

Dear Students:

I very much enjoyed our discussion today. I'm particularly impressed that a number of you are already engaging with the textbook and asking insightful questions about the content of the course.

This will be the first of a series of correspondences that you can expect to receive at the conclusion of each class session. The purpose of these e-mails is to summarize the material covered in class and to provide an avenue for you to communicate with me about questions related to the topic or anything that is generally of interest to you in the disciplines of Communication, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, or any other related topic.

Culture:

We started today by theorizing a definition for the word "culture" and distinguishing between so-called "high" (elite) and "low" (popular) culture. Though even basic definitions of culture are contested in "cultural studies," I would suggest the following definition so that we have something to work with:

[Culture is] “a collective means of perceiving and understanding the world.”

- (1) The word "collective" indicates that that culture is collaborative. Even though there are imbalances of power, culture requires participation.
- (2) The word "means" indicates that, while culture is expressed through a variety of overlapping modalities (e.g. language, fine arts, music, print, film, radio, television, commercial art, digital media, law, economics, bureaucracies, etc.), it is simultaneously a modality unto itself, and thus capable of transforming and shaping its contents.
- (3) The words "perceiving" and "understanding" are meant to call attention to the fact that culture shapes not only our understandings (collective agreements about the meanings of things), but also modifies our perceptions so that even our direct experience of the world occurs in culturally prescribed ways.

Culture, High Vs. Low:

From this definition, we went on to distinguish between high and low culture based on conceptions offered by Leavis and Williams. Whereas F.R. Leavis argues for a proscriptive notion of culture that distinguishes the “worthy” from the “worthless,” Raymond Williams maintains a descriptivist approach which is more concerned with understanding people’s lived experiences of culture. Modern Cultural Studies comes out of Raymond Williams' premise.

Determinisms:

Before we venture into the labyrinth of poststructuralism presented upfront by the textbook, I think it's important to take a look at some of the older theories that cultural studies scholars are modifying or rejecting. Structuralist philosophies are inherently deterministic, meaning that they assert a single cause for complex phenomena. Three deterministic theories that will be important for understanding poststructuralism include: (1) Biological Determinism (Sigmund Freud), (2) Economic Determinism (Karl Marx), and Technological Determinism (Marshall McLuhan).

1. Biological Determinism:

Biological Determinism is associated with Sigmund Freud and psychodynamic theory insofar as it asserts that our physical bodies (particularly the sex organs) have a determining influence over our perception, cognition, and interaction with the world, including other people.

Basic components of Freud's theory of psychodynamics include: (1) Conscious/Unconscious Mind, (2) Id/Ego/Superego, (3) Libido, (4) Psychosexual Development, (5) Oedipus Complex, and (5) Defense Mechanisms.

Conscious/Unconscious Mind:

According to Freud, the mind is divided into two parts: Conscious and Unconscious. The conscious mind refers to the state of perceptual and cognitive awareness which we take for granted in everyday reality, whereas the unconscious mind is an inaccessible storehouse of repressed or forgotten experiences that can only be confronted symbolically through phenomena such as dreams (which Freud referred to as "*the royal road to the unconscious*"). Other therapeutic techniques, psychological ailments, and behaviors can also offer insights into the workings of the unconscious mind. Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Jung theorized the existence of an additional "collective unconscious" that all humans share in common.

Id/Ego/Superego:

Psychodynamics is largely about the interaction among these three components of the human psyche. The "Id" houses our most basic instincts (i.e. hunger, fear, anger, lust), operates according to the "pleasure principle," and is concerned only with itself. The "Ego" refers to the individual's self-awareness and serves as the subjectivity of our conscious experience. Like the Id, the Ego is concerned only with the self, but operates according to the "reality principle," which permits it to function in the world. The "Superego" is the internalized voice of social authority and conscience which allows us to consider the thoughts and feelings of others.

Libido:

The libido is psychic energy.

Psychosexual Development:

Freud identified five stages of psychosexual development corresponding to the sexual preoccupations of the developing child. These include: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital.

The Oedipus Complex:

The phallic stage of development is accompanied by the oedipal complex (perhaps the most famous and outlandish of Freud's theories). Indicative of the power of culture to shape and reflect our internal experiences, Freud derives the name of this condition from the famous Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* wherein the main character unintentionally kills his father and has intercourse with his mother.

According to Freud, the developing male child in his limited frame of reference develops sexual feelings for his mother. Though he recognizes that these urges are unacceptable, he experiences enmity toward his father and entertains unconscious fantasies of replacing him at mother's side. However, father will not passively yield to the unconscious advances of the boy and responds with his own masculine aggression, which is interpreted by the son as a "castration threat." It is through this symbolic threat of castration that the young boy realizes he must yield to the father's power and identify with him symbolically by directing his sexual energy elsewhere.

To describe female sexual development, Freud offers a somewhat ambiguous corollary theory called the "Electra Complex," in which the daughter develops an attraction to her father, but this ultimately manifests itself as "penis envy," which creates barriers to identification with both father and mother. Ultimately, penis envy is reconciled through childbirth when the daughter comes to identify with her mother.

Defense Mechanisms:

Psychic tools used to by the ego to protect itself against unwanted thoughts and desires. These include: Repression, Fixation, Identification, Regression, Displacement, Sublimation, Denial, Projection, and Reaction Formation:

- (1) Repression: Transferring thoughts/impulses from the conscious to the unconscious mind.
- (2) Identification: Taking on another person's identity.
- (3) Regression: Revisiting the preoccupations of a prior stage in psychosexual development.
- (4) Displacement: Transference of libido from one preoccupation to another. (When displacement is socially valued this is called *sublimation* otherwise it can manifest a variety of different neuroses.)
- (5) Denial: Refusal to acknowledge some aspect of reality.
- (6) Projection: Transposition of personal preoccupations onto someone else.
- (7) Reaction Formation: Undesired thoughts/impulses are transformed into their opposites.

The Basics of Narrative Analysis:

We concluded with a discussion about the basics of narrative analysis, including the definition of *narrative*, its various components, and how these should be used to investigate theoretical perspectives within a media text.

A narrative is a series of contextualized and interrelated events that conclude with a climax.

Event: An event is a continuous span of time and space that occurs in a setting, which may involve one or more characters and/or objects, but must feature one or more actions. A setting is a physical place, a character is a person in the setting, an object is an inanimate entity within the setting, and an action is a physical occurrence within the setting.

Contextualized: The events of a narrative are contextualized in the sense that they are situated in a particular reality which is implied or explicitly stated over the course of the unfolding narrative. This may be achieved through the direct exposition of background information or implied by references within the events themselves. Most often, events are contextualized based on the *protagonist*, the character whose perspective and motivations frame how the narrative proceeds and how the events are interpreted.

Interrelated: The events of a narrative have an incremental cause/effect relationship to one another and make reference to a specific chronology, regardless of whether or not that chronology is followed in sequence.

Climax: The event in which the opposing forces of the narrative finally meet and consequently resolve the underlying tension or suspense. It is most often the case that the protagonist's motivation forms one side of the opposing forces and obstacles to that motivation (e.g. *antagonist*) form the other.

Character Traits, Narrative Outcomes, and Event Context:

Given these narrative components, it's possible to uncover the rhetorical message of the narrative by examining the relationships among three factors: (1) Character Traits, (2) Narrative Outcomes, and (3) Event Contexts.

Character traits represent the personal characteristics, values, and identities that are the subject of scrutiny. For instance, a character may have several different social classifications based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, ideology, personality, etc.. How these traits are represented through the character and what ultimately happens to the character over the course of the narrative is of utmost importance to determining the rhetorical message. However, these traits and outcomes must also be considered according to the event contexts that are based on the particular reality implied or described by the narrative. For example, the death or failure of a character may be interpreted as a condemnation of his or her character traits, or it may be interpreted as tragedy or martyrdom based on the event context.