American Mentality:
Trauma, Imperialism *and the* Authentic Veteran

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'fighting for one's country can render one
unfit to be its citizen'
(Shay, J 1994 *Achilles in Vietnam* New York: MacMillan)

Introduction: ideology and representation

Arguments about the *ideological* character of public representation may appear in different guises, but can be distinguished from other debates (over aesthetic quality, economic value, generic form, etc), by their preoccupation with two related issues; the question of *social control* and the possibility that texts either emerge from, or implicitly/explicitly compose *a coherent position or point of view.*

The social organisation of 'advanced' societies could be said to depend upon the circulation of broad genres of text; this is a view of communication 'as a system of thought and power and as a mode of government' (Mattelart, 1991, x). Textual forms and sub-genres, in turn, come to represent the existence and power of institutions. The daily appearance of newspapers, scheduled broadcasts of drama series, the imminent appearance of a film, all testify to the supposed permanence and predictability of the social order.

When *described* as 'ideological' however, messages, reports and fictive representations are usually represented as attempts made by powerful social alliances to exercise a form of 'real world' influence over a subordinate body or class; aimed, in other words, at producing some desired change in the behaviour, attitude, belief or perception of a weaker group forced into the condition of reception because it is held in a position of structural inequality.

'Negative' perspectives on ideology

The long-standing emphasis on negative rather than 'neutral' depictions of ideology, founded as they are on certain assumptions about 'ruling class' cohesion, clear political intent and even observable effects, depicts a 'top down' ideological process, which Abercrombie and his co-authors identified as the 'dominant ideology thesis' (Abercrombie et al, 1980). This position has been used to criticise both state and private forms of authority, in the first case most notably by Althusser (1970/1984) and in the realm of capitalist cultural production by a host of commentators; Benshoff and Griffin, in their work on American movies, follow Fiske in identifying the dominant ideological current as 'white patriarchal capitalism', which they claim permeates film (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004, 9), while Hayward argues that closure in cinematic entertainment always produces a message that is 'central to dominant ideology' (Hayward, 1996).

This sort of conviction has engendered a number of objections; in the political field, Poulantzas responded to Althusser by arguing that the state does not simply function through 'repression and ideological inculcation', but also carries out positive acts (Poulantzas, 1978, 30). Pursuing a similar argument, Larrain felt that attachment to negative perspectives could suggest that ideology was confined to 'the conscious lies and illusions of political parties and groups' (Larrain, 1979, 118). Althusser's preoccupation with structure and hostility to humanism sought, in the opinion of Howarth, 'to 'de-centre' the subject by drawing attention to its production in and through ideology', yet assumed through *interpellation* 'an already constituted subject which subsequently 'recognises/misrecognises' itself' (in Scarborough and Tanenbaum, 1998).

Responses to *narrative* as a supposed variant of directive address are treated below. In the meantime, it appears that shortcomings found in 'dominant' readings of political power have helped to strengthen the notion of a 'post-ideological' condition, one which questions the usefulness or validity of ideology itself as a motive force in public life. Instead of a narrative of universal oppression opposed by the goal of universal emancipation, a 'rebellion of various particularisms' is offered, a list of ethnic, national and sexual revolts which in Laclau's opinion oppose the 'totalizing ideologies' which dominated the Cold War era (Laclau, 1996, vii). It is notable that class does not appear in Laclau's inventory of resistive practices.

Scepticism and 'total' society

The origins of post-modern scepticism about efforts to identify systematic, identifiable belief, emerges from leftist observations about the growth of a 'total' society in which, according to Debord, ideology becomes a materialised and universal condition, making individual ideological positions irrelevant and ensuring that the *history* of *ideologies* comes to an end (Debord, 1967). Baudrillard introduced a variant on this theme, promoting the notion of a mediated sphere which comes to inhabit or even replace a once autonomous reality. The dilemma of theorising an all-pervasive ideology which, exactly because it supposedly inhabits all discursive space, is difficult to characterise, is found in Zizek, who notes that, just at the moment when the expansion of the new mass media 'enables ideology effectively to penetrate every pore of the social body', individuals do not act 'primarily on account of their beliefs or ideological convictions' (Zizek, 1994, 14). The system of representation is thought here to 'bypass' ideology, relying instead upon the use of economic coercion, together with legal and state regulations. Yet Zizek recognises that the 'extra-ideological mechanisms' that regulate social reproduction seem to become sources of ideology (*ibid.*).

If the prevalent conception of ideology is defined as an attempt at domination, in the course of which 'real' conditions of existence are falsified in order to exert forms of social discipline, then it has, at least until quite recently, been easier to dismiss as a species of conspiracy theory. Where, however, ideology is understood not as necessarily *false* but as always an *inadequate* explanation for capitalist social relations (Price, 1997, 111), then it can be attributed to any social group which attempts to promote itself *for pragmatic reasons*. Although it can never offer a 'pure' account of either dominant or subordinate positions (having to draw from a wide and contested field of available discourses), ideological argument can at least give a coherent account of events. In exploring Zizek's dilemma, a political example may suffice; the New Labour project is not 'ideological' in the traditional sense, and may be seen as a pragmatic adjustment to circumstance. The point, however, is that this 'circumstance' is global neo-liberalism, the 'pragmatic' response to which has to be 'sold' both to those who wish to cohere around it, and to those who will suffer from the 'rationalisation' it entails. Thus, following Zizek's explanation, it becomes a form of ideological project the core intention of which is to 'represent' what 'works for Britain', while actually promoting the interests of the 'market'.

Narrative configuration, 'themes' and discourse

If ideology exists where 'signs, discourses, objects and representations are used in an attempt to explain material reality' (Price, 1997, 111), then it is the attempt at producing discursive coherence which must be regarded as necessarily ideological. Although van Dijk speaks of the 'discursive expression and reproduction of ideologies' (van Dijk, 1998, 199), discourse is an 'unreliable' resource (Price, 1997, 76/77), in that when it is made into an *address*, it must appeal to more than the positions its animators might wish to advance; it must be formed in ways an audience will recognise and tolerate.

In the case of film, two essential qualifications should be made; first, that movie narrative (unlike party election broadcasts, another form of story-telling) is not necessarily composed from a unitary perspective and second, that where it is, there is no certainty that it will achieve coherence (nor indeed is this a foregone conclusion in the case of more directive, political forms of address). In Buxton's words, specifically with regard to narrative, there is no guarantee that any ideological project 'will survive the act of configuration intact' (Buxton, 1980). Configuration is the 'bringing together' of different *thematic* elements, where themes are not only 'significant aggregations of subject matter' (Price, 2004), but 'meanings with social purposes attached to them' (Barker, 1989, 267).

In cinematic terms, this means the production of discrete ideas which may not compose a clear 'authorial' position. Although individual scenes may be nearly identical in structure and content, this does not necessarily suggest that they serve the same purposes within the larger context of the movie; the repetition of individual scenes may serve different purposes even within the same genre, casting doubt on whether, in Proppian terms, they can represent the same 'categories of action'. The study of narrative text must encompass close attention both to internal 'cohesive' techniques, and to 'external' reference to those events, ideas, and discourses, which lie beyond the scope of the narrative but which are brought to mind through its power of suggestion.

This approach differs somewhat from Fairclough and Wodak's position, in that it shows less concern that 'discursive practices may have major ideological effects' (Fairclough and Wodak, in van Dijk, 1997, 258). This paper attempts instead to account for the 'strategies' found within textual configurations, relating these to the achievement of 'resonance' a term once employed by Gerbner (1976) to describe the concurrence of viewer expectation and media content.

Discourse therefore, embodied within a number of symbolic/expressive forms besides language, can be further understood as the existence of terms, statements, propositions, observations, images and narratives which *taken together* within a particular alignment or context, may present or suggest some form of 'meaning-coherence'. Such coherence need not necessarily constitute a complete perspective, or a precise ideological conjuncture, or even represent an entirely logical or consistent position.

There is also the *process* or condition of the cinematic experience to consider. As Branigan points out, there is 'a measure of indeterminateness' in fictional texts, which 'acts to *delay* and expand the kinds of searching and restructuring of prior knowledge undertaken by a perceiver' (Branigan, 1992, 195). Themes are not only *stated* but are also *inflected* and understood in a particular way; it is this inflection which will reveal the film-maker's attitude to his or her own material. In sum, a theme is bigger than a simple reference and a single 'subject'.

Values and warfare

There is an explicit distinction in American consciousness between World War Two, known as a 'good' war (despite the airborne slaughter of civilians), and wars which present a more difficult narrative proposition (see for example Boritt's 'War Comes Again' of 1995). The Civil War of 1861-65, although it can be interpreted as a crusade for emancipation, was initiated as a struggle between secessionists and unionists and caused the largest number of American deaths in any conflict. A third example, Vietnam, is characteristic of imperial wars, in the sense that it seems impossible to demonstrate a larger moral value, with the consequent retreat into other propositions about betrayal, comradeship, and individual sacrifice. Movies which attempt to make a moral case for fighting the Vietnam war, such as John Wayne's 1968 'The Green Berets', are forced to sacrifice credibility in pursuit of its grander ideological goal, unlike more cynical accounts which are protected by their narrower range of reference.

Quite besides the inability of some texts to represent large-scale argument, the natural tendency in narrative is to present ideas through the trajectory of individual characters. So, for example, a typical scene where a veteran has a 'flashback' to a previous trauma may often animate the theme 'guilt', but may equally produce more complicated notions of 'experience'; using Branigan's cognitive/schematic perspective, this will depend partly on the difference between encountering the scene as it occurs sequentially, and placing it in its context once the whole narrative is played out. An illustration of this and the deeper 'ideological' impulse at work in a text may be found in similar scenes of auditory flashback which occur in two mainstream Hollywood movies; both make reference to what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Taken from the Greek for 'wound', a trauma is defined as a mental shock, an event that 'shatters people's assumptions' (Ronnie, in Brewin, 2003, 4). Core beliefs or convictions are undermined by an affront too severe to be assimilated, with the consequent appearance of disturbed behaviour. The point about PTSD is that it is attributed to the 'victims of war, oppression, child abuse, marital violence' (Brewin, 2003, 1) and so on, but that mainstream film-makers limit its attribution to male characters (usually middle-ranking veteran officers) who are presented as traumatised and also, in some cases, apparently 'conscience-stricken'. They become as a result the 'victims' of war and not the perpetrators of violence.

In John Woo's 'Windtalkers' of 2002, set during the battle of Saipan in the Second World War, the viewer witnesses the pivotal scene which shows the origin of Joe Enders' guilt. This pivotal character (played by Nicholas Gage) adheres rigidly to an order to hold his position, which causes the death of his subordinates and his own injury. Yet it is made apparent that the patrol is surrounded and cannot extricate itself easily, making the imputation of guilt to Enders, and thus his sense of his own culpability, demonstrably unfair; why then is such an event dramatised?

It makes sense as a narrative device, seen in the context of Enders' subsequent actions; the movie is not primarily interested in exploring a psychological disorder, as in employing it as an explanation for 'future' behaviours. Crucially, in addition, it serves to confirm the authenticity of Enders' moral status; he has 'been there' and proved his mettle. A later scene, in which Enders is shown in a wheelchair, cared for by a sympathetic nurse, plays out the auditory flashback but contextualises the movie's own references to psychological trauma where Enders disavows his own claim to heroic status, remarking that a severely *physically* wounded soldier he sees represents the true casualty of war. In this instance, the film both asserts the existence of trauma, but ascribes its effect narrowly, to those individuals who stand at the centre of the narrative, while also questioning its significance in contrast to 'real' injury. Note that Enders' psychological injury is 'justified' by other more tangible factors; his hearing is damaged, making the entire flashback sequence attributable to a physical cause. It is far removed from the moral ambiguity and universal distress which appears in 'Thin Red Line' (Malick, 1998).

The Civil War drama 'Glory' (1989) features a comparable reference, but one which makes use of the 'traumatised' memory for different purposes. The young veteran Colonel of the 54th Massachusetts volunteers, a regiment composed of white officers and black soldiers, oversees the first distribution of weapons to the rank and file. As Colonel Shaw watches the recruits 'playing' soldiers with their new rifles, the narrative replays the earlier soundtrack of his experience at the battle of Antietam, forcing the viewer to anticipate the realities of warfare which will eventually engulf the regiment. Shaw's insight provokes a more thorough approach to training in marksmanship, borne from his sense of responsibility for black volunteers who have enlisted to fight for universal emancipation. It also indicates quite powerfully what Neale once called 'disparities in knowledge and power' among characters which, he argued, often correspond to 'differences in military rank' (Neale, 1991, 35). The functional and emotional qualities of this scene depend on their general veracity of reference; the themes of war, liberty and sacrifice depend on an enduring consciousness of the Civil War as one fought for higher ideals. *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise as the traumatised and alcoholic Captain Algren, is another movie which makes reference to events which have come to be accepted as indisputable, yet which present a problem for the ideological 'landscape' of the movie they inhabit. Tormented by his role in a massacre conducted against Native American civilians, the audience is provided with a context in which Algren can be forgiven; his attempt to prevent the attack and the guilt which he clearly displays. Taken as it stands, this could be read as a trenchant critique of US military policy during the phase of its 'internal' imperialism, but it is contextualised by Algren's personal sense of morality, and his eventual allegiance to a purer form of patriarchal authority, the village run by samurai; the antidote to modernity and 'dishonourable' manifestations of imperial conquest (represented through technological superiority) here is pre-modern feudal relations.

Conclusion: history, reference and the real

Dramatisations of history, or thematic presentations of the past, are always subject to controversy, usually encompassing debates about accuracy, propaganda, artistic licence, realism and aesthetics. At their simplest, however, arguments about historical representation manifest themselves as a straightforward opposition between truth and falsehood. Referring to Mann's 'The Last of the Mohicans' (1982), for example, Karen Ross declared that 'once again truth is sacrificed for the sake of a good box-office rating' (1986). Yet it is not clear from Ross' remarks which of the film's sources and influences should have been followed; the Anglo-French war of 1757, Cooper's novel (1826), or Dunne's screenplay (1936). When the industry does produce a progressive or at least more challenging text, surprise is often the prevailing response, certainly amongst historians. McPherson, for instance, wrote of 'Glory' that it 'strives for greater historical accuracy than we have come to expect from Hollywood' (*Drawn*, 99).

This brief study chose to examine the ways in which various themes are presented or enacted. It does not, however, support a simple equation between appearance and reality; nor does it depend on the question of 'authenticity', recognising for example that the creation of any communicative form depends upon the selective re-modelling of symbolic material. This suggests the existence of considerable exchange between various sources, commonly known as intertextuality.

The present enquiry, based ultimately on realist principles, maintains that films using historical themes ultimately make references to, and propositions about events, persons, practices, and other phenomena which exist or once existed independently of their later representation. A very general description of realism as a philosophy may show that it adheres to precisely such a distinction between 'objects in the physical, social, and psychological world' and 'theoretical discourse about them' (Greenwood, 16).

The study has identified fractures in the 'discursive coherence' of films which dramatise male fragility in the context of war, noting that themes and narrative propositions do not necessarily achieve a unitary perspective within and between individual representations. It asked to what degree a series of expressive or 'ideological' acts appear in the guise of a standard cinematic technique (the 'flashback'). It does not, however, pursue the idea that such themes constitute watertight propositions capable of reproducing some pure system of belief, but certainly that they are able to reproduce myths about masculinity, service and other motifs which serve to avoid responsibility for the consequences of contemporary warfare. It is better perhaps to talk of 'prevalent ideological assumptions' as does Chattarji (2001, 1) than 'dominant ideology' per se. So, for example, following Ehrenhaus it is possible to note that some therapeutic motifs have resulted in 'the political containment' of the human subjects they use as dramatic reference-points (in this case, Vietnam veterans). The representation of supposedly 'psychological' phenomena reveals the concentration of emotional resource on male sufferers.

Related activities or processes include: the retrospective attribution of 'modern' sensibilities to earlier periods; a narrative strategy which assigns authenticity (Hartman, 2002) to the actions of protagonists whose 'word'/honour falls under scrutiny; the neurotic deployment of alibis in order to prepare the reconstruction of stable masculine identities (characterised as a return to 'honour'); and the creation of a limited anti-imperial critique. In all these endeavours, the 'uneasy construction of American identity' (Ward, 2002) may be scrutinised and insights into an American 'mentality' gained.

In conclusion, it may be interesting to note, judging by John Kerry's failure to benefit from the strategic mobilisation of his own wartime narrative, that explicitly *political* uses of an authentic military record do not guarantee public approbation. Kerry's opponents, working through organisations like 'Swift Boat Veterans for Truth', produced a counter-narrative which derided the quality of his service in Vietnam and emphasised his subsequent opposition to the war. In what Barker calls 'the story-world' (1989), the veteran must ideally be apolitical, a victim of events rather than a perpetrator.

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