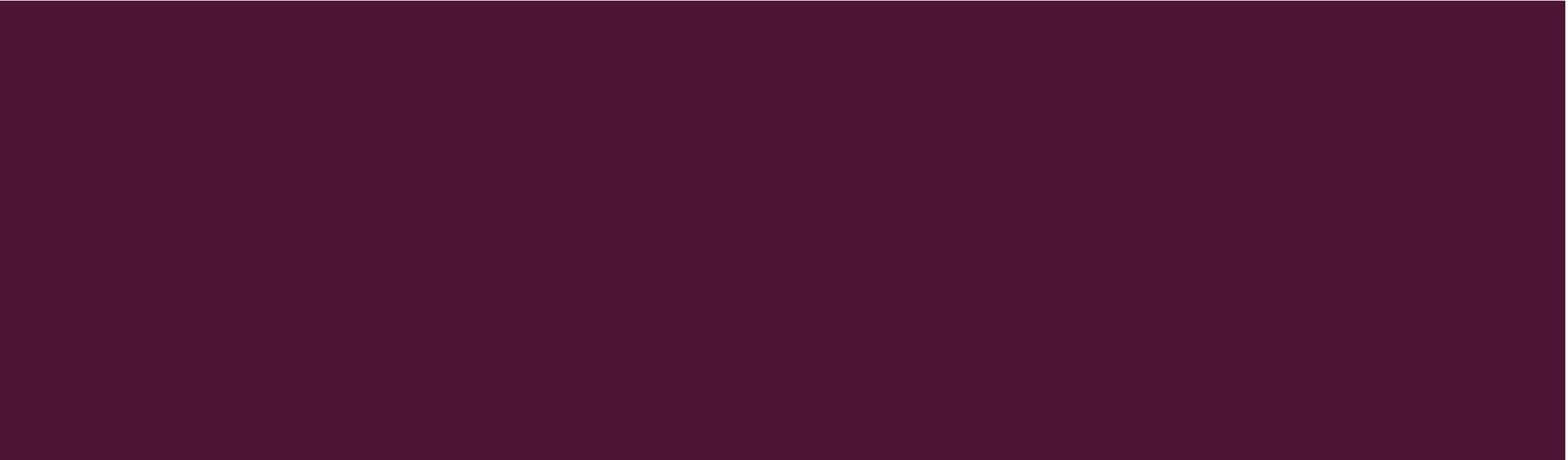

ENRICHING KNOWLEDGE SERIES: UNDERSTANDING FILM THEORIES AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO FILM ANALYSIS

MIGUEL ANTONIO N. LIZADA

MIGUELLIZADA@HSU.EDU.HK



WHY DO FILM CRITICISM? CRITICAL APPROACHES?

- Not exactly about “fault finding” or “seeing things negatively”
- **Etymology:** From the Greek *kritikos* ("able to make judgments") and *krinein* ("to separate, decide, sieve")
- Criticism is about adding value and creating more meaning to a work of art, in terms of the work of art's:
 - Contribution to artistic tradition
 - Engagement with social issues
 - Ability to address questions related to identity and self-hood.

WHY DO FILM CRITICISM? CRITICAL APPROACHES?

For secondary school students, pedagogical benefits include:

- developing sensitivity to structure and form
- honing critical thinking skills
- matching text and context

FILM AS AN ART FORM

- Like literary forms
 - usually has narratives and characterizations;
 - part of genre traditions
- An audiovisual form
- Part of an industry and follows the cycle of production, distribution, and circulation.
- Massified (a form of mass consumption)



CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF FILM



THEORY VS CRITICISM

- Critical approaches are derived from critical theory
- **Critical Theory:** a way of explaining things or phenomena and also a way of looking at the world (a “worldview”)
- **Criticism/Critical Approach:** application of that worldview

SURVEY OF CRITICAL APPROACHES

- Auteur Analysis
- Genre Analysis
- Psychoanalysis (Spectatorship)
- Gender Analysis
- Class Analysis
- Racial Analysis

Approach	Possible Focus
Auteur	Examines the director as the “author” of the film; recurring themes, stylistic signatures, visual motifs, and personal worldview across a director’s body of work.
Genre	Studies conventions, tropes, and narrative patterns of film genres (e.g., horror, romance, action); how genres evolve, reflect audience expectations, and reinforce or subvert norms
Psychoanalysis	Explores how films construct viewing positions; unconscious desires, identification with characters, gaze, voyeurism, and how audiences derive pleasure or meaning from cinematic experience
Gender	Analyzes representations of gender, especially women and sexual minorities; stereotypes, power relations, the “male gaze,” and how films reinforce or challenge gender norms



AUTEUR ANALYSIS



AUTEUR ANALYSIS

- The director as the “author”
- Focus on themes, signature styles, and worldviews of the director
- Not just an appreciation of technique
- Also situates the auteur within the larger context of his/her milieu
 - What was happening during his/her time that prompted him/her to craft his/her films that way?

LIST OF AUTEURS

- Alfred Hitchcock
- Akira Kurosawa
- Charlie Chaplain
- Christopher Nolan
- Steven Spielberg
- Wong Kar-wai
- Bong Joon-Ho

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

- Often called the “Master of Suspense”
- Known for: psychological thrillers, voyeurism, guilt, and intricate plotting
- Signature styles include: innovative camera work, tension-building editing, and subjective perspective.
- Drew heavily from his early work with silent films where there was no dialogue

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: ON ACTING AND CAMERA SHOTS

- Emphasis on how the visual language is manipulated to put emphasis on a character's emotions and feelings.
- Actors have blank expressions so Hitchcock can use the camera angles to build on the emotion.
- “Watch the listening”
- The shots as a form of orchestration

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: AXIS OR THEORY OF PROXIMITY

- Refers to the distance or proximity of the camera to the actor's face to highlight particular emotions.

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: AXIS OR THEORY OF PROXIMITY

- Refers to the distance or proximity of the camera to the actor's face to highlight particular emotions.
 - Close up: Emphasis of emotion
 - High shot: Objective or highlights supernatural
 - Wide shots: Relationships or distance between characters
 - Tracking shots/tracking away: Loss of control
 - Moving from wide to close up: creating the feeling of shock

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: AXIS OR THEORY OF FREQUENCY

- How long a shot stays on screen before moving on or cutting away
 - Moving away from the shot without cutting retains the tension
 - Stationary shot allows different elements or characters to come in
 - Fragmenting scenes emphasize the quick pace of the scene.

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: BODY PARTS AND OBJECTS

- Feet and legs: communicate safety or lack of safety
- Hands: interaction with objects that are used as plot devices
- Eyes: Completing a visual sentence

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: CRAFTING SUSPENSE

- Does not rely on cliché or typical places (such as dark and stormy nights).
- The menace and the terror can happen outside and in the ordinary
- Perpetrators of crimes are often the least expected

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: CRAFTING SUSPENSE

- Suspense is about manipulating and playing with the audience's expectations and appreciation of the events
- Typical structure:
 1. Planting a secret
 2. Close calls (the secret is close to being revealed)
 3. Twist

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: MACGUFFINS

- A plot device—an object, person, or goal—that drives a story's action and motivates characters, but is ultimately irrelevant in itself
- Examples:
 - The stolen money in *Psycho*
 - Government secrets in *North by Northwest*

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: CREATING TENSION

- Suspense vs Tension:
 - Tension helps build the suspense → the series of events that sustain the suspense
 - Tension makes things simple and realistic → the audience should not be confused on what is happening.

HITCHCOCK AS AUTEUR: SOUND

- Silence helps keep a secret from the audience
- Exaggerated to deliver a point or to surround a character to highlight a close call
- For Hitchcock, music pulls audiences from reality.

DOING AUTEUR ANALYSIS

1. Analysis should include more than one film (either as a full comparison or as supplement)
2. Go beyond impressionistic commentary: what do the styles suggest? How do the techniques reinforce interpretation?
3. Explore historical and social context: are there issues that the auteur was addressing or that helped shape his/her aesthetic practice?

SUGGESTED PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES FOR AUTEUR CRITICISM

- Comparison of film clips from the same auteur with worksheet
- Mock LinkedIn Profile or Interview with the Auteur
- Mock Comments section featuring the filmmakers



GENRE ANALYSIS



GENRES

- A way of categorizing films based on conventions, tropes, and thematic focus
- A way of marketing films
- Helps set audience expectations and initial frameworks for analysis

GENRE ANALYSIS

- Explores the history, stylistic conventions, and the tropes (thematic and character) associated with a particular genre
- Studies how a film upholds, updates, or even challenges the conventions of the genre.

EXAMPLES OF STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS

- Use of medium shots in romcoms
- Use of wide shots in sci-fi films
- Use of close-ups in horror films
- Bright lighting in romcoms
- Sentimental music in melodrama

EXAMPLES OF CHARACTER TROPES

- The Damsel in Distress
- The Femme Fatale in Film Noir
- The Chosen One in Sci-Fi/Fantasy Films
- The Wise Old Mentor (often with a White Beard) who Dies or Disappears Before the Third Act

STORYLINE TROPES

- Redemption Arcs
- The Troubled Town + Stranger Savior (Cowboy films)
- Rich Girl/Boy, Poor Boy/Girl
- A Series of Unfortunate Events (comedy films)
- The Road Trip (comedies but also drama or melodrama)
- The Underdog Story

CASE STUDY: ROM COMS

- What comes to mind when you hear the word romcom?
- What are some of the things you expect when watching romcoms?

ON ROMANTIC COMEDIES

- Mostly fantastic (unrealistic)
- Primarily for a female audience
- Draws from literary traditions
 - Comedies of William Shakespeare (such as *Twelfth Night*) → deceptions, love triangles
 - Novels from the Regency Period (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*) → the marriage plot

HISTORY OF THE ROM COM IN HOLLYWOOD

- **1930s/1940s:** Screwball Comedies and the Comedies of Remarriage (couples who separate and get back together)
- **1950s:** Films featuring women (often played by Marilyn Monroe) pursuing a rich man → highlighting economic disparity
- **1960s:** Battle of the Sexes + More exploration of themes of adultery

HISTORY OF THE ROM COM IN HOLLYWOOD

- **1960s – 1970s:** Films that explore disillusionment and reflection on the “permanence” of love
- **1980s:** Rise of the high school romcom
 - Culminated in the release of *Harry Meets Sally* (1989), deemed one of the greatest romcoms of all time
- **1990s – 2000s:** The Golden Age of Romcoms

ROMCOMS TODAY

- Reworking of updated tropes (deconstruction of tropes)
- Occasionally would cater to the male audience
- The rise of streaming platforms meant more time for characterizations

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMCOMS

1. The use of a red herring (a person the protagonist initially falls for)
2. A strong often independent female protagonist
3. The importance of witty dialogue (borrowed from screwball comedy)
4. The marriage plot (or the promise of a monogamous relationship) at the end of the film

CONVENTIONAL CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- Bright lighting with gentle tones
- Over-shoulder shots for conversations and bring about tension
- Close-up shots to highlight emotions
- Tracking shots to show how the environment contributes to the romantic tension
- Romantic music that helps convey the thematic message

DOING GENRE CRITICISM

- Identify the tropes used or challenged in the film
- Identify the cinematic techniques associated with the genre in the film
- Situate the film in its social and historical context
- Discuss whether the film affirms or confirms certain social mores

SUGGESTED PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES FOR GENRE CRITICISM

- Create Your Own [Genre] Story, with Three-Act Structure
- Filming Techniques
 - Have students shoot a scene (either with role playing students or models/stuffed toys) using the prescribed angles
- Do a Pitch Meeting or Honest Trailer to highlight how the films play around with conventions



PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH



- 
- Psychoanalysis $\neq$ Psychological
 - Not about the film as therapeutic
 - Draws primarily from Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan and applies their ideas on psychoanalysis to study film

IMPORTANT PSYCHOANALYTIC TERMS APPLIED IN FILM

- The Unconscious
- The Mirror Stage and Misrecognition
- The Oedipus Complex (yes, might be a little complicated for secondary school students)

THE UNCONSCIOUS

- Freudian Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious contains repressed memories and unfulfilled desires that influence a person's conscious behavior
- In film analysis, the Unconscious can be seen through:
 - Dream sequences and how they are filmed through lighting, color, shadows, among others
 - Symbolisms and Archetypes. Character tropes are interpreted as archetypes
 - The notion of the return of the repressed: Past experiences and trauma manifest in film
 - The Collective Unconscious

THE MIRROR STAGE AND MISRECOGNITION (SIMPLIFIED)

- Formulated by Jacques Lacan
- Occurs during the infant stage where the infant sees a coherent image of himself/herself in the mirror (specular image) that contradicts their own experience of bodily fragmentation leading to the formation of the self and the ego
- Identity is based on Misrecognition and Lack
- Application to film study: how spectators and characters move based on the idea of this lack and needing of coherence.

THE OEDIPUS/ELECTRA COMPLEX

- Developed by Sigmund Freud
- A child's initial attraction one parent is suppressed for fear of the other parent, leading to the formatting of his subjectivity
- Application in film: how some films replicate the Oedipal drama as a search for coherence

FIVE APPROACHES TO PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF FILMS

1. Cultural Myth
2. Biographical
3. Character Analysis
4. Spectatorship
5. Analog

I. CULTURAL MYTH

- Goes back to the idea of the Collective Unconscious
- Cultures and civilizations are built on the idea of myths (different from mythological)
 - Light vs Shadow
 - Nature vs Culture
 - The Cowboy myth
- Spectators are attracted to these myths for their wish fulfillment and addressing of a lack

2. BIOGRAPHY

- Different from auteur approach which focuses on stylistic and thematic conventions
- This psychoanalytic approach looks at how films reveal a filmmaker's Unconscious
 - e.g. Hitchcock's portrayal of policemen and figures of authority based on a childhood experience of being left in a police station by his father as punishment

3. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

- Once again, a look into how characters reveal their Unconscious and desires through their actions
- A character analysis with a strong psychoanalytic angle

4. SPECTATORSHIP

- How do we see spectators see the film
- Christian Metz: How do spectators enter the diageitic world of the cinema?
- •Assigns a point of view (the camera) but as the sole POV since there are not POVs outside of the camera
- How is a spectator gendered?

5.ANALOG

- The Film as a Dream projected on screen
- Condensation: different attributes are compressed into a single character
- Displacement: one attribute is substitute for another
- Tension between presence and absence
- Theatre vs Film in terms of presenting reality
 - Theater: We are watching something fictional performed by real people (actors)
 - Film: We are watching something fictional performed by also someone fictional / not real (recording only)
- Fetishism – “I know that this is fictional and I know that this is not real but this fictional world is my reality for the duration of the cinematic experience.

5.ANALOG

- A return to the Mirror Stage: Identification established through the camera.
- Primary Cinematic Identification: Spectator identifies with the camera's perspective
- Secondary Cinematic Identification: Spectator identifies with the character's perspective
- In terms of “lack,” the viewer pursues what is not there.

5.ANALOG

- The Look vs the Gaze:
 - The Look: The simple act of looking – characters looking at each other or objects in the film's world; the audience looking at the film
 - The Gaze: more subjective and with overlays of meanings.
 - The audience does the gazing (the male gaze)
 - The characters can also gaze back

DOING PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS (FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS!)

- Cultural Myths Approach: What tensions or opposites are being highlighted by film?
 - Examples: Inside vs Outside; Nature/Savage vs Culture/Refinement
- Character Analysis: How are the character's actions in the film motivated by their past experiences? How do the cinematic techniques highlight this?
- Spectatorship (more advanced): how do the camera angles help control the spectator's viewing experience?
- Emphasis on Lack (for Characters and/or Spectators): What lack or missing thing is the character searching for? What lack is possibly remedied by the viewers through the viewing experience?

CHARACTER ANALYSIS: LOKI IN THE MARVEL FILMS

- Experience of being taken from his biological parents
- The loss and search for a father
 - Odin as adoptive father who eventually rejects him
 - Thanos as a father figure
 - Freya as maternal figure
- Thor as an idealized masculine figure
- How do these experiences and loss and identification motivate Loki's actions in the film?



GENDER ANALYSIS



GENDER ANALYSIS

- Draws primarily from feminist theory and also psychoanalysis
- Explores how gender and gender dynamics are represented through characterization and cinematic techniques (particularly the concept of the gaze)
- This can be combined with other approaches

GENDER ANALYSIS: THINGS TO POSSIBLY EXPLORE

- How characters and storyline reinforce or challenge gendered assumptions, expectations, and mores of the social milieu.
- How these characterizations are presented to the viewers through cinematic techniques, especially through various cinematic techniques

EXAMPLE: THE FEMME FATALE

- An attractive woman that uses her charms to charm, control, or even harm men.
- Antecedents from literature include Delilah (from the Bible) and Clytemnestra from Greek mythology
- Usually in film noir, but can also be seen in other genres

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEMME FATALE

- Makes a rather sensational, attention-grabbing entrance
- Attractive and seductive
- Often cynical with her worldview
- Not interested in being a mother or following conventions

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Femme Fatales are expressions of anxieties regarding female and femininity
- Example: Post-World War II context of film noir
 - During the WWII, women took over male roles when their husbands were away
 - When the husbands returned, they found women were more empowered, independent, and not interested in continuing traditional roles
 - Fear also of infidelity

THE “MALE GAZE”

- A concept termed by Laura Mulvey that was derived from psychoanalytic approach
- Posits that the camera is gendered and is interested in how the camera angles position or characterize women in a particular way and thus possibly diminishing their identity

DOING GENDER ANALYSIS

- Identify the gender stereotypes and conventions (roles, expectations, assumptions) in the film.
- Discuss how the different cinematic techniques (most especially the camera angles) reinforce these representations.
- Link these conventions to social mores and/or historical context.

EXERCISES ON DOING GENDER ANALYSIS

- Localization of Discussions on Gender: What are some of the expectations that men and women face in Hong Kong today? Where do these expectations come from?
- This can sharpen the students' critical thinking skills when they do actual gender analysis of films

EXERCISES ON DOING GENDER ANALYSIS

- Play clips from Marvel or DC superhero films. Ask your students: how are the portrayals of the male heroes (like Captain America, Ironman, Batman) similar to or different from the way women heroes (like Black Widow, Wonder Woman) are shot?



ADDITIONAL EXERCISES AND SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES



COMPARISON TABLE

- Especially helpful for auteur studies or genre analysis
- Identify things to compare vs how individual, specific films display such features

SAMPLE

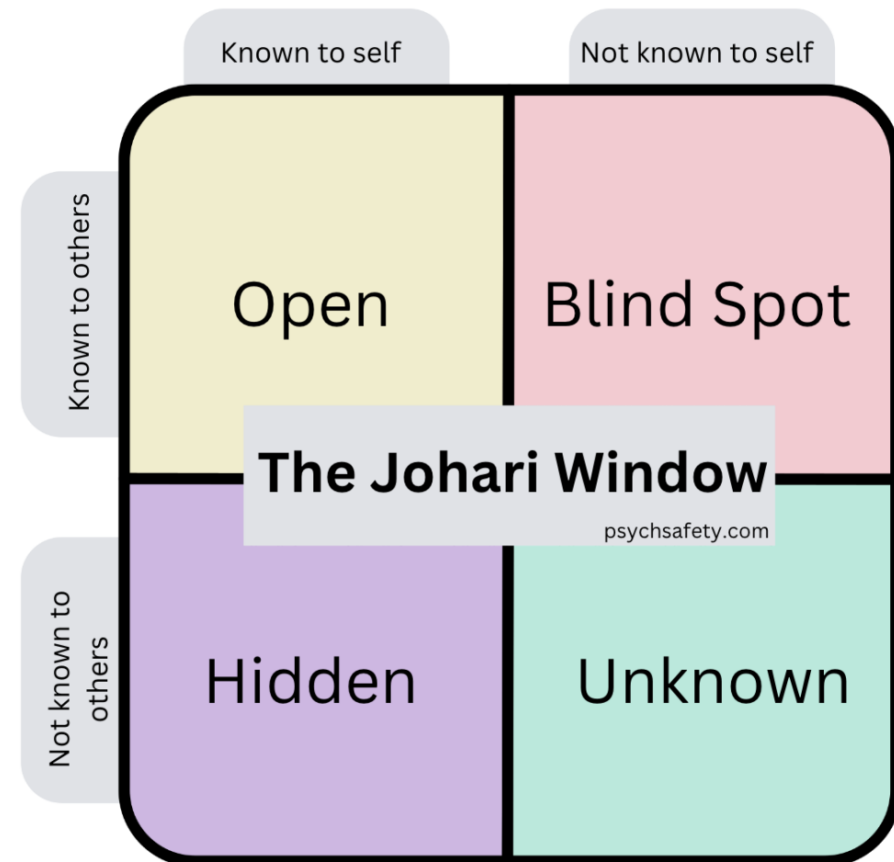
	Movie X	Movie Y	Movie Z
Camera shots and angles			
Lighting			
Editing			
Treatment of Male/Female Characters			

JOHARI WINDOW

- A psychology tool developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 to improve self-awareness, communication, and team relationships.
- Useful for developing character analysis as well as understanding a character's relationship with others

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Open (Known to Self and Others)

- Seeks out the Defense against the Dark Arts post
- Stern, authoritarian
- Favoritism towards Slytherin

Blind Spot (Not Known to Self; Known to Others)

- Feared but not respected by students
- Overt resentment towards Harry Potter

Hidden (Known to Self; Unknown to Others)

- Loyalty to Dumbledore
- Enduring love for Lily Potter

Unknown (Not Known to Self and Others)

- The extent of his love for Lily Potter as exemplified by his treatment to Harry Potter
- The depth of his identity conflict

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

- A student identifies an achievable goal and works towards that goal on a weekly basis with a work plan.
- The worksheet may be evaluated based on the student's ability to achieve the goal by way of identifying specific but also unique examples for each week.
- A synthesis essay may also be asked so that the students' integrative skills can be developed.

SAMPLE RUBRICS

Rubric	Ideal Descriptors
Goal Setting & Clarity	Goal is highly specific, achievable, and clearly focused on a meaningful aspect of the creator's work; shows strong understanding of purpose.
Weekly Work Plan & Completion	Consistently follows a clear weekly plan; all tasks are completed on time with strong evidence of effort and progression.
Use of Specific Examples	Each week includes precise, detailed, and unique examples that strongly support the goal; demonstrates close observation and originality
Depth of Analysis	Demonstrates insightful analysis; clearly explains how examples connect to the goal with strong critical thinking
Synthesis Essay (Integrative Skills)	Essay effectively integrates insights from all weeks; presents a coherent argument with strong supporting examples

SYNTHESIS ESSAY

Alfred Hitchcock's camera techniques are both storytelling techniques as well as ability to manipulate an audience's emotional experience. In *Psycho*, the shift from wide shots to close-ups allows the viewer to move from observing the setting to engaging deeply with a character's emotional state, gradually intensifying tension. This transition shows how changes in shot distance can guide the audience from detachment to intimacy. The use of the dolly zoom in *Vertigo* to represent the character's psychological instability, creates a sense of disorientation that mirrors the protagonist's anxiety. In *Rear Window*, the restriction of the camera to a single point of view builds suspense by limiting what the audience can see and forcing attention to small, significant details. Overall, Hitchcock's films show that visual perspective is central to how tension and meaning are created in cinema.

Goal:

To understand how Alfred Hitchcock uses the camera shots and angles to build suspense

Week	Task Completed	What I Learned
2-3	Watch <i>Psycho</i> (1960)	How the shifting of the shots from a wide shot a close-up can help transition from mere establishment of locale to a character's emotional depth
4-5	Watch <i>Vertigo</i> (1958)	How camera movement—especially the famous “dolly zoom”—can visually represent a character's psychological state, creating a sense of disorientation and anxiety that draws the viewer into the character's fear and obsession.
6-7	Watch <i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	How limiting the camera to a single point of view (Jeff's window) builds suspense by controlling what the audience can and cannot see, making small visual details and shifts in angle feel tense and significant.

PRACTICE:
SCENE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

JURASSIC PARK (1993)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NI8plnMkJWk>
- Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler and mathematician Ian Malcolm are invited by John Hammond to tour an island theme park populated by dinosaurs created from prehistoric DNA. Joining them are Hammond's grandchildren Tim and Lexi.
- A disgruntled employee disables the park's security system so that he can steal DNA vials and sell them to a rival company. This releases the dinosaurs and chaos ensues

- 
- Analyze this scene based on the approach assigned to your group
 - You may consider the questions in the subsequent slides to build your analysis

AUTEUR

The following questions will ask you to examine the techniques employed by Spielberg:

- How does Spielberg's delaying of the full-body appearance of the raptors increase tension?
- How do camera angles and framing make the control room feel like a "trap"?
- How does Spielberg employ editing to make the distinction between predator and prey apparent?
- How does Spielberg signal the shift from suspense to action?

GENRE

The following questions will ask you to examine how the film utilizes and updates the sci-fi/thriller genre

- In what ways are the raptors different from “typical monsters” in other films?
- How does the sudden “rescue” of the T-Rex complicate the film’s ideas about monstrosity?
- How does the film, through this scene, problematize the idea of intelligence?
- How does the film, through this scene, warn us of the dangers of human hubris (arrogance)?

PSYCHOANALYSIS

The following set of questions ask you to examine how the camera shots construct forms of spectatorship:

- How does the film make the audience feel like they are “inside” and trapped inside the control room with the protagonists?
- When do we see the raptors directly, and when are they hidden? Why does this matter?
- How do the camera shots show the T-Rex’s “rescue?” What emotions do these create? Relief? New fear? Awe?
- How do the different shot durations (lingering vs rapid cuts) control emotional response?

GENDER

The following set of questions ask you to examine how the camera shots construct forms of spectatorship:

- What is the significance of making the final confrontation be between the dinosaurs and a makeshift family (The scientists and the two grandchildren of the park owner)?
- How is “parental protection” constructed in this scene—who performs it and who depends on it? (Hint: In the earlier parts of the film, Alan Grant is portrayed as someone who is easily annoyed by children, especially Tim)
- How does the character of Ellie Satler uphold and/or challenge female stereotypes especially in action/thriller films?



RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS



FOR FOUNDATIONAL WORK ON FILM ART AND ANALYSIS

Bordwell, David and Kristin
Thompson. McGraw-Hill, 2012

Hill, John and Pamela Church Gibson. *Film
Studies: Critical Approaches*. Oxford
University Press, 2000.

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. British Film
Institute, 1999.

WEB RESOURCES

- For Simple Definition of Terms: <https://filmanalysis.yale.edu/>
- British Film Institute Resources for Teachers: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/resources-events-teachers/resources-teachers>
- Empire: <https://www.empireonline.com/> (for journalistic but still informative discussions on film)
- StudioBinder: <https://www.youtube.com/@StudioBinder> (excellent for specific topics that cover cinematic techniques, genre, and auteur analysis without being too technical)