

I. Introduction and Definitions (Chapters 1 and 2)

In Ideology & Fiction: Resisting Novels, Professor Lennard Davis argues that the novel - a historical, distinct literary form - is fundamentally defensive and ideological. As such, Davis suggests, the novel is not necessarily worthy of the “unreflective praise” (p.5) that society normally bestows upon it. Instead, the form should be recognized as mass media and “resisted” as an agent of larger social and political progressions (markedly Freudian and Marxist in color) towards narcissism¹, objectification, and reification.²

In defining “resistance,” Davis differentiates between the political and the psychological, noting that the two share an inverse relationship. Political resistance stimulates change by collectively rejecting political power structures. Psychological change, in contrast, stifles change through the individual’s opposition to accurate analysis.³ Davis expressly advocates political resistance to the novel (p.19) and the overcoming of psychological resistance (p.22). His overall goal is not to discourage the reading of novels, but rather to encourage a sort of awareness, a “ self-conscious enjoyment of all that comes within [their pages]” (p.23).

Davis uses the term “defense” in the broad psychological sense: a “defense” is a habit that individuals generate in response to psychological pressures. As Davis explains, “defenses are frequently the nodal points by which humans make contact with reality and buffer that reality” (p.11). The category “defenses” is thus broad enough to include adaptations that are harmful, helpful, or both. According to Davis, we read novels because they formally cater to potentially harmful psychological defenses like projection, identification, and denial. As a result, novels (in general) enable individual, psychological resistance and consequently stifle collective, political resistance.

Of course, the relationship between the individual and the collective is more complicated than the term ‘inverse’ implies because the latter grows out of the former. That is, collective ideas and feelings grow out of the ideas and feelings of individuals. Then, as soon as collective ideas and feelings take presence, they in turn shape the ideas and feelings of individuals. Articulating this paradoxical process is at least part of the business of ideology— a concept and term that Davis uses “[in all] the confusion and richness of its current meanings” (p.15).

Rather than summarizing the dense and lengthy chapter in which Davis traces the history of the term (Chapter 2), it is simplest to use Davis’ own definition of ideology as

¹ Here used as the inability to distinguish “between the inner world and the outer, [the] self and other” (pp.4).

² Here used primarily as a process of depersonalization, usually by way of commodifying people and/or commercializing experiences.

³ As an example of this second type of resistance, Davis points to Freud’s description of how a patient resists personal change by *repeating* defensive explanations of their behavior, rather than *remembering* what actually happened. As Davis points out, a similar sort of repetition takes place in the reading of pre-structured novels (pp.18).

“public ideas wedded to collective and personal defenses” (p.15). In a general sense, ideology here means any belief system or system of signs that produces meaning for a particular group (p.15). In a more particular sense, Davis understands ideology as a group of collective and personal defenses that, though helpful in the short run (such as the uplifting belief in industrialized countries that any person can become wealthy by working hard), can be potentially harmful in the long run because they can neutralize legitimate pressures for social change (such as gross financial inequality) (p.15).

Ultimately, Davis wants to suggest that the novel form operates ideologically by playing to readers’ psychological defenses. Consequently, novels blunt our awareness of potentially harmful social and political processes and decrease the likelihood that action will be taken and positive change achieved. The book is organized into chapters, each of which takes a formal aspect of the novel and shows how it operates ideologically. The final chapter considers the ‘political novel’ and the argument that at least politically-minded novels stimulate positive change. Each chapter will be summarized in turn.

II. Location (Chapter 3)

In Chapter 3, Professor Davis argues that the novelistic depiction of space is ideologically grounded in a group of social and historical processes. Making this argument requires that Davis both articulate the distinct, historical characteristics of ‘novelistic space’ and also make ideological links between those characteristics and social changes taking place at the birth and throughout the development of the novel.

Davis believes that what separates the novelistic space from earlier depictions of space (e.g. depictions in travel literature or military histories) is primarily its depth or thickness (p.53). That is, while earlier depictions usually describe a place with inventory-like descriptions of the symbolic or actual objects that make up a space, novels use language to create “interior spaces” that can be manipulated by both the novelist and the characters. So in the early novel Robinson Crusoe, Davis sees Defoe’s formal description of the island change from that of the pre-novelistic inventory to a more detailed description of “interior space” that Crusoe can use and claim (pp.60-88).⁴ In these descriptions, Davis finds ideological reflections of the middle-class’s emerging desire to own and control property. This seems to Davis conclusive evidence that the authors of novels are (perhaps unintentionally) engaging and promoting the socio-psychological process of commodification. He also finds that the more detailed descriptions of land increasingly convey historical and ideological meaning. Location, that is, becomes an ideological “transformation of terrain” (p.85). So in Crusoe, for example, extended descriptions of the island usually accompany the protagonist’s lectures on the value of hard work or the superiority of the English (p.82).

Likewise, in the later novels of Eliot, Austen, and Dickens, Davis finds descriptions of place reflecting the nineteenth-century notion that “property had to be [ideologically] justified as well as justly gotten” (p.88). As Davis explains:

Elizabeth Bennet has *not* to care about money in order to get it. Pip suffers for wanting it. Heathcliff gets it and is thought less of for his methods, as are

⁴ It is tempting to read Robinson Crusoe as infusing with ideology because it’s *subject matter* concerns the claiming of space. It is Davis’ claim, however, that the novel is ideological in sheer *form* alone.

Bullstrode and Lydgate. Bleak House dissolves on the struggle for money.
Property needs justification (p.88).

In these later novels, descriptions of place (typically cities) almost always convey ideological meaning about social, political, or moral matters. The interest in controlling property that was present in earlier depictions of space now becomes imbued with a concern over just dessert. By describing places in this manner, authors create places that are “known unknowns” for readers: places that are actually unknown but which take on meaning and become knowable as authors artificially shape them into ideological or historical messages. Davis also stresses that at a certain point these descriptions “take on a life of their own,” becoming to readers even more ‘real’ than their physical counterparts (p.91).⁵ Here it perhaps becomes clear that novels not only reflect ideological meaning, but in a strange way come to embody it.

III. Characters and Narrators (Chapter 4)

In Chapter 4 Davis argues that characters in novels are necessarily simplified personalities that, through their simplification, make ideological statements about “the role of the individual in relation to society since the early modern period” (p.103). Davis focuses on readers’ general tendency to indiscriminately ‘identify with’ a range of central characters and also on the typical traits of central characters in novels: beauty, passivity, and an “ability to invite identification.” He eventually shows that authors represent the ‘knowing’ of characters - not their ‘being’ - and that readers ‘know’ characters in novels differently than they know real people. As a result, the simplified, purposeful characters in novels send the ideological message that personality is understandable, changeable, and important. At the same time, the readers’ relationship to the narrator creates a sense of belonging that breeds passivity and conformity.

Davis wants to stress that the very idea of character is itself ideological (pp. 107,120). That is, aside from the specific traits of novel characters that Davis focuses on (listed above), the notion “that personality can be reduced and summarized into an orderly and coherent set of known features and that a fairly simple and understandable change in thought can produce a completely new set of social relations and outcomes” is itself powerfully ideological (pp.120-121). The creation of *any* central character, then, is ideological in the above-mentioned ways.

Character is also ideological as it specifically functions in the novel. Davis finds that central characters in many classic novels are physically attractive and well spoken, despite their social class. They are also generally passive and good. What these qualities have in common is that they attract readers and play to the defense of “novelistic identification,” a form of identification that differs from the psychological in that it “*precedes* the actual encounter” with the object of desire. As Davis explains, readers set out to desire (identify with) any and all central characters because “the form of the novel itself evokes identification” (p.127). Readers then desire characters just as they desire property: “controllable personality” becomes a simplified commodity through the process of novel reading (p.128).

⁵ This effect is of course especially evident in lengthy and widely read depictions like Dickens’ London or Hugo’s Paris (p.91).

This psychological process is complicated and Davis admits he can only briefly sketch its mechanics. In simplest terms, Davis believes that readers indiscriminately identify with characters in order to repetitiously create erotic objects with which they can form bonds without the anxieties and risks of real interactions. In a sense, then, characters in novels help readers convince themselves that the original Oedipal/Freudian displacement of the mother or father (from rival to object of identification) was “not so bad after all” (p.131). At the same time, novels make people feel as if they belong to a community of readers “that replaces the weakening bonds of family and society” (p.133). This personal defense is further supported by society’s tendency to herald the novel and all art for its ability to overcome alienation.

Davis believes that the character that readers most want to identify with is the narrator: a special character that is desired differently than other characters. Rather than desiring narrators as character-objects, readers want the narrator to desire *them*. Readers, that is, are passive in relation to narrators much as most central characters are passive in relation to plot (p.139). Consequently, narrators in novels need not possess qualities like physical beauty in order to be attractive.⁶ Instead, they command authority by appearing knowledgeable. But as with the indiscriminate desire for characters, readers will tend to trust or identify with narrators for no other reason other than that they are narrators. This is because characters and narrators *as sheer forms* enable readers’ personal and collective defenses simultaneously. As Davis explains the paradox:

We all share these beliefs, they are self-evident, any reader is therefore interchangeable with any other reader. At the same time, each reader is an individual who balks at the repressiveness of certain features of society. This *ur-community*, this ideological gathering, is false specifically because it is not based on individual or class interests but simply on the implied community of interests of novel readers. In reality readers will vary widely (p.148).

In conclusion, Davis believes that novels without desirable characters or authoritative narrators have more difficulty engaging readers. Conversely, the novels that are most widely successful are those that make readers feel as if they both individually relate to characters and also collectively belong to a group of novel readers. The use of character assures readers that the solution to social or political problems is individual and domestic. The use of narrative universalizes individual experience, resulting in a pleasing sense of belonging. Working in tandem, the two formal aspects of the novel discourage readers from ‘real’ social or communal involvement and encourage passivity.

IV. Dialogue (Chapter 5)

In Chapter 5 Davis shows that dialogue in novels operates ideologically by objectifying language. He focuses on the single fact that conversation as represented in novels is in no way similar to real conversations. After proving this by comparing novelistic conversation with transcripts of real conversation, Davis asks why people desire to be heard in the novelistic or “commodified mode” (p.171). Why, that is, do people prefer speech that is controlled, grammatical, and isolated from real interaction over speech that is democratic, ungrammatical, repetitious, and communal?

⁶ Note, though, that both characters and narrators usually must be well-spoken.

Ultimately, he finds that readers enjoy “spoken prose” (p.168) in novels because it avoids the reciprocity and anxiety of real conversation. By reading conversations rather than taking part in them, readers avoid the awkward initiation and closing of real conversation. Moreover, readers do not themselves have to worry about participating in conversation and so avoid the anxiety of turn-taking and trying to successfully communicate a mentionable. At the same time, though, they come to depreciate the democratic and communal purposes of real conversation and objectify language as a symbol of class and education.⁷ As Davis puts it, “speech thus becomes not an occasion for *what* is said, but for *how* it is said...Speech becomes display” (p.182). As such, dialogue in novels helps to create a class of the “linguistic elect” (p.189) that becomes superior by speaking rather than acting. As Davis concludes, “Giving language a priority over action also distracts from involvement in actual social conditions, defends against alienation, and reinforces the individual against the group” (p.189).

V. Plot (Chapter 6)

In Chapter 6 Davis argues that plot in novels is different from plot in other literary forms and therefore ideological. In particular, Davis believes that the novelistic plots differ from earlier plots in that they are more original, structured, commodified, and ‘teleogenic’. These qualities are all linked together by a general social progression towards capitalism and the mass market.

Davis believes that plot in literary forms preceding the novel were often considered communal property. So, for example, in the Homeric period, the plot of The Iliad belonged to everyone and bards produced songs from that collective social fabric. Likewise, early folktales were told by storytellers who freely borrowed and repeated plots; storytelling was a sort of “communal work” (p.201). Here storytelling was not art, but a craft (p.201, citing Walter Benjamin).

At the birth of the novel, however, authors had changed from communal storytellers to artists. Consequently, authors had to prove themselves by using increasingly complicated and original plots. Around the same time, stories themselves began to focus on the individual self (rather than the community) and English copyright laws began to recognize property interests in literature (pp.201-203). Plot, in general, became a sort of object that celebrated the self but also alienated the individual from the community.

Contrary to popular opinion, Davis believes that this increasing commodification of plot actually makes novels less realistic than earlier literary forms. That is, although most novels strike us as intuitively more probable or ‘realistic’ than, say, a folktale, they are in fact more alienated from the community and from shared, “lived experience” (p.203). As a result, plots become commodities “divorced from life” that are “designed to make themselves necessary to life, in the way that commodities always do” (p.203).

Davis also finds that novelistic plots evolve from the causative, episodic movement of older forms to the teleogenic (meaning “generated by their end” [p.206]). He describes the teleogenic plot as “not simply refer[ring] to plots that reveal a secret at the end,” but all plots the end of which “revises and justifies” the earlier parts. So, for example, in Tom

⁷ Of course, authors participate here (innocently) by perpetuating the elaborate, literary speech on which their careers rest. They do this in a variety of ways, such as making their ‘best’ characters the most literate or expressive (p.176).

Jones, “misinformation transforms the middle of the novel, as when one realizes that Tom is making love to his mother” (p.208). This broad effect can be seen in nearly all novels, though Davis focuses on the particularly dramatic and obvious uses in detective fiction where the reader has to constantly decipher the text in order to predict the ending (pp.209-210). Davis also distinguishes the teleogenic plots in novels from those in earlier forms by noting that in drama and theater the audience usually knows the ‘hidden’ endings. He pads his argument by conceding that the widespread use of teleogenic plot did not ‘come from nowhere,’ but rather evolved out of earlier uses (p.211).

The novelistic, teleogenic plot peaked around the same time as Europe was changing its attitude towards history. Davis argues that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Europeans had begun to understand history as “having a plot that could be organized through narrative” as opposed to being “determined by destiny or fate” (p.214). As history itself came to be seen as malleable, people scrambled for a way to conceptualize an agency of historical change. It is here that Davis sees plot working ideologically: “plot normalizes behavior and naturalizes change so that it appears more a feature of the individual than it does a social and progressive aspect of history and politics” (p.217). By necessarily focusing on individual rather than group change, then, plot comes to serve as a replacement for historical agency. Ironically, though, plots in novels represent choices and changes that the reader has absolutely no control over. Rather, the reader is only superficially involved as the follower or decoder of the teleogenic plot. In this manner, the novelistic plot operates defensively by blunting the readers’ awareness of their participation in larger social and political processes.

VI. ‘The Political Novel’

In his short final chapter, Davis considers whether the novel form “can ever be used for progressive purposes” (p.225). Though he concedes that novels can operate progressively on the level of content or subject matter (as in overtly political novels like Dickens’ Hard Times or Morrison’s Beloved), Davis holds on to the argument that the form of the novel is fundamentally conservative. That is, as long as an author uses characters, dialogue, plot, and setting, the novel will almost always function in accordance with personal and collective defenses despite any overt progressive message.

Davis admits that some novels have had direct revolutionary impact, but he considers them “only the smallest fraction” of all novels (p.227). He also admits that novels can make readers angry by representing social or political situations as unacceptable. He argues, however, that such “anger does not amount to a political response.” Rather, it is a “reading response” (p.229). Again, only the smallest fraction of readers will be inspired by only the smallest fraction of novels to take action in a way they would not have without the reading.

Davis suggests that some other forms of representation are more capable of being involved with the human community (e.g. the theater or the fairy tale), but knows that such forms have other defects. He also seems pessimistic about the ability of popular film and television to inspire political action (p.235-236). In the end, he seems to consider his study more a call to reform the novel than anything else. As he concludes, “political resistance begins with awareness,” (p.238) and both readers and writers are capable of changing the text.