

The War on Pleasure

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It is a dire plight to try and make sense of the world. Although there are a great many attempts at an explanation, there are a few main schools of thought which most other ideas fall into. The first is the idea is that there is an explanation, the second being that there is not. Albert Camus, coined an existentialist, is one of the leading members of the opinion that it is futile to find meaning in an unintelligible world, however that doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy the struggle. Enjoying oneself is fairly difficult these days, made no easier by its persecution by academia and religion.

Both Western religion and the academics discussion of pleasure originated in the same place: ancient Greece. Plato, who has influenced all modern Western philosophers, was the first to shun pleasure. Prior to Plato, at least in Rome and Greece, pleasure was glorified and revered, especially the pleasure of the flesh. The anti sex school of thought began to spread in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC when Plato said there was a radical division between body and soul. (*From Pleasure to Sin*, 16:01). The material world and the flesh was nothing compared to knowledge. Anything associated with the flesh is worthless and inferior. "For Plato the only legitimate pleasures are those based on the pursuit of transcendental truth, while for political modernism, pleasure can only be legitimated on the basis of a historical and material truth," (Rutsky, 5). This led to a drastic change in academic teaching. In academia, personal pleasure would be cast aside for the pursuit of knowledge, and those who studied or partook in pleasurable activities were seen as less intelligent and inferior.

Another byproduct of Plato's philosophy was its impact on Christianity. In Judaism and the old Testament, sex and pleasure were not frowned upon because it led to procreation. Plato's philosophy in Roman culture influenced early Christianity and Catholicism and the narrative changed. Saint Augustin preached that lust is equated to original sin. Lust drove Eve to take the apple, and in doing so exposed herself and Adam to the torments of the physical world. Adam and Eve became ashamed of their sexual organs and covered themselves. Therefore, all sexual intercourse is intrinsically evil. The Apostle Jerome also believed that sex was defiling, and people would have a greater reward in heaven if they practiced celibacy. The church offers stability in an uncertain world, so with the promise of meaning these teachings are established as the ultimate truth. "...There seems to have traditionally been...confusion in the case of pleasure,

as is shown by the normal attitude of Hedonism. Indeed, a hedonist is popularly a man who pursues a life of physical sensations.” (Manser, 226). Manser also speaks to the connection and differences between physical pleasure and all other activities that produce pleasure, commenting on the fact that pleasure is not restricted to sexual pleasure, but it most commonly associated in a way that would imply all pleasure is as sinful as bodily pleasure.

This denunciation of all pleasures was encouraged by the influence of the monastic life which was introduced by Buddhist and Hindu monks. “Some Christians were so driven by their belief in self-denial they decided to give up their worldly lives completely, living in constant prayer, they denied their bodies food, comfort and sexual pleasure in order to attain spiritual perfection,” (*From Pleasure to Sin*, 30:49). Buddhism preaches that to achieve happiness one must relinquish all physical pleasures. Buddhism reiterates that a life solely controlled by desires is a recipe for unhappiness, (Choudhury, 685). In a purely logical standpoint, it seems contradictory that by denying oneself pleasure, one will achieve pleasure. Across many religious platforms, the ideas the pleasure will lead to damnation or at least unhappiness in this life is a popular theme. “According to the functionalist view, religion performs certain functions for individuals and society. This function includes a social, existential or hermeneutical and transcendent function,” (Cloete, 3). In this manner, the responsibility of finding meaning in one’s own life is removed for the small price of relinquishing life’s pleasures.

However, academics are also not allowed to experience life’s pleasures. Philosophers like Marx and Engles state that the social forces of capitalism transform life from being about living to being about surviving. We do not see that we are ‘dehumanized’ and are therefore not interested in rising up and changing the system. By focusing on the moment, and enjoying the life one is given, we are subjugating ourselves to the system and stuck complacently in a living hell. So, while we may think we are happy, we cannot be truly happy because we are not free. Part of the capitalist agenda is the dominion over the working class, and according to Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno, film is the tool of choice. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception* they argue that the content of the film will extend into the real world, and carry its philosophies with it, further influencing and controlling culture and society (56). Because the ruling class controls the media and film, the philosophies in films will not ultimately be beneficial to the general public. “The postindustrial shift of the U.S. Economy to white-collar and service-sector jobs, and away from blue-collar jobs, has created a

large workforce/audience susceptible to this type of corporate critique,” (Clare 180). In the current system, many people find their lives are not fulfilled, and in a materialist, culture dominated by capitalism the wonderful fantasies of film worlds are a natural escape. Academic criticize this escapism, because it is passive. Although people are experiencing pleasure from film, pleasure is not a worthy pursuit, as knowledge is the only way to find meaning and transcendence.

The solution to the problem of the controlling capitalist society would seem to be for each individual person to rise up and make a change, but it is not as simple or easy as that. For the majority of people, the system is not so oppressive that they would feel the need to enact a radical change. It is important to note that there are theories on how we are only convinced that we are not oppressed enough, even though we are. “The literature of the inside of the corporation becomes merely a vehicle for capitals voice. Since capital cannot truly ‘have’ a voice, it compels those who work for and within it to speak for it, seemingly as a ventriloquist does the dummy...it is the dummy controlling the ventriloquist, only the ventriloquist is completely unaware of this,” (Clare, 192). By continuously analyzing how the reality of the individual is controlled by society, the individual is condemning themselves most assuredly to a lifetime of unhappiness and confusion. In the meantime, the everyday worker must seek fulfilment. “Today's beleaguered worker finds similar escape from economic hardship through film.” (Tay). Tay also points out how many filmmakers use the medium of film to share political theories and ideas, so while it may be escapist, it is also educational.

Adorno is adamantly against escapism in cinema, but not all film is classified as escapist. Art film, avant-garde film, and realist film is often not included in the mainstream cinema dialogue. “Film criticism[s]...academic legitimacy has always been used on the distinction between serious pleasures and mere diversion (the repeated attempts to separate ‘high’ from ‘mass’ culture, art from ‘mere’ commodity),” (Rutsky, 4). Once, again, an attack on pleasure. Serious pleasures include the pursuit of knowledge and meaning in the world. The ‘mere’ commodity pleasure would be the instant joy or emotion experienced in the watching of a film. Psychologists conducted studies on the human brain in relation to pleasure, using wine as a test subject. The human brain experienced more pleasure when drinking an expensive wine even when both wines were in reality the same (DiSalvo). Because of social and cultural influences, our brains react differently to things that we place greater value on, regardless of the actual

value. However, our pleasure centers respond to the things with the higher personal value, and we enjoy it more. Similarly, in film, if we experience pleasure from a film, regardless of the film's value. That being said, if a film brings more pleasure to a group of people, could that film be classified as better? What qualifies the value of a film is also a debate of high art and commodity. While an art film may have a greater philosophical value and cultural commentary, a romantic film may bring more people joy and in this way contribute to bettering the individual experience.

Western culture is predominantly dictated through capitalism and materialism, meaning that to the individual their perceptions of happiness may also be dictated by these things. “Singular pursuits of material wealth and excessive materialism have been reported to be incompatible with religious fulfillment” (Choudhury, 283). “Possessions are understood to fulfill almost all human wants, ensure happiness, define self-worth, play a central role in a person’s life, and symbolize the quality of life,” (Choudhury, 683). Pleasure through materialist pursuits are also frowned upon by the great thinkers and academics. Once again, the quality and type of pleasure we can and cannot experience is dictated by the institutions around us. This also leads into the argument of psychology and how it factors in to what gives people pleasure, as that is bound to differ from one person to the next. Filmmakers are responsible for the messages their films deliver. In propagating educational and progressive messages audiences can enjoy the experience of the film and not be plagued by the guilt of supposedly contributing to the dehumanization of society through propaganda.

Koch, like Adorno, theorizes that film is mass art, and he is uneasy about the audience’s tendencies to consume it without question. “Ambivalence is indeed the starting point of the dialectical turn from shattering and fragmentation to bricolage and subversion—but reconciliation is as incommensurable as is happiness.” (Koch, 83). That is to say that in our journeys to find meaning in our own lives, we must not be so selfish as to negate our responsibilities to the happiness of others and the betterment of the world.

If one is not going to find meaning through religion, or dedicate themselves to academia and transcendence through knowledge, it is important to recognize the alternatives. Choosing to take responsibility for one’s own life and accept that there may not be anything beyond this plane of existence is a tremendous leap away from faith. Existentialism does not open the doors to a life of pure pleasure, because enjoying it becomes a whole lot more difficult. A big part of

religion is the belief that there is something after death. Without this faith in the afterlife, the issue of mortality arises. With the threat of death hanging over one's shoulders, the impediment to live life to its fullest is imposed. Camus "advocates precisely what he takes Christianity to abjure: living a life of the senses, intensely, here and now, in the present. This entails, first, abandoning all hope for an afterlife, indeed rejecting thinking about it. 'I do not want to believe that death is the gateway to another life. For me it is a closed door,'" (Aronson). This is frowned upon in part because of this statement's rejection of god, but also in the idea that life could be lived for the senses, for oneself. Living for oneself is not necessarily a notion of selfishness, but of *amor fati*—to love your life, the richness of life, love the good and the bad, and live every moment of it. "Camus theorized that we will never be able to find meaning in our lives, so we can either commit suicide or hope. Some people turn to religion to give their lives meaning, and the others 'bending one's energies to living for a great cause beyond oneself'," (Aronson). It won't be explained, and it won't be easy, but there is pleasure in the struggle and the journey. "[Camus'] political thought was infused with a refusal to ignore the complexity of politics as well as an insistence that death is not the inevitable outcome of rebellion." (Eubanks, 294).

It would almost be easier to renounce pleasure and find meaning through religion than to stomach the journey alone, but it seems ridiculous to deprive ourselves of everything life has to offer just to serve a greater purpose. Between the religious denunciation of pleasure and the academic discourse, "[Pleasures] are often figured as decadent—betrayals of truth, morally corrupt, politically incorrect—or, at best, as escapist of trivial," (Rutsky, 3). While religion does not condone cinema specifically, Marxist philosophy definitely supports cinema as a model of propaganda and control. However, "watching film is associated with leisure time whereto it is assumed that people can escape to experience pleasure and be playful," (Cloete, 2), and leisure is a pleasure for which there is little room in religion. If there were not such a strong resistance to the pursuit of pleasure, then it may be far easier to find the elusive meaning. Unfortunately, from the thoughts of the ancients, we are forced to ignore our primal instincts and focus on ethereal subject matter.

"...The idea that such weighty matters [happiness] do not deserve serious philosophical scrutiny is simply obtuse." (Haybron, 503). Haybron argues against the hedonistic theories of happiness. "Hedonism errs in its attempt to reduce happiness, which is at least partly dispositional, to purely episodic experiential states" (Haybron, 501). For all the psychology

regarding the human brain and happiness/pleasure, there is not a whole lot of academic inquiry into its value to philosophy. As such an immense part of our day to day lives it seems irrational to give it so little thought. Theories regarding pain are much more frequently discussed. The refusal of the study of pleasure only adds to the notion that pleasure is not deserving of study, so until there is a breakthrough regarding our social response to pleasure, it will remain unlooked at and unimportant. The study of pleasure is incredibly complex, as there are many facets of pleasure which are closely connected with philosophical theories, such as the idea of universal truths and transcendental aesthetics. The former addressing the idea that being morally correct and doing good is a source of pleasure, the latter being in relation to the human experience beginning with sensations and going beyond what can be explained. Sensation is closely related to pleasure, especially physical pleasure, the most condemned of all forms. It however goes beyond touch, as we can experience pleasure through all five senses, the more senses participating the greater the experience. The idea of universal truths breaches the gap between selfish interests and the greater good. Pleasure is not always a self-indulgent negative thing. Sometimes it can be the great incentive to push people to do things for others; communities, the environment, you name it. Believing that more good can be achieved through guilt and fear is irrational and outdated. Understanding and utilizing the great effects of human emotions is in the best interest of all of those who experience them. The world is a daunting and confusing place, and sometimes it is difficult to make sense of it all. Even if the answers are never found, each person should be able to make the best of what they are given, and should not be deterred by the corrupted teachings of ancient philosophers and the Christian apostles.

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