

Week 1 – Screen Violence and the Production of Meaning

Justification of theories

- **Poststructuralism:** can examine the imaginary relations we have to real conditions of existence → Representations can distort, fool, conceal, deceive (e.g. Althusser)
- **Postmodernism:** representations can or must replace reality for groups who lose reference to reality (e.g. Baudrillard, Debord)
- **Discourse theory:** representations can constitute/produce reality so that criminals are discursively produced, but's its very for them to end up in prison (e.g. Foucault)

Discourse Theory

- An object doesn't create our understanding of it
- Our understanding of everything precedes individual experiences, it is, as Kant says, synthetic and *a priori*
- The understanding is more relevant than the thing. But though our understanding doesn't reach things, if the 'thing' is a person, it's relevant

Existentialism

- Representations are not distinct from reality; reality is always present
- The spirit of social science "is to understand 'being in relationship to itself and not in relationship to myself'"
- Objectivity is possible without objectivism/scientism

Jack Katz on existentialism

- 'And the point about embodiment ... is that it is not about describing a person's behaviour from the standpoint or as seen by another'

Elle McFeast and Chopper Read (interview vs movie)

- Libbi Gorr (playing the character of Elle McFeast) was cancelled (moral outrage) in 1998 for showing a very happy Chopper Read drunk and laughing about his violence but when portrayed in film, Chopper became a loveable character
- Box office date suggests that many can enjoy violence as fiction
- We enjoy violence as fiction but we are outraged when its too real
- Applying Katz; The script of a violent criminal being interviewed in a reality format is to be sad, remorseful, previously abused → this is what the audience finds acceptable
- A hard man being happy, unrepentant and 'normal' is a rupture unless the buffer of fiction makes it acceptable/bearable/enjoyable
- Moral disgust and covert enjoyment are both potentially the wrong approaches; rather we could look at these Chopper artefacts (interview and movie) as popular methods to learn something from a happy thug and his actual foreground, effective motivations
- Jack Katz would suggest envy is in operation; we either enjoy his antics or be in a state of outrage
- Non-academics have been doing much more in the field of criminology; if we want to understand criminals on their own terms and not the terms of the criminal justice system, cultural products rather than academic products need to be studied

Conceptual Foundations; paradigms

- Rational sinners → eternally motivated towards crime (Ronald Clarke)
- Strained saints → an adherent of the logic of the strained saints paradigm will look for *external* factors motivating a crime; **forced to commit crime because of circumstance**
- Katz exposes a double failure; intellectually we make criminals like us in the wrong ways and we miss their real motivations → we also miss that these motivations have a really broad appeal
- Character of Bernie in Katz readings → mugged, and so decides to carry around a gun, he started going on the subway late at night further and further out → eventually shoots four young black men because they had asked for \$5 → **Jack Katz suggests that humiliation is a motivation for violence**

The cultural criminology critique

- The rational sinners and strained saints paradigms both assume there is nothing attractive about crime in itself ... they both assume crime is **a mere means** like any other means.
- If you believe in rational sinners, the response is 'Let's get tough on crime'
- If you believe in strained saints, the response is an 'easing' of structural disadvantages
- **Crime is not simply something that one is forced to do because society has not provided the means to live, or that one has been encouraged to do because of a bland cost/benefit analysis.**
- **Crime is in many ways attractive → It can be chosen when no compulsion is present. And where there is no benefit that one can explain rationally. If one refuses to step into the foreground (mentality) of crime, and to stand in the background, all of this is missed.**
- **If we step in the foreground or mentality, we soon realise that the criminal is purchasing a reputation .**

Jack Katz → "Whether their policy implications point towards increasing penalties to decrease or increasing legitimate opportunities ... to decrease crime, modern casual theories have obliterated a natural fascination to follow in detail the lived contours of crime."

- Feeling as a general motivation for crime; desirable or negative emotions contributing to the appeal or the attractiveness of committing a crime
- The proud criminal adds unnecessary extra violence to impress other criminals

Violence and Pleasure

- Cinema and television are devices of pleasure
 - Enjoying violence raises some tricky questions:
 - **Crime is not just attractive to criminals. It is attractive to the general public → 'We invite criminals into our lounge rooms most evenings' (Young 2010)**
1. Should images of violence be pleasurable for spectators?
 2. Should we critique our desire to watch violence on the screen?
 3. What does violence do in cultural artefacts?

- Representations of war are important: actions of terrorists are never defence or revenge but for no reason; there is an implicit evil → counter-terrorism as a response, an orderly and good response to combat evil
- representation is reality; representations of crime have real effects

Cultural Criminology

- We understand crime and justice through their cultural representations/crime and justice are cultural representations
- Jeff Ferrell (2010, 308) – “Cultural criminology rests on an understanding that the reality of crime and control – their meanings and consequences – emerges from an interplay of representation, interpretation, and emotion.”
- Cultural criminology “emphasises the centrality of meaning and representation in the construction of crime as momentary events, subcultural endeavour, and social issue” (Ferrell 2007)
- **Visual criminology and narrative criminology are subfields of cultural criminology**

Visual Criminology

- Movies are constructed through a combination of individual creative choices, social and economic pressures, and visual conventions.
- When doing visual analysis, we need to deconstruct the image or the scene in different parts: we might pay attention to lighting, editing, music, narrative structure, casting, genre, context, discourse etc
- **Nicole Rafter (2014, p.129): “Visual criminology is the study of the ways in which all things visual interact with crime and criminal justice, inventing and shaping one another.”**
- Visual criminology treats the motion picture and the image as text

Genre

- Genre operates within certain codes; creating “expectations” for an audience
- These expectations can be challenged/subverted e.g. the use of dark comedy in a crime dramas
- However, if a film/tv series ‘disrupt’ what is expected, the audience can be lost
- It is most common for genre to be faithful to a certain register e.g. comedy shows will rarely discuss sexual violence
- But this is not to suggest that genres are static → a light comedy/detective show can include powerful society commentary
- ‘Genre can characterise either content (what is said) or form (how it is said)’- Presser and Sandberg (2015, p.93)

Analysing Genre

- “[Genre] exists as part of the relationship between [the cultural production and the audience] ... It is a shared convention with social force” (Frow 2015, p.112)
- Genre is not just a method of cataloguing programmes – it is part of a ‘system that regulates desire, memory and expectation’ (Hayward 2013, p.170)