

Meaning Making & Film (Part 2)

Finding Meaning in Forms, Patterns, & Symbols

COMM 103F
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Recap

- Films are collaborative endeavors that blend creativity, technology, and business
- Films have cinematic lineages that can be understood through film history
- Visual culture in general, and films specifically, make meaning:
 - Form → “The overall system of relationships among the parts of a film.”

PATTERNS

shape the viewer's response and establish expectations

Mythic Patterns



Myths, Origin Stories, Heroes & Villains

- Cultural relationships to myth formed long before mass media, film, etc.
- The “cultural work” of mythic stories
 - Collective in nature, becomes a group’s story anchored in a specific time and place, not just one individual’s
 - Shared identity → Myths tell us what we are, who we are, who we are NOT
 - Shared Ideology → Myths inform us of what is important to us, what values we hold dear
 - Shared Practices → Myths are culturally embedded (in conscious and unconscious ways)
- Popular mythic tropes
 - Hero’s Quest
 - Villains, Allies, Fantastical Interventions
 - Tests, Trials, and Tribulations
 - Victory and Returning with Elixir
- Recognize a universal human nature that can be appealed to by a common story

Discussion Question

How does the cultural embeddedness of the monomyth shape how we visually read narrative in visual culture and film?



THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN 6 POPULAR MOVIES



Encoding & Decoding*

- Critical reading (Barthes)...Connotations and denotations...HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN? What practices are involved?
- Stuart Hall (Jamaican born, lived in UK cultural theorist, 20th cent) → “Encoding, Decoding”
 - All images are **encoded** with meanings in their creation and production that is **decoded** by viewers
 - Three positions viewers can take as decoders of cultural images and artifacts
 - **Dominant-hegemonic reading** → identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of an image or text in an unquestioning manner
 - ****Negotiated reading** → negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings
 - **Oppositional reading** → take an oppositional position by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it all together (e.g. ignoring)

* Next slides from Sturken & Cartwright; **According to Hall, negotiated readings are the most common practice

American Idol Example



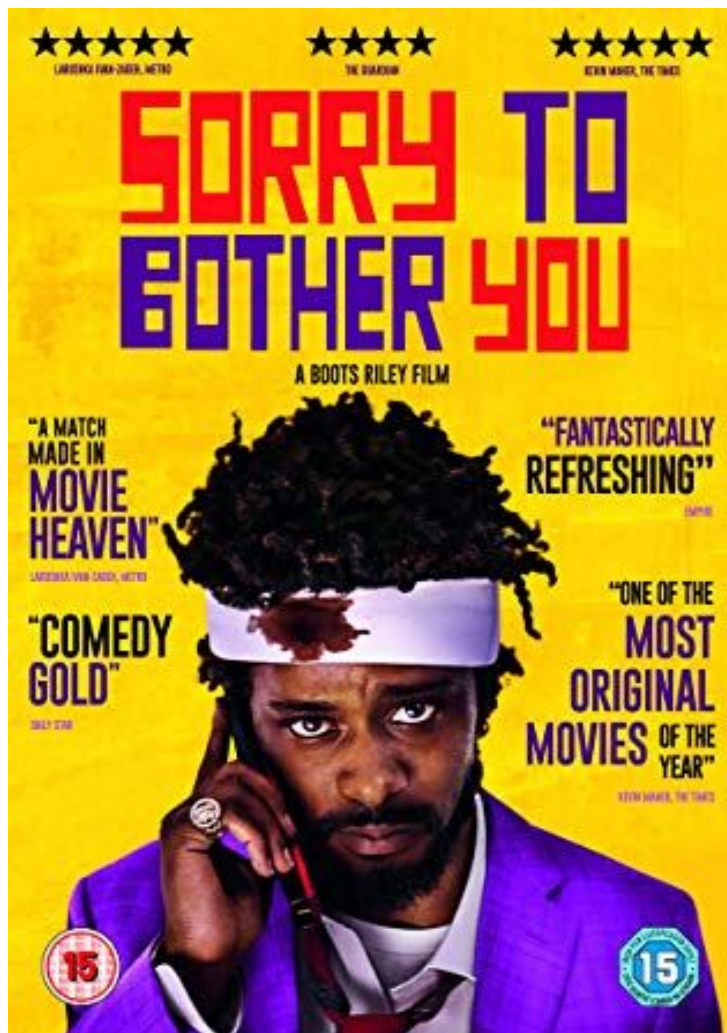
- **Dominant-hegemonic reading example** → Ordinary people have the same opportunities to be rewarded for talent as those with wealth, social capital, and fame
- **Negotiated reading example** → Agree with some premises of the show (such as opportunity) but disagree with others (such as blatant product placement)
- **Oppositional reading example** → interpret reality TV programming in general as a means for TV industries to create cheap programming without having to pay high fees of well known performers and scriptwriters

Reception & Audience

- Viewing practices fall along a continuum of negotiated meanings
- Reading visual culture involves issue of **power**
 - Whose readings matter and how do 'others' readings come to matter?
 - The power ranking of aesthetics and taste (e.g. "high" and "low" cultural forms)
- Does not mean we discount the role of producers of content; they also have intended meanings
 - Barthes → 1967 "The Death of the Author," there is no ultimate authorial meaning for readers to uncover. It is the job of the critical reader not to simply point out dominant meanings but how these meanings are made
 - Foucault (French philosopher, theorist, 20th cent) → 1979 "What is an Author?" a response to Barthes, argues that concept of author did not always exist and uses "author function" as opposed to "author"...where "authorship" is about ownership rather than creation

Key Takeaways

- Cultural relationships to myth formed long before mass media, film, etc.
- Myths perform important “cultural work” informing shared notions of identity, values, customs, practices, and ways of being
- Films have historically been an instrument of contemporary mythic dissemination
- Audiences are a key component of story as we **decode** embedded meanings and **encodings** when we view these films (whether consciously or not)



- 2018
- Comedy, Fantasy, Sci-Fi
- 1 hr 51 mins
- Director: Boots Riley (*debut*)
- Writer: Boots Riley (*debut*)
- Starring: LaKeith Stanfield, Tessa Thompson, Armie Hammer
- Budget: --
- Domestic Box Office: \$17M
- In an alternate present-day version of Oakland, telemarketer Cassius Green discovers a magical key to professional success, propelling him into a universe of greed.

Questions to Consider...

- How does the film adhere to and/or challenge the monomyth tradition?
- What broader themes or ideologies are addressed through the movie (e.g. gentrification, labor relations, notions of race, class, gender, etc.)?
- What technical and/or creative tools are used to move the narrative forward or address broader themes?
- What various meanings are present in the film?
- How did the film's magical realism and satirical approach impact your viewing experience?
- What cinematic elements stood out as unique, oppositional, or even conventional?

Monomythic Forms to Consider While Viewing

