Cinema as Revolution: Innervation, Modernity, and the Senses

By: Will Romines, CA 436

“There is no way he would conceive of a restoration of the instinctual power of the senses and their integrity that would not take into account the extent to which technology has already become part of the human bodily sensorium; by the same token, there is no strategy for preventing humanity’s self-destruction in which technology would not play an essential role.”

-Miriam Hansen on Walter Benjamin (Hansen, 14)

Through the eyes of Walter Benjamin, cinema (as an apparatus) is a technology striving to recreate the senses through a technological medium. While there is some merit to a criticism of large scale integration of technology into our society (in psychology, warfare, the environment), cinema, as a specific technological apparatus, can be empowering. There is no inevitability that cinema will paralyze us into an industrial psychopathology, or a traumatic breakdown of the psyche associated with an assimilation of technology. Instead, it can generate empathy through the senses, re-establish humanity’s relationship to the environment, and provide an opportunity for collective rebellion against the industrial-capitalist regime of modernity. By contrasting Walter Benjamin’s concepts of innervation with Jonathan Beller’s Pathologistics of Attention and citing modern cinema, I aim to show how film has already begun to resist the oppressive forces of industrial modernity.

Benjamin’s concept of innervation, as outlined by Miriam Hansen in Cinema and Experience, can provide us with a positive lens through which to assimilate the apparatus of cinema. The term innervation, as used by Benjamin, differs from its strict physiological use as a
carrying of energy through the nerves of the body. Instead, it describes the “neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and machinic registers” (Hansen, 1). Although the term was commonly used in contemporary psychology circles of the time (i.e. Freud), Benjamin sees it as an ‘antidote’ the paralysis of modernity. Innervation, he believes, allows us to perceive and interact with technology in new ways, specifically through the sensorial apparatus of film. In Benjamin’s words, it is the ‘historical task’ of film to provide new forms of perception that are necessary to interact with an increasingly modernized world (Hansen, 1). In other words, it is only through machines that we can understand industrialization itself, and by harnessing these technologies, we can learn more about ourselves and the world at large. To more clearly illustrate this interaction, Benjamin defines a concept of ‘first’ and ‘second’ technologies: ‘First’ technologies aim to utilize the power of the human and the natural world, whereas ‘second’ technologies, unconsciously as a symptom of modernity, seek to gain distance from nature:

As Benjamin explains, “the greatest technical feat of the first technology is, as it were, the human sacrifice; that of the second excels along the lines of the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew”. Yet, where a contemporary reader might associate the latter with the latest in electronic warfare (drones, cruise missiles), Benjamin makes an amazing turn. “In other words,” he continues the speculation on the second technology’s constitution through distance, “[its origin] lies in play [Spiel]”. (Hansen, 7)

It is this play, between the first and second technologies, where film excels. Not only does film adapt human perception, but by engaging with an apparatus, it has the possibility “to reverse, in the form of play, the catastrophic consequences of an already failed reception of technology” (Hansen, 7). Innervation, then, can be seen as a mediation between the first and second
technologies, the first technology being the sensory receptions of the human body, and the second, the apparatus. How then, does the body participate in cinema?

In order to understand film’s relationship to the body, Sergei Eisenstein explored the phenomenon of synesthesia, a neurological condition in which the senses are intertwined. A synesthete, for example, might simultaneously experience color as sound, or letters as taste. To investigate this phenomenon further, Eisenstein collaborated with Russian neurologist Alexander Luria and sociologist Lev Vygotsky. Luria described an early patient, a newspaper reporter with a tremendous memory (as aided by synaesthesia), as follows: “words settled in his mind as ‘puffs of steam or splashes’ and were translated into rich images. Voices arrived in metals, in color, with taste and texture; they might be ‘yellow and crumbly’ or they might, like [Eisenstein’s voice], feel ‘like a bouquet, protruding a flame with fibers’” (Pisters, 1). Eisenstein was interested in these phenomenon as a way to understand and describe the sensorial excitement in a good work of art. Each aspect of the shot could contribute to these different senses, an example being the senses associated with different graphical lines in the frame: “the line of heat, the line of mounting ecstasy” (Pisters, 4). Although Eisenstein is known for a dialectal collision in film language (through the theory of montage and contrasting shots), inside the single frame he aimed for an ‘organic wholeness’, a coalescing orchestration of a multitude of elements aimed at replicating primordial synesthesia. This is where great art, in Eisenstein’s view, can deeply move us.

Mirror-touch, as a specific form of synesthesia (wherein subjects experience the feelings of another within themselves), is where film is able to surpass simple phenomenological
stimulation and reach into empathetic response by way of ‘the shared affective neural systems in which common brain areas are activated during both experience and passive observation’ (Pisters, 8). Unlike other forms of synesthesia, where senses are linked between common elements of the natural world, mirror-touch speaks to the relationship of art to spectator. Emotional depth, as opposed to one of the primary five senses, can be multi-layered, similar to the orchestration of the whole in a frame, as described by Eisenstein. A patient of the Russian synesthesia research team, in an effort to describe what experiencing the emotions of another felt like, spoke of such orchestration:

‘One synesthete even speaks of an ‘orchestration of emotions’ that can be picked up on different levels: “the emotions of another person are like an orchestral piece, where there is a general key, and mood to the piece at a moment in time, but there are so many emotional layers (...) I feel all of this”. What is even more remarkable is that the interviewee adds that he cannot feel the same depth and dimensions of his own emotions, except when he hears himself on recorded playback. Mediation, at least in this instance, seems to be key in experiencing the depths of the fourth dimension’. (Pisters, 12)

This mediation, between art and spectator, closely aligns with Benjamin’s innervation, in which the physiological sensations of the filmic image trigger emotional affect in the viewer through mimetic identification. Just as the synesthete learns more about his own emotional spectrum through the mediation of recording, we learn more about our ourselves and the surrounding world through the participation in the second technology of cinema. Again, the depth of this identification needs to be stressed: It would be overly-simplistic to say that when a viewer sees a sad face on screen, they meditate on their own sadness. Instead, through the mediation of the filmic language (apparatus) and the mobilization of the senses (the body),
cinema can affect a spectator with an entire array of emotional sensation, beyond the realm of spoken or written language.

If this interplay between these ‘first’ and ‘second’ technologies, by way of empathetic response in cinema, is to supposed to teach us more about ourselves and reconnect us to our environment and the natural world, why does society still struggle with such a massive environmental crisis? It is because, through this unreserved adaptation of technology into our current modern society, we have possibly alienated ourselves from the natural world. In his introduction to his book, *Eco-Mediation*, Sean Cubitt describes this abstraction: “What environs us today, the environment of the twenty-first century, is no longer only what we call nature but the secondary environments of technology and data, with the human body in the process of also becoming an environment. Assessing potential economic, social, and political resources for change, it becomes apparent that the conditions under which we find ourselves demand a revolution in communications, a fundamentally aesthetic politics” (Cubitt, 11). This is similar to Benjamin’s second technology view: Although Cubitt is here maligning technology as the downfall that led us astray (and perhaps rightly so- see: plundering of natural resources, devastating warfare technology), he understands that it is through the technology of communications (here film), that we can escape the modern ecological crisis. To further understand this, it is important to differentiate innervation from mediation.

Again, in Benjamin’s definition, innervation is an interplay between the human sensorium and the external world by way of apparatus. Mediation, by contrast, is a broader concept that extends beyond the anthropological realm. Everything in nature mediates with
another: for example, plant life mediates nutrients and sunlight (through photosynthesis).

Unlike innervation, which is a connective tissue in technological communication and the human world, mediation is not solely communication (although all communications are mediated). Communication, in Cubitt’s view, was actually an ‘original sin’ that began to alienate humans from their environment (Cubitt, 5). Although a necessary tool in order to function as a species, communication drove the need to order and amass, and by extension, founded our current course of economics and civilization through the dominance of money as a universal force in our modern world. Perhaps, then, it is the profit motives of capitalism that have contributed to environmental alienation. But as communications and their resulting technologies have always been assimilated into larger economic structures, it remains important to understand their power, even if they cannot completely overthrow the capitalist structure that is intertwined with modernity.

In order to describe the necessary ‘revolution in communications’, Cubitt cites the 1906 film The Story of the Kelly Gang. Through a use of sharp lenses and deep focus, the film represents an early artifact of the possibilities of realism in early cinema. Because the film of that era was quick decaying nitrate-stock, however, only 17 minutes of the finished film remain, and instead it had to be restored through the use of digitization and predictive algorithms (to fill in missing space in the image). This decay of the film stock displays the organic and entropic nature of early cinema. While the material of the film stock approaches decay, the digital restorations mark a turn of the film from a physical object into an idea; the original film no longer remains in physical actuality, and is instead a digital imagination (by way of algorithmic reconstruction) of what the film used to be. “The Story of the Kelly Gang is not in any simple
way about ecology, but it is itself an ecological artifact, one that links human, technological, and organic worlds in the context of colonialism” (Cubitt, 2). This shows how film, as a unique communication medium (and one of second technology) can re-establish our connection to the natural world (through a confrontation of decay and reclamation), and provide a brighter possibility for a future in a mechanized and capitalist world. Here the medium itself (film stock), and not just the apparatus or film language, is the second technology,

Benjamin’s concept of innervation “as an antidote—and counterconcept—to technologically multiplied shock and its anaesthetizing economy” (Hansen, 5), however, has a significant number of sceptics. Jonathan Beller’s hypothesis of psychopathology (as dissociation of symbolic signifiers) in the modern culture provides a clear counterpoint to the positive reception of technology as seen by Benjamin: “Like the state and the banks that are themselves constituted in it, representation—visual and linguistic—is structured by a matrix of pathologistical processes and is today totally bankrupt” (Beller, 69). Beller views the industrial-capital complex as so intertwined with our modes of modern representation (e.g. art, film) that it has corrupted our collective consciousness to a level of psychological destruction. Cinema, he cites specifically, provides an ‘open book’ for which to view the psychological degradation indicative of the transitional phase between early twentieth century industrialization and our current digital media culture: “To this end, we may observe that montage, deep focus, and the cut, as theorized during the history of cinema thus far, all correspond to neurological and psychological processes as well as to specific forms of attention. We now know, too, that these forms were “destined,” more or less, to be utilized in capital’s emerging regimes of production and monetization collectively termed attention economy or cognitive capitalism” (Beller, 48).
This is where I take issue with Beller’s argument, especially in contrast to the benefits of primordial sensation in empathy, as put forward by both Eisenstein (through synesthesia) and Benjamin (through innervation and mimetic identification). Additionally, it seems unfounded to place the blame of modern psychopathology on the formal tools of cinema. Problematically, Beller considers them ‘destined’ to serve capitalism; not only does this treat the language of the cut, for example, as an overly literal path of psychic fragmentation, it ignores and discredits a long history of resistant cinema which, even if periphery and maligned for large swaths of cinema history, is flourishing today more than ever. Nonetheless, Beller’s criticism of those three aspects of cinema deserves elaboration in order to fully understand the counterpoints to Benjamin’s positive reception of film.

The first formal element, deep focus, is discussed through an examination of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). In a noteworthy sequence, Chaplin’s Tramp character finds himself on an assembly line struggling to keep pace with the unending conveyor belt in front of him. By not following the ‘mechanical routinization of gesture’ (performing rote and repetitive actions of the body to the rhythm of machine), The Tramp is eventually pulled into the machine to which the belt leads and passes through a system of gears. Beller cites this scene not only to illustrate that the price of dysfunction in the machine is prison (where The Tramp eventually ends up), but because Chaplin eschews montage in favor of deep focus in a way that avoids psychological conditioning: “[…] the film’s break from montage and utilization of deep focus at certain key points does not employ this important latter technique to psychoanalytic ends (Beller, 49).” In another scene, the Tramp roller skates precariously on the third floor of a department store. Here Beller claims that Chaplin’s use of gesture and the body (in conjunction with deep focus in
order to capture the complete scope of these movements) provides a moment of liberation in
the face of being “slated to become a programmable sheep by the industrialized temporality of
the machine age” (Beller, 50). So, to clarify, Beller views Chaplin’s use of deep focus as a
positive one (unlike *Citizen Kane*), a Bazinian triumph in the preservation of realism, a fully
constituted body in the face of the programmatic disassembly of the body typical of modernity.
Already it seems that Beller is actually providing a positive use of a cinematic tool in order to
critique the machine of industrialization- a true example of Benjamin’s ‘second technology’.
This is using cinema precisely to bring to light the negative power of the ‘machine’ as
consumptive, not a celebration or reinforcing of industrial ideals with the (unconscious) aim to
indoctrinate viewers with the psychology of the industrial complex. Does deep focus here
contribute to psychopathology or, in fact, bring it to light?

The second formal element, montage, is discussed through an examination of Wells’
*Citizen Kane* (1941). In a famous montage sequence at the beginning of the film, newspaper
headlines whirl past with various headlines describing the titular character as a ‘communist’, a
‘fascist’, and an ‘American’. Beller describes this fragmentation as follows:

We embark on a search for an explanation of the inner workings of a public and indeed cultic personality, one first
introduced to us, it must be underscored, through the montage sequence of the newsreel at the opening of the
film. Kane the citizen, the media mogul, the recluse, […] has a public identity built through mechanical
reproduction’s financially calculated montage effects, that is, through newspaper ballistics that daily sensationalize
the famous Kane’s endeavors and shock the modern public into continuously recalibrated modes of recognition.
(Beller, 51)

Is the use of montage, however, not an explicit reference to the fragmentary nature of our
understanding and knowledge of these cultish figures, the masters of capitalism? I would argue
that it is far from gratuitous to think that Wells meant to bring these problems to the fore specifically through this use of montage, and is not instead unconsciously reinforcing a fragmentation of the psyche typical of modernity. The film’s ending reinforces this: Kane, dead and alone, surrounded by his unfulfilling treasures, is presented as a discarded skeleton of the capitalist regime—a lament, not a celebration, of our industrial way of living. In the true spirit of second technology, he is using the powers of technology in order to develop a further understanding of the pitfalls of capitalism.

The third and final formal element, the cut, is discussed through Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960). Beller makes use of the Lacanian concept of the law of the father in order to ground the concept of the cut as a psychopathology-force, in as early as the film’s title sequence: “The famed opening of Saul Bass’s cut-up credits of Psycho already forecasts the shredding of the symbolic order (both syntagmatically and paradigmatically) and thus of the law of the father—by cinema” (Beller, 54). The narrative of the film is necessary to illustrate the continued oppression symptomatic of the law of the father: the protagonist Marion Crane is in love with a man who is inaccessible due to a lack of money to marry. In the pursuit of love, she robs from her own workplace and then runs from the police. Eventually stopping at a motel, she is cut down (significantly in the middle of the film and not at its climax) by the sole worker of the hotel, Norman Bates. In all three of these points, Beller cites the cutting intrusion of the law of the father that prevents a woman agency to pursue her own desires: her lack of money to marry is capital oppression. Marion’s flight from her crime, and the ensuing pursuit from the police, displays the power of the literal law (an extension of the law of the father). “Her death, in the middle of the film, is a cut from the possibility of a female protagonist with agency from
the film itself. Indeed, it is the film that forces Marion to stop at the Bates Motel. [...] By brutally cutting her up as he did in the middle of the film, he thus, against the audience’s expectations, cut the film star out of the film halfway through the narrative. The second half of the film is the afterlife of both Norman’s and the audience’s fetishistic appropriation and indeed consumption of the female film star” (Beller, 54-55). Similar to Citizen Kane, it is far from unreasonable to see Hitchcock intending to comment on psychopathology; Norman Bates, at the end of the film, is revealed to have a ‘split personality’ disorder and is trapped and alienated by the death of his mother. Hitchcock, in a horror genre-film no-less, seems to be exploring the exact concepts Beller criticizes him of reinforcing, while clearly displaying their terror. In all three examples Beller gives (deep focus in Modern Times, montage in Citizen Kane, the cut in Psycho), he is, in fact, truly criticizing the plot of the films, which he earlier establishes to have ‘thematic relations to money at their libidinal core’. The criticisms of the apparatus (specifically the filmic language) are more critiques of the society in which the film was created than that of the techniques themselves. There is nothing inherent to the language that causes them to be directly responsible for the psychic damage Beller purports: in Modern Times, the deep focus is celebrated as a way of preserving the human form. In Citizen Kane, deep focus is instead imbued with dissociation by way of Bazin: “Deep focus [...] allows for ambiguity, according to Bazin, and in Citizen Kane the deep-focus suspension of the determinate meaning of the image is in fact used to probe a montage sequence” (Beller, 51). Deep focus, then does not seems to be inherently destructive. It may be true that our society, in the shadow of industrial-capitalism, very well may contribute to a psychopathology- These films, however, instead encapsulate Benjamin’s second technology. By generating new forms of sensorial interpretation of the
machine world, we are given cautionary tales of a world that the films are actively trying to resist, not an anaesthetizing reinforcement of their ideals.

How then, in the face of an oppressive structure of industrial capitalism, are we to resist and revolt through cinema? Benjamin’s distinct use of the two German words for ‘body’ helps us explain: “Leib there refers to the body as it belongs to and augments ‘the body of humankind’ and as such is able, thanks to technology, to include even nature—the inanimate, plant, and animal—into a unity of life on earth. Körper, by contrast, refers to the individuated, sentient, and finite being whose ‘solitariness is nothing but the consciousness of its direct dependence on God’” (Hansen, 9). Innervation of the body here eclipses the interaction between just a single being to become a collective force of revolution:

“Revolutions are innervations of the collective—or, more precisely, efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the second technology. This second technology is a system in which the mastery of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [das Spiel] with natural forces. Just as a child learns to grasp by stretching out his hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on presently still utopian goals as on goals within reach.” (Hansen, 10)

Unlike psychologists such as Lacan (or Beller), Benjamin sees this miscognition as a positive force that provokes a sense of play with a technologically dominated world, a way to negotiate a utopian ideal with an imperfect modernity. The integration of technology into our modern world, it has to be said, is an irreversible force—our computers are going nowhere. By extension, Benjamin recognizes the importance using these technologies in order to provide a resistance to the reign of oppressive modernity and capitalism: the epitome of the value in second technologies. How does modern cinema, then, use these techniques of innervation to
reimagine the world around us in collective revolution?

Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016) tells the coming of age story of a gay black man, Chiron, in modern Liberty City, Florida. The narrative is presented in three parts of Chiron’s life, from a young boy, to a teenager, and then adult, as he struggles with his sexuality, identity, and physical and emotional abuse. However, the film sets itself apart by using three different actors to play the corresponding ages of a single character, and as such, directly utilizes and embodies fragmentation. The intertitles preceding the film’s three parts, for example, are all of the different names used for Chiron (Little, Chiron, Black). Beller might see this as a complete shredding of the actors’ subjectivity, and view them instead as fragmented being(s), subservient to the gaze of the audience to reassemble, similar to “the audience playing the role of psychoanalyst” (Beller, 51) as they are in *Citizen Kane*. Fragmentation as used by *Moonlight*, however, allows the film to speak to a deeper level- by watching a single character exist in three bodies, there exists a humanity underneath the individual: The audience’s mimetic identification with the superficial appearance of the actors is suspended, and instead, the character lies deeper than the corporeal bodies as played by the actors. By portraying Chiron in multiple bodies, *Moonlight* seems to reinforce the concept of collective body (leib) as outlined by Benjamin. The film appeals to a collective innervation, not being restrained by the single body (Korper), and thus, it is returned to nature- the plight of the character is now experienced as if a spirit, floating from body to body. This spirit, not bound by needing to be identifiable in static physical traits, can then innervate a collective audience more directly, as the discord of ‘he doesn’t look like me’ is surpassed, and thus mimetic-identification can prismatically radiate through an audience. *Moonlight* re-channels the fragmentation of the modern condition (as
experienced by Chiron) in order to navigate the perils of living as a minority in a racially-hostile America and, in the spirit of collective innervation, give voice to the “vital questions affecting the individual” (Hansen, 10).

In truth, it would be massively unjust to say that cinema can fix the totality of the issues presented by modernity. Beyond the primary disasters of our current world (e.g. climate change, global poverty, nuclear warfare), there is some merit to considering some of the detrimental uses of technology to our psyche in our post-industrial landscape (alienation through ever-comparative social media, internet addiction). Furthermore, the distribution of films, as well as the economic support and tools to create them, to second and third world countries (and minorities in the first) is an incomplete endeavour. Capitalism, additionally, only seems to grow stronger and more concentrated in the production of films at the professionally distributed level, as can be seen in the growing size of major Hollywood studios and distribution/production hybrids (e.g. Netflix, Amazon). How to distribute the beautifully sensorial technology of cinema collectively and evenly across all persons is not only an important and unfinished task, but one vital importance to the progress of the medium itself. As opposed to fatalistically reading cinema as an apparatus doomed to reinforce the society in which it resides, we should channel its effects into a collective innervation capable of resisting, or at the very least questioning, our industrial modernity. While the ‘machine’ (industrial-capitalist-patriarchy) might rob us of truth, damage our psyche, and drive inequality and hardship globally, the apparatus (cinema, film) is our way to battle against that oppression. Through the collective body of creators and spectators alike, we can resist the the dark side of psychopathology typical of modernity.
Works Cited


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