**POPULAR CULTURE**

Gemma Moss

**Introduction**

In 1913, Lawrence claimed that he was going to write a ‘pot-boiler’ (*1L* 536) – a work designed to make money by appealing to popular taste. He set aside the story that would become *The Lost Girl* and began what developed into *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* – butdid not produce his pot-boiler. In 1915 *The Rainbow*’s publisher was prosecuted, the book was banned under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 and the remaining copies were destroyed (*R* xlv). After that, Lawrence struggled to find a UK publisher for *Women in Love*, writing that, ‘I have done a novel, which nobody will print, after the *Rainbow* experience’ (*3L* 100).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Lawrence wanted his fiction to be popular in the sense that he wanted it to be in print and widely read. When he finally completed *The Lost Girl* in 1920 he felt it necessary to reassure his publisher about the commercial viability of his writing, claiming that it would be ‘the perfect selling novel’ and a story that ‘might be quite popular’ (*3L* 439, 503).Lawrence also had a cheap edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, described as the ‘Popular Edition’ on its title page, published privately in 1929 by Edward Titus in Paris (*LCL* lvii). At other times, Lawrence used the word ‘popular’ negatively, to denote culture that is widely consumed but lacks the moral, spiritual and intellectual value that he strove for in his own writing. In 1915, he maintained that his novels could make money without stooping to the status of the ‘popular’: ‘Does he expect me to be popular? I shan’t be that. But I am a safe speculation for a publisher’ (*2L* 370). Fourteen years later, Lawrence’s harsh critique of the ‘the mass of our popular literature, the bulk of our popular amusements’ (*LEA* 244) in *Pornography and Obscenity* (1929) demonstrates his longstanding opposition to a broad, unspecified notion of popular culture.

Hostility to a generalised conceptualisation of popular culture was common among modernist writers. As Andreas Huyssen has shown, many modernists anxiously sought to separate their writing from ‘the culture of everyday life’ – especially during the interwar years (1986: vii). The First World War contributed to the self-conscious eschewal of the popular and everyday among modernist writers by prompting their urgent consideration of political, moral and philosophical issues, as Vincent Sherry (2003), Trudi Tate (1998) and Carl Krockel (2011) have identified. In 1914, Lawrence wrote to the literary agent J. B. Pinker of his hope that the First World War would change literature for the better: that it would ‘kick the pasteboard bottom in the usual “good” popular novel’ by making people feel ‘much more deeply and strongly’ (*2L* 240), and thus more receptive to serious and valuable writing. After the War, Lawrence was disillusioned. The more serious writing he hoped for had not materialised, and his attitude to popular culture and the mass-market became more negative. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) Lawrence denied seeking mass appeal for his writing. He declared that his books were not intended ‘for the generality of readers’ and claimed it was ‘a misfortune that serious books are exposed in the public market’ (*PFU* 62).

Although Lawrence was deeply affected by the First World War, he considered it a symptom of deeper social problems, rather than the cause. In ‘Education of the People’ (1920) Lawrence wrote of ‘the real war, the real fight’ as separate from ‘our last war’ (*RDP* 159). In *Fantasia of the Unconscious* he went further, claiming that the ‘real war’ to come would be about securing freedom from ‘machines’: ‘There are wars in the future, great wars, which not machines will finally decide, but the free, indomitable life spirit’ (*PFU* 119). Popular culture, for Lawrence, was intricately bound up with the negative pressures machine technologies were exerting on social life, which had intensified during the First World War. Lawrence thought that people were becoming increasingly like machines: automatic and unthinking. In Lawrence’s writing, machines function as a metaphor for the rigid and stifling aspects of modern life, for which he wanted his writing to be an antidote. Lawrence claimed that limited forms of education and culture – ‘books and newspapers’ that dulled people’s ‘original spontaneity’ – were partially to blame for people acting like ‘machine-units’ (*PFU* 141, 119).

Lawrence’s fiction published in the 1920s became increasingly critical of popular culture as his ideas about it became intertwined with other key areas of his thought, especially technology, sex and urban life. His critique of cinema’s mechanical production and dissemination in *The Lost Girl*, however, shows that he was not simply ‘in opposition to technology’, as Krockel claims (2011: 138; see also David Trotter’s Chapter ‘Technology’ in this volume), but specifically in opposition to the negative impact he argued that living in increasingly mechanised and automatic world was having on peoples’ capacities to exercise independent thought. In contrast to the generalisations Lawrence makes about the popular in his essays, letters and articles quoted so far, in his fiction he often examines specific popular cultural forms and genres. This Chapter will consider Lawrence’s exploration of cinema in *The Lost Girl* and popular music and painting in *St. Mawr.*

Lawrence was critical of the content of popular culture as well as the forms it took. In *Pornography and Obscenity* (1929) Lawrence claimed that popular culture transmits repressive and immoral ideas about sex and relationships to the public. These criticisms are influenced by his experience of censorship, as well his views on sex and education: *Pornography and Obscenity* was written in direct response to the censorship of *Pansies* and *Lady Chatterley’s Love*r earlier the same year. Issues that are bubbling under the surface in *The Lost Girl* and *St. Mawr* are directly articulated in *Pornography and Obscenity*, which is Lawrence’s most direct attack on popular culture. This Chapter will therefore finish by considering how *Pornography and Obscenity* elucidates the connections between sex, ideology and popular culture that Lawrence was working through in his fiction of the 1920s. *Pornography and Obscenity* also demonstrates some of Lawrence’s strategies for resisting the damaging ideologies that he argues are disseminated through the forms of culture that go uncensored, allowing them to be consumed by the masses.

***The Lost Girl***

At the time Lawrence was writing *The Lost Girl*, which he began in 1912 and publishedin 1920, Huyssen identifies that ‘vernacular and popular culture’ were being ‘transformed into modern commercial mass culture’ (1986: ix).[[2]](#endnote-2) Lawrence explores this shift in *The Lost Girl* by differentiating between waning forms of popular entertainment like music hall and theatre, and newer forms of mass culture like cinema that were mechanically disseminated and far more widely consumed. Although ‘mass culture’ is not a term widely used when Lawrence was writing, *The Lost Girl* does offer a critique of mass culture, since it explores the effects of the mechanical technologies that facilitate cinema’s mass consumption.

Madame Rochard, the leader of the Natcha-Kee-Tawara performance troupe, summarises the difference between theatre and cinema:

“The pictures are cheap, and they are easy, and they cost the audience nothing, no feeling of the heart, no appreciation of the spirit, cost them nothing of these. And so they like them, and they don’t like us, because they must *feel* the things we do, from the heart, and appreciate them from the spirit … They want it all through the eye …” (*LG* 148-9)

For Madame, film is a visual medium that predominantly appeals to the eyes and the mind, working on surfaces, while the theatre has depth: it works on the whole sensory organism, appealing to the spirit and a deeper mode of feeling.For Sam Solecki, in *The Lost Girl* and for Lawrence more broadly, ‘film – a primarily visual medium – makes an appeal only to the viewer’s mental consciousness and in no way involves or relates to his vital, sensual, unconscious self’ (1973: 12). Theatre necessitates a form of engagement between audience and performer, with the potential to achieve vital, spiritual connections. For Madame, film offers no such opportunity: the mechanical technologies of filmmaking and projection allow a great number of people to consume the films, but those technologies also act as obstacles to interpersonal interactions. In *The Lost Girl,* cinema is represented as participating in a troubling shift towards the passive consumption of culture that requires limited interactions with machines, and no active engagement with other people.

Lawrence saw technologies of mass production and consumption as significant forces shaping people’s thought and actions. His novels and essays anticipate arguments made by Frankfurt School theorists about the problems of an increasingly mechanised, capitalist society in which the culture industry plays a significant role. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1992) argue that advanced industrial society and modern subjectivity is built upon the domination of nature and people. In the search for increasingly efficient modes of domination, they argue, mechanical efficiency has become fetishised, and one result is the mass production of standardised forms of culture that generate automated consumer responses. Adorno often returns to the problems of popular culture, especially music. In ‘Perennial Fashion: Jazz’ he argues that the repetitive forms and structures of popular music, require only passive consumption, so that people’s capacities for independent thought are gradually worn down (Adorno 1982: 119-32). For Adorno, popular music – which he also calls ‘consumer art’ – is comprised of ‘basic formulas’ that ‘recur constantly’ with only small variations (123). Such ‘standardization’ creates a public who become used to a limited range of music: they have ‘conditioned reflexes’ and want ‘only that to which they have become accustomed’ (123, 126). For Adorno, popular culture plays a crucial role in robbing people of their capacities for critical thinking and their desire for change, without which positive social transformation is impossible.

Comparable comments about the problems of passivity, easiness, and mechanical thoughts and actions become common in Lawrence’s late essays and articles. In ‘Why I don’t like living in London’ (1928) Lawrence describes an increasingly mechanistic, money-driven society that is over-reliant on technologies that make everything so ‘easy and nice’, they are like ‘anaesthetic’, turning life into a ‘nightmare’ (*LEA* 121). Easiness – whether referring to simple ideas, or the way that the difficulty is removed from life by machines – has extremely negative connotations in Lawrence’s writing, as he fears that peoples’ abilities to experience conflict and difficulty, and also to think independently and thus work towards a better society, are being eroded. In another 1928 essay, ‘Introduction to Pictures’, Lawrence claims that in ‘modern civilisation’ people have become ‘a clock-work. A mechanism, and hence incapable of experience’ (*LEA* 170). Lawrence worries that people are being prevented from living rich, rewarding lives full of variety, conflict and intimacy by an increasingly mechanised society, where machines and mechanisms connote the repetitive, emotionless and homogenous. For Lawrence, popular culture can contribute to creating a passive society through its form – such as the easiness of the consumption of film that Madame Rochard describes in *The Lost Girl* – or through the limited ideas it contains. In *Pornography and Obscenity* (1929), Lawrence describes popular culture as providing ‘second hand’ ideas that limit the potential of the ‘individual self’ (*LEA* 238). The ideas are ‘second hand’ for Lawrence in the sense that they are the ideas of others, acquired from mass culture instead of via engagement with others and the world around them. In Lawrence’s view, homogenous and homogenising mass culture, with its increasing reliance on mechanical technologies, was contributing to what he called society’s ‘fall into automatism, mechanism, and nullity’ (*PFU* 152). Lawrence’s relegation of popular culture to an inferior realm while claiming for his own writing the valuable ability to access truth and real experiences could be considered elitist. Adorno, with whom Lawrence shares so much, has been accused of elitism by Bruce Baugh (1990), while Huyssen acknowledges Adorno’s disregard for genres such as realism (1985: 25).

Lawrence critiques realism in *The Lost Girl*, as well as developing his connections between popular culture, education and attitudes to sex. Miss Pinnegar, an economically efficient woman who is concerned about social status and propriety, enjoys the simplicity and clarity she finds in films. She is unable to see why Alvina values the Natcha-Kee-Tawara troupe and becomes anxious that association with them will damage Alvina’s prospects of marrying someone wealthy. In Miss Pinnegar’s character an approval of cinematic realism is combined with prudish and moralising attitudes to sex and marriage. Miss Pinnegar tells Alvina:

“I can’t understand, myself, how people can go on liking shows. Nothing happens. It’s not like the cinema, where you see it all and take it all in at once; you *know* everything at a glance … I like to go the cinema once a week. It’s instructive, you take it all in at a glance, all you need to know, and it lasts you for a week. You can get to know everything about people’s actual lives, from the cinema. I don’t see why you want people dressing up and showing off.” (*LG* 142-3)

Cinema is associated with knowing, while theatre is associated with feeling. Lawrence’s belief in the superiority of bodily knowledge over mental knowledge is explained in more detail in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, where he writes that ‘the true goal of education for a child’ has been ‘to force each individual to a maximum of mental control, and mental consciousness’ (*PFU* 105). According to Lawrence, forms of education that prioritise intellectual over spiritual development have ‘almost poisoned the mass of humanity to death with *understanding*’ (141). Popular novels and films contribute to a restrictive education by disseminating inadequate ideas about life and relationships. As Lawrence writes in his review of C. W. Stork’s *A Second Contemporary Verse Anthology*, in which he finds crude, sentimental notions of love, ‘The girl who is going to fall in love knows all about it beforehand from books and the movies. She knows what she wants and she wants what she knows’ (*IR* 234). In *Pornography and Obscenity*, Lawrence claims that the ‘public’ are unable to distinguish between their ‘own original feelings and feelings which are diddled into existence by the exploiter’, where ‘the exploiter’ is the culture industry (*LEA* 238). For Lawrence, people become unable to think beyond the so-called knowledge they acquire from popular culture, which shapes their expectations and desires. Miss Pinnegar’s response to the cinema is exemplary of this effect. She believes she is gaining useful information about ‘people’s actual lives’ from films and finds them ‘instructive’, as though they offer a model for how to live. She is unable to see that that she is falsely equating the narrow cinematic world with reality.

Miss Pinnegar’s assumption that a film offers a true representation of ‘actual’ life, combined with the easiness of being able to ‘take it all in at a glance’, suggests that cinematic realism facilitates passive consumption. Here, Lawrence reaches towards something comparable to Adorno’s critique of the mimetic impulse in realist art. For Adorno, realist art attempts a reconciliation between people and the natural world, from which people have become alienated through their subjugation of it. Realist art attempts to accurately represent the world, and cinema – which often draws on realist conventions – appears to have a privileged relationship with the world, since it records and transmits images and sounds. Summarising one of Adorno’s claims in ‘Transparencies on Film’, David Jeneman writes that cinema ‘offers illusory plenitude and wholeness’ by appearing to provide a direct and complete copy of the world (2007: 116). Lawrence makes a similar observation in *The Lost Girl*: since cinema claims to accurately represent life, its consumers accept what they see on the screen. This uncritical acceptance then limits their abilities to imagine or desire alternatives. Such inability is harshly criticised in the opening of *The Lost Girl*, where James Houghton’s business fails because his unusual clothes do not cater for the tastes of the masses, who can cope only with ‘mediocrity’. Money can only be made in Woodhouse, we are told, by providing things that are ‘vulgar, machine-made, and appropriate to the herd’ (*LG* 5), so that commercial success is equated with low-quality produce. Lawrence sees a herd-like mentality produced by realist forms of mass culture such as cinema: when a public are indoctrinated with ideas through mechanically standardised products and forms of art they blindly follow and copy each other, becoming unable to cope with newness and difference.

Despite its critique of cinematic realism and popular culture, *The Lost Girl* is one of Lawrence’s most realist novels. It was also one of his most successful novels during his lifetime, winning the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. John Worthen tells us that the novel was ‘produced as part of Lawrence’s campaign to get *The Rainbow* into print, and to make some money’ (*LG* xlv). Since then *The Lost Girl* has been comparatively neglected by critics, which Ann Ardis attributes to the prioritisation of ‘high modernist’ texts by a generation of critics who equated aesthetic value with abstraction, formal complexity and a lack of commercial success at the time of a text’s original publication (2000: 123-4). Ardis points out that since *The Lost Girl* contains elements of realism and had some commercial success, it was once not considered a complex novel. Huyssen and David Chinitz have questioned claims about the aesthetic autonomy of ‘high’ modernist texts by revealing their fraught relationships with ‘low’ or popular culture, and Ardis draws on these ideas to argue that *The Lost Girl* is interesting precisely because of its complicated relationship with, and potential status as, popular culture. Nevertheless, for Ardis the main goal of the novel is to prioritise the literary: ‘Lawrence arrives at a defence of the “literary” through his criticisms of two popular, and primarily visual, forms’ (130).

Ardis’s closing argument risks simplifying Lawrence’s relationship with non-literary and popular cultural forms like cinema. Linda Ruth Williams has written that ‘D. H. Lawrence had little to say about cinema’ and ‘what he did write was negative’, yet her book identifies Lawrence’s use of cinematic techniques in his writing (1993: 1). Lawrence also praises the use of cinematic techniques in his review of John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*. It ‘is like a movie-picture’, Lawrence writes, ‘of disconnected scenes and scraps, a breathless confusion of isolated moments in a group of lives’ (*IR* 310). Lawrence values Dos Passos’s fragmented literary technique that provides a variety of snapshot moments without a connecting narrative – in other words, his rejection of a realist, linear narrative. That foundational media theorist Marshall McLuhan has since written about Dos Passos’s novel attests to its extra-literary significance (1969). For Lawrence, the gaps between the stories and images resist the falsifying claims to unity, truth and wholeness that characterises realist narratives. If Lawrence shares Adorno’s distrust of realist art forms, another point of continuity between them is in their openness to the radical potential of cinematic technique, despite their broad resistance to it. David Jeneman has explored at length Adorno’s varied engagement with film during his time in the USA (2007: 105-47). Similarly to Lawrence’s claims about the value of disconnection and fragmentation, Adorno writes that ‘It is in the discontinuity of that movement that the images of the interior monologue most resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in discrete signs’ (1991b: 156). Cinema is comparable to writing, for Adorno, and can contain similarly radical potential: by featuring gaps and breaks in its narrative, an art form can eschew wholeness and unity, avoiding simple attempts at mimesis and registering the discontinuity between art and the object it seeks to represent.

Lawrence’s texts place value on experiences that unsettle and disrupt commonly held notions of life. Cinema has this potential, but for Lawrence, it is not realised. There are two reasons for this, and the first is its commitment to realism: a genre which passes off as true a limited range of ideas about the world. Second, it is part of a problematic shift in the kinds of behaviour encouraged by mechanical mass culture: away from human interaction and towards an increasing reliance on technology. Theatre has the potential – even though it is not always successful – to bring a person into closer contact with vital emotions and new experiences.[[3]](#endnote-3) This is the function of the Natcha-Kee-Tawara and other entertainers in *The Lost Girl*. The travelling artists are ‘Odd, eccentric people’ (*LG* 119) who perform remarkable physical and theatrical feats. Their performances are extraordinary because in an increasingly standardised, mechanised world they demand awareness of the non-quotidian and beseech intimate consideration of bodies and emotions by requiring an audience to acknowledge their unusual physical capabilities, or the extremes of human experience. The theatre manager, Mr. May, prefers the ‘turns’ (the short stage performances by live entertainers) that precede the films and cannot understand the success of the Empire theatre, which has ‘only pictures’ and no live performers (*LG* 115). Alvina offers Mr. May an explanation for the public’s preference for film over the ‘turns’ that prefigures Lawrence’s claims about cinema in *Pornography and Obscenity*. She denies that the public have more discriminating taste than Mr. May, as he fears, but says the public are

“more modern.—You like things which aren’t yourself. But they don’t. They hate to admire anything that they can’t take to themselves. They hate anything that isn’t themselves. And that’s why they like pictures. It’s all themselves to them, all the time.” (116)

Mr. May and Alvina enjoy experiencing ‘the living personality’ of the artist, but the modern audience is ‘jealous’ of the ‘flesh-and-blood’ people on the stage. In *The Lost Girl*, being ‘modern’ is synonymous with inward-looking individualism and being unwilling to engage with otherness. In what will develop into Lawrence’s critique of the masturbatory impulse of modern films and literature in *Pornography and Obscenity*, the cinema is a solitary, selfish pleasure in *The Lost Girl*, devoid of human interaction.

Lawrence develops his critique of cinema and connected attitudes to sex in ‘Tickets Please’, a short story published in 1922. John is represented as a vulgar man who lacks depth and uses outings to the cinema as conveniently impersonal preludes to one-off sexual encounters that function similarly to masturbation, offering only momentary and empty sexual satisfaction. John, who is uninterested in achieving any meaningful human connections and has a ‘flock’ of ‘old flames’, abruptly ends his relationship with Annie after realising she takes ‘an intelligent interest in him and his life and his character’ (*EME* 40, 39). In ‘Tickets Please’, the cinema is the preferred pastime of a person who has no interest in developing close relationships, and the format of the entertainment – a dark room in which you must be quiet, and not converse with your neighbour – is particularly suitable for facilitating impersonality and detachment.

***St. Mawr***

In *St. Mawr* Lawrence takes his ideas about the damage popular culture does to peoples’ relationships further, describing the effects of conforming to a fashionable lifestyle on bodily health and sexual relationships. The problems of popular culture are represented differently in *St. Mawr* than in *The Lost Girl*: instead of specific pieces of mass produced culture, it is Rico’s desire to be fashionable that is critiqued, which means he strives to conform to the standardised, ‘second-hand’ ideas about how to live that Lawrence describes in *Pornography and Obscenity* (*LEA* 238). Lou and Rico both try hard to become ‘fashionable’, with their ‘little house in Westminster, the portraits, the dinners, the friends, and the visits’ carefully selected to help them ‘fit in’ (*SM* 23). The strain of crafting their fashionable lifestyle damages the couple’s sexual relationship: they have a ‘curious exhausting effect’ on one another and are perpetually on the brink of illness, which makes sex ‘shattering and exhausting’ (24). Rico is ‘an artist—a popular artist’ (117), closely associated with popular culture, and thus particularly associated with the problems of modern life, as Paul Poplawski has identified (2001: 94). Rico imagines his life in the same terms as his ‘fashionable’ paintings, so that he seems to have acquired his ideas about how to live from popular culture:

And that was Rico. He daren’t quite bite. Not that he was really afraid of the others. He was afraid of himself, once he let himself go. He might rip up in an eruption of life-long anger all this pretty-pretty picture of a charming young wife and a delightful little home and a fascinating success as a painter of fashionable, and at the same time ‘great’ portraits: with colour, wonderful colour, and at the same time form, marvellous form. He had composed this little *tableau vivant* with great effort. He didn’t want to erupt like some suddenly wicked horse ... (*SM* 27)

Rico’s ‘life-long’ struggle to construct a life like a fashionable ‘pretty-pretty picture’ takes such ‘great effort’ that he feels in danger of erupting with the energy and desires he has repressed. Rico demonstrates the attitude that Lawrence wrote about several years later in his review of Burrow’s *The Social Basis of Consciousness*: he is ‘dominated’ by ‘a picture or an idea’ of ‘a normal humanity’ (*IR* 336). The effort of conforming to popular notions of what life ought to be like affects Rico’s health and reduces his masculinity – he is ‘forever quivering’ and ‘*won’t need emasculating*’ (*SM* 31, 97).

In *St. Mawr,* foreshadowing issues that he explores more directly in *Pornography and Obscenity*, Lawrence challenges ideas that had become widespread during the nineteenth century about the benefits of abstinence from sex, by exploring the problems of too little sex. For Herbert Sussman, during the nineteenth century it was common to think of ‘sexual manliness as sexual thrift’, while the poorly behaved man used up his ‘vital energy in wasteful sexual activity’, reducing his masculinity and virility (1995: 96). The health of the physical body acts as an indicator of the health of the soul, signalling social actions as variously beneficial, harmful, or immoral. Such connections have a much longer history. French *ideologues* had long looked to the body to confirm the morality of social actions, with Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis noted for his writing on the ‘influence of the physical on the moral’, as François Azouvi has noted. For Cabanis, Azouvi writes, ‘every event in physical man is capable of “influencing” moral man’ because the intellect and thoughts are considered physical processes (2000: 277).

Lawrence reshapes these ideas to respond to contemporary issues. Through Rico, Lawrence suggests the body can sanction a lifestyle by maintaining its health, or dissent by becoming ill. Rico’s marriage to Lou is ‘without sex’ (*SM* 24), which is emasculating and drains his energy. Rico’s languor is connected to his continual effort to win social acceptance by being ‘self-controlled’ which makes him fearful and ‘uneasy’, so that Lou finds him weak and unattractive: ‘the anxious powerless of the man drove her mad’ (31). Rico is ‘deadly afraid’ of being left with other women because of the danger of succumbing to repressed sexual desires and ruining his carefully curated lifestyle (117). In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence challenges discourses that associated masculinity, health and morality with ‘sexual thrift’. In another sense, though, Lawrence is still working within the parameters of discussions about nineteenth-century masculinity: although Lawrence has different ideas about what constitutes the ‘correct’ sexual behaviour, he still connects ‘correct’ sexual behaviour with health, claiming that well-directed sexual activity is good for the individual and, by extension, society as a whole. In *St. Mawr*, Rico’s physical ailments are the evidence that for Lawrence, the effort required to win social acceptance is immoral and unhealthy.

***Pornography and Obscenity***

In *Pornography and Obscenity*, Lawrence directly articulates connections – between popular culture, repressive attitudes to sex, and censorship – that he had been exploring in *The Lost Girl* and *St. Mawr*. The pamphlet was written in response to the confiscation of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Pansies* by the police in January 1929, and the resultant parliamentary debate on censorship and obscenity on 28 February the same year. Lawrence’s fiction – especially *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* – was targeted by religious organisations and legislators who considered parts of his novels sexually explicit and obscene, as Rachel Potter has shown (2013: 110). In the pamphlet, Lawrence challenges the definitions of ‘pornography’ and ‘obscenity’ that have been used to censor his texts, and argues that popular culture is in fact obscene because it degrades sex.

For Lawrence, the ‘cheap and popular modern love-novel and love-film’ transmits repressive codes of behaviour, demonstrating ‘contempt of sex’ by treating it as something to be ashamed of (*LEA* 244, 243). The ‘mass of our popular literature, the bulk of our popular amusements’, he writes, ‘just exist to provoke masturbation’ in which ‘there is nothing but loss’ (244). Masturbation becomes a metaphor for solitary, energy-draining behaviours that replace human interaction. In *Pornography and Obscenity*, Lawrence refers to the ‘popular’ as anything that transmits what he considers old-fashioned attitudes to sex. Lawrence sees power as concentrated at the top of a social hierarchy, and accuses an anachronistic elite – ‘The grey ones left over from the Nineteenth Century’ (251) – of promoting unhealthy, repressive ideas about sex to the public through popular culture. Lawrence makes sweeping claims that ‘all nineteenth-century literature’ (which had been popular in its own time) that avoids discussion of sex is pornographic (243). Lawrence declares contemporary obscenity laws morally bankrupt because they sanction novels and films that provoke unhealthy masturbation while supressing art that could improve social wellbeing by celebrating sex.

We should view with caution Lawrence’s assertions about his complete separation from popular and contemporary views on sex. His claims about the harmful effects of masturbation owe much to nineteenth-century discourses about the need to carefully control how and where sexual energy is spent. Thomas W. Lacquer has discussed the development of ideas about appropriate social and sexual behaviour during the nineteenth century, when bourgeois subjects were expected to be economically and reproductively efficient by focusing their energies into work and family life (2003: 277-8). Herbert Sussman describes the nineteenth-century ‘view of male ejaculation as a depletion of male energy’, with masturbation considered the ‘greatest’ waste (1995: 96-7). For Alison Pease, Lawrence often uses ‘the enabling discourse of sexology’ to make arguments about which aspects of sexual behaviour and culture are unhealthy (2000: xiv). As Howard J. Booth has noted, Lawrence was shaped by ‘the forces that structured minds and sex at the time, even while trying to imagine and bring about something better and different’ (2018: 205). *Pornography and Obscenity* does, though, offer a view of sexuality and sexual behaviour as constructed, and constructed in part by ideas disseminated through popular culture: ‘in the press, in literature, everywhere’ (*LEA* 251).

In his arguments about the effects of popular culture, Lawrencedraws on ideas about mass psychology that he encountered in Trigant Burrow’s *The Social Basis of Consciousness*. As Burrow contemplates how it comes about that people share certain ideas, he argues that consciousness is not merely something with which the world is approached, but a mode of thinking that is imposed on people as they respond to ideas they encounter in the social world. These ideas create powerful images that people attempt to live by: ‘unconscious images which the repressed psyche uses as a substitute for life’ (*IR* 332). In *Pornography and Obscenity*,Lawrence claims that novels and films play a role in imposing ideas upon people, specifically by promoting associations between an absence of sexual desire and morality: films that characterise sex as profane by giving only ‘the villain or villainess’ sexual desire create expectations among the public, who come to ‘insist that a film-heroine shall be a neuter, a sexless thing of washed-out purity’ (*LEA* 242).

For Potter, in *Pornography and Obscenity* Lawrence argues that ‘Freudian understandings of the unconscious drives which structure psychic life complicate the idea of intention’ (2013: 52). Lawrence’s claims share much with ideas about the repressive effects of mass culture that Adorno derived from Sigmund Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and which he wrote about in his essay ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda’(1991a: 135-57). For Adorno, ‘society extends repressively into all psychology in the form of censorship and superego’ (1968: 79). In other words, the removal of certain ideas from public discourse via censorship affects what people consider appropriate. Rather than responding to public opinion, censorship works to limit the ideas available to the public and constructs self-regulating subjects.

Adorno goes further by explaining why individuals become convinced by ideas they derive from mass culture – to the point of defending them when challenged. Adorno describes how the ‘pseudo-cultured person counts himself among the saved; among the damned is everything which might call his reign – and everything connected with it – into question’ (1993: 53). As Deborah Cook explains this, Adorno finds that individuals ‘derive from the culture industry the sense of being part of an elect group’ (1996: 15). The shared experience offered by the culture industry gives lonely, alienated individuals a sense of belonging, which they become invested in protecting.

For Lawrence and Adorno, popular culture’s powers of mass suggestion have serious and far-reaching consequences. For both writers, media technologies shape ideas and behaviours to produce, at worst, subjects capable of rationalising and engaging in warfare. In *Aaron’s Rod*, Lilly says the First World War was ‘humanly quite false’: that a person would never undertake mass warfare or use poison gasses if he was ‘awake and in possession of himself’ (*AR* 119). The war is described as having taken place ‘in the automatic sphere’ (118) – it was mechanical, thoughtless behaviour of the kind promoted by popular culture and technologies that require only passive consumption and automatic reactions. Jeff Wallace calls this ‘a state of mass-suggestion commensurate with the later potential of media technologies’ (2005: 222). Lawrence and Adorno share a belief that popular culture is diminishing the agency of the subject.

**Strategies of Resistance**

Lawrence does not use the word ‘ideology’ but his argument that novels and films influence people’s actions, thoughts and morals comes close to an analysis of popular culture’s ideological content. In *Women in Love*, Birkin voices ideas about the harmful effects of school education that Lawrence writes about in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*,claiming that children are ‘Imprisoned within a limited, false set of concepts’ (*WL* 41). Birkin simplifies ideology into lies, but Lawrence’s account of writing *The Lost Girl* includes more nuanced observations the variety of forces that shape desires and values.

I think, do you know, I have inside me a sort of answer to the *want* of today: to the real, deep want of the English people, not just what they fancy they want. … this novel is perhaps not such good art, but it is what they want, need, more or less. (*1L* 511)

Lawrence can claim that people only ‘fancy they want’ something because he thinks of peoples’ wishes as shaped by what they know. In other words, desire is ideologically moulded rather than innate, for Lawrence. In this formulation, ideology is not purely restrictive but also works constructively to form peoples’ subjectivities. People’s wants, expectations and beliefs are formed from the thoughts that are available to them, which are influenced by education, traditions, and popular culture. This is positive, because it means the novelist can have a social impact. It also means that the novelist’s task is more complex than disabusing people of false notions – it means the novelist must reshape desires.

Lawrence is interested in who can resist popular culture and how they might do so. Between *The Lost Girl* and *St. Mawr* there is a significant shift in where Lawrence attributes the agency for resistance. In *The Lost Girl*, only unique individuals like Alvina seem able to resist cinema – and with it, commonly held ideas about life, money and relationships. Alvina, though, is not an ordinary girl: ‘we protest’, the narrator tells us, ‘that Alvina is not ordinary. Ordinary people, ordinary fates. But extraordinary people, extraordinary fates’ (*LG* 83). Something better is destined for Alvina because she is different. However, her difference is innate, and if only a minority of unusual individuals can resist the ideas handed down to them by ‘the grey ones left over from the Nineteenth Century’ (*LEA* 251), Lawrence leaves little hope for most people, and by extension little hope for significant and widespread social change.

In *The Lost Girl,* Lawrence’s ideas about the possibilities for resistance are different from Frankfurt School theorists. For Adorno, everyone, theoretically, has the capacity to resist the ideologies of modernity, either with the effort of dialectical thought, or by experiencing art that has ‘truth-content’ (1997: 169): that which formally registers, through techniques like fragmentation and dissonance, the alienated condition of the subject in modernity. Lawrence moves closer to Frankfurt School theories about how to resist ideology in *St. Mawr*. Lou is not special, but she is shocked into a realisation about the ‘rottenness’ of a bourgeois lifestyle by encountering St. Mawr, who is so different he seems to ‘look at her out of another world’ (*SM* 80, 30). In Lawrence’s fiction, experiencing otherness – people, places or animals that are strikingly different than that to which an individual has become accustomed – can cause a shock, prompting rebellion against the standardised behaviour and thought promoted by popular culture. In *St. Mawr*, as I have written about in detail elsewhere, Lawrence uses an unusual narrative form to transmit Lou’s shock to the reader (Moss 2015). In a climactic central event, St. Mawr rears and throws Rico off near the Devil’s Chair – an ancient and spiritual location on the Welsh border. Significantly, St. Mawr rears exactly at the moment when popular culture – specifically popular music, in the form of ‘a new dance tune’ (*SM* 75) – intrudes into an environment ordinarily untouched by modern culture. At the sight of St. Mawr writhing on top of Rico, and sensing the creature’s rebellion against their intrusion into an ancient place, Lou has an apocalyptic vision. Modern life is revealed to her as rotten, evil and destructive. The vision changes her; she abandons Rico and retreats from ‘what other people call life’, which is closely connected to popular entertainment and poor forms of physical intimacy: ‘Wriggling half-naked at a public show, and going off in a taxi with some half-drunken fool who thinks he’s a man’ (153). Unlike *The Lost Girl*, where Ciccio and Alvina achieve some happiness until his conscription, in *St. Mawr* there are no beneficial human relationships. Lou rejects human intimacy, moving to an isolated Mexican ranch. Yet in one significant way, *St. Mawr* is more optimistic than *The Lost Girl*, because the capacity to think differently and resist modern life is not limited to unique individuals, but can be produced by engaging with otherness, or with formally unusual art.

By the time of writing *Pornography and Obscenity*, Lawrence was carefully attending to the form ofhis writing and using literary techniques to challenge the ideas he claimed were transmitted by uncensored culture. *Pornography and Obscenity* does more than argue that novels and films affect how people think: it also demonstrates how writing can do so. The pamphletaims to reverse what Lawrence claims are the commonly held ideas about obscenity that had been used to censor his texts. To do this, Lawrence unfolds a detailed argument in stages, beginning with a typically modernist concern: the problems of language and meaning. He identifies that the meaning of the terms ‘pornography’ and ‘obscenity’ are not concrete: they are constructed in changing social contexts, and different individuals will ascribe to the terms a variety of connotations. As a result, Lawrence argues, broad definitions – or popular opinions; what he calls ‘the mob-meaning, decided by majority’ (*LEA* 236) – are always bound to be simplifications with insufficient nuance and specificity. Having laid this foundation, it is not a big leap for Lawrence to claim that the current consensus about what is obscene is an unhelpful generalisation. The opening of the pamphlet observes the impossibility of accessing conceptual essences and criticises popular opinion, but Lawrence pre-empts charges of elitism by avoiding convoluted word choice and illustrating complex arguments with quotidian examples, such as the varieties of bread that are obscured by the catch-all term.

After an opening that invites a critical approach to language, Lawrence attempts to remould his reader’s ideas by transferring the associations of ‘pornography’ and ‘obscenity’ away from his texts, onto popular culture. Lawrence repeatedly uses the phrase ‘dirty little secret’ to mean ‘repressive attitudes to sex’, re-framing so-called ‘pure’ or ‘moral’ attitudes to sex as unhealthy and clandestine. He bombards the reader with the images of the ‘secret’ being masturbated – ‘rubbing’ and ‘tickling the dirty little secret under the delicate underclothing’ (*LEA* 251) – and makes the descriptions unpleasant through their association with illness and infection: with scratching, rubbing, dirt, and describing the ‘secret’ as a sore that becomes ‘inflamed’ (243). Associations are encouraged between these unpleasant images and popular culture, which Lawrence accuses of encouraging masturbatory behaviour. The pamphlet works on the intellect and sensations simultaneously, combining a series of developing philosophical arguments about language, meaning and morality with the affective potential of language and association to redirect ideas about indecency and feelings of disgust towards popular culture and censors.

The censorship of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* belatedly turned it into a piece of popular culture. When Penguin republished the novel in 1960 and invited prosecution, it won the right to publish the novel unexpurgated. Sales of the text were enormous, and the novel has since been adapted for film, stage, radio and television. Issues of morality dominated public discussions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Its suppression in 1929 and the 1960 Penguin trial both hinged on claims about its obscenity: that it would damage the nation by transmitting immoral, unhealthy ideas about sex. Lawrence thought the opposite: he believed that the novel would benefit people because it represented sexual relationships frankly.Responding to the censorship of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Pornography and Obscenity* invites its readers to question popular notions of what is right, moral and true: could the texts people are told will harm them, in fact benefit them? By the end of his career and life, Lawrence was asking his readers to engage in dialectical thinking – which would become the core tool of Frankfurt School Critical Theorists – to resist popular culture, ideology and industrial modernity. Could things that are sanctioned and approved – such as popular culture, war and the pursuit of money – in fact be harmful? In *The Rainbow*, when Will contemplates the modern world, he thinks of the ‘ponderous, massive, ugly superstructure of a world of man upon a world of nature’ and wants to ‘Sweep away the whole monstrous superstructure of the world of today, cities and industries and civilization’ (*R* 179). For Lawrence, popular and mass culture is responsible for the perpetuation of some of the worst aspects of modernity: it is one of the works of man, and ‘The works of man were more terrible than man himself, almost monstrous’.

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**Notes**

1. For the fluctuations in Lawrence’s relationships with publishers and the extent of his commercial success, see Wexler 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lawrence drafted ‘Elsa Culverwell’ in 1912, re-wrote the story as ‘The Insurrection

   of Miss Houghton’ in 1913, and finally wrote *The Lost Girl* in 1920 (Poplawski and

   Worthen 1996: 210). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lawrence’s reviews of theatre performances are varied. He positively describes a performance of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in Italy because he felt that the performances, which were full of emotion, brought him into closer contact and empathy with characters by showing ‘people frightened, obstinate, foolish, passionate, and dead’. A second play on the same evening is described as ‘childish and foolish’ (*TI* 71, 73). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)