Handbook for the Cultural Analysis of Films

American Culture and the Teen Genre

Popular Culture and American Politics

American Studies 312
Cinema Studies 312
Political Science 312

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A Brief Guide to Film Analysis

Overview: This course inquires into the ways by which social and political meanings are generated through popular culture. We study how the American way of life and its system of values are revealed through Hollywood feature films. In particular we focus on how films generate images of significance in our culture.

A film is a series of interrelated visual episodes (connected images) that tell a story. In this course we study the film as a cultural artifact. That is, we systematically analyze Hollywood feature films because these constitute an important vehicle for producing and reproducing images of cultural significance. In this sense films inevitably to some degree reflect and affect the culture within which they are produced and consumed.

Film Composition: As a series of connected images that tell a story, a film is analogous to a book. Like a book it is composed of sentences (shots), paragraphs (scenes), and chapters (sequences).

A shot is a single continuous take, filmed in a single session from one camera setup. The basic grammatical unit of the language of film, a shot may range from a single frame taken from a fixed position to a setup involving complex camera movement. A scene is a complete unit of film narration. A scene consists of a series of shots (or less frequently a single shot) that take place in a single location and which deal with a single action. A sequence is a number of scenes linked together by time, location, or narrative continuity to form a unified episode in a motion picture. It is often likened to a chapter in a book, the scene being the equivalent of a paragraph and the shot the equivalent of a sentence. Traditionally, but not always, a sequence begins with a fade-in and ends with a fade-out or some other optical transitional device (Katz, Film Encyclopedia). A montage is a series of shots arranged in a particular order for a particular purpose. In a montage sequence, the shots are arranged so that they follow each other in rapid succession, telescoping an event or several events of some duration into a couple of seconds of screen time.

Viewing films in this class: In this class a film begins when the screen first lights up, or when sound begins, whichever comes first. A film ends when the screen finally darkens or the sound ends—whichever comes last. It is impossible to know how all of the choices are made in a film, but a film is intended to begin and end with an image. Remember, we study all of the images in a film to determine their cultural significance. Thus, the logo representing the studio that produced the film, the maintitles (which provides the film's title and may well contain opening credits), and the end credits (which sometimes contain dedications and additional scenes) potentially are important parts of the film and subject to our analysis. A film contains thousands of images. How do we know which ones are the most important for our purposes? Which shots, scenes, and sequences reveal the cultural significance we seek? Only time and experience this semester will entirely answer this question. But, for now, here are some rough guidelines to get you started in your analysis. As you screen the film focus and take notes on:

- Opening and closing shots in a scene
- Unusual or striking shots in a scene
✓ Opening and closing scenes in a sequence
✓ Opening and closing sequences in the film
✓ Dialogue that stands out in revealing character and values
✓ The appearance of symbols in shots and rituals in scenes
✓ Characters who are protagonists and antagonists—especially heroes and villains and the actions that identify them as such
✓ In the film narrative and subtext, identify how and why certain characters, groups, and institutions are portrayed as successful and unsuccessful, good or bad
✓ How objects of our political culture, especially institutions and authority figures, are represented
✓ How men and women, different races and nationalities, social classes and roles, are portrayed.

Attending to these details will allow you to read the film and employ it for cultural analysis purposes.

**Basic film study questions:** The information derived by focusing on film details and cultural concepts should provide answers to three basic questions: (1) How do those who produced the film employ cinematic technique to create the overall images and meanings in the film? (2) What American fantasies and myths does the film employ? (3) What does the film reveal about American culture and if successful—how is it likely to affect American society?

**Some practical advice:** Take notes as the film progresses. Don't just let the film wash over you in the darkness as we usually do when we are viewing the film for entertainment. You must concentrate and learn to observe details that are ordinarily absorbed, if at all, subconsciously.

Above all remember it is not enough this semester to be able to summarize a film's plot and identify its major characters. We are looking for the elements of film composition that provide significant images of our culture. The biggest cultural indicators may be found in the smallest details. Be patient. Initially it tends to be difficult and frustrating to view films in this way. But, it gets easier with practice and hard work. Also, intelligent and perceptive people disagree about compositions as complex as films. We see different things. We interpret things differently. That is why we will discuss the films in class.

A final warning—-it is a serious mistake to rely on so-called expert opinions about what a film means for our purposes. View the films yourself and think about them. Feel free to consult any source about them. I encourage you to view these films with others and to talk about them. Just don't let others do your thinking for you!
American Culture and the Teen Genre

Course thesis: It is the thesis of this course that feature films—especially since the advent of cable television, videos, and DVDs, occupy such a large portion of the time and attention of the youth culture in America that Hollywood movies are becoming a major element in shaping the identity and world view of the next generation. We will test this thesis by systematically studying the Teen Genre of films. Our primary concern is whether teen films, taken as a whole over time, tend ultimately to support or subvert key aspects of American culture.

Hollywood Films and Teenagers: Why is the critical analysis of teen films worth serious concern? First, Hollywood films as an artifact of popular culture have always had a particular attraction for youth. The young have always been an important audience for film producers. The employment of movies as a vehicle for youth socialization has been quite obvious—much of the censorship produced by the Film Code was justified by the tremendous effect movies were assumed to have on impressionable adolescents. It was widely thought in the 1920s, and many today continue to believe, that the teen years constitute a critical period in the path to adulthood and membership in society. This is because adolescents are thought to be especially insecure and vulnerable in these years. Further, once fundamental values are established in adolescence, they will shape the life that follows. During these critical developmental years, tensions between adolescents and adults are inevitable and if left unresolved will produce generational conflict and discontinuity—thereby threatening the stability of the society. Thus, Hollywood film producers traditionally viewed teenagers as a reliable source of money and as a social responsibility!

There are reasons to believe that films are growing in their influence as a socialization agent for American youth—teens especially:

1. Film is a powerful and attractive medium that plays well to adolescent dreams, fears, and fantasies;

2. Affluence has made the youth market a reliable major source of income for film producers—especially when it ties into other popular culture artifacts such as rock music, music video, and video games which typically play heavily upon the anxieties, fantasies, and myths of teens in particular. Thus, emergence of the Teen Film as a distinct film genre. It is a type of movie devoted to exploiting the youth market;

3. Other socialization agents (especially the family, church, and school) have weakened as coherent and predominant institutions. Increasingly, teen images of themselves, their communities, and American life generally are shaped by films rather than direct interaction with adults in traditional community settings.

4. Parents and other adults are less inclined, active, and able to censor what young people view in theaters and at home, which removes an important mediator for film messages and images.
Thus, our study focuses on how Hollywood socializes adolescents with a particular type of film. Michael Medved, in his controversial book *Hollywood vs. America*, has argued that Hollywood over the last generation consciously shifted from being a force (through its film and television productions) that supports mainstream American institutions and values to a force of subversion. This, Medved, contends has alienated the majority of adult Americans and significantly contributes to a growing cultural and moral pollution, which endangers the future of America. He is especially worried about the way in which Hollywood films “corrupt” America’s youth. Are Medved’s concerns well founded? By examining Hollywood films in the *Teen Genre* we should begin to formulate an answer to this important question and explore the implications of that answer.

*What is meant by the term “Teen Genre”?* Teen Genre – Feature films made for, about, and from the viewpoint of teenagers. These films feature a variety of high school rituals such as pre and post-school parking lot gatherings, boring classes, cafeteria cruelty, pep rallies and big games, proms, and graduation night parties. They feature unflattering images of authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and principles) typically ranging from the pathetic to the irredeemably evil. Great emphasis in this genre is placed on the loss of innocence, coming of age, rebellion against authority, and individual liberation from group and community oppression. These films are heavily laced with sex, drugs, rock and roll, and . . . sex!

*Teen Genre and Culture:* The teen genre tends heavily to reflect tensions in American culture. These tensions produce political divisions and conflict in American society. How these tensions are presented and resolved, or fail to be resolved in Teen films provide audiences with important images of our society and affect their socialization. Certain aspects of American culture tend to be supported and/or subverted in the Teen Genre—as are certain myths about American life. A myth is 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.
Glossary of Terms and Concepts

**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 non-heroic 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.

**Civil Society**  The set of voluntary social, economic, religious, and other non-governmental organizations that exist and occupy the community space between the individual and the state.

**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.

**Community**  A unified society in which human beings live together in harmony based on tradition, continuity, mutual respect and concern, and deeply shared values—often, but not always, religious in nature. A community is a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds. Historically, this involves a limited number of people in a restricted social place, held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation and commitment.

**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.

Individualism  The belief that the individual person is the basic social unit. Personal expression and choice rooted in individual freedom and self-regulation are social ideals. In moral and political decision making the rights and needs of the individual person are believed to take precedence over all collectives, such as the family, civil society, or the state. Competition among individuals is considered the driving force in society.

Materialism  Generally, the belief that all that matters is material welfare as opposed to spiritual or other ideals. It holds that property, money, and living standards are the foundation, purpose, and yardstick of civic life. It is based on the belief that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life.

Matriarchy  Literally rule by women—a society in which authority descends from female lineage. Often matriarchy is considered as a negotiation of power between the sexes as opposed to the patriarchal tradition in which the male makes all the important decisions for the family, group, and society.

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. The essence of the 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.

Pluralism  An emphasis on the group as the basis for individual identity and civic life. Competition among groups is believed to be the driving force in society and politics is produced by the interaction of powerful groups inside and outside of government.

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

Patriarchy  Literally, "Rule by the father;" a society in which the family, community, and society is governed by men with women held socially and politically in subservient positions. It produces the practice of granting primacy to fathers, sons, and men over mothers, daughters, and women.

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—including the proper degree of deference to authority and law; (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 society. 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—only as consumers or spectators. 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.

**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.

**Puritanism** The Protestant religious movement that shaped early America mythology as a path breaking republic and exemplary Christian society. Founded in New England it was produced by the search for religious and political freedom in the New World. In the 17th and 18th Centuries the Puritan vision of America as a divine experiment based on a covenant with God shaped the evolution of democracy. In the late 19th and early 20th Century, Puritanism became construed as a severe religious orthodoxy, which is sexually repressive, authoritarian, intolerant and oppressive.

**Racism** The belief that race accounts for important differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others. It tends to produce discrimination or prejudice based on race.

**Religion** An emphasis on the spirit and worship of God as a central feature of civic (i.e. public) life in which spiritual fulfillment is a driving goal. This feature of American culture historically emphasized the Judeo-Christian Tradition as the foundation of the good community and guide for the public purpose.

**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.

**Secularism** The belief that civic life can and ought to be detached from religious foundations. It includes the strong commitment to the separation of church and state as part of a society based on human reason and scientific knowledge rather than religion and divine guidance. Carried to an extreme, it can produce contempt, ridicule, and hostility to faith, religion, the religious, and religious institutions in a society.

**Sexism** Attitudes and beliefs that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender, especially discrimination against women.

**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.