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Ideology in the text

From the Australian example we can see that arguments about the aesthetic qualities of specific film texts are never objective or disinterested. Both the production and reception of film are framed by ideological interests, no matter how insistently this might be denied. In this section, I want to examine the workings of ideology in the film text itself. The starting-point is the simple one that ideology is read from film texts, consciously or unconsciously, and the relationship between each text and its culture is traceable to ideological roots.

The problem, however, is how to deal with this. It is impossible to stand outside ideology and talk about it in a language which is itself free of ideology. It is also hard to see things which we like to think are parts of our identity as ideologically constructed. One's tastes, for instance, are formed through ideology, but it is difficult to accept that something as essential to our sense of ourselves is culturally constructed. Just as the concepts themselves can be a little unsettling, ideological textual analysis can have its moments too. It can be, in turns, dizzyingly complex or ridiculously simple. The next two sections—without falling into either of these extreme categories, it is to be hoped—will outline some of the basic assumptions and applications of this mode of representational analysis.

More than any others, ideological considerations allow us to begin to understand the relationship between film texts and their cultural contexts. Importantly, ideological approaches reject the view of the film text as 'unitary' in meaning; that is, as making only one kind of sense, without contradictions, exceptions, or variations in the interpretations made by different members of the audience. Rather, the text is a kind of battleground for competing and often contradictory positions. Of course, this competition usually results in a victory for the culture's dominant positions, but not without leaving cracks or divisions through which we can see the consensualizing work of ideology exposed. Through such cracks, ideological analysis provides the point of entry to an understanding of the film's formal process of construction. These cracks, or gaps, in the text are not simply the inventions of the critic. They are often points where the audience is aware of a weakness in the narrative: where a union

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between lovers is formed that is 'unconvincing' or where the death of a character might seem unmotivated or arbitrary, or where one might have expected the ending to have a different emotional inflection. Often the formal problems we might discern within a film are traceable to the intransigence of the ideological opposition; an unsatisfactory ending in a film may emerge from the failure to unite the ideological alternatives convincingly.

As the above paragraphs might suggest, generalization is risky in this area. Ideology is a slippery concept since it is not an abstract entity which can be described separately from its workings in a specific act of signification. So we will move to the discussion of an example—a film which highlights the complexities of the working of ideology because it was seen to be explicitly ideological by members of its audience but not by its makers. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* reveals how unconsciously ideology can work and how it can live in the formal properties of the individual film text.

In 1927, German expressionism was a greatly respected film movement, marked by a strong visual style which employed low-key lighting, geometric shapes, oblique camera angles, and sharp juxtapositions of light and dark. Its narratives were melodramatic, offering Gothic and supernatural plots as often as contemporary stories. At the time, the Weimar Republic of Germany was in political disarray, suffering the trauma of defeat in the First World War and the uncertainty of continual changes in government (fifteen different administrations from the beginning of the Weimar Republic until the election of Hitler's National Socialists), and lacking any one political grouping capable of presiding over the reconstruction of the national identity, while a plethora of groups was singled out for special blame and fear: the 'international Jewish conspiracy', the Communists, the dying aristocracy, even the Weimar itself. The film-makers were relatively aloof from this, however, and there are remarkably few direct references to German domestic politics in expressionist films.

It was in this climate that *Metropolis* was made. The film tells the story of a workers' revolution in a futuristic dictatorship. The revolution is actually instigated through a plot hatched between the ruler of Metropolis and a mad scientist, and is intended to discredit a workers' liberation movement which is given the contradictory

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attributes of both Christianity and Communism. The workers destroy the factory and flood their homes, but stability is reinstated by the end of the film. The ruler's son mediates between the workers and the boss, as Christ mediates between God and Man. Or, as the film has it, he is the 'heart' which guides the co-operation between the 'head' (the ruler) and the 'hands' (the workers). Although the film establishes the oppression of the workers, its final frames show them surrendering their power to a newly humanized ruler.

Lang was not an overtly political film-maker at this point, and certainly had no special admiration for Nazism; he saw the film, as he said later, as a rather 'silly' melodrama. Hitler, however, saw it differently and admired its dramatization of Fascist philosophy. In fact, Hitler was so impressed with Lang, a Jew, that he offered him the post of head of the German film industry and the status of 'honorary Aryan'. Lang, to his credit, fled Nazi Germany for America where he became known for, among other things, his anti-Nazi films during the Second World War.

Ideology is unconscious, as Lang's history demonstrates. He was not a Nazi, nor was he pro-Nazi. Yet his film brought Hitler great satisfaction. This is because Lang, the film-maker/*bricoleur*, used what the culture made available to him—not only its languages but its meanings. These included the dominant images of power as patriarchal, fatherly, and the assumption that political unrest was always undesirable and that reformist politics were either messianic or Marxist. The pentangle (five-pointed star) used to represent the evil of the scientist Rotwang, with its close similarity to the star of David, invokes anti-Semitism. The film's view of the people as gullible and to be saved from themselves is probably also traceable to cultural roots. Most of these assumptions and meanings were appropriated by Nazism as well as by Lang's film. Fritz Lang was not the 'author' of the discourses of *Metropolis;* his culture was.

The ideology of a film does not take the form of direct statements or reflections on the culture. It lies in the narrative structure and in the discourses employed—the images, myths, conventions, and visual styles. Even though *Metropolis* is a conventional melodrama involving a love affair between an individualized hero and heroine, it is not a film which is about character or even about plot. Its most obvious attribute is its

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portrait of a world. The film's distinctiveness and power arise from its opening series of representations of dehumanizing working conditions, the physical design of the future world, and the depiction of a rigidly hierarchized physical environment in which the people live. These aspects of the film are both prescient and striking. For the contemporary viewer at least, who may find the love interest a little dated, they are the discourses of a pre-eminently social, political film.

This being the case, the ending of the film needs to resolve its social/political conflicts as well as its personal dilemmas—but it does not. It is characteristic of the workings of ideology that they express social or political differences as personal and individual, therefore to be resolved at the personal not the political level, and a sign of *individual* weakness, not the weakness of the social or political *system*. The ending of *Metropolis* resolves the love interest, reunites the father and son, but changes almost nothing in the social or political structure of its world. The powerful early scenes of dehumanized workers being sacrificed to the machines are cancelled out by the workers' capitulation to what is a corrupt and irresponsible deployment of power. By the end, the power of the masses is represented as the real threat, and this legitimates the reinstatement of the fatherly, benevolent dictatorship. The masses need protection from themselves, it seems, and the guardianship of their future is placed safely in the hands of the ruler of Metropolis.

The film is composed of a series of moves and counter-moves which are not only narratively but also ideologically motivated. Its opening images explicitly connect totalitarianism with capitalism by making the Master of Metropolis an industrialist. However, the socialist alternatives inevitably invoked are not supported. The robot-Maria is used as a metaphor for the temptress of revolutionary Communism and her demonic destructiveness articulates a warning against such temptations. The destruction she causes legitimates the need for a restraining power, for a 'head' who can control the 'hands'. When the Master undergoes a humanizing change of heart, his rule is again benevolent, paternal. This is the only concession required to make the workers surrender their destructive power back to the state. The film is marked by a deep formal and ideological contradiction: the powerful image of the working class as victims is reversed into an

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18 The art direction and set design for *Metropolis* still impresses. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner,* almost sixty years later, owes explicit debts to it (courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia)

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image of the working class as agents of their own destruction; or to put it another way, the critique of class domination and capitalism is overcome by a dread of Communism specifically, and generally of uncontrolled social change.

Contemporary audiences certainly find this unsatisfying, as the contradictions are crudely smoothed over with the invocation of loyalty to the father, and his reciprocal love for his people. It is this latter aspect, presumably, which appealed to Hitler—the binding of the group back into the nation, the investment of faith in the mother/father, as well as the melodramatic depictions of alternative political positions.

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In order to deal with the film's ideology we have to deal, even in this preliminary way, with the surfaces of the text, the formal systems of signification. (In so doing we have uncovered at least two opposing readings, two sets of signification which might make sense of it for an audience.) The method of analysis drives us further than one might expect into the construction of the text, given that the objective of the analysis is ultimately to move *from* the text back to the culture which produced it.

The final point, before leaving this example, is to qualify one false impression that it may have given. I have already talked of the notion of hegemony. This account of *Metropolis* may imply that hegemonic systems are comprehensively, inevitably, controlling and determining. This is misleading. Films must take on some relation to ideologies but they do not necessarily recycle them. John Ellis (1982:74) approaches this point in the following way:

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> General ideological notions are assumed by narrative films. These assumptions are established through repetition, a characteristic of ideological reproduction which leads us to assume things unless they are specifically contradicted. Yet mere repetition alone is not the characteristic of the film text. It may take for granted certain meanings, certain assumptions, but it exists to take risks, to work through ideological problems. Hence the innovatory character of the film in relation to ideological meanings. They are not reproduced so much as refreshed, not so much repeated as reworked.

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I would go further, and say that they may actively oppose or subvert dominant meanings. For example, in the Australian ocker films a popular narrative form carries meanings that are subversive of some dominant patterns. The result was that such films were critically squashed, but they did get made and they did find their audiences.

It is important to see the dynamic nature of ideology. Although culture is subjected to hegemonic constructions, this is a process—not a permanently achieved state. The constellations of hegemonic interests can change. The constituent ideologies can change too. As I suggested earlier, we can see the process being acted out in narrative films where ideologies confront each other as structural opposites in the narrative itself—as good guy and bad guy, as right move and wrong move—to be resolved in the final reel. The film's closure mimics the individual processes of making decisions, taking positions, and making sense of the experiences that we go through every day of our lives.

Issues in ideological analysis

Although it is important to retain a sense of the heterogeneity of the ideological system, the vast majority of the work on film and ideology has concentrated on the ways in which film texts inevitably support existing social conditions, and accept existing explanations of those social conditions. Although the constitution of the ruling interests within culture does change, the function of hegemony does not; it works to maintain the status quo. In film studies, this has provoked élitist critiques of the medium from one side of the argument, but more often it provokes analysis which is aimed at revealing ideologies operating in film and in the culture. Study of ideology in film provides an insight into the meaning systems of the culture and into the ways in which such systems are inscribed into all kinds of social practice.

One target of such studies is the kind of film which seems to be critical of dominant positions—feminist films, for instance, or a film like *Platoon* which appears to attack US involvement in Vietnam. *Tootsie* could be seen as having some progressive attributes; it depicts a man experiencing the sexism normally handed out to women. He learns just how difficult men make women's lives. In his persona as

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Dorothy, Mike Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) attempts to 'liberate' his/her female comrades in the television production company, and ultimately leads the way towards redressing the balance to some extent. On the face of it this might seem to overturn the ideological privileges the male has enjoyed. However, as Judith Williamson (1987) has suggested, this is not necessarily true. Mike Dorsey is still a man even when he pretends to be Dorothy, and the lesson we learn from the film is that men are better at being feminists than women, as well as being better at everything else!

The point of such criticism is to show how potentially critical positions can be articulated within the boundaries of ideology, but are eventually 'clawed back' into the dominant systems to generate their meanings. The first half of the Australian film *Gallipoli* attacks the rich seam of mythology and cultural chauvinism which surrounds the legend of the Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) troops' engagement at Gallipoli during the First World War. The effect of any attack on this legend is to demythologize the Anzac heroes, to claim specifically that they were naïve or were duped or misled. *Gallipoli* stops short of carrying through this claim. The second half of the film turns its characters into heroes, as the standard mythologizing framework claws back their individuality and oppositional potential into the conventional legend. The freeze frame at the end of the film—which catches the more idealistic hero at the point of being shot while charging the Turkish trenches—is the filmic equivalent of the commemorative statues of the soldier erected in small towns all over Australia after the war. Its ideology is the same, too.

The demands of the narrative—the relentless movement forward towards resolution—can serve ideological imperatives too. Moral, political, and social complexities are easily obscured within the tide of narrative. In *Midnight Express,* the death of the sadistic gaoler is preceded by the hero's alibi, the attempted homosexual rape. There is no motivation provided for this rape, other than the guard's specific foreignness. The employment of racist depictions of the prison warders and their attitudes to the prisoners are key determinants of our fear and anger as we watch the film. The death of Sergeant Barnes in *Platoon* is also seen as a kind of rough justice, legitimated by his callous attempt on the life of the Christlike Sergeant Elias. Yet he is probably more

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important in his role as scapegoat for the guilt and confusion that the film builds up around the whole issue of American involvement in Vietnam. Barnes is dehumanized by the war; hence his callousness and hence his dispensability within the narrative. But for the audience, to see Barnes's death as politically cathartic, rather than as essentially retributive justice, would be a much more ambiguous pleasure. The drive of the narrative, however, focusing on Taylor's survival and his ultimate delivery from Vietnam, pushes this problem aside.

It is possible to think of competing readings of films as the product of their ideological, as well as their narrative, outcomes. The end of *Working Girl,* for instance, is signalled by the triumphal soundtrack as the heroine's attempt to cross the line into an executive role achieves success—an office of her own. The camera pulls back, mythologizing the city in which the heroine is working but also reducing her to the status of one person, one window, among thousands. As the camera pulls even further back we lose sight of her altogether and her story is swallowed up in the spectacle of skyscrapers. As a coda to a moral fable of individualist capitalism (which is one way of seeing the film), this closing shot has a very ambiguous effect since it suggests an opposing view of capitalism—as a dehumanizing and alienating system. The end of *Fatal Attraction,* too, is slightly ambiguous: it can be read as reinforcing the ideologies of the family through the consoling positioning of the family photo in the final frame, or alternately, as using this same photo to call up an ironic critique of the effect of these ideologies in this particular family.

Such problems of interpretation, the way in which a viewer is led through the feature film, feed back into a central issue in ideological analysis, that of realism. Realism has acquired a special meaning within this tradition of film analysis. It refers to the dominant mode of narrative film-making, and certainly the dominant mode within Hollywood cinema. Realist film creates a world which is as recognizable as possible; and audiences understand it by drawing analogies between the world of the film and their own world. They are assisted in this process by the lengths that realist film goes to in order to look like real life. The technologies of film production are hidden, so that techniques which might draw attention to the means of construction are kept to a minimum. Editing is as seamless as

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possible, the *mise-en-scène* is as dense as that of real life, camera movements tend to keep pace with the movement of the spectator's eyes, and perspective is maintained as if there were but one spectator. Technologies are not culturally innocent either, as Richard Dyer has demonstrated in his analysis of the representation of 'whiteness' in the cinema and television. In *White* (1997), Dyer argues that photography and the cinema, 'as media of light', lend themselves to privileging white people. Not only that, but the aesthetic which has, for example, organized the conventions of lighting in the cinema serves particular social interests:

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> The whole argument here is that the photographic media are centrepieces in a whole culture of light that is founded on two particular notions, namely that reality can be represented as being on a ground of white, and that light comes from above; these notions have the effect not only of advantaging white people in representation and of discriminating between and within them, but also of suggesting a special affinity between them and the light.
>
> (Dyer 1997:84)

The constructedness of these components of the conventions of realism are revealed when Dyer talks about the difficulty of translating the lighting practices used to eliminate shadows on white faces, on to black faces. In a further example of what he calls 'the white-centricity of the aesthetic technology of the photographic media' (p. 97), Dyer records the difficulties faced by the cinematographer working on *The Color Purple* with an all black cast; all the set interiors and set decorations had be made darker than 'normal' in order for the actors clearly to be seen.

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Realism's disguising of the constructed as 'the natural' is a direct parallel to the function of ideology. The power of realist film, however, lies in the efficiency of this disguise, its ability to appear to be an unmediated view of reality. Colin MacCabe (1981) has argued that in realist film, television drama and the novel, there is what he calls a 'hierarchy of discourse'. Realist narratives offer problems, dilemmas, deficiencies to be solved or supplied; the reader or viewer makes his/

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her way through the narrative gaining knowledge about how this is to occur. At the end, the reader possesses full knowledge, the problems are solved, and there is a sense of a satisfying conclusion. MacCabe argues that realist fictions guide the reader very carefully through one set of discourses—a set of values, a narrator, or the control of the perspectives of the camera—which takes on the role of an authoritative narrator. The authority of the narrative 'tells' the reader what to think, closes off questions, and delivers them to the end of the fiction. The realist text does not question reality or its constituent conditions. Since the realist text depends on the reader seeing it as reality, it cannot question itself without losing authenticity.

MacCabe has claimed that realist films are incapable of expressing opposition to or criticism of dominant values or beliefs, because they depend on them in order to make sense. Even realist modes which represent themselves as critical of dominant values—the TV docudramas like *Days of Hope* or *Boys from the Blackstuff*—have been attacked as simply using history to naturalize social divisions; 'that is the way it is', they are supposed to say, and there is 'little we can do about it'.

This series of proposals needs qualification. The realist debate is a large one, and further reading will bring a greater understanding of it than is possible in this small section. I would like to make the point, however, that realism is a system of signification which still has to work within specific contexts. In Australian film, too, realism signifies historical truth, but until 1977 very few films used it to deal with contemporary historical truths. The first few films to do so dealt with marginalized, repressed sections of the community—unemployed youths or the urban poor, for instance. The social and ideological function of films like *Mouth to Mouth* and *Hard Knocks* seems to me to be critical and progressive because they added to the repertoire of images of Australian society, and complicated that repertoire greatly. One needs to be wary of applying this theory to any film or culture. One cannot simply read off the ideology of a film from its formal characteristics. Indeed, such totalizing assumptions have exposed film theory of the last decade or two to the kinds of critique advanced by Bordwell and Carroll (1996). Carroll warns against 'the routine application of some, larger unified theory to questions of cinema,

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which… unsurprisingly churns out roughly the same answers, or remarkably similar answers, in every case'. The result, he says, is 'theoretical impoverishment' (1996:41). Just as some critiques of psychoanalysis have shifted the interest in ideology (from the unconscious, to the historical and the social), Carroll's insistence on a more 'piecemeal' approach advises against the enthusiastic embrace of overarching theories which eliminate the necesssity of engaging directly and in detail with the specificity of film texts.

This flags some issues which can be followed up in further reading. As Bordwell and Carroll demonstrate, the comprehensiveness of the claims made by theories of ideology have provoked the proposition of competing theories which, for instance, suggest that the pleasures of the body might offer resistance to the ideological. We have to seriously consider the possibility that some aspects of the film experience may be 'outside' the ideological:

> For example, if we are studying horror films, it strikes me as incontrovertible that filmmakers often play upon what psychologists call 'the startle response', an innate human tendency to 'jump' at loud noises and to recoil at fast movements. This tendency is, as they say, impenetrable to belief; that is, our beliefs won't change the response. It is hardwired and involuntary. Awareness of this response enables theorists like me to explain the presence of certain audiovisual patterns and effects in horror film, without reference to politics and ideology. Indeed, insofar as the startle response is impenetrable to belief, it could be said to be, in certain respects, beyond politics and ideology.
>
> (Carroll 1996:51)

While Carroll's 'bracketing' of ideology here has been resisted by some feminist and psychoanalytic theorists, it is worth considering the limits of the concept.

We need to ask if our pleasure at a car chase on film or our day-to-day experience of physical pleasure is constructed in ideology. We might also need to consider if our conceptions of beauty or style are entirely constructed by culture, or if there is something universal and unchanging about such perceptions. One might understand that beauty

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is culturally coded while still feeling that it would be impossible to see a tropical island as ugly. Even sexual pleasure may be culturally coded; is sexuality a 'realism' that needs to be interrogated? Further, such questions should concern more than just testing the limits to theories of ideology. The notion of pleasure is still, apart from the important progress made within feminist theory, relatively undeveloped in relation to popular cinema. The residue of aesthetic preferences still affects the kinds of films which get talked about, the kinds of problems seen to be of interest in film studies today. Yvonne Tasker refers to the difference between what 'we know' and what 'we enjoy', as a distinction which ideological criticism has attempted to submerge. As she points out, this is a difficult achievement in practice since 'the kinds of fantasy investments at work in the pleasures taken from the cinema cannot be controlled by conscious political positions in the way that some criticism seems to imply' (1993:136). These conscious political positions may simply be getting in the way of our understanding of the medium and its relation to its audiences. Drawing on her analysis of heroines in action movies, Tasker suggests that feminists' critical disapproval of action heroines in the films she examines comes, in part, from the notion that 'some forms of activity or entertainment are more appropriate to men and some to women'. The designation of 'inappropriate' images derived from a feminist critical tradition ironically coincides, says Tasker, with a more conventional sense of feminine decorum, 'of knowing one's place within a gendered hierarchy' (p. 136). A benefit likely to emerge from interventions such as Tasker's, expressing a more cultural interest in film, is a more concerted attempt to understand the pleasures provided by mainstream genre films—from horror films to teen movies. It is not enough to think of them working solely through the pleasures of a ritual confirmation of ideologies. Stella Bruzzi's (1997) analysis of the function of costume within the feature film offers another fruitful direction for the analysis of pleasure that does not depend upon narrative or character, but upon the spectacular display of fashion and design.

A final problem. For many who first encounter notions of ideology, the argument that they and their identities are culturally constructed is often interpreted as saying that they are not 'real'. It is difficult to get around the sense that there is some genuine reality out there which ideology prevents us getting at. The trick is to realize that

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19 The action film—Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon 4* (courtesy of the Kobal Collection)

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Turner, Graeme. Film As Social Practice.
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whether that is the case or not is immaterial. Our only access to reality is through its representation. Even as we look at a landscape we do so through cultural filters which actually order what we see. (Early paintings of the Australian landscape make it look just like Europe, its native inhabitants resembling classical statues of Greek and Roman heroes rather than what we now see as the distinctive features of the Aborigines.) Representations of the real world are like any other language system, saturated with ideology. However, this 'real' which culture constructs for us to know and live with is no less material in its effects on our lives and our consciousness. Just because we cannot stand outside our way of seeing the world (to 'see' that way of seeing) does not mean that our relation to the world is in some way false or provisional.

There is no really simple way to state this problem. However, Richard Dyer approached a specific aspect of it in his conclusion to *Stars*. Dealing with the notion that beauty is not inherent, even in film stars, and that pleasure is learned rather than instinctive, even in films, he says: 'while I accept utterly that beauty and pleasure are culturally and historically specific, and in no way escape ideology, nonetheless they are beauty and pleasure and I want to hang on to them in some form or another' (1982:185).

This is a sensible and instructive reaction to the force of ideology and to the pleasure of film.

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Suggestions for further work

1 A good, simple application of theories of ideology to another medium of representation, fine art, is worth searching out. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) demonstrates clearly how ideology shapes our view of the world. Much discussion of ideology is extremely complex and jargon-ridden, so this book may help students grappling with the concept. A further text which deals with the topics from another angle is John Fiske's *Introduction to Communication Studies* (1982), a companion volume to this book in the 'Studies in Communication' series. Discussion of ideology is to be found in treatments of popular culture—such as

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Judith Williamson's *Consuming Passions* (1987) or Rosalind Coward's *female Desire* (1984)—but ideological analyses of films can be found in Nichols's collections of film theory, *Movies and Methods* (1976; 1985), as well as in journals such as *Screen, Jump Cut, Film Quarterly, Australian Journal of Screen Theory, Cultural Studies,* and many others.

2 Testing out your understanding of the concept of ideology on some film texts is a good idea. It might be useful, for instance, to turn back to Chapter 4 and examine the evolution of the western as described by Wright in the light of what you now know about ideology. What changes in ideology underlie this evolution? (In fact, is the term 'evolution' itself indicative of an ideological position—developmental, always improving, rather than cyclical or revolutionary?)

3 The references to the realism debate are brief; anyone who wishes to follow it further—and it is a key debate—can find the most important articles collected in Bennett *et al., Popular Television and film* (1981).

4 Ideology is revealed by examining those things we take for granted. Look at a film of your choice and see just what it takes for granted—at the level of dress, décor, and design as well as at the level of the motivations of major characters. Looking at the representations of women in, say, westerns of the 1950s, reveals that the ways in which women are taken for granted have changed. Are there other such instances you can recall, where change has revealed the dynamic process of ideology?

5 For a discussion of ideology and the film industry, Steve Neale's *Cinema and Technology* (1985) is useful and relatively accessible for such a difficult subject.

6 For a further group of arguments around the notion of pleasure and ideology, see Rutsky and Wyatt (1990) and Noel King (1992).

7 Finally, the reading of ideology in film is an interpretative act. Follow the analyses in the next chapter and try to make use of these methods yourself in interpreting films. It is being done skilfully when it does not reduce the films to their constituent ideologies, and when you find as much that is contradictory and conflicting as you find that is unitary and consoling.

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