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978-0-521-58715-0 - Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality

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Excerpt

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## Introduction

In this monograph I seek to explain the impression of reality in the cinema. I begin by joining a number of recent writers in criticizing the way that contemporary film theory characterizes the impression of reality in the cinema with ideas drawn from Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxist literary modernism. I then offer my own explanation of the phenomenon through an analysis of the concept of illusion and its relationship to fantasy in the experience of visual representation.

I follow the usage of Noël Carroll and employ the term “contemporary film theory” to refer to Althusserian–Lacanian film theory, but the reader should bear in mind that this is a term of art.<sup>1</sup> The phrase “contemporary film theory,” in my usage, does not describe all post-1960s film theory, some of which, like that of Stanley Cavell and Victor Perkins, is cast in the classical mold, and some of which, like the work of Edward Branigan or Carroll himself, has a distinctly analytical orientation. Nor does the term refer to the various theories of spectatorship and culture falling under the general rubric of “cultural studies” that currently occupy the field in the wake of the perceived failings of Althusserian–Lacanian film theory adequately to account for the social context in which films are produced and understood. What the term does describe is a film theory that has the following characteristics:

It is relatively recent in origin – the founding texts date from the late sixties.

It is united by certain common theoretical assumptions, central of which, I shall argue, is a certain understanding of the impression of reality in the cinema.

It is united in method by a self-conscious opposition to traditional or classical film aesthetics.

It has occupied a preeminent place in the theoretical literature on film in the past twenty years.

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In order to characterize the power of movies upon the spectator's imagination, contemporary film theorists draw on Althusser's theory of ideology, which borrows certain ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Contemporary film theorists conceive of ideology as a form of knowledge in which human beings are blind to the fact that what they believe to be true is a product not of the way the world is, but of the language they use. Language appears to provide humans with the capability of knowing reality, but only because its role in structuring the way that knowledge is produced is invisible or transparent. The effect of language upon the human being is more radical than a simple misunderstanding of the nature of reality; for the apprehension of reality that discourse appears to afford also produces a person who defines herself through the apparent ability to use language to refer to reality. Thus, human self-definition is deemed to be based upon a fundamental misunderstanding. The human subject, capable of knowledge, is formed through a necessary misrecognition of her radical dependency upon language.

The transparency of the cinematic image and its effect upon the spectator seems to contemporary film theorists to exemplify this conception of ideology. Contemporary film theorists argue that, for a number of reasons, the cinematic image appears to spectators as if it were reality, but this appearance is an illusion. In fact, the cinematic image provides an *impression* of reality; it is actually an image and not the reality it appears to be. In this way the spectator's response to the cinematic image exemplifies the way in which ideology in general functions. Cinema is a form of signification that creates the appearance of a knowable reality and hence confirms the self-definition of the human subject as someone capable of knowing that reality; but in fact both reality and the human subject who appears capable of knowing that reality are "effects" of a process of signification. The film theorists' exposure of the way in which the spectator experiences cinematic representation as an illusion thus seems to reveal the more fundamental illusion upon which subjectivity itself is based.

I argue that contemporary film theorists' characterization of the impression of reality in the cinema is logically incoherent. Contemporary film theorists claim that the spectator's response to cinematic discourse illuminates the manner in which the human being in general is constructed in discourse. However, it is only possible to understand the fact that knowledge is a function of discourse if a human being exists who is capable of knowing reality in a different way than in the manner described by the theory. There must be a film spectator who *can* see a film and his own relationship to it for what it actually is. If such a human or film spectator exists, then the theory is false. If such a human or film spectator does not exist, then the way in which the

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human being is constructed in discourse cannot be known and the theory is vacuous. Contemporary film theorists construe the film spectator as a passive observer of the image who is duped into believing that it is real. In fact, as I shall argue, the film spectator knows it is only a film and actively participates in the experience of illusion that the cinema affords. However, my arguments may not be convincing to those persuaded by the basic idea that the failure of language to offer a transparent grasp of reality serves to expose the way the human being is constructed out of language. Since it could be argued that the problems arising in film theory stem not from this basic idea but rather from its application, it is the idea itself that must be challenged.

I undertake this task by tracing the contemporary philosophical sources of this idea in the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. I do not claim that these writers are the only philosophical sources for film theory – Georg Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre are also significant – but I do contend that it is transcendental phenomenology and its deconstruction that provide the philosophical picture of representation and its critique that animates contemporary film theory. I argue that in contemporary film theory, the film spectator and, by extension, the human being in general, exemplifies Husserl's transcendental subject to whom representation appears transparent. The exposure of cinematic representation as a form of illusion illustrates Derrida's contention that representation is fundamentally opaque and not transparent in the manner that Husserl claims. Since Derrida, like Husserl, assumes that knowledge is possible only if representation is transparent, the opacity of representation entails that all knowledge is founded upon illusion. The idea of the "humanist" subject that rests on the possibility of shared knowledge of human experience is thus a fiction.

By invoking arguments made in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, I argue that the theoretical discourse that informs arguments about cinematic illusion made within contemporary film theory embodies a mistaken picture of the relationship between human beings, representation, and the world. The error lies in the assumption shared by Husserl and Derrida alike that genuine knowledge is possible only if representation *is* transparent. I argue that contemporary film theorists' analyses of the impression of reality in the cinema illustrate not that knowledge is a function of representation, but embody, instead, a false conception of representation and its relationship to knowledge. Contemporary film theorists suggest that film spectators misunderstand their relationship to representation, but in fact it is the critical theorist who misconstrues the nature of representation and its role in affording us knowledge of the world. For Wittgenstein, the capacity to know the

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world is not an illusion fostered by forms of representation; instead, forms of representation are tools that allow us to interact with a world that we come to know through this interaction. Indeed, it is mistaken to speak of language as a form of representation at all in the sense that the use of language to represent the world is only one of its uses, and one that is no more privileged than others in affording us knowledge.

My arguments place some of the criticisms leveled by Noël Carroll at contemporary film theory and at the theory of subject construction that underlies it in a wider philosophical context. I also concur with Carroll's conclusion that contemporary film theorists' characterization of the impression of reality in the cinema is mistaken. Where my criticism of contemporary film theory differs sharply from Carroll's is in the implication that I draw from the failure of such theory. Carroll rejects entirely the applicability of the concept of illusion to the cinema, and together with his rejection of illusionism, he rejects the appropriateness of any kind of psychoanalytic theory for understanding the spectator's experience of the cinema. In place of psychoanalytic theory Carroll endorses the cognitively oriented theories of narrative comprehension offered by David Bordwell and others who conceptualize the spectator as an active participant in understanding the text. While I believe that cognitive theory illuminates the way in which we understand films, I also believe that by rejecting the idea of an impression of reality in the cinema and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship that might explain it, Carroll is unable to account for central aspects of our pleasure in the cinema that contemporary film theorists correctly identify but incorrectly describe.

I seek to give the impression of reality in the cinema renewed significance through a detailed investigation of the different ways in which illusion may be experienced and the kind of belief that illusion entails. I argue that the form of illusion central to our experience of the cinema is one in which, while we know that what we are seeing is only a film, we nevertheless experience that film as a fully realized world. I call this form "projective illusion." The experience of projective illusion is not one that is imposed upon a passive spectator but an experience into which an active spectator voluntarily enters. The experience is characteristic of all media, not a property that is essential to cinema and cinema alone. However, I argue that projective illusion is most consistently afforded by the cinema because of the specific properties of the medium. In sum, I provide an analytical account of the "suspension of disbelief" as it functions in media that are based upon vision and/or sound, such as representational painting, photography, and theater, and I argue for the special significance of the cinema for understanding this phenomenon.

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Contemporary film theory has tended to assimilate in its use of psychoanalysis the idea of the construction of the subject in discourse. Once stripped of this idea, psychoanalysis can illuminate the epistemology of film spectatorship.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the experience of the impression of reality in the cinema takes the form of a benign disavowal where spectators entertain in thought that what they see is real in a manner akin to the experience of a conscious fantasy. The difference lies in the fact that in cinema this conscious fantasy is fully realized for the spectator in the form of a projective illusion. Thus I argue that while I know that what I see is only a film, I can experience this film with the kind of realization that occurs in dreams. In this way a psychoanalytic theory of film can assign a proper place to consciousness in the experience of film.

The revision of psychoanalytic film theory I propose here has particular significance for feminist film theory. An influential paradigm of feminist theorizing about the cinema identifies the transcendental subject constructed by film with the male subject and assumes a connection between disavowal in the cinema and fetishistic disavowal that is predicated, according to Freud, upon the male perception of female lack. Feminist film theory thus offers a conception of the essentially masculine character of the cinematic apparatus that rests upon the theory of subject construction. In this way feminist theories of the gender-bound character of the cinematic apparatus are also implicated in the epistemological contradictions that underlie the theory of subject construction. Without a doubt, women go to the cinema, but this form of feminist film theory can account for their pleasure only in terms of a familiar double bind: The female spectator must either identify with an active masculine gaze or identify with woman as lack, the object of that gaze. However, I argue that the form of aesthetic disavowal I associate with the experience of the impression of reality in the cinema is not to be identified with fetishistic disavowal that focuses on the sight of sexual difference. It is a gender-indifferent experience that pertains to the child's original separation from her or his mother. I argue that once the gender indifference or neutrality of disavowal and the gaze in the cinema is recognized, proper account can then be taken of the way in which the activity of disavowal engages with specific kinds of image to produce an experience that, although it may be qualified by gender, allows room for different kinds of appropriation of the image by female and other spectators.

The shape of the argument of the book is not strictly linear. In Chapter 1 I outline and criticize the major arguments of contemporary film theory regarding the impression of reality in the cinema, and delineate the way in which contemporary film theory incorporates arguments from Althusserian

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Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxist literary modernism. Chapter 2 takes up the wider philosophical picture that informs the arguments introduced in Chapter 1. I trace the philosophical assumptions that underpin contemporary film theory to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Derrida's "deconstructive" philosophy. I explicate and criticize the work of both these philosophers in the light of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, which I suggest is important for understanding the philosophical failings of contemporary film theory that result, in central respects, from their work.

In Chapter 3, I abandon the general philosophical issues of Chapter 2 and return to addressing the specific question of the impression of reality in the cinema. I develop an alternative explanation for the phenomenon of the impression of reality in the cinema in terms of projective illusion, which I situate in relationship both to other forms of visual experience that we might more readily call illusions and to the experience of projective illusion in other cultural practices. The argument of Chapter 4 proceeds from and complements that of Chapter 3. I suggest that the way we experience the impression of reality in the cinema can be understood through a psychoanalytic conception of the mind and, in particular, a conception of the role that fantasy plays in mental life. In the course of defending a psychoanalytic understanding of film spectatorship, I begin to explicate the relationship between character identification and the experience of cinema in the form of projective illusion. Finally, I reevaluate some of the central arguments of feminist film theory and join the attempt to cast feminist psychoanalytic film theory in a different theoretical mold than the one that has dominated its development.

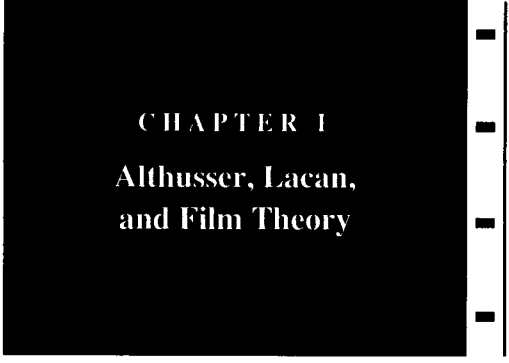
The shape of the work affects the way it might be profitably read. The argument of Chapter 2 relates film theory to a wider philosophical framework, one that informs critical theory in the humanities in general; it thus will prove most interesting to those who seek to understand the connection between film theory and this broader theoretical discourse. Those whose interest is primarily in film can skip this chapter without losing the thread of my argument about the impression of reality in the cinema, how it has been conceived, and how it should be reconceived.

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CHAPTER 1  
Althusser, Lacan,  
and Film Theory

Anglo–French film theory of the 1970s and early 1980s sought to synthesize Marxism and psychoanalysis in an explanation of the ideological, psychological, and cognitive effects of the cinema’s apparent evocation of reality. The impetus to theorize the psychological and social impact of cinema was nourished by events of May 1968 and their failure to provoke radical social change.<sup>1</sup> The outcome of these events rekindled the ongoing debate in Western Marxism about the failure of working-class revolution, which many Marxists imputed to the role of ideology in reproducing the class structure that governs the process of production. The immediate inspiration for radical film theorists in this period was the psychoanalytically inflected theory of ideology proposed by the French Marxist Louis Althusser. Althusser himself did not write on the mass media; but the theory of ideology he proposed seemed to offer film theorists the basis for a detailed explanation of the influence of movies upon the imagination. In particular, film theorists argued that the kind of deception that cinematic illusion wrought upon the film spectator was a precise instantiation of the kind of deception wrought by ideology upon the individual. Since Althusser’s theory of ideology was presented in a provisional and tentative form, and since cinematic illusion seemed to demonstrate his theory so well, the analysis of cinematic illusion promised to play a central role in bringing to fruition the Marxist project of explaining and criticizing the function of ideology in society.

Since the propagation of ideology in the cinema was said to have such a pivotal role in maintaining the status quo, the critique of cinematic illusionism also offered the hope of undermining that status quo and promoting social change. In this respect, ideology critique meshes with a second tradition within Western Marxism, represented by figures such as Bertolt Brecht, György Lukács, and Theodor Adorno, that has promoted social change through the practice of art. Althusser’s own essays on art contribute to this tradition, but their relationship to his theory of ideology is only very tentatively sketched. However, his psychoanalytically inflected theory of ideolo-

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gy was influential upon a group of writers associated with the French journal *Tel Quel* who, in the wake of the events of May 1968, promoted a political literary avant-garde within the Marxist tradition. The key to understanding the relationship between ideology and revolutionary art was, for these literary Marxists, language or, more specifically, signification or linguistic meaning. For theorists like Julia Kristeva, Althusser's theory of ideology could be used to illuminate the way in which signification itself was at once ideological and yet also, in the context of artistic practice, a source of liberation from the hold of ideology. The privileged form of writing for Kristeva, and other contributors to *Tel Quel*, was literary modernism, which echoed Adorno's own espousal of high modernism in the postwar decades.<sup>2</sup>

When film theorists applied Althusser's theory of ideology to understanding the cinema, some of them did so within this broader intellectual framework that equated signification itself with ideology. The effect of the impression of reality in the cinema upon the spectator was likened to the effect of language upon the individual in its ideological impact. In the case of the analysis of signification, it was necessary to turn to a distinctive use of language – literary language – in order to find a way to expose the ideological effects of language. The question for film theory was to identify and promote, in an analogous way, a form of filmmaking that would counter cinematic illusion. Certain filmmakers of the North American avant-garde who explored the material properties of film provided a model of filmmaking practice that was radically anti-illusionist in its form. However, an avant-garde practice rooted in the materiality or “ontology” of the medium was deemed insufficient, by itself, to transform the ideological effects of the apparatus, for it ignored the role of narrative in sustaining illusion and the ideological effect produced by it. It was the interaction between the impression of reality in the cinema and cinematic narration that engendered the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus. Thus, within the framework of Althusserian film theory, contemporary film theorists turned to the work of Bertolt Brecht as a model for a modernist, reflexive filmmaking practice that challenged principles of narrative linearity, closure, and verisimilitude. This Brechtian modernism was considered to be exemplified in the work of Jean-Luc Godard and the collaborative films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet.<sup>3</sup>

Brecht, Lukács, and Adorno had all in their different ways sought to question the distinction between high art and mass culture. However, French political modernists of the 1960s betrayed scant interest in the mass media and tacitly upheld the dichotomy between the refined ennobling experience of high art and the debased manipulative character of the mass media that characterized literary modernism in general. The difference for the Marxist



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literary modernists lay in the fact that the ennoblement of the human spirit that characterized high art was defined as the capacity of certain forms of artistic practice to liberate the individual from the hold of ideology. When film theorists embraced political modernism, they carried this dichotomy over into their understanding of cinema. Mass culture – classical Hollywood cinema – was deemed illusionistic and manipulative, and an alternative film-making practice was celebrated in which cinematic illusionism and the pleasures of narrative involvement it afforded were eschewed in favor of the cerebral pleasures of films that sought to foreground the manner of their construction and undermine the effect of cinematic illusion.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I criticize contemporary film theorists' account of the impression of reality in the cinema and its foundations in the writings of Althusser, Lacan, and Marxist literary modernism. This task is a complicated one for two reasons. First, when the ideas of Althusser or Lacan are applied to film they are often oversimplified and misconstrued, particularly since they often enter into film theory through literary theory. Second, Althusser's own reference to Lacan's idea of "mirror misrecognition," from which contemporary film theorists took inspiration, misconstrues Lacan's argument. However, even when freed from the distortions of film and literary theorists, the arguments of Althusser and Lacan on the topics that have been germane to contemporary film theorists' understanding of the impression of reality in the cinema and its effect on the spectator are not convincing.

**Althusser's Theory of Ideology**

Althusser developed his theory of ideology in the context of a wider criticism of the kind of Marxism that dominated European Marxism in the postwar period and had been inspired by the rediscovery of Marx's early writings. These early writings had grown out of Hegel's progressive, enlightenment view of history as the grand journey of the spirit of humankind through successive self-alienation toward self-realization and freedom. While retaining the overall shape of Hegel's story of history, Marx transforms the relationship posed by Hegel between consciousness and society. For Hegel, different forms of social organization are actual manifestations of the human spirit; for Marx, successive forms of social organization manifest the best available form, at any given level of technological development, for human beings to extract and transform the natural resources necessary to sustain their material existence. According to Marx, the beliefs about society that are held within any given form of social organization tend to promote and sustain that form of social organization. These beliefs are ideological because, although

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held to be true, they turn out to be false in the light of a wider view of history (historical materialism).<sup>5</sup> Thus, to use the classic example, the bourgeois state accords civil liberties to all its citizens, and these political rights bestow legitimacy upon the state. However, these political rights serve to mask the real state of affairs in civil society where one class (the bourgeoisie) exploits another class (the workers). The bourgeoisie is, characteristically, unaware that there is a contradiction between the conditions of life in political and civil society, for it is not in its own interests to perceive this contradiction (false consciousness). Since such a perception is not in its interests, the bourgeoisie will not necessarily be converted to the cause of social change by education alone. In order to recognize the conflict between apparent rights and actual exploitation, the intellectual must take the point of view of the worker, who actually experiences alienation.

Althusser's critique of Hegelian Marxism lies in its assumption of a domain of shared human experience unclouded by ideology to which one can appeal in support of the call for social change. Althusser argues that as Western Marxism embraced this humanist assumption in the postwar period it pursued the option of reform rather than revolution and abandoned its claim to be Marxist. He contends that in order to understand, once again, the necessity of revolutionary practice in Marxism, a reassessment of the revolutionary character of Marxist epistemology is required. Althusser claims that the later writings of Marx articulate an "epistemological break" with Hegelian philosophy and transform the relationship between theory and practice that it implies. It is because the later writings of Marx provide a new theory of knowledge that they offer a conception of political practice incompatible with reform. For Althusser, the early writings of Marx share with the tradition of philosophical epistemology from which they are derived a certain picture of how truth is established. Althusser discerns that this picture of truth underlies philosophy, science, and common sense. He refers to it as the "empiricist conception of knowledge":

The empiricist conception of knowledge presents a process that takes place between a given object and a given subject. . . . What defines it as such is the nature of the process of knowledge, in other words a certain relationship that defines knowledge as such, as a function of the real object of which it is said to be the knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

In an analogy that proved extremely important for film theory, Althusser compares the empiricist conception of knowledge to the metaphor of knowledge as vision. This metaphor describes an ideal of unclouded, transparent perception of the real object by the percipient when she has discovered the