

Cinema as Ideology

From *Marxism and Film* - Zabel

Marx's concept of ideology is very different than that of such pioneers of academic sociology as Émile Durkheim (Durkheim 1985) and Karl Mannheim (Mannheim 1995). It also differs in fundamental ways from the concept of ideology Louis Althusser developed in the 1960s and 1970s, which is a Marxist concept in the sense that it addresses itself to problems raised in the Marxist tradition, though it is certainly not that of Marx himself (Althusser, 2008). From the viewpoints of Durkheim, Mannheim, and Althusser, ideologies are systems of normative thought – that is, systems that influence human action (religion, morality, law, politics, etc.) – that must be accepted by the members of a social group in order to guarantee its cohesion. For all three, there can be no society without an ideology that acts as its “cement,” and this would hold even for a fully developed communist society. For Marx, however, the purpose of ideology is to insure, not group cohesion, but the political, economic, and cultural dominance of the ruling class. It follows that a classless society – i.e. communism – would have no place for ideology. However, if ideology is not a social cement, neither is it a conspiratorial instrument. In Marx's view, ideologies are systems of normative ideas that have cognitive content, but that content is a distorted representation of social reality. Such distortion is not the result of a plot by the rulers against the ruled, as Spinoza and many Enlightenment thinkers held.

Most often, the rulers themselves are taken in by their own ideological distortions. In general, the ruling class believes its ideologies. It does so even when these ideologies are cynical, since, in such cases, the point of cynicism is to affirm the hopelessness of rebellion, and thereby the continued dominance of the ruling class. The unique character of Marx's concept of ideology, then, lies in its distance from both the sociological-Althusserian concept of ideology as a social cement, and the Spinozist-Enlightenment concept of ideology as a conspiratorial instrument of the ruling class. But this is merely a negative characterization. We will consider Althusser's theory of ideology in our later treatment of Godard's films of the 1960s and 1970s, since it directly influenced the work of the Dziga Vertov Group he founded. At this point in the discussion, however, we need to focus on the positive content of the idea of ideology in Marx's own work.

Marx developed his conception of ideology primarily in a single book that he co-authored with Engels and, after difficulties finding a publisher, abandoned to the “gnawing criticism of the mice,” as he was later to say. In the *German Ideology*, the authors announce their intention to settle their accounts with a philosophical movement in which they had once played a role, the movement of Left Hegelians.

In the aftermath of his death in 1831, Hegel's followers divided into left and right wings on the basis of their attitude toward religion. (The theologian, David Friedrich Strauss was the first to apply the political metaphor of left and right to Hegel's posthumous followers).

Hegel had portrayed his philosophical system as the conceptual medium in which what he called the “Absolute Idea” comes to a fully adequate knowledge of itself in Art, Religion, and Philosophy. However, he was always ambiguous concerning the relationship of this philosophical Absolute to the God of traditional religious belief. On

the one hand, he was fascinated by the Christian account of the Incarnation, the mystery of a God who is born as a man, suffers and dies on the cross, and is resurrected to eternal life. He saw it as the glorious symbol of a reality that is "spiritual" (in the unique sense Hegel gave to the term) in that it progresses by overcoming opposition on higher levels of development, and so enriches itself by enduring "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative" (Hegel 1997, 10). On the other hand, he regarded the story of the Incarnation, along with all other religious stories, as the product of "pictorial thinking" (*Vorstellung*). Such thinking communicates profound truths to be sure, but in an imaginative, sensuous form. Imagery, however, is tainted by contingency, since the object of imaginary representation always appears as one thing among others, located at some definite and limited place and time. For this reason, pictorial thinking cannot help but depict the infinite depth and power of the Absolute in distorted fashion. Since it is not completely appropriate to its subject matter, pictorial thinking is destined to be superseded by the purely conceptual thought of philosophy. The concept, in Heidegger's sober phrase, may be "charmless and image-poor," but, for that very reason, according to Hegel, it is the only medium fully adequate for expressing the necessary, eternal, and infinite character of the Absolute Idea.

For Hegel, the supersession (*Aufhebung*) of religion by philosophy has the technical meaning of a negation that at the same time preserves the object negated by lifting it to a higher level of expression. But this eminently dialectical position proved difficult to sustain. For in what sense can religion survive its translation into the language of pure concepts? Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob really a philosopher's God? Here is where the split among Hegel's followers occurred. The right wing had captured the master's own chair at the University of Berlin with the appointment of Georg Andreas Gabler. Gabler and his supporters emphasized the element of preservation in supersession by interpreting the philosopher's absolute as the God of biblical revelation. The left wing was centered in the so-called Doctors' Club that included Marx and Engels, and that met outside the university in the beer halls of Berlin. Its members emphasized the element of negation in supersession by practicing philosophy as a relentless critique of religious ideas. For them, the true home of the absolute is not God, but human self-consciousness, and it is the task of the philosopher to reveal that truth.

Different figures among the Left Hegelians, or the Young Hegelians, as they were more commonly called, developed approaches to the critique of religion along a continuum that extends from relative moderation to extreme radicalism. Strauss was probably the most moderate in that he never denied the truth of Christianity, or even its social authority. He proposed what would later become known as a "demythologizing" critique, that is, one that would dissolve the irrational form taken by Christian beliefs in order to reveal their rational, humanistic core. Bruno Bauer, on the other end of the continuum, took a radically atheistic position. He saw Christianity, along with all other forms of religion, as a kind of idolatry, a subjugation of humanity by the products of its own mind. The task of a critical philosophy, in Bauer's view, is to fulfill the act by which Moses smashed the golden calf, repeating it in relation to the Hebrew God, the Christian Trinity, and all other figments of the human imagination to which humanity now bends the knee.

Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner are key figures in the history of the concept of ideology because they expanded the focus of the Young Hegelian critique to include

systems of ideas in addition to those of religion. Feuerbach launched a critique of Hegelian philosophy itself, and of speculative philosophy in general, for their mystified accounts of mind or spirit (*Geist*), as an entity that exists independently of the real human being of which it is only a part. Speculative philosophy must be replaced by a “philosophy of the future” that begins with an empirical study of humankind as a natural, sensuous species, a species that eats and loves as well as thinks (Feuerbach: 1966). Stirner went further than Feuerbach in that he turned the light of critique, not just on religion and philosophy, but on any system of ideas that generates norms that guide human behavior, and so subordinates the individual human being, whom Stirner calls the “ego,” to mere abstractions. For him, religious, philosophical, political, legal, and moral ideas are chains that the ego must cast off in its quest for autonomy and self-mastery (Stirner 1982). With Stirner, the Young Hegelian critique of religion becomes a critique of ideology in general. Marx and Engels take this task upon themselves in *The German Ideology*, though in a way very different than Stirner.

According to Marx (Engels later credited him as the main author of the materialist theory of history articulated in *The German Ideology*), the problem with Stirner's account, as well as those of the other Young Hegelians, is that it gives to ideas and liberation from ideas a power that they do not possess. In one of the scathing parodies that seem to crop up at every turn in *The German Ideology*, Marx compares the Young Hegelians to a man who spends his life attempting to demonstrate that people die by falling into water because they have the idea of gravity in their heads, so that drowning would be prevented if only we could get people to abandon their belief (Marx 1970a, 37). At first glance, the point of the example seems to be that gravity is a physical force that continues to operate whether or not we have the idea of it. Marx would then be arguing a simple realist position, namely, that physical things exist independently of the minds that think about them. But that cannot be Marx's point. Stirner never made the mistake of arguing that the rejection of ideologies would change the physical world. His view, rather, was that, as systems of normative beliefs, ideologies have effects on human behavior, effects that he believed to be baleful. He wanted to eliminate those effects by liberating humankind from religious, political, legal, and moral ideas. In order to defeat Stirner's claims, Marx needs to defend a position quite different than the realist one. He has to show that the forces that keep ideologies in existence are not ideological at all, so that any attempt to dispel ideologies on the level of thought alone is destined for defeat. But these forces are not physical, and so are not “material” in the usual sense of the word. Marx's materialism is not a physicalistic realism, a simple assertion that physical things exist independently of the human mind (though Marx certainly believes that they do). It is a more complex thesis about the genetic primacy of a unique relationship over ideologies – the relationship between the human species and nature.

Marx incorporates this thesis into a revised concept of ideology. For him, the concept involves, not only systems of normative beliefs, but also the false assumption that those systems are independent of the relationship between humankind and nature. Ideology is not only a set of ideas that shape human beings and their actions in a false or alienated way. It is also, and primarily, a false thesis about the independent origin and efficacy of these very ideas. With Marx, the concept of ideology becomes radically reflexive. The purpose of the critique of ideology changes accordingly. It is not so much an unmasking of ideologies as forms of falsification and manipulation, as it is an unmasking of the

illusion ideologies have about themselves, in other words, their illusion of autonomy.

This unmasking requires an account of the origin and continuing efficacy of ideologies in the relationship between human beings and what Marx calls "inorganic nature," i.e., nature external to the human organism. In order to survive, human beings must change the objective forms they encounter in nature by reshaping them with the movements of the human body in the activity of work. The human body, which is a product of nature in its evolutionary development, must transform the nature that has given rise to it by exercising its capacities. Such capacities become actual powers in the course of being exercised, and at the same time expand in relation to the new tasks that are posed by a partially transformed external nature. People transform the natural world, which then, as a new environment, transforms the people who have transformed it, who, as thus transformed, transform the natural world once again, and so on in a spiral that will continue as long as there are human beings. Marx describes it as a "metabolism" (*Stoffwechsel*) between human beings and inorganic nature, an exchange of progressively transformed substances that must go on continually if the species is not to perish (Schmidt 1971, 77-91). The material character of this reciprocal process is thus closer to biology than physics, though it ultimately transcends both disciplines, since the human organisms involved in the process act with purpose and conscious awareness. By so doing, they produce, not just a transformation of nature – as beavers do when they build dams – but a transformation that is historical in that it tends progressively to expand the sphere of meaningful human action. The product of human metabolic activity in relation to nature includes new human capacities as well as an altered natural world, and both are handed down to the next generation as material to be further transformed.

Since the labor process is the center of this metabolism, its historically varying forms must be explained by a "materialist" theory in Marx's sense. The key to such explanation lies in an account of the division of labor and its epochal changes in the course of human history. In *The German Ideology*, Marx refers to five epochs in the division of labor: those of tribal society, ancient slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and the communist society that will supplant capitalism (Marx, Engels 1970, 37). The division of labor in ancient slave society, feudalism, and capitalism involves the division between classes, in other words, between those who own and control the means of production, and those who must work for them. Class divisions are relationships of exploitation based on the extraction and appropriation of an economic surplus from the labor of the direct producers. In addition to the division of labor involved in the class structure, however, there is also a distribution of productive tasks among different segments of the working population, a distribution required for the reproduction of society through the satisfaction of a multiplicity of needs. Such a differential distribution of productive tasks exists in each of the five social forms, with the exception of the most advanced stage of communist society. There, according to Marx, the productive forces will be so highly developed that people will be able to cultivate multiple activities just as they please, without having to limit themselves to a single specialized function (Marx, Engels 1970, 53).

One central aspect of the division of labor accounts for the illusion that ideologies exist independently of the metabolism between humanity and nature, and the related thesis, shared by Hegel and the Young Hegelians, that ideas drive the historical process. Once mental and manual labor become separated from one another, it becomes possible

to believe that consciousness is “something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real” (Marx, Engels 1970, 51-52). Without the division between mental and manual labor that emerges in the real, material process of history, Hegel’s Absolute Idea would have been inconceivable, and so would its successors: the ego, species being, self-consciousness, and so on of the Young Hegelians.

In somewhat tentative and sketchy terms, Marx attempts to account for the specific transitions from each epoch in the division of labor to its successor. He will return to this task again and again over the subsequent course of his life. But just as importantly he articulates a general theory of transition:

These various conditions, which appear first as conditions of self-activity, later as fetters upon it, form in the whole evolution of history a coherent series of forms of intercourse, the coherence of which consists in this: in the place of an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces and, hence, to the advanced mode of the self-activity of individuals – a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another (Marx and Engels 1970, 87).

It is easy to miss the centrality of this thesis to Marx’s materialist theory of history since it does not receive special emphasis in *The German Ideology*. It would take fourteen years for the thesis to be given the emphasis it deserves in the Preface to *A Contribution to The Critique of Political Economy*. At that point, the earlier phrase, “forms of intercourse,” becomes the more precise idea of “relations of production.” It is worth quoting this formulation at length:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure (Marx 1970, 20-21).

An ocean of ink has been devoted to the problems raised by the architectural metaphor of superstructure and foundation, most of it concerned to avoid the implication that the “economic structure of society” unilaterally determines the “forms of social

consciousness" (ideologies). Engels was the first to tackle this problem in his letter of 1890 to Joseph Bloch. In the letter, he emphasizes that the economic structure determines the course of history, and so the nature of "real life," though only "in the last instance" (*in letzter Instanz*)² and that the legal, political, and ideological elements of the superstructure also exert a determining influence, though not the decisive one. He even goes so far as to say that ideologies may determine the form taken by historical struggles (for example, the religious form taken by class struggles in Reformation Germany), though, by implication, their content is determined by the economic structure, the material foundation of society (Marx and Engels 1978a, 760-761).

For now, we will leave this problem aside. The important point to note at this stage in the discussion is that the passage quoted above from the Preface is merely a more precise and succinct statement of the position Marx had already arrived at in the *German Ideology* that "forms of social consciousness" have no independent efficacy in history, but rather derive whatever efficacy they possess from the dynamic interaction of the relations of production and the forces of production that correspond to them. To quote again from the Preface:

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production (Marx 1970, 21).

The assertion that people become conscious of material conflicts and fight them out in ideological forms introduces a theme into Marx's treatment that is also present in *The German Ideology*, but that we have yet to consider; the ruling ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (Marx, Engels 1970, 64).

This passage is a key to understanding Marx's theory of ideology, but a great deal of what is largely an outline needs to be filled in. What exactly are the "means of mental production?" These must certainly include human brains, just as the means of material production include human muscles, but brains do not produce ideologies apart from definite sets of social relationships, and these in turn require definite forms of economic organization. The production and distribution of ideas are economic processes similar to

the production and distribution of material goods. The labor involved must be trained to perform a determinate range of tasks. Those who work principally with their brains must be relieved of the necessity to engage in material production through a salary, sinecure, or some other claim on social revenue. They must be provided with the tools necessary for accomplishing their work in the form of books, lecture halls, pens, paper, printing presses, archives, and so on. Their ideas must be distributed by means of transportation, including international transport in a global market. They must have available to them channels of communication sanctioned by the ruling class, including schools, universities, court houses, legislatures, theaters, and, more recently, such channels of mass communication as radio programs, television shows, the internet, etc. In short, the production of ideas is not an ideal affair, but a very material one; it requires a material infrastructure if it is to exist and be sustained. Raymond Williams made this point in his theory of “cultural materialism,” and so have a number of other Marxists involved in intellectual and ideological work (Williams 1982).

The class that owns the means of production, and that, under normal circumstances, controls the state, is also the class that owns and controls the material infrastructure that enables ideas to be produced and disseminated. In times of crisis, when the relations of production and the forces of production come into overt conflict, a subordinate class, or alliance of subordinate classes, may be able to marshal the resources and will necessary to build an alternative ideological infrastructure. For example, toward the end of the medieval period, although the bourgeoisie was still a subordinate class, it was able to create newspapers as organs of its own ideology. In order to engage in ideological struggles, subordinate classes need a material infrastructure able to support the production and communication of ideas, though their more narrowly economic struggles alone can sometimes have disorienting effects on the dominant ideology, and in this sense find a presence in the ideological apparatus of the class that rules.

Even when generated by a revolutionary class, ideologies do not articulate truths without distortion. Though Marx does not say this explicitly, it is the clear implication of his treatment of ideology in both *The German Ideology* and the *Preface*. As long as the division between mental and manual labor continues to exist within revolutionary organizations (and how could it not, since revolutionary newspapers, for example, need typesetters as well as journalists?), as well as within society as a whole, the illusion that ideas have an autonomous efficacy persists. Only a fully developed communist society abolishes ideologies along with the division of labor that makes them inescapable. Until then, revolutionaries may become aware of ideological distortion, and do their best to minimize and struggle against it, but they can no more dispel the illusions of ideology than a *camera obscura* can stop inverting the images of objects:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process (Marx, Engels 1970, 47).

The concept of inversion (*Umdrehung*) and the photographic metaphor connected with it have a very specific reference in the context of Marx’s critique of Hegelian idealism, beginning in 1843 with his *Contributions to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of*

Right. There Marx tells us that Hegelian idealism makes the Idea the demiurge of history, and that it interprets the really existing realms of law and the state as mere externalizations, or objectified expressions, of the Idea. This is an inversion of the true relationship, since legal and political ideas (which Hegel regards as phases in the self-development of the Absolute Idea) are actually the expressions in thought of real legal and political systems. At least this is the use Marx makes of the concept of inversion in the *Contributions*. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, inversion pertains to the relationship between the worker and the products of labor which, in capitalist society, come to dominate their maker. In *The German Ideology*, Marx once again applies the concept of inversion to the realm of ideas, but this time with respect to the material foundation of human life in the relations and forces of production (he now interprets the spheres of law and the state as elements of what he will later call the “superstructure”). Ideological inversion, then, is the illusion that ideas are the active forces that determine the material conditions of human life, while in fact the material conditions are the real active forces, and ideas their second-level expressions.

If inversion is the original sin of all ideologies, then the naturalization of social relationships is the secondary sin of dominant ideologies. The *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Volume 1 most explicitly treat the naturalization of social relationships in bourgeois ideologies, though the concept is implicit as early as *The German Ideology*:

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. ...For instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an "eternal law" (Marx, Engels 1970, 64-65).

The ruling class has an advantage over subordinate classes, not only in that it possesses and controls the means of mental production, but also in that it need only express the dominant material relations – which are, in fact, the conditions of its dominance – in ideal form. But the adjective "ideal" takes on an added connotation in this context; the ancient, Platonic connotation of eternity.

The first paragraph of the *Grundrisse* builds on this insight. It makes the point that the individual is the product of a historical development that abolishes the ties that attached human beings to tribes, villages, guilds, and other forms of collectivity, making them essentially communal beings (Marx 1973, 83). The individual fully emerges only when market relations replace traditional social bonds. In the political treatises of Rousseau, the story of Robinson Crusoe by Defoe, and the political economy of Smith and Ricardo, this outcome of the historical process is converted into its presupposition. For these thinkers, individuals have always existed as natural entities, though it is bourgeois society that first affirms that fact by fully embracing market relations and the associated legal form of the contract. Though Marx does not use the word “ideology” in the *Grundrisse*, it is clear that he regards Rousseau’s political treatises, Defoe’s novel and those it inspired, and the political economy of Smith and Ricardo as forms of ideology,

and specifically as forms of the ideology of the rising and eventually dominant bourgeois class. What makes them ideological is precisely the fact that they naturalize a product of history, and in so doing, eternalize it. If individuals, in the bourgeois sense, have always existed, then the market through which they necessarily interact must also be an eternal, natural form. But this withdraws the market from the reach of social critique and practical transformation, since there is, after all, no point in attempting to reject what cannot be rejected, what is always with us as part of our “nature.”

In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx is more detailed in his treatment of the mechanism of ideological naturalization. There he describes market relations as apparently a “veritable Eden of the innate rights of man” (Marx 1992, 280). No one forces anyone to enter into relations of market exchange, and, once entered, the market treats all participants equally. Equal exchange of value is its dominant principle, even when those meeting in the market are capitalist and worker. But this ideology of market freedom and equality – which does in fact correspond to what Marx calls the “phenomenal form” of capitalism, in other words, the surface level of appearances – obscures the real process going on beneath that level in the depths of production. The free exchange of labor for a wage is an exchange of equivalents that hides the extraction of surplus value from the worker. The wage corresponds to the value of labor power, since it covers the cost of reproducing the worker’s ability to labor. The worker, however, produces more value in the course of a day than is accounted for by the wage, and that surplus value accrues to the capitalist in the form of profit. Exploitation is masked by the exchange of equivalents, and the contradictory character of the relationship between capitalist and worker is hidden by apparently natural interactions between free and equal individuals in the market.

The naturalization of historically contingent social relations is in the interest of the dominant class, which wishes to withdraw the conditions of its dominance from the possibility of historical transformation, though it does, of course, become operative in the minds of subordinate classes because of their disadvantaged position in the production of ideas. There is, however, a further characteristic of ideology in class-divided societies that is shared by both dominant and revolutionary classes. In both cases, it stems from the need to retain or win state power. Whether an old ruling class, or one that seeks to replace it, the class involved must portray its own interest as the universal interest of all members of society. This need strictly corresponds to the supposed universality of the state which, democratic or not, always presents itself as that part of society that protects the interests of all. Marx makes a distinction between all earlier ruling classes, whose interests are really particular though represented as universal, and the proletariat, whose interests are genuinely universal. As early as the Fall of 1843, Marx wrote an introduction to his *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* in which he argues that the working class is not so much a class as “the dissolution of all classes,” a sphere of society “that can invoke no *traditional* title but only a *human* title” (Marx 1994, 38). It is the only revolutionary class that cannot rest content until it abolishes itself, along with all other classes. However this may be, the point remains that even the proletariat, insofar as it aspires to state power, must portray its interests as universal. It is simply that, according to Marx, in this case alone, the portrayal is an accurate one.

We can say the following by way of summary. For Marx ideologies are:

1) forms of social consciousness, or equivalently, systems of normative ideas (political, legal, economic, religious, artistic, moral, philosophical, etc.) that

2) are determined by the material foundation of society (forces of production and relations of production in dynamic interaction), but

3) claim an existence independent of that material foundation, as well as an autonomous efficacy, because of the division between mental and manual labor, and

4) require for their existence means of mental production that are largely material in character.

These are characteristics of all forms of ideology, even those generated in tribal societies, and in the early phase of communist society, before the division between mental and physical labor has been overcome. But there are two characteristics that we need to add to specific subsets of ideologies.

5) Ideologies of the dominant class treat historically produced social relations as natural and therefore eternal, and

6) ideologies of the dominant class as well as revolutionary subordinate classes portray the interests of the class concerned as universal in character.

What does all of this have to do with cinema? Can we interpret films as forms of ideology?

Some films are clearly ideological. Many of Frank Capra's movies fall into this category, such as *Why We Fight* (nationalism), as well as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and *It's a Wonderful Life* (populism). So does D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (white racism), Henry Hathaway's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (imperialism), and John Sturges' *Bad Day at Black Rock* (liberalism). These films, and thousands more like them, are tendentious in the sense that they are made to convey a specific ideology. The director or scriptwriter takes on the task of developing an ideological viewpoint, either explicitly or implicitly. In the first case, one or more characters, or even a narrative voiceover, as in some of Capra's films, might articulate the viewpoint. In the second case, and more subtly, the viewpoint might be implied by the plot, development of characters, styles of acting, cinematic techniques, etc. that the director chooses to employ. In both cases the resulting ideological viewpoint is that of the film itself, rather than simply the position of one or more characters within the film. One does not have to be a Marxist to discern the ideological nature of such movies. On the level of theory, standard sociological and political concepts of ideology are at no disadvantage here.

A more daring thesis, and one that Marx's own concept of ideology suggests, is that ideological films are not a genre or subset of films in general. Stated positively, the thesis is that all films are ideological (with the possible exception of abstract films, such as much of the work of Stan Brakhage).

Abstraction aside, movies articulate ideas with normative import. They effect the propensity of the film audience to adopt this or that evaluation, to act in the future in such and such a way, or to feel this or that emotion. In Marx's phrase, they are forms of "social consciousness." In this regard, it is important to remember that Marx does not limit ideologies to conceptual systems, such as legal theories or political doctrines. In a passage we have already quoted from the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx refers to "legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms." The idea that art can have an ideological form is what is relevant here. We will discuss the theme of cinema as art in a moment. For now it is enough to say that the fact that cinema operates with images rather than concepts

(although it can do that as well) does not disqualify it from the status of ideology, since art is not disqualified on the basis of *its* imagistic character. The point would hold even if cinema turns out not to be an art form.

Tracing the ways in which films are expressions of the conflict between forces and relations of production, as well as the class struggles that conflict unleashes, is an arduous task, fraught with dangers of dogmatic oversimplification. The need to exercise caution in pursuing this theme does not, however, mean that the main thesis of the materialist theory of history is inapplicable to cinema. It seems obvious that films draw their material, both narrative and cinematographic, from social reality, and that this is the case even for fantasy, science fiction, romance, and comedy. Clearly a film need not be tendentious in order to have social content. Think of the multiple ways in which the romantic comedies of the 1940s were affected by the Second World War, which itself can only be understood in the context of the Great Depression, the most momentous conflict between the forces and relations of production that global capitalism has yet experienced. Think of the way the conditions of women in the U.S. were changing as they were massively recruited to the workforce as a consequence of the war, and how the resulting tensions between men and women were translated by directors and scriptwriters into the language of comedy. Other forms of comedy are equally unintelligible apart from the thesis that film is shaped by the material basis of society. Chaplin's early films play out in the aftermath of the inter-imperialist conflict of the First World War, and his later films against the background of the Great Depression and Second World War. Similarly, contemporary American film comedy has registered the effects of the financial collapse of 2007, and its sequel in the Great Recession. In science fiction, the battle between the republican rebels and the Empire in *Star Wars* derives from the renewed cold war of the Reagan years. Conversely, *Avatar* is an expression of the liberal critique of megacorporations, and their impact on the environment and indigenous populations. Global warming, and, more obviously, rain forest destruction – each a material process if ever there was one – are in the background of this film.

These very brief comments are not meant to substitute for genuine analysis, but merely to make plausible the thesis that film is conditioned by conflicts between the forces and relations of production, often by way of the historical and political events that are their primary expression. However, Engels' caveat bears keeping in mind. To say that the conflict between the forces and relations of production "determines" or "conditions" (Marx uses both words) the content and perhaps also the form of film is not to say that films are nothing but expressions of the material foundation of society. It is not even to deny that films may have some influence on the material foundation, which was a hope of Dziga Vertov, for example, in *One Sixth of the World*. Vertov's movie attempts to heighten the revolutionary fervor, and hence the productivity, of Soviet labor by raising an awareness in workers of the expansive social character of their work and work responsibilities, in the process of exploring the far-flung interactions between people, and between people and nature, involved in producing a single fur coat, and selling it abroad to raise money for the development of Soviet industry. Determination in Marx's sense does not imply the kind of rigorous determinism involved where the initial conditions of an artificially isolated experimental system determine its future states, and so enable us to predict these states when we apply the appropriate physical laws. Certainly a form of causality is involved in Marxist determination, but a complex causality of interacting

foundational and superstructural factors, in which the foundation is determinate, but only "in the last instance," in the sense that it constrains the possible outcomes of such interactions without forcing a decision between them. So, for example, Dziga Vertov's film may or may not have been successful in increasing labor productivity, but it would have been impossible for it, or any other film, to jump over the phase of industrial development necessary for a fully developed communism. The materiality of human needs that would have to be satisfied to allow transition to a classless society would not have permitted it.

Most films efface their conditioning by material factors by creating imaginary and apparently nonmaterial worlds. The experience of going to a movie theater, sitting with an anonymous audience, having the theater lights dim, and the screen become illuminated with images is discontinuous with real life. There is a sense of disappointment when a film we like comes to an end and we must leave the theater, just as we feel disappointed when we awaken from a pleasant dream into our everyday existence. If most narrative films did not allow us to suspend our immersion in material reality for an hour and a half or so, then it would be impossible to explain their enormous popularity when economic times are bad. Consider the massive number of unemployed workers during the Great Depression who were able regularly to scrape together the five or ten cent price of admission to the movies. As Adorno and others have pointed out, one of the principal functions of the movies in bourgeois society is to create an illusory realm of escape where people can find substitute satisfactions that compensate for everyday stress, exhaustion, boredom, and powerlessness.

But a kind of idealization is involved in all film, and not just those that dominate the movie theaters. Since the filmmaker must choose the footage that he or she wants the audience to see, all films idealize to one extent or another. That is to say, they transform reality into an ideal version of itself by emphasizing just a few of its elements, or, as in montage, by taking reality apart and putting it back together in a different way. Even movies that reflect about the process of cinematic idealization in this sense – such as most of Godard's films, or Woody Allen's *Star Dust Memories* – do so in ideal form. A critically self-reflective cinema is not one that denies this obvious fact, but rather one that calls attention to the final impossibility of the task of reproducing the real world that realist forms of cinema set for themselves, and in this way paradoxically accomplishes that task by making us aware of the real distance between film and reality.

There is no better example of the dependency of ideology on the material means of mental production than cinema. We do not need to repeat our earlier discussion of the film industry, but merely to note that, without its complex technical and economic processes, there would be no films at all.

The expense involved in marshaling the means of cinematic production, as well as the conformism of mainstream film criticism in venues owned by major media corporations, insures that most movies will espouse the ideology of the dominant class. As Marx says, the ideology of the dominant class is the dominant ideology. There is, of course, a difference between the conservatism of *The Green Berets*, and the liberalism of *Coming Home*, for example. But this difference merely reflects a split within the dominant class in American society, in the 1960s and 1970s, between those who wanted to fight the Vietnam War to its genocidal end, and those who wanted to put an end to the domestic turmoil and loss of international support caused by the war. Both films,

moreover, speak in the name of universal interests, interests of humanity as a whole. *The Green Berets* depicts the Vietnam War as a defense of freedom against totalitarian aggression. *Coming Home* develops its antiwar position through a focus on the human tragedy of war. In both cases, the interest of the dominant class, as interpreted by one of its political factions, is effaced in its particularity. The result is the annihilation of history, its conversion into a timeless morality play.

A basic task of the ideological analysis of films is to demonstrate the ways in which the historically contingent structures of capitalist society are made to appear as natural and eternal properties of human life. A full discussion of this topic will have to wait until later chapters. But the comments above on the *Green Berets* and *Coming Home* point toward one such demonstration. A centrist position that wanted to mediate between hawks and doves in the name of national unity might bring out what is common to both films by focusing on the inescapable moral dilemmas of war. When is a war just, and when is it unjust? When does the human and political cost of fighting a war exceed the initial justification for engaging in war? Does the destructiveness of war mean that we ought to renounce all wars, or merely some wars, and, if the latter, which ones? The problem with these questions is not only that they presume a neutral, disinterested assessment of war that has never existed and never will exist. It is also that they make the Vietnam War into an undifferentiated instance of the genus war, while seeking to understand hawks and doves as eternal parties to an interminable dispute. The same questions could be raised about any war at all. But the Vietnam War cannot be understood in its historical particularity by proceeding in this fashion. That war occurred in a very specific context (the wave of decolonization struggles that followed World War II), and with an explicit political motive on the side of the United States government (to stop the advance of communism in Asia, and thereby preserve its global hegemony). The economic motive of keeping, not so much Vietnam, as the "Third World" as a whole, open to the investment of U.S. corporations, of course, also played an important part. In short, what the *Green Berets* and *Coming Home* both miss is the phenomenon of U.S. imperialism, which is not an expression of the unchanging dilemmas of war, but rather a historically contingent expression of a specific stage in the development of global capitalism, with its assertion of dominance by the U.S. state in the period following the Second World War.

If what we have said is correct, then the conclusion follows that all films are forms of ideology, and that most films are forms of the ideology of the dominant class. Marx's concept of ideology points the way to a method of analyzing film that has practical as well as theoretical significance. A critical analysis of the dominant ideology can help loosen its hold on the minds of those who are not members of the dominant class (in the Marxist tradition, the working class and its potential allies), and so weaken the consensus the dominant class can normally expect from a population accustomed to acquiescing in its rule. At least that is the hope of an approach to understanding film inspired by Marx's theory of ideology.

¹ In the Preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes: "Granted, then, that the supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be

held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honor, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man” (Spinoza 1998, 3).

² The German text is in Marx and Engels 1967, 463.