Critical Theories & Methods
Reading About Film
Chapter 11 Sections

- Film & Media Studies are Interdisciplinary: Toolkit Approach
- Major Positions Classical Film Theory
- Key Schools of Thought in Contemporary Film Theory
Semiotics

- **1970s & Linguistic Theory**: describes cinema as a language. This approach describes the codes, conventions, and systems of films without relying on subjective evaluations.

- **Sign** = signifier (word) + signified (concept)

- **Referent**: a specific object to which a word refers in a particular situation/context.

- **Symbolic Sign**: a sign with an arbitrary relationship to its referents (ex. a word).

- **Iconic Sign**: resemble their referents (ex. films).

- **Indexical Sign**: signs have a direct causal relationship to their referents (ex. film, photography).
Structuralism

- French Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss: study of myths focused on their shared, basic structures, asserting that these structures shape our cultural lives.

- Limited number of character functions, plot elements, and plot events with predetermined orders.

- Narratology: a branch of structuralism that studies narrative forms. These theorists reduce narrative to its most basic form.
  - Classical Narrative Form: affirms values of middle-class culture, the agency of the individual, the transparency of realism, inevitability of status quo through identification, verisimilitude, catharsis, & closure.
  - Modernist Narrative Form: favors a more fragmented human subjectivity, a foregrounding of style, and an open-ended narrative.
  - Postmodern Narrative Form: Mixes and matches narratives and formal approaches.
Ideological Critique

- Argues against the naturalization of conventions and the mystification of how things work (derived from Marxist theory).

- Frankfurt School: The “Culture Industry,” via mass production, dupes its viewers, churning out movies with only superficial distinctions.

- French Film Theory & Ideology (1960s):
  - Study ideology (a systematic set of beliefs that is not necessarily conscious, “the imaginary representation of the real relations in which we live”) and its structures of representation in film to understand how people come to accept ideas and conditions contrary to their interests.
    - Films break with ideology in terms of form and/or content.
    - Films that seem to uphold the status quo but register, in their formal contradictions, the stresses and strains of trying to make the dominant ideology work.
Poststructuralism

- Questions the rational methodology and fixed definitions that structuralists use in analysis.
- Critique that asks us to reconsider the truths and hierarchies we take for granted.
- Stresses open-endedness of stories & refuses narrative closure.
- Questions structuralism’s assumption of objectivity and its disregard for cultural and historical context.
- Structuralism + Subjectivity = Poststructuralism
Psychoanalysis

- Draw on psychoanalytic theories to understand films and our viewing experiences.

- **Jacques Lacan:**
  - **Imaginary:** mental pictures, images.
  - **Real:** the domain of trauma that cannot be directly represented.
  - **Symbolic:** domain of language.

- **Mirror Stage:** human’s first recognition of itself in a mirror (also a mis-recognition cause by the illusion of reflection). Theorists liken this powerful and illusory moment to the experience of “believing” in a film’s world.
Film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry saw cinema as an ideological mechanism based on physical technologies, with the power to convince us that an illusion is real.

Apparatus Theory: explores the values built into film technology through its historical development.

Camera’s Monocular Gaze incorporates the values of human-scaled, Renaissance art, which posits the viewer standing at the point of perspective where lines converge.

Asserts that this position is not neutral, but embodies Western cultural values like individualism, possessiveness, and dominance of visual communication.

Poststructural Apparatus Theory: the cinematic orientation positions viewers to understand their own subjectivity or sense of self in this particular, predetermined way.
Spectatorship

- Munsterberg: explained the mind’s role in making sense of movies.
- Christian Metz: argues that film’s strong perceptual presence makes it an almost hallucinatory experience. Going to the movies gratifies our voyeurism.
- Screen Theory/Gaze Theory
Feminist Film Theory

- 1970s: Commentators discuss how male and female images are treated differently in film.

- Is “the gaze” male? (vision associated with ownership, power).

- Laura Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975): argues that psychoanalysis offers a compelling account of how the difference between the sexes is culturally determined. The woman onscreen is constructed as “other” because the act of gazing through the lens is masculinized. Stresses the ways that cinema depends on stylized images of women for its appeal.

- “woman as image/man as the bearer of the look”

- Political Psychoanalysis
LGBT/Queer Film Studies

- Critiques and supplements psychoanalytic and feminist theory, allowing for more flexible ways of seeing and experiencing visual pleasure beyond male/female heterosexual binaries.

- Also stresses the unconscious processes of desire and identification, but in terms of non-heterosexual orientations and spectatorship.

- Posits that the gender of an audience member need not correspond with that of the character he/she finds most absorbing.

- Although movies tend to conform to the dominant values of society, they also make unconscious appeals to our fantasies, which may not be so conformist. They leave room for viewers’ interpretations and appropriations. Spectators positioned at the margins “read against the grain” to find stories that have more relevance to their lives.
Cultural Studies

- Scrutinizes aspects of cinema embedded in the everyday lives of individuals or groups at particular historical junctures and in particular social contexts. It does not analyze individual films or theorize about spectatorship in the abstract.

- Studies how movies are encountered, understood, and “used” in daily experience.

- Topics: the way social background and education influence taste, legal decisions on censorship of films, how films are exhibited at a particular time/place, reception of particular films by particular groups at particular times, activities of film fans.
Reception Theory

- Focuses on how a film is received by audiences, rather than on who made the film or on its formal features or thematic content. Asserts that a film’s meaning is only achieved in its reception.

- Reception is active, not passive.

- Recognizes that films from the past may be viewed by today’s audiences in new ways.

- Cultural Identity, Interpretive Communities, Situated Responses

- Reception Studies deals with actual audiences rather than hypothetical audiences.
Star Studies

• Stars: performers who become recognizable through their films or who bring celebrity to their roles.

• Focused on 1) how stars’ images are composed of appearances, promotion, publicity, and critical commentary, and 2) how audience reception helps define a star’s cultural meaning.

• Stars become “texts” to be read and interpreted.

• We experience a star’s constructed image in relation to cultural codes (including age, race, class, gender, religion, fashion, etc.) and filmic codes (genre, lighting, costume, etc.)

• Star Studies are often the starting point for social analysis, explorations of how ordinary and extraordinary, and other attributes, are defined within a particular culture.
Race & Representation

- **Race**: socially constructed category based on historical experiences and valuations of perceived differences.

- **Representation**:
  - **Aesthetic**: describing or comparing depictions of race in one or several films.
  - **Political**: one person is understood to stand in for (represent) a group of people.

Identification across race is a fraught and often obligatory process for nonwhite viewers because of the historical lack of diversity onscreen. Cinematic history reinforces the assumption of a white (male), Western spectator-subject. In Classical Hollywood films, nonwhite characters are often relegated to the periphery.