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Chapter 6

Film, culture, and ideology

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There have been many attempts at understanding the relations between film and culture. They have occurred under various headings: film and society, film and politics, film and mass culture, for example. Some analyses have focused on the relations between film and trends within popular culture (*Easy Rider* and the hippies of the 1960s, for example), while others have used film as documentary evidence of movements within social history. In many cases, such analyses have assumed a more or less 'reflectionist' relationship between film and society. That is, film is seen as a 'reflection' of the dominant beliefs and values of its culture; if American musicals of the 1940s were Utopian and optimistic, then this must reflect the society's optimism. (An example of such an argument would be Richard Griffith's 'Cycles and genres' (1949).) It should be clear from the rest of this book that such an approach is too primitive; we know, for instance, that American society also produced the alienated and cynical genre of *film noir* during the 1940s: which reflection was the accurate one? The metaphor of reflection is also unsatisfactory because it bypasses the process of selection and combination that goes into the composition of any utterance, whether in film, prose, or conversation. Further, between society and this so-called mirror is interposed a whole set of competing and conflicting cultural, subcultural, industrial, and institutional determinants.

Alternatives to reflectionist views have emerged from structural linguistics, structural anthropology, literary theory, and Marxian theories of ideology. All have contributed to situating the relation between film and society within the broader category of the relationship of representations of *any* kind (photographs, paintings, novels, films) to their culture. Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and 're-presents' its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium. Just as film works *on* the meaning systems of culture—to renew, reproduce, or review them—it is also produced *by* those meaning systems. The film-maker, like the novelist or the storyteller, is a *bricoleur*—a sort of handyman who does the best s/he can with the materials at hand. The film-maker uses the representational conventions and repertoires available within the

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culture in order to make something fresh but familiar, new but generic, individual but representative.

The result of cultural approaches to 'film as representation' is ultimately to focus on the relations between film's representational 'languages' and ideology. Nevertheless, before dealing with this, we need to fill out the overview further. There are two broad categories of culturalist approach to the relation between film and culture: textual and contextual. The textual approach focuses on the film text, or a body of film texts, and 'reads' from them information about the cultural function of film. For example, Andrew Tudor's work on film movements (1974) is text-based; his initial premise is that the texts of German expressionism or Italian neo-realism have something in common which can be understood as expressions of particular aspects of those cultures. We can read, for instance, the recurrence of father-son conflicts in the plots of German expressionist films as symbolic representations of the deep political split between the old and the new guard in the Weimar Republic.

Genre criticism is also initially text-based, even though it may attempt to trace changes in genres to their sources within the culture producing them. Will Wright's study of the western, discussed in Chapter 4, follows such a pattern, as does Schrader's work (1972) on *film noir,* or Dyer's work (1977) on the musical. In general, these textual approaches are responding to a set of conclusions about the specific characteristics of the film text(s); then, operating on the assumption of the culture's 'authorship' of the text, they trace the myths or ideologies of the films back to their sources within the culture. So the suspicion of women in *film noir* is traced back to a series of 'causes', and the Utopian myths which structure musicals are outlined in some detail. Often there is a strong structuralist impulse in such work, since the similarities between films are emphasized more than the differences, and the tendency is to work with many 'typical' texts rather than a few 'individualized' texts.

Although there is no hard distinction between the two angles of approach, contextual approaches tend to analyse the cultural, political, institutional, industrial determinants of—most often—a national film industry. And although there is, again, an interest in film movements which implies a pre-eminent interest in a particular group of film texts,

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this is not the primary concern of such approaches. It is the process of cultural production rather than the work of representation that concerns these studies. Such work as that of Kristin Thompson or Douglas Gomery in America, John Ellis and Charles Barr in the UK, and John Tulloch and Tom O'Regan in Australia, examines the function of cultural policy, government intervention, censorship, technologies, patterns of ownership within the chain of production-distribution-exhibition, commercial practices within the film industry, public institutions, global aspects of the film industry, and many other factors which affect the textual form of a film (indeed, whether a project *becomes* a film) well before it is ever seen by a critic. Such work often draws on a well-developed tradition in media studies where detailed histories of a TV programme's production and reception are now relatively commonplace. The strong, if now unfashionable, tradition of film history—essentially the proposition of an aesthetic 'great tradition' for the cinema—has been hijacked (by, for instance, Douglas Gomery) to explore film's industrial history. This has been increasingly useful in developing an understanding of film and culture.

The combination of these two approaches—textual and contextual—has enormous explanatory power. (In the USA, Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) and in Australia, Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka's two-volume cultural history of the revival, *The Screening of Australia* (1987), have demonstrated this.) The combination is also very unwieldy. It is simply beyond our capacity to deal with all the determinants necessary to understand fully the cultural relationships which obtain at any particular point in film's history. For this reason, most discussion has focused on the structure, or the theoretical composition, of the relationships. Even the primarily historical accounts are valuable for what they tell us of the structure of the film/culture relationship. The common thread, however, which links the textual and the contextual and makes an understanding of them complementary rather than mutually exclusive, is that both industry and text, the processes of production and of reception, must be in some way related to ideologies.

The term 'ideology' is itself continually being redefined, contested, and explored within all areas of cultural theory. There is no incontestable definition of ideology. Put at its simplest, we can say

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that implicit in every culture is a 'theory of reality' which motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on. For this 'theory of reality' actually to work as a structuring principle it needs to be unspoken, invisible, a property of the natural world rather than human interests. Ideology is the term used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality; and although ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relations to our idea of what constitutes an individual. The term is also used to describe the workings of language and representation within culture which enable such formations to be constructed as 'natural'.

The culture's ideological system is not monolithic but is composed of competing and conflicting classes and interests, all fighting for dominance. The process is, in a sense, replicated in our narratives. In Chapter 4, I used Lévi-Strauss to suggest that narratives set up binary oppositions which are resolved at their end; it was further suggested that the oppositions themselves were composed of representations of competing ideological positions. (I discussed how *Desperately Seeking Susan* explores opposing definitions of marriage, femaleness, and sexuality through the contrasting lifestyles of Roberta and Susan.) If our narratives do work to resolve social contradictions symbolically, what they must deal with are those existing political divisions or inequities between groups, classes, or genders which have been constructed as natural or inevitable within our societies. Films, then, both as systems of representation and as narrative structures, are rich sites for ideological analysis.

Although cultural studies have produced a welter of ideological analyses of film texts (which 'read off the ideology from the text), it is important to stress that ideologies structure institutions as well as texts. Our legal system, for instance, is biased towards the defence of property. Although the crime of murder suffers the maximum penalty in most western countries, in general it is true to say that offences such as arson and theft are treated more severely than assault or, until relatively recently, rape. This, we might say, is 'simply historical'. Yet history is constructed too; it is the selection and combination of events, sequences, causes, and effects. (We might say that history has a

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history.) Ideology works to obscure the process of history so that it appears natural, a process we cannot control and which it seems churlish to question. Yet history is the product of competing interests, all attempting to centre their own interests as those of the nation. The history of the institutions of the law reveals discrimination against the poor; the bias towards the protection of property clearly favours those who have most property—presumably, the propertied classes who framed the laws. Yet the institution of the law is normally seen to be above class, above ideology, above politics.

Film institutions have political interests which ultimately determine what films are made, let alone what films are seen. The examination of the operation of these institutions reveals the nature of the interests they serve, the objectives they pursue, and what their function means for the audiences, the industry, and the culture as a whole.

Considerations of the workings of ideology are relevant to both kinds of cultural approach—the textual and the contextual. I wish to stay with this contextual approach for the moment, in order to look, first, at how a film industry participates in the construction of the 'nation'. The second step is to examine this area of cultural production through an illustrative case, surveying the forces determining the development of the Australian film industry during the revival of the 1970s.

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Film and national culture

The idea that the nation-state is the natural form of political organization is a relatively modern one. Nevertheless, most people these days expect our membership of the nation to bind us together, enabling us to achieve more than we could as separate cells or groups of interests. Identification with the nation is often a source of pride and pleasure, too; sporting events, national celebrations of coronations, inaugurations, or holidays such as Independence Day or Anzac Day, are important and satisfying rituals of cultural membership. But we also know that identifications with 'the nation' can be extremely arbitrary. Post-war reconstructions of European

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national boundaries were clearly arbitrary and cannot have hoped to construct 'national' allegiances easily with a line drawn across a map. Recent events have revealed how unsatisfactory such strategies have been. The Middle East is a further site of the rejection of what are seen as arbitrary attempts to establish definitions of separate nations. This may be an extreme example, but one could also ask whether the Welsh or the Scottish internalize the same idea of the 'nation' as the residents of England. Are Australian Aborigines part of the Australian 'nation', despite their relative powerlessness and subordination? Are the differences between San Francisco, California, and Montgomery, Alabama, more substantial than the similarities?

Opponents of nationalism see it as a dangerously effective tool of persuasion; to accept that the good of the nation is pre-eminent is also to accept the possibility of subordination to that good. To accept the possibility is, sooner or later, to experience the reality. So there are at least two sides to nationalism; it can be a positive political benefit or a real political danger. On the one hand, the idea of the nation is one way of mobilizing the sense of identity without which no social group can survive; the rituals of the nation allow us to celebrate and confirm our membership. On the other hand, it can be used to convince those who are inequitably treated to accept their subordination as being in the national interest. When Dr Johnson said that patriotism was the last refuge of the scoundrel, he referred to the persuasive power unleashed by the invocation of the nation. It is very difficult to place your own interests above those of the nation without seeming to be selfish and unprincipled. Most importantly, the idea of the nation can operate at the most basic levels of meaning and discourse. It becomes an overriding set of priorities which define what is acceptable and what is not, what is normal and what is not, all through defining what is Australian or British or American and what is not.

Identification with the nation is an essential prerequisite for political power. We can see the political parties at election time scramble to identify themselves with the flag, with national values, or with the signifiers of an 'essence' of the nation—be it a colonial war in South America, a national cricket team, or a group of astronauts. Political parties attempt to centre themselves as representative of the nation; by so doing they hope to convince voters that their interests, the nation's

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interests, and the voters' interests (as members of the nation) are identical. In wider conceptions of politics—that is, not party politics but power relations generally—the idea of the nation is enlisted in achieving and maintaining hegemony. Hegemony is the process by which members of society are persuaded to acquiesce in their own subordination, to abdicate cultural leadership in favour of sets of interests which are represented as identical, but may actually be antithetical, to their own. The subordinated are persuaded by the ideologies on offer rather than the particulars of their material conditions (which might be the practical result of such ideologies). Hegemony's aim is to resist social change and maintain the status quo.

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The regulation and control of definitions of art, of literature, and of the national film industry are also hegemonic in that the imperative is always to restrict and limit the proliferation of representations of the nation. (This is because the proliferation of representations also proliferates different definitions.) Representations of the nation are themselves particularly important since they both produce and reproduce the dominant points of view. This does not mean that we only have one version of the nation—although ideally that is what hegemony could mean. What is does mean is that the various representations will enjoy a different status and will have different meanings. In effect, they will construct a different nation. So the British culture constructed in *The English Patient* is different from the British culture constructed in *The Full Monty*. Similarly, if the star is the 'type of the individual' within the culture, the face of Ralph Fiennes will represent a very different type of the individual to the face of Robert Carlyle. Such differences can be contradictory and therefore threatening; in such cases, the cultural institutions might attempt to limit or control the multiplicity of representations by depicting some as marginal or crass, for instance. But this strategy may be actively inhibited by the audience's thirst for variety and their active toleration of differences. As we shall see in the Australian example, the pressure for hegemony is often met by the resistance of the popular, 'unofficial', culture.

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Like other ideological constructions, representations of the nation are not 'fixed'; their political and cultural importance is such that they are sites of considerable competition. To gain control of the

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representational agenda for the nation is to gain considerable power over individuals' view of themselves and each other. This is one of the reasons why there is so much concern within so many countries over the domination of film and television production and distribution by the United States of America. If we understand our world (or our nation) through its representations, foreign control of the major media of representation does threaten the coherence of the individual's understanding of that world (or nation). The American domination of the mass media has, to some extent, normalized American images of modern society. Residents of Australia have only recently come to accept Australian urban images for their cinema screens and, only a little less recently, Australian accents in advertising, and radio or television announcers. The cultural hegemony facilitated by this domination of the mass media has worried many countries, and not only on behalf of their media industries.

There is a degree of exaggeration here that can imply greater cultural/national differences than actually exist; the withdrawal of all American films would not remove all evidence of sexism from Australian cinemas, nor the incidence of cultural chauvinism in British cinemas. However, film does serve important cultural functions and those countries which have set up their own industries aim at recovering some control over these functions. They can at least break the silence often maintained about their own culture within American cinema. For Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and many Scandinavian, South American, and European countries, the question for the last forty years has not been 'should we have a national cinema?' but 'what kind of cinema should it be?' Despite the fact that the mainstream feature film is a global industry, and that even the most successful of the national industries are still enclosed within the macro-structures of the American industry, the ideological power of film has been recognized in these competing, if subordinated, voices of national film industries.

In general, the results of this development have been twofold. Firstly, most countries have set up a network of institutions or government policies to control foreign input and encourage indigenous output. Measures taken include box-office levies (Sweden), income tax incentives for investors (Australia), maximum quotas on

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foreign films (Britain), and limitations on vertical integration with multinational companies. The more positive moves include the establishment of a film and television school (Australia), national film-financing bodies (Canada), grants and subsidies (Britain), and government-funded marketing enterprises of the kind that Britain and Australia have mounted at the annual international market-place of Cannes. The 'nationalization' of film promotion through such national marketing offices reveals how closely indigenous film production is connected to the representation and dissemination of images of the nation at home and overseas. What we see is not just a commercial enterprise, but a national cultural project (or projection) as well.

This introduces the second aspect. When films act as *representatives* of as well as *representations* of the nation overseas they become subject to a different regime of inspection. They are assessed, for instance, for their appropriateness as tourist advertisements, or for their 'typicality' as depictions of national life. (This is not something that tends to happen to American films, however.) The ways in which the texts produced by the national industries are patrolled for their images, for their suitability as the national 'touring team', offer another set of determinants of what is produced, what is distributed, and what is positively received by audiences and by critics. And although we are not talking about American mainstream cinema now, it is in such texts and in their conditions of production that we can most clearly see the relationship between film, culture, and ideology. The lessons learnt from such texts and such conditions can easily be applied to any national cinema, including the American cinema.

This brings us full circle, from the context of national cultural production to the film texts themselves. As I said earlier, one cannot hope to do more than chart the intersection of the forces and conditions of film production and reception. But it is illustrative to look at one relatively self-contained example for the lessons it carries about the processes of cultural production. This example is the revival of the Australian film industry, its recovery from near-extinction during the 1970s.

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