## CHAPTER 1

# TALES OF INTELLIGIBILITY

### 1

This is a contesting, some would say contentious, book. It inquires into the ways ideology circulates in some of the films of the 1980s and helps to establish an "imaginary" relation between the spectator (the subject) and the world. Through such imaginary relationships, the discourses of ideology turn the opacity of the world into a luminous intelligibility that not only makes sense of the reality "out there" but also, and more important, creates meaning for the film's viewer, who becomes in this process a knowing subject.

My aim in this book has been to show how seemingly innocent films—what are usually taken to be neutral aesthetic acts of entertainment—are sites of such ideological investment. I have engaged in a series of ideology critiques because I think it is politically urgent to inquire into the operation of ideology: the unchecked domination of ideology limits historical possibilities and produces a world in response to the needs of the dominant class, the privileged gender and the hegemonic race in a society; consequently it subjugates all other needs.

Film is one of the most powerful of what Foucault calls "technologies of the self," through which the social order fashions the kinds of subjectivities required for its perpetuation (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton, 1987, 16–49, 145–62). In engaging these technologies of the self and the subjectivities they produce, I have contested not only the films themselves and their ideological construction of the real, but also the spectator who responds to that ideology, by producing intelligible "tales" from these films. I have also questioned the practices of the dominant forms of film theory and criticism, which are more interested in the formalist study of the immanent properties of filmic texts than in the effectivity of film as a mode of cultural and political subordination. The dominant (poststructuralist) film theory, which succeeded the "mise-en-scene" based ("auteur") film theory over two decades ago, has institutionalized a mode of textualism that has effectively suppressed all but formalist readings of film. Obviously, film theory, in the last few years, has widened its hermeneutic horizons—as a result of a crisis that has beset bourgeois philosophy in general and poststructuralism in particular—and moved beyond the standard issues dictated by its tutor disciplines of psychoanalysis, semiotics and an ahistorical almost "generic" notion of "ideology." Still, a formalist analytics is the only institutionally legitimate mode of critical and theoretical intelligibility in film studies. The widening of the scope of inquiry, to a large extent, has to do with the routinization and collapse of "narratology" as a theoretical project. Most of the "new" studies, led by such conservative film archivists–historians as David Bordwell (1985, 1989) are simply relegitimating empiricism. They deal with a rather local history of the forms, industry, and technology of film (Gomery, 1986; Izod, 1988), or they are simply a reification of "experience" (James, 1989). In either case, they are not directly involved in ideological struggles over the "meanings" of the signs of culture produced in films

I will explore some of the implications of the ruling formalism and its dogmatic regime of close textual readings in the following pages. The institutional power and cultural prestige of postmodern formalism (both the mise-en-scene school and poststructuralism) and the more recent revival of the Russian formalist theories of close reading in the works of such neoformalists as Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger has produced a climate of understanding in which some may find my book too "ideological" and in "bad taste," simply because its insistence on certain political and economic imperatives overdetermining the film's aesthetic integrity offends commonsense empiricism and the belief in "experience." At a time when even some of the most institutionally influential histories of the cinema are being written in terms of the categories of formalist aesthetics (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, 1985), formalist and mainstream film critics and theorists may find my book disrespectful of the textual difference and aesthetic specificity of the filmic experience.

Thus they may marginalize its "argument" about film as the discourse of ideology as mere "assertions" that violate the "uniqueness" of each film in its "totalization." What is *assertion* and what constitutes *argument,* of course, is itself the site of political contestation (Zavarzadeh, forthcoming). The "argument" that does not support the dominant intelligibilities and, therefore, is denied the cultural validation of the institutional "center" has always been read as "assertion" for reasons that I shall discuss throughout this book.

In a sense, however, both the general public and the formalist critic would be correct. I question the validity of empiricism, common sense, and experience as guides to understanding the cultural "real." Common sense and its discourses of experience and empiricism, in my view, are modes of ideological subjugation that produce the obviousnesses of culture and fashion the appropriate forms of subjectivity necessary for the existing social order to maintain itself. It is equally true that I do not respect the uniqueness of the film text, either on the individual textual level (which renders each individual film a unique aesthetic act) or on a collective level (which constructs films as a particular class of cultural artifacts distinct from any other artifact).

The dominant mode of reading films, which is devoted to the protection of the aesthetic "uniqueness" of each film, is in the last instance itself an ideological alibi. The defense of the aesthetic uniqueness of a film is articulated in its textual difference; to be more precise, it reproduces, in the domain of the arts, the privilege and sanctity of the unique, free individual as sovereign subject: it reproduces, in other words, the ideological discourses needed for the naturalization of the existing social arrangements. Capitalism depends on the idea of the "different" individual, who, in his absolute irreplaceability and freedom, engages in free enterprise in a free market. The privileging of the difference and singularity of film text, in short, is a legitimation of this ideological demand for the free, unique, and entrepreneurial individual. Ideology critique violates the principle of uniqueness by demonstrating that the logic of patriarchal Eurocentric capitalism underlies seemingly different, heterogeneous, and nomadic texts. Consequently it is attacked by mainstream film criticism and theory ostensibly on the grounds that it is a “reductionist” reading: it reduces the rich reversible plurality of the film and imposes a closure on it. The actual reason for these attacks, however, is that ideology critique displaces the individual by pointing out the global structures that in fact construct his seemingly “natural” uniqueness and freedom; it thus puts in question the very fundamental ideological grounds of contemporary capitalism.

Protection of the uniqueness of the film (“individuality”) is thus the main purpose of all modes of bourgeois film reading—both by humanist (conservative) critics and by postmodern (radical) theorists. Supporting the cult of uniqueness, in his *Concepts in Film Theory,* Dudley J. Andrew, from a humanist perspective, writes: “In asserting a total view of the cinematic complex (from the dark caverns of spectator psychology to a global network of socio-economics) modern theory has forsaken the enterprise of criticism. How can the study of individual film be important to anyone who senses the single voice of ideology emanating from every film? Criticism in this context could only be redundant” (115).

The (poststructuralist) “theorists” whom Andrew attacks, however, far from opposing the unique, reproduce it in their own new languages and analytical procedures. Writing from within poststructuralist problematics, Andrew Higson (1983) attacks radical critics who place their analytical emphasis on economics and its consequent ideological effects, because in their reading, “All films will seem to be smothered by a blanketing ‘dominant ideology’” (86).

By turning away from the political economy of signification and focusing instead on the “immanent” formal strategies of signification, poststructuralist critics effectively cut off any relation between global political, ideological and economic structures and the “local” politics of signification. Poststructuralist theory, in other words, is as much invested in the defense of the “local,” the “cellular,” and the “nomadic” in film as is traditional criticism. Other theorists, who do not share the philosophical assumptions of the poststructuralists, also focus on the unique qualities of the film text. In his *Narration in Fiction Film,* David Bordwell, for instance, writes: “If ideological analysis is to avoid vacuous overgeneralization, it must reckon in the concrete ways that narrational process functions in filmic representation" (1985, 335–36). The commodification of the "specific" is not by any means limited to film critics and theorists. Film makers are equally emphatic about preserving the singularity of the film. Malcolm Le Grice, the avant-garde film maker–theoretician is highly conscious of the relation between the formal properties of film texts and their politics, but nevertheless insists in his *Abstract Film and Beyond* that film should be "essentially 'cinematic'—not dominated by literature or theatre, nor for that matter by painting or music" (1977, 32). The fetishization of the concrete and the uniquely specific is part of the bourgeois empiricism whose politics and epistemology I will discuss later in this chapter.

Traditional criticism and ludic postmodern theory—which I will discuss in the next chapter—then, do not differ in their support of the specific but only in the way they articulate the unique and different. Whereas, humanist critics privilege the unique by appealing to the unitary consciousness and experience of the singular subject, postmodern theorists locate it in "language"—the style of the narrational process, "textuality," "excess," and the "surprising" movement of unrepresentable "difference" (Derrida, 1982, 1–27; Clifton, 1983; Barthes, 1977, 52–68; Heath and Mellencamp 1983; Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, 1985; Lyotard, 1984, 82). The valorization of the uniqueness and specificity of the filmic experience is among the discursive apparatuses ideology employs to "aestheticize" itself and place its products under the interrogative immunity usually offered to the arts in bourgeois circles. In doing so, ideology prevents detection of the operation and materiality of its discourses.

This book is an overtly polemical intervention in the way contemporary film criticism and theory make sense of film. Films in this book are read not as aesthetic acts but as modes of cultural exchange that form (desired) social subjectivities. Implicit in my approach, of course, is the assumption that culture (that is, the "real"), at any given historical moment, consists of an ensemble of contesting subjectivities. Films are not merely aesthetic spaces but political ones that contest or naturalize the primacy of those subjectivities necessary to the status quo and suppress or privilege oppositional ones.

Formalist mainstream criticism is too busy investigating the immanent logic of signification in the film to be able to inquire into such questions. Its main interest is in the rhetoric of enunciation: *how* meaning is constructed in the chain of signification *in* the film *itself.* My interest, on the other hand, is not so much in *how* (rhetoric) but in *why* (politics): *why* these films mean what they are taken to mean in the common sense of culture. Formalist (poststructuralist) theory, of course, rejects the distinction of "rhetoric" from "politics" and insists on their sameness and identity: politics is a mode of rhetoric and the rhetorical is inherently political. This new orthodoxy has allowed contemporary film theory to focus exclusively on the immanent negotiations of the sign in the film and to bracket the political economy of signification and subjectivity that relate the local immanent politics to global social struggles. In reading the rhetoric of the film as its politics and seeking its politics in its rhetorical procedures, the dominant tendency inquires into the ways that ideology is inscribed in the film's own formal work. Although this mode of reading represents itself as a critique of ideology and in opposition to the ruling social order, it is in fact complicitous with that order. In the pioneering and highly influential text, "Economical-Ideological-Formal," which opened a new phase in the criticism of ideology in postmodern film theory, Marcelin Pleynet, for example, states that the revolutionary effectivity of resistance films is primarily a matter of "formal research" into the material specificity of cinematic texts and has very little to do with economics (1978, 153–54).

The political, Pleynet believes, is situated in the cinematic apparatus itself, which offers a view of reality that is in essence ideological: the cinematic apparatus records the world (the real) according to the rules and laws of Renaissance perspective. Because quattrocento optics is based on a metaphysical fiction about the "real" and the particular position of the "subject" in that logocentric "reality," the modern cinematic apparatus is, according to Pleynet, inherently "ideological." The role of ideology critique, consequently, is to tease out from the specific cinematic text and its unique formal arrangements the singular manner in which the ideological apparatus inscribes itself. Not only does Pleynet reproduce the "unique" in his theory but, more important, he manages to "formalize" ideology. By "essentializing" the cinematic apparatus, he attributes to it an "inherent," and thus ahistorical, ideology and in doing so effectively erases the role of class struggle in the organization of the social: the political is the effect of the formal maneuvers of the cinematic apparatus itself and not the outcome of historical social contradictions. This is basically the same position shared by such other theorists as Jean-Louis Baudy (Hak Kyung Cha, 1980; De Lauretis and Heath, 1980). Even critics such as Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, and their followers—all of whom go beyond the formalist limits set by Pleynet in their understanding of the political—never transgress the boundaries of immanent politics. According to them, the most effective critique of ideology is an "immanent" one offered from within the film text by means of its own formal procedures (digetic verisimilitude, continuity editing, and the like) and thus is respectful of the film's individuality and uniqueness (*Screen Reader 1,* 1977, 2–11, 36–46). This view is shared by more recent (and politically far more conservative) theorists such as Peter Brunette, David Wills, David Bordwell, and other formalists. In *Narration in the Fiction Film,* Bordwell concludes that the political in the film is an effect of the immanent properties of the film and the conventions of form: "By focusing on the individual psyche and maintaining a shifting narrational game with the spectator, *La guerre est finie* transmutes political material into a unique treatment of the conventions of a particular narrational mode" (1985, 228, 335). The *other* possibility—that the political transgresses and transforms the formal—is thus ruled out. For Brunette and Wills the political is the local effects of the operation of the signifier in its distancing of the signified (1989, 11–32).

The most useful critique of ideology, according to dominant film theory, is one performed in the film's "own terms" and not from an external position (economics, for instance) that violates the artistic integrity of the film. Dominant film theory, in other words, essentializes the film's "own terms" and protects them from a global political and economic interrogation. However, there are no such things as the text's "own terms." What are often regarded to be the film's "own terms" are in fact the dominant ideology's "own terms," which are protected in the guise of an aesthetic philosophy. We also need to keep in mind how what one historical era considers to be a unique work's singularly "own terms" are rejected by another historical period as "extraneous" to the immanent organization of the signifiers in a text.

To inquire into the cultural and ideological *why* of films, I have written what might be called transgressive critiques that aim at overthrowing the overt "tale" (meaning) of each unique film and indicate the "other" tale that is suppressed by the dominant one. The displacing of the dominant tale (and the subjectivities it produces) has been done more or less by pointing up and foregrounding what is always in full view but, because of the limits set by ideology, rarely suspected of being anything other than the natural order of things.

To be more precise, instead of focusing on the formal aspects of the film, I have concentrated on the ideological conditions of possibility of the formal and have chosen one specific site of the film to inquire into the way that film produces the kind of reality supportive of the existing socioeconomic arrangements. This filmic space I have called the *tale:* the way that a film offers a narrative—and proposes that narrative to be a paradigm of intelligibility—not simply through its immanent formal devices but also by relying on historically dominant and contradictory assumptions about reality. The film exerts its greatest cultural impact through its tale. By means of its tale the film naturalizes the limits of ideology, and then, by appealing to the commonsensical "obviousnesses" it has produced, the film instructs the audience on how to make sense of the global reality of the culture—how to fit together the details of reality to compose a coherent model of relations and coherence through which an all-encompassing picture of the real emerges. Within the frame of that picture, the viewer situates herself in the world her culture allows her to inhabit. In my treatment of the tales of these films, I have bracketed formalist questions and have not asked *how* a particular tale means but rather *WHY it means what it is taken to mean.* I have, in other words, found the political (why) to be a more effective mode of inquiry than the rhetorical (how).

## 2

The study of narrative elements in films in postmodern theory has more or less followed the formalist narratology based on a distinction between the *events* of a film and the manner in which these events are represented in its *text.* Different schools of theory and criticism have given varying names to these narrative components, which are called *diegesis* and *discourse* in dominant formalist film theory. Russian formalists who first proposed this binary model for the analysis of narrative designated events as the *story* and called the text *plot.* In their formulation, as Tomashevsky has put it, the story represents the causal-temporal relationships that constitute a narrative: how various incidents are chronologically ordered and related to one another in terms of cause and effect. The actual narrative text may or may not follow this (underlying) pattern, but when one paraphrases a narrative and abstracts the story from the text, one usually (re)arranges the narrative in terms of its story line: chronologically and causally. This is one reason why the story has been regarded by some critics to be closer to the logic of reality as we live it and thus the primary element of narrative as distinguished from the plot. Plot is the way in which events are "arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work" (Lemon and Reis, 1965, 67). Tomashevsky summarizes the Russian formalist view of these two fundamental components of narrative: "the story is 'the action itself,' the plot 'how the reader learns of the action'" (67).

This bipartite division of narrative components informs the works of such contemporary narratologists as Todorov and Chatman, who categorize them as *story* and *discourse,* and has become one of the established features of postmodern narrative theory. Bordwell, of course, directly reinscribes the categories used by the Russian formalists: "I argue" he writes, "that filmic narration involves two principal formal systems, syuzhet [plot] and style" (1985, xiii). Some theorists like Genette have maintained the essential division between story (*histoire*) and plot (*recit*) but have added a third dimension which they call *narration.* Christian Metz, in his *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1982), gives a psychoanalytical twist to these two categories. He regards story to be a disguised discourse and as such the enabling condition of a mode of "voyeurism" in cinema. In more sustained deconstructive readings of narrative, this separation of the elements of narrative into story and discourse, like all other binaries of culture, has been seen as a manifestation of a logocentrism that attempts to capture the (illusory) presence and plenitude of a world beyond signification by setting up hierarchies. In structuralist narratology, story is implicitly given priority over plot because its logic and behavior is considered to be closer to the logic of actual life. Story, in other words, has been treated as the privileged term in relation to which plot is a mere secondary entity because it is a treatment of the story. Plot is assumed to be entirely dependent on the story, whose incidents it merely reorganizes for a more effective presentation and impact. However, poststructuralist rhetoric holds that what passes as a story (the primary term) is actually solicited and produced by the rhetorical demands of the secondary and supplementary term (the plot).

Contemporary criticism of film, like the criticism of other modes of cultural narrative, is very much under the influence of the theories of Russian formalists and French poststructuralists. Formalist poststructuralist theory has been particularly productive in providing insights into the workings of filmic discourse. In its most recent configurations, this form of critical theory has brought together psychoanalytical and semiotic investigations with more established forms of narratological inquiry, and the result has been brilliant analyses of the processes of signification in the filmic text. This line of inquiry, even when it deals with (immanent) politics, however, is unable in the end to address the question of the effectivity of film as a cultural act of exchange and communication that provides the viewer with a grid of understanding on which the real of social practices is located. It is ultimately descriptive (rhetorical) and not explanatory (political). Films are not enclosed constructs, as neonarratological models assume, but are instances of cultural acts in terms of which the viewer negotiates his way through the realities of daily practices—all of which are organized, in the last analysis, to confirm the dominant social relations. The final outcome of these cultural acts performed through films is to situate the viewer in a subject position in terms of which his daily practices are seen as significant and he is perceived (by himself and others) as their author and origin. If film criticism and theory is to be more than a mere formal analysis of the organization of the internal space of narrative, then it should investigate the ways in which film performs its cultural role as the producer of class subjectivities. In such an investigation, the narratological project—with its immanentism of story and discourse—will not take us very far. We need to go beyond narratology.

I have located my inquiries not in the "told" (I am thinking of the "past tense" as a narrative marker), that is to say, not in the "story" nor in the "telling" (discourse), but in the "tale": the global *effect* of the film text. Unlike traditional narratological inquiries, then, I have foregrounded the "tale" and focused not on the panhistorical immanent structures of narrative but on the consequences of narrative. My notion of "tale" also allows me to move away from the more recent neonarratological film studies that concentrate on the narrative's immanent textual "materiality" (which actually means "language") and instead to deal with its posttextual outcomes. By the *tale,* then, I do not mean the events or the happenings or any other exclusively immanent aspects of the film. Rather the tale tracks the activities through which the spectator chains together the film's signifiers on a cultural grid of intelligibility—an ensemble of assumptions and presuppositions about the "real"—into an account that makes the film socially intelligible. By making sense of the film, the spectator does not merely engage in an aesthetic act but a political practice: a practice that also enables her to make herself intelligible as a cultural entity—she achieves social "reality" as a "subject." The "tale" of the film, in other words, constitutes the individual ostensibly as a "free person" (whose freedom is manifested in his "interpretation" of the film) but in actuality situates him as belonging to a particular social class. The tale articulates the viewer through the process of sense making, locating her in the social relations of production. Constructing the tale, then, is a necessary cultural skill by which the spectator learns how to sort out the diverse codes of culture, such as gender, sexuality, class, parenting, and to establish a relation among them. In other words, in producing the tale, the spectator learns the ideological syntax of his culture (its class relations) and demonstrates his ability to provide coherent tales—as maps for dealing with the real—and thus proves that he is a symbolically competent and ideologically reliable person. He can be trusted with positions of authority (employment). Cinema is an ideologically useful institution because it helps to produce tale-making subjects out of individuals—especially in a largely postprint, electronic culture.

In producing the tale of the film, which is not a "positive" entity but a hermeneutic construct, the spectator is situated by the framing ideology (not the film itself) in the specific viewing position—subjectivity—that renders its discourses inevitable and invisible at the same time. The film naturalizes this viewing position as the given, the obvious, and the only proper position for the spectator. All modes of films, in different ways, resecure the subject positions needed for reproducing the existing social relations: the realist text (classical Hollywood cinema) reproduces the position of knowing that constructs the subject as coherent, unitary, and stable. However, dominant ideology is not monolithic, and in fact the invisibility (obviousness) of its "domination" is established by the fact that through its diverse discourses it articulates all the historically available domains of social life. To do so at this historical juncture, it needs not only coherent subject positions that respond to a more or less traditional mode of intelligibility (low-tech economy) but also postmodern subject positions that function with agility and without the cumbersome discourses of coherence in more advanced forms of economic activities (high-tech practices). The avant-garde film text articulates the inner economic tensions and contradictions of late capitalist ideology and contests the unitary subject of the realist cinema, thus constructing the subject as inherently unstable, changeable, and even contradictory. These two modes of subjectivity are far from being incompatible, as postmodern film theory maintains: realism is viewed by ludic postmodernism as producing "reactionary" subjects whereas the avant-garde is seen as constructing "radical" subjects. They are in fact complementary. Late capitalism requires not only coherent subjects but also undecidable ones that respond to the economic needs of the social regime that Baudrillard calls *simulation.* In the ideological seams and folds of the ruling practices and aesthetic and social contradictions, of course, other cinematic articulations take shape, such as what I shall call *critical cinema*—a Brechtian kind of cinema of political self-reflexivity that provides the spectator with the space to critique the everyday "from a social point of view" (Brecht, 1979, 86) and thus approach the social as something that is not natural but always demands an "explanation" (125). I shall discuss the (non)relations between form and the emancipatory potential of a film later.

From the positions of knowledge produced by the film text (realist or avant-garde), the existing reality (coherent—"original"—or simulatory) seems to be the only possible one: all other constructions of the real are seen as void of legitimacy. In producing tales, it must be emphasized, the spectator is produced as a female or a male, a white or a black, an upper-class or a working-class subject. In a sense constructing the tale of the film is an indication of ideological skills: a mark that the subject has learned the "proper" codes and practices through which the socially needed "reality" can be made intelligible. Film, as an ideological apparatus, then serves as a means for making sure that the subject is equipped with the elements of the cultural logic of the (dominant) real.

My statement should not be conveniently read to mean that all viewers of a film produce exactly the same tale. Quite the contrary, the dominant frames of intelligibility provide a great deal of interpretive "freedom" and latitude for differences among the tales produced by viewers. In fact it is through this interpretive freedom of texts of culture (film as well as other cultural products) that the ruling ideology establishes its democratic legitimacy and consequently, without overt violence, secures its hold on the limits of understanding.

In the dominant ideology of the democratic state, the subject is represented as a rational (namely, overwritten by the logic of ideology) person who in the privacy of her consciousness can discover the "truth" of cultural texts such as films. Because it is the allegiance of the "free" subject that the state demands, differences in the interpretive construction of the tale (which in fact affirm the ideological "truth" about the "free" individual consciousness) are not only tolerated but in fact actively encouraged.

The dominant ideology however firmly asserts that, in spite of all the differences in reading the tale of the film, there is a core of truth (immanently) in the text itself, and the ultimate goal of viewing a film is to have access to this truth given in the text by another consciousness (the director). In postmodern film theory, as part of its renovation of the discourses of dominant ideology, the "apparatus" and not the "director" is seen as the organizer of the film's signifiers. I shall call this new device a *consciousness effect* as it simply transfers the location of the subject so that it can more effectively produce the new subject for postmodern capitalism, in which there is very little use for the subject as "auteur." The Subject (I shall refer to director–auteur apparatus as the Subject—with capital *S*), needless to say, not only inscribes the idea of the subject in the project of interpretation but also stands for the authority of the social order that is itself organized by the prevailing class-gender-race relations. In constructing the tale, the spectator is free to "interpret" it in anyway that his individual consciousness instructs him as long as his different interpretation accepts the authority of the immanent properties of text itself and thus respects its empirical existence. Although the tale is not a "positive" entity that can be pointed to, the dominant frames of intelligibility make sure that tales follow the reigning (ideo)logic and are not constructed arbitrarily by labeling counterhegemonic tales as eccentric, off-beat, and wayward, thereby rendering them unintelligible. Thus, one of the practices that the viewer learns in constructing the tale of the film is, of course, the proper mode of situating himself in regard to authority. The only limits on the viewer's freedom in producing the tale of the film come in the recognition of the higher authority of the text itself—which is an ideological alibi for the authority that is (immediately) often termed *God* (the origin of all meanings) or *State* (the regulator of meanings) but is, in fact, the mediated authority of the free market forces that mark the produced meanings of texts of culture as purchasable-intelligible or worthless-nonsense depending on their relevance to the dominant economic regime. In regarding individuals as free and allowing for differences in their interpretation of the tale—yet at the same time subjecting them to the authority of a higher power (the immanent properties of the text itself)—the dominant ideology preserves the notion of the free person who can enter into transactions with other free persons in the free market but who is at the same time obedient to the laws of the free market that legitimate the dominant social order.

Contemporary mainstream film criticism accounts for the process of spectatorship and subjectivity in terms of the immanent formal operations of the film through the concept of "suture." Theories of suture are, on the whole, more interested in the poetics of the "desire" the film arouses in the viewer and in the immanent "pleasure" and "displeasure" (lack) he experiences in the process of viewing than in the political economy of spectatorship: the production, exchange, and consumption of cinematic discourses and the pleasures and securities offered by them at historically specific moments in relations of production. History in theories of suture is reduced to a matter of psychoanalytic development—the history of the subject in the move from the imaginary to the symbolic—thereby effectively erasing the role of viewing as a process producing class subjects. Thus the spectator, in mainstream theories of suture, is seen as the subject of *jouissance*—in a state of half-forgetting, voyeuristic-exhibitionistic delight in a darkened theatre, the spectator engages in a pleasurable regression to the pre-Oedipal, fusional moment of identity with an ideal image (mother).

By positing a necessary "absence," mainstream suture theory, especially in the writings of Oudart, Dayan, and Heath, offers a theory of the subject (formation) that erases the socioeconomic and political conditions of subject(ivity). Absence, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is the trope of the unconscious that is believed to produce the speaking subject. Suture theory in its articulation by Oudart, sees the continuity and coherence of filmic narrative to be an effect of an absence that is sutured through the cinematic process of shot–reverse shot editing. The spectator, Oudart assumes, always experiences plenitude, fullness, and *jouissance* in his or her encounter with the first shot, which is unencumbered by limits ("the fourth side, a field of pure absence" [Oudart, 1977–78, 43]). However, he or she soon becomes aware of the "absence," which is condition of the presence. In the words of one of Oudart's followers: "When the viewer discovers the frame . . . the triumph of his former *possession* of the image fades out. . . . The spectator discovers that his possession was only partial, illusory. He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the gaze of another spectator who is ghostly or absent" (Dayan, 1974, 56). It is this "another spectator" who is called "the Absent One" and whose absence the reverse shot attempts to efface and thereby create an impression of auto-intelligibility and transparency for the film—effects that are then assimilated by the spectator. Suturing then, makes film's ideological effects unobtrusive by, in Dayan's words, substitution of the "message" for the "code"—a fictional character for the "absent one" on the level of cinematic ennunciation (56).

In poststructuralist film theory, *Ideology* is a synonym for *representation* and has very little to do with the radical notion of ideology as the diverse practices serving class interests.

However, whether suture is deployed on the level of "shot–reverse shot" editing (Oudart), "point-of-view" editing (Dayan), or in a much more generalized sense as the condition of cinematic ennunciation and communication (Heath, 1981, 97), it is grounded on the notion of "absence" and thus accounts for the formation of the subject in terms of the unconscious and immanent laws of the symbolic order (language). The subject, in short, is "explained" in terms of the mechanics of discourses of subjectivity and their inner dynamics. To be more precise, through suturing the gaps and absences in the film, the spectator is sutured into the film, which provides the subject with "pleasure" through a replay of its history and a recapturing of *jouissance* of the imaginary. Film viewing then is the effect of the experience of pleasure of oneness, and this oneness is severed from the collectivity of the social and the political economy that articulates the subject into relations of production. My point is that seeing films is a political act, and as such it is more than the experience of pleasure; it is a "knowledge" lesson through which the subject is "taught" how to be what Pecheux calls a "good subject" and is placed in its position in social relation (class).

Stephen Heath, for example, regards suture to be "the relation of the individual-as-subject to the chain of its discourse where it figures missing in the guise of a stand-in" (1981, 52). By positing "meaning" as the effect of the immanent and transhistorical laws of signification (Derrida, 1982, 1–27; Lacan, 1977, 30–113) the chain of the discourse occludes class relations. In theorizing suture immanently, postmodern film theory proposes that the production of subjectivity is a formal, and thus an ahistorical, process and consequently severs it from the global political, economic, and ideological practices of the social formation. Even such theorists of suture as Daniel Dayan, who have attempted to connect suture to the working of ideology and to relate the spectator's "resistance" (engendered by "pleasure") to the subjectivities offered by the film, have in fact reproduced a formalism in that they have substituted an inquiry into the *rhetoric* of subjectivity—*how* ideology legitimates certain subjectivities—for an interrogation of the political economy of interpellation—*why* certain subjectivities (class relations) are legitimated at specific historical moments to begin with (Dayan, 1974).

In the poststructuralist film theory of suture, the form of the film provides the space of subjectivity in which the subject's history is reenacted from imaginary plenitude to symbolic lack as he is "sewn in" to the discourse of the film. The form of classical cinema (realist film) is thought to be oppressive, regardless of its content. The avant-garde film, on the other hand, is deemed to have a liberatory effect. The content of such films may be quite repressive—sexism, classism, racism—but as long as the form transgresses the codes of classical Hollywood cinema, it will (automatically) be productive of nonrepressive subjectivities. In all its forms, through the idea of suture, ludic postmodern film theory posits the spectator as essentially a passive person. My theory of the tale, on the other hand, proposes the viewer an active tale maker situated in social contradictions of her culture. Some of these active tale makers are also "oppositional" tale makers.

## 3

The viewer, in his role as a maker of the tale, does not function as a unique individual consciousness who "authors" the tale but rather operates as the ensemble of structures of difference (class relations) in which various frames and codes of intelligibility intersect and enable him to recognize meaning in the film's signs. The tale, I propose, is the narrative (filmic) space in which the viewer by his practice of tale making is made intelligible to himself as the subject of class and constituted as a structure of signification (that is to say, of "difference").

Unlike story and discourse, which are enclosed diegetic spaces, the tale operates on the boundaries of the narrative-spectator-culture series. The cultural impact, for instance, of *The Big Chill* is the effect of the tale that the viewer produces about intimacy in contemporary America. The tale offers a model for making culturally approved forms of friendship intelligible. It instructs the viewer on how to recognize "genuine" forms of friendship (that is to say, those forms that correspond with the subjectivities required by the existing relations of production) and to distinguish them from "false" modes of intimacy (namely, those that threaten the existing models of human relationship made "obvious" by ideology). Through the theory of intimacy produced in the tale (by the spectator according to ideological markers of the "real"), a particular mode of human relationship is legitimated. The film, in other words, is a cultural exchange through which the dominant ideology attempts to maintain its authority over the affairs of society while suppressing other ways of understanding friendship. To place the emphasis on the "discourse" of *The Big Chill* and to merely inquire into its diegetic status is to aestheticize and reduce to a more or less cognitive act what in the film is basically a political practice. Such aestheticization and cognitive reductionism are themselves acts of consent supporting the dominant social order.

The "tale" of the film is *not in* the text itself (it is not a positive entity): it is not determined. Therefore, it is not accessible through an analysis of formal properties. The formal features of the film are not, it has to be emphasized, autointelligible, instead they act as a discursive apparatus through which the limits that ideology sets upon reality are naturalized. Reading a film is thus not merely conditioned by the immanent features and practices of the film or by the reader but rather is shaped, for the most part, by historically produced frames of understanding. It is not so much the empirical viewer who finds meaning in the film, as it is the structures of intelligibility that produce the positions of knowledge that will make sense of the film for those who occupy the desired subject positions. Those who do indeed occupy the subject position of knowledge provided by the film are, in return, placed outside all social contradictions and endowed with coherence and clarity. It is necessary to bear in mind that the authority of the film in interpellating the subject does not derive from itself or its immanent filmic properties (poststructuralist theories of the avant-garde notwithstanding) but from the dominant social arrangements that encourage the subject to occupy the positions of knowledge proposed by the film.

Moving beyond neotraditional narratological models of film analysis and focusing on the tale will make it possible to inquire into the ideological and political conditions authorizing the viewer of a film to chain together its various signs according to a (socio)logic that she is interpellated to understand as the "logic" of the real. The tale of a film, in other words, is a theory of reality generated by the dominant mode of production; and in the spaces of this theory, its politics should be interrogated. The tale of a film is made intelligible when the spectator consents to the dominant modes of subjectivities and employs the frames of interpretation provided by the existing ideology.

### 4

But the production of an "obviously" intelligible tale by the spectator-film-ideology nexus suppresses *another* tale—the tale that the overt one prevents from being told. Each film is therefore the narrative space of contestation and struggle among different tales that produce warring theories of the real. The hegemonic "tale" of the film, which is enabled and secured by the dominant "obviousnesses," is always different from itself; it is reversible and thus rather unstable. Along the line of some of Marx's writings, one can theorize the tale that "exists" (is historically recognized and sanctioned as the real) as an unstable effect of the conflict and contestation between the *actual* and the *possible* (Marx and Engels, 1975, 141–45). The obvious tale of a film is represented by the common sense as being an actual, already "existing" meaning in order to attribute to this hegemonic tale the authority of an inevitable and natural meaning. But the tale of a film is not an already existing meaning; rather it is a contingent construct produced under the conditions of certain ideological, economic and political practices. The framing ideology places the spectator in a position of intelligibility from which she understands the ideologically available (the commonsensical) meaning of the film to be its "real" meaning. In doing so the spectator equates the available (that is, the already existing) meaning with the "actual" and blocks the "possible." The film's other possible meanings—the utopian dimension immanent in all ideological discourses—are suppressed by this representation of the hegemonic tale as the sole meaning and thereby the "real" of the film. The cultural reality proposed by the film is thus perceived as the natural outcome of the world itself ("out there"), and the ideological operation of common sense in the construction of this reality is concealed. Both traditional film criticism and postmodern film theory participate in this repressive empiricism that equates the "actual" with the "real."

The suppression of the *possible* by reifying the *existing* is the effect of the idealist philosophy of empiricism prevailing in contemporary film criticism and theory. In this respect dominant film theory does little more than reinforce the ideological work of the contemporary mainstream film (whether realist or avant-garde). The mainstream film, for the most part, achieves its role in naturalizing the ruling social order not simply by offering films that "thematically" reproduce the "obviousnesses" of ideology but, more significantly, by the sheer "representation" of the "real" ("out there")—that is to say, by testifying to the existence of a real world whose reality is documented in the film as the film: its representationality as such. Mainstream film, in other words, is not so much "about" specific themes and topics (family, love, or, in the case of the avant-garde film, reflexivity) as it is about the existence of a real world *that is accessible to our senses and can be directly experienced.* By capturing the sights and sounds of this world (by testifying to the "obviousness" of *representation*), the film fetishizes a theory of knowledge that, more than any specific thematic, naturalizes the existing social arrangements and their contradictions: the theory of knowledge (empiricism) that equates the world itself with knowledge of the world. What we know, it implies, comes from the world itself as a result of our "experience" of it. Knowledge, in empiricist film theory and criticism is not a historical product constructed within social contradictions and thus the effect of class-gender-race struggles but the "natural" outcome of the world itself. What is visible (the surface tale of the film and the experiential world it represents), in short, is regarded to be the real itself.