Chapter 9

Ideology in Cinema

Objectives: The chapter is an overview of how films communicate ideology; students will become familiar with key theorists and films that have strong ideological content.

Key words: The Frankfurt school, Marxism, Ideological State Apparatus, interpellation, race, social class

Background

A film is a sum total of the maker’s attitudes, beliefs, political, social and cultural positions. Ideology can be visible or deeply embedded and thus appear natural. More often than not, filmmakers have to identify a position which could be overt or covert, and that becomes the ideology of the film. Films, especially commercial blockbusters cater to the prevailing ideology of the society. Consider a film like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994). What is the underlying message of the film regarding family relationships, social hierarchies and status of women in a patriarchal set-up? Riefenstahl’s propaganda film *The Triumph of Will* (1934) had a clear ideology and so did DW Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Ideology is specific and general, seen and unseen, conscious and unconscious. Cinema is an ideological apparatus, though most of the time it renders it invisible.

What is ideology?

Loosely defined, it is a systematic body of ideas, attitudes, values and perceptions; ideology is also the collective views, attitudes, positions & dogmas of a societal group. Ideology can be seen/unseen; conscious/unconscious, and is determined by time and place. As a theoretical term, ideology is indebted to Marxism and explains society (as Marx would say, predominantly the domain of the ruling class). Although filmmakers may decide their story and what appears on screen, a large number of things and beliefs of people in fact influence this. We must also consider the fact that it is the audience that finally reads meaning into a film.

Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is one of the most influential ideological texts, a point of ideological conflict between the East and the West. Even his aesthetic sensibility was imbued with his political vision and the legendary Odessa steps scene contains his vision of oppression, rebellion and collective action. Ideology provides identities and gives us a subject position. D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation is set during the American Civil War (1861-65); and is read as an outrageously racist text. The film reinforces stereotypes: The evil blacks vs. the good white and argues for Ku Klux Klan. The film was a blockbuster, with realistic depiction of historical incidents, such as assassination of Lincoln and Sherman’s march through Georgia. Its
ideology found resonance with the larger audience in the then contemporary America. Later, Griffiths attempted to salvage with *Intolerance* and in the edited version of *The Birth* some of the more racist scenes were deleted.

Sergei Eisenstein analyzes Griffith’s ideology, ‘In social attitudes Griffith was always a liberal, never departing far from the slightly sentimental humanism of the good old gentlemen and sweet old ladies of Victorian England. His tender-hearted film morals go no higher than a level of Christian accusation of human injustice and nowhere in his films is there sounded a protest against social injustice.”

**Marxist school**

Marxism was conceived as a radical theory that sought to expose the relations of power in capitalist societies. Any economic system seeks to perpetuate itself, and power-holders seek to make us share their ways of thinking, including the idea that it is fitting that they be in control. Marxism talks about base and superstructure. Base shapes the superstructure and is concerned with means of production (all owned by the bourgeoisie) and relations of production, where the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat. Superstructure for Marx, maintains and legitimates the base. It includes religion, politics, mass media, family, and education, everything that has got nothing to do with production in society.

Marx and Fredric Engels described ideology as a *camera obscura*, or a distorting lens. It is through these lenses that classes view the world according to their class interest.

**Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)**

For Gramsci, hegemony describes the winning of consent and supports dominant ideology. Within the western world it is the white, middle class, heterosexual male, that is, the dominant groups that govern. Cinema reveals these values as natural, unquestionable, desirable. The subordinates are made to see that it is in the general interest to collude with that construct. This consensus happens not by coercion but from a desire to belong to a socio/political/cultural system. If the Marxist thought believed that the ruling classes enforce ideas on the rest, Gramsci held ideology as a site of negotiation between the classes for hegemony.

**The Frankfurt School**

The Frankfurt School of German Marxists, especially Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer attempted to develop an understanding of the dehumanizing institutions and/or processes of a capitalistic society. Horkheimer’s *Critical Theory* is a study of capitalist society moving towards a new level of ideological sophistication, which Horkheimer called the ‘culture industry.’ He suggests that culture had replaced
religion as the new ‘opium of the masses’ in framing a certain order of conformism. The Frankfurt School was dismissive of mass entertainment considering it as depoliticizing the general public. Because of industrialization, films, books, and music are easy to reproduce, and this, according to the Frankfurt school, has changed culture into merely yet another commodity.

Germane to this is Herbert Marcuse's concept of ‘Affirmative culture’, which seeks to describe how art can affect people.

![Remember!](image)

Genres follow a classic narrative and support a closure, a resolution. Genres provide simple answers to very complex issues (order/disorder/order restored). In a typical Western, for example, the binaries are clearly defined and we as the audience agree with the ideology of the hero, for example, The Searchers (1956), The Man who Shot Liberty Valence (1962).

- **Louis Althusser** (1918-1990)

In Lenin and Philosophy Althusser contends, “Art does have a quite particular & specific relationship with ideology…What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing’, ‘perceiving’ and ‘feeling’, is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.” A key term in Althusser is *interpellation*, which explains how individuals perceive the world from their specific position, in a capitalist setting with a bourgeois point-of-view. In films, the spectator is interpellated into a fixed position and s/he follows the dominant perspective as directed by Ideological State Apparatus. “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (“Ideology &Ideological State Apparatuses”). Ideological State Apparatus persuades us to behave in a particular manner, for example, church, family, education, legal system, media; all these institutions expect us to conform to certain norms.

Repressive State Apparatus: RSA includes the government, police, courts, prison, armed forces etc. Althusser also believes that in ideology the subjects make ideology have meaning by colluding with and according to it. The reason for this consensuality is the reassuring nature of national identity, and the fact that the nation state gives people a sense of identity, status and pride.

**Films and ideology**
In *Modern Times* (1936) Charlie Chaplin conveyed ideology under the garb of slapstick comedy. His worldwide appeal can be attributed to the fact that audiences related to him. The film satirizes assembly line production, where The Tramp is a factory worker and realizes that workers have become a part of the machines around him. Poverty, unemployment, and exploitation of the workers were the issues that Chaplin constantly concerned himself with, and in *Modern Times* he revisits these themes for the last time as the Little Tramp.

Italian filmmaker Paolo Passolini was a Marxist and a social nonconformist. Though an atheist, Passolini directed *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), which reinforces the filmmakers ideology, that is, a radical indictment of materialism and social discrimination. Shot in traditional Italian neo-realist style, the film is relevant primarily because it offers a Marxist critique of Christianity.

In *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel 1971) when Clint Eastwood dares his opponents, (to) “go ahead, make (his) day,” we know that his Harry Callaghan embodies fierce individualism/right to violence. The film clearly bears the hallmarks of 1970s attitudes to violence, gender and race. We may not agree with Harry’s methods to fight the bad guys but we still root for him because we identify with his ideology. Another popular film *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), positions the spectators culturally, sets an agenda, and provides solutions to problems. It plays on binary oppositions: Maverick (Tom Cruise) vs other pilots; U.S. vs Soviets; team player vs. individual and finally reaffirms the myth of the dominant male.


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**Films with conscious ideology**

- *High Noon*
- *Bicycle Thieves*
- *Apocalypse Now*
- *Wall Street*
- *The Insider*
- *Fahrenheit 9/11*
- *JFK*
- *An Inconvenient Truth*
- *Children of Heaven*
- *Turtles can Fly*
According to Colin McCabe in ‘classic realist text’, films have a hidden narrator that tells the story from the point-of-view of the bourgeois. Continuity editing, as seen in classic Hollywood films, contributes towards reinforcing the ideology because this kind of editing remains unnoticed. Since the audiences are not given the chance to think about what is being said to them, they accept whatever idea is presented to them. As Douglas Kellner elaborates:

The film *Rambo* synthesizes (this) “return to Vietnam” cycle with another cycle that shows returning vets transforming themselves from wounded and confused misfits to super warriors (i.e. *Rolling Thunder*, *Firefox*, *First Blood*). All of these post post-Vietnam syndrome films show the U.S. and the American warrior hero victorious this time and thus exhibit a symptom of inability to accept defeat. They also provide symbolic compensation for loss, shame, and guilt by depicting the U.S. as “good” and this time victorious, while its communist enemies are represented as the incarnation of “evil” who this time receive a well-deserved defeat. Cumulatively, the return-to-Vietnam films therefore exhibit a defensive and compensatory response to military defeat in Vietnam and, I would argue, an inability to learn the lessons of the limitations of U.S. power and the complex mixture of good and evil involved in almost all historical undertakings. (Kellner)

In conclusion we can say that an ideology is the product of the position and interests of a particular class. In any era, the dominant ideology embodies and serves to legitimize the interests of the dominant economic and social class. As filmgoers, it is important to be sensitive to the ideological contexts, since no film is free of ideology.


Suggested reading:


• Eisenstein, Sergei. *Film Form and The Film Sense*, NY: Meridian Books, 1957

• McCabe, C. ‘Realism and the cinema: notes of some Brechtian Theses,’ *Screen*, vol.15, No. 2, Summer.


**Suggested websites**


• [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology)

• [https://faculty.washington.edu/mlg/courses/definitions/Ideology.html](https://faculty.washington.edu/mlg/courses/definitions/Ideology.html)

• [http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/FilmAndIdeololgy.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/FilmAndIdeololgy.html)

**Quiz**

1. Answer the following:
   i. What are base and superstructure in Marxian terms?
   ii. Explain Gramsci’s concept of hegemony.
   iii. How do genres subsume specific ideologies?
   iv. What is the ideology of *Top Gun*?

2. State whether the following are true or false:
   i. *The Triumph of Will* is an epic film.
   ii. Ideological State Apparatus is a term given by Bakhtin.
   iii. *Top Gun* has no implicit ideology.

3. Match the following:

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<th><strong>Do the Right Thing</strong></th>
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<th>Tony Scott</th>
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<td>i</td>
<td><strong>Modern Times</strong></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Spike Lee</td>
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<td>ii</td>
<td><strong>Dirty Harry</strong></td>
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<td>Charlie Chaplin</td>
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<td>iii</td>
<td><strong>Top Gun</strong></td>
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<td>Don Siegel</td>
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4. Assignment
Watch any one film from the list on films with conscious ideology and analyze its implicit ideology.

**Answer key**

2. i. – False (propaganda); ii.-False (Althusser); iii.-False
3. i- b; ii.-c ; iii. -d; iv-a