

# Ideology

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“**I**DEOLOGY” is a term that embodies all the problems associated with the cultural complexity of language: it has a rich history, during which it has taken on various, sometimes contradictory, meanings. Furthermore, most of the changes and internal tensions in the word are obscured by the single, dominant meaning it has recently taken on in American political discourse. Thus, before discussing how “ideology” is used in contemporary criticism, it is necessary to recognize how the term is used in the much more widespread and influential language of the mass media.

We are most likely to encounter the word “ideology” in a newspaper or news-program piece of political analysis, where the term is used to designate some kind of especially coherent and rigidly held system of political ideas. In this sense, ideology is a distinctly pejorative term, usually identifying someone who wishes to impose an abstract, extremist, intellectual-political obsession on a “moderate,” mainstream political system. Thus, there are a few people on the right and left (like Robert Bork or Fidel Castro) who “have” an ideology, and who are *therefore* likely to mess things up, and there are the great majority of sensible people (and politicians) who get along quite well because they do not “have” one. “Ideology,” in this language, works as the opposite of “pragmatism,” “common sense,” or even of “reality.”

An analogous understanding of ideology can be found in some versions of literary criticism, especially those influenced by Anglo-American New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s, which tended to isolate and value the formal complexity of the literary text. This tendency has lost much of its influence in the academy but still remains quite strong in the culture at large, perhaps because of its comfortable fit with the assumptions of the dominant political language mentioned above. In this kind of criticism, the ideological aspects of a literary work will be felt as at best irrelevant to, and at worst detracting from, its aesthetic value. In the terms of this criticism, ideology is the unfortunate irruption of opinions and doctrine within what should be a fully “creative” or “imaginative” work. This critical perspective, then, is part of a general framework of assumptions that

shapes both political and literary languages, a framework within which "ideology" is assigned a negative value, and is always seen in a zero-sum relation to some positively valued term like "common sense" or "creativity."

It would hardly be possible for American students to forget this dominant sense of the term "ideology," which will continue ceaselessly to be reinforced by enormous, powerful media institutions. And this conventional meaning of "ideology," as nearly synonymous with "politics," remains useful in the many situations where it is difficult to support the finer distinctions we will elaborate below. Yet, this is distinctly *not* the meaning of "ideology" in recent cultural criticism, so one must make an effort temporarily to put aside, as it were, the dominant sense of the term, in order to understand its rather more complicated history and usage in critical theory.

The word "ideology" was originally used by a French rationalist philosopher of the late eighteenth century to define a "science of ideas" or "philosophy of mind" that would be distinct from older metaphysical conceptions. In this philosophical tradition, it is related to terms like "epistemology." Yet the most influential development of "ideology" has surely been in the discourses of political theory, particularly in Marxist theory, through which it has taken a long and complicated journey before its unexpected arrival in the newer forms of American literary criticism. Perhaps "ideology" was most powerfully developed in Marxism because Marxism always sought to be not just narrowly "political" but a more comprehensive kind of theory that could understand the important relations among the political, economic, *and* cultural elements in specific societies. "Ideology," in fact, became the term through which Marxists tried to articulate, in various ways, the relation between the realm of culture (including, but not limited to "ideas") and the realm of political economy (including "production"). In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels elaborated a first, polemical definition and critique of ideology that still influences cultural analyses of the political left. In later writings, Marx and/or Engels gave more diverse, and less systematic, suggestions about how to understand ideology, thus creating a constitutive set of tensions in the use of the term that continued to mark its later development in both Marxist and non-Marxist discourses.

It might be helpful, then, to outline briefly a few of the major emphases that have been placed on ideology within the Marxist tradition, and within the tradition of sociological thought influenced by Marxism. This will require putting aside another construction of meaning that is continually reinforced in our culture, namely, the conveniently simple construction of "Marxism" as meaning essentially "the Soviet Union." We must remember, however, that Marxism is first of all a complex social theory that has motivated, and continues to motivate, a wide variety of political movements, in a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts, while remaining irreducible to any one of them. Marxism is not some kind of "Russian" or "un-American" phenomenon, despite constant proclama-

tions to that effect by the mass media and the respectable North American intelligentsia; it is, rather, a fruitful outgrowth of the Western intellectual tradition, one that has had powerful and diverse influence in virtually every modern society, including—as this essay indicates—the United States. As with any other theory, we can begin to understand and evaluate Marxism by confronting its logic and argument, not by proclaiming its putative national characteristics.

For Marxist theory, every historical society is crucially defined by its class structure, a network of relations much wider and more fundamental than a “form of government.” Every society, that is, embodies a specific relation between the dominant class, which owns and controls the major means of producing wealth (in our society, large industrial apparatuses), and the producing or working class, which depends for its survival on selling its labor power to the dominant class. It is on the basis of such historically specific class relations (in modern society, between capital and wage labor) that the production (and unequal distribution/appropriation) of all the goods and services constituting the wealth of a society takes place. Therefore, in order even to assure the continuity of its mode of producing material wealth, every society must first assure the reproduction of these class relations themselves. Production of goods and services in a plantation economy requires that there first of all be landholders and slaves, in a capitalist economy that there be capitalist investors and wage-workers, and the continued stability of a society requires that members of all classes tend to accept the given structure of class relations. (This does not preclude an individual social subject attempting to change his/her class position. Individual social mobility does not change the class structure of a society one bit.)

Obviously, any such class-divided social situation embodies an implicit tension that can at any time erupt into open conflict, and thus every class society has certain repressive mechanisms (police, armies, courts) that can be called upon to manage recurrent social tensions, to *force* social subjects to accept the relations of subordination and dominance between classes. But a constant reliance on force, on the power of “the government,” is an expensive and inefficient way to assure the stable reproduction of class relations. This is the sign, in fact, of a weak social regime, one in which a lot of people from the subordinate classes (as well as some from the dominant classes) perceive themselves as being in an unjust situation, and are trying to do something to change it. Much better is a situation in which everyone—from dominant and subordinate class alike—understands and perceives the prevailing system of social relations as fundamentally fair on the whole (even if it hasn’t done so well by them), and/or as better than any possible alternative, and/or as impossible to change anyway. This is a situation in which *ideology*, rather than force, is the primary means of managing social contradictions and reproducing class relations; if society uses apparatuses of force to confront overt rebellion, it uses apparatuses of ideology to form

members of its various classes into social subjects who are unlikely ever to consider rebellion.

When ideology dominates social reproduction, the process becomes indeed much better for the dominant class: subordinate-class subjects will tend to resign themselves to their social weakness, trying to get what they can for themselves in any way possible, and to express dissatisfaction through relatively easy-to-control individual forms of ambition, violence, and self-destruction (including crime); meanwhile, dominant-class subjects themselves are freer to believe that their wealth and power are after all justified, that it really is the best of all possible worlds they manage, and that they can comfortably dismiss all those inconvenient and fanciful notions of how society and the social production of wealth might be organized differently, schemes that would only take away their power and wealth without actually helping anybody else. In such a situation, the social regime of class relations will remain stable, even if there is a lot of individual dissatisfaction. In such a situation, Imelda Marcos's private shoe collection will be universally deplored as obscene in the face of Philippine poverty and starvation, while Donald Trump's private real-estate collection will be widely admired as a sign of entrepreneurial zeal, even in the face of American poverty and homelessness. It is much more effective—and cheaper—to put “You can’t fight City Hall,” or “the poor will always be with us,” or “every revolution just leads to worse tyranny” on everyone’s lips than to put all the cops on all the corners that would be necessary to confront any determined struggle of the poor and homeless against the social system that produces poverty and homelessness. Or, as one radical literary critic put it, in a considerably less urgent context: “Ideology, after all, is more influential than laws. Imagine legislation forbidding professors of literature to get their noses out of their texts!” (Franklin 1972, 115).

This brings us to the question of how the concept of ideology can be useful in contemporary literary or cultural analysis. One writer on ideology has remarked: “A society is possible in the last analysis because the individuals in it carry around in their heads some sort of picture of that society” (Mannheim 1964, xxiii). This observation, with the important addition of “and of their place in it,” might serve as a fair introduction to current ideology theory, which tries to understand the complex ways through which modern societies offer reciprocally reinforcing versions of “reality,” “society,” and “self” to social subjects. When Marx and Engels first developed a critique of ideology, the Anglo-European popular classes were largely illiterate agricultural or first-generation urban workers, there was no universal public education or political suffrage, no technology of mass entertainment, and one social institution—religion—that influenced every cultural practice and offered everyone—in discourses, rituals and images—an explanation/justification of the world and society. Thus, the first Marxist attempt to understand ideology was inevitably limited by a relatively simple psychology of the social subject and was dominated by closely intertwined philosophical and polit-

ical criticisms of European religious ideology. This approach tended to conflate a critique of ideology with a criticism of idealism, so that "ideology" was seen as the form of thinking that mistakenly understood ideas as determining specific historical forms of society rather than vice versa. In this sense, "ideology" defined a widespread form of epistemological error that a new, more empirically based—sometimes called "scientific"—mode of thinking could avoid, if not eventually abolish. At other points in their work, Marx and/or Engels use "ideology" to talk about the specific "forms of consciousness" appropriate to specific kinds of society, or to specific class interests. In this latter use, "ideology" veers away from designating the opposite of "truth," and towards indicating those specific and indispensable "forms in which men become conscious of [social] conflict and fight it out," forms which promote particular sociohistorical interests as representing natural and universal human needs.

Contemporary Marxist theory, deriving largely from the work of Louis Althusser, has reworked the concept of ideology in the light of the more complex notion of subject-formation given by psychoanalysis, and the more elaborate system of ideological practices that have developed in late capitalist societies. In this framework, ideology designates a rich "system of representations," worked up in specific material practices, which helps form individuals into social subjects who "freely" internalize an appropriate "picture" of their social world and their place in it. Ideology offers the social subject not a set of narrowly "political" ideas but a fundamental framework of assumptions that defines the parameters of the real and the self; it constitutes what Althusser calls the social subject's "lived" relation to the real."

We now understand this process of "subjection" as working largely through an address to unconscious fears and desires as well as rational interests, and we understand it as working through a multiplicity of disparate, complexly interconnected social apparatuses. Ideology is less tenacious as a "set of ideas" than as a system of representations, perceptions, and images that precisely encourages men and women to "see" their specific place in a historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, a necessary function of the "real" itself. This "seeing" precedes and underlies any ways in which social subjects "think about" social reality, and this "seeing" is as likely to be shaped through a relaxed fascination with the page or the screen as through any serious attention to political theory. Ideological analysis in literary or cultural study, then, is concerned with the institutional and/or textual apparatuses that work on the reader's or spectator's imaginary conceptions of self and social order in order to call or *solicit* (or "interpellate," as Althusser puts it, using a quasi-legal term that combines the senses of "summons" and "hail") him/her into a specific form of social "reality" and social subjectivity.

Notwithstanding its roots in a class-based understanding of history, contemporary ideology theory also recognizes that perceived forms of social "reality"

and subjectivity are constructed within more than one system of differences. In various socially specific ways, differences of sex, race, religion, region, education, and ethnicity, as well as class, form complex webs of determinations that affect how ideology works up a "lived" relation to the real. Any concrete society incorporates a spectrum of ideologies and social subjectivities, and this field tends to be worked into an asymmetrical whole that must be continually readjusted, a structure in which most ideological positions take up an unequal, subordinate relation to the dominant ideology. Influential ideological practices (literature, film, music, and so forth) in our society must therefore address this entire field of "differences," and usually do not explicitly emphasize questions of class (which is not to say they don't affect the reproduction of social class structures). Modern cultural texts are experienced as complex psychological and personal events, oriented around the provocation and pacification (or, in the more high-brow forms, the intellectual exploration) of thrill and/or anxiety. Recent forms of ideological analysis in the United States have thus tended to focus on the ideological work that texts do on gender differences, a kind of work that is usually central to such textual events.

In principle, ideological analysis is open to the full spectrum of socially significant differences within which the subject is constituted. Of course, in any real sociohistorical situation, some differences will be more socially significant than others. The widespread turn to gender analysis as ideological analysis in this country also partly derives, I think, from the precarious but real gains of feminist politics and discourse in contemporary North America, as opposed to the relative weakness of class-based politics and discourse. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that this weakness hardly marks the disappearance of class as an important social reality, just the success of a social ideology that has constructed a "lived relation to the real" in which "class" is indeed very difficult to "see" and to "grasp," and through which the prevailing structure of class difference is *therefore* all the more securely reproduced.

We can now remark the radical difference between this use of "ideology" and the more common use I described at the beginning of this chapter. In my specification of the term, "ideology" is not the opposite of "common sense" or "realism," and there is no such thing as a social discourse that is nonideological. Indeed, "realism" (whether in politics or literature) can now be understood as the paradigmatic form of ideology, and one's insistence that s/he (or a given text) is "nonideological" because s/he (or it) disavows any coherent political theory is as silly as would be one's insistence that s/he is "nonbiological" because s/he has no coherent theory of cell formation. Ideology is a social process that works on and through every social subject, that, like any other social process, everyone is "in," whether or not they "know" or understand it. It has the function of producing an *obvious* "reality" that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced and did not need to be "known" at all. The

“nonideological” insistence does not mark one’s freedom from ideology, but one’s involvement in a specific, quite narrow ideology which has the exact social function of obscuring—even to the individual who inhabits it—the specificity and peculiarity of one’s social and political position, and of preventing any knowledge of the real processes that found one’s social life.

It is important to note, too, some differences between this use of “ideology” and some others that one might encounter, either in Marxist or in literary-critical discourses. Ideology here is a category analytically different from, although always related to, “politics.” Ideology is an important dimension or “instance” of social practice that develops within and alongside of other important instances of social practice, including the political, in the way that publishing houses and movie studios flourish in the same social space alongside political parties. This is, in fact, not just an analogy but an example: movie studios and political parties are what contemporary Marxist theory would call, respectively, ideological and political apparatuses. There is certainly a widespread interconnection and interpenetration between the two kinds of institutions, but there is also enough recognizable relative autonomy and specificity to the kind of work done in each, and to the kind of social product or effect each produces, so that a rigorous social theory has to be able to make the important distinctions, precisely in order to draw out the important relations. In this regard, we might remark that, if older theories of ideology tended too easily to subsume the ideological under the political, newer versions sometimes tend to overcorrect by minimizing the relative autonomy of the political and/or by forgetting to specify the relationships between ideological and political effects. For this writer at least, ideological analysis maintains its edge—that which prevents it from becoming a form of social psychology—only by keeping our eyes on the relations of cultural texts to questions of politics, power, and/or class.

The difficulty, of course, is to be analytically and historically careful in specifying these relations. Ideological effects are not identical with, but are related or attached in specific, complex ways to political effects. These relations are sometimes explicit, and sometimes surreptitious; they can be quite close, or rather strained; they can operate at the level of a single text, or only through an accretion of similar textual strategies throughout the culture; they usually serve to reinforce, but can also help to disrupt, the subject’s acceptance of a given sociopolitical order. The multiple, potentially contradictory political effect of ideological work is *another* expression or displacement—coexisting with, and often more acute than, those that occur in political practices—of the ongoing conflicts that constitute the class-divided social formation in which all these practices develop.

We live in a society with a constantly changing variety of social apparatuses which have a heavily ideological function: the family (in crisis), churches (now multiple and quasi-competitive), schools, sports, network TV, public TV, cable

TV, Hollywood (mass-audience) films, independent, foreign, and “art” (educated-audience) films, not to mention the various “literary” genres from “serious” fiction and drama to “popular” romances, science fiction, westerns, comic books, and so on. Most of these institutions make every effort emphatically to disavow “politics,” to avoid thinking about who should control the power of the state, and it would be silly to treat them as if they were indistinguishable from those institutions that do directly address explicitly political questions. A horror film does not work in the same way as a campaign speech, though it is in fact the kind of address that works *better* and *for more people*. A declining percentage of the American population pays any attention to predominantly political institutions (only about 50 percent of the electorate voted in the 1988 election); every single American subject is addressed by, and pays attention to, some of these predominantly ideological apparatuses. This declining political interest does not mean the system is not working; to the contrary, it is a sign that the system is working quite well, thank you—only working for more people more of the time through apparatuses of ideological interpellation/subjectation, rather than those of political persuasion.

Indeed, the depoliticization of the social subject is one of the major political effects that the work of American ideology as a whole helps to reinforce. The American political process is itself increasingly characterized—quite to the benefit of the stability of the social system—by the predominance of the ideological over the political, by contests between photo opportunities rather than choices between political programs, by the election of leaders based on the distinctively ideological address of the feel-good fast-food commercial. The relative autonomy of ideology and politics allows us to imagine that some of the ideological techniques of the American entertainment and public-relations industries *could* be used to quite different political effect—to reinforce political awareness, historical perspective, communal responsibility, and a sense of everyone’s right to help determine one’s own, and the nation’s, economic and social destiny. This would require, of course, that the social apparatuses of ideology develop alongside, and in a different kind of articulation with, different kinds of political and economic apparatuses, in a different kind of society. As Althusser puts it:

In a class society ideology is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is settled to the profit of the ruling class. In a classless society ideology is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all men. (1970, 235–36)

The implication of this quotation—that ideology would be a necessary aspect even of the kind of classless society that Marxism posits as possible and necessary—marks a clear difference between this theory and one which would define



ideology as in a zero-sum relation to "truth" or "science." Most previous versions of Marxism understood "ideology" within the framework of "illusions" or "mystifications" that must and could be dispelled by promoting a more accurate knowledge of society. In many ways, these Marxisms accepted a quasi-Platonic epistemological standard of evaluating ideological practice that did not recognize the distinctive social effects it produces; analogously, our insistence on the insufficiency of this Platonism further develops, within a radical social theory, a kind of response that has reappeared frequently in the history of criticism: "the poet . . . he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. . . . What child is there, that, coming to a play, and seeing *Thebes* written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?" (Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesie*).

In our framework, too, the primary point of ideology, that which defines its social function, is not to "give knowledge" or make an accurate "copy" of something, but to constitute, adjust, and/or transform social subjects. The distinctive effect of ideology is not theoretical but pragmatic, to enable various social subjects to feel at home, and to act (or not act), within the limits of a given social project. Ideological discourses and practices will always contain and transmit some "knowledges," but are not vehicles for producing knowledge, and should not be judged in those terms. There are, indeed, other, complexly related social practices—perhaps identifiable as "scientific" or "theoretical"—that have the production of knowledge as their primary purpose, but these different kinds of practices are not the opposite of, and cannot replace ideology. Ideology is a necessary element of "sociality" itself, "a structure essential to the historical life of societies . . . *indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence*" (Althusser 1970, 234–35; emphasis in original). From this perspective, then, the problem with specific ideological discourses and practices is not *that* they are ideological, but exactly *how*, and to exactly *which* "social conditions of existence," they "form, transform and equip" men and women to respond. The kind of question posed by an ideological analysis is less: "Does a given ideological discourse or practice accurately represent Thebes, or New York, or Managua?"; it is more: "What is the effect on social subjects of a given ideological practice, in a given situation, transformatively (mis)representing Thebes, or New York, or Managua, in precisely the way it does?"

There can, of course, be more than one answer to this kind of question, depending on context, audience, and the ways that framing discourses such as literary criticism prepare and re-present texts, and associate them with other texts and social practices. It is probably easiest to grasp the point of contemporary ideology theory by looking at what it might do with a concrete cultural text, the recent film *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. This film demonstrates, first of all, the complexity of that ideological apparatus called "Hollywood"—a word that now designates not a town but a multinational industry. The severe financial constraints

on current film-making have given rise to increasingly complicated prefilm credits, which both indicate the various sources of money and demonstrate our social "subjection" to a specific ideological apparatus that always (even in the case of relatively "progressive" entertainment) requires us to wait on the contractual agreement of capital sources for our entertainment. For this film, we have three separate credit screens, whose syntactical incoherence probably reflects an imbalance of financial clout; these images credit as follows (slashes indicate line breaks): "Island Alive/presents"; "In Association With/FILMDALLAS/Investment Fund I"; "HB Films/presents." These credits seem to indicate a true multinational conglomeration of capital backing the film: British (Island Pictures, an offshoot of Island Records, a British company that has produced a lot of reggae), American (FILMDALLAS a Texas-based investment group), and Brazilian (HB Films, presumably a venture of Hector Babenco, the film's Brazilian director). In addition, the film is based on a novel by an Argentine writer, Manuel Puig, and is carefully casted with hot, "bankable" young American actors who can establish its appeal to the financially crucial American mass market. Thus, this film was successful in part because it shrewdly negotiated the complicated economic preconditions of any contemporary ideological practice that wants to have a mass effect.

These factors describe crucial determinations on the film as the product of an ideological apparatus within a specific mode of production; but they do not yet explain its ideological effects as a cultural "text"—that is, as a system of representations perceived as a plenitude of "meaning" and/or "experience." For this is, after all, a film that strives for, and I think largely achieves, politically "progressive" and aesthetically "interesting" (avant-garde or "postmodern") effects. It is the product of a leftist Latin American writer, and a perhaps even more definitely leftist Latin American director. Manuel Puig is a professed homosexual writer who had to leave Argentina during the years of military repression. One of his earlier novels, the semiautobiographical *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, tells the story of a little boy who develops a fascination with the beautiful feminine screen image as a result of his weekend trips to the movies with his mother. Hector Babenco's previous film, *Pixote*, depicted the life of a homeless, abandoned Brazilian street kid, who eventually takes up male prostitution. The title character was played by a real child of the streets, one of the millions in the Latin American sector of the free world, who recently, at the approximate age of sixteen, met his unsurprising fate—death by gunfire. The previous work of both, in other words, showed a willingness to confront social issues in original and provocative forms; both have sought cultural languages to help deepen the political challenges that have recently broken up some of the more grotesque subfascist regimes in Latin America. The film is in part, then, a product of the historical process of Latin American revolution. In this context, in fact, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* explicitly explores the different ways in which ideology works on social

subjectivity, and attempts to open the viewer (even as it presents the reciprocal opening of the characters) to the manifold, curious, and unforeseen relations that can obtain between ideology and politics.

The film portrays the jail-cell relation between Valentina, a Latin-American revolutionary, and Molina, who has been imprisoned for his homosexuality. This relation is mediated by Molina's "telling" of a film, a secondhand narrative that helps to "pass the time," and to distract Valentina from the pain of the beatings and poisoning to which he is subjected. Molina's favorite film, which in fact constitutes much of the film that we see, turns out to be a crude Nazi propaganda film about greedy and treacherous Jews versus heroic German officers in occupied Paris. While Molina's identification with such a film seems ludicrous, even shocking, to Valentina and the viewer, we quickly understand that he literally does not "see" the film in this way. Molina sees the Jews with yarmulkes as "Turks" with "fezzes," and the German officers as dashing young soldiers in sleek uniforms. When Valentina points out that it is actually a Nazi film, Molina responds (repeating a typical complaint about "criticism" from those who find intense pleasure in the way a text addresses and constitutes their subjectivity): "Look, I don't explain my movies. It just ruins the emotion. . . . That's just the background. *This* is where the important part begins—the part about the lovers." Molina sees and enjoys the film only as "romance," as a kind of ideological address that confirms and reconstitutes an identity and reality in which love, beauty, and finding the perfect mate (which for him has the conventionally "feminine" inflection of "getting the man") are what is "really" important.

This situation has all the trappings, then, of a typical division between the politically "serious" Marxist revolutionary, and the willfully naive, "decadent" homosexual/"romantic," a structure that seems confirmed when we learn that Molina's kindness to Valentina was instigated by the warden as a ruse to get information from Valentina about his comrades; in exchange for acting as an informer, Molina is promised an early release. After all, for Molina, the politics and history of Valentina's struggle are "just the background."

But the effects of ideology and ideological work can be surprising. Precisely because of Molina's romantic ideology, and his telling of the romantic film stories, he and Valentina grow closer, and each learns to respect and open himself to the other's ideology. Drawing Valentina into the romantic fantasies inevitably precipitates Molina's falling in love with him; Valentina, in turn, is actually helped and strengthened by Molina's emotional and physical support (whatever its original motivation), and takes it as (what it increasingly is) a genuine openness and sensitivity that expresses Molina's own different kind of strength. Their mutual ideological complicity is finally confirmed when Molina agrees to act as a messenger to Valentina's revolutionary group, and Valentina agrees to enter Molina's romantic imaginary by allowing the latter to enter his body. Both subject positions are transformed, without either being denied. Molina takes a new

kind of political commitment into his life, which survives even his being shot by Valentina's comrades, prompting the police to suspect—correctly, though not quite in the way intended—that “he was more deeply involved than we suspected.” (The police think that Molina “had agreed if necessary to be eliminated by them [the revolutionaries],” though it seems to the viewer that the revolutionaries shot him because they mistakenly but understandably thought he had led the police to them.)

For his part, Valentina, brutally tortured again, appropriates the strength of romantic fantasy in his own terms, entering the “spider woman” film-within-the-film as a means to avoid the pain of his fresh wounds, and the even more politically debilitating despair that might be inflicted with them. And the viewer finds him/herself enmeshed in a tale showing some surprising interpenetrations of ideology and politics, wherein one social subject's romantic ideology is detached from its original reactionary political associations and worked into a catalyst for revolutionary political commitment, and another social subject's revolutionary ideology opens itself to the hopes embodied in romantic fantasy, and to the revolutionary possibilities of another kind of “lived relation to the real.”

As I suggested above, a complex network of factors—including context, audience, and the influence of framing discourses and practices—helps to determine the “meaning” of any text, and it is unlikely, under current ideological conditions in the United States, that most viewers would spontaneously perceive *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as I just have. Indeed, the present state of American cultural ideology is perfectly epitomized by the following conversation that took place recently in a Brooklyn apartment, while a Puerto Rican family, their guest, and several mice were watching a video of *Demons II*:

YOUNG MAN: This is a good movie, but it's not as good as *Demons I*.

GUEST: I never saw *Demons I*.

YOUNG MAN: Well, it's like *Halloween*. You've seen *Halloween*, haven't you?

GUEST: No, I haven't seen *Halloween*.

YOUNG MAN: Oh, well, it's like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, you've seen that haven't you?

GUEST: No, I never saw that movie.

YOUNG MAN: You never saw *Nightmare on Elm Street*? You don't know Freddy Kruger? Well, it's like *Friday the 13th*. You must have seen *Friday the 13th*, with Jason. If you don't know Freddy, you must know Jason!

GUEST: No, I never saw *Friday the 13th*, either.

YOUNG MAN: What are you, a communist?

Such reactions certainly indicate the conservative thrust of the “normal” American mode of perceiving or interpreting cultural texts, and its perverse, te-

nacious hold on the most disparate social subjects; they also indicate that this “normal” mode of perception is in fact no more “natural,” “spontaneous,” or “obvious”—and no *less* politicized—than what I have done with *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Any mode of perceiving the film would be determined by a prior ideological construction of audience and context, and by the film’s immediate entry into a network of framing discourses that compete to “clarify” and “elucidate”—actually to *produce*—its meaning and/or value, and to do that in politically significant ways. Academic literary and cultural criticism is only one such framing practice, within which contestatory theories—like the self-conscious ideology theory that underlies this essay—have somewhat more space to assert themselves than they do in the dominant Siskel-and-Ebert kind of critical discourse. The dominant discourse produces an audience, context, and text in which the reigning political framework appears as “normality” itself; any other sociopolitical nuances of a text are rendered either imperceptible—“just the background”—or impossible to take seriously—the effects of a demon ideology. The discourse of this essay attempts to make such nuances “obvious” in their own right; the encounter between these discourses marks an ideological struggle over whether a pleasurable/beautiful/fascinating cultural text will be used to reaffirm or to challenge the prevailing sense of self and social order—always a struggle over what is “obvious.”

To give another brief, more direct, and even more “mass-cultural” example of the relation between ideological and political struggle, of how the power to define what is “obvious” helps to determine who rules, and of the relative strength of insurgent versus dominant ideological frameworks, we can offer the widely publicized tussle during the 1984 presidential campaign over the “meaning” of Bruce Springsteen. This began with a column by George Will, America’s favorite reactionary nerd, lauding Springsteen as a shining example of the American dream—of how hard work, ambition, and the unfettered ability to accumulate wealth can give hope, if not ensure success, to working-class Americans. This version of Springsteen was then worked into a Reagan speech in Springsteen’s home state of New Jersey, attempting to appropriate Springsteen, the cultural icon, as a Reaganite kind of guy. The national media soon followed, with full segments on the network nightly news, interviewing fans at Springsteen concerts, who proclaimed that, indeed, Springsteen appeared to them as another proof of the obvious American social fact that if he could make it, anybody can. All of the hoopla eventually prompted Springsteen himself to remind his concert audiences that the words of his songs (like “My Hometown”) hardly proclaim the durability of the American dream; to donate concert proceeds to union welfare funds; and to speak to workers rallying against plant closures, telling them: “What goes unmeasured is the price that unemployment inflicts on people’s families, on their marriages, on the single mothers out there trying to raise their kids on their own.”

At stake here was how the vast appeal of an attractive cultural icon, and the wildly popular and pleasing cultural texts (rock songs) he produced, could be appropriated to support specific political and socioeconomic programs. Do Bruce Springsteen and his work obviously reaffirm or obviously challenge the American Dream according to Reagan and Will? Do he and his songs show an America that is a land of opportunity for everyone, or a land of broken hopes for too many? In this case, the repeated, if somewhat less-publicized, direct interventions of the "author" led right-wing propagandists to back off somewhat on their attempts to appropriate his work, and the result can be described as a kind of stand-off. For even such a rich and prominent "author's" explicit remarks cannot entirely efface the effects of an even richer and more influential ideological apparatus, which continually prepares audience and context to receive any cultural message as always-already confirming the obvious superiority of North American capitalism. Bruce Springsteen is, after all, a product of that ideological apparatus, and the various industries that constitute it; he is a beneficiary of a socioeconomic system whose fundamental project is to allow the unlimited private accumulation of wealth and unimpeded private discretion over its investment—a project that inevitably produces a pole of unemployment, poverty, and misery; he is an icon of an American dream that is not exclusively Republican or Reaganite but a bipartisan pillar of United States capitalist ideology, a dream that is at the present moment (the presidential election of 1988) being enthusiastically endorsed and promoted by liberal Democrats like Michael Dukakis and even Jesse Jackson. And to say this is not to issue some kind of ultraleftist criticism of Bruce Springsteen, who has been forthrightly and refreshingly progressive, but to recognize a sociocultural fact—namely, that he and his work are enmeshed in ideological apparatuses and ideological struggles that determine its "meaning" in ways he can (and does) affect but cannot entirely control. It is also to recognize that progressive ideological struggle inevitably confronts tenacious structures of social and class power, and can overcome their resistance only in conjunction with a progressive political struggle that is equally forthright and tenacious. Obvious, isn't it?

To conclude, "ideology" designates the indispensable practice—including the "systems of representation" that are its products and supports—through which individuals of different class, race, and sex are worked into a particular "lived relation" to a sociohistorical project. Ideological analysis studies the ways in which those "lived relations" and systems of representation are constituted, transformed, and affiliated with various specific political programs. More committed forms of ideological analysis also attempt to change the association of influential ideological ensembles and particular political programs. For there can be no successful political program that is not driven by powerful and comprehensive forms of ideological address. Thus, literary and cultural texts of all kinds constitute a society's ideological practice, and literary and cultural criticism con-

stitutes an activity that, in its own rather meager way, either submits to, or self-consciously attempts to transform, the political effects of that indispensable social practice.

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