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An Apartment of One’s Own: Personal Initiative and Private Ownership in Frances Ha

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In “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” Robin Wood says that by approaching film through the framework of ideological theory, we can become sensitized to “the opposing pulls, the tensions, of one’s world” (593). Even in a film that is not explicitly political, these tensions can find expression. In *Frances Ha* (Baumbach 2012), a young woman struggles to chase her dream while also staying afloat in the harsh landscape of New York City. Until near the end of the film, it seems that Frances might float forever. The supports that Americans used to take for granted are no longer apparent. Having lost her companion/partner, Sophie, and being disconnected from her family, Frances struggles alone. By looking at the film through ideological theory, we can see how *France Ha* expresses the tension produced by a dominant ideology that is constantly in flux, then resolves those tensions by emphasizing and reinforcing one of its most important values: individuality expressed by personal initiative, enterprise, and ownership.

In their essay “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” Comolli and Narboni argue that “every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it” (688). By their reasoning, even the most commercial films are also political. Just like any other piece of art or entertainment, films are commodities. Created by the labor of others, they have value as objects distributed within the capitalist economy in which we live (Comolli and Narboni 687). Even if a film’s content is not explicitly political, to careful viewers it can reveal something about the dominant ideology of the culture in which it was produced.

This is where the film critic steps in. According to Comolli and Narboni, it is the responsibility of the critic to examine films through the framework of ideological theory in order to shed light on the ways in which they operate within, through, and against the dominant ideology of the culture in which they exist. Unless examined in this way, it can be difficult to see what any particular film is saying about our commonly held values and beliefs. In fact, to one who has grown up under a particular ideology, it is difficult even to know what those values are—they are largely taken for granted. By looking at films through ideological theory, however, this critical approach can help us to better understand ourselves and our places in society.
The filmmaker, too, can help us to see the ways in which our reality is constructed. To proponents of realist film, for example, the camera was considered to be a neutral observer, a recording device: everything that happened in front of this device was simply reality as it is perceived in everyday life. To Comolli and Narboni, however, this idea of objective reality does not exist. Even as our own eyes perceive it, reality is being re-interpreted and re-constructed through our most basic preconceptions, ideas, and beliefs about the world and its structure. A better cinematic approach, then, is to break apart the very idea of the recording device; to “show-up the cinema’s so-called depiction of reality” (Comolli and Narboni 689) by creating films that are formally experimental. By constructing a film using formative techniques, such as montage and distorted camera angles, the filmmaker can call attention to the ways in which reality is similarly constructed and expressed through the dominant ideology—and can potentially suggest ways of re-imagining and re-constructing that ideology.

Typically, however, filmmakers do not choose to do this. One reason is that they may lack awareness of the underlying dominant ideology, which is inherently difficult to perceive; another reason is profit. Because films are intended to make money, they are often produced with the intent to appeal to the widest possible audience. Other art and entertainment forms—such as literature or music—are also affected by the capitalist system, but films are affected to a larger extent owing to their high production costs (Comolli and Narboni 688). A film designed to make an audience uncomfortable will not appeal to the majority. Therefore, most films are conventional in form, and project the values of the dominant ideology without challenging or even acknowledging them. Comolli and Narboni group these films into category “A,” which “comprises those films which are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form” (Comolli and Narboni 689). These films may present political problems or questions, but always resolve them in a way that does not demand a radical restructuring of the dominant ideology. Therefore, “the film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself” (Comolli and Narboni 689); the discourse is closed, and it does not invite solutions that come from outside itself. In other words,
In his essay “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” Robin Wood agrees that it is important to discuss films in terms of the dominant ideology of which they are a part. In the case of American films, that ideology is capitalism. Through his comparison of two films, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943), Wood reveals how films can either support the dominant ideology or subvert it (596-601). Wood briefly defines some of the most important values of American capitalist ideology that were upheld by classical Hollywood films of the 1950s: values such as private enterprise, private ownership, marriage, and family. The first two are especially revered; they reinforce each other and extend their influence to ideas of marriage and family. American ideology holds that an enterprising individual who is willing to work hard will undoubtedly earn what he deserves: a house, a car, a wife, a family (593). The concept is gendered in classical Hollywood cinema (men as the primary breadwinners), though it is not so today—and this is not the only way in which the dominant ideology has shifted and changed since the classical Hollywood era.

Marriage and the concept of family have also changed: young adults are postponing marriage and having children later, if at all. Faith in progress and technology—another characteristically American value—is strained as smart phones, social media, and other advancements that were supposed to connect individuals instead leaves them feeling even more isolated. In short, the support structures that individuals once relied on have collapsed, leaving many Americans—young adults especially—with limited support.

This lack of support seems to be the trouble for the title character of *Frances Ha*, a 27-year-old woman trying to get by on her own in New York City. Separated from her family in California, Frances struggles to support herself financially. Refusing to give up on her dream of becoming a dancer, Frances works as an apprentice and dance instructor (for young girls), hoping to one day perform with the rest of the company. Unfortunately, this dream never comes to fruition. When her boss offers her a new position as an office
clerk, Frances turns the offer down. On the surface, Frances appears to embody the caricature of the millennial: she is lazy and selfish, taking advantage of her friends for food and shelter while she waits for a dream occupation that she never acquires. This accusation comes out of a dominant ideology that holds hard work to be a virtue in and of itself (Wood 593). After all, according to that ideology, dreams are not won easily; rather they come as a result of hard work and personal initiative. But this approach, which places responsibility on the individual, fails to take into account the outside factors that affect Frances. It fails to acknowledge how the American dominant ideology, as outlined by Wood, are drastically shifting, leaving Frances with limited options.

Technology is meant to provide one means of support today, as advancements in communication are revered as a means of connecting individuals to one another. Wood even defines faith in technology as one of the primary values of American dominant ideology (594). But technology has failed Frances. Sometimes it directly fails her, as when Frances attempts to connect with a friend in Paris but is foiled because Abbey’s phone does not notify her of the messages. A counterpoint, however, is that Frances is not really connected to technology in a culture where most people are super-connected. It appears that she does not even possess a laptop; she uses the computers on campus in order to read Sophie’s Tokyo travel blog. In an early scene, when Frances and Sophie are lying in bed together, Sophie reads her e-mail from her phone, at which Frances remarks, “You love your phone that has e-mail more than me.” This line underscores Frances’s general disconnection with other people, which is at the base of
many of her troubles as she attempts to navigate a world that is at once super-connected and yet—for someone who rejects technology and “social” media—utterly isolating.

Wood defines family as “an extension of the ownership principle to personal relationships” (593). Although Frances is separated from her real family, she possesses a surrogate family in Sophie. In the film, Sophie and Frances’s relationship is purposely treated similarly to a romantic partnership; Frances characterizes herself and Sophie as being “like a lesbian couple that doesn’t have sex anymore.” In Frances’s case, this relationship might be characterized as co-dependent—she relies on Sophie as a major emotional support and even defines herself in relation to Sophie, saying of her, “we’re the same person ... with different hair.” When Sophie “dumps” Frances and moves to Tribeca, Frances spends much of the film trying to re-connect with her. One way she does this is through her words, re-asserting ownership of Sophie by frequently bringing her up in conversation, talking as if they are still “best friends.” She is jealous of Sophie’s actual romantic partner, Patch, regarding him as competition for Sophie’s attention. Towards the end of the film, Frances even shares a bed with Sophie in her dorm room, suggesting sexual ownership. Sophie’s subsequent exit, and her resistance to Frances’s claim on her, is a major blow for Frances.

Sophie also acts as Frances’s double. Everything that is untrue of Frances is true of Sophie: she is hard working, and loves her job; she is financially secure; she is in a stable, heterosexual partnership. She is a capitalist success story: through hard work and personal initiative, she is able to lead a secure and (ostensibly) happy life. Sophie has everything that Frances is searching for. The fact that capitalism works for Sophie but not Frances may represent a failure of ideology, but the film does not acknowledge this failure.
Comolli and Narboni regarded the formal qualities of film to be an important factor for ideological theory. A filmmaker who utilizes experimental forms can potentially disrupt the audience’s sense of reality, exposing its ideological underpinnings (689). *Frances Ha*, in contrast, is a realist film. Specifically, it resembles a French New Wave film in that it is black and white, its narrative structure is episodic, and it utilizes long takes rather than short cuts. The camera is used not to form reality but to record it. In short, the film is shot with an aim to present reality as it is—or how we perceive it to be. Baumbach, then, is not attempting to disrupt the viewer’s sense of “objective” reality. If the film is saying anything, it is that everything happening to Frances on-screen is natural, acceptable. The film makes no attempt to comment upon the ideological forces that act upon Frances, nor even to acknowledge that they exist.

The film’s resolution, in fact, reinforces this ideology in that it is only after Frances submits herself to the capitalist system that she begins to find stability and peace in her life. After Frances loses Sophie for the second time, the film cuts to her new apartment in New York City, which Frances happily surveys. She has accepted the office job, giving her a steady income with which she has rented her own apartment. In this way the film emphasizes and reinforces the value of both personal initiative and private ownership. Frances even finds a new outlet for her talents, which would not have materialized if she had not acquiesced to the capitalist system by “settling” for a day job.
The dominant ideology in America is shifting. Support structures such as family, marriage, and faith in technology are being questioned, altered, and re-constructed, resulting in crisis as young adults struggle to find their place in society. In *Frances Ha*, this crisis is answered by strengthening emphasis on other values, specifically the value of hard work, private enterprise, and private ownership. *Frances Ha*, then, embodies a category “A” film, as described by Comolli and Narboni in that the film is “ideology … talking to itself” (689). In grappling with the crisis of ideology, Frances finds the answer within the capitalist system: happiness, peace, and stability lie within the individual.
Works Cited

