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## Ideology Takes a Day Off: Althusser and Mass Culture

### Abstract

As theories of mass culture that focus on empowerment, use value and utopian bribes have become increasingly popular, Althusser's groundbreaking work on structural causality and ideology has been left aside because of its alleged inability to account for social resistance. This is unfortunate because such Althusserian concepts still provide the most productive foundation for a Marxist approach to mass culture that avoids both unwitting apologetics and facile, ethical critiques. Nevertheless, many of Althusser's theoretical claims are in need of revision. As the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* implicitly suggests, Althusser's distinction between ideology and the aesthetic no longer holds in consumer-oriented capitalism. In addition, the film undermines Althusser's assertion that the schools are the most powerful ISA under capitalism, suggesting instead that mass culture now fulfills this function under late capitalism. Moreover, this reshuffling of the ideological hierarchy necessarily produces a fresh set of concrete, historically specific contradictions. These contradictions, in turn, provide new possibilities for resistance and social change.

### Keywords

theories of mass culture, mass culture, empowerment, utopian bribes, value, Althusser, structural causality, ideology, social resistance, Althusserian concepts, Marxist approach, Marxism, ethical critiques, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, film, ideology, aesthetic, consumer-oriented capitalism, capitalism, school, ISA, late capitalism, ideological hierarchy, contradictions, resistance, social change

## Ideology Takes A Day Off: Althusser and Mass Culture

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Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation among men and their 'world,' that is the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence.  
—'Marxism and Humanism'

In the move within cultural studies toward the effacement of the distinction between high and low culture, the Althusserian theory of ideology has become something that one moves beyond. In this theory's implications many critics have detected the creeping specter of the culture industry's conception of popular texts, with its supposed vision of the masses as lambs led unwittingly to the slaughter. In its place, a variety of modes of "reading the popular" (in John Fiske's phrase) have gained popularity that focus on empowerment, use value, and utopian bribes and seek to bring what Fredric Jameson calls "dialectical criticism" into the study of mass culture.

It will be the argument of this paper that these two recognizable poles of cultural criticism—the conspiracy theories of massive interpellation of an essentially docile public, and the populist theories of a more savvy public that picks and chooses according to its needs and desires—represent a false choice between structuralism without agency and humanism with. In this reduction, Althusser's groundbreaking work on ideology, structural causality, relative autonomy and overdetermination is either ignored or misconstrued. Using these conceptual tools, this essay will attempt the following: first, to articulate an Althusserian approach to mass culture that draws on both Althusser's work on ideology *and* his less influential work on the aesthetic; second, to update much of what Althusser says specifically about the contours of ideology under capitalism, focusing in particular on the rise of mass culture.

I will begin with a discussion of a standard critique of Althusser and then move on to those alternative models that focus largely on struggle at the level of consumption. Then I will discuss a popular film (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*) at length because it points in the direction that an

elaboration of Althusser's work must go in order to deal with the increasingly dominant role played by mass culture within the ISAs as a whole. More concretely, I hope to use the film to show how mass culture's widespread success in producing consumer desire in contemporary America requires a revamped Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation that *includes* the aesthetic. This project, again, need not import concepts from outside Althusserian Marxism. It is quite consistent with Althusser's model of ideology in general, even if it takes issue with some of its particulars. The ultimate goal is to produce knowledge about what he calls in *Reading Capital* the "mechanism of production of the *society effect* in the capitalist mode of production" (66).

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Criticisms of Althusser are not hard to find. They have come from post-structuralists and orthodox Marxists alike. Perry Anderson, who used Althusserian tools himself in *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, explains the ill-fated union of structuralism and Marxism this way: "Rather than resisting this move [the structuralist rejection of the humanist subject], Althusser radicalized it, with a version of Marxism in which subjects were abolished altogether, save as the illusory effects of ideological structures" (*Tracks* 38). Anderson's point is simple. The union was a mistake for Marxism from the start because its displacement of the constituting subject from the historical process necessarily precludes collective political action toward revolutionary change. In terms of the study of mass culture, the point is equally straightforward. The decentering of the subject denigrates the individual, turning her/him into little more than the "illusory effects of ideological structures," passive repositories without any capacity for resistance.

The either/or logic underpinning this now familiar critique of Althusser runs roughly as follows: either there are no constituting subjects, individual or collective, and we may as well let history and the class struggle take their course, or there are real possibilities of conscious intervention through organised political action. If the argument is formulated in this way (as it usually is by Marxist Humanists), then political action and its agents must be privileged. The fear of the loss of the subject (individual or collective) as the constituting historical agent is thus the underlying issue we must bear in mind in trying to make sense of the polarized debate over mass culture mentioned above. This fear is also largely responsible, I think, for the shift in emphasis from production to consumption. As Meaghan Morris has argued, the banality of culture studies today is its view of consumption as a

separate sphere "rather than [as] one of the necessary, complex, variable *phases* of a productive process" (21). Morris attributes this development to the facility with which struggle can be found in consumption and the difficulty finding it in an increasingly complicated, deindustrialized global economy.

Warren Montag has argued in a similar vein that Jameson's conception of postmodernism denies the possibility for struggle at the level of production.<sup>1</sup> Jameson's approach to mass culture seems to follow logically from this dispiriting conclusion. Indeed, because conflict can no longer be found in production proper, Jameson seeks and finds it elsewhere in the subject's interaction with popular texts. However, both the denial of production and the affirmation of consumption can be traced to the same source. Both derive from a single theory of history. For Jameson, history is a totalization with a totalizer, a developmental narrative by which men caught in the realm of necessity yearn for the realm of freedom. In other words, history is a process *with* a subject—an idealist theory Althusser attributes to Hegel.

It should be pointed out up front that Jameson's approach to the popular and Althusser's are not diametrically opposed. Both agree that the practice of popular culture is not a univocal, but a contradictory one. The difference between these two theories lies in the complexion and complexity of this contradiction. Consider the logic underpinning this passage from Jameson's essay, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture":

[T]he hypothesis is that the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated . . . the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity. (30)

History, in this passage, is something of an unnatural ruse that thwarts and manipulates a collectivity that has sought throughout the course of time to realize its deepest desires, the purest pre-social expressions of human nature. Popular texts then articulate the repressed desires of the people, the real subjects of history. The public is consequently drawn to those popular texts that narrate its collective story.

However much sympathy we may feel for this as an *ideology*, it is just that: an ideology, and not an explanation of the structural practices that determine its shape and function. In its refusal to abandon the humanist subject, Jameson's formulation sacrifices its potential to

make sense of the conflicts within the structures that determine that very subject. As Michel Pêcheux has indicated, there exist "relations of contradiction-unevenness-subordination" among and within these structures that can and often do produce resistance (143-54). But Jameson's subject-based discourse does not make the epistemological break that Althusser attributes to the later Marx, a break that allows for an understanding of history as a process *without* a subject.

An Althusserian approach to popular texts necessarily conceives of such texts as overdetermined. Texts, like subjects, are the product of intersecting (and conflicting) material practices. Instead of focusing on a utopian dimension as a bribe to a pre-existing subject, a strict Althusserian approach should conceive of texts and subjects both as the bearers of structures. Both are sites of a complex interplay among multi-leveled material practices that includes but is not reducible to economic practice. To operationalize this approach to the text, Althusser recommends what he calls symptomatic reading. This method decisively rejects Jameson's humanist ideology that affirms the existence of a subject that can be distinguished from its social context in favor of a discourse that reads the text for "specific structures of historicity" that are immanent in the text in their effect (RC 108).<sup>2</sup>

Terry Lovell has argued that such anti-humanist knowledge is ultimately disabling to political action because it sees the subject as constituted by ideology and not constitutive of history (241-46). Indeed, this too is a familiar criticism, and it is one that Althusser himself acknowledged in his later essays.<sup>3</sup> It is true that Althusser did not fully formulate an account of how the working class might make history. But as Althusserians like Pêcheux, Goran Therborn and Catherine Belsey have shown, Althusser's work on ideology can provide the basis for a cultural politics that does.<sup>4</sup> Pêcheux' work is particularly valuable for our purposes because it stresses the absolute necessity of hard empirical work to determine the balance of class forces and the structural features of capitalist society at any given historical moment. Only after this work has been done can the progressive or reactionary charge of any given popular artifact be determined.

When Althusser writes in "On the Materialist Dialectic" that contradiction is the motive force of history, he is suggesting (as any Marxist should) that each of the multiple contradictions that exists in the complex whole in dominance means "a real struggle, real confrontations, precisely located within the structure of the complex whole" (FM 215). Theories of mass culture like Jameson's and Lovell's imply that this motive force derives from the subject (instead of constituting it) because individuals will always and instinctively fight against

exploitation. As a result, however, the specificity of any given conjuncture gets lost in the rush to treat the culture industry dialectically. The cultural critic finds this essential conflict time and again, and history becomes a continuous narrative produced by human intentionality. The Althusserian subject does indeed 'make history' too, but always in ways that exceed its intent. Montag puts it this way:

We act within a specific conjuncture only to see that conjuncture transformed beneath our feet, perhaps by our intervention itself, but always in ways that ultimately escape our intention or control, thereby requiring new interventions *ad infinitum*. (PD 102)

This need for on-going intervention presupposes a resisting subject, but not a humanist one. Moreover, it implies that the ideologically constituted subject is decentered because ideology is structured like language, a point that Michael Sprinker has made.<sup>5</sup> This is why ideology is eternal and why the subject is constantly being hailed, constantly being interpellated by the ISAs. This is also why the subject is overdetermined, in process and thus always susceptible to interpellation by competing ideologies like communism.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, any investigation of mass culture must carefully situate it in relation to other ideological practices—ones like the family and the schools that have traditionally played a more crucial role in fulfilling ideology's function. The relations among these practices is not predetermined, but rather always shifting—and always possessing the potential for a reshuffling that operates to transform the productive relations. The fact that these relations cannot be known *a priori* is implicit in the ISA essay. In it, Althusser says that under capitalism the schools have replaced the church as the dominant apparatus. However, as we will see in a moment when we turn to *Ferris Bueller*, the schools no longer hold this privileged position, having relinquished it to mass culture.

Lovell and John Fiske find elitism in Marxist approaches to the popular that do not grant consumers the ability to decide for themselves.<sup>7</sup> They point out that the consumer still determines whether a high-budget Hollywood film, for example, will be a blockbuster or a bust. Lovell turns to Marx's concept of use value to theorize the individual's ability to use the commodities foisted upon him or her for contrary purposes. In buying, in other words, the subject resists. In choosing to watch a particular television show or attend a particular film, the subject is asserting its ability to fight back against its oppressors. And yet, however much we may wish to stress the subver-



sive potential of popular texts, we don't want to forget the overall social effect of mass culture. Although we may indeed struggle politically at the level of consumption, we are continually reminded that this struggle is not waged on a level playing field. In general, mass culture displaces antagonism far more often than it condenses or instigates it. Here surely Althusser's notion of "last instance determination" is a helpful (if sobering) reminder that these texts are commodities delimited by the economic interests that finance them and reap the profits. Theories of culture that dwell on empowerment and resistance too often read like apologies for the culture industry. The point isn't that no struggle goes on at this level, but that this struggle is only *relatively* autonomous. As such, it must always be studied as one among many phases of a complicated production process.

In a moment, I will concretize this investigation by turning to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, a film that can be read as a critical allegory of Althusser's theory of ideology. More specifically, it takes as its subject matter the complex role of mass culture in subject interpellation. Our discussion of the particular function of mass culture must acknowledge that this apparatus was not sufficiently theorized by Althusser. While it is true that other apparatuses generally seek to construct *producing* subjects prepared to enter the work force without complaint, mass culture is tied so heavily to consumption that the subjects it seeks to construct are more *consuming* subjects characterized by classlessness. Here, it might be argued that in his broader assertions concerning ideology Althusser did not always adhere to his own caution to respect the relative autonomy of different material practices. While the cumulative effect of ideology as Althusser saw it in the ISAs essay was a "free" producing subject, a mass culture-dominated ideological matrix seems to form something very different: a nonproductive, "free" consuming subject. True, these two subjects are both first and foremost "misrecognizing" subjects, seeing themselves as their own cause—a process Pêcheux calls the "Münchhausen" effect after the immortal baron who lifted himself into the air by pulling his own hair (103-09). Moreover, it can be argued that the producing and consuming subjects are complementary. In order to acquire the consumer items that will express one's unique individuality, one must enter the work force to make the necessary capital. But if mass culture's ascendance comes at the expense of the schools' legitimacy (as indeed it does in *Ferris Bueller*) then an ideological crisis might be in the offing. If education is the ideological practice that teaches the skills needed to participate in the labor force, its denigration by mass culture jeopardizes ideology's



Althusser did not provide for the radical alteration of the ideological terrain that mass culture's ascendance in the United States has brought about. I've already mentioned its denigration of the educational apparatus and complication of the production side of capitalism. But it has also swallowed up the aesthetic. Although Althusser always included the aesthetic among the ISAs, he saw it as a sort of second-order signifying system that "internally distantiates" ideology and allows the spectator/reader to "see, perceive and feel" the discrepancy between the imaginary relation of ideology and the real relation of the productive relations.<sup>8</sup> This theory has been criticized often enough for its ostensible privileging of the avant-garde and its dismissal of classical realism.<sup>9</sup> I will not rehash this argument. I only wish to suggest that it is no longer a particularly relevant one because mass culture itself has erased the dividing line between the two aesthetic modes. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* confronts the Althusserian aesthetic with a mocking dilemma: it is a cynical, enormously popular film that appears to lay its own practice bare. It thus renders the Althusserian division between "real" art and mass culture meaningless. But it also points the way toward a revised Althusserian approach to cultural artifacts that is capable of making sense of mass culture in the postmodern age.

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The choice of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is not an arbitrary one. The film speaks volumes about teen films in particular and mass culture in general because it takes as its very subject the ideological function of such discourses. It presents us with a literalization of the interpellative process that Althusser outlines in the ISA essay. Ferris Bueller—the consummate teenage trickster figure—doesn't merely outwit school administrators and parents; he also teaches his best friend Cameron and the audience how to be individuals in a capitalist society. His day of fun and frolic in Chicago is only a pretense to pass along this valuable lesson. Ferris is something of a filmic figure for the Absolute Subject in whose name individuals are interpellated as subjects by ideology. Cameron is a filmic figure for the "hailed" subject that only exists in and through ideology. To pursue this schematic outline, the relationship between Ferris and Cameron allegorizes two processes: first, transhistorically how what Althusser calls ideology in general functions, has always functioned, and always will function—even after class distinctions have been erased. Consequently, the self-originating subject of humanism is the determinate absence of the film. It is revealed instead to be the bearer of structures; and second, historically

how the relations of contradiction-unevenness-subordination among the ideological apparatuses that serve to shape individuals as subjects have shifted. In the realigned relations that can be read symptomatically from the film, the schools (the apparatus Althusser argued was the dominant apparatus in capitalist society) and the family are subordinate to and in contradiction with the mass culture apparatus that has become increasingly hegemonic. This is particularly true in youth culture, the segment of the population that has yet to take up its position within the productive relations. This shift in the complex constellation of ideological practices parallels a shift in a subject defined by its identity as a producer to a subject defined as a consumer—a shift from a free wage laborer to a consumer expressing his/her freedom in the marketplace of leisure. This shift also suggests that the ISAs function in late capitalism no longer to fulfill ideology's role of reproducing the productive relations in the way Althusser envisioned when he wrote the ISA essay.

From the opening shot, the spectator is positioned as a sort of silent pupil quite explicitly by Ferris, who has just conned his parents into believing that he is too sick to go to school. As the door of Ferris' bedroom shuts behind them, Ferris turns directly to the camera (thus breaking the fourth wall so precious to classic realism) and says, "They bought it. The worst performance of my life and they never doubted it for a second." There is nothing shocking about this rupture of the diegetic space, however. No alienation effect is produced. Through a combination of exaggerated point of view shots from Ferris' perspective and aided by his unctuous overacting, the spectator is led to recognize that what she/he is witnessing is purely performative.

In the series of tableaux that follow, Ferris gives the camera a primer on how to bring off a similar deception. As we tag along, Ferris takes a shower during which he offers up what is supposed to be the film's message. Here, as elsewhere, director John Hughes gives his audience little credit, presenting this thematization as the filmic equivalent of the Cliff Notes they no doubt read instead of the books themselves:

I do have a test today. That wasn't bullshit. It's on European Socialism. I mean, really, what's the point? I'm not European. I don't plan on being European, so who gives a crap if they're Socialists? They could be fascist anarchists for all I care and it still wouldn't change the fact that I don't have a car. Not that I condone fascism. Or any ism for that matter. Isms, in my opinion, are not good. A person should not believe in an ism, he should believe in

himself. I quote John Lennon: "I don't believe in Beatles, I just believe in me."

Ferris seems to be saying that ideologies are not just uniformly bad, they're irrelevant. The subject who "believes in himself" is outside of the apparatus through which ideology realizes itself. Schools (in addition to the family, which is also not to be taken seriously judging by the ease with which Ferris outsmarts his parents) here stand as the pre-eminent purveyors of the kind of "ism" Ferris deplors. Interspersed with this lesson on how to resist the dominant ideological apparatus, the viewer is treated to a series of shots from classrooms. The contrast is clear. While Ferris moves around the house freely, dancing to themes from MTV and "Bewitched" and then sipping a tropical drink by the family pool, his peers are staring glassy-eyed at unspeakably boring teachers droning on about the Great Depression and symbolism in some unspecified novel.

This segment erects the fundamental distinction upon which the film's ideological project depends: the distinction between the subject and the social structure that demands allegiance—between two spaces, the ideological and the nonideological. According to Ferris and the film, there are subjects who exist within ideology (like those who submit to school authority and take the test on European Socialism), and those who elude its grasp by believing in themselves. The spectator ends up in the interesting position, soon to taken up by Cameron within the film, of a student being taught how to be herself or himself. But as Althusser argues, such a distinction is the precondition for the practice of ideology. "What really takes place in ideology seems to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological' " (LP 175). So far, the film is keeping to Althusser's model of ideology in general. But we should recognize that Ferris' modes of expressing this vaguely articulated belief in oneself are (and will be throughout the film) all mass cultural, consumer-oriented activities. While the ideological work done in the formerly dominant schools is clearly at odds with the reality of the existence of its subjects, mass culture presents the "nonideological" liberation of leisure and consumption. Ferris *chooses* all these activities. Conversely, the apathy on the students' faces in the schools bespeaks the consequence of their refusal to exercise individual choice. A change in the dominant apparatus is figured here that in turn constructs a different subject. It is no longer a willing worker, but a consumer in the democratic marketplace. Of course, this is an imaginary relation inasmuch as it denies the reality of unequal distribution of

the capital necessary to express this individuality. Thus the shift from a producer-oriented ideological matrix to a nonproductive, consumer culture also seeks fictively to deny the reality of class (which emanates from the productive relations).

One point on ideology in general: the seductiveness of Ferris' monologue clearly is suggestive in some unexpected ways. If we accept Althusser's contention that there will always be ideology and thus subjects, then Ferris' manner of presentation could be used in very different ways. If, instead of reciting an ode to consumption, Ferris were to begin inculcating the beliefs of historical materialism and explaining the social construction of identity, might the film serve a more radical political aim? If, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, you don't believe in communism because you understand Marx, but rather you understand Marx because you believe in communism, then might Ferris' example suggest an initial procedure for bringing subjects to internalize an ideological system? Of course, the film probably would not have been produced (let alone have been successful) if its ideological raw material hadn't been familiar and safe. The next crucial allegorical section of the film involves the introduction of Cameron, Ferris' best friend, who really is too sick to go to school. When we meet Cameron for the first time, he is lying motionless in bed, covered from head to toe by blankets. The phone rings and Cameron's voice is heard from under the bed covers moaning monotonously. We then hear Ferris' voice speaking through the answering machine, telling Cameron to pick up the receiver because Ferris knows he's there. It is only after several moments that Cameron picks up the phone, and even then the camera cannot make out his face beneath the blankets. All we can hear is Cameron's voice chanting, "Let my Cameron go," over and over. Read allegorically, this scene is a temporalization of the process of entry into subjectivity Althusser describes. Only when Ferris hails him does Cameron recognize that it is really he, Cameron, who is the subject of Ferris' hailing; only then does he accept his social existence.

Ferris's motives are two-fold. On the one hand, he claims to be rescuing Cameron from the malaise that has resulted from the contradictory effects of interpellation in the family and the schools. In both the family and the schools, the degraded position of subordination Cameron inhabits has produced alienation and cynicism. However, Cameron's apathy can also be read as the result of a disjunction between an ideology of a productive subject appropriate to an early phase of capitalism and the reality of a nonproductive, commodity-oriented economy. The latter is represented by the only employment options the film presents: retail store agent and advertising executive (held by

Ferris' mother and father respectively). Both jobs are lucrative, but neither produces any value. This gap thus suggests the unevenness of the relations among ideological apparatuses. The schools and the family have lagged behind a shift in the U.S. economy that has thrown the fictiveness of ideology into relief and diminishes its effectiveness. Ferris is an agent of the now dominant ideology of free consumption more appropriate to this new phase. On the other hand, we must remember that Ferris has a particular reason for calling Cameron: he *needs* him, needs his car to turn his plan of a "day off" into a reality. Similarly, the ideology of consumption that mass culture legitimizes needs the capital that a constructed, desiring consumer will spend to perpetuate itself.

The structures that determine the subject thus become the very subject matter of *Ferris Bueller*. In the action that follows Ferris' phone call to Cameron, we see Cameron trying to decide whether or not to give in to Ferris' demand that he pick him up in his car. But much of the humor of this segment derives from the fact that Ferris and the camera guess—always correctly—what Cameron is thinking to himself. At one point, just as Cameron is about to drive to Ferris' house, he abruptly turns the car off, gets out and disappears back into the house. As the viewer watches Cameron through the back window storming away, the camera never leaves the car seat Cameron has abandoned. It waits patiently for Cameron to return and go get Ferris. Like Ferris, the camera knows what Cameron does not. What appears to be an internal dilemma that Cameron as an autonomous subject must resolve is determined by the ideological structure that dominates him. Evidence supporting this conclusion will accumulate through the course of the film until, at the very end, it serves to undermine Cameron's declarations of self-determination. Thus, while the viewer does indeed come to identify with Cameron, this identification includes the fact that human nature is the end product of a process of internalization, not the source of meaning. In this sense, the film clearly illustrates Pierre Macherey's thesis that the work of art does not so much express ideology as it endows it with aesthetic figuration that ends up enacting the latter's unmasking and self-criticism.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a film that offers a developmental narrative of a character coming to terms with himself unmask the very process that makes this mystification possible.

After Ferris bullies Cameron into letting him "borrow" Cameron's father's limited edition 1961 Ferrari to pick up Ferris' girlfriend Sloane from school, the three head into Chicago for the day. After parking the car in a garage, they go to an upscale restaurant at which Ferris impersonates Abe Froman, the sausage king of Chicago. Then they go

to a Cubs game, to the Art Institute and finally to a parade. What is worth noting about these scenes is that each takes place in an ideological space that is in no way innocent of the charge levelled explicitly at the schools and implicitly at the family. The presentation of the school scenes and Cameron's description of his home life have figured ideology as a repressive force. At the school, boring teachers who pass on stale ideology share space with vindictive administrators like Principal Ed Rooney whose sole purpose appears punitive. At home, parents are either domineering like Cameron's commodity-fetishizing father (he "loves this car more than life itself," says Cameron) and children are subordinate and fearful or parents are eminently gullible like Ferris' loving, cliché-spewing parents, and children get away with murder. In neither case is there any room for "free" expression and autonomy. The "day off" is the antidote to the alienation that characterizes the schools and the family. But the antidote costs money (especially the restaurant where Ferris even feels the need to slip some money to the snotty maître d'), and the process whereby money is made and distributed unequally falls outside the film's purview.

When Cameron finally appears to be letting go and actually enjoying himself in the way Ferris encourages, he stops worrying for the first time about the condition of his father's favorite fetishized commodity, the Ferrari. The car is literally that and figuratively a condensation point for the contradictions that traverse Cameron's subjectivity. As they are driving home, Cameron notices that the odometer reads over 100 miles higher than it should. The odometer presents inescapable proof of the principal contradiction that has run through the film--the incompatibility of the actions Ferris compels Cameron to undertake as a free subject and the actions expected of Cameron as a dutiful son by his father. Put another way, the odometer registers the contradiction between the imaginary relation to existence that represses class differences and the real relation to existence that is based upon a class-based power discrepancy. Ferris represents the former imaginary relation; the father as "absent cause" is the source of the latter real one.<sup>11</sup> When this contradiction disrupts the forward movement of the narrative, Cameron's (and the viewer's) interpellation is also disrupted. As a result, Cameron lets out a blood-curdling scream, which is sustained as the camera disappears down his open throat. When it re-emerges, Cameron is catatonic. For the moment, the contradiction that traverses the ideological apparatus of the social formation has made acting as a "free" subject impossible.

It seems fair to read this moment as an aporia of sorts. Read on its



and accept his status as a subject who “works by himself,” in Althusser’s words. But the film also generates a second reading that suggests that contradiction is a condition of narrative, a condition of ideology. It is the antagonistic relation between these two readings that leads to Cameron’s momentary paralysis. From this point on, the film works to recuperate this rupture. And so, the problem of Cameron’s subject formation is transformed into one of abstract, psychologized fear. Cameron thus decides to take the heat for the car debacle, despite Ferris’ rather lackluster protests. When Cameron claims that he is responsible for his own actions and Ferris smiles, Cameron says, “it is possible to say no to Ferris Bueller, you know.” This statement is a reiteration with a difference of Ferris’ earlier claim that it is possible for the individual to get outside ideology in leisure activity and consumerism. Only now the invalidity of such a claim is evident. The statement is a false reconciliation of the contradiction that surfaced when Cameron saw the odometer.

Later, when the film proper is over and the credits have rolled, Ferris returns to the screen and tells the audience with feigned irritation that the film is over. “Go on, go home, it’s over,” he says with a dismissive wave. This suggests that the consumer subject thus constituted through mass culture is a desiring subject based on lack. It suggests that as long as mass culture reigns supreme among the ISAs, the subject will indeed act in the contradictory fashion of Cameron—denying her/his subordination in the productive relations and proving her/his freedom by spending money on leisure pursuits and films like *Ferris Bueller*.

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The film in general and the last tableau in particular testify to Hughes’ cynicism. Self-reflexivity, now a stock postmodern technique, increases the film’s own smirky appeal. It also renders inescapable the erasure of Althusser’s distinction between the aesthetic and plain ideology. *Ferris Bueller* produces no alienation effect. Nor does it distantiate the film’s own ideology. Rather, it takes consumerism as a given and assumes an audience raised on television and Hollywood. Hughes reinforces this ideology by figuring it as nonideological and contrasting it to the now outmoded school and family that offer obviously subordinate subject positions.

The implication for further work in the Althusserian tradition should now be evident. We need to start with a theory of ideology that exists only in and through subjects, but we must be continually aware



of the fact that the configuration of the ISAs is dynamic. While ideology in general is eternal, ideologies are always changing. Moreover, we should resist the trendy temptation to consider postmodernism as "the end of all crises, the end of all narratives, the end of resistance and revolutionary transformation," in Montag's words (102). The effect of any ideological practice on the spectator cannot be known ahead of time. It will vary according to the different overdetermined and contradictory, constructions of different audiences. *Ferris Bueller* will be most likely to contradict the imaginary and real relations of audience members who don't happen to be white, male and middle-class suburbanites—a contradiction that might potentially lead to spectator resistance to Ferris' "call." But the possibilities for resistance that any cultural artifact might elicit can't be determined solely with the help of theory. They can only be determined through the kind of empirical work necessary to comprehend the text's historical specificity. Althusser provides us with some of the tools for such work, but these alone will not determine what we may find.

Any text of mass culture like *Ferris Bueller* will necessarily bear the marks of contradiction and conflict that traverse the historical moment of its production even if it ends in mystification. These marks are not, however, the unavoidable result of the arbitrariness of language or the impossibility of achieving semantic closure. They are the mark of the history of multiple social struggles. Consumption marks one such social struggle, but only one. To focus exclusively on consumption obscures as much as it illuminates. The prominence of consumption in my reading of *Ferris Bueller* does not contradict this assertion. Consumption is the effect of ideological production, not the antidote. It is an ideology with a history (specifically, emerging at the turn of the century to meet increased industrial production). Shaped by the specific modality of filmic form, the consumer ideal of individuality that Ferris embodies narrates its own unmasking in Cameron's imminent punishment at the hands of his father (which is not shown, of course) and the underlying reality that he will have to get a job someday. The ideology of uninhibited consumerism is thus contradicted most fundamentally by the necessity of employment to make the money necessary to exercise it. It is a banal fact for much of the population, however, that even employment does not lead to free-wheeling spending. More often than not, it brings simple subsistence.

This is the primary contradiction in the film. But it is overdetermined by an educational system that seeks to establish the predispositions appropriate to the division of labor of the economic system and a domestic sphere that is built upon a "natural" and "legitimate" power

disparity between adults and teenagers. From an Althusserian perspective, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a cultural artifact that allows for the provisional construction of a model of its society. Such an approach to mass culture rejects belief in either the pure hegemony of the ruling classes or the heroic resistance of exploited men and women who "make their own history." For the key to this famous quotation from *The 18th Brumaire* lies in the next few words: "but they do not make it just as they please" (15). The dialectic between acquiescence and resistance that characterizes mass culture in particular and the ISAs in general is the Marxist dialectic of history. This dialectic is driven forward continually by conflict and contradiction. In a Marxist theory of history, it could not be otherwise.

## Notes

1. Montag, "What is at Stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?" *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988).

2. This paragraph's brief explication of what an Althusserian approach to popular texts entails is indebted to numerous Althusserians. Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980) remains one of the more accessible explications of this theory.

3. Althusser, *Essays In Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976). In these essays, Althusser finds himself guilty of excessive theoreticism in his early, influential writings.

4. See Pêcheux's *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, trans. Harbans Nagpal (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), Belsey's *Critical Practice*, and Therborn's *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1980), all of which seek to clarify the role of social struggle in Althusserian Marxism.

5. See Chapter Nine of *Imaginary Relations* (London: Verso, 1987) that pursues parallels between Althusser's theory of ideology and Paul de Man's theory of language.

6. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis make just this point in *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge, 1977).

7. Lovell makes this point in "The Social Relations of Cultural Production: Absent Centre of a New Discourse" *One-Dimensional Marxism* (London: Allison, 1980) and Fiske makes it in his *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin, 1989).

8. See Althusser's three essays on art: "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht," *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso Press, 1969); "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" and "Cremonini, Painter

of the Abstract," *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review P, 1970).

9. This criticism has been levelled often enough. See Tony Bennett's *Formalism and Marxism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979) and *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) or any of the essays from *One-Dimensional Marxism* for a sampling.

10. Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978).

11. The distinction between "imaginary" and "real" in Althusser's formulation has been criticized from many corners. Although I don't wish to go into it here, I would only say that "real" merely suggests what Lovell, Jameson and many others do not contest: namely, that the subject has a position within the social structure that can be identified using the conceptual tools of Marxism. In my view, if one gives up on the project of situating subjects within a class structure, however overdetermined that structure may be, one gives up on the project of a Marxist science of history. For a representative account of the critique of these distinctions—real/imaginary, science/ideology—see Bennett's books cited above.

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