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The Ubiquitous Nature of "Post-truth" in

the Twenty-first Century

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North American society has taken on the form of post-truth. Oxford dictionary's twenty-sixteen word of the year, "post-truth" is the idea that facts are subservient to arguments and persuasive speak. ("post-truth") Through social media and pervasive content, society is becoming less focused on the truth within stories, the argument or persuasion is more important. Though cinema that tells superficial stories is essential to distraction and escapism, filmmakers must be cognizant of the impact of cinema. If society is unclear what is truthful and what is not, then films must be careful not to propagate lies.

To discuss post-truth, this essay will first discuss what the twenty-first century has become in terms of reality, and truth telling. Several theorists have declared a distinct distance between reality and what we are experiencing and seeing. Four theorists are particularly relevant to the perspective of the world taken in this paper: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, James Ball, and Jean Baudrillard.

A chapter labeled *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, in the dialectical book *Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)* by Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, discusses the ever present lack of reality in society. Adorno and Horkheimer presciently describe today's reality, positing that people function on a fear of being ostracized, and consequently can do nothing but follow the status quo. (56) Horkheimer and Adorno say that media is responsible for re-affirming beliefs, which is similar to the idea of "confirmation bias" by James Ball () that James Ball posited in his book *Post Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World (2017.)* Ball defines confirmation bias as "look[ing] for and retain[ing] information that confirms our beliefs and [struggling] to accept information that goes against them.

Jean Baudrillard is another theorist that suggests a gap between reality and the world we live in. Baudrillard believes that images are becoming more and more prevalent and less and less

meaningful." (388) Society is visually over saturated with images. Baudrillard continues to suggest the images we see are separating us farther and farther from reality. This is known as "The precession of simulacra." Images start as a reflection of reality, then they mask reality, then they lose any relation to reality, then finally, they become their own simulation, independent of reality. (389) Meaning, images are unconnected to reality, and to the truth. The world is becoming less and less genuine, and movies play a huge role in this, Horkheimer and Adorno say that "the familiar experience of the moviegoer…perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left" (56) Movies are pervasive and believable to the point of influencing reality.

In everyday perception, facts are becoming convoluted and confusing. Post-truth is popular in politics and everyday society. First coined in the mid-nineties by playwright Steve Tesich, post-truth (as defined by the Oxford dictionary) is "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." ("post-truth") Steve Tesich promoted this idea during George W. Bush's presidency, in the wake of the Gulf War. Tesich notes a day and statement to remember when President Bush spoke on May 27, 1991, saying of moral ambiguity "that's the real world, not black and white. Very few moral absolutes." (Tesich) He continues on to categorize people to be "prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world." (Tesich) This acquiescence has continued to the present day.

The idea of many different versions of truth is supported by the Rashomon Effect. "The Rashomon Effect" (Anderson 2016) is the idea of several truths happening simultaneously, with no clarity as to the singular, honest truth. (Anderson 2016) The idea was spurred by the 1950 film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa. In the film, the body of a noble samurai is found, but the story of his death is unclear. Told from several different perspectives, Kurosawa leaves the truth up to interpretation, and avoids direct clarity. Because of the many different news outlets and social media influences, the Rashomon concept has meaning in the twenty-first century. James Ball's book shows that fake news trend faster then real news, and the aforementioned confirmation bias allows us to stay confined in our own circles of truth. (140) If most people get their news from social media, then they are subject to many different versions of the truth. The Rashomon effect is present in our daily media consumption.

Post-truth would not be present without strong support. A large proponent of post-truth is fake news. Fake news, as mentioned before, is key in the Rashomon Effect, and frequently trends and spreads quicker then real news. (Ball) Fake news is prolific enough that Collins dictionary heralded it as their world of the year in 2017. ("Fake News") Defined as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" ("Fake News") fake news is ever present in society.

Traditional news outlets are inadvertently a strong proponent of post-truth. James Ball, in *Post Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World (2016)* discusses the effect traditional news source has had in spreading fake news, and post-truth. News outlets have started to allow unsubstantiated stories the same weight as referenced and researched news reports. "The price that's paid is the audience's trust: if newspapers don't differentiate the stories that they've put time and reporting resources into from those they run based on a single tweet, why should

readers put more credence to one than another?" (Ball, 93) Ball references several news stories that were forced to be rewritten within hours, such as "Sorry folks, they WERE his real hands: Footage Emerges Disproving Bizarre Theory Trump's Bodyguard had Fake Arms so he Could Hold a Gun Under His Coat" (Summers 2017) The article posted by the *Dailymail* in the UK tells the speculative story of whether or not one of President Donald Trump's bodyguard was wearing a prosthetic hand during the president's inauguration. Twelve hours later, the updated conclusion made it clear that the hand was not prosthetic. The conclusion was drawn from footage of the inauguration. Footage that was available at the time of the inauguration, as the entire inauguration was broadcasted live. This article is a clear example of the ever changing news. It is difficult for people to trust what information they are given, as information is ever changing in this post-truth landscape. Trust in media has faced a significant decline since two thousand and three. According to a poll done by Gallup news and referenced by James Ball, trust in media has dropped from fifty-three percent in two thousand and three, to thirty-two percent in 2016. (Swifter) There is a distinct lack of trust in traditional media, and it has ben dropping every year. "What's true barely matters, if it's entertaining." (Ball 93)

The ubiquitous nature of fake news is propelled forward by ever present social media. James Ball discusses Alistair Reid's theory of the "misinformation ecosystem." The idea that incorrect information is propagated in revolving circles spread between friends and loved ones. "It's the amplifying effect of social media and our loved ones… that makes fake news dangerous, Reid warns, and it's these factors that are the most difficult to quantify" (140) It is not possible to quantify this intangible connection that keeps us intrigued and focused in on our own bubbles of information. This once again connects to the idea of confirmation bias. According to Ball, people are more likely to share and repost stories and information that confirms information they already

believe. This has an innocuous presentation, it makes sense to fill one's Facebook wall with one's own beliefs, but it goes deeper then that. People will not share stories that counter their own viewpoint, for fear of backlash from others in their social media circles that maintain similar viewpoints. This fear keeps each person in their own little "filter bubble." (Ball 153) Isolated away from countering viewpoints and a more balanced perspective. This concept bears eerie similarities to the prescient views of Max Horkheimer and Theordor W. Adorno in their aforementioned book "Dialectic of Enlightenment." (1947) Adorno and Horkheimer write of the way people fear being ostracized and consequently follow the status quo. If people fear stepping out of their own comfort then they will stay constrained within their filter bubble, unaware of challenging information. This dissemination of information through other people in our own social media networks is what Ball considers the weaponizing of bullshit. The bullshit circulating is made powerful by the trust we have in the people around us. (Ball 158) Fake and real news is indistinguishable when equally doled out from reliable sources like friends and family.

The twenty-first century. An age of post-truth, the Rashomon effect, and a distinct separation between reality, and what we perceive. Many of the effects on society and people are subconscious. As Ball discusses, it is incredibly difficult to quantify the circuitous sharing of fake news. (Ball 140) so where does cinema come in?

Cinema has the power to perpetrate or question commonly held beliefs. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that cinema and advertising are influential in the way people understand the world and how to interact. (56) Several theorists have put emphasis on the power of cinema to influence society. Both Laura Mulvey and Bell Hooks work to change society through shifting cinema.

Focused on the debunking of gender politics within cinema, Laura Mulvey draws clear connections between the way our society functions and the way gender politics are portrayed on screen. In an intertwined mess "the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him" (Mulvey 264) The pleasure of looking experienced by viewers is possible because of the desires already present within the viewers themselves. Mulvey's posits her beliefs as "adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it worked out in it's favourite cinematic form - illusionistic narrative form" (Mulvey 273) Mulvey suggesting that in order to affect societal change, we need to adjust our gender politics in media.

Another theorist that sees clear importance in cinema is Bell Hooks. In her opening statement of the chapter *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) Hooks speaks of mass culture (including cinema) as the contemporary location that both "publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference" (Hooks 308) An argument different then Mulvey's, but still centred around the idea of affecting change in cinema to effect change in reality. Hook's chapter continues to systematically take apart several films that dismiss and mistreat black culture and black life. She is arguing to adjust films in order to orchestrate positive change in the real world.

Both these theorists are arguing to the importance and influence of film. If the strongest perpetrators of post truth are ubiquitous and intangible, then cinema has the chance to positively affect the truth telling in society. Both Laura Mulvey and Bell Hooks show that there is a correlation between what is on the screen and what is happening in society. If films are created to relay truths like gender equality and proper representation, then society is given a chance to rise

above the existing societal condition. There is value in escapist cinema, allowing people a break from reality to experience catharsis. Yet filmmakers must be careful not to create cinema that propagates the untruths of society. Essentially, cinema must not be made to misrepresent stories or cultures. Bell Hooks speaks of several films that propagate untruths, referencing the representation of black culture in films such as *Heart Condition (1990)* and *Without You I Am Nothing. (1990)* These films serve only to reinforce archaic and uncomfortable ways within society. Hooks states that *Heart Condition* makes "black culture [a] backdrop" (Hooks 314) and *Without You I Am Nothing,* eventually reduces black people to a metaphor (Hooks 317) instead of human beings.

Moving forward, filmmakers have the choice to support or challenge the existing condition. Laura Mulvey and Bell Hooks show that adjusting cinematic content is a clear path to adjusting society. The Rashomon Effect and fake news are instrumental in post-truth. The evidence is clearly stockpiled to suggest that the truth has become incredibly difficult to reveal. In a world of post-truth, cinema is an incredibly powerful medium with the ability to propagate whatever the filmmakers may wish. If society can not differentiate truth and untruth, then cinema must be careful not to propagate further lies.

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