

Ideology and the cinema essay



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First, it should be noted that every film is political, at least inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology that produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing). The cinema is all the more thoroughly and completely determined, according to critics, because unlike other arts or ideological systems its very manufacture (but not necessarily distribution and sale) mobilises powerful economic forces in a way that the production of literature, for example, does not.

In the economic system film is a product manufactured within a given system of economic relations, and involving labour to produce. It becomes transformed into a commodity, possessing an exchange value, which is realised by the sale of tickets and contracts, and governed by the laws of the market. Film is also, as a result of being a material product of a system, also an ideological product of that system. Furthermore, because every film is part of the economic system, it is also part of the ideological system because 'cinema' and 'art' are branches of ideology¹.

The merging of film and ideology is reflected in the first instance by the fact that audience demand and economic response have been reduced to one and the same thing. In direct continuity with political practice, ideological practice reformulates the social need and backs it up with discourse.

The cinema 'reproduces reality: this is what a camera and film stock are for', at least according to conventional film theory². At the same time, however, the tools and techniques of filmmaking are part of 'reality' themselves, and furthermore 'reality' is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology. The camera in fact registers the vague, unformulated

world of the dominant ideology. ‘ Cinema is effectively a universal language through which the world communicates with itself’ according to Andre Bazin. ‘ Films constitute their ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced through the ideological filter. 3’

Althusser defines it more precisely in the following way: ‘ Ideologies are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects, which work fundamentally on men by a process they do not understand. What men express in their ideologies is not their true relation to the to their conditions of existence but how they react to their conditions of existence, which presupposes a real relationship and an imaginary relationship. 4’ In other words, the act of filmmaking is encumbered by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideological lens. ‘ This includes every stage in the process of production: subjects, ‘ styles’ forms, meanings, narrative traditional; all underline the general ideological discourse. 5’

In summary it might be argued that in conventional theory film is a product and a tool of ideology. Taking this as the premise, it may be worth categorising on a general level some of the more notable types of film with regard to ideology.

The National Socialist Film:

The first, and broadest category encompasses films that are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form and give no indication that the filmmaker was aware of the fact. These films constitute unconscious instruments for reinforcing the ideology which

produces them, and form the majority of all types of film, irrespective of whether they are situated in commercial, avant-garde, modern or traditional filmmaking convention. It has been argued that while there is such a thing as public demand, the notion of ' what the public wants' should be more closely associated with ' what the dominant ideology wants'.

By implication filmic content, as part of an ideological medium, is not representative of public demand but rather of ' what the dominant ideology wants'⁶. The contradiction this poses to the notion of films as commodities in free markets illustrates the tension that characterises this category. I suggest that the notion of a cinematic public and its tastes is created by the ideology it is produced by to justify and perpetuate itself, and the fact that that public can only express itself within the ideological box is at the heart of the perpetual cycle of reinforcing of ideology in the cinematic medium.

The formal elements of films in this category are similarly tainted by their ideologies. They embrace established systems of depicting reality, or more precisely ' bourgeois realism and the whole conservative box of tricks: blind faith in ' life, humanism, common sense etc'⁷. Nothing in the films in this ideologically saturated category jars against the ideology or the audiences acceptance of it as reality, although as Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* demonstrates, there are plenty of ways of enhancing the audience's reception of the ideology or enhancing its belief in it as an accurate depiction of reality by formal means. The Nazi party controlled *Illustrierte Film-Kurier* put out a film program that separates the film into six main segments. These are: Introduction, Happy Morning, Festive Day, Joyful Evening, Parade of the Nation, and The Fuhrer.

The most abiding after-images for anyone viewing the film are its opening shots of Hitler descending on the city of Nuremberg from storm-clouded skies like a saviour of his people; abstract patterns of massed humanity, banners 'jostling like a field of sunflowers' and of the interaction of the Fuhrer and his delirious people, formally represented by means of 'the measured, rhythmical alternation of object-spectator, object-spectator'⁸. The cross-cutting of low angled shots of the Fuhrer, Himmler and Lutze first walking the length of the Luitpoldhain, and high angled shots of his volk work to generate the impression that he towers over them, looking over them and is clearly a visual justification of the standing of the Third Reich. The use of point-of-view shots during the procession creates a sensation of one-ness with the Fuhrer who exudes a benevolent paternal air.

In these first two sequences, formal referents are plentiful. According to Hinton, however, the power of the narrative elements of Riefenstahl's cinematography should not be underestimated. Her attention to the 'telling intimacies', such as the Fuhrer receiving a bunch of flowers from a young child and the exhilarated expressions of the young in general, and the use of long telephoto lenses to capture unconscious moments are both important in the perpetuation of the notion of the united Reich that the ideology demanded. In examining the SS human barrier at the side of the Fuhrer's path on the level of the strong grip that one soldier has on the other's belt rather than on the level of the soldier as a whole, this attention to detail serves, perhaps, to obscure the military ideology on the level of repression but serves also to highlight the core strength of the army in protecting the

Fuhrer by focusing on a traditional cinematic signifier of man's liberty, namely the hand.

The following day begins with a glimpse of the waking city that owes much to Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. The music is dreamy as the camera takes in the baroque skyline and church spires in a sleepy, seamless fashion as the soft light falls on the casements and party banners that blow in the gentle breeze. There are scenes of blonde, blue-eyed children that conform to the ideological ideal of the purported Aryan master-race running around helping one another prepare for the joyous occasion.

Action cuts to the opening session of the congress in the Luitpold Hall. Salkeld describes it as 'more than a glorious show. It had the mysticism and religious fervour of an Easter or a Christmas mass in a great Gothic cathedral'. Hitler's dramatic arrival, that silences the band and the thirty thousand people in the hall, and long march down the aisle to the salutes of all the people are all choreographed for maximum effect. Hess, in storm trooper dress welcomes the delegates and pays tribute to Hindenberg before pledging loyalty and gratitude to the Fuhrer: 'You are Germany! When you act, the nation acts; when you judge, the people judge!...Thanks to your leadership Germany will attain her aim to be the homeland of all the Germans of the world.'

Short excerpts follow from the speeches of twelve other party leaders. The intention of this segment is unclear since nothing of particular substance beyond the expected rhetoric emerges. It seems fair to accept Barsam's view that Riefenstahl edits a number of separate sessions of the congress

together ' with motifs of hope, progress and unity, bending the actual substance of each speaker's remarks for the purpose of the film's propaganda'9, while not discounting the more obvious assertion by Hinton that it is intended merely as an introduction of the government of the people.

The introduction of the Arbeitsdienst (Labour Service) by Hierl represents one of the most obvious manifestations of the subversion of cinematic content to ideology in that, although mandatory for unskilled school-leavers, it is portrayed as a privilege and an honour. Each man carries a spade, the equivalent of the soldiers' guns. ' My Fuhrer, fifty-two thousand men await your order'. The notion of a people united behind the leader is reinforced by a staged discourse between Fuhrer and worker in which the workers identify themselves with all the states of Germany. The camera moves from one eager face to another. The sequence closes to the strains of ' I had a comrade' and the bowing of all the flags in the arena to commemorate the dead. The show of unity is once again impressive to say the least. Rebirth is promised as the young men pledge to be the new soldiers of the Reich.

There is a reference to what will be the final motif of the film in the form of the superimposition of the marchers on a dissolve of the fluttering flag. The flowing pattern of the half profile faces as the march away with their song and their ' seig heils' is similar in effect to the earlier shots of the crowd's eye-line which are all directed towards Hitler in that they serve to orient everything in relation to him.

This orientation is juxtaposed with moments in which the frame breaks from contextualisation, while using similar image construction: the disconnected

bodies of people moving through the frame and of the camera panning across stationary masses and the heads of the flags waving in unison in an almost hypnotic way. These moments constitute what Walter Benjamin refers to as 'the aestheticisation of a field that has political implications, propaganda. 10' The mise-en-scene, eye-lines, bodies, stances and programmed motion all relate to the mechanisation of society, to the autonomy of a united people and particularly to the 'perfect' people of the Aryan race who function, in this ideology, as a machine.

The film continues with an evening march attended by some 200, 000 people and watched by a further 250, 000. Barsam suggests that the juxtaposition of the faceless masses and an elevated Fuhrer distorted through the telephoto lens is highly reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* which was one of Hitler's favourite films. The relationship between Riefenstahl and her ideological masters is not irrelevant, for the question of purpose is always central to the outcome of a film, but not necessarily its reading.

Triumph of the Will illustrates the German heritage in the Nazi ideological framework, the importance of communal work and cooperation, and Nazi mysticism. Riefenstahl consistently returns to Hitler to reinforce the notion that he will restore Germany to the Olympian heights of earlier Reichs and reinforces the notion of continuity between Germany's present and its past. Even though Riefenstahl categorised her own work as a 'romanticised spectacle created through rhythmic montages and juxtapositions of sight and sound', Benjamin's critical suggestion that 'the growing proletarianisation of modern man and the increasing forming of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism thrives in film[s].. which replaces

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the political content of the films with aestheticisation because war and only war can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system' is by no means irrelevant. He concludes that ' the violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. 11'

The scene in the Luitpold Arena is perhaps the most striking of all, filmed by Riefenstahl from a lift elevated some 140 feet above the stadium. Speer's monolithic eagle perched on its carved bay wreath containing the swastika dissolves into a long shot from behind of three small figures, Hitler, Himmler and Lutze making their way from one end of the stadium to the other through the parted ranks of fifty-thousand SS men. Only at the last moment does the camera cut to the opposite viewpoint as the trio reaches the war memorial to pay its respects to the dead. The power of these moments is in the dignity and restraint of the camerawork and editing which match the simplicity of the occasion. The dramatic use of the slow moving shot emphasises the stillness and contained emotion. Barsam points out that the absence of close-ups represents an important choice on the part of Riefenstahl ' for it is the tribute, not those evoking it, that is important.'

Then there is the absorbing parade which constitutes one continuous shot in which the frame is filled completely with waving flags, ' moving up, down and forward as if they had lives of their own', followed by an 18 minute compression of a five hour parade in which Hitler stands staunchly acknowledging the tributes. This concludes with a speech at the Luitpold Hall in which Hitler's rhetorical prowess is given full exposure. Although the

content of the speech is little different from earlier exhortations the delivery is everything. His purpose is clear: to send home his audience recharged with his own brand of fanaticism. The reinforcing of the ideology, served well by Riefenstahl's formal techniques, is met by the presentation of the ideology in the form of cinematic content, and the hall is a sea of upraised arms as the Gorst Wessel is struck up once more. The final sequence of dissolves from hall through swastika concludes with the ' final ethereal passage of silhouetted figures marching heavenwards into the clouds'12.

In summary *Triumph of the Will* succeeds in propagating the ideology of which it is a product both through formal and narrative techniques. Its affective power lies in its complete submersion into that ideology which serves to dispel any notion of an existence outside that ideology while at the same time reinforcing its central tenets. The same principles apply to Soviet films of the Eisensteinian mould, American films and newsreels such as those released by the Film Production League (FPL), British films and documentaries of the Grierson mould and so on. The list is inexhaustible, but I would suggest that for the purpose of examining the power of the cinematic medium to reinforce political ideological doctrine, this examination of *Triumph* suffices. The social film, which is not to say socialist film, to which I turn now, is also a powerful tool for critiquing or reinforcing ideological norms.

Camp Film:

Before embarking on a discussion of the Camp ideology, I would like to justify the decision. In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl's portrait is of a

political ideology, whose defined goals make it easy to identify ideological concerns in the film. Not all ideological movements are so clearly situated and propagated. I suggest that the very ill-defined nature of the Camp ideology does not, however, hinder its cinematic produce, and it is important to illustrate that the versatility of the cinematic medium complements less defined ideologies as well as it does the concrete views of an established political ideology.

In the words of Susan Sontag, 'Camp is a sensibility.. like a taste.. not a fact but an opinion¹³'. Despite a number of overt contradictions that exist within Camp theories, there are numerous points on which three notable critics, Sontag, Marc Seigel and Matthew Tinckom, agree. I suggest that a synthesis of the points on which they agree and disagree is essential to gaining an understanding of 'Camp' and its ideological intentions.

The overt contradictions that exist within the theories of Camp are as fundamental as differing opinions as to its project: Seigel views Camp as a form of gay historiography, suggesting that one cannot distinguish between the aesthetic value of Camp and its documentary value for homosexual subculture, while Sontag states that 'Camp's project is to dethrone the serious' and that Camp taste is more than just homosexual taste - it is a projection of life as theatre, while Tinckom understands Camp to be an oppositional stance to Bourgeois culture representations that excluded gays¹⁴.

There seems also to be a contradiction between the naivety associated with 'pure Camp' in Sontag's article and the idea of constructing artifice

suggested by both Tinckom and Seigel. This indicates a difference in understanding of the situation of Camp in its being – Sontag lists numerous objects that she considers to be ‘ pure Camp’, whereas Seigel and Tinckom locate the Camp within the act of aestheticisation and the creation of artifice, although Seigel states, with particular reference to *Flaming Creatures* that ‘ that this cinematic artifice [was] a necessary precondition for acting out fantasies – only through...trashy artifice...could the reality of [Smith’s] creatures be expressed on film¹⁵’, implying that while the artifice is constructed, the reality remains naïve, and thus ‘ Camp’.

Central to the Camp aesthetic is the notion of ‘ Artifice’ (Sontag/Seigel), which, I suggest can be equated with the ‘ construction of glamour’ (defined by Tinckom as ‘ the achievement of becoming, through the expense of labour, something that one is not’). Furthermore, I would suggest that the notion of thematic artifice can be equated with that of ‘ aesthetics over morality’ or ‘ style over content’ on a formal level, which, it is worth noting, is the very concept that Walter Benjamin suggested leads to Fascism, when conjoined with mass movements (which equates with the pop-culture that is propagated by one of the most celebrated architects of Camp, Andy Warhol). It would seem somewhat facetious, however, to draw parallels between National Socialist Germany and 60’s American social movements.

The content of *Flaming Creatures*, that is to say nakedness and sexual relations takes second place to the style in which it is captured, for example fragmented shots of bodies, in which what we are shown is robbed of meaning by its removal from its traditional context. The ‘ rape’ scene embodies the notions of style over content, and artifice – firstly, the use of

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masks and costumes allows the characters to live an artificial existence, becoming something that they are not by virtue of their labour; secondly, the obvious lack of pleasure/displeasure shown by those participating in the scene, contrary to popular notions that sex is fun and rape is not fun, suggests that it is not the content of the scene (the emotion that should accompany the sexual act) but rather the style in which it is portrayed (the 'physical repetitions of hands grabbing bodies')¹⁶ that takes precedence; the masking of true emotion, particularly on the part of the woman who makes only the barest attempts to refuse the fondling to which she is subjected, could be seen to be another example of artifice. The sexual element of the Camp aesthetic goes beyond cinematic style however. Sexual androgyny, make-up and cross-dressing are also important thematic elements of Camp, all of which are embodied in the art-vivant of Smith's film.

Trash also depicts the sexually androgenous (Holly Woodlawn, and to some extent the male protagonist, Joe) and interestingly seems to equate sexualness with artifice on a narrative level. The male protagonist is the only character whose sole apparent purpose in the film is not sexual desire. He is sexually impotent and thus unwilling to engage in sexual affairs with the women he comes across in his search for money to feed his drug addiction.

He also rejects the artificiality of the other characters who are only interested in getting laid or getting high and are willing to go to extraordinary lengths for either, refusing, for example, to lie to one woman as to his motives for breaking into her house, insisting despite her protests that he is there to steal something. That she owns only fake (plastic) jewelry (which in its artifice could be considered camp) is brought into confrontation

with her desire to fulfil her (rape) fantasy (also artifice), and in the end the protagonist rejects both, reinforcing the idea that he is the 'anti-camp hero'.

On the other hand he is willing to participate in the ruse to get welfare since it fulfils his own need for cash, despite its obvious artificiality. The welfare representative's demand that Holly gives him her shoes in exchange for welfare, and his subsequent insistence that if she does not he will not give her welfare, can be seen as an example of bourgeois culture excluding homosexuals and other minorities such as drug addicts. On the other hand, reading by Sontag's interpretation, this could just as easily be Warhol attempting to dethrone the serious act of applying for social security.

Furthermore he is apparently aroused only by his lover's pregnant sister, a relationship chosen surely to provoke reaction in the audience and evidence of the anti-bourgeois representation of sexual deviation that Tinckom referred to as the 'oppositional stance' and also of the style/aesthetic over morality indicator of Camp.

On a formal level, Warhol's refusal to incorporate a causal narrative beyond the simplest 'he needs money, so he goes to find it' level, or to provide at least some kind of overt link between each scene in which Joe goes from one girl's place to another is a strong indication of his preference for style over narrative content. Interestingly, glamour is almost entirely eschewed by all the characters in the film and there is little evidence of labour being put in to becoming what one is not.

I have tried to show there are many inherent contradictions in the theory of the Camp aesthetic which result in and are caused by an ill-defined and

subjective set of perceptual cues, without any agenda or manifesto which give them common purpose. While accepting that this is but the most superficial of examinations of the Camp aesthetic, I argue that both *Trash* and *Flaming Creatures* are as obviously products of the ideology that spawned them as *Triumph* is of its own ideology. The difference lies in the positioning of that ideology within society. Camp can be seen as a reactionary ideology that attempted to undermine the dominant American Puritan Ideal and as such does not attempt to equate itself with the reality that its audience experiences. Rather, it is the propagation of an ideal that is not yet in place.

Although formal elements do reinforce its ideology, as suggested above, the primary means of conveying ideological content is through mise-en-scene and narrative occurrences. In this respect, these Camp films are less successful in promoting their ideologies since they adopt the imagery and language of the ideology they propose to undermine. In maintaining conventional formal elements and methods of depiction they do not set themselves apart from the dominant ideology sufficiently to truly undermine it, and yet this too can be seen as a characteristic of the prevailing 60's cultural ideology, and this in fact strengthens the argument for film's ability to reinforce ideological concepts.

Dada Film:

The final category to which I turn is that of the film which propagates purely aesthetic ideology. This is not to say that Dada films do not have form or

content. Rather it is to say that the politicisation of their ideology in film rests entirely on the abstract notions of their art.

The main theoretical concern of early Dada cinema was overcoming reproduction in favour of producing unique sensations not possible in any other medium. Film should not record achievements of other art forms but produce its own aesthetic building on its exclusive property of recording movement through time. The Dada group had a political and social agenda that was not dissimilar to that of the Surrealists, but were generally not inclined to use the cinematic medium to advance it.

Kuenzli summarises the characteristics of Dada related films thus: ' they disrupt the viewers expectations of a conventional narrative, their belief in film as presenting reality, and their desire to identify with the characters in the film, Dada films are radically non-narrative, non-psychological; they are highly self-referential by constantly pointing to the film apparatus as an illusion making machine.' Furthermore, I would suggest that through their cinematic de-familiarisation they attempted to undermine the norms and codes of conventional filmmaking and thus of the social conventions on which the narrative cinematic conventions were based. 17

The work of two early pioneers of the Dada film, Hans Richter and Victor Eggeling, serves to illustrate the abstract products of that ideology. Eggeling and Richter were both intent on establishing the general principles of a visual art form and saw the orchestration of time as its aesthetic basis and the concept of polarity as a central tenet of the form they were trying to create. Thus, in *Rythmus 21* Richter uses the simple form of a square which,

he claimed, ' gave him the opportunity to forget about the complicated matter of our drawings and to concentrate on the orchestration of movement and time'. 18 The juxtaposition of white and black effectuates the most obvious aesthetic conflict, but the movement of the pieces through space over time sets up the rhythm, which, he suggests, ' is the chief sensation of any expression of movement.'

Eggeling is considered to be the first to recognise the artistic, non-literary possibilities and consequences of films, largely due to his study of the aesthetic of time in film. He searched for ' the rules of a plastic counterpoint' and was interested in the interplay of opposites and affinities. The visual and subliminal gestures to the modernity that has created the medium are emphatically self-referential. The use of the medium, which is itself a product of the modernity it represents, to subvert and to celebrate its epoch is an ironic representation of the very polarity which the Dadaists saw at the heart of the medium. By refusing to participate in the conventional depiction of reality they hoped to maintain the ideological position that post-cubist art had created whereby neither imagery nor ideological content was a necessity. '[A]s cubist painters understood, painting can exist without imagery, without everyday references and without obvious ideology'19. The Dada experiment in abstract, non-narrative, non-formal cinema was short lived but this should not detract from its validity as a form of ideological cinema.