IDEOLOGY, CINEMA AND

‘Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism’

‘Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism’ (Comolli and Narboni 1971) was the title of an editorial in

the important French cinema journal Cahiers du Cinéma in 1969, shortly after the student

and worker uprisings of May 1968 in France which had nearly brought down the government.

May ‘68 drew on and magnified intense political radicalism. Because it involved

students and many of their lecturers, it also sparked a culture of intense intellectual activity,

which was felt especially in film circles (Harvey 1978). This editorial, translated in Screen in

1971 – one of the leading journals in the UK to propagate French political culture in

English – marked Cahiers’ commitment to radicalism. This was all the more significant

because Cahiers had been the home of André Bazin (1918–58), a founding figure of French

film culture, whose commitment to realism was at the point of being disowned by the

younger radicals who now took over the journal.

The Cahiers essay displays its rationale only at its conclusion, where it rejects impressionistic

and interpretive film criticism. Giving Bazin a nod, they thank him for drawing

attention to the specifics of film practice, before pointing towards the linguistic inspiration

of the unnamed Christian Metz, whose work of the late 1960s reformulated film as a

semiotics based on the model of language. They refuse ‘phenomenological positivism’ and

‘mechanical materialism’ – the former associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, then at the

height of his infiuence, and the latter with the old guard Marxism of the Second International

which sanctified the relation between economy and ideology as that of base and

superstructure. In their stead they propose drawing on the Russian revolutionary

filmmakers of the 1920s, especially Eisenstein (who of course continued making films and

theorizing until the 1940s) (see MONTAGE THEORY II [SOVIET AVANT-GARDE]).

The fundamental appeal, however, was to Louis Althusser, communist and structuralist

philosopher – not to his infiuential theory of ideology which was first published in 1970,

after this editorial, but to his distinction between ideology and science (Althusser 1979 [1965];

Althusser et. al. 1979 [1965]). The new Cahiers would be dedicated to scientific analysis, not

impressionistic interpretation. The appeal to linguistics reflects a then current faith in linguistics

as ‘queen of the human sciences’, the one discipline in the humanities to have

embraced the procedures and goals of the hard sciences. The school of linguistics the authors

refer to is the semiotic tradition that began with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who

introduced some key distinctions: between the whole system of a language and the activity

of speaking or writing in it; between a sign and what it refers to; and between the material

form of the sign and its semantic component, the ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ respectively.

The difference between signifying (representing, depicting) and the world it refers to

(loosely speaking, reality) is where ideology operates. Ideology is an obfuscation of the

relation between signifying systems – such as cinema – and the reality of the world and

human life. Science is an accurate account of those relations. Rather paradoxically, the

essay sets out to give a scientific account of the ignorance and lies. Hence the opening

phrase ‘Scientific criticism’ and the would-be disciplinary methodology: to establish its

object and methods (Althusser’s problématique), and to analyse the truth-conditions of its own

way of proceeding.

In this case the conditions are firstly a group of people involved in film culture and

producing a magazine, and secondly the capitalist economy of France which is the objective

and unavoidable framework of printing and distributing it. They reject the ‘parallel’,

alternative culture, common enough at the time, of self-regulating communes holding

themselves apart from mainstream society, both because they are easy targets and because

repressive tolerance (Marcuse 1965) brackets them off as evidence of a freedom of speech,

efiectively turning them into another object of consumerist lifestyle choice.

Given this political frame, Comolli and Narboni assert the critical distinction they will

abide by: to distinguish between films which reproduce dominant ideology and those that

in one way or another challenge it. They distinguish first the film from cinema as a whole,

a topic too large for the magazine to take on, instead specifically orienting themselves to

‘the film today’. The second section opens with an even more tightly focused part of this

larger inquiry: what is a film? They specify two aspects, which relate almost as signifier and

signified, and very clearly as the Marxist categories of exchange-value and use-value: the

film is an industrial product sold for profit, and it is an ideological vehicle. They present

the core of the new project for Cahiers: ‘Because every film is part of the economic system it

is also part of the ideological system’ (Comolli and Narboni 1971, 29–30). But this does not

mean that all films are equally ideological, or in the same way. Instead, since filmmakers

difier, so do their films. As a result, they stress that ‘every film is political’ (30). The function of

criticism will be to identify the manner and tendency of that politics.

Two qualities of films make them especially favourable to conveying ideology. First,

because they require teamwork, they typically mobilize economic forces and are tied to

monopoly suppliers like Kodak. Second, cinema has the reputation of being a realist

medium, tied by technology to what later critics would refer to as indexicality: a privileged

relation to the world based on the involuntary physics of light and light-sensitive film-stock.

However, they argue that ‘concrete reality’ is an eminently ideological idea. The cinema

typically reproduces not things as they are but as they appear, and therefore according to

the relationships established between people and their world under actually existing social

and historical conditions. Disrupting this replication of the world as self-evident is the

political task of film.

Underpinning this argument is a dialectical relation between the world and its depictions.

Cinema, they say, is one of the ‘languages through which the world communicates

itself to itself’ (30). This is the nature of re-presentation: doubling up, as if to confirm that

the world actually is as it is. But according to the authors, what is reproduced is not the

world but an ideological refraction of it. Ideology in this sense is an imaginary relation to

the real conditions of existence. So the cinema is not the world communicating itself to

itself, as Bazin might have had it, echoing the poet Mallarmé, but rather ideology ‘talking

to itself’. Thus, far from reinforcing the realty of the world, cinema reproduces its ideological

constitution. Yet as we have heard, Comolli and Narboni do not believe that all films

are the same. How differently can filmmakers respond to this problem, this political

challenge?

Seven categories of films

They suggest that there are seven categories of films: (a) ideological mainstream films;

(b) films that resist in content as well as form; (c) artistic films that resist formally without

being overtly political; (d) films with political content but realist form; (e) films that should

belong in the first category but are sufficiently self-contradictory to disrupt pure ideological

functioning; and finally (f) and (g), two modes of cinéma direct documentary, the former

accepting the dominant realism, the latter resisting and disrupting it. Some films address

ideological issues – mainly political ones – without also innovating formally; others are

formally inventive without clear political commitment.

The majority form of film is the ideological vehicle pure and simple. Such films

repackage social needs as discourse, such that ‘audience demand and economic response

have also been reduced to the same thing’ (31). The very idea of a public, and thence of

public taste, was created ideologically: giving the public what it wants is thus a closed loop

of ideology once again talking to itself. Even more than profit, the reassuring repetition of

common sense from ordinary life into the film seems to motivate the film industry’s

production of these ideological movies.

In the second, and much the most praiseworthy, group are films which break open the

dominant in style and content. Among the films they mention here are Unreconciled (Nicht

versöhnt oder Es hilft nur Gewalt wo Gewalt herrscht) (1965), directed by Jean-Marie Straub from

a novel by Heinrich Böll, and Robert Kramer’s political thriller The Edge (1968), indicating

that there is no intrinsic bias away from Hollywood and towards Europe; just as ideological

films can be mainstream or art-house, so political films can appear in the guise of genre

movie-making. It is clear by now that the critical political task of cinema is to break down

the ideology of depiction, the realism once championed by the journal in the immediate

postwar years.

If critics have a role in revealing the ideological in majority filmmaking, and celebrating

its breakdown in category (b) films, they have a special role in the interpretation of artful

and innovative productions which, however, have no obvious political bone to pick. The

selection of films here indicates again the breadth of their sympathies: Ingmar Bergman’s

quintessential angst-ridden vanguard fiction Persona (1966); Méditerranée, an almost abstract

forty-minute 1963 documentary by Jean-Daniel Pollet and Volker Schlondorfi, with a

script by Tel Quel founder Phillippe Sollers; and Jerry Lewis directing himself in the 1960

comedy The Bellboy. This last is diffcult for anglophone audiences to quite get to grips with:

French cinephiles adored Lewis, seeing his work as the legitimate heir to Keaton and

Chaplin. This indicates the importance of critical interpretation to rescuing films from

their apparently merely aesthetic qualities.

Categories (c) and (d) mirror one another: the former attempt to be artistic without

politics, and the latter political without formal innovation. The authors are clear where

they stand: it is far more important to make formal attacks on the ideological work of

depiction than to make populist political films. This stance would inform the debate in the

UK over Ken Loach’s early television series Days of Hope. Comolli and Narboni’s examples

are Costa-Gavras’ 1969 political thriller Z and a rather quirky political melodrama from

1969, Le temps de vivre by Bernard Paul. It is unclear quite why the latter figures in this

classification. A similar division exists in the examples from cinéma direct: Chiefs, an eighteenminute

1968 documentary by Richard Leacock about a Hawai’ian convention of thousands

of police chiefs, is singled out for not challenging the normal functions of depiction,

oddly compared to Les Grandes familles, a 1958 fictional portrait of a wealthy family starring

Jean Gabin, while Le règne du jour, Pierre Perrault’s 1967 documentary about a French-

Canadian family’s search for ancestral roots in France, and Jacques Willemont’s 1968

documentary La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder (whose title is slightly misquoted), a brief

documentary on the defeat of a strike in May 1968, are singled out for breaking up the

traditional methods.

But of all their taxonomy, it is category (e) films which have received the most attention.

Here are films which set out with little aesthetic or political ambition but which nevertheless

express in their internal contradictions the problematic nature of ideological representation.

Here they echo literary critic Georg Lukács’ defence of Balzac, the supporter of

a defeated royal party whose bitter insights into the corruption of mid-nineteenth century

Paris were of greater value precisely because more misplaced than the explicitly socialist

novels of his contemporary Zola. ‘Frankly reactionary’ purposes (32) can be suppressed

when, as they express it, the ideology becomes subordinate to the text, that is when the

work of making the film takes over from the labour of reproducing the ideology – when,

for example, a narrative or a way of shooting in a location take on a logic of their own.

Such films begin to dismantle the system from within. Among their examples is Ford’s

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), which would provide Cahiers with the material for a model analysis

of a category (e) film (Cahiers du cinéma 1972) (see SYMPTOMATIC READING).

This category would be a benchmark for film studies throughout the 1970s and 1980s,

driving passionate research into the radical potentialities of various genres, as Barbara

Klinger (1984) points out. Finding the troublesome edge between the practice of filmmaking

and the ideological project of cinema as a whole would employ film scholars who felt

the necessity to provide a political analysis, since that proved that film studies were

important, while at the same time preserving their enjoyment of even apparently exploitative

horror, B-movie and blaxploitation films. As Klinger argued, however, genres are

integral to the industry’s overall evolution, and, as Rick Altman (1992) demonstrated

six years later, the ostensibly liberating genre of melodrama was integral to classical

Hollywood.

Intriguingly, though they were at pains to place cinema as an economic activity, there is

little here to propose a political economy of the cinema industry. Nor is there any proposal

for studying audiences, commercial or ‘parallel’. More surprising, given their distrust of the

old realism once espoused by the journal, is their cheerful acceptance of the auteurism of

the nouvelle vague who had preceded them at the journal. This auteurism would endear them

further to the rather literary and textual tradition that began to emerge in the 1970s and

1980s in English-speaking film studies, where the lionizing of directors like Hitchcock

would become a small industry within film studies.

On more positive notes, the proposal was made in this editorial for an empirical

engagement with the material of the films themselves and with film technique. While criticizing

the apolitical formalism of a barren antiquarian style of analysis, this principle

demanded that theory be melded with critical analysis. Each category of film required a

different mode of analysis, reflecting Althusser’s three stages of research: defining the

object, the method, and the kind of knowledge you wish to produce. If, in the afterglow of

near revolution in 1969, that kind of knowledge was politically radical and intellectually

utopian, it is important to the history of film studies that at one time it was strongly

directed towards a radical platform of social and cultural change.

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