How to Measure an Ideology

Evan Wm. Cameron

Professor Emeritus
Senior Scholar in Screenwriting

Graduate Programmes,
Film & Video and Philosophy

York University

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Testing Predictions

Filmmakers make predictions and act upon them when making movies, almost as ordinary mortals would do. Screenwriters, designers, directors, cameramen, actors and others say to themselves, unceasingly though rarely consciously , 'I am going to do this rather than that, because, if I do so, the results will be as I anticipate.'

Their predictions accord often with maxims of craft or rules of thumb relied upon commonly by workers within the art (for example, 'Avoid plots without crises'; 'Avoid unfocussed images'; 'Avoid theatrical gestures'; 'Avoid cutting images to the beat of the soundtrack'; and other suggestions gross or subtle.)

Theoretical Context

Whether or not the filmmakers are aware of it, their predictions are frequently entailed by one or another of the theories of film design by which a few of us attempt recurringly to explain the success or failure of past predictions of similar scope and substance.

Predictive Problems

Questions do arise, however, whenever the predictions of filmmakers prove inaccurate (for example, what choices ought rather to have been made?), or whenever disagreements arise between contending parties to a filmmaking decision (for example, what choices ought now to be made?). Such questions raise deep philosophical issues – among them the deepest extant.

Hume's Horror

For example, whatever justification can a filmmaker have for expecting his singular predictions to prove true? None whatever, as Hume showed. When push comes to shove, no one is justified in expecting the future to be as anticipated – even when not filming on location.

Relevance of Theories

If we agree, however, that it is wiser (that is, more rational) to act in accordance with our best-tested conjectures about the world than to act in defiance of them, then we may also agree that a filmmaker may often distinguish among alternative singular predictions by choosing among alternative theories that support them differentially, for theories can often be tested in the present, even if the bulk of the singular predictions that they entail cannot be tested until well into the future.

Theories

How is it that theories can often be tested in the present, whereas most of the singular predictions that they entail cannot be tested until the future rolls around and either confirms or disconfirms them directly?

Truth or Falsity Unknowable

Theories, unlike singular predictions, entail universal conjectures: they assert (by logical inversion) that something or other does not exist – neither now, nor in the past, nor in the future. As such, theories can never be known to be true, for somewhere in the universal block of spacetime a counterexample may have occurred, be occurring, or will occur of which we are currently unaware.

Neither, however, can they be known to be false; for were we to find a counterexample, we could never be certain that what we had found was indeed a counterexample. To apply a theory to the world, we must first describe part of that world to which we are applying the theory – and we can never be sure that our description is accurate. No description, however comfortable, is ever unequivocal; hence not theory can ever be known to be false.(To test the theory `All swans are white' against birds in the world, for example, required firstly that scientists encounter birds that they could unequivocally describe as `swans'; unsurprisingly, when some scientists found the first black swans in Australia, most other scientists took the theory to be as yet unrefuted on the grounds that the birds that the first scientists had encountered could not have been swans!)

Testable Nevertheless

Because they entail that something or other does not exist, theories may differ testably in their ability to cope with the world as we currently experience and understand it. Anomalous events may exist for one theory that are explicable by competitors.(c.f., Eddington's experiment, 1917: as a result, we knew neither whether Einstein's theory of gravitation was true or Newton's false; but we did know that an anomaly existed for Newton's theory that did not exist for Einstein's.)

Hence Comparable Nevertheless

Although we cannot therefore know whether a theory is true or false, we may at least be able to determine that one theory cannot currently cope with the world as well as another can, for one but not the other may face a crucial anomaly.

Normative Consequences

Hence, if we are to act rationally as filmmakers (to act, that is, in accord with the best-tested conjectures we have about our world), we ought to act in accord with those theories that currently cope best with the world (i.e., are least anomalous with it.)To act otherwise would be to act contrary to the best-tested conjectures we have.

So What?

So far, so fair. What does all this have to do with ideology?

Taxonomies

Theories, our only testable (and hence rational) general guides to conduct, must be expressed within languages. Every theory, that is, must be articulated within some one or another system of predicates – within some one or another taxonomy (that is, descriptive classification scheme).

Inconsistent & Incomplete

A taxonomy may be inconsistent with itself, and hence may be radically inapplicable to any world. Even if consistent, a taxonomy may be more or less incomplete and hence descriptively inadequate.

Universally Applicable; Neither True nor False

No taxonomy, however, even if consistent and reasonably complete, could be true or false of the world. For any consistent and adequate taxonomy must be applicable to the events of the world come what may. (Physicalism, for example, or phenomenalism or any other of the ontological taxonomies within which competent metaphysicians have construed the world.)

Ideologies

An ideology, generously construed, is a taxonomy that is ethically, socially, religiously, or politically biased. Or, put gently, it is a system of predicates by which to describe the world whose key terms express simultaneously approval or disapproval of the objects or events described. ('Capitalists' versus the 'proletariat' to classical Marxists, for example, or 'elect' versus the 'non-elect' to classical Calvinists, 'seduction theory' versus 'infantile sexuality' to classical Freudians, or 'rigorous film analysis' versus 'non-rigorous film analysis' to classical publicists of the Harvard University Press are terms or blocks of terms by means of which aspects of the world are be described and simultaneously applauded or denigrated.)

Universally Applicable; Neither True nor False

An ideology, if consistent and reasonably complete, may be applied to the world come what may; for any adequate taxonomy must be so applicable. Consequently:

Refutation Impossible

No ideology need fear refutation by any event encounterable anywhere by anyone. An ideologue may expect with assurance to describe – in hindsight – any event whatever within his or her ideology, if he or she proves to be sufficiently clever and persistent. Analysis post hoc is assured. (Whatever any psychoanalytic session may encompass, for example, it will be accurately describable in hindsight within any of the reasonably complete psychoanalytic taxonomies – as Freud discovered to his chagrin when Adler and Jung began to rehash the 'clinical evidence'; similarly, whatever sociopolitical events occur in the world during the next twelve months will be accurately describable in hindsight within any of the reasonably complete sociopolitical or religious taxonomies – whether Marxist, capitalist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, astrological or other.) Hence:

Predictively Useless

Ideologies are useless as tools of prediction. An ideology may always be used to describe in hindsight whatever in the world has fallen within the range of its predicates; but since its predicates must be compatible with whatever may occur in the world, they alone can have no predictive power at all.

Untestable

Ideologies, being predictively powerless, are untestable, for testability requires matching predictions against occurrences. The non-testability of an ideology is its saving virtue (albeit a self-destructive one), compassed about by dangers on every hand. Let's speak firstly of the dangers, and then of self-destruction.

Dangers of Ideologizing

Ideologizing (interpreting past or present events in terms of an ideology) may easily mislead practitioners if the scope and limits of the enterprise are not clearly understood.

Non-Explanatory Analysis

An ideology is unpredictive, for, as an adequate taxonomy, it must fit over the world come what may. Ideologizing (analyzing an event within the terms of an ideology) can therefore have no explanatory value whatever, despite appearances (!), for any current or past event interpreted within an ideology could have been interpreted within that ideology regardless of its nature – and hence its nature cannot have been explained by the analysis given.

Reclassifying contra Explaining

The sense of enlightenment to which ideologues attest when confronted by a past or present event newly reclassified may be genuine enough: the event may indeed now be `seen differently'.(Religious `conversion experiences' , for example, are often genuine.)If so, however, the enlightenment results from the jolt of reclassifying – from newly noting the fit twixt taxonomy and event – and not from any explanatory power inherent in the reclassification. Only predictive tools (theories, for example, that discriminate between alternative possible states of the world) can have explanatory value in hindsight; reclassifications, however startling, can have none whatever.

Immunizing

A clear and present danger, therefore, is that practitioners will mistake reclassifying (that is, analyzing non-predictively) for explaining, and take so much pleasure in the joy of seeing the world reconstrued under their predicates that they (effectively) immunize themselves from noticing that they are thereby failing to explain anything.

Immunized Ideologies

Converts to ideologies, for example, are commonly so taken with the newly-noted ability of their ideology to encompass everything that they fail to notice that the ability to analyze everything is equivalent to being unable to explain anything. One can `explain' everything that happens only if it makes no difference what happens – and that means only if your schema is unpredictive, and hence unexplanatory. The ability to analyze anything, come what may, is a measure of explanatory irrelevance, not power.

Self-Destructive Virtue

The sole virtue of an ideology rests paradoxically on the fact that it encompasses a taxonomy that is useless predictively (and hence useless explanatorily as well).

Expressing Theories Within

The predicates that an ideology encompasses may be reconstrued, if we are properly disrespectful, as a taxonomy non-biased with respect to the way the world is, and may then be used to express theories that are testable independently of the sociopolitical bias of the predicates themselves.

Reclassifying Usefully

Reclassifying an event may therefore be unprejudicially useful – but only if the reclassification leads one to construct within it new and more powerful theories (or testable historical conjectures that entail theories) than have been articulated within competing taxonomies.

**An Example from
the History of Musical Composition**

The distinction between taxonomies, ideologies, and the theories constructible within them, and the inherent dangers of immunizing through ideologizing, will be apparent to anyone familiar with the history of musical composition in Europe from the end of the Middle Ages.

Notation & Descriptive Terms

A system of notation developed gradually into a reasonably-adequate taxonomy within which to describe possible sounds, supplemented by linguistic descriptions capable of describing complex notational structures ('madrigal', for example, or 'motet', 'figured bass', 'tritone', 'parallel octaves', etc.).

Theories & Maxims

Within the taxonomy, testable theories were developed that supported maxims of musical design ('Avoid parallel fifths', for example, or 'Avoid parallel octaves' or 'Avoid the tritone').

Ideologizing & Immunizing

Gradually, however, the terms within the maxims become ideologized by the Church. The maxims lost their theoretical support and became untested admonitions. (Violations of the maxims were prohibited because the resulting music would be unsanctioned, not because it would be necessarily less pleasing to the ear.) An ideology reigned, safely immunized.

Theorizing & Experimenting

Only when composers of genius began to defy the ideology, and to reconstrue it as a taxonomy within which theories could be constructed and tested by experiment, was the spell of immunization broken. Only when music was produced in violation of the maxims, and heard fairly prior to adjudging its musical worth, could the theoretical and explanatory content of the maxims be reintroduced into western music.

Measuring Ideologies

We may now answer the title question of this essay: how may competing ideologies be measured?

By Explanatory Consequences or Analytic Power? No!

Having no predictive power, and hence no explanatory power either, competing ideologies cannot be distinguished from one another by explanatory effect. Nor can they be measured for comparative analytic power, for any reasonably complete and consistent ideology may be fit over the world as neatly as any other, if one is clever and determined enough.

By Generated Theories? Yes, but only if Self-Destructive

We may, however, compare two ideologies by comparing the predictive power of theories generated within them (insofar as the theories are of comparable scope).To consider a theory couched within an ideology, however, is to consider the ideology as a taxonomy only. Or put otherwise, it is to reconstrue the ideology as if it were bereft of those sociopolitical biases that make it ideological.

De-Ideologizing

It seems, therefore, that ideologies may be compared with one another (and thus rendered intellectually useful) only to the extent that we are willing to construe them non-ideologically – as taxonomies rather than ideologies.

Cinematic Experiments

Films are not only sometime-works of art, commercial products, political tools, ego advertisements, etc.. They are also the experiments by which observant and careful filmmakers test the theories that undergird the maxims that guide their predictions. Tested theories are the only guide by means of which a filmmaker may decide rationally among alternative and problematic filmmaking choices; and completed films are the experiments against which such theories must be tested.

As a teacher of screenwriting and film design, I am therefore compelled to isolate, compare, and generate theories that can better serve my students as rational guides to practice within the problem-solving context of contemporary filmmaking.

Ineffectual Ideologies

My disenchantment with current ideologizing rests upon the above considerations, and is continually reinforced by the startling absence of theories generated within the current ideologies that are as testable and powerful as the classical theories (couched in ideologically neutral terms) that have guided film practice for the past 50 years.

Minimal Hope

It is quite possible that theories of interest await articulation within one or another of the current ideologies – perhaps theories that would be difficult to express as succinctly in other terms. Until such time as ideologues get to work, however, and generate theories that can compete with the best-tested theories we now have as filmmakers, no filmmaker need take them seriously.

Conclusion

As filmmakers, we urgently need testable conjectures by scholars concerning the history of our art, for therein lies the record of the experiments that have determined its present horizons; and we need new and better theories about the scope and limits of our art itself, for therein lies the source of future innovation.

All the rest is chatter.