

Ideology Critique and Film Criticism in the New Media Ecology

Matthew Flisfeder

Volume 40, Issue 1, January 2016

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.13761232.0040.110>
[<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.13761232.0040.110>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>]

Academic buzzwords in the humanities and social sciences, in recent years, are quite indicative of the times. “Digital humanities;” “screen studies;” “entrepreneurship;” it seems clear that neoliberalism and the ideology of technological progress have something to do—much more so in our current age of austerity—with the shape, relevance, and space for critical theory. Cultural criticism in neoliberal times has shifted away from the critical investigation of the arts (including cinema), and has geared the study of culture towards business interests—the Culture Industry thesis has transformed into “the cultural industries.” Technological transformation, though, certainly, has changed the way films are made, and the way that we view cinema: IMAX and 3D, on the one hand, and hand-held devices and online streaming services like Netflix, on the other. We have a larger than life “cinema of attractions” on one side—a side that “massifies” the audience—and digitized personalization on the other (and here I use the “digital” to indicate, as well, the individuation of spectatorship—pseudo-individuation, if you like, very much keeping with Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Culture Industry).

Though the grand spectacle of the cinema attracts “audiences,” it might be more appropriate now—more so now than in the 1970s—to speak of the “spectator.” The post-Theory criticism of the 1990s chastised the “screen theory” version of the ambiguous spectator, preferring instead the empirical audience; and though “audience” seems to denote a “mass,” the personalization of media experience might make the spectator an appropriate unit of study (when the neoliberal “individual” has largely taken priority over the society) in the “post-media” era. By “post-media” I refer to a media ecology that tends to blur the lines between different media. I borrow the term from Lev Manovich who, in an unpublished paper available on his website, argues in favour of doing away with the critical distinctions between different media in the digital age, since it is all too often difficult to really draw the lines in contemporary aesthetics; and I think that this is a suitable argument given that new media changes the way that we experience art, culture, and cinema. But, because of the blurring of the lines, it is my contention that film criticism must all the more forcefully be tied to the critique of ideology.

There is a distinction that needs to be made between the ideological analysis of cinema, and the cinematic critique of ideology. The former deals with films as ideological symptoms, and the aim is to deconstruct the film text to locate the ideology present within the frame. The cinematic critique of ideology, a practice engaged by critics like Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson, tells not something about the ideology of the text; instead it is a practice of using the text to deal with textuality of our everyday lives—that is, the uncovering or the revealing of ideology as part of the fabric of our everyday culture.

If we want to locate a particular practical mode of operation here, we can think of Comolli and Narboni's category 'e' in their well-known editorial in *Cahiers du cinema*, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." The films in this category, they point out, are those which seem to fit directly with the reigning ideology, but can be appropriated for radical purposes, helping to dismantle ideology from within. This includes films like *The Matrix* (1999) which, though they appear as typical sci-fi action thrillers, help us to grasp more easily the operation of everyday ideology. More recently, I would include films like David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014)—a film that at first glance is codified in misogynistic visual rhetoric, but which can also be appropriated to develop an apt interpretation and critique of the media ecology of our hyperreal environment, particularly in the way the characters self-reflexively perform their identities for the media. The film teaches us that real change demands a pseudo-individuated construction of the Self for the media—particularly in social media, where the construction of a Self in the form of the public profile has become the very means by which we make ourselves available to the Other. This is the fabric (or fabrication) of identity in the twenty-first century, modelled on the entrepreneurial ethic of post-2008 financial crisis neoliberalism.

If film criticism is going to have any relevance for the twenty-first century, it's going to have to commit to the raising of critical awareness of our own historicity, and the culture of neoliberalism and austerity-finance-capital, the digital, and processes of personalization that further mark gaps in the social. I draw my own inspiration from Comolli and Narboni's editorial where, in the context of the post-May '68 period, they sought to politicize film and film criticism directly—something that contributed to earliest formations of film studies as a distinct academic discipline. A politicized film criticism can be part of the congealing of the "digital humanities" and contemporary "screen studies."

Author Biography:

Matthew Flisfeder is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University. He is the author of *The Symbolic, The Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*.