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Film and Ideology – Remarks on a Complicated Relationship

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To argue that films are ideological products is not in any way controversial. Rather, this is the very basis for much discussion, understanding and critique of film. But still, this is an understanding that is very much in need of further critical examination. What does it mean to say that a film carries and transmits ideological notions? The answers to this question actualize several different notions of film as well ideology.

Are films ideological in the sense that they mirror the society in which they are created? Or are they ideological since they discuss and provide certain perspectives on this society? Is it possible that there are different ideological projects in the same film depending on which of these perspectives one chooses?

In the paper, these questions are examined on a theoretical level as well as through examples from the films *King Kong*, *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho*.

The Different Manifestations of Ideology in Film

This paper is a presentation of a part of an ongoing research project named “Film between Industry and Aesthetics”. My project within this larger project is, as this paper, called Film and Ideology.

The purpose of this project is, in short, to discuss and analyze how and in which ways films are ideological. This may seem to be a quite simple question – since it is an everyday statement – but what do we really mean when we say that a film is ideological or has an ideological meaning? This question may have, as one soon realizes, several different answers. These different answers constitute the starting point for my discussion. In this paper I will point out six of them.

The first possible answer is perhaps the simplest: a film is ideological since it *expresses ideology*. That is that the film consciously delivers a political argumentation. It has a more or less outspoken political and ideological ambition and tries to argue its standpoints as convincingly as possible. Within this category there are naturally different degrees, the expressed ideology can be more or less at the focal point of the film, but the core is that the film is a conscious ideological product that treat its topic in this way.

This, however, must not be confused with the second category, which I believe is the most common meaning of arguing that a film is ideological, namely that it *reflects ideology*. That is, a film is ideological in the sense that it reflects contemporary ideological patterns and structures. The film reflects the society in which it was created and its dominating values can be seen in the film. This means that ideology here is something much more unconscious and automatic than in the first category, where ideology is consciously conveyed, and forms a structured argumentation. Here films are ideological whether they want to be it or not, they simply reflect their context. This is for example how ideology in film in the main are understood by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner in their book *Camera Politica* (1988) in which they argue that movies constitute a seismograph by which one can read and understand ideological transformation in and of the American society.

Related to ideology as expressed and ideology as reflected is also a third category that is perhaps hard to clearly distinguish from these categories: A film can be ideological in the sense that it *discusses ideology*, that is that it consciously or unconsciously criticizes *or* supports certain notions regarding societal issues. And typically for this category, which also is what distinguishes it from the above two categories, it is often not clear whether the film actually supports or criticizes that which is depicted in the story.

A typical example of this is a film containing stereotypes of any kind. How to view and understand this from an ideological standpoint? Are stereotypes in movies challenging or reinforcing stereotypical notions of the society? That this depends on the film is the obvious answer, but still: it should not be neglected that this poses an intriguing question, because who decides and controls this meaning and in which way is this meaning created? To challenge stereotypes, they have to be depicted, but this may also create meaning that in fact reinforces the stereotypes. For example, many films that has immigrants in Sweden as its central theme falls into this category. Saying that they discuss ideology is to say that they do so in an unconscious as well as conscious way. Conscious since they take part in an ongoing debate, but unconscious since they cannot control their own meaning since they for narrative reasons have to play with and use stereotypes that have ideological consequences.

This category – that films are ideological in the sense that they discuss ideology – is as said hard to distinguish from the two preceding categories; films are ideological in the sense that they express ideology and films are ideological since they reflect ideology. Of course, the purpose here is not to find watertight categories – they obviously do not exist as such and ideology in all senses presented in this paper can be present in the very same film depending

on your viewpoint (that is actually one of my main points: the same film can send radically different ideological messages depending on which category that is at the forefront of the analysis) – but there are some subtle differences between the categories I have spoken of thus far: Ideology as expressed is conscious of its own existence, ideology as reflected is or pretends to be unconscious of its existence and ideology as discussed is conscious of its existence, but unconscious of its (creation of) meaning.

The forth category, to move on, takes this a step further: *Ideology as subconscious*. It may seem to be a small genre of film interpretation that falls into this category, but the truth is that it can be found in much scholarly film discussion since there is a large psychoanalytical influence within this tradition. It is also very much the understanding of the cinematic workings of ideology that is permeating Slavoj Žižek's work (for example 1989, 1991 and 1994).

Here the ideological moment is seen as something unspoken and almost unutterable that still communicates between film and audience through common subconscious structures and symbols aligned with the fundamental fantasies that we use to make the world comprehensible. For example, Žižek (1994) argues that the production of David Lynch is fundamentally about the dissonance between reality, viewed from afar, and the absolute nearness of the real. Another example is Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) where *Alien* is used, understood and analyzed as a manifestation of the theories of Jacques Lacan, and where the Jaws-figure in the film by the same name is understood as a *Vagina Dentata* (an interpretation Creed's is one of many examples of).

These examples illustrate the fundamental presuppositions of this category and how it works analytically. Ideology, or meaning in itself, is something that only can be conveyed and understood by the analytical specialist and is something that is, realistically, very far from what goes through the mind of most viewers when watching the film. But it still has this very profound meaning, and refrains from being just the fantasies of the analyst, by communicating a certain ideological fantasy of the world with the subconscious of the viewer.

This may perhaps seem to be akin to the old understanding of ideology as false consciousness. And in a sense it is, albeit with the Lacanian and Žižekian twist that all consciousness is false and that this is something that we enjoy as well as fear. But there is a further category that is much more connected with Marxist comprehensions: *Ideology as a cinematic experience*. With this category we leave the understanding of ideology as something in one way or another embedded in a certain film and its meanings. Instead we here meet cinema as machinery that in itself and as such portrays and promotes an ideological understanding of the world in a Marxist sense, that is, ultimately, that it gives the impression that our existence, the world and its history are idealistic instead of materialistic.

This category – and this understanding of the connection between film and ideology – is very much linked to an Althusserian understanding of ideology. Cinema and the act of viewing cinema constructs the individual as a subject open to interpellation through imposing upon it an upside-down version of reality and through naturalizing the unreal as real. The perhaps most clear theoretical expression of this understanding can be found in Jean-Louis Baudry's classic text "Ideological effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (1970/1986) in which he argues that the cinematographic technique produces specific ideological effects that themselves are determined by the dominant ideology of society.

This leads to the sixth category, in a terminological if not thematic sense. And here we again meet a more common understanding of how films are ideological. If one takes the step from the screen, from the analyst and from the apparatus to the *audience* one quite soon encounters what can be called *ideology as effect*. Here ideology is something that is primarily connected with film through the values it produces in the society in which it is transmitted and

exists. Ideology is not primarily something that precedes the film, or even not primarily something that exist within the frames of the film itself, but rather something that it produces and creates. This is naturally related to the other categories presented, all senses of ideological meaning presented so far are of course related to the society in which they exist, but ideology as effect makes this situation its focus. It is something that comes to exist in people and have direct bearing on how they conduct their everyday-lives.

In its most vulgar version this leads to highly simplified arguments such as pornography creates rapists, violent movies creates violent children, drug-use on film creates alcoholics and so fort. But leaving these naiveties aside, understanding ideology as an effect is related to understanding film, and other symbolic activity, as a discursive process that creates meaning which consequences are that the interest of some is put before the interest of others and that this inequality is constantly played out in the concrete practice of living.

So far the different categories of what can be meant by arguing that a film is ideological. This discussion has been a kind of abstract exegesis, so I will in a moment try to give an example of how this kind of reasoning can be used when trying to understand and analyzing films. But before that tough, it is also necessary to mention that this presentation has not included the kind of discussion of the notion of ideology that it in a sense rests on and needs. So let me just briefly mention that the six relationships between film and ideology that I have spoken of can be understood as loosely tied to six different notions of ideology, or at least six different strands in the tradition of ideology theory.

Expressed ideology is related to a descriptive or neutral notion of ideology as within the political science tradition as well as Leninist-Marxist circles. Ideology as reflected is, on the other hand, much more tied to a critical notion and understanding of ideology as developed within the western Marxist tradition, by the Frankfurt School and typically also, within this specific context, by Adorno and Horkheimer. Ideology as discussed refers to ideology as something much more unstable, transformative and undecided, whose meaning is constantly fought over in society. This is akin to the theories of Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985/2001) where the meaning of so called floating signifiers are decided by, in short, their relationship with what is called nodal points that stabilizes and decides meaning. Ideology as subconscious is naturally related to this, but more directly connected with Žižek's use of Lacan in his development of the notion of ideology. Ideology as a cinematic experience have already been described as closely tied to Althusserian notions, while ideology as effect related to discourse as process is a theoretical perspective once developed in an article by British sociologists Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt (1993), a perspective that also is indebted to the theories of Althusser.

The Presence of Ideology in *King Kong*, *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho*

What then to do with all this? In my project this theoretical discussion is developed through a critical examination of different ways of analyzing four specific films and an effort to develop the different strands of meaning that exists in this material. The films I use in my analysis are Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* from 1933, Peter Jackson's remake of the same movie from 2005, Gary Marshall's *Pretty Woman* from 1990 and Mary Harron's film version of Bret Easton Ellis novel *American Psycho* from 2000. This analysis is split up in two sections, the discussion of the King Kongs forms one part and *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho* forms another.

In these two analyses I try to show that if the film-pairs are read against each other, it creates interesting ideological complexities that can be understood and further developed by using the different understandings of ideology in film that is outlined in the above.

Concerning *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho*, which I otherwise leave outside this short presentation, these films can be said to be related to each other in several ways, not least do they include scenes that are very similar, however in a much inverted way. But the overarching structural ideological relation between the two films is in short that *American Psycho* is an expressed ideological critique of the ideology that *Pretty Woman* reflects. Understood this way Richard Gere's Edward Lewis and Christian Bale's Patrick Bateman are two different representations of the same ideological character. This is a quite instant observation – it is probably hard to find a more clear expression of the commodity-centred, neo-liberal and neo-conservative American 1980s with its gender and minority rights backlashes than *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho* is obviously a satire over this decade and its values – but there are also subtexts within these films that can be further developed with the different theoretical categories. The issue of using and transgressing stereotypes are interesting from the perspective of ideology as discussed; for example Julia Roberts' character in *Pretty Woman* has been interpreted as symbolizing the concept of gender as performance (or even the concept of *queer*) (*Teaching 'Pretty Woman'* 2003). Ideology as subconscious is also highly actualized – *American Psycho* can in one sense be said to take place in the subconscious of the 1980s, or even more narrowly to *be* the subconscious of *Pretty Woman* – as is ideology as effect, which is exemplified by the debates that both films (and of course the novel) created.

To read the two King Kong movies against each other and finding and analyzing ways interpreting them poses in some way similar, but also different problems. If there is a meaning-creating time-relation between *Pretty Woman* and *American Psycho* – one movie unconsciously speaks of its own time by encapsulating it within itself and the other movie uses its distance in time to project and make conscious the consequences of this unconsciousness – the roughly seventy years that separates the two King Kong movies creates a very special situation for the analyst. This because *King Kong* from 1933 and *King Kong* from 2005 are quite identical. Yes, the special effects are better, the sound is better and so on in the 2005 version which also is longer, but the story, and the filmic representation of the story, is exactly the same. The only thing that has happened to the film, other than in small details, is that it has moved in time. But what are the consequences of this for the ideological content and meaning of the film?

Besides being a classic horror-movie and a milestone in the history of special effects, *King Kong* is a movie that contains clear racist elements and the ideology of racism is therefore intimately interwoven with the film. This much has many times been pointed out in the interpretation history of the 1933 movie. The racism of the film is not monolithic however. It exists on different levels and is related to different types meaning and therefore also of different ways of understanding what meaning is and how it is created.

One racist theme in *King Kong* emanates from understanding it as an ethnographic movie typical of its time as Fatimah Tobing Rony does in the book *The Third Eye. Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (1996). Cooper and Schoedsack who made the movie were originally documentary ethnographic filmmakers and, of course, the movie itself is about an ethnographic film-excursion. From this viewpoint *King Kong* explicitly delivers a colonial world-view complete with Western modernity's superiority over the naturalized other. The representation of the natives of Skull Island is also a key part of this racist stratum. The film represents the unconstrained as well as controlling gaze of the West and the racialization of the other.

Another understanding of the films racist element is much more connected with its relation to the American context in which it was made. Here King Kong can be read as a symbol for the waves of African Americans that migrated from the South to northern metropolises during the time. Not least is the gorilla-figure closely connected with the black

man. The chaos Kong creates by his sheer presence mirrors the fears of white America and the end of the film its symbolic revenge. The racism of the film is a reflection of a white society afraid of and disappointed with emerging black civil rights and increased presence in the North. Kong in chains brought to the nation from overseas also invokes the days of slave trade and slavery.

This is also related to a third possible manifestation of racism in the movie that represents the sexual elements of this ideology. From this viewpoint the movie is about white man's fear of the black man's sexuality and its effects on white women. Kong himself is a subconscious representation of the fear of the white man and is connected with a long tradition of depicting African Americans as animalistic rapists, as for example can be seen in *The Birth of a Nation*. Kong climbing up on the at the time most sacred symbol of white America's modernity and superiority – the fallitic The Empire State Building – gets a specific meaning within this context. The shooting down of Kong here comes to represent the white subconscious wish of black castration.

These meanings, depending on viewpoint, exist in the 1933-movie – and can quite easily be recognized as in turn expressed, reflected and subconscious ideology. But do they exist in the 2005 movie?

When answering this question it is helpful to distinguish levels of meaning and the workings of ideology with the help of the categories expressed, reflected and subconscious. The expressed racist ideological elements of the 1933-movie is in one sense naturally still the same in the 2005-movie, since it is the same story, told in the same way, even though the colour, sound and actors are different. The natives of Skull Island are also in the 2005-movie depicted as almost colonial caricatures. They are violent, animalistic, pre-modern and devoid of most things that resemble Western humanity. The film-expedition still represents the superiority of Modernity and the absolute righteousness of the modern colonial gaze. Their conquering of the island and their capturing of Kong is still the fantasmic adventure of the white man. As for the leading female character, Anne Darrow, her part still mainly consists of screaming and wooing the leading male characters (including Kong) as an object of sexual desire.

In this way, the films express the same ideological fundamentals. But still, an understanding of the expressed ideology needs to take into account the historical, societal etcetera situation it is expressed in. The 2005 movie is not – as is the 1933 movie – a movie expressively about its own time. Instead it incorporates within itself a relationship with the historical time it depicts. The 2005-version's allegiance to the original speaks of this. The movie attempts to create a safe-haven for itself by attempting to refer to nothing else but the original movie in an almost pastiche-like manoeuvre. In this sense, the 2005-movie declares itself as not being for real and therefore not responsible for the ideas it projects. That responsibility is projected back to the original movie and the 2005-movie is therefore able to express the same ideological elements while distancing itself from their realness. It is racism with a wink of the eye: the ideology that is expressed in the 1933-movie is also expressed in the 2005-movie, but it is so in an ironic or even cynical manner.

But if we leave the level of expressed ideology, what society and what ideology does the 2005-*King Kong* reflect then? If the 1933-movie reflects an American society grappled with white fear of burgeoning African American civil rights and continuous migration waves, the 2005-movie reflects a post-civil rights, post-multiculturalist, postmodern society. It reflects a simulacra-existence where nothing is for real, not even racism and, for that matter, sexism. It reflects a society focused on the consumption of enjoyment and a fetishization of a history that is rendered harmless by a dissociation from itself.

But as the subconscious sexual-racist element speaks of – the ironic smile is often painfully aware of its own character.

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