Class 7B: Masculinity & Action Cinema

The Film Experience
Chapter 11: "Reading about Film: Critical Theories and Methods"
Contemporary Film Theory

Structuralism
Claude Lévi-Strauss
narratology: the study of narrative forms
Structuralist theorists reduce narrative to its most basic form: a beginning situation is disrupted, a hero takes action as result, and a new equilibrium is reached at the end.

Poststructuralism
questions the rational methodology and fixed definitions of structuralism.
includes many areas of thought, form psychoanalysis to postcolonial and feminist theory.
a position of critique, asking us to reconsider the truths and hierarchies we take for granted.

Structuralism attempted to be systematic with empirical observation by looking for transhistorical patterns to which specific data would fit. Poststruturalism, in turn, questions structuralism's assumption of objectivity and the disregard for cultural and historical context.

Psychoanalysis
Jacques Lacan: imaginary (images), symbolic (language), real (trauma that cannot be directly represented).

The Mirror Stage: The young child sees herself in the mirror and begins to understand herself as a separate being in the world, with an individual identity.

Apparatus Theory
explores the values built into film technology through the particular context of its historical development.

argues that an individual who stands in front of a Renaissance painting or watches a classical Hollywood movie is "subjected" to the apparatus's positioning and understands his or her "subjectivity" or sense of self in predetermined conditions.

Jean-Louis Baudry
"The Apparatus:
Metaphsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema"

Plato, The Allegory of the Cave

Baudry uses this to imply a transhistorical drive toward the apparatus; the shadow play in the cave is "a desire which haunts the invention of cinema."

Freud, Regression

The desire for undifferentiation

The two most noted examples are the oral stage (for the mother's breast), in which someone obsessively eats, smokes, talks, etc.; and the anal stage, in which one is obsessively neat or sloppy.

The Major Analogies of Cinema and Dreaming

- Inhibition of Movement ("chained" in our seats like Plato's prisoners)
- Lack of Reality Testing (For example, in dreams, we need to "pinch ourselves," In *Inception*, they use a spinning top.

- An Imagistic Medium (However, unlike films, dream images tend to be *incomplete*, foregrounds without
- backgrounds, figures in voids, and overlaying figures and places, dream images no not "map" onto a visual space coherently).
- A Dark Room
- A More-than Real Impression of Reality (Cinema is an expression of a desire, an impression of reality imbued with affect. It is an artificial psychosis, and hallucinatory, because of the dreamer/viewer's undifferentiation, she identifies with characters on screen.)
- A Tendency to Efface the Distinction between Perception and Representation (Lack of distinction between active/passive, interior/exterior, undifferentiation of bodies, and this underlies the desire for regression.)

Queer Theory

Queer film theory critiques and supplements feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, allowing for more flexible ways of seeing and experiencing visual pleasure than are accounted for by the binary opposites of male/female, seeing/seen, being/desiring.

Cultural Studies

Reception Theory

Reception theory focuses on how a film is received by audiences, rather than on who made a film or on its formal features or thematic content. It implies a theory of audiences as active rather than passive.

They may react from the position the text slots them into—the **dominant reading**; offer a **negotiated reading** that accommodates different realities; or reject the framework in which a dominant message is conveyed through an **oppositional reading**.

Star Studies

In addition to analyzing how a star's image is composed from various elements—film appearances, promotion, publicity, and critical commentary—theorists are interested in how audience reception helps define a star's cultural meaning.

Race and Representation

Representation in:

1. the **aesthetic** sense, whereby we may speak of representations of African Americans in films of Spike Lee versus those of *Gone with the Wind*
2. the **political** sense of standing for a group of people, as an elected representative does.

Yvonne Tasker
"Dumb Movies for Dumb People:
Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema"

How would we account for the undoubtable marketability of the male body in the 1980s?

These films and stars exemplify, in different ways, a tendency of the Hollywood action cinema toward **the construction of the male body as spectacle**, together with an awareness of **masculinity and performance**. They also play upon images of power and powerlessness at the center of which is the male hero.

Suffering—torture, in particular—operates as both a set of narrative hurdles to overcome, tests that the hero must survive, and as a set of aestheticized images to be lovingly dwelt on.

Richard Dyer: in a world "of microchips and large scale growth (in the USA) of women in traditionally male occupations" the adoption of such tones suggests that the 'values of masculine physicality are harder to maintain straightfacedly and unproblematically" (1987: 12).

"Within the action cinema **the figure of the star as hero**, larger than life in his physical abilities and pin-up good looks, **operates as a key aspect of the more general visual excess** that this particular form of Hollywood production offers to its audience. Along with the visual pyrotechnics, the military array of weaponry and hardware, the arch-villains and the staggering obstacles the hero must overcome, the overblown budgets, the expansive landscapes against which the drama is acted out, and the equally expansive soundtracks, is the body of the star as hero, characteristically functioning as spectacle" (233).

If anxieties to do with sexuality and difference are increasingly worked out over the male body and its commodification as spectacle, then there seems to be **two dominant strategies** in the action cinema:

1. images of physical torture and suffering
2. comedy

The hero's excessive masculinity, is subjected to humiliation and mockery at some level (237).

"If **muscles** are signifiers of both struggle and traditional forms of male labor, then for the many critics the muscles of male stars seem repulsive and ridiculous precisely because they seem to be dysfunctional, 'nothing more' than decoration, a distinctly unmanly designation. The body of the hero may seem dysfunctional, given a decline in the traditional forms of labor that he is called on to perform, but also essential in a last stand, operating **as both affirmation and decoration**" (239).

"It is perhaps **the failure of work**, the lack of effectively with which his efforts are greeted that, as much as anything, allows an understanding of the cynical vision of the populist hero that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and which is crucial to the characterization of John McClane in the two *Die Hard* films" (240).

In both films, John McClane has no official place, as a stream of officials and bureaucrats insist on pointing out. "By and large the hero of the recent action cinema is not an emissary of the State or, if he is, the State is engaged in a double-cross, as in *Rambo* (1985). The hero may be a policeman or a soldier but he more often than not acts unofficially, against the rules and often in a reactive way, responding to attacks rather than initiating them" (241).

Die Hard 2 **(Renny Harlin, 1990)**
In the following scene at the beginning of the film, it doubles down upon, and makes explicit, the contemporary technologies that challenge the hero's masculine agency.

Sharon Willis
"Mutilated Masculinities and Their Prostheses: Die Hards and Lethal Weapons"

"Because popular films read, consume, and even offer partial analyses of **fantasies and anxieties** circulating in the social field, **they are always ambivalent**, and their address to us is ambivalent. If we recognize that films may tell us what we are really thinking about—are really anxious about collectively—then we have to assume that we do not automatically understand these anxieties any more than the film do, because surely **the unconscious** is at work **in the social field** as well" (58).

We need critical reading strategies that remain alert to our own seductions. [A poststructuralist argument.]

Generalized crises of authority: Both *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* offer curious and excessive rewritings of a plot familiar to us from **westerns**: "the hero is a lawman—uncontained by marriage—whose renegade force is unleashed by a woman's disappearance or the threat of her disappearance. As in westerns, the relationship of the hero to the law is unstable—does he represent it, or does he become it?" (28)

The hero's relation to the law turns on the question of whether or not he can, or must, embody it—quite literally; that is, on whether or not his body can be the law, whether the law is written on the body. In each case **the crisis of authority combines with masculine sadomasochistic spectacle** in the context of **bonding with a black man**: the film's strongest form of closure (28).

What these films put forward as the central figure of masculinity in crisis is really **white heterosexual masculinity** desperately seeking to reconstruct itself within a web of social differences. The opposing terms:

1. femininity
2. black masculinity
3. male homosexuality.

Paul Smith: "the pleasure proffered in action movies can be regarded, then, not so much as the perverse pleasure of **transgressing given norms**, but as at bottom the pleasure of **reinforcing them**" (33). Willis argues that these films require *both moves*: "And this requisite suggests a pleasure in repeating the instability of the 'law' in order to maintain it" (33).

These action films treat sexual and racial difference as unproblematic, as already managed. But they also come through as incoherent, racial issues are pushed to the periphery; the erotic center is also the site of aggression: the white male star.

Die Hard rewrites the western, as a disaster film. It redistributes the anxiety through the disaster motif, projects it onto the scale of the building.

The foregrounded combative male body "appears simultaneously as a machine of destruction and as constantly eroded and mutilated flesh; it is **both hyperphallicized** in its straining muscularity **and feminized** as it is placed in the masochistic position" (40).

Die Hard's most persistent image: the shattering of glass—computer screens, office windows.

Holly is not an equal adversary; "she is visually and thematically constructed as a phallic career woman who cuts her husband down or out of the picture" (43). In the end, her voluntary name change signals her submission to marital law (43).

Spectacle & Display (of the Male Body)

"Our gaze is most commonly situated with the camera's—in dizzying mobility, sweeping across action scenes, or following the characters' motion, or pulling away to scrutinize the body from extreme or implausible angles directly above or below it, zooming in to fragment it in detail. This disrupted and disrupting gaze raises the issue of authority, the law, and the sadomasochistic fantasy implicated in the spectacle of the male body" (45). At the same time, the camera allows us to "go" and see everywhere in the building.

The bodies in action are figured in a highly-stylized fashion that freezes the narrative, that recognize the "pleasure of display" (46). This spectacle, however, involves aggression as a means of covering up or warding off the erotic gaze, and operates within the contexts of a "crisis" of masculine authority and of the body's limits.

McClane's body attains its status as law through mutilation and torment. "Spectator pleasure is split between the sadistic and the masochistic, since we are able to identify with authority while seeing it punished in the person of the hero" (47).

Authority & Technology

The struggle for authority here overlaps with a continual struggle for control of available technologies: "The limitations of sight here give rise to an entire economy of prosthetics within a nightmare of complete technological dysfunction, where an ordinary office building becomes a terrifying prison since it is virtually

unmanageable for the scale of the human body without electronic prosthetic devices—elevators, computers, telephones, television, and video technologies" (48). This is an anxious fantasy about mismanagement, about the failure to arrive at the appropriate measure of technology (48).

"Anxieties about racial and sexual difference are also recoded in anxieties about technology and its management, about the security of the divide between body and machine" (54).

Mass Media

Mass media and communications technology remain central to *Die Hard*'s ironies. The figure of television is charged with ambivalence: it invades McClane's domestic space to interview his kids and thereby allows Hans to identify him and his wife. Television also emblematizes popular discourse. (McClane chooses the name "Roy Rogers.")

As for **the radio**, "the voice is closer, truer than the eye; the radio has the greater authority" (50).

Global Capital & Social Difference

The film is fundamentally organized by a multiculturalist fantasy: "*Die Hard*'s fantasies about social difference, however, are diffused as they are mapped onto figures of international cultural difference, where the central opposition is American/foreign" (52).

This gleeful fantasy of corporate and technological destruction rehearses populist anticorporate sentiments alongside technophobic ones in the context of international trade conflicts, with the Germans and the Japanese as competing foreign interests (51).

To be American is to be a *bricoleur*, a behind-the-scenes guerrilla, a good manager of crisis, in a culture depicted as in a constant state of emergency. The film offers the cliché of American individual initiative and inventiveness, against German precision and bloodlessness, and Japanese regimentation and conformity (53).

Die Hard depicts **a state of permanent emergency**: "Despite its happy ending, we cannot forget that its picture of a multicultural society looks like a disaster, one that brings down the house, quite literally. Within this film's escalating spectacle of disaster, difference becomes yet another special effect…" (54).

"Now, if films consume, transform, and **shape popular discourses**, they inevitably do so **ambivalently**, offering up possibly progressive impulses and indicating points of resistance as well as managing resistance and anxiety" (55).

Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988), 131 min.

Novel by Roderick Thorp. Screenplay by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza

Cast

Bruce Willis	John McClane
Bonnie Bedeila	Holly Gennaro McClane
Reginald VelJohnson	Sgt. Al Powell
James Shigeta	Joseph Yoshinobu Takagi
Alan Rickman	Hans Gruber

Note how the film presents McClane as an "average Joe," trying to negotiate this alienating (and castrating) new world of computer systems, international corporations and capital, career women, and official (and bureaucratic) law enforcement—and how these changes frustrate his ability to act and enforce his will. In what ways is his bonding with Sgt. Powell, the black cop, presented as one of the only solutions to this "crisis"?

Note how McClane's body, as a site of the law and action, is both hyper masculine (as sadistic and powerful) and feminized (as masochistic and "castrated"). How might this convey an *ambivalence* about the fantasies and anxieties presented in the film?

In what ways might the film suggest that to be American is to be a *bricoleur*, a good manager of crisis, flexible enough to improvise, to appropriate the tools and cultural references at hand?

Discussion

With these insights from Willis and Tasker in mind, address how contemporary action movies might be read as similarly ambivalent fantasies about race, gender, globalization, science, technology, or other forces that may pose a "crisis" to masculine agency—the ability of white men to uphold law and order through violent, physical action. In what ways do such action films also exhibit what we might call the "frenzy of the visible," through rapid montage and/or mobile camera shots (actual or virtual), and what might such spectacles say about other media (i.e. GoPro cameras, video games, medical imaging)? To what degree might the spectacle of the male action hero be read as "erotic" in particular contexts, and how might this eroticism be displaced onto displays of violence?