That’s Why I’m Lonely: Ideology of the Absurd

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“It is not only our reality which enslaves us,” according to Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher Slovoj Zizek, “when we think that we escape it into our dreams, at that point we are within ideology” (Pervert, 2012). It has long been the task of cultural criticism to uncover the functioning value systems which guide our actions and structure the ways in which we make sense of our experiences. All stories, as cultural productions, take for granted certain assumptions as to the way things are, the way things came to be, and the way things ought to be. The ideologies that these assumptions comprise tend to be culturally specific, often functioning as myths which naturalize political and economic systems—or to be less specific—simply the way things are. These social doctrines are always philosophically grounded, and therefore can be said to transcend politics. Understanding the ideology of a given text, however, is not a simple task. Viewing ideologies as such monolithic entities can be problematic for many reasons. I will discuss Mister Lonely (Korine, 2007) in the context of ideological film theory. In doing so I will also attempt to briefly show the ways in which Mister Lonely problematizes the notion of ideology as coherent category, which calls for a much more nuanced approach toward ideological analysis in general.

Contemporary American culture, in all of its nationalist glory, proudly celebrates its capitalist political economy. As previously noted, all cultural productions inescapably function within ideology—though it is primarily through story telling that a culture explicitly and implicitly explains itself. Hollywood cinema is the ultimate mythmaker in American (and ever-increasingly throughout the world) culture, and is therefore one of the primary purveyors of the ‘dominant ideology’. Hollywood films are not only cultural products, but more specifically commodities themselves—produced, bought, and sold for profit—a reality which necessarily situates them within the American capitalist ideology. It is clear then, the importance of ideological theory to cinema studies, and conversely, the useful insights of cinema studies in the critique of American dominant ideology.

British-Canadian film theorist Robin Wood outlines some key components of American capitalist ideology as represented in classical Hollywood cinema as the following: (a) capitalism
and private property ownership; (b) the moral excellence of honest toil; (c) heterosexuality and monogamous marriage; (d) settling of the land as exemplified through agrarianism and the suppression of nature; (e) technology as progress; (f) wealth as a measure of success; (g) valorization of the working poor; (f) the reconciliation of all problems within the existing system (Wood, 593-4). Wood further suggests that the dominant American ideology of Hollywood cinema produces a dialectical pair of male and female archetypes. The contrasting male archetypes are the ideal, uncompromising maverick versus the domesticated family man. Their female counterparts are the ideal, subservient homemaker versus the sexualized woman of intrigue. The ideal gender archetypes form a complementary pair, while the presence of the opposed other threatens to disrupt the apparent unity of the familial structure. Finally, in order to reconcile the inherent contradictions within their ideology, Hollywood films always offer closure through the satisfying resolution. Good triumphs over evil, leaving the sanctified unity of the ideal family intact—the effective nucleus of American society—and thus ideological tensions are solved within the dominant American ideology itself (Wood, 595). The ideological function of all cultural productions—especially narratives—is to naturalize the premise of their operational ideological system, leaving it unexamined, and ideally, unquestioned.

The primary components of American capitalist ideology as outlined by Wood are almost entirely contradicted within Korine’s Mister Lonely. The concept of private property ownership is undermined by the fact that most of the film takes place on a commune of celebrity impersonators—though this not to say that collective property ownership is shown unproblematically either. There is little indication that any of the commune’s residents do any work whatsoever in terms of contributing to the collective sustenance. Of course, there are livestock on the commune, but the collective proves inept in maintaining them when their entire herd of sheep become mysteriously diseased and must be slaughtered—a sort of failed pastoralism. The impersonators are, however, shown working quite intensively to construct their ‘majestic theatre’—a building which more closely resembles a shanty than anything—as the performance place for their grand spectacle. This spectacle, their self-proclaimed magnum opus, is to be the “greatest show on earth.” The theatre is adorned with a small hand-painted sign hanging above its door listing the virtues, “FEAR GOD, WORK HARD, BE HONEST,” all of which are to be thoroughly transgressed. Their tireless and determined toil resembles anything but a well-oiled machine—full of petty argumentative turmoil and self-doubt. The grand
spectacle in fact turns out to be far from successful, resulting instead in utter tragedy and despair when the central female character, Marilyn, commits suicide—leaving both her family and the entire collective in crisis. The work ethic exemplified in capitalist ideology, which promises reward to those who work hard and preserver, is blatantly undermined. The family unit as the microcosm of the society at large, is destroyed without any clear motivation, rationalization, or explicit closure.

The gender archetypes presented in *Mister Lonely* are often incongruous to those presented in the conventional Hollywood cinema. The main character, Michael, a dancing Michael Jackson impersonator, is timid, sensitive, self-conscious, sentimental, non-athletic, and non-competitive—a perfect ‘man-in-the-mirror’ reflection of the androgynous persona of Michael Jackson as portrayed in mainstream American screen-culture. In addition to being the polar opposite of the championed male archetype in American dominant ideology, these traits could easily be categorized as feminine under the traditional, American construction of gender. The central female character, a Marilyn Monroe impersonator, fits closely within the non-idealized “shadow” female archetype in American ideology as the potentially destructive sex symbol. Michael and Marilyn, however, form an inconceivable couple within conventional Hollywood cinema—a pair that could seem to imply a sort of latent homosexuality—the ultimate threat to the procreative heterosexual family unit needed to perpetuate the dominant American ideology.

In the wake of the 1968 revolutionary uprisings in Paris, Jean Narboni and Jean-Luc Comolli, writing for the formidable *Cahiers du Cinéma*, also advocated for the ideological critique of all cinema. Comolli and Narboni proposed a system of classification under which all films fall into certain categories according to their form and content in terms of connection to capitalist ideology. Hollywood films exemplify the dominant mode of cinematic production and distribution as being distinctly capitalist. The production model of Hollywood films, as commercial entities, treat labor as dispensable in budgetary terms while alienating the filmmaking crew from the product of their toil; authorial credit (as well as principal profit) is finally attributed to either the director or the production studio. The ultimate manifestation of
Hollywood style films as highly capital-driven and dependent commodities makes them capitalist cultural products par excellence (Comolli, 688). Furthermore, the apparent realism of cinema is attacked as being nothing but a convention of ideological perspective—the very notion of depiction as merely the codified cinematographic language of an ideology in discourse with itself (Comolli, 689). As such, Comolli and Narboni propose seven categories in order to classify a given film: (a) films which willingly reinforce the conventions of capitalist cinema on both the levels of form and content; (b) those which question, reject, or problematize dominant cinematic conventions on both levels of form and content; (c) films which operationally challenge the dominant mode of cinematic depiction in form, though not necessarily in content; (d) films which are political in content, yet adopt the dominant modes of depiction and production; (e) a rare sort of film appearing at first as completely within the dominant ideology in form and content, yet manages to implicitly disrupt or call attention to the dominant ideology from within; (f) documentary films which adopt the dominant methods of depiction; (g) documentary films which problematize the conventional methods of depiction, thereby breaking from the dominant ideology on both levels of form and content (Comolli, 690-692). While there are often times films which defy tidy placement into any single category, these categories can still be useful as a starting point for ideological criticism. Keeping in mind that ideology also transcends political economy, it is important to look beyond to the philosophical positions which naturalize the core assumptions of a given political ideology.

*Mister Lonely* seems to fit within the second category of films suggested by Comolli and Narboni—breaking from the dominant system on the level of form and content, though only as a matter of degree. Take for example the opening scene, which consists of a single-unbroken shot of the film’s main character riding on a miniature crotch-rocket in slow motion towards the camera. From the back of the tiny motorcycle a toy-monkey wearing roller-skates dances on the end of a rope. Bobby Vinton’s ‘Mister Lonely’ plays. All diegetic sound is absent. To be sure, the absurdity of this sequence on its own defies any clear interpretation. The film’s second sequence provides some character exposition through voice-over narration. On screen, Catholic nuns are shown smoking cigarettes, dancing with dogs, playing volleyball, and baptizing a newborn in what appears to be a small Amazonian village. The narrator, whom we will only later recognize as the voice of Michael, laments, “I have always wanted to be someone else. I have never felt comfortable the way I am. All I want is to be better than myself. To become less ordinary and to
find some purpose in this world.” For those accustomed to the conventional Hollywood cinema, *Mister Lonely* is already strikingly dissimilar to the straightforward style of narration and story exposition found in most films. Never mind the Marxist reading possible in this scene, which clearly indicates a state of alienation (i.e. ‘Mister Lonely’).

Although the content of *Mister Lonely* is certainly radical, aspects of the film’s form are not completely divorced from Hollywood style. *Mister Lonely* had an estimated budget of 9.5 million dollars—Korine’s largest budget to date. The film was shot using Fuji Film 35mm and super 16mm stock on Arricams with Zeiss and Angenieux anamorphic lenses—standard camera equipment used on most big-budget Hollywood features (“Technical Specifications”). The dependence upon capital, which *Mister Lonely* exhibits by nature of its budget, makes it difficult for us to place the film neatly into the second of Comolli and Narboni’s categories. It must be argued though that because of its lack of appeal to Hollywood conventions overall in terms of form and content, *Mister Lonely* is certainly a radical film. That Korine was able to receive so much financing for such a project is nothing short of an enigma.

Although *Mister Lonely* provides a story that is more or less discernible, the audience is ultimately alienated from any real sense of meaning or closure from the film. No resolution or satisfactory ending is offered, rather the last shot of the film is the exact same as the first shot. This circular narrative structure suggests neither a linear conception of time nor any hope for reconciliation of the narrative’s conflicts. Often, the irrational and illogical depiction in *Mister Lonely* gives way to complete absurdity. Two story lines take place within the film which never cross paths—that of the colonialist missionaries and the commune of celebrity impersonators—nor is any connection between the two made explicit other than by virtue of juxtaposition. Within the missionary story, a skydiving nun is shown in long shot while on a bicycle, continuously back flipping no-handedly. The comedic sense of playfulness throughout is met with dramatic tragedy. Marilyn Monroe is first raped by Charlie Chaplin and then later hangs herself without any clearly rationalized motivation. The absurdity and incomprehensibility of the world and its characters presented by Korine produces a certain nihilism which is in direct opposition to the core assumptions of enlightenment philosophy—a world view deeply attached to reality as being ultimately observable and knowable through the primacy of rationality and the application of logical reasoning. Enlightenment philosophy’s rationalist, absolutist, and vitalist worldview produced the notions of human nature and human rights which in turn serve as the basis for
capitalism and the market economy, as well as democracy. By calling into question the core assumptions of enlightenment philosophy, *Mister Lonely* not only attacks American capitalist ideology on the levels of cinematic form and content, but in doing so, also transcends politics to address the ideology at its philosophical basis.

It must be stated that *Mister Lonely*’s nihilist, absurdist ideology, while clearly attacking American dominant ideology, by no means implies a Marxist/socialist ideology either. My earlier discussion of the character relations within the commune of impersonators shows no valorization of collective action, communal property ownership, nor a reduction of alienation. Obviously Marxist ideology is far from monolithic, and could follow several different and even conflicting variations—my goals is not to reduce such a complex body of thought to an overly simplified list of criteria. Despite having only scratched the surface in this analysis, I seek to illustrate difficulty in any attempt to follow ideological critique as a means to a clear and stable semantic reading of *Mister Lonely*. Clearly ideological film theory is useful, interesting, and fruitful to a certain extent as a methodology. However, *Mister Lonely* is quite the slippery text for it to tackle. To fully address the many semantic wrenches which Harmony Korine throws into our critical apparatuses would warrant discussion far beyond the scope of this essay. For now, perhaps it may suffice to speculate that *Mister Lonely* sleeps, yet only to forget its own Zizekian dreams.
Works Cited


