
Capturing Conflict In Documentary Film: An Introduction To Dialectics

Summary

This essay is about dialectics in film. More specifically the essay will offer insight in how the notion of dialectics helps to explain cross-cultural differences captured in short documentary film. Dialectics in the documentary will be framed by explaining dialectics and drawing upon Theodor Adorno's perception of conflict in society. Roger Odin's vision on the deictic value of the smartphone is discussed in order to show how the phone camera can be of help when capturing dialectics in film. Finally, the theory will be applied to the documentary 'Did This Really Just Happen?'. Specific examples are laid out to contextualize dialectics in reality. With the documentary, the author hope to inspire audiences to grasp potential clashes in the day-to-day setting.

Introduction

The dialectic form of reasoning may be old, but is definitely not dead. If anything the theory surrounds our everyday lives. Because of its age the concept has conceivably been subject to development throughout the years. In this essay Theodor Adorno's controversial perspective on dialectics relates to the short documentary film 'Did This Really Just Happen?'. The film addresses cross-cultural differences in behaviour amongst Western and Eastern students of the University of Sydney. Specific cultural etiquette could lead to confusion or even conflict within the classroom. As such the concept of dialectics offers guidance in contextualizing – or maybe even comprehending and overcoming – the tense situations resulting from cultural differences. First dialectics are discussed and followed up by an analysis on Adorno's slightly different perspective on dialectics. After that a framework is offered to capture dialectics in the short documentary film by drawing upon Roger Odin's vision on the deictic value of the smartphone. Finally, the documentary 'Did This Really Just Happen' is examined, referring to both dialectics and the way of capturing those dialectics.

Dialectics

To understand the 'Negative Dialectics' of philosopher, sociologist, psychologist and composer Theodor Adorno, it is important to understand the origin and development of 'Dialectics' in general. The philosophical term was introduced first in ancient Greece (reference?) and 'the Greek verb *Dialegomai* literally translates to conversing'. As such 'dialectics' refers to a way of reasoning to find 'truth' by using contradictions. Plato and Aristotle are known for discussing opposing forces to find the truth. Along the way new ideas are being shaped. If truth were a person the two philosophers perceived her as a constantly developing individual with a dynamic character. Therefore finding truth is a process of asking the right questions, accepting the opposing nature of their answers and finally adjusting a certain previous hypothesis of the truth. (original dialectics in cinematic movies?)

It was inevitable that 'dialectics' would evolve since the concept constantly questions any given

status quo. And subsequently, it did evolve. The theory expanded from a form of reasoning into a historic sociological movement. Philosopher Georg Hegel (1770 – 1831) approached dialectics as a system to explain progress in human history. According to Hegel a lesson is to be learned from society in every stage in the past. By knowing and decomposing even the worst periods in time he justified progress in society. He explained that throughout history progress has followed a steady pattern. He argued that advancing is a complex process that is a result of development. He explained progress as bumpy road with many twists and turns. When following that road the truth will be found, but the human way of truth finding will never be a linear process according to Hegel. He captured that process in the concept of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. 'Both the thesis and the antithesis contain parts of the truth. But they are also exaggerations and distortions of the whole. And so need to clash and interact until their best elements find resolution in a synthesis.' Or as Holloway, John, Fernando Matamoros, and Sergio Tischler (2009) put it:

'The typical Hegelian triad of thesis–antithesis–synthesis ends in a closing synthesis, which provides the basis of a view of history as a series of stages or steps. The synthesis is a reconciliation of opposites,'

How Adorno's Negative Dialectics differ from Hegel

A different school of thought regarding dialectics started to flourish in the 1900's with the Frankfurter Schule and Theodor Adorno (1903 - 1969). As such Adorno holds a different view on dialectics than Hegel does. Adorno doesn't believe in synthesis as a positive outcome of the two previous stages of thesis and antithesis. From Hegel's argumentation follows a synthesis between man and nature, which he referred to as the 'Absolute Spirit'. According to Hegel human knowledge would evolve over time to be capable of understanding nature. As a result nature and human thinking would fuse. By that time nothing would escape the Absolute Spirit or would be incomprehensible.

Adorno lets philosophy and human history coincide, just as Hegel does. Adorno however didn't agree on integrating thought in reality. Adorno became an advocate of 'Negative Dialectics'. He wrote a book with the same title that is considered the magnum opus of his work. In 'Negative Dialectics he tries to formulate a "philosophical materialism" that is historical and critical but not dogmatic', as Zuidervart and Lambert put it. Adorno thought the tragedies of the 20th century, like Auschwitz and the Gulag, didn't align with Hegel's concept of the Absolute Spirit. Forced-labour camp systems of reality didn't fit into Hegel's format of progressing development history of thought that eventually would be able to create heaven on earth. Reason is powerful, but not almighty. She tries to grasp truth and reality, a process that Adorno is thankful for. How else would science and technology develop? 'The only responsible philosophy according to Adorno is the one that no longer imagines that it has the absolute to its command.' (online lecture) It has to be critical of itself. In essence, Adorno argued that reason is unfit to understand every aspect of the world, even though the human race has tried to ever since the Age of Enlightenment. Adorno argues we have to recognize that flaw instead of trying to control it. Ultimate control of reason still resonates in the Holocaust, according to Adorno. He would like for society to acknowledge the incapability of reason, when she reconciles with the power and incapability of reason. Only then human kind will learn how to commiserate with all tragedy in human history. That's why the philosopher encourages people to accept differences between people and culture for that is real culture – especially if we don't understand it.

Deixis

With a critical approach to progress in society in mind, it's important to address technological improvements since the year 2000. Because of advanced technology the world has changed irreversibly. Everyday lives around the globe are dominated by the smartphone: the smartphone innovated by offering a range of previously inaccessible insights. But the pocket computer is surrounded by conflict too, for example in the contact between people or even within a person self due to lack of concentration. Both the benefits and the malicious sides of the smartphone are being discovered and tested currently in an almost pacifistic war, systemic dialectics in its purest form. Will the smartphone-related future be in line with Hegel's dialectical vision on development of society, and will there be found an answer to these conflicting forces of smartphone use eventually? If so, in what form will the smartphone be of optimal use in a globalizing society? Or, as Adorno would stress, is there even an optimal form? Or should we accept that the phone both limits and broadens our perspective at the same time? Without assessing the evolution of the smartphone as a good or bad development, there is a specific value of the device that changed the range of possibilities in documentary filmmaking. Roger Odin refers to this as the deictic value of the smartphone camera:

'the mobile gives its images their deictic value, conveying, for example, the sense of "here" and "now." (...) The mobile has achieved the dream of immediate communication with the moving image.'

The notion of the deictic value of the smartphone has to be addressed when transmitting dialectics into film. Surely dialectics can be transferred into film without the smartphone. Look at 'Strike', part of a film series made by Sergei Eisenstein in 1925. He thought of conflict as the driving force of a movie. With clever montage the Russian filmmaker and essayist depicted capitalists as pure evil and the working-class as heroes. But Eisenstein lived in a day and age where it was harder to portray contrasts by capturing them directly on camera. Less re-enactment could have been used to achieve a similar product if he would have been able to capture certain conflict situations at the moment of arising. This is not said to dismiss montage or to suggesting that Eisenstein could have made a better film. The deictic value of the smartphone is mentioned to address an important aspect of documentary filmmaking. 'Of documentaries it is expected 'that they will be a fair and honest representation of somebody's experience of reality'. (Aufderheide). Certain situations can be re-enacted, as is often done in documentary filmmaking. But in specific circumstances the 'truth' could be more powerful when picturing a situation as it actually happened instead of imitating it. Due to the nature of the smartphone and the places where it is carried, the smartphone camera is able to capture situations in a specific point in time a larger camera would never shoot. Specifically when capturing sensitive material for a documentary film the deictic value of the smartphone can be of help.

Did This Really Just Happen?

The short documentary film of the author of this essay is titled 'Did This Really Just Happen?' and addresses cross-cultural differences. Certain scenes are shot, but the film is still in its early production stage and will be finished during the second semester of 2019 at the University of Sydney. The documentary is about being trapped in a political system, looking for escape, but not always being able to escape that system. The filmmaker was inspired by the classes she

attended during the Master of Moving Image at the University of Sydney. She came of the idea of making this documentary after watching several episodes of the Australian TV-series 'You Can't Ask That', in which gives in intimate insight in minority groups in Australia. In the author's documentary both West-European and an East-Asian perspectives on confusing situations inside and outside the classroom in Sydney are being addressed. The author's classmates are a blend of cultures, but consist mostly of Chinese students. The author's general knowledge and cultural etiquette differs from her Chinese classmates. This results in striking situations during class according to the author; Chinese students sleeping on their desks or missing out on a specific (western) type of humour. Sometimes certain behaviours can take a surprising turn. For example when a student wasn't paying attention to a personal conversation and kept looking at her phone. It turned out she was reading 'Crime and Punishment' by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and was really captivated by the book. To make scenes like these extra powerful, they are not re-enacted. They are filmed on a smartphone as they are happening. The deictic value will give the audience a sense of urgency, by emphasizing the reality of the situations. At the same time an Eastern-Asian student is asked to track striking and unfamiliar behaviour of western students in order to capture the systemic dialectics of different world orders. In the documentary the here and now filmed on a smartphone is contrasted to the past by using traditional camera's and historical footage for the past tense. To give the dialectic system in the documentary extra depth important societal markers will be discussed amongst the filmmaker and the East-Asian students. Several Chinese students in Sydney criticize the Chinese university system as not being equal and offering fair chances for the community. On top of that they realize their own government withholds information from citizens. They come to Australia to enhance their lives. And yet the Chinese students continue to defend the political system of the Communist Party. In the documentary those (apparent) contradictions are addressed. Similar alienating situations about Europeans from a Chinese point of view are yet to be collected. The filmmaker strives to guide people in contextualizing potential conflictual situations between cultures. Finally it is up to the audience how they perceive the cross-cultural discrepancies. Will they follow Hegel's vision on dialectics and decide that both cultures can learn from one another? Or will they see the differences as opposing forces in culture that cannot be assimilated? It is not the filmmaker's goal to force her opinion on the matter onto her audience. If anything she would like her audience to be critical of developments in a globalizing world as dialectical theory encourages to do.

Conclusion and shortcomings

This essay doesn't claim to give the definite answer on how the notion of dialectics can strengthen documentary films. Shaping and evolution are inherent to the theory itself. But it can be concluded that the short documentary 'Did this really just happen?' benefits from the concept. Both in structuring it's content and producing the film. With the film we try to explain cultural differences as well as possible. The smartphone camera captures truthful moments and spontaneity. To demystify the contrasts Chinese classmates comment on specific cultural differences. But there is still a fair chance that the audience won't be able to grasp what had just happened – even with the cultural context that is offered. That is Adorno in a nutshell: we might not understand fully what just happened, but we did learn something.

Conflict and confusion may result from culturally perceived inappropriate behaviour.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5JGE3lhuNo>

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2. Stewart Martin. 'Adorno's Conception of the form of Philosophy.' *Diacritics* 36, no. 1 (2006): 48-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4621058>.
 3. Zuidervaat, Lambert, 'Theodor W. Adorno', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =