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Frankfurt School – the musical!: Shock Treatment *and the Eros of online civilisation*

Abstract

This paper explores philosophical themes present in the film *Shock Treatment* (1981), a musical comedy written by Jim Sharman and Richard O'Brien. The film, which serves as a partial sequel to the better-known *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), was a critical and commercial failure at the time and has been largely overlooked subsequently. This paper offers a philosophical reconsideration of *Shock Treatment*. It argues that there are a number of themes developed within the film's narrative that correspond closely to the central concerns of the Frankfurt School, particularly those developed by Herbert Marcuse. It further argues that the film provides a way to explicate and critically reflect upon those themes in relation to contemporary online civilisation, with particular regard to the commodification and subversion of Eros within the capitalist system. As a result the film holds considerable potential as a teaching resource for courses on Frankfurt School critical theory.

Keywords: Shock Treatment, Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Eros.

Introduction

Shock Treatment was a musical comedy, directed by Jim Sharman and co-written by Sharman and Richard O'Brien, and released on 30 October 1981. The film functions as an ambiguous sequel to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), in that it stars many of the same actors from the earlier film, and some of the same characters, namely Brad and Janet Majors. The film was a critical and commercial failure, and failed to develop the cult following of its predecessor. *Shock Treatment* is a savagely satirical piece of musical science fiction, depicting a future America in which everyday life is marked by the collective obsession with commercial media and celebrity. Its critical and commercial failure may be attributed in part to the fact that its satirical content seemed too far distant from the society of the time. However, 40 years later, what was speculative science fiction has become an only slightly warped reflection of the contemporary world of social media.

Shock Treatment, like much science fiction, provides fertile ground for the exploration of, and reflection upon, philosophical themes and concepts. Rather than merely serving as exemplars for the articulation of longstanding philosophical arguments or thought experiments, science fiction narratives can themselves extend philosophical themes, adding important features to a position or suggesting novel applications or modifications, or problematising them by drawing out contradictions or pointing out problematic consequences.

In this vein, I argue that *Shock Treatment* can be utilised as a resource for teaching Frankfurt School critical theory. More specifically, it can serve as a means of articulating visually and dramatically some of the key philosophical themes and concepts central to the first generation of the Frankfurt School. In this regard I focus here on the relationship between Eros and liberation, and between technology and domination. *Shock Treatment* can also be used as a vehicle to extend key themes and concepts from the Frankfurt School from their original historical context to contemporary technological society. I also argue that this film can be interpreted as a critical overview of the fate of the Frankfurt School both as a school of thought and form of critique. The pronounced similarities between the views of key members of the Frankfurt School and the film's narrative mean that the film can be viewed as offering not just an exposition of key themes of the Frankfurt School, but almost a meta-narrative commentary on the historical trajectory of the concepts put forward, and of the Frankfurt School itself.

Shock Treatment (1981): synopsis

Janet and Brad, experiencing marital ennui, come to Denton to appear on a TV show called *Marriage Maze*. The host of the show, Bert Schnick, declares Brad an "emotional cripple" and sends him to Dentonvale, a psychiatric facility run by "neurospecialists" Cosmo and Nation McKinley. Janet's parents appear on *Marriage Maze*, and after confirming Bert Schnick's diagnosis, win a dream house on another show, *Happy Homes*. After delivering Brad to Dentonvale, which itself is also televised, Cosmo and Nation inform Janet that Brad is harbouring feelings of deep hostility towards her. And they advise her that his medical condition can only be addressed by her own self-improvement.

Janet has a makeover and embraces the celebrity lifestyle with a will, facilitated by the TV crew and the mysterious new sponsor, Farley Flavors Fast Foods, and encouraged by the approbation of the studio audience. In the meantime Brad is kept medicated, and shackled, in a cage in Dentonvale. When Janet's increasing megalomania results in her becoming intractable, she is medicated by Cosmo and Nation. She then appears, semi-comatose and incapable of speech, on *Faith Factory*, a new TV show set up and hosted by the sponsor, Farley Flavors, where she is crowned Miss Mental Health. Brad is freed by Betty Hapschatt and Judge Oliver Wright, the former hosts of another TV show, *Denton Dossier*.

Denton Dossier, which engaged in critical reflection upon Denton and its TV shows, had been cancelled shortly after the arrival of the new sponsor. Suspecting a conspiracy, Betty and Oliver have begun their own investigation into Farley Flavors. They reveal that Farley Flavors is in fact Brad's long-lost twin brother and that Brad has been incarcerated as part of a plan to replace him in Janet's affections. Brad, who had been freed by Betty and Oliver, confronts Farley and reveals his plan to Janet and the TV audience. Janet snaps out of her haze and reunites with Brad. Farley recovers from this setback and then reveals his masterplan, to invite the audience to join him inside Dentonvale, where they can be patients, part of the audience, perpetual consumers of Farley's products, and stars of the show, forever. The audience, laughing and singing, all receive straitjackets with corporate branding and march into the asylum. As the audience line the corridors, smiling and swaying along with the music, Farley Flavors, McKinley, Nation, and Bert Schnick celebrate in the Dentonvale office with champagne and cigars. In the meantime Janet, Brad, Oliver and Betty escape with the members of the studio band, Oscar Drill and the Bits, in a stolen convertible.

One-dimensional online society

Herbert Marcuse, in *One-dimensional Man*, puts forward an analysis of the dangers of modern industrialised society which he argues is showing clear indications of becoming one-dimensional in that any form of critical dialectical thought is no longer possible. The contemporary capitalist socio-economic system, on Marcuse's account, is developing into a totally administered society with a specific mode of rationality which serves purely productive/pecuniary aims, rather than the development of human life or human capacities. And Marcuse describes the peculiar features of one-dimensional society, namely that unlike previous authoritarian systems, in order for a one-dimensional technological society to operate, it is necessary that the citizens of that society believe that they are freer than they really are. To this end the system must provide citizens with enough goods to keep them pacified. It must ensure that the citizens identify with their oppressors, and that meaningful political discourse is eliminated.

I suggest that the Marcusean analysis of the features of one-dimensional society highlights many of the problematic features of the town of Denton, the setting for entire plot of *Shock Treatment*. Denton, to an extent, exemplifies Marcuse's dystopian one-dimensional society. Denton in turn anticipates many of the problematic features of our own contemporary, social media-fixated, technological society. Marcuse's analysis of technological society was, of necessity, limited to the state of technological development present in his own time. Denton, by combining key features of Marcusean critique with a prescient sketch of contemporary celebrity-obsessed online existence, provides a useful bridge between Marcuse's analysis of 1960s industrial era technology and the social media technosphere of the present.

In *Shock Treatment* the town of Denton is also a TV studio, and the TV studio encompasses the entire town of Denton. There is no effective separation between the two. The audience members who are present throughout the movie are permanently within the boundaries of the studio, but are also the members of the town. The people on the TV shows that they are all watching are also members of the town.

Whereas when Marcuse described the outlines of one-dimensional society he was critiquing the consumerist culture of the 1960s, *Shock Treatment* points towards a new kind of consumerist relation, one in which the audience are both producer and consumer of all the products that they encounter. Their existence

has become almost entirely visual. Their behaviour occurs almost entirely in response to technologically-mediated visual stimuli. Throughout the film the population of Denton sit in the audience section of the studio. They all cheer and clap and sing at the same time. They only respond to TV adverts for products, and to the TV shows, which are themselves merely vehicles for the advertising of consumer products. Their days are filled with the theatre of spectacular capitalism. They sit, avidly watching the cast members, who are their fellow town members. And then they go from the audience section onto the stage where they become the stars and everyone watches them. Or occasionally the stars of the show step off the set and into the audience to conduct vox populi interviews with the audience about the TV shows that they are watching.

This is an ironic inversion of Brechtian dialectical theatre, whereby characters in a play would step out of character and break the fourth wall by engaging directly with the audience. Brecht's purpose in so doing was to prevent the audience becoming too emotionally involved with the characters on the stage, and to remind them that what was happening on stage was not reality itself, but merely a presentation of reality. Reality was what happened off-stage, outside the theatre, in the audience's own lives. By breaking the fourth wall, Brecht's actors distanced the audience from the drama unfolding before them and encouraged the audience to critically reflect on the features of their own existence that were being reflected in the play.

In *Shock Treatment* on the other hand, TV characters break the fourth wall and engage with the audience in order to remind them that what happens on stage (and in the TV broadcast of the stage) is reality, and to enhance the audience's immersion in the TV show and their emotional identification with the TV hosts, characters and products. The revolving door between audience and cast continues to turn throughout the film, and the audience's visually consumptive mode of existence is never interrupted. If the audience members are not watching the stage, then they are watching the monitor which shows them watching the stage. And so on in an endless recursive loop of technologically-mediated visual stimuli.

There is a particularly telling moment in *Shock Treatment* when the studio shuts down for the evening. Now, the idea of media actually stopping might seem rather odd to readers of this article who have grown up in an era of streaming services and 24-hour rolling news channels, and it perhaps betrays more than anything else the film's roots as social commentary upon

the mediascape in the early 1980s. But, nonetheless, there was indeed a time when TV stations stopped broadcasting in the evening, and flicking through the TV channels late at night one would encounter nothing but dead air and static. And at one point in the film, the viewer is shown around the exterior of the set while Denton is not being broadcast. The camera slowly tiptoes through the studio, now silent and in relative darkness, and then pans to reveal the audience section of the studio. Even though the station is no longer broadcasting, the citizens of Denton are all still sitting in their chairs in the audience section, insensible and immobile. So synchronised has their existence become with the consumption of Denton TV, that in the absence of visual stimuli they lapse into unconsciousness. Come the morning and resumption of broadcasting, the audience all jerk back into consciousness at the precise moment that the camera turns back on.

In the town/studio of Denton, *Shock Treatment* presents us with an almost fully developed anticipation of online society and the idea of the prosumer. The film also suggests that contemporary online society is merely a hyperkinetic form of Marcuse's one-dimensional society. For all the differences in technological forms between those of 1960s society and those of the present day, it appears that his description of one-dimensional society still applies. Culture, under advanced capitalism, has become a one-dimensional product. In Denton, and its many TV shows, one finds nothing critical and nothing radical. Everything is shallow. Everything is bright and flashy and colourful and utterly interchangeable. And this description holds for the TV shows, the TV stars, the products advertised, and the audience themselves. What counts as 'culture' in this technological society is consumption. The denizens of this society consume the culture, then produce the culture, and then consume what they've produced themselves. And all the while, all their activities and the products of their activities, serve merely as carriers for brands and for products. The values of this society reflect its dominant mode of praxis. For in Denton, happiness is consumption.

In an early essay, 'The affirmative character of culture', Marcuse argued that culture, properly understood, belonged to the sphere of art, and as such operates at a certain remove from the practical day-to-day world of material and social relations. To it belong the ideas of beauty and truth, and with them the possibility of happiness. From Marcuse, it is in this realm that one can develop 'radical subjectivity', that is to say conceive of novel ideals and norms which, in turn, can be used to challenge and remake the current social

reality. Under bourgeois capitalism, however, this realm of culture is detached from social reality and 'spiritualised'. Freedom and beauty are to be attained through culture but only within one's inner life, through a self-transformation that leaves sensuous reality unchanged. Culture, under these conditions, removes freedom and the development of critical self-consciousness from concrete existence, and neutralises the possibilities for the formation of radical subjectivity. Bourgeois culture reconciles the individual to their oppressive socio-material circumstances, rather than providing a critical space for its alteration.

Considered in this light, the form of culture presented in *Shock Treatment* is of a piece with Marcuse's account of bourgeois culture. Culture, as it appears in Denton, serves to endlessly affirm consumption with no possibility for any other kind of thought. Happiness still remains a spiritual state, and a solely individual pursuit, and is still to be found in the realm of culture. However the scope of what the term 'culture' encompasses has shrunk to the products of what Adorno and Horkheimer termed the culture industry. Happiness now lies in mass culture, and "under monopoly all mass culture is identical" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 121). Happiness thus remains an inner state but one achieved by each individual through consumption of capitalist cultural products. These products come in a dizzying myriad of variations but are always and everywhere the same. There is, by design, no space for critical reflection in mass culture, and the pursuit of culture aligns exactly with the interests of the capitalist system. And happiness, in this adulterated form, appears to be readily attainable. The town of Denton is the studio and the members of the town are both the stars and the audience of the show. They produce and consume all the content on DTV. They have become near identical with the products they consume, and as there is no longer any separation between leisure and work, there is never a real break in productive/consumptive labour. Leisure has become work but under the guise of freedom and pleasure. Everyone in Denton performs a prescribed function, and reality is that performance. Thus DTV culture endlessly affirms consumption, with no possibility for radical subjectivity.

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse introduces the Freudo-Marxist concept of the performance principle. Every individual in every society must accept a certain amount of repression, of delayed or sublimated gratification, in order to continue in existence. This is what Marcuse, following Freud, terms the reality principle. It represents the sum total of the compromises, demands, alterations, and repression we accept so that we can survive in the world. As society

develops however, additional repression above and beyond that required for simple existence is demanded in the interests of domination. This surplus repression is required to maintain and reproduce the system of production upon which the dominating class depend. The performance principle is the current iteration of the reality principle, and represents the total amount of repression that the individual is required to internalise in order to perform under present socio-economic conditions.

In Denton we find Marcuse's performance principle presented quite literally as a performance. The audience members dutifully perform their roles until they are plucked from the audience and placed in front of the camera. At which point they then perform their roles as stars. And then they move back to the audience again, and resume their roles as audience. In the meantime, documentary crews walk around interviewing both the stars and the audience about how they feel about the stars and the audience. The boundaries between the audience, the stage, the backstage, and the control room are endlessly blurred into one big, never-ending media hellscape. In Denton consumption is a leisure activity, and leisure has become work, albeit under the guise of freedom and pleasure. And this system functions because every citizen of Denton, from cast to audience, has internalised the conviction that this is what freedom is. Watching TV is freedom and a duty, just as consuming is freedom and a duty. But this life of leisure and pleasure is awfully hard work. The audience have to sleep in their seats just to be able to keep up with all the DTV content. And yet the illusion of freedom pervades Denton. All of these people would doubtless describe themselves as free and happy, if they were asked. Yet, we as spectators can see that they are completely constrained in how they are living their lives, and that their 'freedom' serves the interests of the ruling elite by perpetuating the present socio-economic system.

One-dimensional Eros

Moving on from Marcuse's critique of consumerism, *Shock Treatment* also offers a fascinating glimpse into the effects of living in a one-dimensional society on social relations. The story of Brad and Janet, I suggest, can be interpreted as a critical Marcusean reflection upon the effects of the late capitalist performance principle on interpersonal relations. More specifically, on what happens to love and to the libido in one-dimensional online society. Brad and Janet have travelled to Denton in order to address their marital issues

by appearing on the TV show, *Marriage Maze*, which apparently specialises in addressing marital malaise. Their guide on this televised journey towards marital harmony is the host of *Marriage Maze*, 'counsellor' Bert Schnick, who is blind. Bert Schnick promptly declares Brad to be an 'emotional cripple' and consigns him to a stay in Dentonvale, a psychiatric facility which is also part of the studio and also televised. The TV show then cuts to a commercial break and while the audience are entertained by a succession of TV adverts displayed on the monitors, Brad and Janet sing to each other.

BRAD
Dear blender? Oh won't you help
a first offender
Oh toaster? don't you put the
burn on me...
Refrigerator why are we
always sooner or later
bitchin' in the kitchen or crying
in the bedroom all night.
Dear knife drawer, won't you
help me to face life more...
Oh trash can, don't you put the
dirt on me
Oh percolator why are we always
sooner or later...
bitchin' in the kitchen or crying
in the bedroom all night.

JANET
Everything used to be okay
but I've been had
And Brad I'm glad to say
is on his way.
Micro-digital awaker
Why are we always sooner or
later
Bitchin' in the kitchen or
crying in the bedroom all night.
Shower curtain

won't you help me to be certain
Oh toothpaste
don't you put the squeeze on me
Depilitator
why are we always sooner or
later
Bitchin' in the kitchen or crying
in the bedroom all night.

In the brief moment when the attention of the studio audience and the host is turned elsewhere, Brad and Janet try to talk to each other about the state of their relationship. However, as both perpetuators and victims of the Denton performance principle, they are unable to articulate their feelings and express them to the other. Instead they default to a form of relationship and communication with which they are far more familiar and more comfortable, and express their feelings both to and through the consumer products that surround them.

In the song quoted above, 'Bitchin' in the kitchen', Brad and Janet are beseeching the consumer products that populate and orientate their existence to give them guidance in how they should be conducting their relationship. Here we see the impact of reification on intimate personal relationships. Brad and Janet and the denizens of Denton live in a world in which the entirety of human existence seems bound up in the commodities that one owns, where success and happiness are defined by owning commodities, which has resulted in the perception that the commodities are more fulfilled and perfect beings than we ourselves are. Consequently, when there are problems in their relationship, Brad and Janet turn to the consumer products, whose ownership/consumption is supposed to provide them with happiness, in order for the products to tell them how they should behave if they want to be happy. Here we see, at the level of the individual, the entanglement of reification, of consumer relations and interpersonal relations, and the corrosive effect they have on the very possibility of human relations. Brad and Janet, though yearning for a human relationship, are forced to imagine themselves as happier commodities as the only possible solution for the problems they face.

Towards the end of the song Janet segues from asking her shower curtain and toothpaste for advice and addresses the audience, singing, "Tell me, spectator, why are we always sooner or later bitchin' in the kitchen or crying

in the bedroom all night?" The commodities did not answer her pleas, so she turns instead to the audience, which of course itself is a commodity, in order to crowdsource advice for how she should live her life. And in turn, the answer she receives to how she should live her life is by turning herself into a commodity.

Here we see the illusion of democracy in Marcuse's totally administered society. Janet consults the people; the people express their preferences by voting that Brad should go into Dentonvale. And when Janet's parents are brought onto *Marriage Maze*, and asked to assist in diagnosing Brad's psychological problems, the judgment they form (infantile regression) is guided by cheering and shouting from the audience. In this psychological assessment by means of popular consultation, the audience 'downvoted' Brad. By failing to be happy in Denton, he represents a poorly performing product, and is sent off to the asylum to be 'fixed'. Everyone was consulted, the process was free, open and democratic, and the actual structures of power that underlie the Denton community's conception of reality remain unnoticed.

The Grand Hotel Abyss

Two characters who appear throughout the film are Betty Hapschatt and Judge Oliver Wright. At the beginning of the film they can be seen recording a show, called *Denton Dossier*, which reviews and comments on Denton TV's shows. I suggest that Betty and Judge Oliver can be viewed as representing, in a rather ironic manner, the Frankfurt School itself. From their first appearance, they provide an ongoing critical commentary on DTV; the TV shows, the cast, the audience, etc. For example, in the film's opening scenes the audience and cast sing Denton's new 'community anthem', "Denton USA", which extols the many virtues of Denton: "You'll find happy hearts and smiling faces, and tolerance for the ethnic races, in Denton." After the audience sing, and clap and sway in almost mechanical unison, Betty and Oliver have the following exchange:

BETTY: Did you enjoy our anthem Judge Wright?

OLIVER: In a way…

BETTY: I detect a note of reticence. Are you, perhaps, one of those amongst us who feel this emotive form of presentation is overly manipulative?

OLIVER: Well, Betty, there are many ways that the spider may catch the fly…

At the very beginning of the film then *Denton Dossier* raises notes of concern in a measured and scholarly fashion about Denton TV's content and, by extension, the society that Denton represents in microcosm. The manipulation inherent in DTV's rapturous celebration of leisure and pleasure, and the celebration of Denton as "the home of youth" and "America's truth", are clearly pointed out. The audience however merely stare vacantly at the monitors, while the TV crew talk over Judge Oliver's commentary. In between the noise and bustle of the studio operations brief fragments of *Denton Dossier*'s Cassandra-like pronouncements can be detected, "Monetary inducements... Seduction... Lies!", but they remain unheard by the audience and are soon drowned out by the cheers that greet an advert for Farley Flavors Fabulous Fast Food.

The cast of *Denton Dossier* then offer a considered and scholastic critique of their society which has no effect on the members of that society and makes no practical difference whatsoever. It does however attract the brief attention of DTV's sponsor, Farley Flavors, who promptly cancels *Denton Dossier*. The now unemployed cast of *Denton Dossier* then go into 'exile', creeping around the studio/society and carrying out their investigation into the structure and meaning of Denton in the safer spaces on the periphery. There is a degree of mockery in the film's depiction of Betty and Judge Oliver. They spend most of the movie tiptoeing around the action, peering down from the rafters of the studio, observing, critiquing, but not intervening. Lukács famously described the Frankfurt School as the 'Grand Hotel Abyss',

> a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered (Lukács 1962).

By this Lukács implied that the Frankfurt School had conveniently separated critical theory from praxis, and were thus able to voyeuristically gaze upon the suffering wrought by industrial capitalism. Critical theory, for all its revolutionary trappings, functions effectively as "elite interpretation" carried out at a safe distance. Now, leaving aside the question of whether Lukács was correct in his analysis of the Frankfurt School, this interpretation does seem to apply to the cast of *Denton Dossier*, who I argue can by understood as Frankfurt School proxies in this film. At the beginning of the film Betty and Oliver provide an accurate assessment of the dangers of Denton's one-dimensional society from a comfortable position of employment within that society. Driven from

that position by the forces of authority, they watch the action from the gantry above the set, analysing and critiquing all the while. Despite being characters within the film, just like the audience and the main characters, they are trapped in the role of spectators of the film with their critique having no material impact upon the drama developing before them. The impression of learned ineffectuality is reinforced by Betty and Oliver's conversation. In between oracular pronouncements, Oliver and Betty exchange literary allusions. And, in one particularly ghastly moment Betty quotes the entirety of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in order to impress Oliver. This takes the whole night. While the populace is sleeping below, the residents of the Grand Hotel Abyss watch them and cite poetry.

From here to eternity

A factor that complicates treating *Shock Treatment* as a straightforward presentation of Marcusean theory is the rather ambiguous ending of the film. For all the critique of mass culture present in the film, the fact remains that *Shock Treatment* is actually a love story. At one point Farley Flavors, the villain of the film, says of Janet that, "She represents everything that our customers want. Innocence, decency and the illusion of a happy ending!" And this is precisely what the writers deliver to the audience at the end of the film – the illusion of a happy ending. Janet and Brad are reunited, kiss, and are carried off by the youth into the world outside the set which represents liberty and freedom. But this is where the standard cinematic happy ending becomes problematic. For Janet and Brad have not resolved the issues (alienation, apathy, anxiety) that drove them to visit Denton in the first place. The kiss that they share on reuniting is brief and decidedly chaste. The emotional insecurity and performance anxiety that plagued Brad before the start of the film are unlikely to have been fixed by his time in a straitjacket in a cage in Dentonvale. And the spectacular megalomania that Janet exhibited throughout the film was not the result of the drugs that Cosmo and Nation fed her, but was rather the manifestation of certain aspects of her personality under societal conditions which gratified them. And so as Janet and Brad go off with the youth into the post-Denton future, they are just as messed up as when they arrived, if not more so.

Furthermore, the one time that Nature makes any appearance in this conspicuously studio-bound movie is when it is glimpsed at the conclusion. The doors of the studio slide back to reveal not sunlit uplands but a dark,

windy night. The world outside the gleaming artifice of Denton to which the heroes are escaping looks like a cold and hostile place. Granted that Janet and Brad are being carried away by the youth, full of nonconformist energy, joie de vivre, and Marcusean utopian potential. But the revolting youth, the film reminds us, are rather quixotic. They do refuse to go along with Farley's plans and they do help Janet, Brad, Betty, and Oliver escape from Denton at the film's conclusion. But their motivation for this 'Great Refusal' is far from revolutionary. The youth are not helping Brad, Betty, and Oliver, but Janet whom they idolise. And the reason they idolise her is because when Janet was at the peak of her megalomania, trashing the set and singing "me, me, me", they decided that Janet was cool. They think that Janet is a Rockstar, a guru who is going to give them the answers once they escape the confines of the studio. But we know Janet has no answers. The youth themselves, as represented by Oscar Drill and the Bits, seem motivated more by a rebellious mood rather than authentic liberatory commitment. Their solution to emotional problems, as evidenced by their attempts to help Janet earlier in the film, is to take drugs. In this regard, the youth in the film reflect in miniature the failure of the utopian hopes that Marcuse placed in the counter-culture youth movements of the 1960s.

If one is to find a Frankfurt School silver lining in the film's conclusion, I suggest, it lies in the changed relationship between Janet and Brad. Here we see the beginnings of a possible liberation movement, albeit on a far smaller scale than Marcuse anticipated. Its genesis lies in a couple deciding that their relationship is, for all its faults, important to them, and that while they may not know how to fix it they are at least aware of the conditions that make it worse. If this is liberation it is of a sort far closer to that called for by Erich Fromm in his *Art of Loving* than that called for by Marcuse. And in this regard the conclusion of the film serves as a subtle Frommian critique of Marcuse's revolutionary sexual utopianism.

For Fromm the art of love is the beginning of dialectical rebellion against the capitalist system. It stems from the recognition that love is not a panacea, a commodity to be acquired which guarantees to protect both parties from anxiety and loneliness. And that the partner in a relationship does not have a purely instrumental value. Rather love is labour, a form of praxis that requires continuous effort to master, and it consists in two people in a relationship trying to work towards each other by admitting that there is a problem but realising that whatever the solution is, it must lie within themselves. Janet knows that Brad is still an emotional wreck, and Brad knows that she is unhappy. And

yet they still end the film singing, "No matter how the wind is blowing, we're gonna do it anyhow! Anyhow!" The implication being that, even if their stolen convertible breaks down five miles outside Denton and the youth abandon them, Janet and Brad have committed to each other, and a non-reified conception of love. And that they just might make it after all.

It is we the spectators who have the most ambiguous ending of all. At the end of the film as the doors of the studio close behind the departing convertible with Janet, Brad and the others, the camera's point of view (and by extension ours) does not shift to follow them into the outside world but remains fixed. We do not escape with them but are left in a liminal space, in the empty audience stands and soundstage among the debris left by the departing audience. We remain both outside the Dentonvale madhouse but also still inside Denton, and still inside the studio. And thus the illusion of a happy ending is reserved for the cast of the film, who are either free to face an uncertain future or medicated, restrained and happily singing. It is we who are left with the question of what to do next and how to get there.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the film *Shock Treatment* can be used as a resource for those teaching Frankfurt School critical theory. It not only presents, in an easily accessible musical format, key themes of the first generation, it also indicates how those themes might be extended to contemporary capitalist society. It also offers a rather ironic and critical commentary on the ideas of the first generation and their subsequent fate. This paper has focused largely on the presence of Marcusean themes in *Shock Treatment* but this is meant to be merely suggestive of the film's potential rather than definitive.

For reasons of space I was not able to explore here the feminist dimensions of Marcuse's thought in relation to Janet's transformation from unhappy wife to uber-capitalist girl-boss. And moving beyond Marcuse, one finds plenty of material here for explorations of the culture industry, the aura of celebrity, reification, madness, self-help and the commercialisation of mental health, state capitalism, the authoritarian character, etc. I appreciate that musicals are not to everyone's taste, and that Adorno most definitely would not approve of any of this. But I would argue that, for an undergraduate student, watching *Shock Treatment* is probably a far easier way into critical theory and its application than reading *Minima Moralia*. And that Frankfurt School critical theory just sounds better when sung.

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