Film Theory/Cultural Studies

Course Objectives: This seminar focuses on basic readings in film theory and cultural studies, with the goal of understanding the key principles associated with each theoretical movement and how these movements relate to each other. As much as possible, we will move chronologically in order to develop a sense of the relation between theory and history. We will also test each model we study by reading related criticism and watching films or videos that raise the issues it addresses. A few key films will be assigned early in the term and used as reference points throughout the seminar.

This seminar, first, should enable students to write about film and popular culture with a greater awareness of how the material qualities of any medium influence its aesthetic effects. Second, you will learn how all cultural works are shaped by contexts of production and reception. When you study texts identified with high culture, you will do so with an understanding of how the category of high culture is dependent on the category of popular culture, and the implications of that opposition. Finally, you will develop a heightened awareness of the assumptions and purposes that guide your critical work on any literary or cultural text.

While the seminar’s primary emphasis will be on theoretical approaches to the study of cinema, we will also work on how to do close readings of cinematic texts and how to conduct film-related research.

Class Procedures: The class will be conducted seminar-style, combining discussions led primarily by students with lectures by the professor. Each week, three students will be responsible for guiding the class through discussions of the readings and a close analysis of a film sequence relevant to the readings. Presentations on readings should include (1) a brief outline of key points; (2) questions for discussion; (3) relevant film clips or other cultural texts to demonstrate important concepts; (4) additional annotated bibliographical sources on the subject. The most successful presentations will generate critical thinking by establishing the stakes of each argument (why should we care?) and by relating the argument to earlier readings. Consult with me as necessary and inform the seminar at least one week in advance about films to be presented. We will make informal arrangements for screenings of the films.

You will also write a seminar paper due at the end of the term. You will choose a topic by Week 3 and turn in preliminary textual analysis by Week 5. The paper will be due Week 9 so that you will have the opportunity to make revisions and turn your final paper in during exam week.

Note: This seminar is intended to provide an overview of influential readings and ideas in cultural studies and film theory. Time will not permit us to discuss all of the assigned readings in depth. Some weeks, we will focus on only one or two, with the remaining readings providing important context. Also, we may adjust the syllabus as the seminar progresses to accommodate student interest.

Texts:

Recommended:


Additional readings will be available on Blackboard (BB). Many of those are taken from Hill and Gibson or from other anthologies on reserve.

1. Jan. 5 Introduction: Classic Concepts in Film Studies
   BB: Richard Dyer, “Introduction to Film Studies,” Hill and Gibson
   Robert Kolker, “The Film Text and Film Form,” Hill and Gibson
   B/C: V. Pudovkin, “On Editing,” 7-12
   Sergei Eisenstein, selections from “Film Form,” 13-34
   Sigfried Kracauer, “Basic Concepts,” 147-58

2. Jan. 12 Canons, Class and Cultural Value: Film as Art (or Not)
   Storey: Introductions, xv-5
   Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy,” 6-11
   F. R. Leavis, “Civilization and Minority Culture,” 12-19
   B/C: Introduction to “The Film Artist,” 445-49
   Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” 451-54
   Thomas Schatz, from “The Genius of the System,” 523-27
   BB: Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman”

   BB: Graeme Turner, “Cultural Studies and Film,” Hill and Gibson
   Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia”
   Storey: Introduction, 55-57
   Selections from Marx and Engels, 58-62
   Recommended:
   Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (BB)

Seminar paper topic due

4. Jan 26 Reading Images: Psychoanalysis and Semiotics
   Storey: Sigmund Freud, “The Dream-Work,” 246-54
   B/C: Christian Metz, selections from “The Imaginary Signifier,” 694-710
   BB: Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding”
   Recommended:
   Henry Jenkins on Reception Theory (BB)

5. Feb. 2 Permutations of Difference I: Gender and Feminism
B/C: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 837-48
BB: Molly Haskell, “The Woman's Film”
Astrid Henry, “Daughterhood is Powerful”
Angela McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture”

Recommended:
Janice Radway, from Reading the Romance (Storey)
Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’”

Textual analysis due

6. Feb. 9  Genre: Melodrama
B/C: Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” 552-63
Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess,” 764-73
BB: Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury”
Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised”

Recommended:
David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” B/C 774-82

10:45 Meet with Librarian Elizabeth Peterson in Knight Library

7. Feb. 16  Queer Theory and Stars
BB: Selections by Richard Dyer and Maria LaPlace on stars
Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, “How Reese Witherspoon Walks the Line”
Anneke Smelik, “Gay and Lesbian Criticism,” from Hill and Gibson
Alexander Doty, “There's Something Queer Here”
Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”

Handout: “Lead with Your Best Stuff, and Other Tips for Successful Academic Writing”

8. Feb. 23  Permutations of Difference II: Race and Ethnicity
Storey: bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 388-94
BB: Robyn Wiegman, “Race, Ethnicity and Film,” from Hill and Gibson
Jacqueline Bobo, “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers”

Recommended:
Clyde Taylor, “The Master Text and the Jedi Doctrine”

9. March 2  Empire and National Cinemas
BB: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, selections from Unthinking Eurocentrism

Recommended:
Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism”

10. March 9  TV, Postmodernism, Digital Culture: Into the 21st Century
Storey: Barbara Creed, “From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism,” 358-6
BB: John Hill, “Film and Postmodernism,” Hill and Gibson
Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”
B/C: Michael Allen, “The Impact of Digital Technology on Film Aesthetics,” 824-33

Recommended:
Chela Sandoval, “Fredric Jameson: Postmodernism Is a Neocolonizing Global Force”

Papers due
Readings on Blackboard

WEEK 1


WEEK 2

WEEK 3
Graeme Turner. “Cultural Studies and Film.” From Hill and Gibson. 193-199


WEEK 4
Stuart Hall. “Encoding, Decoding.” From During. 90-103.


WEEK 5


WEEK 6

**WEEK 7**


**WEEK 8**
Robyn Wiegman. “Race, Ethnicity and Film.” From Hill and Gibson. 156-66.


**WEEK 9**


**WEEK 10**

John Hill. “Film and Postmodernism.” From Hill and Gibson. 94-103.