the time of lived duration which the latter famously posited in contradistinction to the “spatialized” time of science and the reflective consciousness (see section 2.3). The critique hinges on the fact that, although Bergson allegedly tried to go against the reification of consciousness by theoretically reconstructing the *content* of the lived experience of time, he made it into a *form* of consciousness, a particular mode of cognition.¹²⁴ In Adorno’s reading, Bergson’s distinction between *durée* and spatialized time however has the merit of reflecting a crisis in time consciousness:

Die krasse Dichotomie der beiden Zeiten bei Bergson aber registriert die geschichtliche zwischen der lebendigen Erfahrung und den vergegenständlichten und wiederholbaren Arbeitsprozessen: seine brüchige Zeitlehre ist ein früher Niederschlag der objektiv gesellschaftlichen Krisis des Zeitbewußtseins.¹²⁵

Bergson’s dichotomy of the two times highlights a “historical dichotomy” between the time of lived experience and the temporality of labor under industrial capitalism, where work is increasingly performed in concert with the repetitive movements of machinery, and the resulting commodities are objectifications of human abstract labor. In qualifying the crisis of time consciousness as “objectively social,” Adorno suggests that the *Zeitbewußtsein* cannot be sundered from the societal conditions in which it is formed. Against metaphysical and idealist conceptions of time as an ahistorical category and itself a timeless form, he conceives of time as socially mediated, that is, instituted through social practices and processes. As I intend to show in the following, the cultural mediation of a social and historical construct of time was already at the heart of Adorno’s “The Schema of Mass Culture.” In the manuscript, Adorno is concerned with how the products of the culture industry both express and inculcate the time consciousness brought forth in capitalist modernity.

Erscheinung das Unwandelbare im Dasein, d. i. die Substanz, und bloß an ihr kann die Folge und das Zugleichsein der Erscheinungen der Zeit nach bestimmt werden” (Cf. Kant, quoted in Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 325).

¹²³ “Detemporalization” translates the notion of an “Entzeitlichung der Zeit” (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 327).

¹²⁴ See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 327.

¹²⁵ See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 327. I’m quoting from the German original, since the English translation fails to render some of the terms.

3.3 The disappearing distinction between culture and reality

In “The Schema of Mass Culture,” Adorno continues the investigation of the shifting function and production of culture in late capitalism that he and Horkheimer undertook in the “Kulturindustrie” chapter of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. The use of “Massenkultur” in the title and throughout the manuscript of 1942 may appear anachronistic or untimely for a sequel since, by the time of publishing the chapter on “Kulturindustrie,” the authors had decided to replace “mass culture” by “culture industry.” Adorno and Horkheimer forged the term *Kulturindustrie* in order to clarify that their argument was by no means a matter of an elitist, condescending critique of cultural expressions originating from the masses nor of their taste, but much rather a critique of the commodification of art and the standardization of cultural production.¹²⁶ With the critical concept of *Kulturindustrie*, Adorno and Horkheimer not only sought to account for the commodification of culture, but also to denounce how culture was used to naturalize social domination, where entertainment became a way of attaining collective compliance with the capitalist society.

Adorno inaugurates “The Schema of Mass Culture” with the observation that the “commercial character of art causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear.”¹²⁷ It is thus the disappearing of this difference that not only prompted, but also formed the wider social and cultural context for Adorno’s inquiry into the structuring of time in both “mass culture” and works of art. The context is noteworthy since it speaks to a loss of autonomy of art vis-à-vis society. Art no longer upholds any opposition to the society of its time – an opposition which, in Adorno’s view, was constitutive of the bourgeois artwork. In the posthumously published *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), Adorno characterized the relation between art and society as follows:

Vielmehr wird [die Kunst] zum Gesellschaftlichen durch ihre Gegenposition zur Gesellschaft, und jene Position bezieht sie erst als autonome. Indem sie sich Eigenes in sich kristallisiert, anstatt bestehenden gesellschaftlichen Normen zu willfahren und als ‘gesellschaftlich nützlich’ sich zu qualifizieren, kritisiert sie die Gesellschaft, durch ihr bloßes Dasein.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ In a radio lecture of 1963 titled “Résumé über Kulturindustrie,” Adorno addresses the lexical shift from the prone-to-be-misunderstood notion of *Massenkultur* to the critical concept of *Kulturindustrie* (Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein. London & New York: Routledge, 1991, 98). In this chapter, I use the two terms interchangeably.

¹²⁷ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 61.

¹²⁸ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019, 335.

The culture industry has not only brought about a loss of the *Gegenposition* that art had toward society, but it has become difficult to at all distinguish the experience offered in culture from the experience one has in everyday life. This is the implication of Adorno's subsequent observation that "the borderline between culture and empirical reality becomes more and more indistinct."¹²⁹

Paradigmatic of this change of dynamic from an opposition to the indistinction between culture and practical life is the rise in popularity, since the onset of the industrial era, of an art that promotes the "right attitudes" to society.¹³⁰ Such tendency is reflected both in the literature prevalent among the youth and in bourgeois education materials, wherein Adorno discerns how pragmatic instruction prevails over the promotion of ideals. At the most, ideals are instrumentalized to facilitate the pupil's understanding of the "demands of 'real life.'"¹³¹ The primacy of practical instruction is exemplified in classics praised by the National Socialists – such as Max Eyth's *Hinter Pflug und Schraubstock* (*Behind Plough and Vice*) and Gustav Freytag's novel *Soll und Haben* (*Debit and Credit*) – but Adorno also cynically notes that

Perhaps the fantastical figure of Robinson Crusoe was already no different, who represented the very model of *Homo oeconomicus*, being transported by a fortunate shipwreck out of the system of bourgeois society only to reproduce it again 'through his own effort,' as the children's literature likes to put it.¹³²

The bemoaning of art as a tool for the adjustment of people to the demands of capitalist society also comes to the fore in Adorno's critical view of cinema. Cinema's sumptuous and captivating images exert a power on its viewer that "deceive adult human beings about the extended childhood that is only prepared for them so that they might function in all the more 'adult' a fashion."¹³³ The entertaining playfulness of cinema lures the adult spectators only to better adapt them to societal norms.

Noting that a "pseudo-poetry" or "everyday poetry" becomes "total" in cinema, Adorno appears concerned with how film, by virtue of its indexical technology, captures "reality" and endows what it has captured with poetry by the sheer fact of rendering it and magnifying it on film – "a shiver of the poetic is forced upon every piece of emphatic objectivity."¹³⁴ Adorno's

¹²⁹ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 61.

¹³⁰ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 61.

¹³¹ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 61f.

¹³² Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 62.

¹³³ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 63.

¹³⁴ My translation of the German original: "Jedem Stück emphatischer Nüchternheit wird der Schauer des Poetischen zugemutet" (Adorno, "Das Schema der Massenkultur," 310).

reluctant stance vis-à-vis cinema is fundamentally concerned with the power that resides in the relations and mode of production of film. For instance, he claims that the fascination and wonder that the cinematic image ignites in the spectator are produced by a technological *Übermacht*: “The tremor lives off the excess power which technology as a whole, along with the capital that stands behind it, exercises over every individual thing.”¹³⁵ Anything that appears in the cinematic image has a poetical sheen akin to the aesthetic sheen that advertising endows commodities with. In this regard, the art of cinema takes on a “commercial character,” to return to the formulation Adorno uses in the opening sentence of the manuscript.

One of Adorno’s main concerns with film and advertising is that their images hypostasize the reality they depict rather than offering a counter-image to what is presented as given. In fact, advertising and film do more than just affirm a certain representation of reality. Akin to the Kantian “schema,” to which I will shortly return, they constitute reality:

It is precisely this stress upon the mere fact of being which is supposed to be so great and strong that no subjective intention can alter it in any way – and this stress corresponds to the true impotence of art in relation to society today – that conceals the transfiguration against which all sober objectivity gestures. Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication. This is how the technological veil and the myth of the positive is woven. If the real becomes an image insofar as in its particularity it becomes as equivalent to the whole as one Ford car is to all the others of the same range, then *the image* on the other hand *turns into immediate reality*.¹³⁶

The duplication of empirical reality, the insistence on “the mere fact of being,” amounts to the perpetuation of this very reality. It naturalizes the capitalist society as a given. For Adorno, such image-mediated reality appears just as adamant as it is unshakable, something that neither individuals nor artworks can dislodge. The presumed objectivity and innocence of representations that depict reality “as it is” conceal the transformation that these representations impose on reality. The claim that “Reality becomes its own ideology” implies that the viewer’s sense of reality is supplanted by a distorted image of reality, a false consciousness, as it were.

¹³⁵ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 63.

¹³⁶ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 63, my emphasis. This passage rehearses and prolongs some of the claims that Adorno and Horkheimer put forth in the “Kulturindustrie” chapter: “Kulturindustrie hat die Tendenz, sich zum Inbegriff von Protokollsätze zu machen und eben dadurch zum unwiderlegbaren Propheten des Bestehenden. [...] Kulturindustrie schlägt den Einwand gegen sich so gut nieder wie den gegen die Welt, die sie tendenzlos verdoppelt. [...] Die neue Ideologie hat die Welt als solche zum Gegenstand. Sie macht vom Kultus der Tatsache gebrauch, indem sie sich darauf beschränkt, das schlechte Dasein durch möglichst genaue Darstellung ins Reich der Tatsachen zu erheben” (See Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, “Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3. Dialektik der Aufklärung*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981, 170f.).

What is “veiled” through the technology of mass culture is the possibility of another reality than the one depicted, for instance a reality with other social relations. The “myth of the positive” holds on to what is instead of representing emancipatory possibilities that point to how the current order of things could be changed. In sum, the depicted reality justifies its empirical pendant, whereby the hegemony of a capitalist social order imposes itself as a given. There appears to be no alternative to what is perceived as reality.

In *Adorno on Popular Culture* (2003), cultural sociologist Robert W. Witkin succinctly recapitulates Adorno’s conception of the relation between reality and image in mass culture, arguing that “popular culture does not oppose reality but slavishly imitates it to the point of standing in for it. Reality does not remain unaffected by this process. It absorbs its own simulation as its model. It imitates art.”¹³⁷ In this vicious circle, culture fails to offer a counterpoint to reality. Art embodies the ruling norms of society to a point where it is unclear which one prescribed the other. Following Adorno’s characterization of mass culture’s “faithful duplication” of empirical reality as the “myth of the positive,” what is missing in the age of culture industry is an image that operates as the “negative” to this reality. Where the positive image can be thought in terms of a repetition of the existing which thereby lacks any critical distance to social reality, a negative image would gesture toward how reality could be different *in spite of* the way it is. Therein lies the “power of negative thinking” which Herbert Marcuse, another philosopher of the Frankfurter Schule, defined as “a critique of the given state of affairs on its own ground – of the established system of life, which denies its of promises and potentialities.”¹³⁸

The absence of the “negative” and, by extension, of any alternative to the status quo recalls the argument that Marcuse developed in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). The one dimension refers to the whittling down of any opposition to the ideology of advanced capitalist society as the “individual by himself reproduces and perpetuates the external controls exercised by his society.”¹³⁹ Marcuse first writes of this process as an “introjection” of social controls, but then notes that such transposition of the “outer” into the “inner” suggests “the existence of an inner dimension distinguished from and even antagonistic to the external exigencies – an individual consciousness and an individual unconscious apart from public opinion and

¹³⁷ Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 2003, 62f.

¹³⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, vii. The formulation appears in “A Note on Dialectic,” a preface that Marcuse supplemented to the Beacon Press re-edition of *Reason and Revolution*.

¹³⁹ See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London & New York: Routledge, 2007, 12.

behaviour.”¹⁴⁰ However, as Marcuse further observes with regards to the society of his time, “the ‘inner’ dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root” has been “invaded and whittled down by technological reality.”¹⁴¹ The collapse of the inner and the outer dimensions amounts to nothing less than an “immediate identification of the individual with his society,” such that antagonism and opposition can no longer occur.¹⁴² The lack of opposition to empirical reality that Adorno observes in the culture industry thus prefigured this one-dimensionality.

It is remarkable that the example Adorno chose to demonstrate the elimination of the distinction between image and reality is not visual, but auditive, namely Orson Welles’ 1938 radio drama *The War of Worlds*. Welles’ news-bulletin style of narration led some listeners to believe that the invasion from Mars that appeared in the story was “really” taking place as they were listening. In Adorno’s words, the broadcast

was a test performed by the positivistic spirit to determine its own zone of influence and one which showed that the elimination of the distinction between image and reality has already advanced to the point of a collective sickness, that the reduction of the work of art to empirical reason is already capable of turning into overt lunacy at any moment.¹⁴³

To me, the way in which radio listeners took the drama for a fact above all speaks to a lack of critical evaluation of media, that is, an attitude of fundamental belief in anything heard in the news. It is less plausible that audience members would have the same attitude when watching a feature film at the movies. Yet, for Adorno, the listeners’ falling for the illusion of realism in the breaking-news mode of storytelling is symptomatic of how “consumers” of mass culture take an image of reality for reality itself.

The notion that the culture industry and advertising constitute reality brings us back to the Kantian schema. The “schema” in the title of “Das Schema der Massenkultur” does not refer to Adorno’s outline of the culture industry, but rather to the culture industry’s own schematizing, which Bernstein aptly describes as “the pre-formatting of experience.”¹⁴⁴ In Kant’s account of human knowledge, the schema mediates between the categories – the a priori

¹⁴⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12.

¹⁴¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 13, 12.

¹⁴² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12. Marcuse further notes that “[t]he loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 13.)

¹⁴³ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 64.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. J. M. Bernstein, “Introduction,” in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein. London & New York: Routledge, 1991, 11.

concepts of understanding – and intuition – the experience furnished by our senses. It is by virtue of the schema that imagination can subsume the manifold of the sensible intuition under a general category of understanding, thereby providing a concept its image.¹⁴⁵ This is how the human mind not only produces knowledge but, more fundamentally, also constructs a world of experience. Adorno shows how, in the age of culture industry,

any expectation that imagination might of its own accord gather together the discrete elements of the real into its truth, is repudiated as an improper presumption. Imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest imago to be distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality.¹⁴⁶

The subject's use of imagination is written off. "The cognitive dimension of cultural experience," Shane Gunster suggests, "is limited to the mere sorting of sensations into a crude schematic according to the labels firmly stamped upon them at the point of production."¹⁴⁷ The schematism of human understanding is supplanted by the pre-formatted experience offered in films, television, radio broadcasts and popular music. In the "Kulturindustrie" chapter, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly referenced Kant as they cynically noted that "Die Leistung, die der kantische Schematismus noch von den Subjekten erwartet hatte [...], wird dem Subjekt von der Industrie abgenommen. Sie betreibt Schematismus als ersten Dienst am Kunden."¹⁴⁸ Put more drastically, the schema of mass culture forecloses the subject's effort to construct a world that differs from the world promulgated by the culture industry. As "clients" consuming experiences that have already been pre-formatted, the audience members have nothing left to classify and sort out on their own. In this regard, the culture industry severely damages the ability to resist, to have new experiences and to critically reflect on experiences that break with the dominant schema.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. "Diese Vorstellung nun von einem allgemeinen Verfahren der Einbildungskraft, einem Begriff sein Bild zu verschaffen, nenne ich das Schema zu diesem Begriffe" (Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 242 (A 140/B 179)).

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture", 63f.

¹⁴⁷ Shane Gunster, "Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form," in *Cultural Critique* 45, 2000, 54.

¹⁴⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, "Kulturindustrie," 145.

3.4 The liquidation of history: On structures of time in mass culture

3.4.1 The lack of conflicts and the “abstract present”

The liquidation of the difference between culture and practical life, along with the conflation of the image and empirical reality is – in my estimation – crucial to Adorno’s analysis of temporality in artworks and culture. He observes how the structuration of time in mass culture has begun to replicate certain temporal features of everyday experience under industrial capitalism. The changing representation of time is, following Adorno, inscribed in a wider process of “levelling down” (*Nivellierung*) set forth in mass culture. The levelling down is first noted in the “self-reflexive” tendency of culture to refer to what has previously been, that is, to “successful” productions that have already been approved and align with the interest of the culture industry.

All mass culture is fundamentally adaptation. However, this adaptive character, the monopolistic filter which protects it from any external rays of influence which have not already been safely accommodated within its reified schema, represents an adjustment to the consumers as well.¹⁴⁹

The equation of mass culture with adaptation plays with the double meaning of “adaptation.” On the one hand, it speaks to how culture industry integrates and promotes the norms and conventions of the capitalist society. On the other hand, it points to the adaptation of traditional cultural media, as in the case of a classical novel being adapted to the medium of film. In this reproduction of the already approved or what the audience already knows, Adorno notes how the culture industry endows its productions with a “pre-digested quality,” making it as easy to consume as “baby-food.”¹⁵⁰ The pre-digested quality is but another word for the pre-formatting of experience. Equally leveled down is the “difference between ‘serious’ and ‘light’ culture,” between critique and entertainment, as illustrated in the fate of socio-critical novels that pass through the bestseller-machinery, whereby “we can no longer distinguish how far the horrors narrated in them serve the denunciation of society as opposed to the amusement of those who do not yet have the Roman circuses they are really waiting for.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 67.

¹⁵⁰ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 67.

¹⁵¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 67f. In a wording that echoes Adorno, Marcuse was also concerned with a levelling down of the opposition between culture and reality: “Today’s novel feature is the *flattening out of the antagonism* between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted another dimension of reality. This *liquidation of two-dimensional culture* takes place not through the denial and rejection of the ‘cultural values,’

The question of temporality proper enters the discussion when Adorno observes how the levelling down not only occurs between different cultural productions, but also *within* them. The first characteristic of such immanent levelling down is a lack of conflicts, which manifests as a loss of suspension and development, amounting to a shift in the general orchestration of temporality. In mass culture, there are “no longer any real conflicts,” since conflicts are “surrogated by shocks and sensations which seem to erupt from without and generally have no real consequences, smoothly insinuating themselves into the episodic action.”¹⁵² To understand the importance of this change, it is helpful to recall that in classical drama, the element of conflict structures the narrative as a struggle between different forces, for instance between the intention or will of a protagonist and obstacles to it. By contrast, the absence of conflicts in mass culture does something to the temporal unfolding. In lieu of a *Handlung* in which one event leads to the next, there are merely disparate episodes.

In claiming that conflicts have been replaced by “shocks and sensations,” Adorno seems to make a critical allusion to Benjamin, who believed that the shock effects produced through cinematographic montage could help prepare the spectator for the “shock experience” that had come to characterize many spheres of modern life. “The shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*] which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated ‘experiences’ of the worker at his machine.”¹⁵³ Benjamin noted a congruity between the saturated sensorial experience of film-watching and the overburden of impressions in everyday existence:

Film is the art form corresponding to the increased threat to life that faces people today. Humanity’s need to expose itself to shock effects represents an adaptation to the dangers threatening it. Film corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic, and on a historical scale by every present-day citizen.¹⁵⁴

Although Adorno’s disapproval of shocks concerned how they replaced the narrative principle of the conflict, he would undoubtedly be skeptical against an instrumentalization of shock effects in view of the “adaptation” of humanity to the excessive demands of modern life. Instead of questioning the shock experience of workers on the assembly line, film – as a means of adaptation – would merely help workers cope with the new labor conditions. It would,

but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 60, my emphasis).

¹⁵² Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 69.

¹⁵³ Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 329.

¹⁵⁴ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility. Third Version,” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 281.

nevertheless, seem as if the element of shock was a less important stylistic feature of the films of the culture industry than it was for the proponents of Soviet cinema such as Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov. In the words of Eisenstein, “montage is conflict.”¹⁵⁵ Through the juxtaposition of clashing or conflicting individual shots, montage produces shock effects that compel the viewer to think. In Soviet cinema, the production of shocks did clearly not aim to adjust the spectator to modern society but was primarily used to make unexpected associations and stir intellectual activity.

It is remarkable, then, that Adorno disregards the critical potential of the shock and merely refers to “shocks and sensations” as symptoms of the decay of narrative development and suspension. The lack of conflicts, as a device that binds the temporal unfolding, corresponds to a shifting conception of the spectator. The culture industry presupposes that their “consumers” have a poor memory (*Gedächtnisschwäche*).¹⁵⁶ “No one is trusted to remember anything that has already happened or to concentrate upon anything other than what is presented to him in the given moment. The consumer is thus reduced to the abstract present.”¹⁵⁷ One cannot but note how this *abstrakte Gegenwart* stands in stark contrast to the time consciousness that Edmund Husserl, the principal founder of phenomenology, referred to as *lebendige Gegenwart*. The “living present” denotes how consciousness extends the momentarily perceived through acts of “retention” and “protention” that bind the immediate present to the past and the future.¹⁵⁸ Transposing the structure of Husserl’s time consciousness to the sphere of artistic reception, the culture industry presupposes a break in the spectator’s ability to constitute a temporal continuum.

Yet, Adorno’s critical characterization of the spectators-cum-consumers does not describe the actual ability of the so-called consumer. It is rather a euphemism for how little mass culture demands from its audience. Instead of fostering attention and remembrance, the culture industry rather sees that the spectators do not remember anything besides that which is momentary happening before their eyes. Being “reduced to the abstract present” speaks to an experience of temporal confinement, where what presently happens is cut off from any links to a before or an after. There is nothing that ties what takes place to a determined past or a future. Adorno painstakingly links this temporal formation to a design of spectatorship where viewers

¹⁵⁵ Eisenstein quoted in Kevin McDonald, *Film Theory*. London: Routledge, 2022, 31.

¹⁵⁶ “Ausgegangen wird von der Gedächtnisschwäche der Konsumenten” (Cf. Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” SMK, 307.)

¹⁵⁷ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 69.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2021, 170f.

are neither confronted with “suffering” nor urged to think.¹⁵⁹ On the contrary, the culture industry ultimately hinders the development of a capacity to think critically.

Furthermore, Adorno sees the lack of conflicts illustrated in the happy ending which, at the time of his writing, was the norm for cinematic *dénouements* in film productions of the Golden Age of Hollywood.¹⁶⁰ When the ending is a “predetermined resolution,” there is no real suspension.¹⁶¹ The viewer knows that the outcome of every apparent tension is already decided from the very start. Adorno links the lack of real development at the level of narrative to a time “without history.” “Jedes Stück Massenkultur ist seiner Struktur nach so geschichtslos, wie es die durchorganisierte Welt von morgen sich wünscht.”¹⁶² What makes every specimen of mass culture *geschichtslos* in its very structure is precisely the lack of an actual development in its structuration of time. Adorno equates this lack of development with a structural abolition of history. In the age of the culture industry wherein art mirrors reality, the absence of development assured through the predetermined happy ending narrative reflects the suspension of development of social reality. The thoroughly organized world of tomorrow desires a time “without history”, precisely because the intensified and more insidious form of the capitalist society does not “want” any development of reality, no changes in the order of things.

The depiction of a world that is organized through and through prefigures what Adorno and Horkheimer later referred to as the “verwaltete Welt.”¹⁶³ The “verwaltete Welt” not only alludes to how life in capitalist society is increasingly managed through bureaucratic systems and procedures. More broadly, it names a world wherein individuals are caught in a system wherein their desires and needs are manipulated and adjusted to the existing order. In the “verwaltete Welt,” culture is no longer developed in opposition to hegemony, but rather becomes a powerful tool of social control.¹⁶⁴ In line with Adorno, Markus Schroer notes that:

¹⁵⁹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 69.

¹⁶⁰ The happy ending was the norm in Hollywood cinema, but its hegemony did not apply everywhere. In early Russian cinema, tragic finales were standard. This is the subject matter of Tacita Dean’s *The Russian Ending* (2001), a series of photogravures with etchings, whose title alludes to “a convention in the early years of the Danish film industry when each film was produced in two versions, one with a happy ending for the American market, the other with a tragic ending for Russian audiences.” See Rachel Taylor, *Vesuvio*, 2004. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dean-vesuvio-p20261> (Accessed 2024-09-10).

¹⁶¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 69.

¹⁶² Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 307f. I’m quoting from the German original since the English translation renders *geschichtslos* as “historical,” thereby missing the main point of Adorno’s sentence.

¹⁶³ In a preface added to the 1969 edition of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Adorno and Horkheimer note: “Das Buch wurde in einem Augenblick verfaßt, in dem das Ende des nationalsozialistischen Terrors absehbar war. An nicht wenigen Stellen jedoch ist die Formulierung der Realität von heute nicht mehr angemessen. Indessen haben wir den Übergang zur verwalteten Welt schon damals nicht zu harmlos eingeschätzt” (See Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 9).

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Markus Schroer, “Ende des Individuums,” in *Adorno Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer, Stefan Müller. Berlin: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2019, 334.

Die Kulturindustrie ist Ausdruck der spätkapitalistischen, total verwalteten Welt. Sie erfüllt die wichtige Funktion, die einzelnen Mitglieder der Gesellschaft auf beinahe unmerkliche und geradezu angenehme Weise an die Bedingungen der verwalteten Welt zu gewöhnen. Sie stellen mit gleichsam weichen Methoden her, was sonst nur durch äußersten Terror und Zwang zu erreichen möglich scheint: Eine manipulierbare Masse, die zu keinerlei Widerstand und Widerspruch nicht mehr nur nicht in der Lage ist, sondern auch gar nicht die Motivation hat, weil sie mit dem, was ist, einverstanden ist.¹⁶⁵

The products of culture industry – such as entertainment and seemingly harmless distraction – serve as an “ideological weapon” in defense of the existing social order.¹⁶⁶ Through a constant repetition and affirmation of what already *is*, the culture industry weakens individuals’ ability to imagine social transformation. For Adorno, the “lack of development” in the inner temporal organization of mass culture becomes paradigmatic of an ideology that prevents the audience members from imagining a transformation of the world as it currently is.

3.4.2 Variety entertainment as the “allegory of high capitalism”

Although Adorno notoriously regarded film and jazz as the most characteristic forms of mass culture, he argues in “The Schema of Mass Culture” that they draw on the techniques of an earlier form of entertainment: namely, “variety.” In his critical analysis of variety, Adorno further elaborates on the structuring of time in the culture industry and posits variety as paradigmatic of the ways in which mass culture confronts its audience with a time without history. Derived from the French *théâtre de variétés*, variety is a spectacle consisting of a succession of acts and attractions of various kinds – acrobatics, dance, comic recitation, musical performance, clown pranks, magic, et cetera – without any unifying thread. As a form of entertainment, it gained popularity in the theatres of the nineteenth century. The various performances are put together one after the other, but each act is a self-closed unity. In this regard, variety is episodic in nature and does not ask of the audience to concentrate on anything other than the short act that presently happens before their eyes. Variety thus rehearses two of the hitherto discussed temporal features of mass culture: it lacks continuous development and caters to *gedächtnisschwache* spectators.

Constitutive of the experience of attending a variety act is, as Adorno puts it, that “something happens and nothing happens at the same time.”¹⁶⁷ The spectator is in the state of

¹⁶⁵ Schroer, “Ende des Individuums,” 334.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Schroer, “Ende des Individuums,” 334.

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

waiting for something to happen, only to realize that it already happened. Adorno illustrates this with the performance of the juggler, where it turns out that “waiting for the thing in question, which takes place as long as the juggler manages to keep the balls going, is precisely the thing itself.”¹⁶⁸ In this manner, the spectator mistakes the event itself for the mere building up to the event. Adorno calls this a “betrayal of the temporal order,” since the viewer is cheated out of the event, as it were.¹⁶⁹ To speak of a “betrayal” makes it sound as if the variety act deliberately seeks to mislead or deceive the spectator with regards to the order of time. Once the event occurs, it is more akin to a frozen image, a “symbolic suspension of the action.”¹⁷⁰ In a paradoxical manner, just as the viewer anticipates that the action will take place, there is a caesura of action.

As Adorno goes on to specify, the trick is not merely played upon the viewer, but upon time itself.¹⁷¹ It is a betrayal of temporal development as such:

Variety [was already] the [invoking] repetition of the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced through time – the very allegory of high capitalism which demonstrates [it as mastered by appropriating] its necessity as the freedom of play.¹⁷²

The invoking repetition of the industrial procedure might first be read in a literal way, as it is easy to imagine a “formal” repetition of the selfsame in the example of the juggler. However, such an interpretation is less meaningful or productive when it comes to other variety acts. How can a comic sketch, for instance, be understood as a mechanical repetition of the selfsame, seen to its content and form? One must rather understand the “invoking repetition” of the temporality of industrial production as a description of the logic of time in variety. In underscoring how the industrial procedure amounts to a sequence of the selfsame through time, Adorno marks the contradictory quality of a temporality that is “selfsame” (*Immergleiches*) and “through time.” That which is always the same and not changing would seem to oppose

¹⁶⁸ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

¹⁶⁹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

¹⁷⁰ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

¹⁷¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

¹⁷² I have modified the English translation: “Variety already represented the magical repetition of the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced through time – the very allegory of high capitalism which demonstrates its dominating character even as it appropriates its necessity as the freedom of play” (Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70). The German original reads: “Damit war das Variété schon die beschwörende Wiederholung des industriellen Verfahrens, wo Immergleiches in der Zeit sich folgt, die Allegorie des Hochkapitalismus, die ihn als beherrschten demonstriert, indem sie seine Notwendigkeit als Freiheit des Spiels sich zueignet” (Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 308). An “invoking repetition” would be a more apt translation of *beschwörende Wiederholung*. *Beherrscht* should be translated with an adjective in the passive form, such as “mastered,” and not the active, “dominating.”

the development and duration that “through time” insinuates. Variety becomes emblematic of a production through time of something that, essentially, does not develop in time. It thus testifies to how the temporality of the mechanical repetition in industrial production seeps into the inner organization of cultural forms. By calling it an “allegory of high capitalism,” Adorno interprets variety as an artistic device that *represents* the workings of the temporality of capitalist production. Adorno adds that, as an allegory, variety pretends to “master” capitalist temporality by appropriating its inescapable domination as the “freedom of play.” What is imposed as a necessity in social reality is artistically approached under the guise of freedom. Instead of lamenting the compulsory, pervasive character of capitalist temporality, variety playfully imitates it.

The mechanical repetition of the selfsame brings us back to the question of history and by now it should be evident that, for Adorno, the sequence of the selfsame through time is opposed to historical development. In variety, “the performance becomes the model of mechanical repetition and thus absolves itself of its nugatory historicity.”¹⁷³ An embodiment of industrial modernity’s technical control over time, the variety act ultimately stages the suspension of development and, by extension, the abolition of history that characterizes capitalist modernity. In this regard, Adorno argues that there is a “disenchanted truth in ‘variété,’” which might be preferable to the “semblance of the historical” that bourgeois art still tightly holds on to.¹⁷⁴ However, the question remains whether this “disenchanted truth” was legible as such to the audience, or if the playful replication of capitalist temporality rather dissimulated its unavoidable, compulsory character. Many variety-goers likely sought – and found – respite from their everyday reality in capitalist modernity, without realizing that the temporal structure of variety was a symptomatic replication of that very reality.

Adorno observed a similar development in music, noting that impressionist music “imitated the procedure” deployed in variety. To Adorno, this was flagrant in the work of Debussy, who even named his pieces *Études* – implying that they were practice material – and *Préludes* – literally insinuating that they were the introduction to a main act, although they formed the piece itself. “The inexperienced listener might well be tempted to take everything here as a prelude and wait for it all to begin.”¹⁷⁵ All the more critical is Adorno’s view on jazz,

¹⁷³ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71. The German reads: “Der Akt, die Handlung wird zum Muster mechanischer Repetition. So entäußert er sich seiner nichtigen Geschichtlichkeit” (Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 309).

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71. Adorno furthermore speculates that the “disenchanted truth” laid bare in variety is what “inspired Wedekind and Cocteau, Apollinaire and Kafka to praise the form so much” (Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71).

¹⁷⁵ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71.

which he defines as “the form which subsumed the heritage of impressionist music for the purposes of mass culture.”¹⁷⁶ Of particular interest for my inquiry is the temporal structure that Adorno detects in jazz, as a legacy of impressionist music: “in a jazz piece, all the moments which succeed one another in time are more or less directly interchangeable with one another, [...] there is no real development, and [...] what comes later is not one whit richer in experience than what has preceded it.”¹⁷⁷ This interchangeability recalls the temporality of clock time, where each unit of time is virtually equal to any other. Structurally akin to the temporality of variety, jazz – in Adorno’s view – presents the listener with a succession of isolated moments that have been arbitrarily connected as opposed to a continuous, unfolding whole. It is also noteworthy that the quality of “experience” enters the analysis. Whereas the unfolding of interrelated events would produce an experience that grows “richer” through time, the mere succession of interchangeable moments amounts to a relative poverty of experience.

Variety and impressionist music borrowed certain features of industrial procedure for artistic purposes. As a result of the integration of aspects of mechanical repetition and the temporal logic of clock time into their inner organization, they manifest a temporality of eversame, interchangeable moments. According to Adorno, they are paradigmatic of a tendency of mass culture to make mechanical production its very “theme.” Perhaps he deliberately played on the polysemy of theme as subject matter and, in music, the recognizable melody upon which a composition is based. “In so far as [variété and impressionism] made mechanization their privileged theme, they attempted like Chaplin to play a trick on it and transform the shock of the eversame into a Bergsonian laughter.”¹⁷⁸ The “Bergsonian laughter” alludes to Bergson’s essay *Le Rire* (1900) in which he argued that human laughter is provoked when “something mechanical is encrusted upon the living.”¹⁷⁹ Put differently, one laughs when the living behaves mechanically. In Bergson’s account, laughter can function as a “social punishment” or a “mode of correction” of automatic-seeming conduct or stiffened habits that wakes the person being laughed at from their behavior.¹⁸⁰ In his role as a factory worker in *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin appears as the embodiment of Bergson’s thesis insofar as it is his exaggeratedly mechanical movements that make the audience laugh. Chaplin’s performance offers a comic relief in the face of the difficult reality wherein the worker’s body

¹⁷⁶ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71.

¹⁷⁷ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71.

¹⁷⁸ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71.

¹⁷⁹ “Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant, voilà encore notre point de départ. D’où venait ici le comique? De ce que le corps vivant se raidissait en machine” (Henri Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris: PUF, 1997, 38).

¹⁸⁰ Bergson, *Le Rire*, 102f.

cannot cope with the pace of the machine. Yet, the laughter a film viewer may have at the extension of mechanization to human behavior and body language does not suffice to radically interrupt the “shock of the selfsame” in the assembly lines of industrial production. Rather, as Adorno pessimistically writes, “mass culture falls victim to its pre-ordained fate inasmuch as it adopts its law and simultaneously obscures it.”¹⁸¹

3.5 Adorno and Benjamin on epic theatre, montage and film

3.5.1 Adorno’s temporal critique of Brechtian technique

A crucial argument that Adorno makes in “The Schema of Mass Culture” is that even the works of art that set out to counter the culture industry have taken on some of its temporal features. The lack of conflict, which Adorno saw as a defining feature of mass culture, has made its way into the “great art” – exemplified by Arnold Schönberg’s twelve-tone music and Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre – that “most resolutely resist the cultural monopoly.”¹⁸² In the following, I will focus on the arguments related to Brecht since Adorno’s interpretation of Schönberg and extensive writing on classical music exceed the scope of this master’s thesis. Although the notion of “epic theatre” more broadly applies to forms of theatre that break with the conventions of Aristotelian drama, the term is particularly associated with the conception of theatre that Brecht shaped from 1920s onwards, not only through his writings but also as a playwright and theatre director.¹⁸³ Epic theatre does away with the theatrical illusions of conventional drama: instead of hiding the construction of the play, it exposes the mechanisms. Brecht theorized and practically implemented several important changes in the apparatus of theatre, among others with regards to the construction of the play, the style of acting, the role of the spectator, and the use of music. In “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre (Notes to the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*),” he presented a table that shows certain “shifts of accent” from the dramatic to the epic theatre.¹⁸⁴ Where the spectator of dramatic theatre “is in the thick of it” and “shares the experience” of the situation unfolding on stage,

¹⁸¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71.

¹⁸² In underlining how the lack of conflicts in mass culture “stems for the all-encompassing concerns of the monopoly,” Adorno insinuates that the monopoly of the culture industry seeks to evacuate conflicts precisely because conflicts is what drives development and therefore threatens the maintenance of the capitalist society (Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73).

¹⁸³ Ulrich Kittstein, “Episches Theater,” in *Handbuch Drama*, ed. P. W. Marx. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012, 296.

¹⁸⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre (Notes to the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*),” in *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet. New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1978, 37.

the spectator of epic theater “stands outside” and “studies” it.¹⁸⁵ Epic theatre thus seeks to bring forth a critical distance in the spectators, rather than identification and emotional involvement. Instead of providing the viewer with sensations, epic theatre “arouses his capacity for action” and “forces him to take decisions.”¹⁸⁶ As for the construction of the plays, epic theatre differs from the plot of narrative drama wherein “one scene makes another” in a logic of dramatic “growth” and “linear development” – in its stead, Brechtian technique offers a narration wherein “each scene [stands] for itself,” and the isolated scenes are linked through “montage.”¹⁸⁷

It is precisely the latter aspect – the question of technique and structure of the play – that Adorno attends to in his reading of Brecht. Adorno notes that “Brecht’s epic theatre, which has taken to constructing conflict specifically for the purpose of social critique and for the sake of a materialist dialectic, has actually cancelled a dramatic dialectic.”¹⁸⁸ As a proponent of “materialist dialectic” in the lineage of Marx and Engels, Brecht’s “social critique” indeed aims at the transformation of the existing bourgeois order. In materialist dialectics, reality is understood as a process of continual development driven by contradictions and antagonisms which form the possibility of radical transformation and emancipation. Adorno contends that Brecht, in attempting to bring about a transformation of reality through his theatre plays, has forsaken dramatic development. Such critique leaves one wonder why dramatic dialectic cannot be sacrificed if such sacrifice would bring about a social change.

What Adorno appears to be most reluctant about with regards to Brechtian technique is the introduction of “montage” into theatre. As I briefly outlined in the definition of epic theatre, Brecht introduced interruptions in the linear development of action and constructed his plays as a montage of self-contained scenes. For Adorno, the isolation of the scenes – instead of a development from one scene to another – makes them seem interchangeable in time, an accusation which should recall the deplored structure of variety. The cut-like interruptions between the scenes – made in view of social critique – would come at the price of a sacrifice of a temporal development within the work. Scenes would fleet by in a seemingly contingent manner, in an abstract relation of before and after. Moreover, Adorno holds that the montage procedure gives epic theatre the “lack of resistance of cinematographic technique.”¹⁸⁹ The medium of film, in turn, would fail to affect the viewer since the images on the “unresisting

¹⁸⁵ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 37.

¹⁸⁶ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 37.

¹⁸⁷ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 37.

¹⁸⁸ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

¹⁸⁹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

smoothly unfolding reel” have been reduced to objects that “impotently” pass the spectators by.¹⁹⁰ For Adorno, the “lack of resistance” is due to the technological apparatus of cinema:

Whatever problems of psychological fate the film may present, through parading the events past the viewer on the screen the power of the oppositions involved and the possibility of freedom within them is denied and reduced to the abstract temporal relationship of before and after. The eye of the camera which has perceived the conflict before the viewer and projected it upon the unresisting smoothly unfolding reel of film has already taken care that the conflicts are not conflicts at all. In so far as the individual images are played past in an uninterrupted photographic series on the screen they have already become mere objects in advance. Subsumed as they are, they pass us impotently by.¹⁹¹

Yet, if Adorno grounds the lack of resistance of cinema in the technological and material conditions of how its images are produced and reaches the viewer, how can he confer a “resemblant” lack of resistance to Brechtian montage?

Adorno suggests that “all Brecht’s innovations could be read as an attempt to salvage the theatre in an age of film after the disintegration of psychology.”¹⁹² However, between the lines, Adorno’s point is that these innovations not only draw on the techniques of mass culture, but they also operate on the premises established by the culture industry rather than radically leaving behind its frame. For instance, he holds that Brecht’s conception of the spectator presupposes that the audience suffers from the “*Denk- und Gedächtnisschwäche*” that mass culture has fostered.¹⁹³ Epic theatre would address an audience whose faculty of social critique must be stirred through theatrical devices and effects, a spectator who must be awakened from the illusion through the *Verfremdungseffekt*. This is why, following Adorno, “Epic theatre is both a response to mass culture and mass culture’s own reversed consciousness of itself.”¹⁹⁴

The fact that epic theatre uses the technique of montage to produce social critique does not seem to make a difference to Adorno. His critique is not concerned with the intended or actual *effects* of a work of art, but rather its technique. Yet, Brechtian technique appears to blur the distinction between artistic technique and technique in the culture industry that Adorno later proposed in “Culture Industry Revisited.”

The concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with technique in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic.

¹⁹⁰ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 72.

¹⁹¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 71f.

¹⁹² Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

¹⁹³ Cf. Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 312.

¹⁹⁴ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 73.

In contrast, the technique of culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object.¹⁹⁵

If Adorno generally seems to disqualify montage as an artistic technique and rather identifies it with the techniques operative in the culture industry, it is noteworthy how neither cinematic montage nor the Brechtian one can be seen as “external” to its object. Adorno’s critique of Brecht’s epic theatre ultimately concerns the “internal organization” and “inner logic” of his plays insofar as montage would endow them with a time wherein fungible moments succeed each other in a time without development.

In Benjamin, who was a close friend of Brecht’s, one finds a much more generous reading of the affinity between epic theatre and film. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin shared Brecht’s conviction that the techniques of modern art, even those of technologically reproduced mass culture, could be put into service of social critique. Brecht’s epic theatre, he writes,

takes up a procedure that has become familiar to you in recent years from film and radio, literature and photography. I am speaking of the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted. But here this procedure has a special right, perhaps even a perfect right.¹⁹⁶

Brecht’s use of montage undoubtedly differed from the editing techniques of the culture industry, for instance the ways in which classical Hollywood productions deployed montage procedures to create seamless narratives. Instead of creating an illusion of temporal and spatial continuity, Brechtian montage sought to produce the “interruption of action” and “constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience.”¹⁹⁷ Rather than creating illusions, Brecht used the theatrical apparatus to expose real situations and experimentally rearrange elements of reality. Unlike products of the *Kulturindustrie* which aspire to adjust the consumers to the dominant order of things, Brecht aimed at “alienating [the public] in an enduring way, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives.”¹⁹⁸ Therefore, Benjamin qualified Brechtian technique as nothing less than “the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Adorno, “Culture Industry Revisited,” 101.

¹⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 2, 1931–1934*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings & Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 778.

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 778.

¹⁹⁸ Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 779.

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 779.

3.5.2 Benjamin and the revolutionary potential of film

In contrast to Adorno's pessimist diagnosis of cinema as devoid of any resistance vis-à-vis society, Benjamin presented a more hopeful perspective on the potential of new technologies of cultural production in the essay "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1936).²⁰⁰ Although Adorno does not explicitly reference Benjamin in "Das Schema der Massenkultur," some arguments in the text can be read as responses to Benjamin's "Kunstwerk" essay. Countering Adorno's resignation with Benjamin's theory of the revolutionary function of film thus presents an anachronistic confrontation, but it can illuminate the critical potential of cinematographic techniques for a rearticulation of time – a potential that Adorno overlooks. Benjamin was by no means naïve regarding the power that the culture industry exerted over cinematic productions at the time of his writing. Yet, in contrast to Adorno, he attempted to theoretically separate the *reality* of film production – along with the restrictions it imposed on the films – from the *possibility* of "revolutionary criticism of social conditions" held in the technology of film:

So long as moviemakers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule the only revolutionary merit that can be ascribed to today's cinema is the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. We do not deny that in some cases today's films can also foster revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of property relations. But the present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is western European film production.²⁰¹

In the "Kunstwerk" essay, Benjamin outlines the shift away from a religiously informed, contemplative reception of art – which he considers historically superseded and politically regressive – toward "distraction" (*Zerstreuung*) as a counter-model that can become a tool for emancipation.²⁰² This conception of distraction stands in contrast to the negative connotations of those who saw the distractive function of entertainment as inseparable from the capitalist system – as if distraction merely prepared workers to better cope with their working

²⁰⁰ The "Kunstwerk" essay was originally published in a shortened, French version in 1936. Benjamin reworked the essay several times and these changes are reflected in the different versions he circulated – and in the existence of multiple versions that were published after his death. In my thesis, I am referring to the so-called third version, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility. Third Version," in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 251-283.

²⁰¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 262f.

²⁰² "For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. [...] Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 256f.).

conditions.²⁰³ In contrast, Benjamin understands distraction as an awareness without effort, a combination of habitual perception and “heightened attention” provoked through the shocks of montage.²⁰⁴ According to Benjamin, cinema can function as a perceptual *Übungsinstrument* – or a “second technique” – giving the masses a realm wherein they can practice in a playful and experimental manner what the technologized social reality demand from them.²⁰⁵ One could critically say that cinema is a technique of habituation or, in keeping with Adorno, a means of adapting to the conditions and demands of capitalist reality, but this would neglect Benjamin’s claim that film can afford spectators with an unprecedented sense of awareness and agency.

Whereas Adorno firmly believed that cinema’s faithful duplication of reality reinforced that social reality, Benjamin instead highlights how technological reproduction can change or expand the representation spectators have of their environment. “Film can be characterized not only in terms of man’s presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus.”²⁰⁶ According to Benjamin, one of the “revolutionary functions of film” lies in showing that the artistic and scientific use of photography are identical.²⁰⁷ The intersection of science and art brings to mind the works of Jean Painlevé or Jan Cornelis Mol, filmmakers of the early twentieth century whose respective approaches to scientific film rendered visible aspects and phenomena of reality that had never been seen before. Jan Cornelis Mol’s *From the Realm of Crystals* (1927) was one of the first to use time-lapse photography in film, rendering the process of crystallization visible to the human eye. Around the same time, *The Octopus* (1928) – one of the numerous films Jean Painlevé shot in an aquarium – granted the human spectator insight into the submarine world of other species. In these experimental examples, the artistic and the scientific align in the exploration and reflection of new aspects of the world. The revolutionary function of film lies precisely in its capacity to render analyzable aspects of human existence that previously remained inaccessible. Benjamin compares the camera’s charting of territories that were

²⁰³ This attitude is crystallized in Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry: “Amusement ist die Verlängerung der Arbeit unterm Spätkapitalismus. Es wird von dem gesucht, der dem mechanisierten Arbeitsprozess ausweichen will, um ihm von neuem gewachsen zu sein” (Cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, “Kulturindustrie,” 158).

²⁰⁴ Cf. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 267f.

²⁰⁵ In a passage that was omitted from the so-called “Dritte Fassung” of the “Kunstwerk” essay, Benjamin notes: “Der Film dient, den Menschen in denjenigen Apperzeptionen und Reaktion zu üben, die der Umgang mit einer Apparatur bedingt, deren Rolle in seinem Leben fast täglich zunimmt” (Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Mit Ergänzungen aus der Ersten und Zweiten Fassung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2011, 68, italics in the original).

²⁰⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265.

hitherto unavailable to human perception with psychoanalysis and its forays into the unconscious. Through the camera, he writes, we discover the “optical unconscious.”²⁰⁸

Even in its depictions of the most familiar empirical reality, film – Benjamin argues – can offers novel ways of looking at the ordinary, new insights into its fabric:

On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities [*Zwangsläufigkeiten*] governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*].²⁰⁹

Film’s ability to artistically render the “necessities governing our lives” lends itself to a comparison with Adorno’s critique of how variety imitated the temporal logic of industrial procedure as the production of the selfsame through time, appropriating its necessity as “the freedom of play.”²¹⁰ For Adorno, variety’s playful imitation of this temporality ultimately dissimulates the inevitability with which the capitalist order imposes itself and does not offer any means to oppose it. In contrast, Benjamin believes that film’s amplified representation of the necessities that govern our empirical reality does not merely reproduce them. Much rather, the technologies of visualization enabled through film open a critical field of action. The notion of “*Spielraum*” evokes a freedom of action, of movement, of interpretation, as a *marge de manœuvre* beyond the spaces and temporal designs that regulate life in capitalism.

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.²¹¹

The destructive potential of film emancipates the spectator from the spaces – and temporalities – of urban modern life, as it were. Yet, it is noteworthy how Benjamin’s poetic verve in the above-quoted sentences makes it more ambiguous whether the cinematic experience really

²⁰⁸ In Benjamin’s view, the publication of Freud’s *On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) marked a turning point. “This book isolated and made analyzable things which had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception. A similar deepening of apperception throughout the entire spectrum of optical – and now also auditory – impressions has been accomplished by film. [...] It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265f.)

²⁰⁹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265.

²¹⁰ Cf. Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 70.

²¹¹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265.

takes the spectator out of this “prison-world” or if the “journeys of adventure” are confined to the space of the cinema or the realm of imagination.

The question of temporality is not at the center of Benjamin’s theory of cinema, nevertheless his attention to the manipulation of empirical time through cinematographic techniques of “disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence” demonstrates how cinema – far from presenting a mere record of time – intervenes in the perception of time.²¹² Cinema has the capacity to offer an experience of time that radically deviates from the ever-same pace and forward march of clock time. Film reconfigures time just as much as it reconfigures space:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly ‘in any case,’ but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them [...].²¹³

Hence, cinema does not merely render more precise what was already visible, it reveals entirely new structural formations or qualities in the matter it depicts, thereby endowing the spectators with new means to not only perceive, but to act on the world they encounter through this expanded lens.

In the light of Benjamin’s conviction that film could foster “revolutionary criticism of social conditions” along with the insight that the conditions of film production at that time did not develop this potential, it is worth recalling that Adorno wrote the “Schema of Mass Culture” while being in exile in the United States, in a period that coincided with the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood. The then dominant visual style, narrative structure and production method have since been challenged and diversified. In fact, there has, since the early days of cinema, been alternative approaches. Adorno was certainly not unaware of the existence of Soviet Cinema, and in the decades that followed his critique of the “Kulturindustrie,” many other attempts to emancipate film from the culture industry can be enumerated. In the late 1950s, the filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague in France – such as Jean-Luc Godard – embodied an opposition to mainstream film production by producing their own films on often minimal budgets, with an experimental approach to style, narrative and editing that broke with classical

²¹² Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 266.

²¹³ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 265f.

conventions. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, film would become an important instrument for political activism.²¹⁴

Adorno, who initially held that cinema was deemed to function as an “excuse for the world,”²¹⁵ later revised his view on film and considered the possibility of an alternative cinematic practice. In texts such as “Filmtransparente” (1966), he evokes the “Oberhausener Manifest” – a manifest signed by a group of twenty-six filmmakers, proclaiming the death of the old film and urging for a renewal of West German film production which was to be obtained through the liberation from the conventions of the film industry, the influence of sponsors and the paternalism of stakeholders.²¹⁶ For Adorno, the “comparatively awkward and unprofessional cinema” of this new generation of filmmakers conveys “the hope that the so-called mass media might eventually become something qualitatively different.”²¹⁷ In an introduction to “Filmtransparente,” cinema scholar Miriam Hansen furthermore insists on the influence that two of Adorno’s friends and occasional collaborators – Alexander Kluge and Hanns Eisler – had on his changing perspective on film. In the 1940s, Adorno and Eisler wrote *Composing for the Films* which, in stark contrast to “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” makes appeal to the use of montage for critical purposes.²¹⁸ Moreover, Hansen argues that Kluge’s approach to filmmaking – which built as much on his own writing practice and literary modernism as it did on his grounding in the theories of the Frankfurter Schule – played a pivotal role in making Adorno drop his defenses against film as a mere product of culture industry.²¹⁹

²¹⁴ For a detailed account on the efforts to turn film into an anti-commercial and communal political medium, see Young-a Park, “Film Activism: Film as Politics,” in *Unexpected Alliances*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014, 25f.

²¹⁵ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 66.

²¹⁶ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” in *New German Critique* 24/25, 1981/1982, 199.

The “Oberhausener Manifest” was presented by Alexander Kluge during the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen in 1962, at a press conference provocatively titled “Papap Kino ist tot.”

²¹⁷ “In this comparatively awkward and unprofessional cinema, uncertain of its effects, is inscribed the hope that the so-called mass media might eventually become something qualitatively different. While in autonomous art anything lagging behind the already established technical standard does not rate, vis-a-vis the culture industry – whose standard excludes everything but the predigested and the already integrated, just as the cosmetic trade eliminates facial wrinkles – works which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental, have a liberating quality. In them the flaws of a pretty girl’s complexion become the corrective to the immaculate face of the professional star” (Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” 199).

²¹⁸ Miriam Hansen, “Introduction to Adorno, ‘Transparencies on Film’ (1966),” in *New German Critique* 24/25, 1981/1982, 194f.

²¹⁹ Hansen, “Introduction to Adorno, ‘Transparencies on Film’ (1966),” 194.

3.5.3 A typology of temporal treatments in modernist and avant-garde art

Having countered Adorno's understanding of film and the technique of montage as he presents it in "The Schema of Mass Culture," I will return to his discussion of three different types of inner temporal organizations in works of art. In order to examine the significant change that epic theatre makes with the regards to the immanent temporality of the artwork, Adorno contrasts it with the treatment of time in other works from different art forms. He begins by noting that the "overcoming of time" (*Überwältigung der Zeit*) was the "most crucial concern" for drama and symphony.²²⁰ As a verb, *überwältigen* may be translated as "to overcome" or "to overwhelm." For the present-day reader, *Überwältigung* thus has an unusual ring when it is used to bear on the handling of time. If read as a subjective genitive, it could even insinuate that it is time itself that overcomes or overwhelms. Yet the context clearly indicates that time is the object and that it is a question of "mastering" time. What does the fact that time is seen as something that can be *überwältigt* reveal about the conception of time? Time appears almost as a natural force that is to be tamed and controlled through the compositional and dramaturgical procedures deployed in the work of art. "The empty passage of time, the meaningless transience of life was to be seized upon through form and brought into participation with the 'idea' by virtue of the totality of this form."²²¹ The work of art thus carries out a *mise-en-forme* of time, whereby the meaningless passing of time receives an imprint of the meaningful.

Musing on the dramaturgical mastery of time, Adorno returns to the notion of "conflict," which he now defines as the means to overcome time by crafting and sustaining intra-temporal tension within the work of art. The conflict upholds the temporal continuum as it ties the past and the future to the present. Adorno sees this formula illustrated in Henrik Ibsen's modernist drama wherein "the measure of conflict is the power of the past in the present as the threat of the future."²²² In drama, all moments are so thoroughly intertwined or temporally interrelated with one another that one instant contains all the other: "The temporality of absolute drama would be the instant which reveals itself in a flash from the crystallization of all the temporal relationships within the action."²²³ The "flash" (*Nu*) not only evokes the flashing up of the dialectical image in Benjamin's concept of history,²²⁴ but it also

²²⁰ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 73.

²²¹ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 73.

²²² Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 74.

²²³ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 74.

²²⁴ Another allusion to Benjamin occurs in Adorno's remark on Beethoven: "It is no different in the case of the symphony which by means of its universal motivic elaboration, the musical equivalent for the dramatic dynamics

brings to mind Renaissance paintings of mythical or biblical motifs, for which the painter had to carefully choose the singular instant that best conveyed the whole story, an image that condensed its own past and future. Yet, If the “overcoming of time” in the work of art ultimately consisted in banning the outer, seemingly meaningless passing of time from the aesthetic realm, the “dams it has erected are constantly broken by the time it has tried to exorcise.”²²⁵ Adorno marks the limit of aesthetic attempts at temporal mastery, arguing that “by virtue of its overcoming [*Aufhebung*] of time art remains impotent really to accomplish the transcendence of existence in the mere commemoration of it.”²²⁶ While art can transcend the ordinary experience of time – breaking with what Adorno cynically described as “the empty passage of time, the meaningless transience of life” – it ultimately cannot overcome the temporality that reigns outside of itself, nor the conditions of existence that such time institutes.

In contrast to the artistic attempts to “overcome time,” Adorno points to bourgeois works of art that have opted for other strategies in the treatment of time. In lieu of a dramaturgical imprinting of meaning, this second type consists in the renunciation of all “pre-ordained meaning and through an unfettered, as it were, passive, ‘empiricist’ abandonment to the temporal element which we have given up trying to master.”²²⁷ Here, the novels of Marcel Proust and James Joyce provide the paradigm in that they “surrender themselves so unreservedly to time that time itself [...] now becomes as dissociated as the individuals who move through it.”²²⁸ Giving up temporal mastery in order to succumb to the passing of time thus has repercussions both on structures of meaning and of subjectivity. It confronts the audience with an absence of meaning as it explodes the continuum of meaningful constellations that Ibsen and his likes had carefully crafted by sustaining a tension between all interrelated moments. In Proust, for instance, the narrative disintegrated into temporal moments that no longer appear in a relationship of “succession” since the workings of memory “draw all temporal events back into themselves like a whirlpool.”²²⁹

of conflict, not merely fulfils its own time but actively imposes meaning upon it and causes it to disappear: Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony provides an exemplary case of the dialectical arrest of time” (Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 74).

²²⁵ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 74.

²²⁶ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 74. In the German, Adorno writes: “Kunst bleibt ohnmächtig, vermöge der *Aufhebung* der Zeit, im bloßen Eingedenken des Daseins dessen Transzendenz wirklich zu gewinnen” (Cf. Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 313).

²²⁷ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 74.

²²⁸ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 75.

²²⁹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 75.

Brechtian theatre, in turn, “already presupposes the collapse of time as well as that of the individual.”²³⁰ The epic element – such as the breaking of the fourth wall – interrupts the drama to “reveal its illusory and ideological nature.”²³¹ Yet, it does not replace the temporal continuum of dramatic action with the disintegrated temporality found in the novels of Joyce and Proust. Rather, epic theatre presents a third strategy that breaks with the two aforementioned modernist examples of temporal articulation: “The Brechtian drama is governed by a kind of time-space, an experimental time which more closely resembles that of the repeatable ‘laboratory experiment’ than it does the time of history.”²³² Time-space – or *temps espace* as Adorno writes in the German – alludes to Bergson’s critique of the tendency to “spatialize” time, whereby time is divided into isolated and homogeneous instants like sections of space. In qualifying the time of epic theatre as a *Zeit des wiederholbaren ‘Versuchs’* or *Experimentalzeit*, Adorno evokes the fact that Brecht published some of his works under the title *Versuche*.²³³ Besides “essay” or “test”, the notion of *Versuch* denotes a “scientific experiment” which is essentially repeatable. If one were to reproduce the conditions and the protocol of a laboratory experiment at another time, the result should be the same. By aligning Brecht’s treatment of time with that of modern science and mechanics which fully embraces time as homogeneous, divisible and interchangeable through time, Adorno presents the temporality of epic theatre as an ally of the very conception of time that undergirds industrial capitalism. Despite Brecht’s effort to stage a critique of social reality, his *mise-en-forme* of time would – to speak with Adorno and in opposition to Benjamin’s reading – amount to a “faithful duplication” of capitalist temporality.

3.5.4 Time consciousness as a deep-seated expression of domination

If there is any common denominator to be found among the three distinct inner organizations of time that Adorno deciphers – the dramatic overcoming of time, the modernist novel’s surrender to time or Brecht’s repeatable experimental time – it is that none of the strategies succeeds in challenging or subverting “empirical time:”

It is true that this experimental time is no more protected from the irruption of empirical time than is its counterpart of dramatically contained time. For empirical time, which is the most profound expression

²³⁰ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 75.

²³¹ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 75.

²³² Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 75.

²³³ Adorno, “Das Schema der Massenkultur,” 313.

[*der tiefste Niederschlag*] of the relations of domination within the field of consciousness, persists as long as domination lasts and lies embedded in art itself because art is constituted in the protest against the time of fate.²³⁴

This passage attests to the tremendous importance that Adorno grants the issue of time. It suggests that any radical critique of the relations of domination must also be a critique of its temporality. By analogy to Adorno's use of "empirical reality" to speak of reality as it is or the myth of the positive, "empirical time" can be understood as the time that pervades capitalist society. Empirical time is also the time that the culture industry has naturalized. The notion of *Niederschlag* – here translated as "expression" – also evokes the notion of "sediment," which offers another way of accounting for the formation and maintenance of domination in terms of an equally insidious and deep-reaching sedimentation of external temporal structures within the subject. As the deepest sedimentation of relations of domination in consciousness, the temporality of capitalism is so well-integrated within the subject that it is no longer being noticed. This is the reason why empirical time can also be qualified as the "time of fate." The institution of time created and perpetuated by human beings come to appear as an independent formation or second nature, thereby taking on the appearance of fate, that is, as something equally predetermined and unshakeable.

What moreover comes to the fore in this passage is a seemingly ambivalent status of art – a discrepancy between what it does and what it should do, as it were. On the one hand, Adorno affirms the critical force of art since it is constituted in "protest against" the naturalized order of things and, by extension, against the temporal order that is so deeply seated within the subject's consciousness. On the other hand, the analyses that Adorno develops in the "Schema of Mass Culture" all suggest that art in the age of the culture industry falls short of protest and resistance against this "time of fate." Given that all the artistic approaches to the immanent organization of time discussed by Adorno – be it Ibsen, Joyce/Proust or Brecht – have either failed to function as a critique of empirical time or even become symptomatic expressions of it, the question arises whether there are any works of art that succeed in expressing an objection to empirical time? Can there be any adequate representation of the crisis of temporality in late capitalism?

²³⁴ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 75. "Diese Experimentalzeit freilich ist so wenig wie ihr Widerspiel, die dramatisch gestaute, vorm Einbruch der empirischen sicher, die, als der tiefste Niederschlag des Herrschaftsverhältnisses im Bewußtsein, so lange weilt wie Herrschaft dauert und auf dem Grunde von Kunst selber liegt, weil Kunst im Protest gegen jene Zeit – die von Schicksal – sich konstituiert" (Adorno, "Das Schema der Massenkultur," 313).

Witkin convincingly suggests that Adorno's analysis in the "Schema of Mass Culture" points to the "impossibility of a positive temporality," that is, the failure of any positive representation of time, which brings Witkin to conclude that "the absence of this temporality, or temporality as loss, as suffering, as pure negativity, had to be the very form and content of the modern work of resistant art."²³⁵ This is why, according to Witkin, Adorno prefers Beckett to Brecht. In plays such as *En attendant Godot* or *End Game*, "the attempt to integrate time and to master the temporal element is abandoned altogether."²³⁶ The audience experiences the weight of time and history through the modality of loss or lack, "in and through its negation."²³⁷ I would like to add that a representation of temporality "in and through negation" nevertheless lacks the critical power of "negative thinking" that would propose a forceful alternative. Can the representation of "negative temporality" function as an antithesis to the false society? Would not Beckett's theatre, in keeping with Adorno's own frame of analysis, be but the frankest representation of the "disenchanted truth" of time in the false, capitalist society?²³⁸

3.6 From the replication of hegemonic time to emancipation

Through a meticulous analysis of the inner logic of time in products of the culture industry and works of art, "The Schema of Mass Culture" offers a trenchant portrait of the characteristics of time in capitalist modernity. In articulating the triangular relation between the hegemonic order of time, the representation of time in culture, and time consciousness, Adorno outlines the constellation they form in the age of culture industry. As to the question whether aesthetic practices and representations of time in works of art reinforce or undermine a prevailing understanding of time, Adorno's answer – in "The Schema of Mass Culture" – is rather pessimistic. Not only are the products of the culture industry bound to imitate and replicate the time that capitalist society continuously institutes, but Adorno claims that even the works of art that seek to contest and undermine this very reality – as in the case of Brecht's epic theatre – are caught in its temporal logics.

Centering his examination on the technique and internal organization of *variété*, impressionist music, jazz, film, Brechtian theatre as well as modernist theatre and literature,

²³⁵ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 67.

²³⁶ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 67.

²³⁷ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 67.

²³⁸ I'm alluding to the "disenchanted truth" that Adorno saw in the variety act (Cf. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 71).

Adorno painstakingly sought to show how they reproduce the time of capitalist modernity. In his frame of analysis, the temporality that dominates the empirical reality of capitalism must not be reflected on the level of the content, it is rather sedimented in the inner logic of the form of the artwork. Across the examples that Adorno attends to, the temporality of capitalist society is portrayed as a time “without history,” a time that mimics the industrial procedure as a paradoxical sequence of the eversame through time. It is also a time akin to clock time, made up of isolated, interchangeable moments.

Adorno not only demonstrates how mass culture replicates empirical reality, but also addresses how our perception of reality, in turn, is pre-formatted by the “schema” of mass culture. This *Wechselwirkung* between reality and culture gestures toward a potentially disruptive and transformative power of art which Adorno, in this text, nevertheless seems unwilling to acknowledge. It is, nevertheless, precisely this potential that Benjamin foregrounds in his understanding of film and the technique of montage. Benjamin suggests that artistic techniques for the work-immanent organization of time are not bound to simply replicate the temporal logics of modernity; they can also propose novel articulations of time that challenge those of empirical reality. In conclusion, the articulations of time in works of art and culture have a crucial role in the complex relation between the socially instituted “empirical time” and time consciousness. While cultural products that merely manifest the prevailing understanding of time also reinforce its domination, works of art have the potential to draft other conceptions of time which may destabilize – and eventually undermine – the hegemonic temporal design of capitalist society. Such aesthetic interruptions of the dominant order of time will be further explored in the next chapter’s discussion of Jacques Rancière.

4 Interrupted narratives: The multiplicity of temporalities in Jacques Rancière

4.1 On the aesthetics of time at the heart of politics

Unlike Adorno who foregrounded how culture in the age of capitalism imitated and sustained hegemonic temporality, the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière understands works of art as instances of aesthetic experience wherein the temporal hierarchies that structure our ordinary experience can be challenged, negotiated and reconfigured. In fact, the question of temporality spans Rancière's thinking like a through-line and manifests in his extensive writing on time in relation to labor, politics and the arts of literature, dance and cinema. Already in *La Nuit des prolétaires* (1981), one of Rancière's earliest monographs, he showed that the workers' movement of the 1830s primarily consisted in a reconquest of time, in which the workers broke the normal succession between rest and labor, using the nights for other activities than sleep.²³⁹ Moreover, time plays a fundamental role in Rancière's concept of aesthetics as a "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*) that configures our political experience:

If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.²⁴⁰

In Rancièrian aesthetics, time is conceived as a historical, social and political configuration that conditions our perception – what and who can make themselves seen and heard – and who can have a part in politics. Finally, in recent books concerned with literature, such as *Le fil perdu* (2014) et *Les bords de la fiction* (2017), Rancière attends to how modern fiction questioned the narrative principles that have dominated storytelling since Aristotle's *Poetics*. The revolutionary character that Rancière ascribes to literature manifested as a "destruction" of elements once considered fundamental to all fiction. Modern fiction broke with the classical

²³⁹ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*. London & New York: Verso, 2012.

²⁴⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2004, 8.

narrative structure, constructed as a sequence of causes and effects, and introduced descriptions of details and events deemed irrelevant to the classical narrative economy.²⁴¹ In doing so, literature brought about an upheaval of the dominant ordering of time, leading to a redistribution of the sensible.

If these three, briefly outlined examples demonstrate how Rancière keeps returning to the issue of time and grants it a central part in processes of emancipation and aesthetic revolutions, temporality undeniably takes center stage in *Les temps modernes. Art, temps, politique* (2018), which was translated into English and published as *Modern Times. Temporality in Art and Politics* (2022).²⁴² The title intentionally evokes both Charlie Chaplin's homonymous film and the French journal *Les Temps Modernes* that was founded in 1942 by de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. In the foreword to the book, Rancière nonetheless distinguishes his own view of "modern times" from the journal's understanding of it as the current "age," described by Sartre in terms of a "totality, a 'signifying synthesis'" in which the writer ought to be fully engaged.²⁴³ Differentiating his own endeavor from the aim of the journal, Rancière states that "[t]his book involves neither a diagnosis of modernity, nor an appeal to embrace the time. Instead, it ponders the montage of time that makes it possible to issue such an appeal or advance a diagnosis."²⁴⁴ Countering the colloquial understanding of "modern times" in the singular (*qua* the present age), Rancière puts emphasis on the use of the plural, insisting that modernity – as a "montage" – consists of a multiplicity of temporalities. In this regard, Rancière explicitly sides with Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), a film that so astutely staged the conflict of temporalities in modernity, between the merciless rhythm of the machine, on the one hand, and the tramp who cannot keep up with it, on the other.

Resulting from a series of reworked lectures and conference papers, *Les temps modernes* brings together four essays that all attend to "modern times" as a multiplicity of interlacing or conflicting temporalities. "There is no one modern times," as Rancière puts it in the preface to the book,

²⁴¹ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Le fil perdu. Essais sur la fiction moderne*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2014, 10.

²⁴² Comprising four chapters that were initially presented as lectures or conference papers in different venues between 2014 and 2015, an earlier version of the book was published in English in 2017 as *Modern Times. Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics* by the Multimedijalni Institut in Zagreb. In the following year, La fabrique published a version in French, amended by Rancière and with a slightly modified subtitle, see Jacques Rancière, *Les temps modernes. Art, temps, politique*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2018. This book, in turn, was translated into English and published by Verso in 2022. In the following citations, *Modern Times* refers to the Verso edition, see Jacques Rancière, *Modern Times: Temporality in Art and Politics*, trans. Gregory Elliott. London & New York: Verso, 2022.

²⁴³ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, vii. Rancière uses "époque" in the French (cf. Rancière, *Les temps modernes*, 7).

²⁴⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, viif.

only a plurality of them, of frequently different, and sometimes contradictory, ways of thinking the time of modern politics or modern art in terms of progress, regression, repetition, arrest or overlapping times; different or contradictory ways of organizing the temporalities of the arts of movement – their continuities, breaks, forms of splicing and resumption – to create works responding to present conditions and future exigencies.²⁴⁵

Central to Rancière's concept of a "montage" of temporalities – which not only applies to our understanding of the time of modern politics and history but also characterizes the artistic articulation of time in literature, dance and cinema – is his critical interrogation of "narrative" forms. In the following, I will show that the critique of a dominant narrative structure is equally central to Rancière's idiosyncratic conception of time as a hierarchical distribution of forms of life as it is to his investigation into cinematic treatments of time as critical responses to the historical moment they participate in.

4.2 Time as a "hierarchical distribution of forms of life"

4.2.1 Aristotle's fictional rationality and Plato's partition of occupations

Although Aristotle and Plato are recurrent interlocutors in Rancière's writing, it might seem surprising to convoke two ancient philosophers in an elaboration of the meaning of modern times. The references to Aristotle and Plato are particularly prominent in the first essay of *Les temps modernes*, wherein Rancière muses on the constellation of the three terms that make up the chapter's title: "Time, Narrative, Politics." The articulation of these terms begins in the form of a question: How is the time of politics narrated? Taking the Marxist science of history – and its narrative of time – as a point of departure, Rancière observes that today the idea that the historical development of relations of production would bring about justice and the end of capitalist exploitation appears naïve and obsolete. Such "History," he notes, turned out to be but "a story: the fiction of a temporal development guided by a future end, the grand narrative of a wrong inflicted and justice promised to a universal victim."²⁴⁶ Yet, as Rancière demonstrates in the chapter, it does not suffice to denunciate this grand narrative to get rid of the assumptions about time that underlies it. Rancière argues that the Marxist concept of History and the critique of Marxism that proclaims the end of its grand narrative share a certain

²⁴⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, x.

²⁴⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 1.

manner of “dramatizing” time.²⁴⁷ In their respective ways of narrating the time of history, the Marxist grand narrative and the discourse that fervently denounces it both deploy a “dramaturgy” which draws on a type of rationality that Rancière qualifies as “fictional.”²⁴⁸ Fiction, as Rancière defines it,

is not the invention of imaginary beings. In the first instance, it is a structure of rationality. It is the construction of a framework within which subjects, things and situations are seen as belonging to a common world, while events can be identified and linked in terms of coexistence, succession and causal linkage. Fiction is required whenever a certain sense of reality needs to be produced.²⁴⁹

This expanded definition of fiction – as a way of world-making or, more precisely, a manner of linking events that endows them with a plausibility that makes the audience subscribe to the narrative – speaks to the power of fiction in literature and film. It also gives a hint as to why fiction is incepted in journalism, science and political discourse. In examining the narrative put forth in the Marxist science of history and in certain critiques thereof, Rancière argues that both deploy a fictional rationality that stems from the principles of storytelling that Aristotle outlined in *Poetics*, a treatise mainly concerned with the analysis of tragedy.

In the Book IX of *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes a difference between the poet and the historian. The difference is not a matter of rhythm or meter, but a difference of principle according to which the poet and the historian relate events.

[T]he poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse – you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.²⁵⁰

In the excerpt, Aristotle defines “history” as a form of writing that relates what *has happened* in the manner of a chronicle of past events, whereas “poetry” constructs a sequence of actions that *might happen*, a story wherein every situation appears as a “probable” and “necessary”

²⁴⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 2. In the French, Rancière writes of “la manière commune dont la critique marxienne et la critique du marxisme mettent le temps en scène” (Cf. Rancière, *Les temps modernes*, 14, my emphasis).

²⁴⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 2.

²⁴⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 2.

²⁵⁰ The passage is situated in the Book IX of *Poetics*, see Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle. Volume Two: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 2322f.

consequence of preceding actions. The task of the poet – and, by extension, the fiction writer – is to account for the unfolding of events as a chain of causes and effects. As a principle of construction, the law of probability grants the narration of what “might happen” the appearance of something that could really occur. The criteria of probability or verisimilitude is thus a condition for the “effect of reality” that fiction, to borrow Rancière’s wording, produces. Equally important, if not more so, is the hierarchy that Aristotle establishes when he considers poetry “more philosophic” and “of graver import” than history. It is arguably the conformity to a “law” and an intelligible principle that grants poetry a “universal” quality, whereas history is bound to the singularity of a thing that has happened.

Rancière seizes these two modes of narration for his conceptual instrumentarium and summarizes that *historia* – alternately referred to as the chronicle – “narrates how things happened empirically, as contingent events, one after the other” whereas *fiction* “constructs a specific time wherein the sequence of facts is identical to that of a chain of causes and effects.”²⁵¹ Insisting on the alleged superiority of fiction over the chronicle, Rancière shows how the legacy of the Aristotelian treatise on classical drama has repercussions reaching far beyond the sphere of tragic poetry proper as it becomes “a model of intelligibility of human action” in general.²⁵² The hierarchical division between two types of narration corresponds to a hierarchical division between two models of action, two ways of inhabiting time:

The hierarchy of times that grounds the rationality of human action corresponds to a hierarchy of places separating two categories of human being. There are those who live in the time of events that might happen, the time of action and its ends, which is also the time of knowledge and leisure. From antiquity to the nineteenth century, they have been referred to as active men or men of leisure. And then there are those who inhabit the time of things that happen one after another – the circumscribed, repetitive time of those dubbed passive or mechanical men, because they live in the universe of mere means without sharing in the ends of action any more than they do in leisure, which is an end in itself.²⁵³

The “active men” live in a time that unfolds according to a causal rationality wherein they can inscribe their actions in view of certain ends. They thus partake in shaping the course of events as historical actors. By contrast, “passive men” inhabit the time of the chronicle and are rather subject to a contingent succession of events that happen to them. The terminology of “active men” and “passive men” – a division of human beings that Rancière sets out to dismantle – is

²⁵¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 6.

²⁵² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 6.

²⁵³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 7f.

also an Aristotelian legacy. It stems from Rancière's interpretation of Book VIII of *Politics*, wherein Aristotle muses on a distinction between rest as "the time of relaxation required between two periods of physical exertion" and leisure as the "free time of those not subject to the compulsion of labour and rest."²⁵⁴ These two forms of inactivity were reserved for two different kinds of people. While workers had to spend their time of not working on rest, "free time" was the temporal privilege granted to those who did not have to work. In this regard, the "hierarchy of inactivity" was symptomatic of a hierarchy of two models of acting:

Leisure was the form of inactivity appropriate to so-called *free or active men*, who were capable either of projecting the ends of their activity far ahead, or of acting solely for the pleasure of asserting their capacity for action. For its part, rest corresponded to the way of being of so-called *passive or mechanical men*, because their activities were never anything but means of satisfying immediate needs.²⁵⁵

What Rancière refers to as a "hierarchy of times" and the subsequent separation of two categories of human beings not only hinge on an inegalitarian distribution of time, but also on the different temporal horizons in which they act.

With Plato, Rancière shows that the distribution of time is entwined with a partition of places. In Book II of *Politeia*, the interlocutors of the dialogue discuss the functions that different classes of citizens should fill in the ideal *polis*. In the guise of "justice," the dialogue posits, and ultimately legitimizes, a division between those entitled to leisure time and those who are not. Envisioning a rigid distribution of times and places, of activities and capacities, Plato – transposed into the words of Rancière – saw it as a prerequisite that "artisans, who must not have time to go elsewhere, time to do anything other than the work which cannot wait, should be kept exclusively in the space of the workshop."²⁵⁶ Being temporally and spatially confined to the workshop and the cycle of labor and rest is thus what defines the very way of being of the artisans. For the sake of maintaining the order in his perfectly "just" *polis*, Plato prescribes the artisans an essential temporal deficit, as it were. To Rancière's point, Plato perfectly articulates how the partition of time becomes a central means to maintain (the dominant) order, which is also the order of domination.

²⁵⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 57f.

²⁵⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 58, my emphasis.

²⁵⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 8. Rancière often returns to this Platonic narrative, for instance as an example of the distribution of spaces and times in "The Distribution of the Sensible" (*Le partage du sensible*), where he writes that "Plato states that artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do *not have the time* to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be *somewhere else* because *work will not wait*" (Cf. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7f., italics in the original).

Critically drawing on Aristotle and Plato, Rancière analyzes how two distinct ways of narrating a sequence of events – as causally linked or as a contingent succession – correspond to a hierarchy between two ways of relating to time. This hierarchy, in turn, forms the foundation of his idiosyncratic conception of time. For Rancière, time is not merely the temporal unfolding that runs from the past toward the future, it also a hierarchy of forms of life: “The rationality of the horizontal unfolding of time is based on a vertical hierarchy that separates two forms of life, two ways of being in time – as we might simply put it, the way of those who have time and the way of those who do not.”²⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that, in Ancient Greece, Plato’s hierarchy of occupations and Aristotle’s division between free and mechanical men concerned the status of the philosopher – perhaps these divisions were even the condition of possibility of philosophy as an occupation. In the *polis* envisioned by Plato, for instance, the philosopher needed leisure and free time to philosophize while other citizens were condemned to do the work that would prevent the philosopher from thinking. Ultimately, certain people have the privilege of leisure *because* others work. The form of life of those who have time depends on the way of life of those who do not have time.

4.2.2 Of “historical necessity:” The end of grand narratives

The dual nature of time as the unfolding of moments and as a hierarchical separation of two ways of being in time – a division itself rooted in the Aristotelian distinction between fiction and *historia* – is crucial to Rancière’s analysis of the grand narratives of modern politics. Rancière is particularly interested in how this narration takes the form of an all-encompassing account that portrays history as “a totalization of moments in a sequence stretching towards an immanent end.”²⁵⁸ In its account of history, the “grand narratives” conflate the two models of temporality that Aristotle distinguished:

[The grand narratives] cancelled the contrast between fictional [rationality] and the purely empirical character of the successive facts of *historia*. That is how History – with a capital H – became a form of rationality and a promise of justice. The narratives of historical progress and the Marxist narrative of History applied the model of causality reserved by Aristotle for fictional creation to the succession of historical facts. They dismissed the hierarchy of temporalities by subordinating the time wherein things happen one after another to the rational form of a series of causes and effects.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 8.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 26.

²⁵⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 8f.

By subordinating the time of the chronicle to the causal linking of events proper to fictional rationality, grand narratives mold the succession of historical events in the form of necessity. Out of this coalescence of the sequence of historical facts and the model of causality, the idea of “historical necessity” is born. The Marxist science of history went even further in its recuperation of Aristotelian poetics, Rancière argues, insofar as it conceived of an intrinsic relation between the unfolding of time and the notions of knowledge and justice, albeit a different articulation of these notions than the one found in Ancient Greek tragedies.

The time of tragedy is articulated around *peripeteia*, a sudden reversal of a situation where fortune turns into misfortune and ignorance is transformed into knowledge. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, the peripety is the moment in which Oedipus comes to realize that he unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, even as he believed that he was taking measures against this prophecy. “This is,” Rancière notes,

how time is linked to knowledge and justice. Tragic characters pass from fortune to misfortune not as a result of some divine curse, but because their actions produce effects that are the reverse of those expected. And, in suffering these effects, they attain knowledge of what they did not know.²⁶⁰

In tragedy, then, the evolution of knowledge coincides with the transition to misfortune.

In a reversal of tragedy’s coupling of the hero’s coming to know with a turn to misfortune, the Marxist grand narrative posits knowledge as a key to the transition from the misfortune of capitalist exploitation toward a fortune to come through its abolition. Knowledge, in the Marxist grand narrative, not only grants intelligibility to the current order of things but also the *possibility* to transform it. The Marxist hero of modern History, one could say, does not gain knowledge about his situation retrospectively, for he has the knowledge of the necessary development that supposedly will turn his misfortune into fortune. The historical necessity that is said to have brought forth capitalist exploitation as the current order of things has also produced the knowledge of a historical necessity of a coming destruction of the capitalist system. In this regard, the Marxist understanding of history builds on a certain relationship between necessity and possibility:

[T]he new science of history heralded a transition from the misfortune of the experience of exploitation to the happiness of liberation, secured thanks to the knowledge acquired of the law of necessity. A privileged link was thereby asserted between necessity and possibility: the necessary development of

²⁶⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 6f.

forms of exploitation yielded a knowledge of necessity that made it possible to be rid of its sway. History thus became the narrative of a positive conjunction between the unfolding of time, the production of knowledge and the possibility of justice. Historical development itself produced a science of development that enabled historical agents to play an active role in transforming necessity into possibility.²⁶¹

Yet, at the core of the “historical necessity,” the hierarchical division of times reappears. It takes the shape of two distinct ways of experiencing the very same historical process. On the one hand, a minority inhabiting the “time of science” wherein the *knowledge* of necessity could be transformed into action and, on the other, a majority – the proletariat – living in the “time of ignorance,” the lot of those who passively and impatiently waited “for a future whose conditions were not yet ripe.”²⁶² The hierarchy between “active” and “passive” men thus returns. Rancière describes the “ignorance” as endemic to the capitalist system. “The same laws that generated the system’s functioning generated misrecognition of it,” they “reproduced the veil of ideology which kept people at a distance from knowledge of the real movement of historical forces.”²⁶³ While Marx asserted that the proletariat would inevitably displace the capitalist system, Rancière shows that the proletariat, as a potential actor of social transformation, was held in passivity. Marxist science of history failed to think through the activation of the proletariat. Rather, the workers were kept in ignorance about the knowledge of the alleged necessity that would make the abolition of capitalist exploitation possible. The crux, in Rancière’s analysis, is that the “historical necessity” which was supposed to furnish the possibility of historical transformation also reproduced the impossibility of such transformation. Describing it as an “inner splitting” of the notion of necessity, Rancière notes that “[t]he science of historical necessity was knowledge of the possible destruction of capitalist domination and knowledge of its necessary reproduction and indefinite postponement of that destruction.”²⁶⁴

No matter how critical Rancière is of the narrative at work in the Marxist science of history – the story of a coming yet ever-deferred abolition of capitalist exploitation – he expresses reservations about the proclamation of the “end” of grand narratives. The problem with the postmodern celebration of the end of grand narratives of History is precisely that it fails to grasp how the narrative of historical necessity survives in our present age. Rancière

²⁶¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 9f.

²⁶² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 11.

²⁶³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 10.

²⁶⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 11.

contends that forms of capitalist and state domination have adopted the principle of historical necessity for its own purpose, cynically noting that “[s]ubmission to this necessity, and comprehension of it, were more than ever made the sole route to any future happiness.”²⁶⁵ In the neoliberal appropriation of the temporal model of the Marxist narrative, however, necessity is no longer the necessity of a transformation to come, but rather the necessity of the perpetuation of capitalist social relations. Today, the transition to fortune is no longer conceived as moment of reversal of the current situation, for the possibility of transformation is altogether excluded from the new grand narrative. The notion of historical necessity continues to structure the dominant order of time. Yet, unlike the Marxist narrative of History, the struggle for a transformation of current relations of domination have been surrogated by the mere optimization of the existent order. In lieu of a socialist revolution, we are fed with the narrative of the triumph of a global free market.²⁶⁶

4.2.3 Disrupting the dominant narrative: “The power of the moment”

Rancière’s analysis of the time of modern politics is thoroughly marked by the critique of the “narrative” that undergirds it. It would, however, be misleading to conclude that he wants to discard the concept of narrative altogether. Rather, Rancière demonstrates that each narrative operates a certain distribution of time – wherein the Aristotelian fictional rationality is but one model.²⁶⁷ A narrative, as we have seen, is essentially a mode of relating events. In telling the unfolding of moments, the narrator sequences the events according to a structure of rationality of their choice. Every narrative form pertains to a model of temporality. In the attempt to operate a shift away from the modern and contemporary avatars of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that I have discussed in the previous sections – the narrative of historical necessity and the hierarchical separation of two ways of being in time – Rancière attends to emancipatory narrative practices that form breaches and openings in the fabric of dominant time.

²⁶⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 11.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 12.

²⁶⁷ I am referring to the above-cited definition of fiction as a structure of rationality that undergirds the construction of a common world. Rancière makes clear that the narrative structured as a sequence of causes and effects is not the only way of linking events, for they can be related in different ways, “in terms of coexistence, succession and causal linkage” (Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 2). In an article concerned with Rancière’s thinking on time, Mark Robson stresses the importance of the notion of narrative: “It is the issue of time, then, of its place in a series of narratives from the most influential to the largely overlooked, of its centrality to a mode of thinking and to the interruption of that thought, of its determining role in the distribution of the sensible as it is lived. But it is also and always a matter of the time that narrative itself dispenses, develops and distributes, of the time that appears in the gap that opens up between a certain political philosophy and its objects” (Mark Robson, “Jacques Rancière and Time: le temps d’après,” in *Paragraph* 38(3), 2015, 299).

The struggle to abolish the hierarchy of times through the creation of another narrative is at the heart of Rancière's comments on the manuscripts of the carpenter Gabriel Gauny (1806-1889) which he qualified as a "Plebeian philosopher."²⁶⁸ The compound of "Plebeian" – which alludes to the commoners in Ancient Rome – and "philosopher" performatively breaks the (Ancient) division between the artisan and the philosopher crystallized in Aristotle's hierarchical division between free and passive men. Gauny's writings testify to the alienating conditions of workers at the onset of industrial capitalism and their struggle for emancipation. In Rancière's reading, the manuscripts make manifest that the workers' emancipation was first and foremost a reconquering of time, a time that they per definition did not have in the hierarchical separation of forms of life.²⁶⁹ Gauny's writing reconquered time in two regards. First, in order to write, he had to insert an interval of time between the time of productive labor and the time of reproduction of his labor force. In other words, he took the time he did not have. Moreover, in "making a narrative of his working day," Gauny shattered the very idea of a day of labor as a "succession of hours where nothing is ever going to happen" and transformed it into a time marked by a multitude of micro-events.²⁷⁰ Attentive to the myriads of things that occurred during the working day –

a different hand gesture, a gaze that strays, causing thought to wander, a thought that arises unexpectedly and changes the rhythm of the body, a play of affects prompting translation of the servitude or freedom experienced into a variety of gestures and contradictory sequences of thoughts²⁷¹

– Gauny "generated a whole series of positive divergences from the normal time of reproduction of working-class being."²⁷² In different words, Gauny's writing performatively instituted a way of inhabiting time that deviated from the manner of perceiving, moving, speaking and thinking assigned to the being a worker.²⁷³ In a process of disidentification, Gauny emancipated himself from the temporal constraints imposed on workers.

The re-invention of narrative structures was also at the heart of the "modern revolution of fiction which is called literature" which Rancière sees as epitomized in Virginia Woolf's

²⁶⁸ Cf. Gabriel Gauny, *Le philosophe plébéien. Textes rassemblés et présentés par Jacques Rancière*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2017.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 19.

²⁷⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 19.

²⁷¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 19f.

²⁷² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 20. Here, the term "divergences" renders Rancière's use of the notion of *écarts* in the French. (Cf. Rancière, *Les temps modernes*, 34.)

²⁷³ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 20.

essay “Modern Fiction.”²⁷⁴ In this essay, Woolf “denounced the tyranny of causal emplotment.”²⁷⁵ Against the classical (Aristotelian) norms for fiction writing, she declared that “the truth of experience resided in the shower of atoms, the succession of sensible micro-events that happen one after another, but above all alongside one another, in the absence of any hierarchy.”²⁷⁶ Noting that such literature has often been regarded as an “elitist literature complacently harping on the slightest sensations of characters from elevated social circles,” Rancière instead foregrounds the egalitarian impulse in Woolf’s orchestration of temporality:

It is a time of coexistence that refuses the opposition between two types of succession – a time common to the humans said to be active and those deemed passive. It is a time that itself diverges, starting from any point whatsoever, in multiple, unpredictable directions. [...] It is the time of all those lives that struggle against the order that keeps them on the wrong side in the partition of forms of life.²⁷⁷

The “time of coexistence” reflects the experience of the modern city-dweller who – not unlike Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway – wanders around the city and crosses paths with uncountable anonymous lives. These lives resemble stories that run parallel and occasionally intersect. The coexistence of multiple temporal developments contests the Aristotelian division between the temporality of mere succession of people deemed passive, on the one hand, and the causally sequenced time of those who project their actions toward certain ends, on the other.

Narrative thus remains indispensable to Rancière’s account of how Gauny “put into narrative what was excluded from the universe of narrative”²⁷⁸ and Woolf’s introduction of a time of coexistence of micro-events in lieu of the traditional plot. Yet, I would suggest that it is the notion of the “moment” – and the related notions of “fragmentation” and *écart* (“gap,” “divergence”) – that takes center stage in Rancière’s conception of the struggle to abolish the hierarchy of times. These notions are crucial to the idea that the unfolding of time can be broken up from within in and renegotiated. *Fragmentation* is what “creates differences and breaks within the supposedly homogenous continuum” and “each *moment* of this continuum is at once the point through which the reproduction of the hierarchy of times passes and the point of a *gap*, a *break*.”²⁷⁹ Here, Rancière invokes Benjamin’s anecdote of insurgent Parisians shooting at clocks, which he takes to be a “fabrication,” a narrative that serves as a symbol of “moments

²⁷⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 24.

²⁷⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 48.

²⁷⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 48.

²⁷⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 24f.

²⁷⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 20.

²⁷⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 20f., my emphasis.

that explode continuous time.”²⁸⁰ Insisting less on the destructive aspect of the revolutionaries’ gesture, Rancière foregrounds the creation of “a different common time born from the breaches made in the former.”²⁸¹ In this regard, Gauny’s rewriting of his working day resembles the insurgent acts of Benjamin’s revolutionaries insofar as both “counter the parceling out that forever kept them at a distance from their own time with a fragmentation that gives them control of it and develops a new possibility.”²⁸² The capitalist fragmentation of time is countered by a new fragmentation, a fragmentation that consists in the insertion of breaks and deviating intervals into the continuity of the dominant order of time.

Responding to a critique that has been leveled against Rancière will allow me to flesh out the role of the *moment*. In “Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies” (2022), a contribution to a series of Verso roundtables on *Modern Times*, the philosopher Jussi Palmusaari addresses what he sees as the limit of Rancière’s conception of time in order to think political action. Palmusaari contends that “*Modern Times* follows the method of rethinking time in terms of spatial coexistence as opposed to a time understood as a determined sequence ordering difference.”²⁸³ In Rancière’s attempt to think how the hierarchy of times is abolished through the implementation of an egalitarian time of coexistence, Palmusaari foregrounds a shift from causal necessity to “coexisting elements in undetermined succession” and “absolute contingency of the successive order which coexisting trajectories happen to form.”²⁸⁴ Following this interpretation, he claims that Rancière “reject[s] the idea of time as an ordinal sequence” and that the absence of “temporal direction” would annul the horizon for political action.²⁸⁵ “The irony,” Palmusaari continues, “lies in how Rancière’s own work tends to wager on a coexistence of heterogenous temporalities while resisting to project them on an overarching temporal order, and how it thus problematises politics as a consequential process from the outset.”²⁸⁶ In sum, Palmusaari contends that Rancière “compress[es] the temporality of politics into the present” and thereby “makes it difficult to think the temporality of politics in a way which would enable to integrate into it ideas of strategic action or allow us to understand how political actors might be able to control the unfolding sequences that their actions form.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 21f.

²⁸¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 22.

²⁸² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 22.

²⁸³ Jussi Palmusaari, *Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies*, 2022. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/5383-transgressing-temporal-hierarchies>. (Accessed 2024-11-11).

²⁸⁴ Palmusaari, *Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies*, n.p.

²⁸⁵ Palmusaari, *Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies*, n.p.

²⁸⁶ Palmusaari, *Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies*, n.p.

²⁸⁷ Palmusaari, *Transgressing Temporal Hierarchies*, n.p.

In my view, Palmusaari's reading fails to understand not only Rancière's conception of the time of coexistence but also the temporality of politics and the notion of the moment. First, Rancière's interpretation of Woolf's essay makes clear that the concept of coexistence by no means does away with the idea of succession. For Woolf, in Rancière's words, experience resides in "the *succession* of sensible micro-events that happen *one after another*, but above all *alongside* one another, in the absence of any hierarchy."²⁸⁸ Rancière does not reject the succession of time. Rather, he insists on the multiplicity of parallelly unfolding temporal developments. Succession and coexistence are thus not mutually exclusive terms. Rancière explicitly depicts the coexistence ("alongside one another") of a plurality of successions of moments. Coexistence must foremostly be understood in contradistinction to the hierarchy of times. Against the subordination of one temporal model under another – as in Aristotle's *Poetics* – Rancière points to a plurality of temporalities that exist simultaneously and on an equal footing. Second, Rancière's conception of politics is, in my estimation, deliberately distinguished from politics conceived in terms of a "consequential process" whereby political actors – to borrow Palmusaari's wording – "might be able to control the unfolding sequences that their actions form." Such projection of actions toward certain future ends is caught up in the narrative of politics that draws on the causal model of Aristotelian fictional rationality. What *Modern Times* makes clear, in echoing Rancière's previous writings, is that politics only exist in the moment.

The moment is not a new term in Rancière's thinking, but to my knowledge it has received little attention in the secondary literature on his work. The fact that "moment" has made its way into the titles of two out of the four chapters in *Modern Times* – "The Moment of Dance" and "Cinematic Moments" – is indicative of the importance that Rancière gives the term. In the chapter "The Moment of Dance," Rancière notes that

a 'moment' is not merely a division of time; according to the etymology of the word, it is also the movement generated by a certain balance or imbalance of weights on scales. To put it in my terms, it is a certain redistribution of the sensible.²⁸⁹

In fact, Rancière already elaborated on the forceful image of the moment as "another weight thrown into the equation" in the collection of writings *Moments politiques* (2009).²⁹⁰ The

²⁸⁸ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 48, my emphasis.

²⁸⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 67.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Moments politiques. Interventions 1977-2009*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2009, 9, my translation.

moment, Rancière further writes, is the “impulse that triggers or deflects a movement,” a shifting weight that produces a “tear in the common fabric” through which the givenness of the world is called into question and the possibility of a different common world becomes perceptible.²⁹¹ To say that politics effectively exists *par moments*²⁹² or that – as Rancière proposed in a conversation with his publisher Eric Hazan – *en politique, il n’y a que des présents*,²⁹³ is to stress that it is in each and every moment that inegalitarian relations are renewed and in each and every moment that the routes of emancipation must be invented.

In fact, Palmusaari’s claim that Rancière’s focus on the present moment fails to think politics as a “consequential process” shares the assumptions of a critique that has often been levelled at the Rancièrian conception of politics. *In nuce*, this critique contends that, for Rancière, politics would only exist in fleeting, insurrectional moments snatched from the normal course of things. Even if Palmusaari writes in response to *Modern Times*, he does not seem to fathom that Rancière already anticipated such criticism. Rancière argues that the disqualification of the “power of the moment” is a legacy of the Marxist revolutionary tradition who reduced it to “the time of the ignorant and impatient” or, as he goes on to specify, “the time of spontaneous, ephemeral revolt and future utopias, as opposed to the time of strategic action based on knowledge of the historical process.”²⁹⁴

While the notion of a momentary insurgence was disqualified in the dominant narration of modern politics – especially the Marxist narrative of revolution – Rancière shows that it was an important feature of the narrative structure of modern literature:

Modern literary fiction has put at its centre this time where, *at every instant*, a battle is being waged between the misfortune that is servitude renewed and the fortune that is freedom gained: a time composed of a multiplicity of manifest micro-events whose coexistence and interpenetration are counterposed to the time of subordination specific to traditional fiction.²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ I am referring to Rancière’s formulation in the French: “Un moment, ce n’est pas simplement une division du temps, c’est un autre poids jeté dans la balance où se pèsent les situations et se comptent les sujets aptes à les saisir, c’est l’impulsion qui déclenche ou dévie un mouvement : non pas un simple avantage pris par une force opposée à une autre, mais une déchirure du tissu commun, une possibilité de monde qui se rend perceptible et met en cause l’évidence d’un monde donné” (Rancière, *Moments politiques*, 9).

²⁹² Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Moments politiques*, 9.

²⁹³ The conversation was later published in the form of a book, see Jacques Rancière, *En quel temps vivons-nous? Conversation avec Eric Hazan*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2017.

²⁹⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 24.

²⁹⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 25, my emphasis.

In this regard, “The power of the moment which creates a different temporal sequence has had a contradictory destiny in modern times.”²⁹⁶ While it was recognized by practices that formed artistic modernity, it was denigrated in the discourses of political modernity. It is against the latter tradition that Rancière takes pain to demonstrate that the concept of “moment” is “not the time of the ephemeral smugly contrasted with long-term sequences and the science of causes.”²⁹⁷ Rather, the moment names

the power of generating a different temporality by redistributing the weights on the scales of the fates meted out to humans in accordance with the time they inhabit. It is here that the miniscule deviations which change the carpenter’s working day are bound up with the barricades which challenge power. Individual emancipation – emancipation from a certain form of individuality – and collective emancipation – emancipation from a certain mode of collective being – feed off one another, and are based on the same *power of the moment* that creates a deviant temporal sequence.²⁹⁸

Rancière thus rethinks the time of politics by attending to the singularity of moments wherein individual and collective gestures create “miniscule deviations” that suspend, arrest or subvert the hierarchy of times. To propose a narrative of one’s day that breaks with the dominant script is a manner of renegotiating or disadjusting to the dominant order of time. The seemingly unshakable script that has been written for every one of us can be disarticulated and written anew. It is a matter of creating an *écart* – a break and a deviant interval – in the course of “normal” time which is nothing but the time of domination.²⁹⁹ In lieu of strategic actions, top-down politics and big revolutions, Rancière foregrounds the weight of minor gestures. In doing so, he proposes a dehierarchization of political agency; a redistribution of who can take part in politics. In showing that the social relations we live in are instantiated in each and every moment, Rancière shifts the temporality of politics, furnishing each and every moment with the possibility of instituting different relations. In this idea, Rancière has a certain affinity with Benjamin’s messianic and revolutionary conception of time. The Rancièrian moment in which politics plays out echoes the Jewish relation to the future wherein “every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 23f.

²⁹⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 21.

²⁹⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 21, my emphasis.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Jacques Rancière, “In What Time Do We Live?” in *Política común* 4, 2013, n.p.

³⁰⁰ “We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 397).

4.3 Cinematic treatments of time: Countering the narrative of progress

In “Cinematic moments,” the chapter that closes *Les temps modernes*, Rancière pursues the question of a disruption of dominant time through a cinematographic lens. More precisely, he is concerned with how cinematic treatments of time can stage moments that challenge the dominant narrative of history and politics. The chapter is structured around the close reading of three cinematic moments excerpted from Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and Pedro Costa’s *Colossal Youth* (2009). The select films not only pertain to three distinct moments in the history of cinema – the Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, the classical Hollywood cinema of the 1940s, and (Western European) independent cinema of the early twenty-first century – but they also belong to three different historical moments.³⁰¹ Foregrounding how the films encapsulate something of the historical moments in which they were made, Rancière notes that they, each in their own way, “bear witness to the conflicts, hopes, and disillusionments” that marked the 20th century.³⁰²

The inherently cinematic conception of modern times as a “montage” of multiple temporalities, which runs through the book, is further elaborated in this chapter as Rancière attends to cinema’s capacity to “put several times in a single time,” that is, to articulate several modes of temporality in one temporal sequence, “in order to think and express the history it pertains to.”³⁰³ Montage, in Rancière’s use of term, does not only mean to bring together or contrast images through editing. It is, more broadly, the combining of different temporalities. In the analyses of the films of Vertov, Ford and Costa, he is concerned with how each film stages a “state of tension between different temporalities” in order to speak of its own times and the “time of History understood as collective destiny.”³⁰⁴ Rancière identifies three heterogeneous temporalities that the films variously combine to achieve different effects – the temporalities of narrative, performance and myth – which he preliminarily defines as follows:

The temporality of narrative presents itself as corresponding to a lived temporality; the temporality of performance, by contrast, is a constructed, autonomous temporality; and the temporality of myth is what brings an instance of the extra-temporal into play in narrative.³⁰⁵

³⁰¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 95.

³⁰² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 95.

³⁰³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 96.

³⁰⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 96.

³⁰⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 96.

In my view, Rancière's film analyses present a thematic and methodological continuity with the essay on "Time, Narrative and Politics" insofar as he attends to cinematic moments that interrupt or introduce deviant intervals into the conventional progression of narrative. Such cinematic interruptions, for Rancière, amount to a critical break with the progressivist narrative of History made dominant by the Marxist tradition. If the promise of a justice to come was a crucial aspect of the Marxist model, Rancière suggests that the cinematic breaks with narrative progression rather reveal the irreconcilability between the narrative of historical progress and the scenario of justice.

4.3.1 Dziga Vertov and the temporality of performance

What Rancière understands under the "temporality of performance" is best exemplified in his interpretation of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*.³⁰⁶ The film also offers a clear illustration of how the cinematic treatment of time responds to the historical moment the film pertains to: Vertov's experimentation in the novel medium of cinema partakes in the social experiment of the birth of the Soviet Union following the October revolution in 1917.³⁰⁷ The experimental spirit comes to the fore in Vertov's montage procedure and notably his radical use of time that completely breaks with narrative conventions. Vertov, in Rancière's words, "makes a film without a narrated story and without actors playing characters. In their stead, he offers 'an experiment in the cinematic communication of actual facts.'"³⁰⁸ Taking this quote from the manifesto-like text that appears in the beginning of *Man with a Movie Camera* as a point of departure, Rancière meditates on the notion of "communication" as one of the principles of Vertovian montage and how it relates to the procedure of "fragmentation." In formal terms, Vertov's "cinematic communication" consists in the putting together of short fragments of disparate activities and movements performed by different people and machines:

the ministrations of a beautician or shoe-shiner, the sharpening of an axe or barber's razor, the gestures of a hand that sews or operates a sewing machine, those of an assembly-line worker making cigarette

³⁰⁶ Vertov is a central figure for Rancière's rethinking of artistic modernity and what he glosses the "aesthetic regime." In *Modern Times*, Rancière discusses *Man with the Movie Camera* at length in three of the four chapters, see 47-57; 68-70, 97-103.

³⁰⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 97.

³⁰⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 97.

packets, typists in a typing pool, operators in a telephone exchange, and many others, including those of the cameraman who turns his handle and the editor who cuts, scrapes and glues the film.³⁰⁹

Against those who have equated the film's "ultra-rapid montage" with the "Taylorist and Fordist breaking down of movements into precisely timed fragmentary gestures,"³¹⁰ Rancière demonstrates that Vertov's fragmentation has a different function. Once again, Rancière contrasts a process of fragmentation inherent to industrial capitalist temporality with a positive, emancipatory fragmentation. The difference lies in the distinction between a logic of *complementarity* in the division of labor and the construction of an *equivalence* of gestures. "Taylorism breaks up a task into a finite number of complementary operations whose discrete exercise it seeks to optimize. Vertov's montage combines fragments of movements that are not complementary but simply equivalent."³¹¹ In this regard, the "fragmentation" of gestures and movements that flit by in *Man with a Movie Camera* is less a mode of division than a manner of uniting. Through montage, fragments of separate yet *equivalent* activities are put into one temporal sequence which endows them with a sense of unity. Vertov uses fragmentation to "construct the new egalitarian sensorium wherein all activities are equal and form part of the same movement."³¹²

Rancière characterizes *Man with a Movie Camera* as a "revolutionary" film, not in terms of what it *depicts*, but with regards to what it *constructs*. The film is not about revolution; it is itself a "a communist activity, one of the activities whose general articulation constitutes communism, not as a form of political organization, but as a new fabric of sensible experience."³¹³ What makes this new fabric of the sensible world communist, in turn, is not the nature of the activities shown in the fragments of gestures, but "the nature of their connection."³¹⁴ Through the communication between the fragments of equivalent gestures, Vertov's film produces a common time, along with new forms of collective life wherein the different yet equivalent activities merge into a single joint movement.

³⁰⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 100. Here, the meaning of "communication" seems close to the term's etymological root in the Latin verb *communicare*, "to share," "to make common," "being in relation with."

³¹⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 50. The critique of the technique of montage as analogous with the division of labor and the logic of the assembly line recalls Adorno's critique of variety as modeled on the temporality of the mechanical repetition in industrial production (see section 3.4.2). Rancière's retort could, in my opinion, also be used to counter Adorno's disqualification of montage as an artistic technique and to show how Vertov's non-narrative use of montage radically opposes the conventions of the culture industry.

³¹¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 51.

³¹² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 58.

³¹³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 47f.

³¹⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 101.

Attentive to the fact that Vertov's film both begins and ends in the cinema, Rancière posits that those who perform the fragmented gestures throughout the film are both actors and spectators. In the closing scene, the people seen performing a myriad of different activities attend the spectacle of their day "transformed into a collective performance."³¹⁵ Rancière qualifies the "great unanimous symphony of communist life," which inscribes these equivalent gestures into a joint movement, as a "time of pure performance."³¹⁶ It is a cinematic temporality that foregrounds its own constructedness and autonomy vis-à-vis the temporality of narrative. The radically non-narrative montage not only breaks with the Aristotelian principles of storytelling, but also with the hierarchical division of times by performatively implementing a communist time. *Man with a Movie Camera* substitutes the "hierarchical time" of the causally unfolding narrative with an "egalitarian time of coexistence."³¹⁷ What does the communist time that Vertov cinematically constructs say about its own historical moment? Rather than reflecting the official model of history of the Soviet Union along with its belief in strategic action and the forward movement of history, the film breaks with it by doing away with narrative progression altogether.

4.3.2 John Ford and the disjunction of times

Compared to Vertov's film without narrative, John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) seems to obey a traditional narrative structure. An adaption of John Steinbeck's namesake novel from 1939, the film draws on a then contemporary moment in the history of the United States, namely the exodus of Oklahoma farmers. The farmers were forced to leave their lands due to a combination of the "dust bowl" and the mechanization of agriculture only to later be, as Rancière succinctly puts it, "confronted in California by the savage exploitation of farmhands by the capitalist trusts of the fruit industry."³¹⁸ The film depicts the fate of the Joads, a family of tenant farmers, in their unfortunate quest for a better life through a series of situations propelled by the moment of expropriation.

Yet, despite a seemingly traditional plot wherein the search for work drives the narrative forward as in a chain of causes and effects, Rancière argues that "the straight line of this story is split in two from the outset by a different temporality" in an episode at the

³¹⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 102.

³¹⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 103.

³¹⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 99.

³¹⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 104f. The "dust bowl" refers to a period of intense drought and severe dust storms that particularly affected the southern plains of the United States in the 1930s.

beginning of the film.³¹⁹ The split occurs when Tom Joad, the family's oldest son who just got out of prison, returns to his family home accompanied by the former pastor Casy, whom he met on the way, only to discover that the house has been abandoned. As Tom wonders what might have happened to his family, he stumbles upon someone who is hiding out in the dark. It is the tenant farmer Muley who, against the orders of the landowner, decided to stay on the land that his family has farmed and inhabited for generations when everyone else left. Emblematic of the film's often spare and dramatic use of lighting, the sequence is shot in the dark and the protagonists' faces are lit by candles or other flickering light sources. Recalling painterly *chiaroscuro*, the visual effect endows the film with a ghostlike atmosphere. Rancière's description of the scene in the abandoned house also foregrounds the ghostly elements: Muley seems to have "*emerged from nothingness* in a house plunged into darkness, where the flame of the candle transforms the characters in *phantomatic apparitions*," revealing "his distraught face, which seems utterly *haunted* by what he has lived through."³²⁰

In the darkness, Muley relates the expropriation of which his own family and all other tenant farmers are the victims through two flashbacks. In the first one, a wealthy-looking man shows up in a shiny car at Muley's house to notify the family that they must "get off." In response to their infuriation, the man replies, "Don't go to blaming me. It ain't my fault." As Muley and his son vainly try to find out whose fault it is, the man's answer is an infinite regression that makes it seem as if no concrete person can be held accountable for their dispossession. It is not the fault of the company who owns the land, they are told, since the company's president merely does what he has been told by the bank in Tulsa. The bank's manager, in turn, is not guilty since he himself is busy keeping up with "orders from the East." Facing this bureaucratic dissimulation of power where there is no one to pick up the fight with, Muley – in a state of fury and hopelessness – asks, "Then who do we shoot?"

In a second flashback, Ford visualizes Muley's haunting memories in a sequence of superposed images that depict the arrival of an army of caterpillars akin to "mythological monsters."³²¹ The caterpillar pilot, who comes to level their house, turns out to be the son of someone Muley knows. As if in defense, the young man says that he took the job – the horrifying mission of leveling the houses of his own people – to be able to sustain his many-headed family. Muley threatens to shoot him, but the pilot cynically and realistically convinces him that it would not make any difference. The company would just send another guy, he says

³¹⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 105.

³²⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 108, my emphasis.

³²¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 105.

before hitting the gas pedal and tearing the house down. Here, Rancière makes an astute parallel to the ending of Eisenstein's *General Line* (1929), where the tractor driver is portrayed as a hero of the new times who "smashed the barriers of individual properties" and brought about the triumph of the *kolkhoz*, collective farms on state-owned land, over the *kulaks* – wealthy land-owning peasants.³²² By contrast, the driver of the caterpillar in *The Grapes of Wrath* is merely the "agent of the anonymous power of finance."³²³ From Eisenstein to Ford, the symbol of the tractor is transformed from an "emblem of emancipation, bound up with the time of progress, into an emblem of oppression."³²⁴ After his flashbacks and back in the dialogue in the dark, Muley eyes are full of tears as he exclaims, "I am just an old graveyard ghost."

The fact that the moment of expropriation is being told through Muley's recollections – that is, through the hallucinated vision and words of a character who afterwards disappears from the plot – is central to Rancière's interpretation of the film. "The expulsion of the farmers, which gives the story its motor, thus exists only in the distraught gaze and speech of the ghostlike character whose nightmare it is."³²⁵ Cinematically, Muley's narration of expropriation and expulsion which "mark the passage of History – in this instance, capitalism – over the configuration of a region" is presented as "a moment detached from the plot."³²⁶

It is as if, with [Muley's] momentary performance, the relationship between story and History splits in two. The expulsion is the event that will set the Joad tribe and the former pastor on the road to California. But this event will only have existed visually as the nightmare or trauma of an individual who, for his part, will not leave: the man struck by injustice, whose fate condenses that of all those whom the same violence has affected and who, for that very reason, are removed from the narrative combinations of stories stretching towards their conclusions.³²⁷

Muley's performance not only testifies to the injustice inflicted in the name of capitalism's progress, but also to a refusal to join the march "forward." Ultimately, his apparition is an embodied obstacle to the narrative of historical progress toward justice. As a moment that takes place outside of the film's overarching narrative, Muley's apparition interrupts the progression of the story and splits the temporality of narrative in two. "His singular performance as a distraught man connects the wound of History to a time now separated from any future; it

³²² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 105.

³²³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 105.

³²⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 105f.

³²⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 108f.

³²⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 109.

³²⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 109.

connects it to the extra-temporality of myth.”³²⁸ In the French, Rancière uses the expression *hors-temps* which comes closer to “outside of time.”³²⁹ The temporality of myth produces a tear in the narrative fabric. Put in a Shakespearian vernacular, the temporality of myth brings the time of narrative out of joint.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the “mythical element” – the hallucinatory recollections of the scene of expropriation with the arrival of the caterpillars – is “not what celebrates the forward march of history, but what divides it irredeemably.”³³⁰ The extra-temporality that Muley’s manifestation inserts into the temporality of narrative is “the time of an inscription of the irreparable,” a time that “seems to revoke any story of salvation.”³³¹ It radically questions whether the narrative of justice can be combined with a narrative of progress. And yet, the narrative of Ford’s film is not brought to a halt. Rather, it tarries with the irreconcilability between justice and industrial capitalist progress as a story of class struggle. It is noteworthy that Rancière does not explicitly dwell on how the “outside of time” brought into play by the temporality of myth relates to the “ghostly” motif. I will return to this constellation in my final discussion of this chapter, connecting it to the figure of the living dead and the cinematic critique of historical progress in the film of Costa.

4.3.3 Pedro Costa and the abolition of narrative progression

Ford’s film forms an important comparative backdrop to Rancière’s discussion of Costa’s *Colossal Youth*. Both films are concerned with the ravaging effects of capitalism and the fate of those forced to migrate but deploy significantly different cinematic articulations of time as they respond to distinct sociopolitical realities in historical moments that are sixty years apart. Even though *The Grapes of Wrath* presents “mythical,” momentary breaks in the narrative’s progress and thereby problematizes the notion of historical progress, Ford’s film still appears as a progressing, linear narrative that fulfills the expectations of the Hollywood film industry. For Rancière, it is a distinct feature of the “classical” moment of cinema that its films are “capable of integrating into the continuity of the movement of images the temporal gaps or vertigo that contradict it,” thereby expressing a “historical moment when the balance of forces in a society is clearly visible and interpretable.”³³² Such integration of narrative disruptions is

³²⁸ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 109.

³²⁹ “La temporalité du mythe est celle qui fait jouer dans le récit une instance du hors-temps” (Rancière, *Les temps modernes*, 116).

³³⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 110.

³³¹ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 111.

³³² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 112.

nowhere to be found in *Colossal Youth*, a film that – according to Rancière – most aptly address our contemporary moment. Rather, Costa deliberately does away with narrative progress altogether as a means of contradicting the idea of historical progress itself. In Costa’s treatment of time, Rancière moreover sees a poignant counterpoint to the postmodern lament that “any possible narratives about society and history have been wrecked in the great disasters of the history of a century and the collapse of grand narratives.”³³³ It is – as I will show in the following – through an idiosyncratic articulation of what Rancière glosses the time of the “chronicle” and the time of “fiction” that Costa succeeds in making a critical narration of today’s sociopolitical reality.

Colossal Youth is the third film in Costa’s Fontainhas trilogy wherein he attends to the lives of a group of Cape Verdean migrants and other people living in the fringes in the namesake, deprived neighborhood of Lisbon. The film has aptly been described as “a form of ghost story, a tale of derelict, dispossessed people living in the past and present at the same time.”³³⁴ Imbued with Costa’s unmistakable spare and austere aesthetics, *Colossal Youth* follows Ventura, a former construction worker from Cape Verde, in his quotidian undertakings. Ventura wanders around in the labyrinthic streets of a shanty town and between brand new, almost blindingly white social housing complexes. He watches TV in Vanda’s room, converses around a dinner table and tries to help Lento, an illiterate friend, write a letter to his wife. The succession of everyday, mundane situations without any clear narrative thread endows the film with a documentary aspect as if it were an intimate portrait of Ventura and the people he visits, many of whom he strangely refers to as his children.

Rancière notes how the scenes *seem* too banal to not be documentary. But as most of the times when Rancière repeatedly uses the register of *semblance*,³³⁵ he does so only to later counter how things “seem to be” and affirm how they really are. What at first appears to be a familiar narrative that documents the lives of worker migrants – “workers without work and without a working class, without class struggle and with no expectation of any future”³³⁶ – would seem to pertain to the time of the chronicle. As a cinematic chronicle of the lives of worker migrants, it would be opposed to the time of fiction, that is, the temporal model of Aristotle’s fictional rationality, which is also the time of “active men” who are the agents of history. Yet, as Rancière notes, “the way [these scenes] succeed one another without any

³³³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 113.

³³⁴ Criterion Collection, *Colossal Youth*, n.d. <https://www.criterion.com/films/439-colossal-youth> (Accessed 2024-10-10).

³³⁵ Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³³⁶ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 113.

connection undermines our faith in the documentary character of what we are watching.”³³⁷ This is to say that there is no clear temporal continuity between the short scenes that make up *Colossal Youth*. The scenes are neither causally connected nor simply a succession of situations occurring one after another. Rather, they unfold as a sequence of discontinuous moments.

The fact that the short scenes are almost exclusively shot with a static camera enhances the sense of discontinuity. It is also remarkable that many of the tableau-like shots show a window. Yet, with few exceptions, one rarely sees something through these windows – save for the opening scene in which furniture and household appliances are thrown out of a dark square, for instance. Counter to its usual function, the windows do not mediate between the inside and the outside. Instead, they enforce a sense of confinement and discontinuity between spaces. The absence of spatial continuity between the scenes heightens the experience of a lack of temporal progression.

Rancière’s interpretation of the film centers on Costa’s insertion of breaks into the temporal continuum, breaks that produce the discontinuity that troubles the documentary appearance of the story. One moment that particularly stands out as a break not only between spaces, but also between times is the scene wherein Ventura enters the former flat of his friend Lento. The view and sound of the door closing marks a cut. “On the other side of the door, we are no longer in the same temporality,” Rancière notes.³³⁸ Once inside the “empty flat whose walls are blackened by smoke,” Ventura and Lento’s gestures noticeably change and take on a “ceremonious character.”³³⁹ Ventura takes Lento’s hand and the two non-professional actors suddenly appear as “stage actors” who stand side by side, speaking into the void in front of them as if they were facing a theatre audience.³⁴⁰ “They say you jumped out the window, with your four children, your wife, and that you landed on a car. They say that you yelled a lot,” Ventura says. We learn that Lento, in despair at his own condition, threw a match on a mattress which caused a fire in which he lost his wife and children. “I yelled my head off,” Lento says, “I yelled for my mother, my father, the fire department, St. Barbara the Generous. I even yelled your name. Then everything went black. See my hands?” “All burnt,” Ventura replies when Lento holds out his hands as if to show the burns. But the film spectator can’t see any traces of the fire. For Rancière, this discrepancy between the *said* and the *seen* is but a small one compared to the major gap in the narrative that this scene introduces. “For the Lento [the

³³⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 114.

³³⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 115.

³³⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 115.

³⁴⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 116.

spectators] had seen hitherto had neither wife nor child. And, above all, they had already seen him die, falling from the electricity pole to which he was trying to connect the shack he shared with Ventura.”³⁴¹

Rancière argues that the impossibility to integrate this scene within the narrative continuum of the film sheds light on the meaning of the seemingly inconsistent succession of everyday scenes that makes up *Colossal Youth*. The scene reveals that the film is no documentary of lived moments in the existence of these two worker migrants.³⁴² Rather, all episodes are “fictions,” but fictions of a specific kind,

not stories of fictional characters played by actors, but minor scenes in the manner of Brecht’s *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*; scenes that are forms of condensation of their story and those of all migrant workers who share their fate in the metropolises of Capital.³⁴³

Just as in epic theatre, these fictional scenes treat elements of reality, but they are not restrained to the personal fates of Ventura and Lento. The story of the fire, for instance, did not happen to Lento, but it was the tragic fate of another Cape Verdean family during the shooting of *Colossal Youth*.³⁴⁴

However, Rancière insists that Ventura and Lento are not just any actors who integrate this story into their performance. Importantly, they perform it “with their bodies scarred by exile and exploitation, bodies that carry the general scar of the condition they speak of, even if what they say happened to others.”³⁴⁵ In this regard, their acting complicates the meaning of “representation” as a theatrical and political term. Ventura and Lento’s performance has traits of two forms of representation that the literary and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak distinguishes between: *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. If *darstellen* means to re-present someone (as in a portrait), *vertreten* is to speak in someone’s place (as in the sense of political representation).³⁴⁶ While the distinction is helpful for the sake of analysis, these two meanings of representation are hard to separate since a discursive or artistic representation of someone is rarely free of elements that also “speak for” the other. What makes Ventura and Lento’s performance particularly interesting is that they – as real migrant workers – represent the

³⁴¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 116.

³⁴² Rancière, *Modern Times*, 116f.

³⁴³ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁴⁴ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁴⁵ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 71.

condition under which they themselves live. The representation of the fates of others coincides with the presentation of their own bodies, as it were. Their speaking in the place of others is also, to a certain degree, to speak of and for themselves.

“Their performance,” Rancière claims, “bears witness to History – that is, in this instance, to what colonization and immigration have done to human beings – in as much as it is situated in a kind of extra-temporality.”³⁴⁷ The intrusion of an outside of time, a mythical temporality, into what appeared to be the time of the chronicle is particularly tangible in the presence of Lento who allegedly already died twice. Rancière forcefully describes him as “an inhabitant of Hell who has returned to our world to bear witness to the hells present at the heart of it” and to “make the life of all those who share his condition appear for what it is: a life suspended between life and death, a life of the living dead.”³⁴⁸ To narrate the ravaging passage of colonialism and capitalism that has produced and continues to produce the conditions of the migrant worker, Costa’s film combines the temporality of performance with that of myth at the expense of the instance of narrative. Where the classical cinema of Ford integrated the discordant mythical moment within its narrative continuity, Rancière argues that a present-day story of migration cannot be told in the form of a progressive narrative. In Costa, therefore,

The extra-temporality of the irreparable and of myth is now introduced into the heart of the chronicle. The time of exploitation to which Ventura and Lento doubly attest – as actors and as bodies that are bearers of history – prohibits the film from unfolding as a sequence of events progressing from a beginning to an end.³⁴⁹

Costa’s montage foregrounds the impossibility to incorporate the discontinuous scenes and irreparable moments into any progressivist narrative precisely *because* there is no salvation, no possible reparation for the violence and injustice that errant migrants have suffered and continue to suffer in the name of progress. “Justice,” Rancière argues, “is shown as extra-temporal, as something that can only come from a radical outside relative to the time of progress, which is merely the time of the progress of exploitation.”³⁵⁰ In response to our contemporary sociopolitical reality, Costa deploys the temporalities of myth and of performance to display “a radical split between the scenario of justice and the time of progress, be it historical progress or the progression of the narrative.”³⁵¹ The abolition of a cinematic

³⁴⁷ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁴⁸ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁴⁹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117f.

³⁵⁰ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 117.

³⁵¹ Rancière, *Modern Times*, 120.

narrative progression thus forcefully signals the impossibility to maintain an understanding of history as a progressive development toward a better future for all.

While Rancière seems cautious about drawing any conclusions regarding what this cinematic split entails for a thinking of the “temporality of politics today,”³⁵² his analysis reveals how films – through narrative structure and montage – may offer spectators an aesthetic experience that challenges their habitual ways of thinking and experiencing time. *Colossal Youth* has its own politics, but not in the sense that it would offer straightforward solutions to today’s most urgent political problems. Rather, the film is political because it structures narrative and temporality in ways that disrupt the established distribution of the sensible, opening new possibilities for how one can perceive, think and act in our shared world.

4.3.4 Spectrality and justice: Rancière with Derrida

In Rancière’s reading of Ford and Costa’s films, “phantomatic apparitions” and the “living dead” manifest in moments that speak of injustice suffered in the name of progress, a progress which is nothing but the progress of capitalist exploitation. And yet, Rancière does not make any broader argument about what the spectrality of these figures have to say about time. Why do both Ford and Costa invoke ghosts in the cinematic moments that, as Rancière shows, most forcefully function as critiques of the progressivist concept of (historical) time? To further unpack the signification of the “ghost” in these films and at large, I will bring it into discussion with some ideas that the philosopher Jacques Derrida offered in the exordium to *Specters of Marx* (1993).³⁵³ Not unlike those invoked by Ford and Costa, the ghost emerges in Derrida’s writing in a reflection on justice and the discordance of time.

Derrida claims that we need to “learn to live *with* ghosts”³⁵⁴ which, in an idiomatic sense, suggests that we must accept the unpleasant and seemingly unchangeable situation that the ghosts bear witness to. To be with specters, he continues, entails a “*politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.”³⁵⁵ The ghosts in question refer to those who are no longer with us or not yet here. Coming from an outside of time – to speak with Rancière’s mythical

³⁵² Cf. Rancière, *Modern Times*, 120.

³⁵³ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994. Initially delivered as a two-part conference, *Specters of Marx* meditates on the afterlife of Marxism in the wake of communism’s collapse and the unbridled expansion of free-market capitalism following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of USSR in 1991. The “specter” is also a reference to the specter of communism which, according to the opening sentence of Marx and Engels’s “Communist Manifesto,” was haunting Europe.

³⁵⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviif., italics in the original.

³⁵⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii, italics in the original.

temporality – the ghost denotes the presence of an absence that is effectful in the present moment, as it were. In Derrida, the ghost is inextricably linked to the issue of justice because no justice seems thinkable without a notion of responsibility vis-à-vis the ghosts of those who are not presently among us:

It is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.³⁵⁶

Disjoining the living present through its mere apparition, the ghost challenges the narrative of modern politics and the idea of History as an automatic, linear progression toward justice by demanding responsibility for the justice of past and future generations. The “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present,”³⁵⁷ as Derrida later phrases it, names a present that is *haunted* by those who are no longer or not yet there. The exhortation that we need to learn to live with ghosts not only implies a reckoning with the injustices committed through colonialism and capitalism, but it also invites us to engage in a different articulation of the dominant narrative of history and politics.

The ghostly figures summoned by Ford and Costa not only bring the cinematic narrative out of joint, but they haunt the spectator of the film. Especially as spectators of *Colossal Youth*, we are confronted with the ways in which past injustices linger in the present. In testifying to the repercussions of European colonialism, the film does more than respond to our present moment. It speaks of the constitution of capitalist modernity by depicting coloniality, its flipside. A book concerned with “modern times” would, in my estimation, have been incomplete without addressing the role that colonialism plays in it. Costa’s cinematic critique of the narrative of historical progress fires at the temporal core of capitalist, colonial modernity.

³⁵⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii, italics in the original.

³⁵⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii, italics in the original.

5 Conclusion

Rather than unfolding one linearly progressing argument, this master's thesis has presented three distinct critical accounts of the concept of the time that became prominent in capitalist modernity. Across the three main chapters of the thesis, I have examined how the time of capitalist modernity has been articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated – both in theory and in practice, in philosophies and in works of art.

The inquiry into the genealogy of clock time took me from the regimentation of life in the monastic routine via the temporal discipline of workers' bodies to self-inflicted time-management. If there is any conclusion to be drawn from this development, it is that even the most accurate of clocks do not give its inventors any real mastery over the passing of time. Regardless of how precisely we can measure, plan and “save” time, it much rather seems as if we have made ourselves captives of the logics of clock time. It might be too optimistic to believe that an increased awareness about how the clock shapes our experience of time will suffice to turn us away from neoliberal time-management and help us foster a more sustainable relationship to time beyond the detrimental logics of capitalist temporality. What we urgently need, in my estimation, is a shift in attitudes and habits away from a temporal economy in which time is *saved* or *spent* toward a notion of time that is primarily *shared*.

The ambiguity of the notion of “shared” time – whether as time divided into measured parts or as time enjoyed with others – brings us to the heart of the problem by pointing to the vicissitudes of timekeeping. A shared way of measuring time is a necessity for our practical needs – not only for work schedules, transport timetables or global communication, but also for our personal and social lives wherein *sharing time* is what constitutes our being with others. Yet, the abstract and homogeneous time of the clock will never be able to properly measure the heterogeneous time that we live *in* and *with* others. As Lim argues, clock time can only ever be understood as a “socially objectivated temporality” that, in accordance with Bergson, “remains ‘indispensable but inadequate’ – a necessary illusion that must be exposed.”³⁵⁸

Furthermore, I have argued that the time of capitalist modernity – a time that can be divided, measured and optimized – is not a mere product of new technologies and industrial mechanization. Rather, it was a certain way of conceiving time that paved the way for Western capitalist society. This implies that any radical critique of capitalist society must begin with a critique of the understanding of time that underpins it, just as any critique of the progressivist

³⁵⁸ Lim, *Translating Time*, 10.

concept of historical time must start by interrogating the notion of time as homogenous and empty, to speak with Benjamin. Exposing the historical and cultural contingency of the twelve-hour clock and the concept of time it embodies represents a crucial step toward liberating our collective existence from the grip of capitalist temporality.

In the chapter centered on Adorno, I explored other facets of the social and cultural institution of our understanding of time by examining what role culture and works of art can play in it. Taking Adorno's "Schema of Mass Culture" as a point of departure, I elucidated his claim that products of the "culture industry" sustain social domination and the status quo of the social order by replicating and naturalizing the temporality of advanced capitalism. Exploring the triangulation between the inner temporal organization of mass culture and works of art, time consciousness and the prevailing conception of time in capitalist society, Adorno argues that not only mass culture but also works of the avant-garde – such as Brecht's epic theatre – imitate and thereby reinforce the hegemonic temporal order. Adorno's pessimistic analyses of mass culture and works of art provide instructive portraits of the time of advanced capitalism as a "time without history," an "abstract present" detached from both the past and the future, and the repetition of the "selfsame through time." Bringing some nuance to Adorno's stance that mass culture promotes the myth of the positive by imitating reality as it *is*, thereby foreclosing any potential transformation of social reality, I argued – drawing on Benjamin's politicization of film – that the work of art's immanent organization of time must not replicate the temporal logics of capitalist modernity. Artistic treatments of time can also intervene in our perception of temporality and open a critical field of action with emancipatory perspectives on how the current order of things could be changed.

By means of a close reading of Rancière's *Les temps modernes*, the last chapter of the thesis explored the capacity of narrative forms to either maintain or disrupt a dominant model of temporality. I demonstrated how Rancière dismantles the "grand narratives" of modern politics and history by showing how they are modeled on a hierarchy of times, which is rooted in Aristotle's distinction between two models of storytelling and Plato's distribution of occupations in his ideal *polis*. It is from a critical reception of these ancient legacies that Rancière develops his idiosyncratic contribution to a political category of time, contending that time is a hierarchical division of forms of life. Accounting for Rancière's critique of the narratives that perpetuate the hierarchy of times, which is also the time of domination, I nevertheless underscored the importance he gives to narratives that redistribute time, as exemplified in Gauny's narrative of his working day or Woolf's "time of coexistence." Against the critique that Rancière's conception of time fails to account for politics in terms of strategic

action and consequential processes, I showed that – for Rancière – politics only plays out in the present moment since it is in each and every moment that domination is renewed, or emancipation can pave its way. Thus, I asserted that the “power of the moment” which brings about a new distribution of the sensible is a crucial notion in Rancière’s understanding of politics. In the final section, I argued that the common denominator of the cinematic moments analyzed by Rancière is that they stage interruptions in the progression of narrative or dispense with any conventional narrative structure. From Vertov’s non-narrative film via the disjointed narrative in Ford’s story of class struggle to Costa’s abolition of narrative progression, I argued that these cinematic treatments of time level forceful critiques at the narrative of historical progress.

In conclusion, my thesis has challenged the tendency in the history of continental philosophy to treat time as an ahistorical and universal category. Instead, it examined time as a historical formation that is instituted through social, political and aesthetic practices. I have traced the emergence of the modern conception of time as *abstract, divisible, homogeneous, linear, measurable, objective* and *progressive*, exploring how it has been represented and contested in works of art, narrative structures and other social practices. While asserting that time is socially and culturally instituted, I have foregrounded works of art as prominent instances in which our conception of time can be challenged and reimagined.

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8 Abstract

English

This thesis critically examines the concept of time as abstract, homogeneous, linear, measurable and objective, which gained prominence in capitalist modernity. The study begins with the premise that time, far from being an ahistorical and universal category, is socially and culturally instituted, and thus an inherently political issue. The thesis first explores the genealogy of clock time as the dominant representation and device of modern time, investigating how this conception of time has been lived, thought and contested. In line with Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the "culture industry" and its pre-formatting of experience, the thesis then specifically elucidates the ambivalent role of culture and works of art in capitalist modernity. While works of art can replicate and naturalize a dominant conception of time, they can also challenge and subvert it. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's *Les temps modernes* (2018), the thesis concludes by highlighting how the narratives that sustain the time of domination can be interrupted, and how artistic treatments of time can implement other ways of inhabiting time.

German

Diese Arbeit hinterfragt den Begriff der Zeit als abstrakt, homogen, linear, messbar und objektiv, der in der kapitalistischen Moderne an Bedeutung gewann. Die Untersuchung geht von der Prämisse aus, dass Zeit keineswegs eine ahistorische und universelle Kategorie ist, sondern sozial und kulturell instituiert wird, und daher eine inhärent politische Frage darstellt. Zunächst erforscht die Arbeit die Genealogie der Uhrzeit als die dominierende Darstellung und das zentrale Instrument der modernen Zeit, wobei untersucht wird, wie diese Zeitauffassung erlebt, gedacht und bestritten wurde. In Hinblick auf Theodor W. Adornos Kritik der „Kulturindustrie“ und ihrer Präformierung der Erfahrung beleuchtet die Arbeit dann besonders die ambivalente Rolle von Kultur und Kunstwerken in der kapitalistischen Moderne. Während Kunstwerke den herrschenden Zeitbegriff replizieren und naturalisieren können, sind sie zugleich in der Lage, diesen zu hinterfragen und zu untergraben. Ausgehend von Jacques Rancières *Les temps modernes* (2018) zeigt die Arbeit schließlich auf, wie die Narrative, welche die Zeit der Herrschaft stützen, unterbrochen werden können und wie künstlerische Auseinandersetzungen mit der Zeit andere Weisen, die Zeit zu erleben, ermöglichen können.