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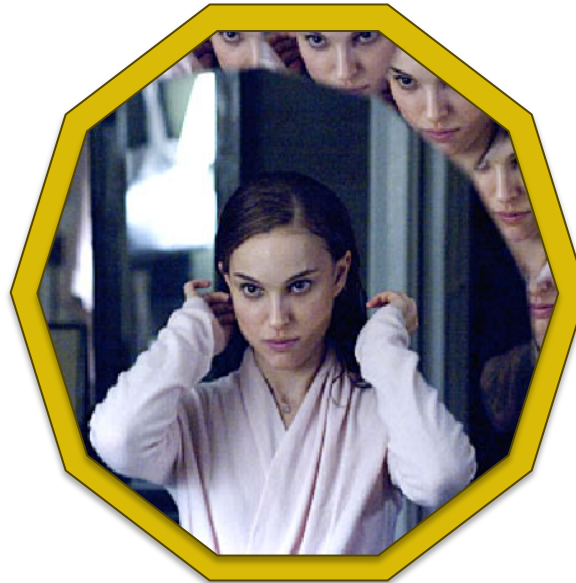
INTRODUCTION TO FILM THEORY

F I L M T H E O R Y

In his major critical work, *The Mirror & The Lamp*, literary scholar M.H. Abrams insists that works of art serve two chief purposes in the world; as his title suggests, great works both reflect the environment from which they emerge (and thus, to some degree, “hold a mirror up” to a particular era) and can also serve as a lamp that illuminates otherwise hidden or obscure parts of our world (or—in a broader sense—even influence the way people *see* the world around them). As you may have read in Chapter 2, the most powerful of narratives function in this double sense; for instance, when it was brought to the silver screen, Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* not only held a mirror up to the dangers of government-sanctioned control over human behavior, but also (tragically) inspired several crimes in mid-1970s Britain, in which the perpetrators claimed that they modeled their own violent acts upon scenes in the film.

Though Abrams does not explicitly discuss film in his text, his theory can undoubtedly be applied to cinema; to be sure, given the sheer amount of films watched per year—the University of Sheffield estimates that 7.6 billion trips to the theaters are made every year, while YouTube’s in-house statistics place daily viewership in 2010 at 2 billion—it is essential that we learn how to actively and critically view them, for they often leave such lasting impressions on us.

Whether this means unpacking the suggestions a film makes about what we fear or value as a culture, determining how accurately a film portrays the world around us, or even creates standards of behavior for the various relationships that make up our lives, reading films closely will help us better appreciate them and perhaps also be more aware of the ideologies embedded within them.



In light of this, this chapter aims to introduce students of film to ten of the major critical “lenses” used by film scholars to analyze everything from the suggestions a film can make about the nature of the human psyche to the ways in which filmmakers use the cinematic devices discussed in Chapter 1

to “move” or affect their audience—whether ethically or unethically.

More specifically, in the pages that follow, we will attempt to streamline relevant critical material from Dr. Lois Tyson’s *critical theory today*, all in an attempt to provide you with a crash course in critical film theory that is both manageable and yet still scholarly. Below you’ll find publishing details about the text, which can be found easily on Amazon, half.com, or even your local library; it’s highly recommended that you secure a copy of this text if possible.

Finally, **a note for instructors:** the one-page articles on each of the ten critical lenses covered below were designed to be read and elaborated upon in class. Subsequently, the backs of each article are blank so as to allow students to take notes on any supplementary information provided in class.

Recommended Texts

Tyson, Lois. *critical theory today*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

In *critical theory today*, Tyson distinguishes between two predominant psychoanalytic approaches: Freudian and Lacanian. This section aims to provide a brief introduction to both.

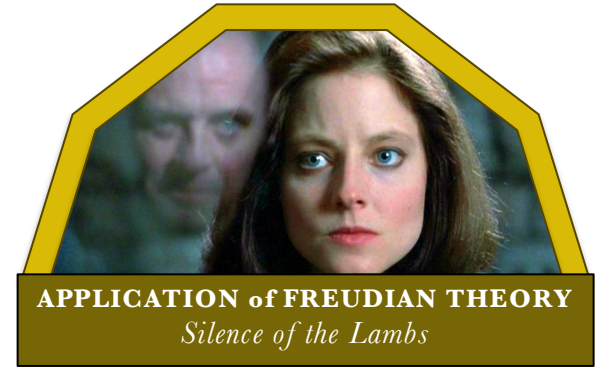
FREUDIAN THEORY

According to Tyson, Freudian theory hinges on the search for two things: first, there is the search for defeating or self-destructive behaviors within humans, and second, a deeper search for the seeds planted in our earliest years that gave rise to such behavior. “For example,” Tyson writes, “[Freud might argue that] if I don’t realize that I still long for the love I never received from my long dead, alcoholic father, I am very liable to select an alcoholic, aloof mate so I can reenact my relationship with my father and ‘this time’ make him love me” (13). Thus, Tyson first identifies a defeating habit (*i.e.* an impulse to find an alcoholic partner), and then links it to a deep-seated need for love from a very specific kind of father-figure. She argues that, for Freud, such habits and patterns must be investigated if one is to gain control over his or her life.

Another major component in Freud’s psychology is the identification of fears—fears of intimacy, of abandonment, betrayal, etc.—all of which Freud argued ultimately functioned as a larger fear of death.

Freud posited that all human beings have a *thanatos* or “death drive”; it’s how he made sense of what he perceived as an “alarming degree of self-destructive behavior... psychologically if not physically” in humans around the globe (22). Tyson’s understanding of this *thanatos* is as follows: “our fear of death...translates for most of us into a fear of loss in general—loss of my mate’s attention, loss of my children’s love, loss of my health...[thus we can realize] how death...is so attractive, at least on the unconscious level: if I don’t feel anything, then I can’t be hurt...This desire to not feel, this desire to insulate ourselves from life in order to insulate ourselves [by extension] from pain, is probably the most common form of death work” (23).

Yet Freud is perhaps most famous for his “penis envy” theory, in which he posits that all women covet male genitalia—and men, in turn, have “castration anxiety” (*i.e.* men fear losing their genitalia). Tyson provides some much needed insight on this theory when she interprets such “envy” as a drive shaped by the Victorian environment from which Freud’s theories emerged; Tyson argues that what Victorian women truly envied were the socio-political freedoms and powers enjoyed by men. In this sense, “penis envy” translates to a desire to vote, to own land, etc.—in short to be able to operate meaningfully in the world (as so many men did) and know that one simply matters within her environment.



APPLICATION of FREUDIAN THEORY

Silence of the Lambs

Throughout *Silence*, the main female protagonist, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), could be said to embody both a fear of abandonment and “penis envy”. For one, the flashbacks within the film reveal that Clarice’s father, who served as a police officer, was shot and killed by a criminal when Clarice was only 10 years old. Thus, Clarice’s formidable drive to join and excel in the FBI could be read (from a Freudian lens) as a desire to control criminals—a desire to prevent evildoers from killing the fathers of any other innocent girls. Moreover, Starling also demonstrates a strong desire to be perceived by her male peers as an equal—and to some extent as an agent of superior talent and dedication. In a scene leading up to the autopsy of one of Buffalo Bill’s (the serial-killer antagonist) latest victims, Starling demands that the local, male police officers leave the room. Starling’s insistence on their departure is one way in which she asserts her authority and renders herself masculine.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

LACANIAN THEORY

Like Freud's theory, the psychoanalysis championed by Jacques Lacan zeroes in on the earliest experiences of a human being; however, unlike Freud, who concerned himself with pinpointing the traumatic events that shape a child's life, Lacan began instead with a concern regarding two things: 1.) How does an infant perceive the world around him or her? and 2.) How does the act of perception itself end up traumatizing people in *infancy*? More specifically, Lacan explored how a baby's first recognition of himself or herself as separate from his/her mother traumatizes and shapes his or her life.

For Lacan, every infant initially perceives "both itself and its environment as a random, fragmented, formless mass. Indeed, the infant doesn't even differentiate itself from its environment and doesn't know that parts of its own body are, in fact, parts of its own body because it doesn't have a sense of itself that is capable of such understanding" (Tyson 27). However, when a child is approximately between six to eight months old, it will begin to recognize that it has some sort of form or wholeness, specifically when it sees itself in a mirror or sees another human being mirroring its body language/behavior back to it (think peek-a-boo). Subsequently, Lacan dubbed this event the "Mirror Stage". This stage is comprised of two periods, the first of which is called the Imaginary Order; despite its name,

however, it doesn't have to do with mirages or hallucinations so much as an infant's belief that it is one with its mother and has total control over its environment. Thus it is "imaginary" insofar as the child's worldview hinges on a delusion of control. According to Tyson, here the child experiences the "desire of the mother," which is to say he or she assumes that his/her mother is all that he or she needs and vice versa (27). The central traumatic experience of the infant's life arrives when it acquires language—specifically the knowledge that "I" am "me [the baby]" and not "you [the mother]"; our entrance into this second period, the Symbolic Order, "involves the experience of separation from others, [most notably] the intimate union we experienced with our mother" during the Imaginary Order (28). Lacan argues that within everyone is a repressed desire to feel a bond that strong again, and that from time to time, we encounter *objet petit a* ("small others" or mementos) that reinvigorate this desire.

Insofar as film studies go, we can apply Lacanian theory by asking the following sorts of questions (Tyson 33):

- + Do any characters, events, or episodes in the [film] seem to embody the Imaginary Order?
- + What parts of the film seem informed by the Symbolic Order?
- + Do *objet petit a* figure into the narrative?



Darren Aronofsky's breakthrough film, *Requiem For A Dream*, received massive attention for its graphic and cinematically stunning depiction of drug use. What's often overlooked, however, is how Aronofsky juxtaposes all of the graphic drug-use against quiet, heartbreaking scenes regarding the main characters' respective mothers. For instance, the now famous quick-cut, extreme close-ups of Tyrone's (Damon Wayans) drug use give way to a short but powerful scene where he remembers the seemingly unconditional love that his mother once provided him. When the flashback ends, Tyrone looks haunted by the memory—and then begins moving a full-length rolling mirror back and forth hypnotically. The blunt use of the mirror here by Aronofsky suggests that the character's drug use is rooted in a desire to return to the Imaginary Order of the Mirror Stage. Moreover, in the spirit of Lacanian theory, some of the final images in *Requiem* are close-ups that pull back to aerial shots, in which we see each major character—all in pain and alone—curling into the fetal position.

M A R X I S M

“Getting and keeping economic power,” writes Dr. Tyson, “[is what Marxists would argue motivates] all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on” (53-54). Thus, whereas the above Lacanian analysis of *Requiem For A Dream* unpacks how the characters’ drug use appears to be rooted in their subconscious desire for the sort of oneness they experienced in infancy with their mothers, a Marxist analysis of the film might focus instead on how the parental figures within the film pressure the young protagonists to become capitalistic Americans (with the implication that it’s financial success and stability—earned via hard work and belief in the American dream—that makes life worthwhile). Put simply, for a Marxist, it’s the adult figures’ unfair classification of their children as “slackers” or “unambitious” that might have inspired their drug use—and also, ironically, leads them to find economic security via drug trafficking.

For Marx, “the real battle lines [were] drawn... between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ between the *bourgeoisie*—those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources—and the *proletariat*, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the

factory work...that fills the coffers of the rich. Unfortunately, those in the proletariat are often the last to recognize this fact” (Tyson 54). Because the socio-economical structure of modern America does not conform to the *bourgeoisie* / *proletariat* dynamic upon which traditional Marxism hinges, Tyson notes that any application of Marxism to works of art produced by modern American artists—or Western artists in general for that matter—requires that we consider how the five-tier socio-economic structure (which she articulates as the underclass, the lower class, the middle class, the upper class, and the aristocracy) may be structured in a manner that prevents the lower classes from securing their basic needs as humans.

In addition, according to Marxists, the inequalities within and stresses provoked by this class system stem from a number of *ideologies*. Marxists aim to expose the American dream as not a natural way of life, but simply one of many ideologies or ways of looking at the world—one that they believe falsely presupposes that the pursuit of wealth is an inherently good and meaningful pursuit. Many Marxists also take issue with the idea that the poor are poor simply because they have not applied themselves, for they would argue that this perspective hinges on the belief that the American dream is universally attainable.



There are few contemporary characters in American cinema that embody the drive to succeed and dominate so magnetically and horrifyingly as Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) in *There Will Be Blood*. In Plainview, director Paul Thomas Anderson gives us ambition and greed incarnated; to be sure, the character’s surname, Plainview, emphasizes how Daniel’s single-minded outlook—that is, to curry unimaginable wealth and power—is precisely what makes him so heartless and efficient in his quest to become an oil baron. However, the film is not exactly a cautionary tale for capitalists—there is no final act uprising by *proletariat*-esque characters. Rather, Anderson suggests something much more chilling about what the hunt for dizzying financial success will do to men: turn them back into animals. For all of the stunning technological innovations that Plainview utilizes to dig for oil, he regresses, by the film’s end, into an animalistic state; in the final scene his barbaric body language and use of a bowling pin as a club make him look more like a caveman than a homo sapien.

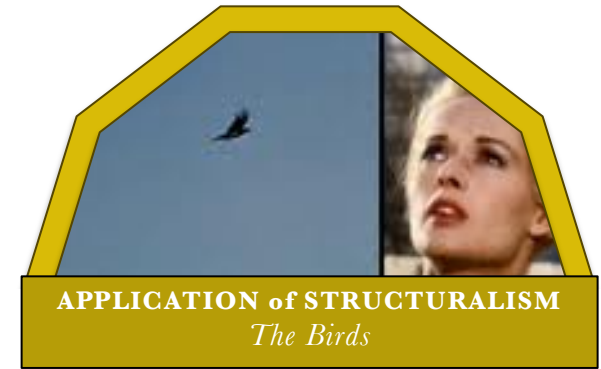
STRUCTURALISM

Rooted in the language-theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism asks us to examine the foundations (or “structure”) of language itself—it wants to examine the rules that govern language. After his death, de Saussure’s colleagues assembled notes taken by his students in an effort to preserve his argument that all language is composed of two parts: a “signifier” (*i.e.* the “sound pattern” that is said out loud or thought of silently) and that which is “signified” (*i.e.* the meaning of the word spoken or thought of). The word “trees,” for instance, corresponds to the organic objects that live and grow in soil (and bear fruit or leaves, etc.); thus, “tree” is a signifier and the actual plant is the “signified”.

Structuralism can be applied to film in multiple ways; one can examine, as Raymond Bellour did in his famous essay on Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, how individual frames in a relatively brief scene are structured to emphasize ideologies within *The Birds*. Though he was criticized for watching *The Birds* as if it were a series of paintings or photographs and not a motion picture, Bellour outlined how Hitchcock’s cinematography suggested that Melanie, the female protagonist of *The Birds*, was punished for being romantically forward towards a male character. Just as de Saussure insisted on exploring how *the relationship* between words and what they signified gave

words meaning, so does Bellour insist that the *relationship* between frames in the famous “the birds attack” scene supplies the film with its “forward female behavior is bad” theme. In his essay, Bellour establishes that several successive frames in the scene set up a “this is Melanie looking” and “this is what Melanie is looking at” dynamic; the camera repeatedly—as if on a loop—moves from a shot of Melanie’s face to a shot of what is in her line of vision. Once the audience becomes comfortable with this back-and-forth movement, Hitchcock interrupts it with a shocking shot in which he shows us not Melanie’s point-of-view, but rather a seagull in the air—and then moves to a shot of the seagull attacking Melanie. Bellour argues that it’s when Hitchcock interrupts patterns he’s set up that he’s trying to emphasize underlying themes within the film; here, Bellour feels the violent attack suggests that Melanie is being punished for looking at a male and, moreover, for having the impulse to actively pursue him.

Alternatively, one could examine how *The Birds* fits into—or perhaps does not exactly fit into—the horror/suspense genre. The goal here would be to watch and study massive amounts of horror/suspense films, attempt to pinpoint themes and images and cinematic techniques that crop up across the board, and then compare *The Birds* to this “catalog” or list of essential characteristics that surface within



most horror/suspense films.

For instance, one could argue that *The Birds*—like *Psycho* before it—helps carve out a subgenre of horror films that do not feature a supernatural villain (such as Dracula, who was demonic, or The Mummy, who appeared to be supernaturally brought back to life by ancient Egyptian rituals). Moreover, one could argue that, because the film features a female protagonist, the film sets itself apart from most early to mid 20th century horror films, which tended to depict women as helpless damsels in distress.

The lens of structuralism can, ultimately, be applied in dozens of other ways as well, though the underlying goal is always this: to identify the foundations the cinematography and dialogue establish in a genre or collection of films, and then examine how singular films fit into or subvert these foundations.

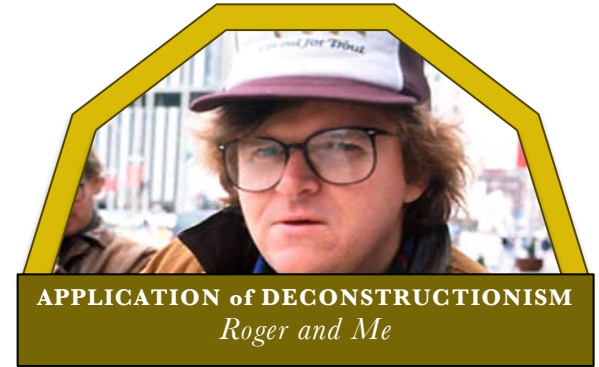
DECONSTRUCTIONISM

As a critical lens dedicated to investigating how oppressive ideologies or ways of thinking shape our lives, Deconstructionism challenges us to examine how any work within the language arts—any single word or sign even—can be charged with powerful messages about what sort of beliefs, behaviors, lifestyles, etc. are valuable or destructive, healthy or unhealthy, and so on.

Inaugurated by Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s, deconstructionism has notoriously eluded a single definition ever since, for it is so intimately bound to the process of exploring how things collapse in on themselves. Philosopher John D. Caputo wrote in *Deconstruction In A Nutshell* that “Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell... the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility... That is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any” (32). Thus, while Derrida initially focused on complications within the signifier-signified dynamic in structuralism (*i.e.* If the word “tree” represents that organic, big plant that lives and grow in soil, doesn’t this definition of a “tree” run into problems when we realize it could also apply to what we call “flowers” and “crops”?), film critics have applied deconstructionism to films in order to determine how content and form can at times “butt heads” with one another, or how a filmmaker may have unknowingly embedded

ideological “trap doors” within his or her film—that is, *how a filmmaker may have, in his or her attempt to create a film with a specific message, contradicted that very message as he or she produced the film.*

Similarly, deconstructionists aim to “explode” binaries—which are pairs made up of two ideas or groups traditionally considered to be opposites (think male/female, objective/subjective, individual/group, etc.)—that they believe are overly simplistic, sexist, racist, etc. For example, while Americans living in 2012 might, in general, champion the individual over the group, a close look at what it takes to allow an individual to function (let’s say even a pioneer like Steve Jobs or Steven Hawking) reveals that the so-called individual depends upon others to manage their personal affairs (executive assistants), finances (accountants), health (doctors), and so on. Thus though we may champion individuals over groups, upon inspection, the life of any individual, genius or otherwise, hinges on an intricate web of others who allow the individual to thrive. Insofar as film goes, this breaking of binaries can be very helpful for sociologists who aim to point out how various films challenge the individual/group binary or for feminists who want to draw attention to how films reinforce or challenge the notion that male characters are superior—in whatever way—to female ones.



Along with *Bowling For Columbine*, & *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Roger and Me* secured director Michael Moore’s status as an A-list celebrity. And yet, while his position in Hollywood is secure, his reputation as a documentary director is the subject of much debate; effective as his films may be in provoking emotional reactions from audiences and earning profits at the box office, Moore’s presentation of the decline of the automotive industry in Flint, Michigan has been denounced as unethical by hosts of serious critics. As Stephen Prince argues in *Movies and Meaning*, “Critics charged that...*Roger and Me* (1989), violated documentary ethics because it rearranged and reordered the chronology of events leading to the demise of the General Motors auto plant. The film condensed events that occurred over a long period of time so that they seemed to happen virtually overnight [in the film]” (299). Thus, the catch-22 in *Roger and Me* resides in Moore’s use of unethical narrative techniques in a genre that hinges on its usefulness as a means of spreading social truths to the public.

NEW CRITICISM

Despite its name, New Criticism—which any English student might know as the all-too-familiar “close reading” of a text—emerged in the early 20th century as an alternative way of approaching a literary text; up until then, American literature professors focused on the historical conditions that surrounded a text and/or the author’s intent in creating a text (i.e. Why would someone write this? What was their purpose in writing the text?). New Criticism recognizes that a text can have a purpose and meaning beyond what its author intended; in short, it operates under the belief that a work of art can take on a life apart from the artist who created it.

Insofar as film goes, this practice—of watching a film “closely”—demands that audiences familiarize themselves with the techniques or devices a filmmaker has at his/her disposal in order to produce an authentic interpretation of a film. Thus, because all critical readings of film must consider both the **content** of a film (i.e. its central themes, its narrative) and the **formal** elements in the film (i.e. how filmmakers present themes and the narrative via cinematography and dialogue), this lens serves as the foundation for all other critical lenses. For example, before coming to the conclusion that P.T. Anderson depicts Daniel Plainview as an evil, animalistic capitalist in *There Will Be Blood* (i.e. approach the film from a Marxist point of view), one would have to closely examine the cinematography and dialogue within the film

(or look at the film as a New Critic might) to gather the evidence such an argument would require.

It’s the dual examination of content and form that makes New Criticism such a complex endeavor at times. Consider Matthew Weiner’s *Mad Men* for a moment: the series often sends out mixed messages regarding protagonist Don Draper’s life and behavior—which may look attractive, even envious in one moment and clearly destructive and bleak the next. In the pilot episode, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes,” Weiner depicts Don as a man with an enviable life; he has a challenging but rewarding (and incredibly high-paying) career as a creative director for the fictional Sterling Cooper ad agency, is respected—almost worshipped—by his staff for his ability to conjure knockout ad campaigns out of thin air, and enjoys the company of Midge: an independent, intelligent woman who supports his constant search for brilliant new campaigns. Moreover, the cinematography in the episode depicts his smoking and drinking habits not as destructive, but rather essential “fuels” for Draper—from the opening scene (see Image 1.1), his incessant drafting of various taglines for Lucky Strike’s upcoming campaign seems to run on a combustion engine of cigarettes and whiskey cocktails. After ordering another “old fashioned,” Don toils away—the golden light around him (see Image 1.2), his incessant



In a later episode, it’s only after Don sleeps with Midge—who we later find out to be one of Don’s many mistresses—that he’s inspired to create successful ads for his clients; after a late-night rendezvous with Midge, he thinks of a new direction for a Right Guard ad: “What do women want...any excuse to get closer.” The suggestion—that Don’s affairs somehow jumpstart his creativity—is clear.

Despite the way in which the cinematography flatters what most would consider Don’s destructive habits, in the dialogue, Weiner often highlights how fundamentally joyless Don’s life can be. “You’re born alone and you die alone,” Don exclaims in the pilot episode.

NEW HISTORICISM

In the introduction to the critical work *The New Historicism*, editor H. Aram Vesser writes that “The New Historicists combat empty [criticism] by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of... analysis” (xi). Although Vesser does not explicitly name the source of this “empty [criticism],” it’s fair to say that New Historicism arose in the 1970 and 80s as a direct reaction to perceived deficiencies in *New Criticism*; for literary critics such as Stephen Greenblatt (famous for his New Historical take on Renaissance works), closely reading a text was insufficient scholarship. If universities wanted to offer more compelling and significant research, language arts professors would have to begin asking how have various historical events been interpreted and, in turn, what these interpretations tell us about the interpreters—classical historians might ask, by contrast, “What happened?” and “What does the event tell us about history?” (Tyson 282). Consequently, New Historicists do not believe we can look at history objectively; so, while all can agree on certain, indisputable facts (*i.e.* George Washington was the first President), the quality of Washington’s service (*i.e.* as effective or ineffective, as ethical or unethical) will always depend on whom you ask.

This new way of looking at literature and art—as a subjective means of preserving the ideas that defined historical eras—was guided

in large part by French scholar Michel Foucault (pronounced foo-KOH). In *Literary Theories*, editor Julian Wolfreys explains that Foucault used the term *episteme* to refer to “a particular group of knowledges and discourses which operate [together] as the dominant [ways of thinking] in any given historical period. He also identifies epistemic breaks, radical shifts in the varieties and deployments of knowledge for ideological purposes, which take place from period to period.”

In turn, the New Historicists were intensely concerned with the dynamic between knowledge and power, for all knowledge is transferred by linguistic means—and by extension all power must be inseparably bound to language. Here “power” does not necessarily mean the power wielded by a king or president—it tends, rather, to refer to the way in which one uses language to shape the world around him/her. A lawyer, for instance, is powerful insofar as he or she understands how to word a contract so as to protect his or her client’s interests. Similarly, a pharmacist is powerful insofar as he or she understands the various technical terms involved in correctly filling a prescription. In this sense, New Historicists are concerned not merely with the language arts, but all language as its enables individuals or groups to meaningfully affect—for better or worse—the world around them.



APPLICATION of NEW HISTORICISM

The Birth of a Nation

“Had the Nazis won World War II,” writes Lois Tyson, “we would all be reading a very different account of the war, and the genocide [of the Jewish people], than the accounts we read in American history books today” (286). A brief look at D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*—with its explicit championing of the Ku Klux Klan—demonstrates how a film can be a vehicle for the sort of alternate take on history that Tyson describes above. According to University of Houston professor Steven Mintz, “The message embedded in [Griffith’s] film was...that African Americans could never be integrated into white society as equals, and that the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan were justified because they were necessary to reestablish legitimate and honest government” (“Slavery in American History” 1). Here, Mintz engages in New Historicism by examining not the Civil War and subsequent events, but rather the racist ideologies at work within one man’s take on these events.

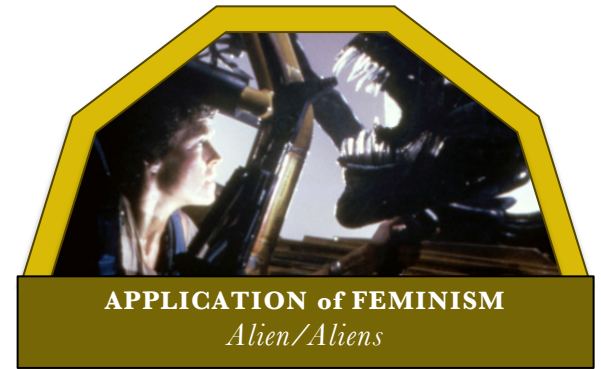
F E M I N I S M

Because the term “feminism” has somehow become attached to extreme, anti-male attitudes and singular dramatic images (*i.e.* bra burnings in the 1960s), it’s essential that we discuss what “feminism” actually looks like as a major critical lens of the 21st century. Critical feminism simply insists on equality between the sexes, for true “feminist criticism examines the ways in which...[all cultural productions, including film] reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 83). Thus, feminism is about making sure women and men have equal footing— not about tearing men down.

While some may argue that women now enjoy equal footing with men—though the lingering pay-inequality between men and women who perform the same tasks at work suggests otherwise—a close look at a few seemingly harmless entertainment products will demonstrate how these seemingly harmless products harbor shockingly sexist ideas. Consider *Super Mario Brothers*—the colorful, light-hearted side-scroller that has brought even the most embattled brothers and sisters together before the TV set to play. In the text, *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, unpack how this seemingly innocent, joyful game is a sort of “time capsule” of sexist ideas about how men and women interact.

Not only is Princess Peach an unplayable, passive character, they argue, but she also must wait for the male character, Mario, to rescue her. As a matter of fact, Salen and Zimmerman unpack how most of the video games we grew up with as children reinforce this male-as-sole source of strength and protection view (*i.e.* *The Legend of Zelda*, *Crash Bandicoot*, etc.). Alternatively, they draw attention to how female characters in more recent games—particularly fighting games such as *Tekken*, *Dead or Alive*, and so on—may be playable characters who can compete with the male ones, but are unfortunately depicted in scandalous clothing not suitable for combat (while the male characters are often fully clothed in attire fitting the combat scenario).

Feminist film critics aim to identify where these same sexist (or misogynistic) models rear their heads in cinema. Just as women serve as chief monsters in Greek and Roman mythologies (*i.e.* the Sirens of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Medusa) and the very downfall of humankind in the Old Testament (*i.e.* Eve), feminists identify similar uses of female characters on the silver screen and tear down these one-sided/flat depictions of women. By extension, they also look for female characters that resist these stereotypes.



Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) has long been a lauded female character in films—*Alien* and *Aliens*—that boast fairly complicated depictions of women at large. First, let’s turn our attention to “the bad guys”—the sleek, oil-black xenomorph alien for which the series is named. Although the lead alien is a female—the Queen—and thus fits into the female-as-destructive monster role mentioned in the general “Feminism” article to the left, gender roles are upset insofar as the Queen has the absolute loyalty of the male aliens. The alien colony operates on anything but a “patriarchal” or male-dominated system. In addition, though Ripley leads the crew of *Aliens*, the male and female characters alike are inspired by her very active, constructively aggressive attempt to protect humanity from the aliens. Ripley is the very opposite of the helpless, Princess Peach-type female who can do little more than wait for a man to arrive and address the problems in the narrative.

QUEER THEORY

In light of the political and social realities that non-heterosexuals face (even in the 21st century), Dr. Tyson argues that queer theory is an especially important critical lens, for it allows us to investigate how works of art either reinforce or challenge the homophobia (as well as other phobias related to one's sexual orientation) that ultimately prevents gay, lesbian, etc. individuals from enjoying the same rights heterosexuals have long held. As Tyson states in her chapter on lesbian, gay, and queer criticism, "Part and parcel of the discrimination practiced against lesbians and gay men are the negative myths that used to be generally accepted as truth and that still exert some influence today. These include the myth that gay people are sick, evil, or both and that it is therefore in their "nature" to be insatiable sexual predators, to molest children, and to corrupt youths by "recruiting" them to become homosexual. Another myth portrays gay men and lesbians as a very small population of deviants, when, in fact, it is estimated that gay people comprise at least 10 percent of the U.S. population. Other common misconceptions include the belief that children raised by gay men or lesbians will grow up to be gay [and so on]" (320). The queer theory critical lens is but one vehicle scholars have for exposing such myths.

Yet queer theory entails much more than this—its larger goal is linked to deconstruction in the sense that it looks for and then draws attention to works of art in which traditional binaries related to sex and sexual expression (i.e. male/female; heterosexual/homosexual; etc.) breakdown or overlap or do not apply whatsoever. Tyson articulates this as follows: "The word queer has a range of meanings...it can refer to any piece of literary criticism that interprets a text from a nonstraight perspective...[but] queer criticism [also] reads texts to reveal the [problems in certain texts] representations of sexual categories...to show the various ways in which the categories of homosexual and heterosexual break down, overlap, or do not adequately represent the...range of human sexuality" (336). Tyson goes on to provide several questions queer theorists ask about works of art:

- + What does this work contribute to our knowledge of queer, gay, or lesbian experience and history?
- + Is a work homophobic? If so, is the homophobia explicit or implicit?
- + How does a [work] illustrate the problems [or complications] in one's sexual identity?



Though it was relatively unsuccessful in its initial 1975 box office run, *Rocky Horror* is the longest running release in film history, thanks in large part to midnight showings of the film and the droves of viewers who come out to watch the film frustrate traditional, 20th century sexual categories time and time again. To be sure, the film's lead, Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry), is explicitly described not only as a transvestite in the beginning of the picture, but as a "sweet" one. Thus the film champions, from its first minutes in, a "non-normal" category of sexual expression. Moreover, in one of the film's central scenes, Frank-N-Furter demonstrates how the innocent couple who happened upon his headquarters can be physically attracted to members of the same sex, despite the fact that they are both heterosexual adults. Harkening back to the "Kinsey scale" established decades earlier by Alfred Kinsey, the film suggests that sexuality exists on a wide spectrum, not a simple heterosexual/homosexual binary.

RACE CRITICISM

Though some might argue that blatant racism—which Dr. Tyson defines as the systematic denial of essential liberties and rights to non-white individuals—was eradicated in America long ago, Tyson argues that latent or covert racist practices continue to affect non-white Americans to this very day.

In this sense, Tyson is concerned with a distinct iteration of racism: *institutionalized racism* (361). Tyson defines *institutional racism* as “the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates...health care [for example] can be racially biased in everything from the allocation of research dollars to the location of hospitals...the corporate world, [moreover], often practices racial discrimination in its hiring and promotion, despite whatever equal-opportunity policies it claims to have” (361). In addition, Tyson argues that people of color are not only denied these sorts of advantages, but also subjected to harsher punishment for breaking American laws. She writes, “let me offer just one striking example of why there is a larger proportion of African Americans than whites incarcerated in our country. It takes only five grams of crack cocaine (used predominantly by black Americans) to trigger a five-year mandatory prison sentence. However, it takes five-hundred grams of powder cocaine (used predominantly by white

Americans) to trigger that same five-year mandatory sentence. Discriminatory laws like these draw attention to drug use in poor black neighborhoods, a situation that has resulted in increased police surveillance in these areas, while drug use in white neighborhoods is largely ignored” (368).

Consequently, those using critical race theory as a lens through which they choose to watch films aim to identify how said films challenge and/or reinforce such unjust aspects of American culture. For instance, HBO’s most famous series, *The Sopranos*, deliberately suggested that the organized crime rings run by white Americans employed and manipulated black Americans as “ground-level” enforcers for their various money-making schemes. This depiction of the inner-workings of the mob, controversial as it was and remains, challenged preconceptions regarding who instigates crime in a major metropolitan city. In sum, if one opts to view a film through the critical race lens, he or she may want to begin by asking the following:

- + What can this work teach us about African heritage or African American culture, experience, and history?
- + Does a particular work correct stereotypes or misrepresentations of marginalized races or does it reinforce racist ways of thinking?



A controversial cultural artifact of the 1960s, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* preserves the post-Civil Rights racism that simmered throughout America. In the film, female lead Joey Drayton (Katherine Houghton) has a fairytale romance with a young, idealistic, black physician named John Prentice (Sidney Poitier)—consequently, much of the film revolves around how, even though the American legal system at this time recognized more rights for blacks than ever before, *individuals* still felt it inappropriate for whites and blacks to fraternize and/or date. In this sense, director Stanley Kramer draws the audience’s attention to the sort of “everyday racism” that reared its head in American households. The discomfort Joey’s parents display when John is brought to meet them exemplifies this variant of racism, and one could certainly argue that the unfavorable light in which Kramer depicts Joey’s parents is a positive application of race criticism on his part.

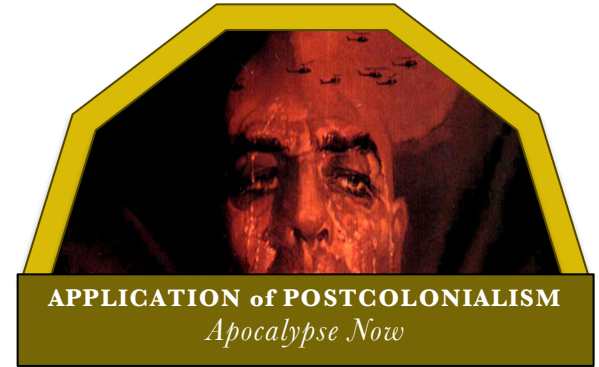
POSTCOLONIALISM

As its title indicates, postcolonial criticism examines how the colonization of various social groups has affected both those colonized and the colonizers—though the field’s emphasis usually lies in highlighting the ways the colonizer has oppressed native peoples. Accordingly, Dr. Tyson opens her chapter on postcolonial studies with an explanation of *colonialist ideology*—by which colonists made both an immediate and lasting impact on the culture they have invaded. “Colonialist ideology,” she writes, “was based on the colonizer’s assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native...peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded” (438). However, as Tyson and countless anthropologists point out, many of these so-called inferior cultures had established complex artistic, agricultural, architectural, and religious systems prior to the invasion of their lands; Tyson suggests that it was the colonizer’s distinctively metropolitan background—which included more industrial technology and man-made materials (in contrast to the heavily organic substances that were central to the lives of those they colonized)—that made them feel superior.

It was this process of comparing an indigenous culture’s goods and habits to Europeans goods and habits—and, in turn, categorizing them as “savage” or “uncivilized”

—that constitutes the process of “othering” natives. This process would, effectively, bleach native cultures so as to make them more European, more “appropriate”—and it would also psychologically damage those who had been colonized. In her article on critical race theory, Tyson refers quite shockingly to the concept (and practice) of *intra-racial racism*, in which members of a race actually turn on or denounce members of their own race that retain, whether biologically (*i.e.* in skin tones) or culturally, anything native to their people. According to Tyson, in many instances, colonizers so thoroughly implanted their European notions of right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, etc. within the culture that anything lying outside of these new European categories would be deemed unsavory—even by those whose culture had just been “whitewashed” (419-420).

Consequently, postcolonial criticism attempts to identify how various works of art preserve this sort of dynamic between a colonizer and those colonized. It also strives to identify instances of mimicry (*i.e.* cases where the colonized take on the speech patterns, dress, customs, etc. of their colonizer in order to fit it), exile and alienation (*i.e.* the literal or symbolic displacement of natives), and the struggle amongst those colonized for individual and collective identity.



As a film adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s famous Modernist novel, *Heart of Darkness*—an early example of postcolonial literature itself—Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* has long been examined for the ways in which it criticizes America’s role in the Vietnam War.

In one of the more famous scenes in *Apocalypse*, Lieutenant Coronel Bill Kilgore accepts a dangerous mission at the mouth of the Nung River only because of the surfing conditions present there (for Kilgore is an avid, even obsessive surfer). As he rides waves along the river, a napalm strike is casually called in, and the invasion theme song *par excellence*, “Ride of the Valkyries,” is cued up over loudspeakers. Thus, one could argue that while Kilgore does not operate like a typical colonist (who desires to conquer a people and mold their ways to his), his role is far more chilling in that he goofs off surfing while simply exterminating a culture foreign to him.

FILM THEORY – APPLICATIONS

Having introduced you to the major critical “lenses,” this chapter aims, finally, to demonstrate briefly how one might apply each theoretical lens to one major work. To this end, Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* Trilogy is excellently poised for this final part of Chapter 4.



Films such as *The Dark Knight* Trilogy allow us to investigate how gritty blockbuster movies can be much more than that—they demonstrate how entertaining films can double as works of art embedded with complex suggestions about the human psyche, economics, how we view reality, sociopolitical matters, and human behavior in times of crises.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis—in the classical, Freudian sense—is concerned primarily with how an individual’s identity is shaped by repressed emotions as well as the “role(s)” into which one’s family or environment has placed him or her. On the basis of this, one could argue that Nolan’s Batman (and indeed any iteration of Batman) is defined in large part by the guilt and anger rooted in his parent’s deaths. To be sure, Alfred Pennyworth offers numerous warnings to Bruce Wayne, specifically regarding how his efforts as Batman have only led to increased violence from the leaders of Gotham’s underworld—and yet Wayne insists on continuing to serve as Batman. Dr. Tyson, author of *Critical Theory Today*, argues that “our unconscious desires not to recognize or change our destructive behaviors...because we have formed our identities around them” (15). Thus, one could identify Wayne as a hero whose work as Batman simultaneously reveals stunningly noble/sacrificial and self-destructive facets of his personality.

MARXIST

As a theoretical lens that insists we examine how economic systems structure human societies, Marxists might see *The Dark Knight* Trilogy as an especially complicated film series. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan clearly depicts the economic gap between the rich and the poor as the catalyst or fuse for Gotham’s demise. To be sure, during the ballroom scene, Selina Kyle whispers to Bruce Wayne, “You [and the rest of Gotham’s elite] are all going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us”. In this sense Kyle justifies her alter-ego (a cat burglar) as a by-product of Gotham’s extreme class divide; “A girl’s gotta eat,” she quips when questioned by the police about her criminal activity. And yet it is Bruce Wayne, with his multi-billion dollar bank account, who is able to forge the Batman persona—and in turn assemble a massive array of gadgetry to help him restore balance to the city. Thus, money is both a key cause of and solution to Gotham’s instability.

STRUCTURALISM

Each film in *The Dark Knight* Trilogy serves as what film critics might refer to as “meta-theater”—that is, as a theatrical work in which the characters discuss the power of theatricality or role-playing. To be sure, Bruce Wayne’s Batman persona hinges on his assumption that operating as a seemingly-immortal and terrifying vigilante will enable him to root out Gotham’s crime more effectively than if he simply joined the police or entered the political arena. By extension, Wayne’s activity as the Batman serves as commentary on the structure of Gotham—or more accurately, the dysfunction and limitations of Gotham’s traditional law enforcement agencies (i.e. Gotham Police, the Mayor’s office, etc.). Throughout the trilogy, Nolan’s villains draw attention to how easily human beings’ justice systems can be corrupted—to be sure, while Batman ultimately triumphs over each major antagonist, they always manage to “buy off” the established “lines of defense” in Gotham.

FILM THEORY – APPLICATIONS

Having introduced you to the major critical “lenses,” this chapter aims, finally, to demonstrate briefly how one might apply each theoretical lens to a single film. Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* is excellently poised to serve as our film of choice for this final part of Chapter 4.



Because the film is so well known, *The Dark Knight* affords us the opportunity to investigate how a gritty blockbuster movie doubles as a film embedded with complex suggestions about the human psyche, contemporary economics, the construction of reality, human behavior in times of crises, and so on.

DECONSTRUCTIONISM

Insofar as deconstructionism is approached as the practice of determining where a narrative collapses in on itself [i.e. where a story—in the process of making its point(s)—actually contradicts those point(s)], we can look to Heath Ledger’s Joker as a sort of incarnation of this theory. For one, Ledger’s Joker sheds light on the corruption within Gotham’s legislative and executive branches, perhaps most notably in the famous interrogation scene. “Who did you [Gordon] leave [Harvey Dent] with, hmm?” Joker asks Commissioner Gordon, “Your people? Assuming they are still your people, and not [mafia boss] Maroni’s.” Here, The Joker forces Gordon to acknowledge how his colleagues—who by definition should be loyal—have double-crossed him. In doing so, The Joker serves as a truth-teller—which one might point to as the contradiction that deconstructs The Joker himself. Yet a closer look at the character reveals a more complex reality; The Joker’s ambiguous relationship to chaos/order

DECONSTRUCTIONISM, con’t

and lies/the truth is central to the film; he describes himself as a wild “dog” who has no plans, no scheme—but the entire plot progresses via his carefully constructed, multi-layered plan. While this may, at first glance, appear to be a fatal contradiction, it paradoxically serves as the kind of contradiction that breathes life into The Joker character. As the embodiment of true chaos, The Joker *by definition* must at times contradict himself and engage in planned, ordered activities—such as orchestrating Gotham’s fall. Put simply, when examined under the lens of deconstructionism, the contradictions within Joker’s behavior become apparent, and this prevents us from ever truly knowing whether he is fully insane or merely acting, unruly or strategic, etc.—which is exactly the point. It is precisely by collapsing in on and contradicting himself that Ledger’s Joker remains a variable—like the joker card itself. He leaves all guessing at his “true” limits and thereby functions as a perfect Lord of Misrule.

NEW CRITICISM

Although New Criticism—for scholars of literature—revolves around a close reading of a text, because a film is grounded in both a script and cinematography (which advocates of “pure cinema” would argue is more important), we will approach New Criticism as a close “reading” of the visual storytelling within *The Dark Knight*. As the Lighting section within Chapter 1 indicates, directors tend to use high-key lighting to suggest a character is innocent, good-natured, or even angelic. However, in several key scenes within *The Dark Knight*, Nolan uses neutral or high-key lighting to illuminate The Joker, whereas Batman is often shot with low-key lighting. Cinematically, this is one way Nolan reinforces his Joker as one that, like the Fools in Shakespeare’s plays, sheds light on socio-political dysfunction in his society. In other words, while he undoubtedly commits evil acts, The Joker also demonstrates how frail Gotham truly is—and Nolan’s lighting emphasizes this “good” aspect of his character.

FILM THEORY – APPLICATIONS

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NEW HISTORICISM

New Historicism insists that history is neither a simple linear series of events (from Event A to Event B to Event C, etc.) nor a story that can be summed up from one perspective. With this in mind, one could argue that The Joker’s perspective regarding Gotham—that is, that Gotham’s mounting instability has actually been aggravated, not alleviated, by Batman) is a twisted and provocative application of New Historicism. In other words, although citizens like Commissioner Gordon may believe that Batman is simply “trying to help,” as he states in *Batman Begins*, other individuals within Gotham may find Batman’s use of extreme force and physical aggression unacceptable. Despite the fact that Batman refuses to use lethal force, one could argue that his tactics have—regardless of Wayne’s actual intentions—sparked more aggressive behavior on the part of the mob.

(See the “Postcolonialism” excerpt below for further examination of this topic.)

FEMINISM

A brief look at *The Dark Knight* Trilogy reveals a complex and somewhat wanting depiction of females—in particular, regarding how they relate to and interact with the lead male characters. For example, in *Batman Begins*, Rachel Dawes is an assertive, productive female assistant district attorney who subverts the male district attorney’s attempt to shield her from the job’s dangers. She does, however, ultimately rely on Batman to save her from physical harm at the hands of the Scarecrow. But this three-dimensional treatment of her character is erased in *The Dark Knight*, where she is re-introduced as a woman who flippantly finds the attempted murder of her boyfriend, Harvey Dent, to be a kind of aphrodisiac; she expresses no concern or fear regarding the attempt on his life, but rather only attempts to convince him to “take the rest of the day off” for a sexual encounter. In this sense, she meagerly resembles the “zero empathy” Joker played by Ledger; as the sole lead female, Dawes v2.0 thus disappoints.

QUEER THEORY

While queer theory might traditionally be applied to examine how homosexual, transgender, etc. characters are portrayed, the dearth of such characters in the trilogy leads us to apply this lens a bit differently—more specifically, by examining the films’ abundance of male-male working-relationships. While the murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents is depicted as the catalyst for his emergence as the Batman, Bruce’s life hinges on formative relationships with male characters exclusively. Alfred serves as a surrogate father, Jim Gordon and Lucius Fox as essential allies, Ra’s al Ghul as a mentor-gone-awry, and John Blake as a pseudo-Robin. To be sure, only Selina Kyle ever assists Batman in his frontline-attack on Gotham’s crime—and she, unlike almost all of Wayne’s male allies, is the only one to double-cross him in a traditional sense. In light of this, one could argue that Batman is defined in large part (and enabled to engage in a meaningful life) via male-male relationships.

FILM THEORY – APPLICATIONS

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RACE CRITICISM	POSTCOLONIALISM	CLOSING NOTES
<p>A classic way of applying this lens—not merely to superhero films, but to any action film in general—is to examine how the protagonist/antagonist lines are sometimes established via racial lines. Think of <i>Die Hard</i>, <i>Captain America</i>, or the countless war films that provide flat, non-nuanced depictions of non-Americans or non-whites as the villains. As far as <i>The Dark Knight</i> Trilogy goes, Nolan appears to have mostly avoided such storytelling avenues, preferring to demonstrate how the threats to Gotham (a fictional but unmistakably American city) are internal or perpetrated by outsiders who are not simply a legion of non-white characters. Major antagonists in each film—the Scarecrow, the Joker, the mob of <i>The Dark Knight</i>—are Gotham-based parasites on the city. One could argue, however, that the criminal infrastructure that gave rise to these figures is the League of Shadows—an ancient band of vigilantes situated in an undisclosed but seemingly Eastern part of the world.</p>	<p>Strictly speaking, postcolonial theory examines how colonizing forces affect the identity of the people and place(s) they annex into themselves; Nolan says little about this social dynamic (in the traditional sense), but one could use this lens to examine how Wayne’s financially-enabled war on organized crime affects Gotham for better and/or worse. Interestingly enough, at the conclusion of <i>Begins</i>, Gordon muses on the principle of escalation with Batman: “We [the police] start carrying semi-automatics; they buy auto-matics. We start wearing Kevlar...they buy armor-piercing rounds” he declares. It’s here that Nolan establishes a central theme for the trilogy: the arrival of a new, intimidating presence in Gotham may frighten some, but will only instigate others to amplify their own use of violence. And regarding how Batman’s “immigration” affects identity, The Joker goes so far as to say that he “is how crazy Batman’s made Gotham”; thus he paints his sociopathic behavior as a by-product of Batman’s arrival.</p>	<p>As you may have noticed while parsing through each of these abbreviated applications, some (particularly Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Deconstructionism, Feminism, etc.) are natural fits for <i>The Dark Knight</i> trilogy, whereas others require a fair amount of “academic gymnastics”. Race criticism or postcolonial criticism of <i>The Dark Knight</i>, for instance, do not yield much—in large part because Nolan says little (whether explicitly or implicitly) about race relations or colonization in the trilogy.</p> <p>Thus, while this section is meant to illustrate how one can apply all of the major critical lenses, it should also trigger some warning bells—specifically that as critics of film, we should think critically about whether our reading of a film is too much of a stretch or warranted, but simply difficult to get a handle on.</p>