Key Terms and Concepts for the Cultural Analysis of Films

Popular Culture and American Politics

American Studies 312
Cinema Studies 312
Political Science 312

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**Antagonist**  The principal character or characters shown in opposition to the protagonist in a film narrative. Usually, though not always, the antagonist is shown as a villain conflicting with the hero or antihero. Groups, impersonal social forces, society as a whole, and corrupt institutions (sometimes symbolized by individual characters) commonly are antagonists in films that extol the antihero as a protagonist.

**Antihero**  The protagonist in a film with whom the viewer associates, but who possesses nonheroic and weak qualities not traditionally belonging to heroes. The antihero tends to be an alienated and isolated character with clear human frailties. He or she manifests a private code of ethics, which compels them to conflict with society. Film tends to glamorize antiheroes, despite their antisocial persona, as the true heroes in a world of corrupt values and hypocrisy. Indeed, frequently films show the antihero as a romantic rebel—more sinned against than sinning.

**Cinematic politics**  The images of American politics and government that emerge over time from feature films. These images reflect and affect popular fantasies and myths about the competition for and use of power in society.

**Classism**  The stereotyping of individuals and groups based on socioeconomic position and status. In America, this is heavily based in occupation, wealth, and education. While not as stratified and as rigid as many other Western cultures, class distinctions and the discrimination and prejudices they produce are an important feature of American life—producing class tensions and conflicts strongly reflected in our politics.

**Culture**  The value system of a group, community, and nation that is passed from generation to generation. Culture consists of a network of norms, rules, processes, and institutions through which people define, organize, conduct, and evaluate the meaning of life.

**Fantasy**  Images of life that define the world as people imagine and wish it to be—rather than as it literally exists. Fantasy is the use of the imagination to project our deepest aspirations, desires, hopes and fears onto our environment and the people within it. Films rely upon, indeed they tend to exploit, dominant cultural fantasies to attract and satisfy mass audiences.

**Film genre**  A particular kind, sort, or style of film. It is a form with certain conventions or patterns that, through repetition, have become so familiar that viewers expect similar elements in works of the same type.

**Film narrative**  The chronological or linear construction of a story. It is the storyline of the film.

**Film subtext**  The complex structure beneath the narrative in films that evokes certain associations in the audience and thereby creates greater meaning for the character, action, or story. Films tend to have two dimensions: first, there are the images projected onto the screen; second, there are the meanings projected from the screen. The second dimension is created by the intellectual and emotional connections made by the audience with what they are watching.
**Hero**  An object of admiration and respect based on the possession and use of socially defined virtues. The purpose of heroes is to make sense, explain, and give meaning to human existence and experience. Heroes tend to be the center of myths and are taken as examples of how a person should be if they are to be worthy of emulation, respect, and prestige in the culture. In stories, such as those presented in films, the hero commonly is a person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who risks or sacrifices his or her life for others or a cause.

In recent years films increasingly feature the *anti-hero*, reflecting a deep sense of frustration, cynicism, and even despair associated with the loss of cultural innocence and a sense of widespread corruption among traditional groups and institutions.

**Hero’s Adventure/Journey**  In myths the hero takes a journey that tests character and courage. The reward for completing the adventure is knowledge about self and life that is denied those who do not undertake the journey. The hero’s adventure is a metaphor for life itself: human beings are defined over time by how they respond to the challenges, dangers, temptations, and heartaches that comprise the human condition. *The hero’s adventure is life.* What makes a person heroic is how and why he or she lives life and the quality of the choices made in life. The mythical hero’s journey is not for the mere aggrandizement of the hero. The ultimate aim of the hero on the adventure is the wisdom and power to serve others. The celebrity (the merely famous person) lives for self, the mythical hero acts to redeem others, sometimes an entire community.

In mythical stories, the hero or heroine finds or does something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself. The moral objective of the hero is that of saving a people, or saving a person, or supporting an idea. The hero sacrifices himself or herself for something—that’s the morality of it. Joseph Campbell once said: "Our life evokes our character." Hero’s adventures evoke their character and by the end of the adventure, regardless of what they were like at its beginning, they now are worthy of respect, admiration, and emulation.

By studying heroes and the heroic in a culture—especially why and how they are rewarded, indeed if they are rewarded, one gains insights into the deepest values of a people and their way of life. The modern age has been very hard on myths and heroes. Most especially it has tended to drift away from the mythical hero and his/her adventure. Instead, we seem to be drifting toward the celebration of power, fame, fortune, and self-expression—often for no higher purpose that vengeance.

**Icon**  A widely recognized pictorial representation of a complex subject. Icons are images that tend to be universally recognized to stand for certain ideas, values, or activities. Cultural icons commonly are invested with an aura that makes them worthy of uncritical veneration.

**Image**  A *reproduction* of the form of a person, object, or an event; it is not the person, object, or event itself. It is a mental picture of something not real or present. *Technically,* an image is an optically formed duplicate, counterpart, or other representative reproduction of an object—especially an optical reproduction of an object formed by a lens or mirror. *Culturally,* it is the concept of something that is held by the mass public. It is the essential nature and character of a
person, object, or event, which is projected to the public--especially as interpreted by the mass media.

**Metaphor** A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison. A metaphor suggests what something is like by comparing it to something else.

**Myth** A dramatic, complex, socially shared image of the world that explains life according to what people believe, or wish were true, rather than what actually happened or really exists. Myths are fantasies that endure over time. They are passed from generation to generation in narratives. Myths help people, groups, and entire cultures make sense of and endure life. The purpose of mythology is to ensure that, as closely as possible, the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past; it is a means by which humans create connections with past and future generations. Films, thus, can provide important information as to the change and continuity in cultural values insofar as they employ myths in their narratives.

**Myth of the American Dream** The central myth of American culture is that life will be more prosperous, free, secure, and meaningful for each succeeding generation. The American Dream is that the good life is attainable for all those who come to these shores, sacrifice for their children, and live by the rules of the culture.

**Myth of the Classless Society** The myth that, in America, individuals are not bound or limited by the socioeconomic class of their parents. Whatever socioeconomic distinctions exist can be overcome by talent, hard work, and making the “right” life choices. This myth is related closely to the myth of the American Dream in which individuals and groups can overcome hardship and adversity in an open and free society; i.e. individuals and groups can overcome adversity and low socioeconomic status in life through virtue and hard work. It includes the notion that, in American society, individuals are judged based on their individual character and behavior rather than on their parentage and class.

**Myth of American Exceptionalism** The myth that America is different, better, and plays a unique role in world history. It is rooted in the notion that America is a land of destiny and has been ordained by God (or perhaps simply by fate) to model and shape the future of the world. It holds that America has a special moral place in international politics because we formed the world's first mass democracy. According to the myth, America bears a special burden to promote and preserve democracy everywhere.

**Myth of Redemptive Love** The myth in which a loving act or series of acts, requiring risk and sacrifice, saves and cleanses a person or thing. It especially involves the act of love that saves the life, soul, or spirit of another person or thing--often either by dedicating one's life to the service of others, or of giving up one's life so that others may live.

**Myth of Redemptive Violence** The myth in which a violent act or series of acts, requiring risk and sacrifice, saves and cleanses a person or thing. It involves violence which is justified because it directly, clearly and irretrievably serves a greater good.
myth of redemptive violence is that killing and destruction on behalf of a "higher cause," or to right an ancient grievous injustice, or to rid the world of evil is justifiable and cleansing. Heroes who partake of redemptive violence typically are on a journey in which their souls (less often their lives) are saved; i.e., the violence redeems them through its redemption of others.

**Political choice** The expression of preferences and decisions over who gets what (and who does what), how, and when in a society.

**Political culture** The network of attitudes and beliefs that orient people and groups to politics and government. Every nation seeks to impart norms and values to its people (such as patriotism, nationalism, obedience to authority), and the people in turn have distinct ideals about how the political system is supposed to work, about what it may do to and for them, and about their duties and obligations. It is the distinctive ways in which Americans think and act toward political objects and government. Political culture comprises the psychology of a nation in regard to politics. There are three major components of a political culture: (1) beliefs about the proper role of government in the society; (2) attitudes toward the political institutions of the state; (3) the degree to which citizens feel they can influence and participate in political decision making. National symbols and myths play an important role in political culture, providing a basis for national unity, pride, and identification.

**Political socialization** The process by which we acquire ideas and images about our political selves and the political world. This is how the political culture of a nation is taught, learned, and passed from one generation to another. During the socialization process children and adolescents acquire the beliefs, values, manners, and rules that often last for a lifetime. While people are socialized throughout their life, our most fundamental orientation to the culture transpires before we attain adulthood and our later learning largely is mediated by what we acquire as children and adolescents. The major traditional agents of socialization in America are the family, the school, peer groups, and government. The mass media, especially television, have in recent years emerged as a ubiquitous and powerful socialization agent.

**Politics** The struggle over who, gets what, how, and when in a society. It includes the competition for the attention of, and influence in, government.

**Popular culture** Those aspects of a culture that are readily available and commonly known by virtually everyone in a culture. Commonly, popular culture is an activity of entertainment (movies, television, newspapers, magazines, sports, popular music, art and literature) in which significant segments of the population participate--if only as consumers or an audience. Popular culture is a pervasive influence in American life, although its impact is often subtle and unrecognized. It is the thesis of this course that popular culture both shapes and reflects our images of the world, thereby inevitably affecting our individual and collective political choices. Most especially, we contend that popular culture increasingly is a predominant agent for political socialization. Thus, much of what we know about the political world, and how we act toward it, is influenced by what we learn from popular culture.

-- Key Concepts for Popular Culture Analysis --

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**Protagonist** The main character or characters in a film. This is the figure with whom the audience is expected to identify and sympathize as the narrative unfolds. In most films, the protagonist is presented as a hero or an antihero.

**Public discourse** Our political, religious, informational and commercial forms of conversation. It is that conversation in which members of society engage in public communication about their collective lives.

**Public Sphere** The area of social life in which individuals and groups engage in public discourse. Increasingly, the public sphere is shaped by the electronic mass media rather than face-to-face personal contact. Recent technological innovations such as the personal computer and the Internet appear to be revolutionizing the shape and nature of the public sphere—decentralizing what the mass media had centralized and broadening participation in previously inconceivable ways.

**Resonance** When a particular statement or action in a film strongly affects members of a film audience. When something resonates it creates a sense of personal, and often mass, identification with what is projected onto the screen.

**Ritual** The repetitive and consistent activities that have complex social meaning beyond their immediate physical or literal meaning. The function of ritual is to give form to human life. Rituals often define important points in the passage of life, defining, teaching, and reinforcing important cultural values. Rituals provide a means of conferring membership, position and status for an individual in a group or society.

**Socialization** The process by which we acquire ideas and images about our culture and the world around us. This is how the culture of a society is taught, learned, and passed from one generation to another. During the socialization process children and adolescents acquire the beliefs, values, manners, and rules that often last for a lifetime. While people are socialized throughout their life, our most fundamental orientation to the culture transpires before we attain adulthood and our later learning largely is mediated by what we acquire as children and adolescents. The major traditional agents of socialization in America are the family, the school, peer groups, the neighborhood, community, and government. The mass media, especially television, have in recent years emerged as a ubiquitous and powerful socialization agent.

**Symbols** Objects that have complex social meaning beyond their ordinary physical or literal meaning. Symbols often evoke a powerful emotional response when used. An icon is a particular type of symbol.
**Teen Genre**  A style of films (most often a comedy) made for and about adolescents presented from the teen perspective. They rely heavily upon adolescent fears, resentments, and fantasies. These films include stock characters (such as prom queens; jocks; nerds; rebels) engaging in a variety of high school rituals (e.g. pep rallies; the big game; classroom antics; hazing; parties). Recurring themes in this genre are coming of age, individual liberation from group oppression, and rebellion against indifferent, abusive, and tyrannical adults. All this with a heavy dose of sex, drugs, and rock n roll!

**Villain**  A wicked or evil person or thing, usually in opposition to a hero or antihero in a film. A villain is someone, or sometimes something, shown as the cause of a particular trouble or evil. It usually is someone who plots the serious harm of another. Over the past half-century American culture has fluctuated dramatically in the socially defined values that constitute the villainous. That is to say, our cultural notions of right and wrong, moral and immoral appear to have changed. By studying villain’s and the villainous in a culture – especially why and how they are punished, indeed *if* they are punished, one gains insights into the deepest values of a people and their way of life.