

Illusions and Realities in the Film *Green Book*

From the Perspective of Ideology

Xiaoxuan Wang

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign studies, Guangzhou, China

Abstract—Film, from Louis Althusser's standpoint, serves as one of the powerful ideology state apparatuses in the form of popular culture and mass media, to achieve the effect of interpellating the individuals as subjects, and constructing imaginary identity. This paper, based on specific theories on ideology, especially that of Althusser's, tends to analyze the ideology issue in the Hollywood film *Green Book* (2018), including what kind of ideologies the film fabricates, how it fabricates them, and what kind of ideology such fabrication gives away. Through scrupulous exploration, this paper maintains that by narrating the reconciliation story between the American white and black, *Green Book* actually aims to disseminate to the audience specific ideologies in class, race and the American nation, in order to console the masses and dilute the social conflicts. Yet, besides the ideology desired by the film, there is "an ideology behind ideology" the film betrays.

Index Terms—film, *Green Book*, ideology, Louis Althusser, popular culture

I. INTRODUCTION

In his famous essay "Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses", Louis Althusser points out eight kinds of ideology state apparatuses in a society, which "include religion, education, the family, trade unions, the mass media and popular culture" (Strinati, 2004, p. 139). Therefore, film, as one forceful form of popular culture and mass media, functions as one of the powerful ideology state apparatuses. The Hollywood film, *Green Book* (2018), having won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2019, is no exception. Through telling the story of the reconciliation between the white chauffeur Tony and the African-American pianist Don Shirley, *Green Book*, this paper assumes, manages to disseminate to the audience illusory but consoling class, racial, and national ideology, accordingly producing a series of illusory class, racial, and national representations. Yet besides such an overt ideology the film expects the audience to receive, the film expresses "an ideology behind ideology". Therefore, by employing specific theories on ideology, especially Althusser's ideology theory, this paper attempts to analyze and discuss the desired ideology *Green Book* produces for the audience and the hidden ideology it holds, and how it constructs the ideologies.

II. THE ILLUSORY REPRESENTATIONS IN *GREEN BOOK*: IDEOLOGY THE FILM WANTS TO DISSEMINATE

According to Althusser, ideology "as a system of representations" (Althusser, 2005, p. 231), is "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971, p. 162). Therefore, through such representations, "the function of ideology state apparatuses is just to establish an almost perfect and imaginary relationship between the individuals and their real conditions of existence" (Dai, 2004, p. 187). What's more,

Ideology provides a global imaginary picture where every individual can legitimately position himself/herself, and finally accept his/her current position. Hence, the problems the individuals encounter in reality will be imaginarily solved in ideology, and every subject can mirror himself/herself in an ideal image in such ideology and thus get soothed in it (Dai, 2004, p. 187).

Ideology functions through what Althusser calls "interpellation". According to Althusser, ideology "exists only by constituting concrete subjects as subjects" (Althusser, 1971, p. 173), and this process constituting concrete subjects as subjects is interpellation. And the way through which ideology interpellates individuals as subjects is mirror recognition. In watching the film, the audience, like the infant who misrecognizes himself complete and mature as his mother in the mirror, identify themselves with the represented film images and thus are interpellated as subjects by the representations.

The film *Green Book*, as a concrete entity of the ideology state apparatuses, just produces a series of illusory representations for the individuals according to their class, racial conditions and finally the nation's conditions. By dint of these representations, the film interpellates the individuals, makes the individuals accept the presented ideology, and eventually makes them be pacified in their real life.

A. Illusory Class Representations in *Green Book*

In *Green Book*, the ideal and illusory class representations are mainly produced through the "working-class Tony image". The white chauffeur Tony Lip, who is of the working-class people in the American society, is depicted as a man who leads a very happy, satisfying and even carefree life, and this "happy and carefree Tony" image is primarily established by showing his touching and harmonious family life and his casual way to treat both life and people around

him.

In the film, Tony shows up as an ideal hard-working breadwinner who lives with his big family and has two cute children and a beautiful wife. At the beginning of the film, Tony is just shown losing his job in the saloon. After a whole night's work, tired and disappointed, Tony drags himself home before dawn. Though having gone through many unhappy accidents and lost his job, Tony manifests no upset or discontent. When he returns home, before his eyes is a family in sound sleep, filled with love and peace. He kisses his kids and wife as if nothing has happened, and even in a humorous tone he and his wife greet each other with "good night" and "good morning" because Tony always comes home quite late due to his job. Here, in those scenes where Tony is home, the background music is quite brisk, the light quite soft, though a little bit dark. The music and light work together to romanticize and warm the family atmosphere. Therefore, though with no real "happy" thing happening, with the warm family life picture, the brisk music and the soft light, the film at the very beginning shows the audience Tony's enviable and harmonious family full of love and understanding, unwittingly erasing the pressure and mess a no-job working-class man is going to face. Additionally, when Tony is asked to leave home for two months for work's sake, the film gives a close-up shot to the sad facial expression of Tony's wife to suggest the deep affection between them: it is so hard for them to separate. When Tony is about to start the working journey, his wife demands of him with a strong attachment and also witty tone that "You better be home for Christmas or don't come home at all!" (Farrelly, 2018), and Tony's father adds to the conversation: "He who arrives late has no bed" (Farrelly, 2018). In short, by highlighting the movingly intimate relationship among the family members, employing romantic music and light, and also light tones, the film manages to construct a working-class man's happy satisfying life. There is no upset or unpleasant scene in this working class family. As a result, such a harmonious family life picture lets the working-class individuals temporarily forget their problems in reality and enjoy the happiness of Tony's as their own. Based on the above illusory representations, the ideology here produced and disseminated to the audience is that the working-class people in America live a pleasing life, and that though having not a high or legitimate income, they still can live happily, and that they have what the higher class has, or, has not: a beautiful and thoughtful spouse, bright and cute children, and at last a happy and solid family.

In addition, apart from the happy family life picture, the film also provides an imaginary emotional outlet for the working-class individuals, allowing for the aggravated class conflicts arising from the increasing economic inequality and wealth disparity in American society. In *Green Book*, the working-class Tony is delineated as a person afraid of no authority and no big shot, adept at handling all kinds of problems and having quite an unruly lifestyle. When confronting a rampaging bigwig who shouts to him "you know who I am?" (Farrelly, 2018), Tony punches him directly in the face with no fear and hesitation. Afterwards, when Tony is informed that "The guy you hit. Mikey Cerrone. Part of Chailie the Hand's crew" (Farrelly, 2018), Tony shrugs his shoulders and says "Guess he shoulda known better" (Farrelly, 2018), behaving apparently as somebody. When his families speak of his loss of job in the sanitation department and comment on his act to punch out the foreman, Tony replies only in quite a casual and carefree manner: "He shouldn't have woke me up" (Farrelly, 2018), and the whole family then laughs and says "This is Tony" (Farrelly, 2018). Besides, at the end of the film, it is revealed that Tony, an unemployed working-class bodyguard, at last becomes the hero who assumes the responsibility for saving Don Shirley and achieving racial reconciliation. Hence, by representing the working-class Tony as rebellious, confident, fearless and capable, the film produces for the working-class audience an illusory vision and ideology that the working class is of great importance in American society, and lets the working class's anxiety, pressure and even indignation get released.

However, different from what is represented in the film, when the film is produced and on in 2018, America is still experiencing the increasing wealth disparity and tense class conflicts: while the few privilege-class people are getting richer and richer, the majority of the citizens in American society are getting poorer and poorer. Therefore, by providing the above illusory class representations, the film interpellates the audience as the subjects, makes them mirror themselves in the film through Tony and thus misrecognize themselves as Tony to feel and experience what Tony feels and experiences. Consequently, the audience, the individuals the film interpellates, will be enchanted with the represented beautiful class illusions, and will tend to be oblivious of the real plight they are in and which needs to be changed.

B. Illusory Racial Representations in Green Book

The racial relationship between the American whites and the African-Americans has always been a significant issue in American society. The conflicts between the two races have never disappeared in the society. Thus, to appease the discontent or even outrage of the African-Americans, and to thaw the relationship between the whites and the African-Americans, *Green Book* also presents corresponding illusory racial representations to distract the audience's attention from the still severe racial conflicts, and to construct the illusion of racial equality and peace.

Green Book distracts the audience's attention from the existent racial problems first by shaping the fresh and apparently different "Don Shirley image", granting African-Americans considerable significance. In *Green Book*, the pianist Don Shirley subverts the stereotypes of African-Americans of being poor, rude, uneducated and underprivileged. Being an outstanding pianist, Shirley holds three doctorates in Psychology, Music and in the Liturgical Arts, and has performed in the White House twice. When Shirley at first appears in the movie, he wears ornate robe and walks into the room like a king. The house he lives in is filled with precious antiques and collections. Hence, the first striking feature of this "Don Shirley image", being rich, is at once established. Then, as the movie goes on, when the elite-class

Shirley interviews the working-class Tony as his chauffeur, a low-angle shot is given to Shirley, while high-angle shot to Tony. It should be noted that in film, low-angle shot usually “suggests power and privilege of subject” (Lynn, 2005, p. 54), while high-angle shot “suggests smallness and vulnerability of subject” (Lynn, 2005, p. 54). Before the concert journey starts, Shirley is shown as a superior employer: telling Tony what he needs is a valet; ordering the servant to cover the blanket for him... Therefore, the apparent power relation here presented is that Shirley is superior to Tony—an African-American is superior to a white. In addition, different from Tony’s casual and even rude manners, Shirley keeps elegant all the time. His choice of words, and his careful behavior and so forth all signify his good breeding, and the African-American Shirley even teaches the white Tony how to behave. When Shirley is conducting his concert in Raleigh North Carolina, he is treated definitely as an important person and distinguished guest. Thus, the air of superiority, dignity and importance is what Shirley impresses and conveys to the audience. When watching the movie, the African-American audience will put themselves in Shirley’s place and form a specular image of themselves from the “Don Shirley image”. Finally, by interpellating the African-American audience so, *Green Book* throws them in the ideology that the African-American group, like the white, enjoys equal treatment, opportunities and importance.

Through the progression of the story, Tony gradually gets rid of his racial discrimination towards African-Americans, and Shirley and Tony at last build up deep and touching friendship. The movie ends with Shirley’s Christmas in Tony’s family where Shirley hugs Tony and his wife, which implies to the audience that the African-Americans and the whites in America have achieved their reconciliation, and gotten along with each other like families. Moreover, during their return at the snow night, a policeman, different from the former ones who deliberately obstruct Shirley, helps them fix the car, and most importantly, greets them and gives sincere wishes to Shirley and Tony. It is worth noting that the police is an important public agency of a country. Therefore, this scene of the snow-night returning is of significant metaphorical meaning, and the ideology disseminated here is that America, the State, is the faithful and powerful defender of racial equality.

As a result, by the above representations of racial equality and reconciliation, *Green Book* imaginarily solves the intensified racial problems in the audience’s minds.

C. Illusory National Representations in *Green Book*

Drawing on the above class and racial representations, *Green Book* eventually constructs a grand Utopian picture of how happy and beautiful it is to live in the United States of America. By offering the representations of the gratifying life of the working class, *Green Book* has the individuals vision a country where all classes are in their proper place living happily; by providing the representations of the friendly racial relation, and the distinctively superior African-American, *Green Book* makes the individuals experience the imaginary racial peace and equality. More importantly, by representing the fluid journey of racial reconciliation, the film represents America as a great country which keeps progressing in the chequered history: though having a dishonorable past, this country has the bright present and future that surpass the past.

In the film, when Shirley is detained maliciously by the racist police, Shirley calls the brother of the American president, the Attorney General of the United States Bobby Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy gives immediate response to let the police release Shirley and Tony. This scene conveys the illusory ideology that even the senior government authority attaches great importance to the citizens and that the individuals are protected and taken seriously. The moment Bobby Kennedy gives the response call to the police, a piece of slow, warm and moving background music begins to ring, and Shirley and Tony’s faces are lit up immediately, oozing extreme happiness and pride, ceasing being desperate. Here a great, strong and radiating image of the country is at once erected. And through the African-American Shirley’s mouth, the film inculcates the audience with the ideology that “that man and his brother are trying to change this country” (Farrelly, 2018). And the scene where the policeman helps change the tyre is composed of mellow light and slow lyrical music. In company with the gorgeous snow drifting around, all these conspire to create an affecting sentimental atmosphere, and signify the happiness and warmth of living in this country. At last, the film interpellates the audience as subjects to be uplifted and proud of their country.

In addition to the dominant plot, the film presents magnificent landscapes of America as the setting. With the help of the lines, *Green Book* constructs a gorgeous image of America, and interpellates the audience to feel so and proud of it: “I never knew how beautiful this country was. Now that I am seeing it I know. You wouldn’t believe how beautiful nature is. It is as beautiful as they say” (Farrelly, 2018); “when I think of you, I am reminded of the beautiful plains of Iowa” (Farrelly, 2018). At the end, the movie ends with a busy, happy and warm Christmas night full of love and harmony, and the black and white celebrate Christmas together, indicating a country which is open, diverse, tolerant and happy. Thus, through all these representations, the individuals are interpellated to be proud of America and to exclaim: it is so great to live in the United States of America!

Nonetheless, “the function of ideology is often an effect of lies” (Dai, 2004, p. 189). “Ideology, like religion, is only capable of providing the individuals with a sort of illusion, a false consciousness produced for the individuals to seek a sense of psychological security” (Ji, 2005, p. 51). Therefore, in this sense, the representations *Green Book* provides are just what Althusser labels as “pure dream, empty and vain” (Althusser, 1972, p. 160). The sense of satisfaction and security the individuals derive from the movie is just a specular misrecognition. “What the representations reflect is not objective reality. Instead, it usually contradicts the reality and is only the individuals’ own imagined reflection in the ‘film mirror’” (Peng, 2008, p. 23). Behind the illusory beautiful Utopian picture are the bony reality and a deeper

ideology the film hides.

III. IDEOLOGY BEHIND IDEOLOGY, REALITY BEHIND ILLUSIONS AND IMAGINATIONS

A. *Behind the Subverted Stereotypes: the White the Savior; the Black the Saved*

Beneath the mask of subverted stereotypes and racial equality, *Green Book* still unconsciously gives away its hidden ideology of the white supremacy. Though outwardly Shirley is the dominant employer who possesses more power than Tony, in the core of the movie, Shirley is still the weaker side in the relation to Tony who plays the role of a leader and savior in the movie just as he is the driver who steers the car to lead Shirley around. At the very beginning of the movie, a low-angle shot is given to Tony to shape him as a big hero. And throughout the movie, Tony is portrayed as a tactful, brave and capable man full of masculinity, while Shirley is obedient, timid, and even self-abased. In the relation of the two guys, Shirley is always the one who needs Tony's help and rescue. It is Tony who saves Shirley from all kinds of troubles: when Shirley's hit and obstructed in the white pub, it is Tony who confronts the racists bravely and saves Shirley from them; when Shirley is detained by the police due to his affair with a white man, it is Tony who valorously argues with the police for Shirley; when Shirley comes across robbery out of the black pub, Tony protects him from being attacked. What's more, it is Tony who leads and helps Shirley to get closer to his ethnic culture and changes him in his attitudes to both the white and the black community. Through the journey, Tony is not simply a driver, but more importantly the life guider and protector of Shirley, who teaches Shirley enjoy life, learn about ethnic culture and encourages him in his music career: "Trained? What are you? A seal? People love what you do. Anyone can sound like Beethoven, or Joe Pan or them other guys you said. But your music, what **you** do... Only **you** can do that" (Farrelly, 2018).

To put it briefly, the white Tony is shaped as an active and capable savior to redeem Shirley who is passive, helpless and needs to be protected and taken care of. In the movie, Tony even shouts to Shirley: "From now on you go nowhere without me. Nowhere! Got it?" (Farrelly, 2018). Besides, the real power relation between Tony and Shirley is fully expressed in the scene where Shirley drinks lonely in the black hotel. In this scene, Tony, given a low-angle shot, gazes down at Shirley from upstairs, demonstrating obviously a savior's sympathy and worry, and Shirley is utterly presented as a passive isolated and helpless man by a high-angle shot. And here rings the only piece of sad music in the movie to emphasize the helplessness of Shirley. Even worse, in order to highlight the mightiness of the white savior and the necessity of the white's saving, *Green Book* deliberately exaggerates the internal conflicts within the African-American group and Shirley's alienation from it. For example, in the black hotel, Shirley refuses to join his fellow people's activity and then his fellow people feel offended and annoyed by Shirley's refusal and more importantly by his superior air he exhibits. What's more, during the interval when Tony is fixing the car in the journey, Shirley comes across a group of his fellow people farming the land laboriously and they immediately cast eyes of incomprehension on Shirley, making him look like an isolated alien. All these draw the audience's attention from the conflict between the white and the black to the internal conflict within the African-American community, and justify the white's saving. Hence, through such character construction and presentation of power relation, the ideology hidden in the core of *Green Book* is still of white supremacy, which is that the white is the dominator and savior, and the black needs to be saved and protected.

B. *Fig Leaf of Racism: Excuses for the White, Interpellation for Non-Violence of the Black*

In *Green Book*, one detail needs paying close attention to: throughout the movie, it is the white Tony who gives the racists the hardest attack with his fists. Every time Shirley encounters unfair treatment, it is Tony who tackles it for Shirley. By displaying such a representation, *Green Book* foists considerable white efforts into the Civil Rights movement. Besides, the movie, from time to time, makes efforts to exculpate the white group. Every time Shirley is confronted with racial discrimination, Tony shows extreme astonishment and incomprehension. When Shirley is refused to try on the suit, Tony casts considerably confused eyes on the salesperson; when Shirley tells Tony he is forbidden to play white classical music on the stage, Tony gives an extremely astonished "why?" In a word, every time seeing or hearing Shirley encounter unjust treatment, Tony acts like an absolute innocent outsider: the racist deeds have nothing to do with him. Besides, when Shirley complains to Tony about racism, Tony's reply is: "Why you sore at me? I don't make the rules down here. Oh! You saying just 'cause I am white and they are white? You know, that's a very prejudice thing you just said there. A very prejudice thing" (Farrelly, 2018). Yet it is worth attention that at the beginning of the movie, Tony throws into the trash two glasses used by the colored maintenance men in his house. This scene shows that Tony is never an "innocent" white having nothing to do with racism. Hence, these lines are stark excuses for Tony and also other whites, especially the other white racists. They transfer the white racists' fault to the black, and make it the black's prejudice. Through these lines, and Tony's behavior, *Green Book* interpellates both African-American and white individuals: for the whites to believe it is not their fault because for the whites watching the movie in 2018, they surely did not participate in person in the racial segregation and other racist activities, and can excuse themselves just like Tony; for the African-Americans, it is not the whites' fault because they surely did not participate in person in the racist activities. But if it is not the whites' fault, and not the blacks' fault, then whose fault is it? Is there still any fault? What's more, through Shirley's mouth, by interpellating the African-Americans to recognize Shirley, the film convinces the African-Americans to give up forceful fight: "so that little temper tantrum...was it worth it? You never win with violence, Tony. You only win when you maintain your dignity" (Farrelly, 2018).

As a consequence, *Green Book*, by interpellating the individuals as subjects to identify with the characters, excuses the white, mitigates the racial conflicts, and prevents the black from violent protest through its hidden ideology, in order to consolidate the society.

IV. DILUTED HISTORY, BEAUTIFIED REALITY

The story of *Green Book* is set in 1962 when the problem of racial segregation is really severe in the deep south of America, and when the Civil Rights movement is on. Though set in such a grieving historical period, narrated with a grave racial theme, the film *Green Book* tells a pretty relaxing, pleasant and bright story. The journey Tony and Shirley experience is quite thrilling and exciting. In spite of a few unhappy episodes, the journey is overall full of laughter and warmth. The moving friendship between Tony and Shirley distracts the audience's attention from that painful history.

Furthermore, the film utilizes a great many practical cinematic techniques to dilute the history and romanticize the reality. First of all, the film is presented as a "road movie" with overt comic elements. According to Chinese scholar Li Bin, such a consoling road movie, "heals the pain of the individuals, achieves the effect of psychological therapy and the redemption of people's soul" (Li, 2013, p. 49). Therefore, with the healing effects and comic elements, *Green Book* indulges the audience in a sea of pleasure and in forgetting the history. Besides, both the background music and the hue in the movie make the audience feel warm and pleasant. The background music in the movie through the journey, besides one piece, is always brisk, bright, and at last emotional, while "Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, 'Come and weep, my child.' It is catharsis for the masses..." (Strinati, 2004, p. 63). Consequently, by the deceptive music, *Green Book* interpellates the audience in a healing atmosphere and makes the grave history behind ignored. Another technique to dilute the history behind is the film's composition. When expressing the warmth of the country, an almost perfectly symmetrical composition and a Golden Mean of the scene are used with the romantic snow night setting, while when the slogan about the racial segregation rules appears, it is arranged in the corner beyond the T-shaped area of the screen, given that "objects of attention will normally be placed within T-shaped area of the screen" (Lynn, 2005, p. 53). Thus, by selectively presenting the country's image through certain techniques, the painful history is marginalized, and the reality is beautified.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the film *Green Book*, through the journey of racial reconciliation represented by the white Tony and the African-American Shirley, by providing illusory class, racial and national representations, inculcates certain ideology in the individuals, and interpellates the individuals as subjects to get satisfied with their status quo, and thus functions to soothe the masses in a society inundated with conflicts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author owes a debt of gratitude to Professor Zhang Pinggong who provides so much careful instruction and encouragement during the writing of this paper, and also the author's best friend Wang Ping who always gives her the sweetest love and support throughout her academic studies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Althusser, L. (2005). *For Marx*. London & New York: Verso.
- [2] Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses. In L. Althusser (Ed.), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (pp. 127-186). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- [3] Dai, J. H. (2004). *Film Criticism*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [4] Farrelly, P. (2018). *Green Book*. Universal Picture.
- [5] Ji, G. M. (2005). *Ideology*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University.
- [6] Li, B. (2013). Distinguishing the Genre and Interpreting the Values of "'Chicken-Soup-for-the-Soul' Road Movie". *New Films*, (6), 48-51.
- [7] Lynn, A. (2005). *Appreciating Cinema*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [8] Peng, Y. M. (2008). The Ideology of Film and the Ideological State Apparatus. *Movie Literature*, (16), 23-24.
- [9] Strinati, D. (2004). *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.

Xiaoxuan Wang was born in Shandong, China in 1997. She is currently conducting her third-year study in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and her research orientation is English language and literature. Her former academic outcomes include one article published in *Home Drama*: "Identity Construction in the 'Third Space' Illustrated by the Movie *Green Book*", and two research projects including a provincial one.