Colin MacCabe's Critique of the 'Classic Realist Text': a Sociological and Political Perspective

Luke Martell

About 40 years ago, as an undergraduate student, I wrote some dissertations that were probably better than anything I wrote as a professional academic, admittedly a low bar. I wrote this one when I was 21. The film academic Colin MacCabe published an essay criticising realist novels and films for having a form that prevented them from being politically progressive, effectively arguing for more avant-garde forms. I thought he was wrong and wrote this essay defending political realist fiction and saying why a sociological perspective, that I thought MacCabe lacked, showed this. It's about 8500 words long, written in quite academic language and I doubt anyone, quite reasonably, will read it. But, as I mention in my post [about blogging](), even if no-one does, I like to know it's out there.

Web [version here]().

1. Introduction

It is possible to site MacCabe's analysis within the framework recently adopted by the journal *Screen* and many of its contributors. This framework draws on a number of theoretical backgrounds and concerns. These include: film theory, particularly that of Christian Metz; the anti-economism and anti-humanism of Louis Althusser and his lending of relative autonomy to ideology as interpellating the subject into an imaginary relation to her/his real conditions of existence; Lacanian psychoanalytic theory's concern with the constitution of the unconscious and subjectivity in language and discourse; the concern to legitimate modernism and avant-garde art (such as the films of Jean Luc Godard) and denigrate realism, originating from debates conducted by Brecht, Lukacs, and the Russian formalists; and a general emphasis on signification as productive and constitutive of the real. (1)

Hall argues (2) that the *Screen* position has built upon its original concerns with signification and language as productive and material, as opposed to transparent, and with decentring the Cartesian subject. It has continued from the basic influences of structural linguistics to the more recent position [this essay was written in the 1980s] drawing markedly on Lacan and Althusser. Here the emphasis is on the subject's constitution on entry into language and the ideological interpellation of the subject. There is a significant move, by Marxist cultural theorists such as MacCabe, away from the basic premisses of historical materialism and a

shift towards a more idealist emphasis. The repeated justification for this shift is the necessity to avoid economic, class reductionism or determinism and to rethink the base-superstructure metaphor. My argument is that the justifiable reaction against such orthodox Marxist analysis has been far too radical and has slid into an idealist and reductionist textual determinism (3).

This essay is mainly a critical account of the framework that MacCabe and others, eg Stephen Heath, Coward and Ellis, Kristeva etc, have adopted in this context (4). I think there is much that is useful in MacCabe's analysis of the 'classic realist text', particularly what is revealed by his use of formalism and the structural linguistic paradigm for an analysis of internal narrative structure. Much of MacCabe's argument that is outlined in the next section I agree with. However, I have chosen to criticise what is problematic rather than celebrate what is useful; firstly, because sociologists and theorists of film are now largely aware of the positive insights of the sort made by MacCabe, and, secondly, because the dangers of MacCabe's analysis outweigh its advantages in the present context where a number of film theorists have taken up many of his more problematic claims to the exclusion of a more adequate sociological, historical, or materialist analysis.

My argument in general is that the formalist or structural reading of textual analysis is not adequate for a sociological, or historical materialist textual analysis of the classic realist text (5). The attempt to make a Marxist analysis of the classic realist text in the way attempted by MacCabe is undermined by the Marxist commitment to historical materialism. In MacCabe's formalist and idealist analysis historical specificity and material and social relations, essential in any sociological analysis, are largely neglected. This point is really at the basis of all my criticisms which merely show the central inadequacy of MacCabe's analysis in its many different manifestations.

2. MacCabe's analysis

The first aim of this essay is to outline briefly the points raised in MacCabe's analysis of the classic realist text (6) that are particularly significant for a sociological analysis of film.

The most central encompassing argument of MacCabe's article is that the classic realist text is composed of a hierarchy of discourses where the discourse of the narrator provides true knowledge against which the other textual discourses may be measured and contextualised. The important factor in this typology is the form or organisation of the text, rather than its content, and the relations that this form inscribes for the reader. As an aside, this ignores content for the sake of formalist questions. My emphasis in this essay is less on the internality of the text, such as content, and more on the text in sociological context, so I won't dwell on this point. But it is worth noting that MacCabe focuses on form in the text as preventing contradiction, at the expense of how content in the text can encompass contradiction.

To return to form, the narrator's dominant point of view in the realist text, says MacCabe, is never revealed as one productive of meaning or constructing reality but one which reveals reality and true knowledge in a transparent and natural way. Other discourses are seen as material and explicable from the narrator's point of view while the narrative discourse

denies its own status as articulation. MacCabe argues that his model of the classic realist text applied to literature (eg *Middlemarch*) is also applicable to film (eg *Klute*) where the dominant discourse is the narration of events.

MacCabe's argument is that the realism of the cinema is related to the characteristics of the specific literary production of the 19th century realist novel where there is a hierarchy among the discourses composing the text defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth. The narrative discourse posits the other discourses of the text and compares them with the truth available through its own transparent window. There is heteroglossia with narrative discourse as the dominant one.

Following from this, MacCabe argues that the classic realist text cannot deal with the real in its contradictions and that it positions the subject in a relation of dominant specularity to the text. Giving the reader access to the truth in the narrative meta-discourse entails the concealment of its own articulative operations and puts the reader in a position of an imaginary unity where all the other discourses of the film may be read. Through the effacement of the text's signifying practice or construction the reader is placed in a position of knowledge from which everything can be assessed. For example, in the film *Klute* the dominant discourse is the unfolding of the narrative as revealing reality against which the other discourses subordinate in the hierarchy can be measured. The subjective account of Bree given in her conversations with her analyst is shown by the dominant narrative-of-events discourse to be illusory. The images of Klute and Bree preparing to leave show her subjective belief that it 'won't work' to be incorrect.

So, according to MacCabe, the classic realist text produces the illusion that it can show reality. In the novel the dominant discourse is that of the author while in films it is that of the narrative of events. The privileged discourse has an authority against which the other discourses may be measured and which positions the viewer in a position of knowing the real. The subjects of the text - the narrator, characters, viewer - are inscribed and the reader recognises and accepts her/his position. The text offers a closed, fixed meaning which the reader passively accepts.

MacCabe's political conclusions are that this form, as one which ideologically conceals its signifying practices and fixes meaning, is reactionary and that a progressive or revolutionary text must be one whose form foregrounds its processes of construction denying the filmic epistemology of a single fixed knowable reality and showing the real as contradictory and discursively produced. For MacCabe, it is only modernist and avant-garde texts that fulfil these criteria of progressiveness. These texts open out meaning and position the viewer in an active role. MacCabe argues that to offer an alternative dominant discourse within classic realist structures is not enough. This is a reactionary practice because it merely conceals the contradictions and different articulations of the real and still positions the spectator to accept a fixed meaning.

The most significant aspect of MacCabe's argument for the sociological analysis of film is perhaps his use of linguistics and his analysis of the language and codes of film. Using linguistic concepts, he shows how the languages of realism are material and rejects the notion of the transparent window on the world with which reality is revealed. Rather,

MacCabe sees reality as articulated or constructed in its definition in a set of differences and oppositions which make up language. We can see this deriving both from the relational system conceptualised by the structural linguistic paradigm and also from the Althusserian concept of ideology as the representations through which women and men live in an imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence. There is a significant shift away here from the materialist analysis of the real and from the question of base-superstructure determination to a concern with the discourses and practices of ideology itself.

3. Formalism, the reader, and subjectivity

A number of problems with MacCabe's analysis of the 'classic realist text' arise from the formalist or structuralist perspective within which he works. This emphasis allows MacCabe to isolate the text and so to make the subject merely the effect of textual structure and the text an entity which is analysed independently of and in abstraction from the reader, reality, and social and historical determinations.

MacCabe himself recognises this when he argues that his article on realism and the cinema "is contaminated by formalism; by a structuralism that it claimed to have left behind" (7). His article posits a passive reader who is injected with meaning by the meaning producing structures of the text and who is positioned and constructed by those textual structures. The text "fixes the subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious" (8). This conception not only poses the viewer as a receiver rather than a reader but also isolates the text as determining and not determined, and as independent of reality and the reader in the meaning that it produces. MacCabe argues that the metalanguage simply "places the spectator outside the realm of contradiction and of action outside of production" (9). The view which sees the text as producing meaning itself autonomously of social and historical determination neglects the basic materialist premises of the Marxist paradigm with which MacCabe aims to reconcile semiological or linguistic analysis. The reader is seen simply as the sum total of positions allocated to her/him in the text. Reality and the reader are reduced to the text.

As I have said this is a problem with Mac Cabe's structural sociological or reading of textual analysis which is not adequate to a sociological or materialist reading of the classic realist text. Rather, the question should be, as he himself notes, of,
"analysing a film within a determinate social moment so that it is possible to determine what identifications will be made and by whom" (10).
Williams notes (11) that the lack of this sort of analysis in the realism and the cinema article is evident in the crude text-spectator model with which MacCabe explains the ideological production of the subject. He correctly points out that realist films may well contain characters who "embody or vocalise certain positions" and that it is fair to say that there can be a closure or orientation of viewers in certain directions but not to the extent that the viewer is fixed in an allotted space or point of view. This really only accounts for texts as texts and not as social events. Furthermore, in the tradition of Althusserian anti-economism, it runs the risk of neglecting the fact that subjectivity is not only constituted in the text-reader relation but also in sites outside that relation and not solely in the sphere of ideology - eg also in the division and experience of wage labour, material social conditions, class collectivity etc.

Despite what MacCabe may say, his argument posits an oversimplified relationship between the text and its audience where the former puts the latter in their position and where there is simply a "place allotted to the reading subject" (12). His argument is all about the ideological constitution of the subject, but gives a too simplistic one-way model of that constitution. This analytical simplification on MacCabe's part is made all the more surprising by his advocacy of a more adequate account of subjectivity after structuralism and his consciousness of the potentially active role of the reader in his prescriptions for a modernist film practice. It seems that in order to justify alternative practices aiming at the distanciation of the reader and her/his positioning as an active producer MacCabe must regress to a critique of existing practices as merely inscribing the reader in the text as a passively consuming effect of textual strategies. To practically activate the reader, MacCabe theoretically pacifies her/him.

On the other hand, the advantage is that he does introduce the question of subjectivity on to the agenda and does so in the sphere of ideological construction. This is a substantial advance on traditional Marxist theory which has not engaged in the question of subjectivity at all or has done so largely within the framework of an orthodox class analysis (13) which puts heavy emphasis on labour and production to the exclusion of gender, the family, and ideology as contributing factors. I would argue that an adequate analysis of subjectivity must take into account the materialist basis of Marxism and class analysis but must supplement this also with insights from feminism, psychoanalysis, and ideology analysis. Thus, what MacCabe's recovery of explanations from outside an orthodox class analysis gains should not be lost, but also materialism should not be allowed to be marginalised in the reaction against its perceived hegemony.

Central to this discussion is the general question of the *Screen* position on the ideological construction of subjectivity, or at least the position taken up by the majority of its contributors (14). Most problematic in this position, in my opinion, is the question of the relation between the textual and the extra-textual and the problem of trying to theorise the practices of meaning production in a way that is sociological, historical, and materialist. I do not think that *Screen* pays adequate attention to such concerns.

Willemen points out (15) that in the formalist analysis of texts, such as MacCabe's, spectators are seen as subjugated in a relation of passivity to the unilaterally determining text. The heavy emphasis on textual and ideological construction of subjects by formal mechanisms implies a theory in which readers are merely effects, texts are autonomous from material, social or historical determinations, and subjects are ahistorical.

For a start, this is problematic in that texts are not all that is ideology. Even if subjects are completely ideologically constructed there are discourses other than those activated by the text. Furthermore, Willemen correctly argues that readers do not actually confront texts in the abstract but in the concrete real as subjects in history and social formations and not merely subjects of the single text. Subjects are the intersections or ensembles of a number of discursive relations and have different, contradictory relationships to discourses which are determined, to some extent at least, by their position in the real, in the material relations of the production and reproduction of life. Subjects have a number of different contradictory

subject positions, eg as 'British' and 'working class', and they have individual and collective histories. Other simultaneous and past interpellations affect that made by the classic realist text and the reader may refuse an inscribed realist reading in favour of another contradictory discourse in which they have been previously interpellated. The ideology of the classic realist text may be contradicted by the subjects' positions in relation to other texts, ideologies, and discourses. In brief, the single text cannot simply inscribe the subject, but subject positions will be given by a multiplicity of positions given by the relation of the subject to different texts, ideologies, and institutions in contradictory subjectivities.

What needs to be rethought here is the influence of discourses which particular readers have differential access to according to, say, their class, gender, race, or sexual orientation. Also, texts should be thought of as bundles of discourses offering a number of different subject positions so that subjects do not simply passively accept a subject position forced on to them by the dominant meta-discourse but may take up subject positions offered by other discourses according to their historical situation, class background, expectations, or other extra-textual factors. Therefore, reading is not simply consumptive but has the status of expanded production. Subjects are not merely the effect of a textual discourse but may produce the text in relation to a whole number of other extra-textual discourses and material influences. It must remain questionable that concrete individuals constituted as subjects for a number of discourses can be interpellated by one text. Rather, subject positions should be seen to be constituted in the position of the subject at the conjuncture of a whole number of other discourses and extra-textual, social and historical determinants. MacCabe and other *Screen* contributors appear to continuously neglect this concrete individual in preference for an abstraction.

The ironic thing is that the productive role of the subject is precisely that which MacCabe and others claim to have revealed with the development of post-structuralism. But the problem is that in his analysis of the classic realist text, MacCabe has taken great care to theorise the text-subject relation but has done so in a way that is still seriously limited by a textually determinist model. He theorises single positionings rather than multiple positionings and bundles of discourses, he fails to account for the position of the subject at the conjuncture of a number of discourses rather than as simply the effect of the discourse of the text, and he fails to theorise the productive and active role of the subject. Despite claims he may make to have moved in a post-structuralist direction his analysis of the classic realist text fails to account for the subject as much other than an effect of the text and is still seriously limited within a structuralist or formalist framework.

Implied by Willemen's argument is a prescription of conjunctural analysis; analysis of the ideological and cinematic within a historical materialist analysis of their articulation with the political and economic. Thus, the form of a text has to be looked at along with its process of production, consumption, distribution and exchange specific to a particular historical moment and social formation. Nicholas Garnham (16) supports Willemen's critique of the "essentially idealist formulations that have dominated *Screen*'s recent trajectory" (17). Garnham argues that *Screen* has privileged the ideological instance at the expense of the economic so that any rare references to the concrete historical analysis of institutions usually amount to little more than "rhetorical gestures" (18). This is certainly true of MacCabe's analysis which gives little if any credence to the analysis of subjectivity outside its

textual construction, as encouraged by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Notably this latter strand in *Screen* theory is particularly idealist and universalist in its positing of the construction of the subject by language-in-general, the direct antipathy of a politically optimistic historical materialism although not totally irrelevant to its problematic.

Garnham's particular concern, with which I agree, is to re-site the problematic away from *Screen*'s concern to reconcile psychoanalysis and historical materialism towards a concern, consistent with Willemen's arguments, to limit the relevance of psychoanalysis and give "the object of its analysis a subordinate position within a wider analysis of modes of social determination" (19). I think that this is the correct project and an adequate response to the model of *Screen* theory proposed by MacCabe in the 'Realism and the Cinema' article. Here the attempt to reconcile or synthesise psychoanalysis with historical materialism is unsuccessful and MacCabe shows his reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis to be inadequate for a historical materialist reading of the text and subject. The only way in which MacCabe can carry out this project is to abstract out from history and material relations and posit a subject constituted through psychical mechanisms by textual form. MacCabe simply makes little if any attempt to discuss the constitution of subjectivity outside the model of one-sided text-subject determination. Aside from all the reductionist, idealist, and universalist problems which make this analysis inadequate as such, it is also a failure to actually reconcile psychoanalysis and historical materialism. In taking on the former the latter is lost. The typical response of *Screen* theorists to this failure is to attempt to rescue their claims to historical materialism by a sprinkling of Marxist rhetoric and an appeal to psychoanalysis as materialist; both strategies which, I would argue, serve only to give their analyses a Marxist appearance rather than a Marxist substance.

It seems to me that Garnham over-reacts to the problems of MacCabe and *Screen* and reverts slightly too far towards a crude orthodox Marxism. While correctly retaining the relative autonomy of ideology he does take a particularly 'productionist' line emphasising the importance of wage labour and the relations of production to the exclusion of the relatively autonomous material practices in, for example, women's domestic labour and the family which are also sites of the material/ideological constitution of subjectivity. Although, given the primacy of the attempt to regain historical materialism from the idealism and universalism of the Screen orientation, this is an understandable over-reaction on his part.

So, it is important, for instance, to examine the individual's concrete position in real material social relations and the way in which this affects what discourses s/he will encounter and have access to and how s/he will read those discourses. Garnham agrees that psychoanalysis should be placed within the historical materialist analysis of the relationship of the mode of production of material life with ideology as a "subsidiary moment" (20). The same goes for the broader category of ideology analysis within which psychoanalysis may have something to contribute to an explanation of psychical mechanisms and drives involved in the ideological construction of the subject. It is not necessary to reject the relative autonomy of ideology or revert to a crude materialist analysis of unilateral determination or reflection in order to point out the presupposition of the economic, or at least the material, in any adequate Marxist analysis of ideology. Garnham points out that Marx's analysis of ideology starts with the maintenance of the unequal distribution of the material surplus and power in capitalist society and only then goes on to explain the role of ideology in the reproduction of

this specific structure of material imbalance. Of course, this is only the beginning of the analysis. Ideology cannot be reduced to such a functional role but must be seen to have some degree of relative autonomy and determining power of its own. But the point is that ideology must be explained in a historical materialist analysis in relation to the prior economic or material determinant. MacCabe and other *Screen* contributors are concerned with signifying practices, form, and ideological construction to the exclusion of such a consideration.

Garnham and Willemen point out how this exclusion leads to the further exclusion of class determinants and the importance of the extra-textual class (and gender and race) influence on the productive reading of a text. Thus, Willemen argues,
"Individuals do have different relations to sets of discourses in that their position in the social formation, their positioning in the real, will determine which sets of discourses a given subject is likely to encounter and in which ways it will do so. In other words, this position will determine which discursive formations are likely to combine and produce given individuals as subjects in ideology" (21).
Furthermore, Garnham goes on to point out, in an analysis which there is not really space to discuss here, the dependence of ideological discourses on the material productive labour of others, the mode of their distribution, and other institutional and economic factors of their production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. This offers an example of the historical materialist concrete analysis argued for in this essay.

This orientation does not have to take the reductionist line of orthodox class analysis to avoid MacCabe's textual reductionism. Instead, sociological or historical materialist analysis can start to look at the effect of the economic and political constitution of class, gender, and race collectivities on the distribution and availability of discourses. The socio-economic position of readers can be seen to have a conditioning effect on the reading competences and discursive sensibilities available to them. In general, the position of the subject in meaning production can be extended sociologically in a whole number of ways dealing with categories such as class, gender, race, sexual orientation, the family, the state, education, politics and a whole other multiplicity of effects on an individual reader's history. This, I would argue, points to the sort of reading of textual analysis which is adequate to a sociological, historical, and materialist analysis of the classic realist text.

4. The category 'classic realist text'

One of the consequences of the formalist emphasis of MacCabe's analysis is that his category of the classic realist text, his typology of texts, is far too general to be operationally useful or analytically revealing in sociological terms. The formalist basis of his definition and typology prevents an analysis of classic realist texts in their specificity from one another which is revealed by a more complete analysis of the text in its determinate social moment and in its relation with the reader and wider ideological discourses.

MacCabe himself highlights the problem of this category,
"The category of the classic realist text lumps together in book and film 'The Grapes of Wrath' and 'The Sound of Music', 'L'Assomoir' and 'Toad of Toad Hall' " (22).
In concentrating on the form and internal structure shared by a group of texts. MacCabe

loses the specificity of individual texts that can be seen with an approach which does not abstract out from its content and the context of its production, distribution and consumption. Sociological analysis should, for example, locate the text with its internal structure and hierarchy of discourses within wider ideological discourse. Thus, classic realist texts with a socialist content, eg 'Days of Hope', can be distinguished from the bourgeois, as MacCabe puts it, classic realist text in the contradiction of its ideology with wider dominant ideological discourses (23). In this way 'Days of Hope' retains the concrete specificity lost in MacCabe's general abstract typology of texts. In general, what the category of the 'classic realist text' reveals about the formal and ideological characteristics of a vast group of texts it conceals about their specificity and position as the ensemble of a whole set of relations and determinations. There is definitely a need to move from the abstract to the concrete here, and from the general to the particular.

Furthermore, it seems to me a very reductionist argument that defines a text as reactionary or bourgeois according to its internal structure or form. For MacCabe, the classic realist text is reactionary because of 2 main features that it possesses. Firstly, it cannot deal with the real as contradictory and, secondly, it fixes the subject in a position of dominant specularity. Both of these features derive, according to MacCabe, from the internal form or structure of the text in which there is a hierarchy of discourses defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth. For MacCabe, realist texts have an essentially ideological form that interpellates spectators in an imaginary unity and in a position of dominant specularity.

The problem with this is one which runs through all my criticisms of MacCabe's article. This is his heavily formalist and unsociological emphasis without which he would have great difficulty in legitimating his claims for the classic realist text as reactionary, modernism as revolutionary, the subject as passively constructed, and so on. He can only argue for these things by abstracting the text-subject relationship from history and the social and material circumstances of the text's production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. My argument is that the effectivity and political definition of the classic realist text cannot be made simply at the level of textual form. Certainly, I agree that the form of the classic realist text has a highly significant role in positioning the subject and constructing the real but its effectivity in this is conditioned in conjunction with a whole set of extra-textual practices, in particular external ideological discourses and the material and ideological position of the subject.

Thus, the classic realist text imbued with a socialist content and produced for, distributed to, and consumed by a mass working class audience in a capitalist society where dominant ideological discourses are overwhelmingly from a socialist point of view 'bourgeois' is a politically progressive text. In this context the ideological discourse of the classic realist text is in stark contradiction with dominant extra-textual ideology and widely accessible to the class exploited by the material relations concealed by that ideology. However, in a developing socialist society in which the dominant ideology is primarily socialist, the 'Days of Hope' texts may not serve a politically progressive role, serving mainly to confirm existing ideology rather than activate and engage people in its development and criticism. This is quite a hypothetical and crude example but illustrates the argument that it is not in the intrinsic form that the classic realist text gains its meaning and political definition but in its relation to extra-textual ideology and the material position of the viewer. To ascribe

particular characteristics to the classic realist text, as MacCabe does, is to abstract it from its wider economic, political and ideological relations within which its status and effectivity may be negotiated and redefined.

So, the classic realist text should not be defined simply by its internal form or textual characteristics. More specifically it cannot simply be defined as 'bourgeois' by such an abstraction. Rather it must be identified in its concrete specific use and its particular social and historical situation. Such an analysis is not of a text as an independent thing but as a social practice and set of social relations in which it may function one way in a particular conjuncture and another elsewhere. Again, the problem with MacCabe's analysis is that his formalist, linguistic, immanent reading of textual analysis is not sufficient for the historical materialist or sociological definition of the classic realist text.

5. Elitism

Much of MacCabe's analysis of the classic realist text is carried out with a commitment to politically legitimate modernist or avant-garde art and reflexive film texts. This has been made possible by his heavily formalist definition of political progressiveness which allows him to argue for texts in which there is no dominant discourse but a great deal of self-consciousness and a positioning of the viewer in an active productive role in the film.

MacCabe argues that while classic realist texts with a socialist content may be progressive in the sense that they propose a dominant discourse contradictory to wider dominant ideology, they are essentially ideological and reactionary in their form which is one that interpellates the viewer as a unified subject in a position of dominant specularity. The viewer is positioned in such a way that s/he is led to believe that s/he knows reality or the truth.

For MacCabe the preferred progressive alternative to this reactionary art is of the sort that foregrounds rather than conceals the process of reality construction and so does not lead the viewer into the illusory impression that s/he has a transparent view on to reality. MacCabe's progressive text is, then, one which is very reflexive and concerned with its own signifying practice and its foregrounding. It refuses to position the viewer in a passive position of knowledge but forces her/him into an active role of reality construction due to the lack of a privileged or fixed reading.

The result of this is that MacCabe's prescriptions for progressive texts are highly elitist and intellectualist and as such advocate a practice which is, at this juncture, far from being politically progressive or revolutionary. MacCabe's recovery of Brecht has, as Harvey points out, been very selective. He has,
"recovered Brecht the modernist, not Brecht the entertainer; Brecht the anti-illusionist, not Brecht the socialist with an interest in mass politics and the forms of popular art" (24). MacCabe's highly formalist analysis leads him to prescribe a textual practice on the basis of a theory which fails to account for the characteristics and cultural capital of the audience. Consequently, his prescribed practice is not equipped to engage the audience and deal with the text-audience relation factors of accessibility, popularity, and pleasure. The main audience whom MacCabe's revolutionary text engages are a small intellectual elite. If he

seriously believes that it is this elite that must be changed then he raises questions about Marxist politics which fall outside the scope of this essay. However, such a belief would depart significantly from the central historical concerns of socialist politics with the politicisation and organisation of the working class and other oppressed groups.

Modernist and avant-garde film which MacCabe aims to politically legitimate and prescribe as revolutionary are available almost exclusively to an intellectual elite defined within existing social relations. As Lovell points out (25), avant-garde film which MacCabe prescribes caters for the feelings and sensibility of an intellectual elite whose cultural and educational apparatus, relatively inaccessible to the working class and other oppressed groups, allows them mainly to engage in the language and images of modernism. Lovell is quite correct in this context to say,
"It is impossible to produce a truly revolutionary text in a discourse in which only the dominant have any facility" (26).
We can see that MacCabe's formalist emphasis has marginalised the factor of the audience without a knowledge of which it is impossible to construct a revolutionary textual practice. The meanings and effects of a text reside not only in its form and signifying practices but also in its relation to the requirements, characteristics, circumstances and reading apparatus of its audience. Not only must form be progressive in its internal structure but it must also be able to engage the audience at which it is aimed. In order to do this, I would argue that socialist film practice would have to attempt to put a socialist content into popular or classic realist forms although not in a way which is not significantly critical or subversive of those forms. A socialist film practice would have to be based on accessibility, popularity, and availability to a mass audience. A precondition for this practice is a theory which takes into account the characteristics and cultural capital of the audience. Seeing as the working class and other oppressed groups have significantly less access to the cultural and educational apparatus underlying the sensibilities with which modernist film engages then it makes little sense to define modernism as revolutionary, and realism, to which they do have access, as necessarily reactionary.

In short, my argument here is that MacCabe's failure to adequately understand the viewer not only leads to a crude, hypodermic, abstract text-spectator model of communication but also leads him to prescribe a textual practice unrelated to the real characteristics and cultural capital of the audience it is aimed at.

Harvey supports this view when she argues (27) that an analysis of the meaning production of a text and its political effectivity must concern itself centrally with the social class of the reader and the cultural capital allowed to that class (and gender and race for that matter). She correctly points to the active reading role in meaning production neglected by MacCabe and argues that the ability to decipher codes or code breaking operations is culturally and socially determined and that the reader approaches a text within a particular apparatus of reading. Thus, a modernist reflexive text that requires a cultural capital to which the working class have less opportunity for access (as do others not so oppressed) can hardly be revolutionary. Rather, such a practice, formulated on the basis of a theory which denies the active role of reading and so also the relationship between social class and cultural capital, fails to engage its intended audience. For a text to be politically effective or revolutionary it must strategically intervene and engage itself within the framework of the cultural reading

capital of its intended audience.

We can see here again, then, the underlying problem which flaws MacCabe's aspiration to a Marxist or sociological /aesthetic theory and politics. His immanent form of textual analysis is not adequate for such a historically, materially, or sociologically based project.

5. Politics and pleasure

A further point concerning the elitism and inaccessibility of MacCabe's prescribed practice and cultural politics is its rationalism and denial of pleasure. One of the more useful attributes of psychoanalytic theory may be its theorising of the pleasure of the text as related to unconscious desire, repression, wish-fulfilment and so on, although it may be argued that you do not have to have psychoanalysis to explain pleasure in this way.

However, my main point here is that the rationalism and intellectualism of MacCabe's prescribed film practice contributes further to its inaccessibility and reactionary lack of effectivity. The Brechtian approach, as he reads it, denies the usefulness of the cinema of pathos and works towards the critical detachment and distanciation of the audience. The productive apparatus of the text must be consciously analysed and the general orientation of MacCabe is to make the reader produce meaning, to make her/him labour intellectually. But there are problems with this as Harvey notes,
"The problem with the process of distanciation, of course, is that the audience needs to be distanced in order to exercise its critical faculties, but not too far – it must not be so distanced as to lose interest. Similarly, the invitation to participate in the work of producing the meaning of the play or the film must be perceived as a pleasant invitation and not as a sentence to 90 minutes of hard labour" (28).
I would argue, in relation to this point, that the cinema of pathos is not necessarily one that fixes the audience in uncritical involvement. Such an analysis reduces the meaning production of the film to the moment of viewing. The participation of feelings of solidarity, sympathy, outrage and so on may be said to provoke a critical analysis and process of meaning production that extends well beyond the viewing moment.

Furthermore, and more importantly, this prescribed practice marginalises an aspect which, as Lovell points out, should be central to Marxist or socialist aesthetics - that of social or collective pleasure. Such pleasure is not necessarily progressive at all. However, Marxist aesthetics rejects the potential mobilisation of collective pleasure for progressive film practice "at its peril". As Lovell argues,
"Aesthetic sensibilities are class- and sex-linked and the politics of aesthetic pleasure will depend on the particular ways in which that sensibility has been appropriated and developed along lines of sex and class" (29)
This is a conception of politics and pleasure marginalised by MacCabe and one which, incidentally, can include collective pleasure based also on the political solidarity along the lines of race, sexual orientation, or other potentially progressive oppressed groups.

7. Contradiction and political progressiveness

It should be clear by now that MacCabe's definition of the classic realist text as reactionary is based on 1) the inability of its form to handle the real in its contradiction and 2) in its positioning of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity. The question of the positioning of the spectator has already been discussed and the concern now is to look at the question of contradiction.

MacCabe argues that the classic realist text can enter into a level of contradiction in the contradiction between the dominant discourse of the text and the dominant ideological discourses of the time. In this sense, some classic realist texts "might be classified as progressive" (30). However, he argues that in the form of the classic realist text, in which there is given a metadiscursive position of knowledge or truth in the narrative of events, it is unable to investigate the real in its contradictions.

There are problems with this argument raised by MacCabe himself when, coming as close as he will do in the 'Realism and the Cinema' article to a sociological and historical materialist analysis, he sees the status of the literary production as a social event and admits to a type of political progressiveness which the classic realist text might be capable of in its contradiction with extra-textual ideology. It is also here (31) that he comes nearest to an analysis which is real and concrete and able to differentiate and specify between different particular texts otherwise lumped together in the abstract.

The point is that there is a lacuna in MacCabe's analysis here where he explains the potential political progressiveness of the classic realist text, and the particularity of texts within that abstract category in terms of their historical specificity and situation within particular relations. Such an analysis undermines much of what his analysis of the classic realist text otherwise argues or implies - the autonomy of the text, its definition by its formal structure, its one-way determination of the subject etc. - and furthermore it highlights what is problematic about his definition of political progressiveness - its formalist abstraction from concrete historical and social relations.

It is problematic to define the ultimate or final conditions for the progressiveness of texts in their form, as the extent to which a film text may be progressive or reactionary is defined in the set of textual and extra-textual relations which determine its meaning. Caughie argues (32) that the progressiveness of television has to be defined conjuncturally and institutionally, particularly given its potential contradiction with the conservative institutions of film and television production, distribution, and exchange within which particular texts derive their radicalism. Thus, the political analysis of television has to
"go beyond the identification of the politics it speaks towards an analysis of the place which it occupies within the political forces and contradictions which are current at the time of its screening" (33).
In arguing this Caughie draws attention as well to the social and historical definition of radicalism so that it can be seen that what at one moment may be a politically progressive text may some time later be defined differently within a different conjuncture of relations and a different political climate.

In general, on the question of contradiction we can see that MacCabe is being one-dimensional and over-textual in his definition of the inability of the classic realist text to deal

with the real in its contradiction. McArthur's attempt to show the internal ability of the classic realist text to show the real in its contradiction attempts to deal with MacCabe on his own formalist grounds (34). He tries to argue that the textual form itself is capable of handling contradiction. The point is really to show up the inadequacy of the formalist problematic itself as abstracting from the wider discursive and social situation. Whether the classic realist text is unable to handle contradiction in its own internal structure, as MacCabe argues, is less the point from a sociological perspective (although, as mentioned earlier, I think it can in at least its content). A sociological or historical materialist analysis should be able to show that the way in which a classic realist text, such as the 'Days of Hope' serial, may foreground the real in its contradiction is, as MacCabe himself actually momentarily argues, in the contradiction between the textual discourse and the dominant ideological discourses of the time.

This contradiction is revealed in the sociological analysis of the classic realist text in its historical specificity and relations with readers, institutions, and extra-textual discourses and concealed by an abstraction of the text and analysis of it in its isolation or internal structure alone. Contradiction, therefore, does not have to be activated purely at the textual level. Such a conception results from the over-formalist approach characteristic of MacCabe's prescriptions. Contradiction can be activated in intertextuality and by the contradiction of dominant ideology texts with alternative ideology texts. In the very posing of alternative definitions and meanings against dominant meanings or ideology the real in its contradictions and the opposition of class forces may be represented. Thus, in the creation of contradictory alternatives, the left can make a point of partial cultural-political intervention that does not constitute merely replacing one ideology for another or forsaking contradiction. It may, therefore, be politically progressive to
"confirm an identity (of sexuality or class), to recover repressed experience or history, to contest the dominant image with an alternative identity".
There is a progressive role in introducing into the discourses of television and film,
"a repressed political, social discourse which may contribute to an audience's political formation and may increase its scepticism of the other representations which television offers". (35).
Thus, the underlying problem of MacCabe's analysis has cropped up again in connection with the question of contradiction and political progressiveness. MacCabe's formalist, internalist textual analysis has failed to deal with the progressive and contradictory role which the classic realist text may play in its situation in a set of social, historical and material relations. His reading of textual analysis is inadequate for a historical materialist analysis and politics of film.

In general, then, my preference is for a historical materialist perspective willing to reflexively recognise its own historically conditioned limitations and draw on inputs from outside its framework to explain that which previously it may have excluded - eg gendered subjectivity, the relative autonomy of ideological Interpellation etc. I prefer this approach to both 'crude' orthodox class analysis and the immanent textual analysis approach practised by MacCabe in the 'Realism and the Cinema' article. In my opinion, it is absolutely essential to remain within the historical materialist framework and I think many of the idealist and reductionist problems of MacCabe's analysis arise from his attempt to synthesise historical materialism with textual analysis rather than doing the latter inside the former.

To attempt to draw from outside historical materialism need not involve leaving its framework at all. Orthodox Marxist class analysis certainly cannot deal with the multi-dimensional type approach which I argue for but reflexive historical materialism can. In fact, the multi-dimensional approach must be historical and materialist in my opinion. It is the failure to make such an explicit commitment which leads theorists such as the contributors to *Screen* into universalist (eg the Lacanian universalising and naturalising of patriarchy) and idealist (eg the slide from the Althusserian relative autonomy of ideology to the post-Althusserian absolute autonomy posited by Hindess and Hirst and Coward and Ellis) reductions. This is manifested in MacCabe's analysis by his neglect of the social and historical determinations and concrete material relations within which the text and subject are situated.

In cultural analysis an example of the sort of approach I am arguing for is demonstrated by Janet Woolf (36) and makes an appearance in the contributions of Lovell, Garnham, and Willemen. Also, there is an analysis of personality or subjectivity by Leonard which criticises the problems of both orthodox class analysis (eg Seve) and the over-reaction to it (eg Coward and Ellis) (37). Leonard argues for a reflexive analysis situated in historical materialism and drawing on class analysis but escaping reductionism and conservativism by drawing also on feminist, psychoanalytical, and symbolic interactionist inputs. Barrett attempts a similar exercise from the point of view of feminism itself (38). In these manifestations historical materialism is neither restrictive nor reductionist. I see no real advantages as such in attempting to dump historical materialism as a framework for sociological analysis and very real advantages in retaining the explicit commitment it has to historical specification and concrete material analysis. It certainly avoids the idealism and reductionism which make MacCabe's form of textual analysis inadequate for the analysis of film from a sociological point of view.

8. Notes and references

1. Aspects of this ideological context can be seen in,
Metz, C. 1974 *Film Language*
Metz, C. 1974 *Language and Cinema*
Althusser, L. 1984 *Essays on Ideology*
Lemaire, A. 1977 *Jacques Lacan*
Brecht, B. 1974 'Against George Lukacs', *New Left Review* 84
Lukacs, G. 1970 *Writer and Critic*
Lemon, L.T. and Reis, M.J. eds. 1965 - *Russian Formalist Criticism: 4 Essays*

2. Hall, S. 1980 - 'Recent developments in theories of language and ideology: a critical note' Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *Culture, Media, Language* p.157
There is a further discussion of the *Screen* position in Morley, D. 1980 'Texts, readers, subjects' in the same book.

3. Here I mean idealist in the sense of an exclusion of the analysis of material relations

rather than in any epistemological sense.

4. See, for example,
Heath, S. 1974 'Lessons from Brecht', *Screen* 15,2
Coward, R. and Ellis, J. 1977 *Language and Materialism*
Kristeva, J. 1973 'The semiotic activity' *Scree*n 14,1
Hindess, B. and Hirst, P. 1977 *Mode of Production and Social Formation*

5. The assumption made here and throughout this essay is that the best sociological analysis is historical and materialist. To discuss this in any greater detail than is done would require another essay.

6. MacCabe, C. 1974 'Realism and the Cinema' *Screen* 15,2

7. MacCabe, C. 1976 'Principles of Realism and Pleasure' *Screen* 17,3

8. MacCabe 1974 p.16

9. ibid p.24

10. MacCabe 1976 p.25

11. Williams, C. 1980 *Realism and the Cinema* p.163

12. MacCabe, C. 1974 p. 15

13. For example,
Seve, L. 1975 *Marxism and Human Personality*
Seve, L. 1978 *Man in Marxist Theory*

14. Apart from MacCabe 1974 and 1976 other examples of this Screen position include, as already mentioned, Heath 1974, Coward and Ellis 1977 and Hindess and Hirst 1977.

15. Willemen, P. 1978 'Notes on Subjectivity' *Screen* 19,1

16. Garnham, N. 1979 'Subjectivity, Ideology, Class and Historical Materialism' *Screen* 20,1

17. ibid p.121

18. ibid p.121

19. ibid p.122

20. ibid p.123

21. Willemen 1978 p.55-7

22. MacCabe 1974 p.12

23. See the debate in *Screen* on the political progressiveness of realism provoked by the transmission of the 4 'Days of Hope' filmed plays.
McArthur, C. 1975/6 'Days of Hope' *Screen* 16,4
MacCabe, C. 1976 'Days of Hope - a response to Colin McArthur' *Screen* 17,1
Tribe, K. 1977/8 'History and the Production of Memories' *Screen* 18,4
Caughie, J. 1980 'Progressive Television and Documentary Drama' *Screen* 21,3

24. Harvey, S. 1982 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties' *Screen* 23,1

25. Lovell, T. 1980 *Pictures of Reality*

26. ibid p.87

27. Harvey 1982

28. ibid p.52

29. Lovell 1980 p.95

30. MacCabe 1974 p.16

31. ibid p.16

32. Caughie 1980

33. ibid p.?

34. McArthur 1975

35. Caughie 1980 p.34

35. Woolf, J. 1981 *The Social Production of Art*

37. Leonard, P. 1984 *Personality and Ideology*

38. Barrett, M. 1980 *Women's Oppression Today*