CHAPTER ONE

Marxist Film Theory

In this chapter, I offer an overview of a few key concepts in Marxist theory that prove particularly foundational for the project of film theory, along with a summary of some of the ways those foundations have been built upon. The key concepts discussed are "mode of production," "ideology," and "mediation." Before turning to the outline of those key concepts, this chapter asserts in some broad strokes why Marxism in general is useful as a theoretical paradigm, since this cannot be taken for granted in academic inquiry at large nor in film studies at all. Resurgent interest in Marx after the global financial crisis of 2008 and the revaluing of socialist (albeit not communist) alternatives in 2016 and beyond suggest that the time is ripe for a renewed centrality of Marxism in film studies. Marxism is a project of composing new ideas in the service of composing a new social order, and that project remains compelling almost two hundred years after its emergence.

Formalism in Marxism

In the introduction, I indicated that through its emphasis on human creativity and the contingency of social history, Marxism can accord a special significance to art. I want to

give that significance some more heft in pointing out how much Marxism defined itself as a philosophy of contradiction by analyzing the concrete forms in which contradiction takes shape. Indeed, "form" is a crucial category of analysis for Marx, and one which opens connections to aesthetics and to art interpretation. Marx presented his revolutions in thought as rooted in his focus on the *forms* of existing relations. He called this revolutionary approach "materialism." As he defines it, materialism addresses itself "first . . . to the existence of living human individuals . . . the organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature." Note the *plural* existence, and the organization of this plurality. Where Kant, Hegel, and other idealists philosophized in the singular, about being and consciousness and the idea, Marx pointed thought toward the ways that material context complicates, diversifies, and multiplies the singular subjects of philosophy. He contextualized philosophy's spiritual realm, placing ideas in their material context of power, relations, organizations, and the outcome of this process of contextualization was concern for the "definite forms" of philosophical abstractions. He differentiated between his philosophy and the prevailing idealist philosophy, and between his critique of economic relations and the prevailing discipline of bourgeois political economy, by training his gaze on the way phenomena are composed, arranged, designed, put together. Where bourgeois political economists before him had identified numerous aspects of capitalism and even promoted a labor theory of value, Marx distinguished his contribution to the critique of political economy with his own emphasis on what he called "forms" of value. *Capital*, Marx's culminating work, of course famously begins with the commodity form—"The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities, its elementary form being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity"—and its analysis proceeds by taking up definite forms, forms of appearance, forms of value, and more.

Marx often framed his advances beyond existing scholarship in terms of this attention to form. Where bourgeois political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo had already described value as produced by labor, Marx departed from their labor theory by contributing an analysis of the different forms value takes on (use-value, exchange-value, surplus value), and of what he always called the "commodity form" as the distinguishing feature of capitalist economies. Early sociologists, industrialists, and activists had all used empirical observation and journalistic techniques to describe the capitalism of the nineteenth century, but Marx added the formalist focus on the systemic nature of capitalism, and on its functioning according to intrinsic principles. Early theorists of money and the credit economy, from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to Walter Bagehot, had described the predicament of faith and suspense created by the promise of paper money or lines of credit, but Marx added the elaboration of how these apparently subjective experiences constitute the objective system of metaphysics under capitalism, with its orientation toward the future and its deferral of reckoning. In each of these cases, Marx was able to make conceptual innovations because he attended to forms, to systems, to wholes, to composites.

Form is composed relationality. Marx was a thinker of relations, a thinker of and with form, so his critical presuppositions, procedures, and vocabulary lend themselves readily to analysis of forms of cultural production. His signature critical move is to ask why things take the form they do: Why do we have this form of economic production and not another, why do we have this form of class relation and not another? As he described his own analytic project, he aimed "to develop from the actual, given relations of life the *forms* in which these have been apotheosized."[1] He wants to start with observing the empirical, and move from there to the general, to study relations in context in order to abstract to their principles of composition.

In our current university configuration, we probably think of the study of form as a minor subset of soft disciplines like

literature, music, and art history. Even in those disciplines, form is often a secondary rather than primary consideration, one among many elements like context, biography, technology that would be introduced in, say, a film studies class. But Marx's work can remind us that form is indispensable for the hard disciplines like economics, sociology, history. Moreover, it can remind us that taking form as a primary object of inquiry rather than a secondary or tertiary topic can actualize an intrinsically Marxian methodology: the study of form can be politically astute and politically consequential. Indeed, prominent Marxist theorists like Georg Lukács, Fredric Jameson, and Sianne Ngai have regarded form as the site of social relationality. In this book I advance this understanding of Marxism as a combination of formalist focus and contextualist rigor, suggesting that Marxism can transcend these shopworn oppositions between soft and hard disciplines, between aesthetics and politics, between formalism and the social.

Germane to Marx's prioritizing of form is his own formal practice. Throughout his career Marx worked in numerous genres, and he was constantly inventing new genres, concerned with the manner of production, circulation, and consumption of ideas about economic and cultural production and the role of representation in those domains. He wrote poetry and plays and a novel; he layered all of his philosophical, political, and journalistic writing with myriad literary and artistic allusions and quotations from an international, transhistorical pantheon of creative writers such as Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, and Dickens. He wrote a manifesto, deftly wielding that genre's reductive and performative features; he wrote stirring expository journalism; and he also wrote painstakingly detailed systematic treatises. He improvised the new genre of "the critique of ideology," starting with his massive and wild 500-page *The German Ideology* (cowritten with Friedrich Engels), a text that sometimes gracefully, sometimes awkwardly incorporates essays, manifestos, declarations of philosophical tenets, logical equations, sustained jokes, lists of maxims, catalogues of uninterpreted quotations, shorthand

notes for future elucidation, gnomic slogans, and play-written scripts for the dramas that might take place among his opponents.[2]

Building things with Marxism[3]

Marx's experiments with forms provide just one clue to the importance of form and of building things up for his thought, but this importance itself is key to answering the common charge, from both popular and academic circles, that Marxism is an overly reductive, destructive, and negative endeavor to spoil everything fun and beautiful by exposing the power behind it, and to attack everything normal in the name of dethroning that power. If you bounce around the right-wing cybersphere, or read *The New York Times*, you might think Marxism doesn't want to build anything up—it wants to "destroy," "sabotage," "commit treason," and "wage psychological warfare against America;" in its grips, "western civilization itself is under relentless attack." Ignorance and anti-Semitism underwrite these caricatures, but such rhetoric of Marxism as a force of destruction actually operates very widely, even in more refined spheres. In the academy, to take only the example of cultural studies and literary criticism (let alone political science or economics), the widespread and well-funded movement called "postcritique" faults Marxism for promoting an overly negative view of art, literature, and culture. For example, feminist film theorists celebrate how female spectators find empowerment in films and deplore Marxism as a total bummer. Right-wing fake news and liberal feminist professors surprisingly align.

That spectrum may be united by poor reading, but perhaps Marx set himself up for it, since he described his life's work as "the ruthless critique of everything existing," and the title of the very first work he coauthored with Friedrich Engels was "Critique of Critical Critique." The joke's repetition and tautology betoken Marx's signature ironic tone, the abyssal

downward drive of *judging judging*, the undermining of everything. This tail-chasing reflexive quality is important: Kant thought the job of philosophy was to assess itself, to analyze the subjectivity of the philosopher—and Marx took this job seriously, noting that the history of philosophy had not yet reckoned with philosophy's history, had not yet situated the knowing subject within her historical conditions. The work of explaining how "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" can often seem largely negative. What is Marxism, but critique of everything existing, indicting the corruption of everything, exposing the complicity of even those who want social reform, ever denouncing the sleeping unwoke? What is critique, but tearing things apart, revolutionary arson? What is revolution but permanent revolution, ceaseless churning? What is the critique of critical critique, but a joke about this hollowness, the chasm of irony undermining any solid ground on which to stand?

Even in the course of writing his most sustained elaboration of what materialism is (*The German Ideology*—around the same time as the *Critique of Critical Critique*), Marx demurred to define the positive tenets of communism: "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things." Then just a few years later in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the genre that is supposed to make manifest things that have remained unseen, this aura of the negative remains forefront: as the document concludes "In short, the communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. . . . The Communists . . . openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." Marxism's reputation for insatiable negativity is perhaps not all caricature.

Nor in fact is this reputation always a bad one. In fields like history, philosophy, and literature, critics who have claimed Marxism as inspiration—especially the framework

of historical materialism, of studying social life **in situ**—have often understood their work to be this forcible overthrow—the dismantling of hierarchies, the breaking down of grand narratives, the decomposition of universals. The hallmarks of these enterprises are probably familiar—"Declarations of the universal are problematic." "Rights are a bourgeois construct." "If we invoke the human we bring the baggage of Enlightenment racism." "The state is nothing but an apparatus of violence." Opposing all of these built-up generalities and institutions, theorists understand their work as instead particularizing and taking-apart. Thinking locally, prioritizing "the exceptional, nuanced, situated, concrete, embodied, the historically specific,"[4] critics devote themselves to what eludes classification or massification, what is excluded from formed wholes. For example, the prominent Marxist theorist Jacques Rancière, who claims to devote his work to the liberation of the proletariat, repeatedly argues that politics is the designed configuration of social relations and the corresponding design of sensory experience, and repeatedly associates any such definite configuration, any fixed relations of order, with "the police." The police is any established arrangement for social relation; against it, "the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement," but these disturbances must perpetually disturb themselves—anything sustained or instituted transmutes politics back into the police. Fighting the police, destabilizing order, fueling dissensus, this putatively Marxist project of perpetually overturning anything which stands in place ends up bearing striking resemblance to what Jill Lepore and John Pat Leary have called "the disruption machine," the culture of innovation at the heart of neoliberalism.

In the ecstasy for overturning, for resisting any reification, for spurning institutions, for rejecting constitutions, many political thinkers claiming some allegiance to Marxism have ultimately viewed their work as against constructs and consensus, against synthesis, against building things up. The spectacularly influential political philosopher Giorgio Agamben even has a name for this dissolution and dismantling, which he

celebrates as the opposite of constituting: "destituency" (from the Latin *de* + *statuere*—moving away from setting things up, deserting, forsaking, abandoning). Agamben consummates a profound tradition associating constituting and building with violence, and formalization with oppressive containment, and thus for embracing as an alternative unforming, destituting, deconstituting. Agamben names the ethos of formlessness that functions as the ideal uniting a variety of theories and practices, from the mosh of the multitude to the localization of microstruggle and microaggression, from the voluntarist assembly of actors and networks to the flow of affects untethered from the symbolic. Noting its refusal of order, we can call this ideal "anarchovitalism"—the fantasy of life without any built formations, of effusions beyond bounds.

As this ideal has taken hold, it has become a reflex to valorize destituency, taking things apart, and to often claim a Marxist basis for this. But, as we have seen, the elementary lesson of materialism is to situate reflexive positions in their contexts of power—what ruling classes are served by these ruling ideas of demolition? And by contrast, what might be the revolutionary potential of valorizing building? I would argue that Marx's own work actually provides important resources for building. The ruthless critique of everything existing enables making new things. Proactive projection of another order of things is latent in the reactive rejection of this order of things. The work of liberation is the strengthening of those projections into compelling visions, positive platforms, definitive demands, utopian maps.

Marx's norms, Marx's utopian maps

The projective function of Marxism is perceptible in the tacit norms with which Marx frequently frames his materialist constructs. His ideas are designed to serve an active, enabling function in the work for other worlds rather than just for

passive documenting of the merely existent world. Even though he invented the practice of ideology critique, exposing how ideas participate in power relations, and even though his radical revisions of materialism set it up as a tool for revealing how norms and normative values uphold unequal distributions of power and wealth, his work also implies that not all norms are bad. After all, his materialism is more than the insight that "ideas" are shaped by context of their production—it is also a great exercise in how ideas exceed context, exceed determination—his materialism is itself an idea! Marx and Engels established critique as an immanent relation to context. Materialism reveals the rootedness of thought in a given society, but it also performs the faculty of thought as uprooting, as pivotal for social transformation. Marxism is the theory and practice of critique of *this* given sociality of capitalism, critique which *this* sociality itself generates, critique which must of necessity be immanent to what exists even while it works for the inexistent, setting out toward utopia.[5]

When the *Manifesto* exhorts the workers of the world to unite, it does so in the interest of implied reversals of the way things are under capitalism. Take a statement like

> In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of laborer's, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborer's, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.

These lines imply that laborers should be able to live even if they do not find work and should be able to work even if their labor does not increase capital, and should not have to sell themselves piecemeal, like a commodity. The social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat Marx and Engels

positively call for decisively intervene in the existing world in order to actualize a better world: normatively, things will be better when the regime of surplus value does not organize the production of material life itself, when the norms of the state are to serve the immiserated and expelled.

Creative labor

Perhaps the most essential expression of norms for our film theory purposes is Marx's definition of human beings as creative, constructive *builders*. Rejecting common ways of differentiating human nature from animal nature, Marx settles on the idea that whereas animals merely subsist, humans produce a mode of production: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization." In producing their existence, humans express their essence as productive. Labor exceeds the social relations in which it is ensnared in the capitalist mode of production; it is also a transhistorical faculty of the human. Marx writes,

> Labor is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man mediates. . . . We understand labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own.[6]

Strikingly, Marx chooses the figure of the architect to emblematize the human—foregrounding the capacity for creative construction. While the bee fulfills needs by changing the form of natural materials, man builds an idea, an imaginative construction, an integral projection of both needs and their fulfillment. Labor is mediation, including the mediation of the material and the ideal. Crucial affinities therefore entwine labor and imaginative representation—which is why Marx complements the figure of the architect with the figure of the poet: "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* in the same way that a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature." Literary production exemplifies the human's natural productive faculty, its blend of ideal and material making. These tropes of creative construction, of making in the ur-sense of poiesis, powerfully underwrite the Marxian commitment to building.

Artworks are often considered creative rather than productive, something extra on top of real material productivity, something done in the interest of a value that differs from economic value. But Marx's insistence on creativity as an essential component of human labor points to the capacity of creative works to reveal truths about work in general. This revelatory capacity must be central to any Marxist theory of film. Hollywood films are produced for profit, but they are also produced as creative building, projecting fictional worlds, generating new realities.

The emphasis on essential creativity is absolutely central to the Marxist critique of modern society. Animals, Marx points out, create merely to satisfy needs. Humans are animals who have the ability to create for reasons having nothing to do with need, and to bequeath to each other creations for which there is no immediate use. Creative production is the essence of the human; it is this essence which is betrayed or "alienated" by modes of production that make physical survival dependent upon waged compensation for work. "Alienation" in Marxist theory is the name for this estrangement in capitalism: humans are at a distance from their essence as creative producers, they are unwillingly separated from the products of their labor, they

are obliged to create specialized pieces of products rather than wholes, they do not reap the full benefits of their efforts. If all humans had food, shelter, and healthcare regardless of whether they earned a wage, they would be freer to keep or dispose of their creations as they liked, and to create things that were not immediately exchangeable or valuable. Workers sell their labor to capitalists; the capitalists in turn own the products of the workers' labor. Workers are thus alienated from, disconnected from, their own products. Owners exacerbate alienation by selling the products of workers' labor and making a profit; workers are distanced from not only their products but also the profits they produce. They further exacerbate alienation by coercing workers to participate in division and specialization in the creative process in order to maximize efficiency.

One of Marx's great contributions to the understanding of human experience is to insist on the ways that what earlier philosophers had described as an existential predicament was actually a contingent, materially conditioned one. It is a feature of the human's essence only insofar as the creative drive tends to result in the externalized creation of objects—whether concrete material goods like tools and crafts or abstract goods like ideas and art—which can then move beyond their creators. But many of the social connotations of alienation—separation from fellow beings, distance from norms of mental health, anxiety about the meaning of life—are not essential so much as the result of specific social processes. The Marxist sense of alienation locates these more diffuse senses within those specific processes, addressing capitalism as a root cause. Marxist theory therefore sometimes suggests that the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism could result in overcoming alienation. Meditations on the status of alienation—including self-division, the division of labor, and social antagonism—may be assessed in terms of whether they project an ultimate identity and integration, or whether they foresee the ongoingness of alienation even after the end of capitalism. We will return to this debate in our analysis of the identity and estrangement problems that preoccupy *Fight Club*.

The intense creativity of human existence is the norm violated by the systematic division of labor and the exploitative conditions of labor, whereby workers are denied the freedom to create heterogeneously.

> In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. (The German Ideology, p. 53)

The ultimate prescription is for this freedom of creative and life-sustaining activity, a freedom to engage in it as the expression of the species-being, of making and producing and creating, and to engage in it for reasons other than mere survival. This positive vision of expressive existence, of flourishing, Marx does hazard a formula for, very late in his career, in 1875, in another critique—a line-by-line correction to the Gotha Program's statement of positive positions for German socialists—in the course of which he made some positive assertions of his own, some of the most forthright statements of his own convictions:

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs![7]

The fulcrum of this formula is the unstable asymmetry of ability and needs, either side always incommensurate with its other.

This incommensurability gives the lie to any wish for a simple, flowing, social immanence. More just states must be highly designed formations, avowing their merely formal character, offering themselves for constant reform and rebuilding as asymmetries and antagonisms irrupt. This formal problematic is encoded in Marx's most allusive, most direct position on the state: the dictatorship of the proletariat. What Marx means by this apparent paradox—how can you take the masses and make them singular as a dictator?—is that we must find a political formation that supports contradictions, that admits its own contradictory quality.

Contradictions in motion—not synthesis but the negation of the negation which radically produces a something that is not nothing—these ideas in Marx's rare writings on the state position the state not as ends but as means—a technique of flourishing, a variform base. His point is never that there should be no organized institutions of social life, but rather that those institutions should be infrastructures in the service of social life. His writings on the Paris Commune affirm "the reabsorption of the state power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their oppression," and he works with similar images of absorption and skeletal support in concluding "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it." These commitments to organization, to the party, to reabsorbed state power, to the subordinate organ of the state, to infrastructure distinguish Marx's thought as a program invested in composed relations and in new energies of composition, of building things up.

Perhaps, then, what Marxism builds in the world is a willingness to think about definite forms of relationality as the spaces of existence—rather than to think about form as police,

as order that must be anarchically abolished, as an obstacle to a formlessness fantasized as freedom. What Marxism builds is a practice of thinking infrastructurally, risking dialectical regard for forms, reaching for spaces more adequate for human beings (to invoke Ernst Bloch's definition of utopia). Critique, like hunting and fishing and cattle rearing, is an essential human activity for Marx, an expression of the creative faculty that is the always laboring, always making being. The ruthless overturning of everything existing finds its dialectical complement in the dynamic making of new existences, new things, new forms, new orders. We practice this making not in the maker-culture of entrepreneur tech and industrial engineering, but in humanities endeavors of imaginative projection, enabling abstraction, compelling storytelling, creative synthesis, and the choreography of solidarity. The study of forms is more than just destruction—it is the affirmation of composed relationality, formedness rather than formlessness, that we may better pursue the arts of social building.

Marx built his philosophy by seeing form in the world and by proffering concepts that could help others see as well. Three of the key concepts in his thought will anchor the rest of our discussion: mode of production, ideology, and mediation. We will explore these concepts in his thought and in Marxist theory after him, and then we will also turn, in Chapter 2, to how these concepts are elaborated by *Fight Club*.

Mode of production

In his project of analyzing forms, critiquing forms, and advocating for new forms, Marx invented a number of constructs that are aimed at making perceptible the forms of relationality, the frameworks of organization, that comprise the infrastructures of the social. These constructs are abstractions of these definite forms, meant to reveal the role of form in history. For example, he proposed the major concept of

"the mode of production" to convey the idea that the activity of producing and reproducing collective existence has no natural form, but rather takes many contingent forms throughout history. "Mode of production" (*produktionsweise*) is the way life itself is produced: as he introduces it, "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself." This production of material life consists of two levels in combination. These are the *forces* of production (resources, labor, technology, materials, land) and the *relations* of production (the social and political relationships among the people whose material lives are being produced—relations such as associations, class, property, law, power). What results from the mode of production is a *totality*—an ensemble for organizing the whole of existence, and for reproducing that constellation of relations into the future, that is marked by its contingency, its incompletion, its possibility of being otherwise. Totality is not "all the things"—it is the contradiction between a specific situation and other possibilities, and the principal of thinking this contradiction at this level.

When Marx first introduces the concept of mode of production, in his preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he writes "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life." Mode of production is a concept then that doesn't just encompass economic relations, but also addresses how economic relations are a "determining" factor in other kinds of relations. Because economics is at its root the organization of the conditions for human survival ("economy" from the Greek *nomos*, meaning law, and *oikos*, meaning *house* or *hearth*), every society will have some sort of economy. Marxism in turn is the approach to human history and human relations which insists that whatever sort of economy is in place will be determining for the kinds of culture that will be in place—the kinds of social

relations, the kinds of political organizations, the kinds of everyday practices, and the kinds of beliefs. "Determining" is thus a crucial dynamic in the Marxist way of thinking. In the simplest terms, determination for Marx means limits on what will happen, but it does not mean prescriptions of what will happen. He writes: "In all forms of society it is a determinate production and its relations which assigns every other production and its relations their rank and influence. It is a general illumination in which all other colors are plunged, and which modifies their specific tonalities. It is a special ether which defines the specific gravity of everything found within it."[8] These images of light influencing the tone of color or air effecting the factors of gravity are instructive as natural metaphors; for Marx it would seem that the relationship of determination is natural. Marxism prioritizes the collective production of conditions of collective household life ("eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing") as an inevitable natural occurrence that, however contingent its shape, exercises a natural influence over what gets shaped.

Determination means that economic relations are foundational, and that the contingent type of economic relations sets some limits upon the variety of social, political, and spiritual relations that attend any given mode of production. To clarify that these limits are structuring but not controlling, that they configure possibilities but do not foreclose all possibility, the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser invoked the concept of "overdetermination." He borrowed the concept from Sigmund Freud, who seems to have coined it himself. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud uses "overdetermined" (*uberdeterminiert*) to insist that hysteria has multiple causes that are social and psychological, not merely physiological. Similarly, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he sets out to overcome the entrenched orthodoxy that dreams are allegories, writing "there are no limits to the determinants that may be present" and he interestingly makes recourse to an industrial analogy: "Here we find ourselves in a factory of thought where, as in the Weaver's masterpiece,

'a thousand threads one treadle throws, where fly the shuttles over here, over there' . . . each of the elements of the dream's content turns out to have been overdetermined—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over."[9] Freud's concept names a factory of causes, all busy, weaving together the fabric of what happens. When Althusser takes up this notion, it has this connotation of busy, concerted production that amounts to a state of things which is itself irreducible to any factor in the busy-ness. Overdetermination for Althusser indicates limits, or "causes," that exceed any effect; there are too many causes for an effect to be said to issue directly. The concept also indicates for Althusser the meeting ground between what he calls "a historical inhibition" and that of "revolutionary rupture": at every moment that a particular mode of production continues to operate, it is holding off a revolutionary rupture, inhibiting a flow of history. Overdetermination is this engineered suspense, the continued effectivity of the present order of things.

The mode of production determines culture—not in the sense of causing it, but in the sense of providing too many causes for it. Althusser thus also arrives at another famous formula: political, social, cultural, and spiritual relations enjoy a "relative autonomy" from the economy. Insofar as they are limited, but not prescribed, or caused but not reductively caused, these dynamics are partially contingent, independent from the mode of production. This independence can be understood temporally: culture can outlast the mode of production, and it can anticipate new modes of production. But it can also be understood logically: culture can reproduce the status quo, while it can also critique the status quo and performatively bring about some other status. Either way, it must be understood dialectically—hence the adverb "relatively," which is a qualifier just like the "over" in "overdetermination." To analyze culture and cultural productions like film requires attending to both overdetermination and relative autonomy, to both reproducing the way things are and precipitating something else.

In the course of setting out his definition of the mode of production, Marx employs a metaphor that continues to be vividly used and hotly debated. In the same passage from the preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* we were already examining, he continues:

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definition relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real basis on which rise legal and political superstructures, and to which correspond the definite forms of social consciousness.[10]

This architectural metaphor of a foundation and superstructure (*basis* and *uberbau*) is one of the most enduring legacies of Marxian materialism.

This metaphor works to provide a model for understanding the interdependent infrastructure of social formations. It illustrates that what has been built up as social existence has different components that are structurally integrated. The basis supports and enables what stands upon it. Materialism addresses this base and this relation of support or correspondence. But the model doesn't say what it means to correspond; it doesn't say that correspondence between base and superstructure, economic structure and social consciousness, is totalizing. Similarly, Marx explains that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." Yet Marx's own ideas, the whole superstructure of values and methods and norms and insights which he generates to be intensely critical of the capitalist mode of production, "rise" atop that mode, and "correspond" to it.

The "Mode of Production" is a construct that renders available the constructions of sociality and brings into relief the possibility of other such constructions. Capitalism

is only one mode of production; but all socialities can be fathomed as productive, as activated by the production of material life itself, comprised of both forces and relations. The goal of transforming capitalism isn't ending production, but ending this particularly unjust mode, and arranging the mode differently. That is the force of Marx's use of "mode" (or "way" in German): capitalism is one way of producing, and naming this way helps us cognize us other ways. History provides examples of other ways, and what progress there is in history prompts the reckoning that there may be as yet unactualized ways in the future. If the normative goal of Marxist theorizing is greater freedom for laborers, the very idea of "the capitalist mode of production" points toward the possibility of a mode with a different adjective, perhaps the communist mode of production, perhaps the humanist mode of production, perhaps the contingent mode of production.

To enrich our understanding of other possibilities, Marx conducts studies of historical examples, and projects future options. History features examples of tribalism, feudalism, capitalism. The future, yet to be historically instantiated, may include socialism and communism. In many ways Marx implies that human world history is moving along a trajectory, a progression through stages of different modes, and a progression with a tendency toward increasing human freedom. The capitalist mode can therefore look like a midway point between the principled inequality of the past and the concrete equality to come.

The tribal mode of production obtains before the agricultural revolution and encompasses hunter-gatherers and nomadic peoples. Anthropological and archaeological evidence points to such a social organization, revealing a priority of kinship relations. Although Marx and Engels refer to class struggle as present throughout history, the tribal modes may have been sufficiently small as to rely more upon kinship hierarchies than economic classes. Sometimes Marx and Engels attribute to this era of human history a possible configuration they call "primitive communism," an egalitarian and cooperative mode

in which production occurs for collective use rather than for commodity exchange, but since they based these ideas on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archaeological thinkers like Bachofen and Morgan, a certain imperial tint comes with the concept. Imagining non-Western territories as non-capitalist could provide justification for the allegedly civilizing mission of colonialism and imperialism. Even with these pitfalls, however, the concept of the tribal mode of production holds open the prehistory of capitalism, outlining a way in which human beings produced their own means of existence without the instrument of private property.

In feudalism, an expansive period of human history, the majority of peoples subsist as slaves and peasants, in loose social organizations that nonetheless redound to rigid hierarchies, empowering a small minority to control land and resources, often through violence, threats of starvation, and physical force. Most resources are held privately, with little function of a political institution like the state to regulate publicly held resources. Feudalism involves an open acknowledgment of inequality, in turn rationalized as natural, divinely ordained, and/or otherwise meritoriously apportioned. The feudal mode of production allocates glory and wealth and health to the limited few, and fear and endurance to the rest. This mode of production uses violence to hold itself in place and unlike capitalism, it does not in any way obscure its real conditions of existence. Peasants lack a right to private property, and slaves lack any rights at all. Feudal lords can engage in parallel relations with other lords through trade, conquest, and war; the feudal system takes its name from the Latin *feudum* meaning fief, domains that lords and emperors award to vassals in exchange for their military service or war/trade counsel. Over time, multiple empires and kingdoms—Carolingian, Ottoman, English, and Anglo-Norman—developed, entailing the growth of cities like Venice and London, of mercantile technologies, and of market relations. Urbanization and trade are crucial components of capitalism, but the feudal period differs from capitalism because the impetus of these institutions

is the *use* of goods by the feudal class, in lavish displays of wealth—not accumulation for accumulation's sake. In the twenty-first century, some scholars have begun to speak of "refeudalization" as dramatically rising inequality, regimes of austere scarcity and of severe debt, insidious privatization of formerly public resources, the moralization of wealth, and criminalization of poverty have pitched late capitalism back toward feudal relations.

Capitalism transforms feudal use into aristocratic/bourgeois accumulation, and peasant/slave subsistence into working class exploitation. One element of this transformation is "enclosure," the full privatization of lands upon which peasants had subsisted without owning, and the consequent expulsion of peasants onto a market in which rather than toil for their survival in largely agricultural fashion, they sold their labor for wages in mercantile and industrial fashion. The invention of financial technologies like credit, stock, and insurance in the early modern period fueled the basic principle of this mode of production, the accumulation of surplus value. Another indispensable element of the transformation is the informal and formal abolition of the slave relation (especially through the Haitian Revolution and the policies of the British Empire), since capitalism apotheosizes abstract freedom, the freedom of all to sell themselves. Capitalism promises freedom: peasants liberated from the land, lords liberated from obligations to their vassals and serfs, workers liberated by machines, social relations liberated from fixed hierarchies of blood and tradition, opened to the floods of profit and professionals.

Marx was keenly attuned to this promise, pointing to the contradiction between its abstract message and its concrete realities. Freed from subsistence farming on de facto public land, peasants found themselves starving and anonymous in overcrowded cities, reeling from unregulated conditions in dangerous factories. Why should surplus accumulation be the principle determining how human beings organize the production of their own existence? Why not collective flourishing and the common? In asking these questions, Marx

pointed toward concrete freedoms. To hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner; from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. The communist mode of production would marshal capitalist technological advancement in the service of communal well-being, disarticulating human productive activity from the wage relation, disarticulating human survival from selling labor. Communism is ultimately nothing for Marx other than this concrete practice of freedom to make and to live, freedom to transform social relations, to evolve the mode of production, to participate in the open future of "the real movement to abolish the present state of things."

The concept of "the mode of production" demarcates the past from the present and the future, and underscores that those differences are not inevitable or natural, but the result of deliberate human activity. The idea that a few thousand years of human history could be meaningfully apprehended in a schema of a few categories may strike some as overly grand and overly reductive. The Marxist effort to articulate these varying modes of production points therefore to tensions between what we now understand as the disciplinary protocols of history and those of philosophy. What is so important and useful about such a philosophical rendering of history is the way it issues from a political conjuncture and a political vision: Marx and Engels want to relativize the capitalist mode of production—to reveal that it is the result of specific historical events and configurations, and to reveal that it is not the only possible way to organize human existence. Their schema accomplishes this by giving names to other principles of organization without private property, or without abstract freedom.

Mode of reproduction

The concept of the mode of production aims at relativizing individual modes, thinking about their particulars so that they don't appear as natural or as the only possibilities.

An entailed concept is that any given mode of production must include derelativizing—must hold itself in place, keep itself going, sustain the relations that enable it. The Marxist name for this dynamic is "reproduction." The "re" captures the element of repetition, since supporting a system is ensuring its ongoingness, its repeatability. But the "re" also captures two other colloquial senses of origination: (1) Going back to the starting point/bringing something into existence again/sexual reproduction, and (2) Copying/simulating/producing a text, image, or idea again. Marx writes "every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction" and Althusser elaborated the function of ideology in perpetuating the capitalist mode of production in an essay called "On the Reproduction of Capitalism."[11] Reproduction brings the mode of production back to its origins—every society will produce, will have an economy. It also brings the mode of production into relief as a strategy of copying, producing itself over and over.

Like the concept of the mode of production, the concept of social reproduction helps clarify that Marxism is not just focused on economics, is not simply an analysis of economic systems, but is a synoptic view of the diverse social practices and social relations that constitute capitalism. Part of the configuration of the forces and relations of production in the capitalist mode is the perpetuation of that mode. The problem of social reproduction raises the question "Who produces the worker who produces?" Feminist theorists have thus been particularly interested in this concept, since it points to the unofficial, unwaged labor of generating and sustaining labor, or to the off-the-books costs of socially enabling human existence. When Marx defined labor as making, and as the key feature of all of human history, he opened the door to thinking about the labor that goes in to making human society, into raising workers who then sell their labor when they are older.

Understandings of this labor, in scholarship by Silvia Federici, Nancy Fraser, Tithi Battacharya, and others, return to the roots of "economy," the law of the house, since labor that

is not part of the wage relation is nonetheless part of the mode of production. Specifically, women are often laboring to bear pregnancies, nurse infants, tend toddlers, and raise independent children, as well as care for elders, while also laboring to cook, clean, and maintain a household—yet none of this labor is directly compensated by the owners of the means of production. The capitalist mode of production reproduces itself by means of unwaged labor that brings workers into existence, an origin for human beings that isn't reducible to capitalism. When women are able to work outside of the home for a wage, they generally then employ women lower on the social scale than themselves to substitute for this labor, such as young women, old women, immigrant women, non-white women. The subordination and exploitation of women, including the subordination and exploitation of women of color, is therefore built into the capitalist mode of production, since the powerful forces and relations of production include the power to value and devalue labor. The concept of social reproduction helps illustrate that there are other possible modes of production because it marks the difference between the work it takes to make the human animal capable of work and the goal of surplus accumulation. We undertake the work of producing existence for reasons other than surplus accumulation. And this would be true even if all domestic work was wage work. The survival of the species is an end that differs from capitalist ends. So are love, pleasure, and community.

One of the tricks of the capitalist mode is to try to incorporate these alternatives, these other ends of action, into itself. Thus the "love" parents might spontaneously feel for their offspring becomes a vehicle for upholding the wage theft the capitalist effectively commits in not compensating its workers for the costs of the sustenance of their emergence as workers, since parents are told it is "meaningful" to give up wage work or careers when a child is born to stay home. Defining words like love and meaning and wage, and the everyday practices those definitions enable, thus become a material force for the mode of production.

For some feminists, the historical fact that patriarchy predates the systematic transition to the capitalist mode of production contradicts the analytic power of Marxism, since it will never, they claim, be able to account for axes of social relations that exceed capitalism. This charge is also sometimes levied by theorists of race, though the historical facts of precedence are more contested there, since many historians and theorists argue that the emergence of race as an epistemological and social category tracks closely with the consolidation of capitalism. But some of the strength of Social Reproduction Theory, as it is now called by contemporary Marxist feminists, is to point out repeatedly that what look like independent kinds of social relations ancillary to capitalism are actually integral to its normal functioning in everyday life and its historical trajectory through dynamics like primitive accumulation and the expulsion of surplus populations. We don't know what societies and modes of production look like that don't rely on gendering and racialization, but that doesn't invalidate the quest to devise a different mode of production.

In addition to the material support for capitalism that gendered and racialized persons provide, sexism and racism provide support as ideas. They are frameworks of meaning that make capitalist domination and exploitation appear justified, that make the capitalist mode of production seem like the only one. These meanings become a material force for the mode of production. This notion of an immaterial material force is our second key word.

Ideology

How can a mode of production and its attendant social relations be perceived? From what vantage? What holds the capitalist mode of production in place? What is the epoxy that can withstand the pull of profound social contradictions? Why do we participate in our own exploitation? What is the

connection between the economic production of goods and the artistic, philosophical, and religious articulation of the good? The Marxist notion of ideology outlines these questions. Trying to answer them has kept theorists busy for generations. My discussion below moves through several moments of this theorizing in largely chronological order, although the intent is not to imply that more recent theories of ideology are more correct. As we will see eventually in the analysis of ideology in *Fight Club* in Chapter 2, each of these theories can helpfully shed light on different aspects of social relations and the consciousness of those relations.

In our colloquial usages, and even in many misconceived theories, "ideology" means a scheme for politics, a set of committed beliefs about what should be done in society. If you understand the term this way, then you can speak of "Marx's ideology" or "Marxist ideology" as the critique of the capitalist mode of production and the advocacy for a more collective, more emancipatory mode. But Marx not only had an ideology, he also spent a lot of energy theorizing what ideology is.

His theorizing refined the work of earlier philosophers. For eighteenth-century thinkers, "ideology" meant rather literally "the science of ideas," and referred chiefly to the enterprise of knowing how we know. The implied contrast was between ideology and metaphysics, where metaphysics would maintain that ideas existed in some real sense and then living thinkers accessed them, and ideology would be the more empirical study of how ideas only exist among specific thinkers (i.e., among humans). In the eighteenth century, ideology signified precisely this empirical study, the "science of ideas," and is associated with Enlightenment thinkers like DeStutt de Tracy. The term acquired the pejorative sense often associated with it—an agenda, a bias—after the French Revolution, when Napoleon himself derided the republicanism of philosophers that seemed to contest his power by calling them "ideologues," proponents of "that shadowy metaphysics which subtly searches for first causes on which to base the legislation of peoples, rather than making use of laws known to the human heart and the lessons

of history."[12] For Napoleon, ideologists were those interested in liberal principles of rationalizing law and exploring consent rather than those who simply naturalized the current order of things. They were needlessly partisan, taking exception to nature.

Marx departed from both the quasi-science and the philosophies of liberalism by developing a theory of ideology rooted in the question of the social relations from within which any science of ideas or any debate about republican sovereignty could be undertaken. He insisted on the social dimension of the activity of specific thinkers, on their social location and on their participation in the configuration of power in their context. For him the previous accounts of ideology had been too immaterial, too focused on intellectual abstractions. By way of correction, he wanted to underline the material relations and practices that give rise to ideas. But the way practices give rise to ideas is not predetermined—ideas may describe practices (as the idea of materialism does), may reflect practices in some partial or distorted way, or may obscure practices. The importance of this range of possibilities is that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between ideas and practices. There is instead a rift or gap: "Individuals . . . may appear (*erscheinen*) in their own or other people's representation (*Vorstellung*)" different from how "they really (*wirklich*) are; i.e. as they operate (*wirken*), produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will." This gap between representations and operations, between how we produce ideally and how we produce materially, has to be studied in its particulars; materialism is that study. It becomes necessary to analyze particular ideas in relation to material practices in order to understand what representational form they take. There can be no ideas outside of material relations of existence, and since those relations always take contingent shape, ideas—even those that claim to be universal or eternal—will always be marked by contingency. "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is

their actual life-process." From the name of the study of ideas, ideology shifts for Marx to be the name of the contingency of ideas, since there cannot be an objective study.

To elaborate this notion of the contingency and positionality of ideas, Marx early on invoked the architectural metaphor of the base and superstructure that we have already encountered. Through this metaphor, we can say that for Marx ideology is superstructure, the ideas that correspond to the mode of production. The capitalist mode of production determines consciousness under capitalism, and that determined consciousness is ideology. These dialectical relations of correspondence and determination point to Marx's interest in ideology as the general name of the interpenetration of material relations and their ideal counterparts. This interpenetration is true for any mode of production, and configuring it differently is one of the tasks of revolutionary social change. Marx writes:

> A distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic—in short, ideological—forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.[13]

Here Marx indicates that ideology is a political idea not just designating agendas or standpoints, nor even designating the political context for ideas as he himself laid out, but also designating entire systems of ideas and representations and practices encompassing the law and courts, spirituality and churches, philosophy and wisdom, art and literature. Moreover, ideology is a way of becoming conscious of social contradiction, which suggests that it is a representation of contradictions that can have multiple uses. The representation might be inaccurate or false; it might be accurate and critical; it is likely some of both. Ideology is ambivalent, a way of becoming conscious of social contradictions which can

simultaneously generate recognition of those contradictions and propound misrecognition of them.

Ideology and the camera

In addition to the superstructure metaphor, Marx's own theory of ideology crafts another analogy that will be very consequential for our discussion of film studies. The inevitability of ideology and impossibility of objectivity/necessity for situated knowing, for the material practice of interpretation, compels Marx to make an analogy between ideology and the physical reality of the human eye. There is no way to see that isn't ideological; ideology is a complicated natural process: "If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process."[14] Ideology is the production of images through physical processes like vision and the functioning of the optic nerve. Strikingly, the analogy transpires by way of a technology of perception, the camera obscura. From Latin for "dark room," a camera obscura is small box that channels light rays though pinholes within the interior of the box to project images of the setting exterior to the box. The images of the exterior appear in the interior in inverted form. Even though the image is inverted, it preserves dimension, ratio, and color. Human vision works in the same way, since the pupil is a pinhole through which exterior settings are refracted inside the dark space of the eye. There is no way to see without inversion.

Significantly for our purposes in this book, Marx makes this analogy between vision, technology, and ideology in 1845, a mere year after the main inventor of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, published the first ever book of photography. The historical coincidence between the theory of ideology and the technology of photography suggest the intimate connection between the two. It is hard to theorize

ideology, the way that illusions exert material power, without recourse to the camera, the material production of illusion. Marx's reference to the camera obscura goes so far as to argue that there is no way to see other than through the inversions on the retina; there is no way to gain access to the world without the filter of representation. When we look at the world, we are looking from a particular vantage, but we are also looking at phenomena that have developed through historical processes that are not merely natural evolutions. We see in bias, and we see bias. Philosophers are not objective describers of a neutral terrain but interested participants in a social field.

The German Ideology, the work in which Marx and Engels introduce their notion of ideology and explain how materialism enables the critique of ideology, is anchored by this sense of the unseen, unacknowledged political investments of philosophy in their day. The dominant thinkers of their time, received as expositors of a universal human condition, were, Marx and Engels pointed out, predominantly Christian, and thus enjoying clout because of their consistency with the power structure of the church in Germany. "It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality," they wrote of popular thinkers. If they were to inquire, they would find that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." Marx and Engels thus encouraged approaching philosophy as a practice that participated in the production and reproduction of reality. Ideas are in this view not a mechanical reflection of their context but an active agent in creating context.

Because ideology is seeing, a representation of a reality that is itself a projected coherence atop material practices, it is everywhere, inevitable, and constitutive of both obfuscation and critical illumination. When we are deluded about material practices—convinced, say, that the capitalist mode of production is the only one, or is natural—we are seeing ideologically, but when we are arguing that there are other modes of production

possible, that this one is unjust and unnecessary, we are also seeing ideologically. Analyzing this agency of ideas within their own reality is, very importantly, not defined by Marx as some kind of throwing back the veil and exposing who is ideological and who isn't. The opposite of ideology isn't getting free of ideology; it is rather the ongoing interpretation of the context of ideas. Marx sets out a procedure that is seemingly unending, and he calls this ongoing interpretation "the *writing* of history." It takes narrative and perspective and duration to be able to fathom ideology.

The falsity of "false consciousness"

In theories of ideology after Marx, there is an unfortunate tendency to forget this ongoingness of the writing of history and to forget this impossibility of seeing without ideology. Too often, ideology has been defined as "false consciousness." The phrase itself comes from a private letter written by Engels, a decade after Marx's death, in which he writes "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces." Engels didn't intend this letter for publication, but the notion that people act without understanding their own motives eventually travelled widely into much political and philosophical discourse and became embellished to include the claim that this lack of understanding could be seen not just as ignorance (or unconsciousness) but as a distorted or wrong kind of consciousness. Georg Lukács picked up the term in the 1920s in his famous work *History and Class Consciousness* to explain why not every member of the working class espouses revolutionary understanding of their contradictory relationship to the ruling class. He had read Engels's letter and suggested the phrase "false consciousness" as a description of the state of mind in which most men

conduct their everyday deeds. Urging a dialectical approach, Lukács did not recommend contrasting false consciousness with "true" consciousness, but rather "investigat[ing] this false consciousness concretely as an aspect of the historical totality." The implied other of ideology is therefore not "non-ideology" nor "truth" but "investigating," studying, contextualizing, and "the writing of history."

Despite Lukács's caution, the allure of the idea of false consciousness proved too strong, and many theorists have fallen for it. Herbert Marcuse was one source of its continued circulation, since his 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* offered extremely catchy analysis of the "false needs" that consumer society engenders and the "false consciousness" that reproduces "a false order of facts."[15] Marcuse's book was reviewed in the popular press, and he was the undergrad and masters advisor for the incredibly influential scholar-activist Angela Davis. "False consciousness" became a very handy phrase for describing the 1960s project of "consciousness raising," and it continues to be a prevailing colloquial meaning of "ideology."

As other Marxist theories emerged, the problematic of false consciousness endured. Antonio Gramsci incorporates false consciousness into his notion of "common sense," part of his argument that the theory of ideology needs to be supplemented by a construct of "hegemony." Hegemony means rule, and Gramsci differentiates between rule by force and rule by ideas. Hegemony therefore functions like a synonym for ideology which circumvents some of the pitfalls of consciousness since it refers to the system of rule rather than something like mind-sets. Hegemony especially captures the power of ideology to hold the capitalist mode of production in place even when economic conditions are ripe for, or indeed enable, a proletarian revolution. Why do revolts and revolutions take place only to fail, falling back into capitalism? Hegemony answers why, since it names ideology as the entrenched system of values, ideas, and beliefs that can resecure the economic regime of private property and surplus extraction even after

workers revolt against that regime. For him, "beliefs and ideas are themselves material forces," and thus class conflict can and must take place not only in the material economic arena (i.e., in strikes, riots, occupations) but also in a war of ideas.[16]

False consciousness is a very weak way to theorize ideology. As diluted versions of Lukács, Marcuse, and Gramsci have flowed into academic inquiry and criticism, false consciousness has reigned as an easy umbrella term for why things are the way they are, why intellectuals are important, and why the global revolutionary energy of the 1960s and early 1970s dissipated into the retrenched capitalism of the neoliberal era. The problem with the rubric of false consciousness is that it implies the existence of true consciousness. It thus imagines an outside of ideology, an authoritative or enlightened position from which to critique the false. But the whole point of the Marxist theory of ideology is that all ideas are situated. We are being the most ideological precisely when we feign to be outside, since our outside-ness is still a part of the matrix of social practices that give rise to ideas. Moreover, the notion of false consciousness cannot account for the ways that the capitalist mode of production reproduces itself without regard for our beliefs. It doesn't matter what we think; it matters what we do. As Marx himself put it, "They do not know it, but they are doing it."

Doing not believing

The most decisive theory of ideology as what we do comes from Louis Althusser in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." His major insight is that ideology is not the beliefs that attach individuals to a particular mode of production, but the everyday habits, rituals, behaviors, and processes that keep the system going. There is thus no such thing as a society without ideology. Base and superstructure exist in all societies; ideology, as he put it, "has no history." But there are different kinds of superstructures, and Althusser

distinguishes at least two: the *repressive state apparatus* (RSA) which keeps things going through violence (the police, the military, what we now call the prison industrial complex, etc.) and the *ideological state apparatus* (ISA) which keeps things going through everyday life (family, religion, education, media, recreation). Aside from the question of violence, the two apparatuses differ in that the repressive is relatively unified (agencies working together for law and order, on threat of prison and death) and the ideological is relatively plural (disparate institutions and industries with potentially conflictual goals, and divergent techniques for upholding law and order). The capitalist mode of production mobilizes both apparatuses, but may be understood to break with the historically preceding feudal mode of production by placing relatively less weight on the repressive apparatus: whereas a monarchy enforces its authority through ultimate violence like execution or war on the whim of the king, capitalism relies more upon the practices that are at once freely conducted (which church to go to, how much school, what newspaper to read, whether to get married) and simultaneously indispensable to propagating the general matrix of social practices. It is the material practice that secures our reality. It doesn't matter how little we believe in capitalism's truth, or how snarkily we analyze its limitations—it matters that we live our lives all day within it, keeping it going. Ideology is not our consciousness; it is our actions. To illustrate this, Althusser draws upon Pascal's scandalous formula of religion: "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you shall believe."

To show the efficacy of the beliefs our actions create, Althusser employs the notion of "interpellation," the process by which the ideological state apparatus calls a concrete individual into being as a subject—that is, as a recognized agent with capacities and desires. Famously Althusser illustrates interpellation in a scenario: a person is walking down the street, noticing a police officer but going about her own business. After passing the police officer, hears someone yell "Hey, You!," and she responds by turning

around, looking toward the officer. In this scenario, the person has imagined that she is being spoken to, imagined that the speaker is the police officer, and felt an obligation to respond. Admittedly, Althusser's example is confusing, since he is using an interaction with the RSA to illustrate his idea of the ISA. But the example nonetheless dramatizes the gap that interests Althusser, the gap between the embodied person walking down the street, and the interpellated subject that imagines itself being recognized. This gap is elaborated in the work of Jacques Lacan, the structuralist psychoanalyst who emphasized the role of language in constituting the psyche. We are spoken to before we can speak; we are subjected to the (m)other's ideas of us before we can act; we do not choose our own names or social position at birth—and all of these external social factors contribute to forming our internal life. In borrowing this framework, Althusser thereby suggests that even our psychology is its own ideological state apparatus, propagating a sense of identity and of being recognized that ultimately shores up the social system which grants the identity. Even what we think of as our private cores are always already public, and thus conditioned by the contingent mode of production into which we are born.

Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses rests on an understanding that the practices and interpellations promoted by institutions cultivate an imaginary vision of what society is. Even though ISAs are not unified in their content or form, they may ultimately converge in projecting a reality which individuals find coherent and which is itself a representation of the mode of production, or what Althusser calls "the real conditions of existence." As we have seen, the capitalist mode of production is a configuration of the conditions of existence for the sake of extracting value from the mass of human beings and amassing that value as wealth in the hands of the few. The capitalist ISA represents that configuration as if it were for the sake of freedom and optimization. An imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence prevails. Ideology

is not that imaginary relationship directly; it is rather, and this is Althusser's crucial point, the *representation* of that imaginary relationship. "What is represented in ideology is not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live." Ideology within the apparatus is practices (going to school). Ideology within the mind of the practicing individuals is the meaning created that articulates imaginary relations. For example, we tell ourselves that we go to school to get an education, to learn about the world, to become more well-rounded people. But in many ways schooling exists to reproduce the compliant labor force for the capitalist mode of production. Ideology is the *practice* of going to school, and it is the *representation* of going to school as if it is meaningful for reasons other than social reproduction.

The contrast between real conditions and the representation of an imaginary relationship to them mobilizes another of Lacan's ideas, his schema of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. Lacan invokes these three registers to organize his study of mental and social life. The imaginary is the realm of images and projections, of identifications and fantasies, of wholes and connections. The symbolic is the realm of language and order, of social norms, customs, habits, rules, laws, and our ability to represent them. The real is the realm of what eludes symbolization, either because it is what any particular social order must exclude to generate its own consistency or because it is something prior to the mediations of the imaginary and the symbolic (i.e., something material, something impossible, something like the disturbance in nature which produces the universe and is embodied in human drive).

For his formula of the opposition between the imaginary and the real, Althusser activates Lacan's theory of registers: the imaginary is fundamentally a realm of the image, whereas the real resists representation (as image and as symbol). The imaginary makes up our reality while the real is the material

support of that reality which does not appear within it. To put this back into the Marxist terms we are starting to use, the real could be thought of as unformed nature including the human animal, whereas the imaginary is the specific mode of production through which human animals are able to exist and through which they transform nature. But this translation also shows how slippery the fusion of Marxism and psychoanalysis can be: the imaginary is effective, it is material—but it includes ideals (ideas, images, projections) and it is different from the real, the inaccessible ground of the material. In his book *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson points out that Althusser's version of this fusion minimizes the question of the symbolic, another of Lacan's registers, and that the problem of critically charting our own imaginary relationships to real conditions requires the intervening mediation of linguistic representation. Ideology is not only imaginary representation, since it includes the communicating of those representations in words, images, and beyond, but at the same time, we must represent ideology in the symbolic (describe it, reveal it) to have any chance of changing its effects. Jameson's reminder of the symbolic is thus something like a call for new symbolic representations, for the work of mediating ideology.

We have seen that the concept of ideology encompasses several things: the distortion inevitable in every representation (in analogy to the optic nerve and the camera), the ruling ideas in a social context, false consciousness, and actions that produce social cohesion. We need to add one final dimension before moving on to our next key word, and that is the psychic compulsion which underwrites the actions that produce social cohesion. Slavoj Žižek embellishes Marx's explanation of the inevitability of ideology and Althusser's elucidation of ideology as practice with a specifically psychoanalytic sense of an ineffable, compulsive, spontaneous drive to actively accede to the given reality. In his view, which he derives from a combination of German philosophy with psychoanalysis, reality is a matrix of ideas and practices that provide coherence for the fundamentally

incoherent raw material world, including the fundamentally contingent organization of that world into the capitalist mode of production. As he writes, “The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape.” For this notion of escape into reality, Žižek draws upon the contrast made in Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory between reality and the real. Reality is a matrix generated by language, signification, images, and practices (the symbolic in Lacan’s theory). The real is by contrast the limit to this matrix, an impossible, unknowable ground of reality that also undermines reality. Reality offers stability, the real destabilizes. Symbolic consistency, and the authority of any particular social order, work through acts of suture and imposition; encountering the real exposes these impostures. The real is sometimes thought of as a material substrate of what we know and do in social experience: matter, including the chaotic evolving matter of the universe, and drive, the force behind human activity and enjoyment. Reality is integrated; the real is unintegratable. Incoherence is hard to tolerate, and the vast terrain of undefined possibilities is terrifying, and thus there is something like a psychic and cognitive inclination toward manufactured coherence and delimited possibilities. It is this inclination which Žižek designates with the word “ideology.”

Most emphatically, Žižek insists that ideology works by means of disavowal, renouncing or repressing a truth: we know that we live in an exploitative, contingent system, yet we act as if we do not know. This idea of disavowal is crucial for explaining how very direct admissions and very explicit displays of social truths of domination—like the widely circulated photographs of US torture of inmates at Abu Ghraib, or like Melania Trump wearing the infamous “I don’t really care” jacket to visit the baby jail on the Texas border—make no change in the workings of power. Capitalist exploitation is not hidden; ideology is not the veil but the compulsive inertia of our keeping calm and carrying on. Thus, the real problem ideology poses is not how to precipitate enlightenment or raise

consciousness, but what orthogonal or new practices conflict with business as usual.

Critique as practice

The theory of ideology has often straddled a line between a theory and a practice. Since Marx's *The German Ideology*, defining ideology has been entwined with revealing its social function, often in the manner of exposure: the young Hegelians thought they were radicalizing philosophy with their account of universality, but they did not consider that the Christianism of their notions supported the ruling government in Germany. Thus, the position from which ideology could be defined as the ruling ideas of the ruling class constituted itself as a critique of the ruling class. Critique had been Kant's name for a philosophy that tried to account for its own conditions of thought, and "ideology critique" became the accounting for the material conditions of many types of thought. Accounting for such conditions is the condition of possibility of transforming them. Marxism traces the rootedness of thought in social relations, and it also exercises the uprooting potential of thought, the power of ideas, deeply situated in context, to nonetheless take distance from their context, thus working to precipitate transformations. Critique is in this sense not an outside of context, but a possibility immanent in any context. Any given mode of production includes and confronts the real possibility of other modes; a critical account of the specificities of the capitalist mode of production can also operate as a projection of something else. Marxist theory is above all else this procedure of immanent critique, critique internal to a situation which speculatively effectuates new situations.

Under the leadership of the Frankfurt School, the critique of ideology took shape as a concerted project to oppose all domination by exposing the work of ideas and representation in its legitimation, and could thus be applied not only to

the analysis of dominant culture but also to the analysis of academic, philosophical, and political discourses that purported to oppose some types of domination while explicitly or implicitly supporting other types. Often, ideology critique has addressed itself to a project of "demystification"—of revealing the mystifications, obfuscations, distortions in dominant ways of thinking. The wealthy are virtuous, the capitalist mode of production is natural, social inequality is inevitable—these are claims ripe for demystification. But in other versions, ideology critique has regarded most representations of social existence as necessarily balancing mystifications and illuminations, justifications and questions, ideology and critique. Ideology critique of textual or linguistic forms—speeches, literature, scholarship, verbal arts—requires some different tools than ideology critique of visual and practical forms—habits, institutions, architecture, painting, billboards. Whatever the medium of the cultural product under consideration, ideology critique is less the diagnosis of that product's particular ideology than it is the engagement with the product in order to reckon with the ideology of the social field outside the product. Thus, the goal of ideology critique is never simply to show how an artwork is secretly ideological but rather to confront the ideological web which the artwork and the critic alike are constituted by and are endeavoring to understand. Ideology critique interrupts the smooth normality of ideology, rearranges accepted meanings, and forms new categories, and the very process of so doing—collectively, say, in a classroom—may be an example of the kinds of practices that counter everyday practices of holding the mode of production in place.

Critique, the critique of critical criticism and the ruthless critique of everything existing and the utopian projection of something better, emerges within Marxist theory as one such practice for conflicting with business as usual. It is an unfinishable practice, an orientation toward everydayness as well as to large-scale history, to the imperative of social transformation, to the creativity at the core of the human.

Within the theory of ideology, we have seen this practice hailed as substantively *intellectual*: as reading, writing, studying. Marx recommended the materialist writing of history as the only way to apprehend ideology. Similarly, Lukács recommended investigation. Althusser also has a recommendation: "symptomatic reading." The critic of ideology must engage in a reading procedure which relates the manifest text (of a film, say) to a latent context (what he called "a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first").[17] Symptomatic reading is active, generative reading; it produces interpretations by linking what a text says and represents to the gaps in what it says and represents, and thereby generates an account of contradictions, negations, or other limitations that may have precipitated the gaps. Contrary to how it is sometimes caricatured, symptomatic reading is not "gotcha" reading that exposes a hidden meaning. It is rather a reading that situates, that places the text in relation to logics that overdetermine what can be said and thought, and that thereby helps those logics become traceable or nameable. It has a complicated topology: the logics are not extraneous outsides of the text but dimly perceptible insides. As Althusser memorably puts it, "The invisible is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, *its* forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible . . . the outer darkness of exclusion—but the inner darkness of exclusion . . . all its limits are *internal*, it carries its outside inside it."[18] Reading symptomatically is reading for shading and shadows, the framing and lighting of representation. When it comes to film, reading lighting and cinematography may therefore be an analogous procedure.

Symptomatic reading is especially well suited to reading *narrative* artworks. This priority of narrative has been elaborated by Fredric Jameson, a theorist who enhances Althusser's theory with more structural focus on narrative: in representing social relations, ideologies lend causes and closure to those relations, in the fashion of narrative grammar (a narrative requires a cause; a fact like "the sky is blue" is

not a narrative but a statement of a cause of the fact or of the fact as cause is ("the sky is blue because of air pollution")). Ideologies give us causes for why things are the way they are, and they propose resolutions to the conflicts they acknowledge in that state of things. Studying narratives, such as novels and Hollywood cinema, therefore opens up new insights into how ideologies work, and reciprocally, studying narratives requires engaging with the problematic of ideology.

Across the different notions of ideology we have rehearsed here, a sameness stands out. Whether ideology is inversion, falsity, legitimation, interpellation, or disavowal, it functions to constitute a matrix for action: for what we do, for why we do it, for what we produce and reproduce when we act. It is in this respect an ultimate projection: ideology projects a reality in which our actions are purposeful. We will soon explore the formal analogy to cinematic projection but let us quickly posit at the outset that there is a dialectical counterpoint to this projection of reality within which we uphold capitalism: utopia. Thinkers ranging from Ernst Bloch to Paul Ricoeur to Slavoj Žižek have argued for a connection between ideology and utopia. Projecting a reality is after all not so different formally from projecting another reality, a better reality. Ideology critique seizes upon this utopian dimension. And, as we will elaborate later, the cinema as projective technology does too.

Ideology has been at the heart of the academic study of both high and low culture. If there are prevailing frameworks for social reality that hold in place an iniquitous mode of production, those frameworks might be identified in their concrete sites of production and circulation. Mass culture—music, TV, film, advertising—would seem to be a central such site. At the same time, if the ruling ideas belong to the ruling classes, then elite culture could also be central. Thus critics, historians, sociologists, and philosophers interested in the problem of ideology have often set out to interpret individual works of mass cultural production as well as individual works of high art. Yet because culture is traditionally understood as

cultivation, beauty, civilization, a dialectical approach to the ideology of culture considers any given work's ambivalent function in propagating the status quo and in gesturing toward utopian alternatives.

The ultimate point of the Marxist theory of ideology is that ideas, which seem to be abstract spiritual entities in a different realm than concrete material activities, are actually material processes. They are not merely determined by those processes nor are they merely reflections of them. Ideas themselves are generative. What they generate may too often be the reproduction of the order of things, but they may also generate materializations in social practice that in turn generate the production of new socialities. The task for the Marxist critique of ideology, or the Marxist critic of film, is to explore what a given idea or representation makes possible, and what it renders impossible. It is also to practice these critical reflections as part of a social movement for transformation. A goal, then, of Marxist criticism is not only to appreciate or evaluate cultural production but to enter into conversation with cultural products in order to produce situated knowledge, which is itself a factor in the war of positions.

Just as the Marxist theory of ideology originates in reflections on the camera, the signal moments in the development of that theory often implicitly or explicitly refer to imagistic production. Ideology can be thought of as photographic or cinematic: the projection of an inverted image of the pro-filmic world, the phantasmatic wholeness of perspective, the inner darkness of exclusion, the screening of alternatives. These formal and technological similarities make the medium of cinema a rewarding focus for ideology critique. Indeed, today's foremost Marxist theorist of ideology, Slavoj Žižek, very often analyzes films for just this reason.[19] Through formal analysis of this type, film theorists can ensure that such critique is never merely the rating of a film ("*Mama Mia* is so ideological") but the situated grappling with how representation simultaneously conceals and reveals social contradictions.

Mediation

If ideas wield material force, a dialectical approach regards that force as working in two directions simultaneously: ideas uphold the ruling classes, and ideas critique the ruling classes. "Mediation" is the Marxist name for this bidirectional capacity of ideas, representations, and forms. This Marxist inflection builds on diverse connotations of the term, from ancient philosophy, where it means communicability and finding a middle, all the way to contemporary media theory (which is particularly important for film studies). As long as this history of the concept is, it has remained relatively underutilized in Marxist analysis and especially in aesthetic and film analysis, so my discussion here will be less anchored in the history of the idea than our other two sections, and more driven by directions that film and cultural theorists should take up.

In everyday parlance, we know that "to mediate" means to create a relation—to, most commonly, facilitate a connection between two opposing parties. If we want to turn this verb into a noun, we could think of a "mediation" as a relating, a relation. A relation can be between two things by way of a third, but it can also be between the two things by way of each other, or between a thing and itself. In Marx's theory, which we have already noted is centrally concerned with form, we can understand "mediation" as the work of forms. The commodity form, the money form, the novel form, the state form, etc., are all mediations of the underlying class relations of the capitalist mode of production. They are all what he often calls "forms of appearance" of relations—they give specific, concrete contour to the diffuse network of relations. We cannot see or touch the capitalist mode of production, but we can see and touch the forms that instantiate it. We cannot directly perceive our social relations—they are not immanently present to us—but a novel or a film can *re*present those relations. In this sense social forms like money or films *relay* the mode of production—they communicate it, they make it available for our study,

they mediate it. Mediation is profoundly important to the process of understanding the capitalist mode of production and the process of projecting alternatives, since it facilitates and actualizes the reading and investigating and writing that Marxists exercise as critical practice.

The contradiction of labor and capital is mediated—at once managed and displaced, illuminated and obscured—by ideology. The mode of production is mediated by its concrete manifestations. The resulting relation can also become a new thing. Mediation is thus more complicated than reflection or reproduction—it is a dynamic relation of working on and through something, yielding something different at the end. Metabolizing in this way, taking things in and processing them, can be denoted by the etymological origins of mediation. In Latin, the word *mediatio* means intervention, intercession, and halving. From this original meaning flow senses of going between two poles, taking up a middle, dividing. Mediation is a relationship of independence as well as of dependence, of opposition as well as of connection. For Hegel, mediation contrasts with immediacy. He is concerned with the distance between the knowing subject and the known object, and ultimately refers mediation to the self-reflexive knowing (the subject knowing itself as object) in which a true philosopher engages. Mediation is fundamentally conceptual for Hegel, the process of understanding the world. Marx then critiques the insufficiency of this self-reflexivity since it had remained too immediate in considering the philosopher's consciousness but not his social circumstances. Just as Marx defines his materialism as the situating of Hegel's conceptual process within social relations, his refinement of the concept of mediation involves inflecting it with material, not just conceptual/ideal, content. And he extends the idea of the movement between thought and circumstances into his theory of labor, which, as we have seen, he defines as a mutual transformation of the human and nature.[20] Marx may have elaborated on this notion of the transformation of nature in his letters and discussions with Engels that prompted Engels's compilation of the *Anti-*

Duhring, which theorizes an activity, or what Engels also called a "dialectic," by which nature materializes itself, moving from potentiality to actuality: "A transition is made from the realm of non-sensation to the realm of sensation." In this sense Engels propounded a theory of nature as transforming, mutating, actualizing—as mediating—that later media theorists and ecological philosophers—from Gilles Deleuze to Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour—would run with.

Because mediation is so central as a condition of possibility for, as a topic of, and as an outcome of, Marxist theory, we can remark the special consequences of Marxist theory for aesthetic analysis. When we study forms like painting or music or cinema, we are studying mediation. The individual art works can carry us to other times or to distant cultures, but their primary function is not to inform us about those contexts. Instead, the function of art is to reveal the processes of representation that structure its composed relations and that structure the social field. In so doing, art is able to continue to be of interest in radically different contexts than that of its emergence. Marx was very explicit about this. In writing about art, he asks "From where comes the eternal charm of Greek art?" Wondering whether evolving economic context invalidates meaning, he poses additional questions:

> Is the *Iliad* possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press the singing and the telling and the muse cease, that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear? The difficulty we are confronted with is not, however, that of understanding how Greek art and epic poetry are associated with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still give us aesthetic pleasure.[21]

Following Marx's line of questioning, Marxist theorists like Raymond Williams and Pierre Macherey have emphasized that a work of art is not a thing but a social process; works of

art are being produced and reproduced over and over again. Even when a sculpture or a film is "finished," it can circulate in new contexts, new times and places, and occasion new interpretations which reveal additional facets of the original work. The Marxist emphasis on social context for art thus does not fix the meaning of art as a reified reflection of its society, but rather opens the field of relations in which art is always contingently intervening. *Fight Club* necessarily looks like a different work upon release in October 1999 than after the November-December 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, September 11, 2001, the financial crisis of 2008, or the 2016 global fascist insurgency. The film's ability to continue to be interesting across those different social events speaks not only to its artistic and intellectual complexity but also to the situatedness of the social process of interpretation.

Art's ability to continue to offer aesthetic pleasure in different contexts stands in contradictory relation to its determination by its own context of production. Marxist theory of art highlights this contradiction. This does not mean that interpretations of individual art works must themselves be contradictory or equivocal. It means rather that interpretations must attend to how contradictions of cultural production and of the capitalist mode of production shape the individual work, including whether the work itself stages contradictions, and it means that interpretations must be conjunctural, recognizing their own situation.

Hegel, Marx, and Adorno all used the German *Vermittlung*, the putting of things into the middle, and "mediation" is frequently used (without definition) by critics discussing oppositions: the mediation of abstract and concrete, of subjectivity and objectivity, of past and present. Adorno accentuates the contradictory status of this middle: mediation for him is the awareness of difference/non-identity, of antagonisms/contradictions. Rather than the three-party mediation or two-party mediation, he thinks of the one party: "Mediation is in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought."[22] He contrasts

mediation with the immediacy he sees in Walter Benjamin's correlating of superstructure causally to a substructure, and describes that immediacy as "romantic."[23] And he goes on to insist that "immediacy itself is essentially mediated."[24] Raymond Williams usefully posited mediation as "a positive process in social reality," stressing the varieties of agency in the "interaction between separate forces" that is the "relationship society and art."[25] Where many critics have interpreted the base-superstructure model and the idea of determination to mean that the superstructure is just a mirror image of the base, Williams insists on the interrelation between base and superstructure, and their mutual constitution by ongoing social practices, and therefore on the ways that there is no stable thing to be reflected in the mirror. Charting the different valences of "mediation" as intercession, reconciliation, indirect connection, he promotes it to describe the relationship between society and art. Rather than reflect society, art projects it, negates it, distorts it. Each of these operations of representation in turn engender other kinds of processes: social interpretation, pleasure, confusion. Just as Marxism conceives of the communist future as an outgrowth of the capitalist present, it allows that aesthetic representations do more than reflect the conditions and context of their production; art acts upon extant relations, even and especially when it projects inexistent relations. Nathan Hensley observes that mediation indicates "productive reconfigurations and critical recoding operations—that is, acts of thinking—texts themselves perform."[26] In media studies, mediation may be thought of as the filtering of reality into consciousness by way of differing technologies. In media theory, we find the Marxist insight that representation is itself part of the social process of the mode of production, since theorists argue that print, painting, photography, film, CDs, memes, etc., not only circulate but also transform experience. John Guillory argues that the very concept of media as communication was only able to be formulated with the invention of printing technologies, and that as the concept expanded, it enfolded the fine arts and information genres. For Marshall McLuhan,

any new medium defines itself with regard to the medium it sees itself as superseding. Cinema understands itself in terms of the novel. The novel understands itself with regard to the newspaper. Mediation for him thus combines an object's differential self-identity with technological change. Richard Grusin accentuates Engels's natural overtones by arguing that mediation is "ontogenetic," pertaining to the development of being in nature, and therefore a notion which actually overcomes the dualisms previous thinkers relied upon in their definitions of mediation as a movement between language and reality or subject and object. For him, mediation "can no longer be confined to communication and related forms of media but needs to be extended to all human and nonhuman activity."[27]

A crucial Marxist formulation of the operations of mediation comes from Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping"—a concept which has special ramifications for film theory. Art as social practice can take the shape of promoting social literacy, and the analogy of cartography works to indicate the orienting and projective function of such literacy. While the term "cognitive mapping" might court literal impressions that art can help us make in our minds a map of this existing world, Jameson means something rather more complex by it. As he admonishes: "Since everyone knows what a map is . . . cognitive mapping cannot (at least in our time) involve anything so easy as a map . . . dismiss all figures of maps and mapping from your mind and try to imagine something else." The something else that Jameson is after is therefore a less literal, more abstract process of social interpretation.

This process of interpretation takes place in the relationship between art and criticism. As Jameson makes clear when he first introduces the notion of cognitive mapping in his classic *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), art can teach (following the classical rhetorical tradition's definitions of art as able not only to delight or to move, but also to teach). Art can teach about "the true economic and social form that governs experience" and can teach about alternatives by its agency to "produce the concept

of something we cannot imagine." But in order to do so, art needs criticism to pave the way since criticism illustrates the relations between social forms in positively existing reality and the imaginative forms that produce something else. Art that participates in cognitive mapping therefore needn't itself be literal or even didactic. It doesn't need to depict the geopolitical world of capitalist relations in order to mediate them. Rather, cognitive mapping results from aesthetic experience that promotes dialectics, abstract synthesis, or ideology critique.

Since cognitive mapping is a spatial metaphor for mediating the capitalist mode of production, it may be especially evident in spatial art forms. Thus, Jameson studies architecture at great length, but, significantly for our purposes in this book, he also takes up the idea that cinema is a fundamentally spatial art. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and space in the world system* (1992), he foregrounds this spatial quality as central to film's ability to "think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves" (2). Set design and projection are spatial relations that make up the cinematic medium, and that assist in cognitive mapping of the integrated space of the capitalist world system, the effort "to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late 20th century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality" (3). Films that explicitly tackle the capitalist mode of production on a global level, like *All the President's Men* or *Three Days of the Condor*, often do so, Jameson argues, by intensifying their spatial aesthetic, creating unique shots and angles and plots attuned to setting, landscape, architecture, transportation, and telecommunication. Incorporating the medium's inherently spatial qualities into figurative studies of space, such films invite connections between local and global, concrete and abstract, in a dialectical fashion.

Marxist mediation ultimately names the dialectic that is proper to representation. Individual works of cultural

production, like poems or films, mediate their socio-historical context, the dominant ideas of their time, and other works to which they allude or draw upon. Yet we can also speak of mediation as the action of culture as such, the processing of the mode of production into a meaningful reality and the taking up of distance from that reality. How does film mediate the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production? How does the projective technology of cinema reveal the projective function of ideology? What are the technological connections between the retina, the camera, ideology, projection, and the moving image? Mediation enables us to think of how films act upon the world ambivalently, making things apparent but also obscuring them.

Marxist film theory

If my general argument that Marxism is a theory that encourages constructive praxis is convincing, and if my outline of the core concepts of mode of production, ideology, and mediation has laid the ground for some important connections between Marxist theory and the theory of art, then we can now turn to some more concrete ways in which it has enabled the analysis of artistic composition with regard to the ultimate composite art, film. Marxism can help bridge the gap that has recurred throughout twentieth-century film theory between the study of film aesthetics and the study of film as social practice, because it provides such a comprehensive theory of how aesthetic representation issues from, instantiates, and alters social practice.

One of the concerns of this book is to address a conundrum: early film theory engages deeply with Marxism, but contemporary film studies seems to engage hardly at all. This is partly due to the rejection of theory in favor of proliferating localized analyses. As is the case in literary study, a traditional home of film theory in the university, the

An alternate trajectory: Jameson and the prospects of Marxist film theory

Even as Marxism has been left behind by film theory, one theorist has continued to pursue its theoretical promise with such eminence that there is even an entire book in this Bloomsbury Film Theory in Practice series devoted to him: Fredric Jameson. The greatest actually existing Marxist film theorist, Jameson is generally known less for his film theory than his work as a literary critic since he is the author of dozens of books spanning a career from the 1970s to the present, most of which concern literature. But several of his works are collections of essays on film, while others treat film as a significant counterpoint to or revealing touchstone for analysis of literature, philosophy, architecture, art, and television. And more important than this quantity, the quality of his engagement with film wonderfully exemplifies the interpretative practice we advocate for in this book. In our overview of the key concept of mediation, we have already discussed Jameson's influential notion of cognitive mapping, which substantiates mediation as a process of understanding the world to catalyze changing the world. So let's now focus on another of his crucial concepts for Marxist film theory: periodization.

Jameson is perhaps most famous in literary and cultural studies for his contributions to what is called "periodization," an effort to describe large-scale artistic movements as they transform over the course of history. There are many approaches to periodization, but a Marxist one fundamentally starts with transformations in material history and within (or among) the mode(s) of production. This means that a Marxist periodization of literature considers economic changes like the enclosure of common lands or the development of global shipping as illuminating backdrop for changes in literary style or the advent of new literary genres. Yet in some sense these changes are not changes at all, since they extend more of the same: the capitalist mode of production. Thus, Jameson has

remarked that "for Marx, modernity is simply capitalism itself," an equation that would seem to acknowledge that as long as we have capitalism, we are in modernity, not postmodernity.[38] A Marxist film periodization attends to the mutations in the capitalist mode of production since 1895, including the impact of the First and Second World Wars on global economic production, the large-scale shift toward participation by middle-class women around the world in the official wage, the end of Bretton-Woods in 1973, the founding of NAFTA, the development of the internet and subsequent dot-com boom and bust, and the global financial crisis of 2008. These shifts are the broader context for what historians of film identify as significant pivots, mainly technological evolutions such as the rise of digital video, or the advancing popularity (and enabling tax breaks) of filming away from studios in locations like New Orleans, Chicago, and Albuquerque. For a Marxist, periodizing schema are opportunities to ask new interpretative questions about the form, content, and ideology of film, but they are not answers to those questions. Film has a different relationship to capitalism than certain other kinds of artistic production, like poetry, since its history is entirely coincident with capitalism. How to understand this difference is also a question: Is film, as some might argue, the paradigmatic artform of capitalism? Does this mean it is incapable of imagining a beyond of capitalism, since it is a representational form conditioned by capitalism? Or does it mean that film has some special ability to mediate the capitalist mode of production?

As Clint Burnham describes Jameson's achievement in his book in the Film Theory in Practice series, Jameson's method of film interpretation is "always dialectical in two important ways: first, it seeks out the contradictions internal to a film and its workings, and then, in a way that brings us back to the question of periodization, it locates the film in a historical context or situation." This means that Jameson synthesizes the context and the text, reading film form in relation to economic reality. Furthermore, and this is a crucial point, Jameson's technique of periodization differs from the new historicist

approach to context because he always integrates contextual particulars back into the general history of the capitalist mode of production. Periodization is a contextualism that keeps the general in view, fathoming big swaths of economic continuity and discontinuity.

This dialectical character of his regard for film, and the dialectical character of his philosophy of history, makes Jameson the critic whose work most consistently actualizes the powerful promise of Marxist film theory. This is in no small part because his overall prescription for critical practice is that it must be dialectical: "A Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised simultaneously with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the utopian impulses of these same ideological cultural texts."[39] His analysis tends to keep in mind economic history, but to still begin with the form of a film, especially with what seems paradoxical or contradictory within its formal system, and how that formal frisson might be said to represent the social contradictions of capitalism. For example, he might argue that minor characters in a film set up the film's investigation of class politics since the tension between the minor and the major, which reiterates that between big-name stars and their anonymous character-actor counterparts, direct our attention to the social rules of who has power in society.

For Jameson, the ultimate point of the dialectical balance in method between formal analysis and economic contextualization is to arrive at a dialectical conclusion: many films present an interpretation of society—a representation of imaginary relations to real contradictions—that can function dually, as a re-inscription of the way things are, and as an articulation of utopian impulses for things to be different. Thus, Jameson takes the broad arcs of the Marxist theory of ideology as we have traced them and enhances the connections between the production of representation and the production of something new. Art, like everything else, is always ideological, but unlike everyday discourse, art makes

the dynamics of representation itself a subject of investigation: art encourages us to think about how representations work, and therefore to think about what representation does in the world. When art is especially forward about mediating its own representational apparatus, techniques, and medium history, then it gives us to think this power and functioning of representation in vivid detail.

Some motifs in Marxist film analysis

Now that we have reviewed the history of Marxist film theory, we can summarize some consistent topics of Marxist film analysis. These topics must be taken up dialectically—in relation to one another, and with regard to the relation between any individual film and the medium of film as such—or the project of theory will dissolve into the localities of mere analysis. Marxist film theory upholds the singular indispensability of mediation: aesthetic representation always enfolds the possibility of immanent critique, of texts breaking from context, of forms alienated from their determination, of ideology exposing itself. Analysis of any particular film must tie back to this essential appraisal of filmic potential.

Because of Marxism's emphasis on the basis of culture in the capitalist mode of production, any practice of Marxist film theory will likely attend to the basic economic relations undergirding the production of film. Movies are big business, and big business in particular for a global order atop which the United States presides as hegemon. In the twenty-first century the US federal government's Bureau of Economic Analysis began trying to formally calculate just how big, and they released the first annual findings in 2013, estimating that Hollywood-led creative industries account for 3.2 percent of all US goods and services, or approximately $504 billion of GNP.[40] By comparison, tourism is only 2.8 percent. Hollywood is the largest employer in the entertainment industry, with an

estimated 310,000 workers. The state of California is the world's fifth largest economy, around $2.7 trillion GNP, behind only the United States, China, Japan, and Germany; in that economy, Hollywood is smaller than Silicon Valley technology, but still accounts for $300 billion of that total.

Thus, it is important to understand that the United States has long been the dominant center of the film industry, even as its profits have been majority international since the 1950s. It is equally important that this center of the industry is organized by large conglomerates, many of which have been operating since the early twentieth century. These conglomerates include Walt Disney, Sony, Time Warner, Viacom, NBC Universal, and 21st Century Fox. One of these, Disney, ranks in the top 10 percent of Fortune 500 companies. All of these companies combine film interests with other industries, such as television, cable, telecommunications, and appliances. They also all function through vertical integration, meaning they control multiple levels of the production process, from purchasing scripts and acquiring film rights to novels, memoirs, and other patentable stories to shooting on sets in physical real estate they own to marketing through other industries they own (TV, newspaper, and radio commercials, for example) to distributing films among theater and retail chains they own.

These significant economic functions of Hollywood suggest that there is quite a lot at stake when a film challenges dominant corporate values. It is in the best interest of the film industry, the US economy, and thus the global economy, for Hollywood to continue turning sizable profits. These interests may make it unlikely that films seriously represent anti-capitalist ideas or practices. They provide important context when evaluating the messages of individual films, or when assessing whether it matters that some films are products of major, traditional, and/or integrated companies and others the products of small, untraditional, and/or independent companies. The economic facts of film production do not dictate the stories that films tell or the forms that films take. But they are determining—they

set some important limits. One task of a film analyst working from a Marxist point of view is to discern and acknowledge those limits.

These limits set by the capitalist mode of production stem not only from the overarching industrial situation of Hollywood but also from the economy as a whole. Marxist film analysis should also situate the film being analyzed within not only the macroeconomics of film production (3 percent GNP) but also the more immediate economic context of its individual production. It is therefore useful for a Marxist analysis to consider the facts of a particular film's economic situation, including its production financing, its profits, what state the film industry was in at the time of its production, and how the global economic system in general was performing. A film made in the late 1990s, like *Fight Club*, may be influenced by the ways in which the industry was rapidly expanding in that period. The 1990s were the longest period of economic expansion in American history, and Hollywood grew alongside everything else. New levels of industry integration were enabled by the approval of mergers of major studios with television broadcasters, creating Disney as owner of ABC, Viacom (Paramount) as owner of CBS, and Universal/General Electric as owner of NBC. Feature films became more linked to post-theater branding ventures like videogames and musicals. Megaplex cinemas became more common, partly to simulate the free choice experience of cable television. As home viewing of movies escalated, Hollywood turned toward spectacular action, special effects, CGI, and performance stunt films that readily showcased the benefits of the large screen. Studios made use of their international conglomerations to initiate worldwide releases, generating more marketing buzz and global engagement. This successful expansion of the industry suggests that executives may have felt it less risky to take on idiosyncratic projects. We might say that capitalism's boom years enabled the flourishing of more critiques of capitalism, precisely because those critiques would seem so irrelevant. But the boom also meant that more begot more and same begot

same; *Fight Club* was greenlighted as an action film and was marketed that way against its director's wishes.

Alongside the macroeconomic context that comprises the mode of film production, another aspect prioritized in Marxist analysis of film is the division of labor. We have seen that this notion arises to describe the tendency of humans to specialize in their creative activities, and the pressure of the capitalist mode for efficiency and autonomation and standardization. In film production, the division is also what makes the medium very collaborative. Some workers will help set the stage, as it were, for shooting: writing a screenplay, hiring actors (Casting Director), negotiating contracts, doing makeup, designing or purchasing costumes, arranging lighting, building sets, sourcing props, coordinating transportation of people and equipment to filming sites. Some workers will learn lines to be characters, learn blocking to be extras. Some will be involved in shooting, conducting the camera, positioning it (Dolly Grip), loading film or changing memory cards (Loader), getting perspective on how things are looking. Still others might never set foot on the set but will work hard on putting the film together: editing, splicing, choosing among different takes, synching the sound, choosing soundtracks (even composing or performing soundtracks), designing trailers, arranging promotional campaigns.

Some of these workers belong to professional guilds and unions, and sometimes these unions are involved in negotiations over their conditions of labor or are even on strike. The Writers Guild of America has staged two huge strikes in the past few decades, lasting over four months in one case and almost six months in the other, and both concerning how writers are compensated relative to the rest of the industry, especially with regard to post-theater viewing on DVD, streaming services, etc. The first ever Screen Actors Guild strike, which won the right for actors to earn compensation in residuals, was led by a charismatic young Illinoisan named Ronald Reagan. Film laborers may also organize themselves unofficially. Frances McDormand used her 2018 Academy Award acceptance

speech to underscore that one answer to the sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination scandals plaguing the film industry and the economy at large is an "inclusion rider," a contract provision stars, writers, producers, and others can adopt to ensure equitable representation of, and compensation for, women and/or people of color in a film's production. Analysts of films produced in the coming years may attend to the impact of this kind of labor action.

Film production often involves a large spectrum of laboring types, from caterers to lawyers, graphic designers to publicists, financiers to celebrities. This in-built diversity of economic positions may mean that medium has some capacity for rendering that diversity available for consideration. Moreover, the collective nature of film production provides one explanation for how a film might contain contradictory messages (whereas it can be harder to get this when reading a novel). In cases like *Fight Club*, where there is a novelist, a screenplay writer, and a director, we may reflect that there are inconsistencies or complexities within the film that pertain to this plurality of origins, or even to the different class positions of the creators (*Fight Club* was the screenwriter's first screenplay, adapted from an unknown novelist's ill-selling first novel, but its director's third Hollywood feature film).

The industrial context for *Fight Club*, as for any movie, is not a key to the film's meaning but an indicator of questions that can be profitably asked of the film. Differentiating between the explanatory power of context and the suggestive power of context has often been a debate in Marxist cultural analysis. The term "vulgar Marxism" refers to the reductiveness of the explanatory tactic. The dominant New Historicism often contents itself with merely identifying context. A more dialectical Marxism, by contrast, wants to take account of the overdetermination of a film's meanings, and of the ways that cultural production exceeds its immediate context. After all, the issues of consumerism, alienation, corporate malfeasance, and workers' struggles that *Fight Club* explores are not specific to the 1990s but recur across the centuries-long history of the

capitalist mode of production. The framing of those issues and the imagination of political possibilities around them can be very specific to a historical moment but can also repeat earlier moments or resonate with future ones.

After production comes consumption; another consideration for Marxist film analysis is thus the functioning of film as a commodity, a thing that is bought and sold, consumed and exchanged. We might think that going to the movies is an escape, something to do for leisure, and therefore far away from the workday or the normal order of capitalist society. Entertainment seems unproductive since it doesn't result in something that can be sold. I might write a review of a movie after I see it and post that review on Fandango.com, which might in turn earn additional profit by selling more ads since it has more impressions, but in general it is hard to see what I contribute to the direct economy by consuming a movie. But a Marxist perspective directs our attention to what is productive about consumption—to who profits directly from our ticket purchase, and to who profits indirectly. It points to the ways that the appearance of leisure or an escape can renew our capacity to work more; to the ways that the experience of enjoying a movie that seems to criticize dominant capitalist values can restore our faith that we are freely choosing to participate in the capitalist mode of production. Marxist film theory ultimately frames questions about how the consumption of arts commodities contributes to the social reproduction of the current state of affairs.

When, as in the case of *Fight Club*, a Hollywood film offers a critical perspective on the capitalist mode of production, the question becomes: Who profits from offering this perspective? Do those who profit control the hearts and minds of those who pay? Does the circulation of ideas provide fodder for new sociopolitical acts, or does entertainment deflate any will to act? When we watch a movie that depicts political struggle for social transformation, do we want to go out and generate our own struggle, or do we want to watch more movies? Marxist film theory does not prescribe answers to these questions, but it

underscores that they should be part of the picture of any film analysis. Because many of these questions cannot be answered through film analysis, but rather would require things like ethnography and statistics and long historical distance, the mere posing of them highlights the ways that film analysis is its own situated, limited cultural production.

All of the considerations we have just outlined as crucial for Marxist film analysis—the connections between film production and the capitalist mode of the production, the conditions in the macroeconomy when a film is produced, the conditions in the film industry when a film is produced, the labor conditions and division of labor, the conditions of consumption, the position of the critic—require research into the socioeconomic context for film. The literary theorist Jonathan Culler has remarked "Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless."[41] The Marxist dialectic has the advantage of counterbalancing boundless context with the bounded text, and thus formal analysis must complement contextual analysis. The ultimate topic for Marxist film analysis is formalist analysis since it is in the form itself that we find the materialization of social contradictions and their mediation.

Film form

The contextual questions we have outlined for Marxist film analysis must be taken up in relation to film form. We have seen that formalist inquiry is essential to Marx's own thought, and in this section I make the case that it is equally essential to fulfilling the dialectical potential of Marxist film theory. As I have argued, this potential emerged at the very beginning of film theory, in the works of Eisenstein and Benjamin, but the evolution of film theory since then has been away from Marxist considerations and away from formalist ones. Renewing those projects is a goal of this book.

The tasks we've outlined for Marxist film analysis so far revolve around the economic base of film (the conditions