

# Response to Owen Schalk’s “Disney, Salò and Pasolini’s Inconsumable Art”: Dialectical streaming in a digitally platformed world.

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*This essay is a response to “Disney, Salò and Pasolini’s Inconsumable Art,” an article written by Owen Schalk in the socialist magazine Monthly Review in 2021. In contesting Schalk’s argument, the essay identifies the limits of the complaints about the way Netflix operates as the dominant digital streaming platform, using algorithms to determine what films are brought to users’ attention, based on pre-existing customer selections. Writing against the argument that commercial imperatives built into algorithms overdetermine what users see, the response identifies the way consumer choice serves as an ideology that, in a dialectical sense opens up contradictory readings of the many avenues available for filmic consumption within contemporary ideation. Pasolini’s film Salò is used by Schalk to inform Pasolini’s theory of inconsumable and indigestible art, an orientation that generates an acknowledgment of capitalism within the general scheme of fascism. The theory still applies to inform cinema watchers of capitalism in the current cultural conjuncture. The case is made that rather than being suppressed by algorithms that predetermine what films can be watched on Netflix, the diversity of many sources of knowledge in the digital environment heightens ideological positions to enliven political struggles, manifesting as dialectical contradictions within a historical materialist approach. Postmodernism is presented as a framework that enhances digital fracturing of cultures generating richer contradictions.*

**Keywords:** Schalk, Netflix, Streaming Video, Cinema, Adorno, Pasolini, Indigestibility, Marxism, Dialectics, Postmodernism

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Like it or not, we are immersed in and defined by digital culture. And yet, toward the end of 2021, *Monthly Review*, “An independent Socialist Magazine Founded in 1949 by Leo Huberman and Paul M Sweezy,” included an essay by Owen Schalk, “Disney, *Salò* and Pasolini’s Inconsumable Art,” that offered wildly misdirected criticism of the digitally mediated world we inhabit. On initial inspection of the title, that is, before reading, the article appeared to be a welcome addition to a magazine that focuses on global politics with a Marxist perspective. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm proved to be wrongfooted, as it transpired that Schalk’s article was a complaint about streaming media, namely Netflix, and the company’s propensity to use algorithms to determine users’ film watching priorities. Consequently, it failed to account for the array of sources of knowledge that now constitute the field of contemporary culture, thereby confirming that there remain serious gaps among left commentators in documenting, comprehending and interpreting the vastness as well as the richness of the current cultural conjuncture due to the availability of vast resources of digital content. This criticism brings to mind the words of Walter Benjamin in “Theses on Philosophy of History:” “Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us” (1940). Benjamin draws attention to the way historical materialism offers a vision of change in culture due to technology, one where the political economy remains defined by the struggle for emancipation.

Against this Marxist tradition, Schalk’s article offered an insight into the limitations of cultural critique on the political left, as exemplified in *Monthly Review*’s coverage of media. Such infrequent, even “sketchy” engagement by *Monthly Review* has been the case since the media scholar Robert McChesney completed his stint as editor from 2000-2004, leaving the journal to focus on the necessary analysis of the climate catastrophe, undoubtedly directed by the current editor John Bellamy Foster’s expertise. This is part of a trend in recent times, as *Monthly Review* and other publications on the left such as *Review of Radical Political Economics*, have struggled to provide critically informed discussions about the defining questions of contemporary media, communication and technology that structure everyday life and culture, in other words the political economy of existence (Breen 2019). In keeping with this trend to cauterize as it were, media, communication and technology off from the totalizing breadth of left political economy as required by Marxist approaches, Schalk’s article highlighted critical gaps in contemporary media critique.

The cause of Schalk’s complaint was that Netflix’s algorithms selected movies he did not select for himself. This was presented as barely short of a personal affront, as Schalk suggested that Netflix had imposed its algorithms on his freedom to choose the movies he wanted to watch. Such affrontery marked the negation of his ability to actively select streaming video programs for himself. As if to rehearse Benjamin’s observations noted above about contemporary conditions, the ideological foundations of the complaint reproduced a kind of uncritical American consumer entitlement.

Such an approach incorporates an attitude contained in Max Weber’s essay, “The Distribution of Power within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party,” where sociological concepts of “life conduct” or “lifestyle” (*Lebensführung/Lebensstil*) describe an “unreflective habit” or habitus, a somewhat commonplace for Americans since World War 2, as the general population has enjoyed a consumerist cornucopia in all things, including media (Bulmash 2019, Weber 1978, Abel and

Cockerham 1993). The lifestyle idea was publicly debated – that is, it moved out of academic circles - when framed as a critical intervention into the affluent conventions of post-World War 2 America, with the release of *The Affluent Society* by the institutional economist J. K. Galbraith (1958). It is worth recalling the way Galbraith articulated the historical shift out of endemic human poverty in the US due to scarcity, into post World War 2 consumerism, through change mechanisms (or demand management) constructed by media, advertising and marketing: “So great has been the change that many of the desires of the individual are no longer even evident to him. They become so only as they are synthesized, elaborated and nurtured by advertising and salesmanship, and these, in turn, have become among our most important and talented professions. Few people at the beginning of the nineteenth century needed an adman to tell them what they wanted” (1956: 2).

More recently, consumer choice theory has been established as the stated and unstated ideology of contemporary capitalism, led by “US consumerism.” This ideology of consumerist consumption has been deployed as the global standard for social life, due to the deep imbrication of persuasive selling techniques built into media technology through digital devices. Given this context, contemporary political economy can be characterized by dependent determinacy, a lifestyle ideology created by the ubiquity of always-on internet services that are increasingly impossible to live without and which have produced systems of “surveillance advertising” based on the algorithms for marketing that Schalk protested in his article (Crain 2022).

It is instructive to locate myself in relation to Schalk’s article, because I read it as one who is conscious of having “given up” another national identity for US citizenship. While this transition is at once banal in the sense that millions of people have been naturalized in the US, this act of rejection of one’s birth identity with the active acceptance of a newly constructed identity, creates a unique sensibility about being American. On becoming American there emerges a consciousness about what has been left and what has been gained by the compromises, contradictions and conceits of American citizenship.

Against this background, Schalk’s entitlement to consumerist choice *against* the algorithmic determination of Netflix prompted my critical reaction, reminding me that I am sometimes horrified at the unconscious embodiment of the ideology of consumerism by Americans, including on the left, and furthermore, that this ideology, the US way of life, has been a major global export. That is to say, my response is one that I share with many non-Americans and admittedly, some Americans, who oppose the popular claim to have anything and everything at their immediate personal disposal, as if this kind of consumerist choice is the natural order of things. Reading Schalk’s claims of distress about the way Netflix’s algorithms robbed him of choice, suggested that streams of consumerist American entitlement run deep. And yet those very same streams of choice generated by industrial capitalism’s intense attention to customer potentiality, opens up contradictory readings of the many avenues available for filmic consumption within contemporary culture.

Thankfully, Schalk went much further than to complain about the lack of consumer choice in Netflix. After addressing his complaint about the way Netflix exploits data to offer him movies he didn’t want to see, his article explored two important texts that could be considered foundational to left, Marxist and Communist media studies; one is commonplace, while the other was a somewhat obscure point of reference for media studies, specifically cinema in the streaming era.

The first text was Max Horkheimer's and Theodore Adorno's 1944/1947, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* text, which offers a critique of media industries *at the time* it was written. It is a text with which most if not all media studies researchers are familiar. However, this is where Schalk was mistaken in his approach; to take a foundational yet ageing critical media studies text and apply it to media analysis in the digitally streaming 2020s. Suffice to say, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is baked in time, although its philosophical method of dialectical analysis remains apposite for any critique of media. This is a point to which I will return.

The second reference was to the Italian film maker Pier Paolo Pasolini, some of whose later films are presented as the foundation for theory building based on aspects of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* along with Roland Barthes' semiotics, most notably the concept of *sens suspendu* (suspended meaning). Drawing on this confluence of critique, Schalk proposed inconsumable art theory, based on ideas from semiotics and structuralism. He persuasively argued that Pasolini was determined in the later films he made in the 1960s and early 1970s, to use cinema through *sens suspendu*, to create a semiology of indigestibility, a kind of shock and disgust at cinema that was otherwise dedicated to (note the historical conflation) "the formulaic and manipulative processes of modern cultural production as exemplified in the film industry of Pasolini's day, and by today's multinational streaming technocracies" (49). Pasolini's indigestibility tactic, argued Schalk, was intended to "challenge(s) easy digestibility by introducing deliberately indigestible elements to the work" (49). Certainly, for cinema watchers and Marxist scholars who have engaged with and celebrated Pasolini as a radical film maker within Communist media studies whose focus is class struggle and revolution, the indigestibility theory is valuable, not least of which is its invitation to reject taken-for-granted capitalist, liberal democratic ideology that is imbricated within uncritical, consumerist cinema and everyday life. Digestibility theory extends the *avant-garde* commitment to resistance-through-art, as a critical strategy aimed at replacing and where necessary overthrowing the industrial forms of cultural reproduction, through recognizing "the contradictions that unites within itself" (Bürger 2010, 695). At the level of generating necessary theory for cultural critique that contributes to the programmatic overthrow of existing forms of oppression, Schalk has an argument. At another level his conflation of Horkheimer, Adorno, Barthes and Pasolini with Netflix was mistaken, because he did not acknowledge contradictions in the development of cultural production within capitalism, and thus the utility of the dialectical method for an analysis of the complexity of the current cultural conjuncture that a historical materialist method requires.

The mistake was further amplified because left criticism of cultural production is polysemic, reflecting multiple, complex shifts in approaches and theory that cannot easily be characterized in resistance to Netflix's overdetermined digital platform culture. This diversity of potentiality began most notably in media studies with Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where Benjamin noted that "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art" to operate as a feature of political struggle because art's aura is multiplied through technology to the masses (Benjamin 1970, 226). This mounts to the politics of technological reproduction. Unfortunately, Schalk's article did not acknowledge the emancipatory capacity of technologies to provide communicative vehicles for the oppressed, in what Benjamin identified as a new kind of democratic movement within cultural production. Instead, Schalk directed his theory

against the global platformization of Amazon, thus missing the opportunity to celebrate the historical shift to multi-vectoral media production.

Finally, by way of introduction, it is important to reiterate the contemporary role of alternative left media. As a socialist and Marxist magazine, *Monthly Review* is a publication with an official circulation of around 4,400 subscribers. Its critical perspectives in essays and commentaries are often fresh and refreshing when set against the two major foci of information in the US: the remorseless daily grind of trivializing corporate media news reports that tilt from the political center to the right and fascist, with coverage of the injustices experienced by the working class primarily offered as entertainment; or secondly, coverage through stenography rather than journalism about geo-political issues intended to promote the US Government and its hegemonic interests (Prasad 2022). In contrast, alternative and left media can offer news and information informed by critical frameworks about material conditions across society. *Monthly Review's* contribution is welcome, yet it could do much more by offering critical analysis of media drawing on a historical materialist approach that takes into consideration the varied trajectories of cultural production due to digital technologies. In the following comments, I will address in more detail the limits of Schalk's approach, while acknowledging the ways that the indigestibility theory he proffers contributes to the contemporary cultural conjuncture.

### **The initial response – empirical movies**

Schalk's commentary came into perspective on a recent Friday evening, after a demanding week in which I navigated undergraduate teaching while attending faculty interviews with candidates for a new position in the department where I teach. My partner suggested that we watch a movie. She worked through a variety of possibilities in listings that she had opened on her phone. The titles appeared because they were similar to other movies she and I had watched: British drama, Australian Aboriginal topics, rock and roll documentaries, women directors, French New Wave. Some of the recommendations were considered then, after a brief discussion, discarded as irrelevant, or not quite right for the night in question.

As I cut and diced the vegetables, movie titles and their synopses were read out. There were perhaps six titles, but none caught our shared attention. Nevertheless, she persisted, scrolling, reading, scrolling.

After half an hour and some frustration, a preferred title emerged, bringing to a close a decision-making process replicated in thousands, even millions of homes around the world: an engagement with consumer choice, in which a variety of cinematic and cultural products are available for selection on digital streaming platforms. In our home, on a dramatically clear screen above a sound bar set up for maximum cinema audio effect – expressions of affluence we barely consider a privilege - we agreed to watch *Lovely and Amazing*, a 2001 film written and directed by Nicole Holofcener, featuring Catherine Keneer and Emily Mortimer, two actors I like. As a film about domestic challenges facing female actors and artists in and around Hollywood, it had a quirky twist provided by a wealthy mother who has adopted a black girl. The film offered the prospect of an evening immersed in feminist politics in cinema, as defined by the liberal imagination of contemporary, wealthy independent white women.

This somewhat trivial retelling of a Friday night operates as a qualitative ethnography-of-sorts, in that it identifies through observation and self-disclosure, at least one element of the commonplace process of cultural decision making in a domestic US household. My intention in the retelling is to illuminate Schalk's complaint by drawing on a comparative experience in my relationship with streaming video, where two people in the domestic space of a North American home expressed their privilege and agency in making a choice from a variety of options. In addition, the "ethnographic" description is intended to make a further point: *Lovely and Amazing* was *not* on Netflix, the global film and television streaming service that was the object of Schalk's grievance. *Lovely and Amazing* was on Kanopy, another streaming service offered in the Northeast U.S. by the Minuteman public library consortium and to many universities in the US and around the world. Kanopy's "free" access is offered through the Overdrive platform to public library members and college students in cities and colleges that offer access. It streams up to 30,000 films, among other digitized cultural artifacts – books, magazines, recordings, games - that can be selected from the databases.

Unfortunately, Kanopy has been pressured by the imperatives of market fundamentalism, making it impossible for some public libraries to continue to subscribe to the free-for-library-users service under the "patron driven acquisition model (PDA)" (Gall 2021, 42) due to "unpredictable and unsustainable costs" (Kanopy). For example, the New York Public Library announced in a Twitter post on June 24, 2019, that it could no longer afford to pay for Kanopy, joined on July 1, 2019, by Queens Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library (Kanopy). Private university libraries and public libraries in wealthy cities appear to be unaffected by what amounts to the application of neoliberal policies that favor the already privileged, thereby extending the "digital divide" and with it, denial of public access to cinematic language in cities and towns under financial pressure.

Nevertheless, the availability of Kanopy challenges Schalk's claim that access to high quality cinema and television is determined by Netflix: that one digital platform is a monolithic, algorithmically determining expression of dominant ideology that depresses cultural access. In addition, there are other streaming video platforms in the U.S. (and unique national ones such as Stan in Australia), including Hulu, Criterion, You Tube, iTunes, Amazon Prime. If anything, the Artificial Intelligence that informed Schalk's choice grievance suggests that the opposite is the case: the options for watching film and television on a variety of digital streaming platforms is an expression of contemporary capitalism's supply side excess. Consequently, it is physically impossible to watch everything that is available, even when Artificial Intelligence algorithms offer sorting and indexing functions in keeping with pre-existing user preferences, in a technique referred to as "profiling" for surveillance advertising (More on that follows). To focus on the predetermined preferences arranged by the algorithm's computer code attached to the subscriber's name and watching habits on their Netflix account, is to miss the plethora of ideation within the cornucopia of cultural visibility. Certainly, it is possible that within the cornucopia of cinematic material, the benefits of inconsumable art as argued in Schalk's theorization are likely to be lost in an ocean of streaming "product." And yet, active decisions can be taken to search for, find and view Pasolini's inconsumable and indigestible cinematic interventions, if one is inclined to search, not only on Netflix.

Much of the energy that drives Schalk's protest is drawn from the anti-capitalist view, that "technocratic profit maximization" drives the technological determinism built into Netflix to

actualize the perpetual negation of human emancipation. This perspective is in line with Adorno's "standardization of style" (Schalk 44). This simplistic perspective harkens to Marx's and Engels's observation made in *The German Ideology*, "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas," that "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas" (1846, np). And while there is undoubtedly a standardization of style in capitalist media production as a result of the profit fetish, there is also diffusion of ideas that offer counterpoints to the claim that one is forever subordinated to capitalist ideas. (It is worth keeping mind that the end point of total subordination to the capitalist imperatives of profit through exploitation and alienation would be absolute desperation, depression and suicide within the left and more generally. This is something that is arguably at play in the U.S. in "deaths of despair," due to suicide, excessive drug and alcohol abuse and addiction (Case and Deaton 2020).

In the digital era dominated by the application of a choice theory that generates almost limitless, self-correcting algorithms, Marx's dictum about ruling ideology is no longer as clear cut as it could once claim to be, if it ever was. Nor for that matter is Horkheimer and Adorno's negativity towards the creative industries helpful in the way it universalized mechanical reproduction as negative. Indeed, Marx's comments overstated the media situation in the nineteenth century, as the ruling ideas in the media of that era gave way to other ideas and revolution across Europe. For example, people like Thomas Müntzer mobilized the German peasantry in 1524-1526 with his "Sermon to the Princes," during the years of emergent capitalism, as described by Engels in *The Peasant War in Germany* (Müntzer 2010). Coming very soon after Martin Luther's break with the Catholic Church, Müntzer's published sermon, related tracts and pamphlets were an early manifestation of popular literacy informing a social movement that became revolutionary. As Benedict Anderson showed in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, this was possible due to the emergence of the printing press, followed by the commercial printing industry and distribution channels which opened up Europe to popular literacy, paving the way for Protestantism's ideology of emancipatory self-management rather than the Catholic Church's imposed feudalist serfdom (Anderson 1983). Europe's printing-popular literacy shift of the sixteenth century heralded ideation with profound shifts in the mobilization of social movements of the Left and Right.

Leaping ahead a few hundred years, after the emergence of the Internet and social and streaming media, the ideological struggle has been heightened in digital form. The Right has undoubtedly been more effective in coordinating political actions through the ready application of business marketing campaigns for illiberal, anti-progressive, anti-communist, white supremacist priorities using new media technologies (Bickert et al. 2017). This development exists in the context of the emergence of Donald Trump as President of the US, whose consolidation of the Republican Party comprehensively refused Biden's social policy programs in 2021-2022, offering salient examples of an organized Right. In the US and perhaps globally, the Right, originally through the actions of Trump's social media guru, Brad Parscale built, "the most sophisticated marketing operation that politics has ever seen" (Parscale Strategy 2022). Meanwhile, by 2022, Republican voters showed only five percent "confidence" in newspaper news and only eight percent "confidence" in television news: trends downward against formal news sources (Brenan 2022). Using tactics created for strategic business practices, the Right is notable for its ability to consolidate itself using social media, propaganda and government administrative controls, through the structures put in

place by Trump and Republican allies in US states, while the Left consists of many splintered organizations of “fellow travelers,” leaving a left that struggles to combine as The Left. One exception is in Europe, with the formation of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s NUPES (Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale / New Ecological and Social People’s Union, 2022) in France.

These sharpening ideological lines inform political struggles in society due to digital impacts. These struggles are drawn from new social and economic stresses while directing grievances about them. The sharp ideological lines illustrate the role of media in ideation and social movement formations, informed by the impact of digital technologies in heightening cultural engagement that has redefined political collisions between emergent ideological movements. They heighten an appreciation of Walter Benjamin’s historical materialist observation, that as desire could not be realized in material life, the (predictable) “explosive energy” of dialectics would result (Thompson 2019).

### **Digital Turns for Discursive Diversity**

Digital streaming platforms like Netflix are systems that determine user preferences based on data harvesting, prioritization settings and personalization, generating “data driven algorithmic culture” more recently defined as profiling (Striphas 2015), relying on the increasingly complex application of rational choice theory within Artificial Intelligence for their appeal (Marwala 2017). Such an approach by cultural providers manifests the excesses of capitalist consumption, and is a topic that requires more critical analysis and engagement along with strategic and tactical thinking to incorporate critical theories about contemporary digital ideology. Of considerable assistance in such a project is Jodi Dean’s theory of “communicative capitalism,” where “the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment and communication technologies (in ways that) capture resistance and intensify global capitalism” (2009, 2). This condition, argues Dean, produces “consumerism, personalization and therapeutization,” that generates a sense of victimization at the hands of algorithms, and is manifest in Schalk’s criticism of Netflix (Dean 2009, 6). Curiously, applying Dean’s schema, Schalk can be considered to be a victim robbed of choice, the highest “claim” of the fundamentalist turn in neoclassical economics and its global neoliberal manifestations on the rights of the individual as consumer.

Relying on Horkheimer and Adorno for his criticism of the industrial processes of the manufacture and distribution of cinema, Schalk failed to acknowledge that Adorno in particular, was a product of his times as well as something of a German snob, whose disgust with industrial cultural production has demotivated the left’s appropriation of “the popular” for the socialist project or deeper, revolutionary cultural critique. Conversely and for his part, admittedly before the full capacity was realized of mechanical reproduction to which Adorno objected, Marx’s work as a journalist, publishing essays in popular working-class magazines and newspapers like *New York Tribune*, informed his view that alternative media was a significant source for new and emerging forms of knowledge that would reconstruct working people’s consciousness (Ledbetter and Wheen, 2007). In other words, there are many levels at which the contending forces of social and economic life express contradictions, demanding creative responses grounded in an appreciation of evolving history that informs Marxist theory.



Proponents of Adorno and the narrower ideological interpretation of Marx, such as Schalk, reproduce the view that cultural production is the result of an industrial monolith, characterized by unbreachable, financialized, global creative industries. Certainly, computer science smarts extend the monolithic determinism of algorithmic culture especially through AI, making it possible to profile every US and global consumer, as the 2016 Cambridge Analytica video “confessional” shows (2016). As this video illustrated, everyone’s data in the United States was evaluated to generate a psychographic profile for the purposes of targeting wavering Trump supports in the lead up to the 2016 election. More generally, such psychographic data is sold to advertisers who use it to better target consumers on various social media platforms. In the case of Netflix, the data is “sold” to itself, within a data ecosystem directed at retaining its audience by finding and promoting Netflix films that closely accord with the psychographic preference for film styles the viewer has established on the platform. (Netflix Research offers detailed explanations of its “analytics – driving insights from data” on its website). But here’s the rub: such a system is not closed to new ideas, including Pasolini’s “inconsumable” cultural artifacts. In fact, psychographic methods derive their power from its fungibility. Its billions of lines of computer code chase after, then “produce” consumers in a personalized relationship with cultural products, about which it could not care less – as long as the relationship is commodified within the capture of global capital. Happy or sad, sick or rejoicing – the system flourishes, even when it presents the inconsumable as a choice option!

Adorno, along with his Frankfurt School acolytes, established the negative (as opposed to his philosophical negation theory in dialectics) school of cultural production, one characterized by political hopelessness in the potential of cultural products to generate ideologically fresh, radical and revolutionary texts. According to Schalk, Netflix’s equivalent is its user-viewer psychographic profiles, which create a sense of hopelessness in the face of its computations.

But here is another rub, reiterated from earlier. Applications of Adorno’s critique of cultural production suffer from a critical blind spot that is apparent in the digital context: he and those engaged in cultural theory at the time, were focused on the *analogue production processes* of cinema. In the context of the 1930s to the 1980s, the cultural industrialization that Adorno criticized, offered a singularity of vision. An analogue film or musical text is a relatively stable, single artifact. Similarly, this criticism is relevant to Pasolini, who was commenting on cultural production with fascist characteristics within post-World War 2 consumerism, where cinema and then commercial television were the primary products of communicative industrialization. Schalk carefully documents Pasolini’s inconsumable art theory, which is accurate in the analog situation, but in the context of digitally networked communication and media, such a theory can only do the critical work it is expected to do in the context of networked digital technologies. It requires informed theoretical energy, grounded in the history of the transformation of form and content that accompany the digital turn.

This shift to digitally networked technologies is inadequately represented in Schalk’s criticism of Netflix or his theory building. Take for example all the technologies that have emerged since Adorno and Pasolini – that is, since the 1970s. Digital technologies make possible the manipulation and distribution of sound and image on screen that are far in advance of anything critics working in the analogue era could imagine. Similarly, the Internet as a cultural facilitator has confirmed, extended, then moved beyond what the French Communist Francois Lyotard described as

microsocial political empowerment tools in his essay *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984). The Internet has opened new fronts for solidarity movements for the left, as well as destructive amplifiers for the Right, as evidenced in the forces of reaction that Donald Trump was able to mobilize, as noted above.

The chaotic diffusion of cultural opportunities within the digital edifice of networked culture offers an open, evolving series of possibilities and challenges. One such challenge in this landscape includes the exploitation of creatives amateurs, the underpaid and exploited workers of the media sector. Andrew Ross argued that the corporations seeking this kind of labor force have to be opposed in the interests of long-term livelihoods of “qualitatively good work” (2009, 22-24). What matters about this is that the organization and mobilization of the forces of the left are necessary in order that the digital tools of change *not* be used exclusively to further construct the illiberal, fascist, anti-progressive movement of the Right.

Given such options, Schalk’s criticism of Netflix prompts a counter-vision of cultural opportunities, ones bursting with rich potential, because it is within the trajectory of digital technologies driven and informed by algorithms and Artificial Intelligence that a new political economy of collective interests has emerged. For every Netflix algorithm that predetermines through profiling and psychographics a selected menu of films for individuals, there is the “More Films Like This” option button that will seek out the preferred movie interests of the viewer, offering, as if backwards, agency to the viewer as a result of the viewer’s profile. It is within such individualized arrangements that a complex new relationship with the collective consciousness of cinema can be realized. This condition weaves materialist sensibilities together with philosophical potential for yet another terrain of activity, namely film theory. This terrain opens the way forward for shared ideas, forming new ideological possibilities for cinematic knowledge production that aims at collective action (Flisfeder 2012). Complicated new theoretical considerations about the psychoanalytic, specifically ideas of the subconscious along with the mental machinery of desire derived by Jacques Lacan, inform the social capacity of cinema, emerging as part of the engagement with left politics that seeks new philosophical horizons for politics, as Slavoj Žižek and other Lacanian interpreters in critical film studies have argued (Jagodzinski 2012).

To add to this collective capacity, and more profoundly for its potential, much cinema is now watched on mobile smart phones, devices that until a few years ago were merely telephones connected to local “cells” for making phone calls. This newfound cinematic mobility is matched by the availability of social media platforms that rely on inventive film structures, from YouTube and Twitter to TikTok’s videos that run from 15 seconds to three minutes. For example, consider the critic Sasha Frere Jones’s invocation of these technologies as a way for Surrealism to be appreciated in its expression of Freudianism and Marxist materialism, even indigestibility, in this new communicative environment.

*I see a great deal of surrealizing on Instagram and TikTok, where accounts like @Succ.exe and @onylshitpostsIG mash together sound and image for sequences that tell no linear story and can barely be explained. Two electric drills, joined at the bits, dance on a garage floor to a soundtrack of farts. Post it! Or you can go to hypnogram.xyz, and let AI make you a personalized exhibit (2022, np).*

These innovations demand fresh theories of cinema within the history of art, communication, media and politics, such as that presented by Laura Mulvey, who unwound the heterosexist fetish of cinema associated with “The Male Gaze” in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973). More recently, Mulvey has championed meaning making techniques in *24X a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, arguing that digital technologies allow the film viewer to be a “pensive spectator,” one who deeply and critically engages with images by stopping, skipping, repeating, reviewing and thereby challenging established hierarchical aesthetics, allowing the viewer to become a new kind of avant-gardist by exploring psychosocial possibilities in image construction through the “desire to know” (2006, 181 and 12). The latter phrase is an endorsement of Lacanian approaches in her research about cinema.

Mulvey’s optimism for new critical engagement in the context of digital production, offers a continuation of the aspirations of cinema as a political tool, as Massimiliano Mollona argued in “Working Class Cinema in the Age of Digital Capitalism” (2021, 154). Mollona draws on examples from Ken Loach’s production processes, especially films focused on class struggle and collective survival, suggesting positive opportunities for political education, knowledge creation and diffusion using digital cultural production. Both Mulvey and Mollona serve as examples of approaches to theory and practice in the discovery of new avenues of praxis in cinema.

Contemporary Marxist analysis of culture - specifically cinema in its messy relationship with streaming platforms - must include the complexities of contemporary political economy. Unfortunately, by focusing on Netflix and its algorithms, Schalk identifies the dominant U.S. formation, one in which profit maximization is achieved by finding audiences everywhere around the globe and commodifying them. However, to focus on one platform, with its algorithmic preference settings, is to reduce the possibilities for comprehending the complexities of the globally networked cultural system, given the digital turn and the many options available within it.

Furthermore, and at the risk of overstating the criticism, to suggest that the deep and necessary critiques of industrial creativity that emerged during the analogue era of movie-making can be applied in the global networked context, does a dis-service to those critiques that are historically bound, and to the present possibilities for cinema in an opticentric world (Breen 2021). For example, references to Paulo Pasolini’s criticism of television as a continuation of fascism in Italy is accurate and necessary to restate. But to suggest, as Schalk does, that Pasolini’s film *Salò* offers a way of reconstructing the present with “an unflinching indictment of the consumer-capitalist culture he sought to expose over the course of his career,” does a disservice to the field of cinema and media studies that are engaged in historicizing cinema as well as politicizing it (Schalk 52). All that to say, it is unwise to contemporaneously invoke Pasolini’s creative work without recognizing that it emerged in a different historical time that was defined by analogue technology.

### **Heterogeneity in platform cinema – it’s postmodern**

Schalk’s article highlights an analytical gap that explains the primary weakness of his analysis. That is, the absence of postmodernity. While the critical media and communication research community is long past its 1990s obsession with the postmodern, especially the Cultural Studies version of it, there is a sense that *Monthly Review*, its editors, writers, and its audience have a confused relationship with postmodernity as an element of the left’s emancipatory movements, or

the literature that informs it. This may explain why Schalk draws on the analogue world of Adorno and Pasolini, as if postmodernity's digital fracturing of communication never happened. For its part, the theory of indigestibility is fully commensurate with postmodernity's diversified multiperspectivalism, in which new images rich with historical materialist ideas flood into and fertilize the dialectical whole. That is why Schalk's complaint does not adequately address the central appeal of postmodernity in its contribution to the dialectical conceptualization of contesting forces at work in media production and consumption. The collision between established modalities of media production and consumption which coexist with new formations, generate conflicts that, as Laura Mulvey pointed out, offer fresh pathways in which cinema can flourish, including postmodern formations that incorporate *sans suspens* and its inconsumability. Similarly, postmodernity welcomes the aesthetic and political collisions that inform the *avant-garde's* desecration of bourgeois respectability. This postmodern approach advances dialectical intensification, not as some kind of privileged design indulgence, but as a means of making obvious the contradictions that generate revolt against the established capitalist order. In this case, Pasolini's application of avant gardism in the theory of inconsumability in *Salò*, is brought into contemporary circulation through the institutional structures of digital streaming platforms, where it meets the privileged watching in their lounge rooms. In so doing, it facilitates what Hal Foster referred to as *criticality*, where – perhaps optimistically - art and cinema consumers observe and reimagine human relations in otherwise settled visions of cinema (Foster 1996, vix-xvi). Historical materialists should expect nothing less.

These comments extend from Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in which he pointed to the challenges of sustaining heterogeneity on the left. Jameson suggests that a totalizing system of analysis – such as that used by Schalk to critique Netflix – renders a kind of paralysis.

*... by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, (sic) and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself (1985, 57).*

It is to be hoped that Schalk's stimulating provocations will not produce such paralysis, especially when so much cinematic beauty offers critical knowledge within global circulation on digital platforms. Such paralysis would misdirect the struggle away from the foundational questions that the Left needs to repurpose as it retheorizes political action within an evolving model of social life. It is a social life that is increasingly informed by digital technologies and streaming media that more fully render the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. The goal is not to abandon attention, action and organizing as the conditions that inform the dialectic becomes more obvious, but, as Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote in his poem "The Ashes of Gramsci," to continue "this desperate passion to be in the world."

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