RLG101H FILM ANALYSIS THEORIES

As explained in the Film Analysis assignment instructions, your first three paragraphs must be written as follows (you may change the ordering if you like):

- Paragraph 1: film analysis using a theory of belief from chapter 5 in Nye's text (revised)
- Paragraph 2: film analysis using a theory of ritual from chapter 6 in Nye's text
- Paragraph 3: film analysis using a theory of text from chapter 7 in Nye's text

Below you will find information and advice that may help you use the theories from Nye's text that you must choose from (as listed in the Film Analysis instructions) to analyze your film. Within each chapter you should pick just *one* theory/theorist to work with. Also, do not rely on these short descriptions; make sure you go back to Nye's text and read his detailed discussions of the theories carefully.

1. BELIEF

1. Reductionist theories (p. 108–9)

    There is not enough information about any specific reductionist theories (e.g., from Freud) to be useful. However Nye's overall summary of such theories generally could be helpful. It also might be challenging to apply reductionist theories to the film you've chosen, because the films for this assignment are not "religious" and reductionist theories are specifically about interpreting supernatural phenomena (e.g., gods, spirits, demons, etc.). Here are two possible ways in which these theories might still be helpful:

    a) There are *some* films that are not generally religious but in which something supernatural happens (e.g., Mufasa speaking to Simba from beyond the grave in *The Lion King*).

    b) In films where you do not find anything supernatural, you could consider using a reductionist approach to understand phenomena that are beyond human perception, and that you could perhaps argue function in human life in ways that are similar to the ways in which concepts of god(s) and other supernatural phenomena function (in *The Lion King*, e.g., it's possible to apply a reductionist approach to the notions of both "hakuna matata" and "the circle of life").

2. Cognitive vs. affective beliefs (p. 117)

    It is usually helpful to think about *both* cognitive and affective beliefs in relation to a particular character in the film. Do these two beliefs line up or not? What do these two beliefs suggest about what the film is trying to teach us? With Timon and Pumbaa, e.g., their cognitive belief is "hakuna matata" – and at first this matches their affective belief. When Simba needs their help, however, their affective belief appears to shift away from "hakuna matata." Why does this shift matter? What does it suggest the movie is trying to teach us?

3. Habitus (p. 125-6)

    Please pay attention to the definition of "habitus" on p. 125. The original idea comes from Bourdieu, and Nye also discusses ways in which Bell uses the idea. The critical elements of Nye's summary of habitus can be found on p. 126. There are two main (related) questions to ask here:

    a) How do a character's beliefs and actions appear to arise from (or how are shaped by) specific contexts, environments, etc.?

    b) Are the same (or similar) beliefs practiced in different ways by different characters from different backgrounds? (Nye gives the example that the belief in "the sanctity of all life" can and does mean very different things in different religious communities).

    With both of these questions, the point then is to ask: what does any of this *mean*? How is the film using the notion of habitus to promote a particular message? (And what is that message?)

2. RITUAL

1. Rituals and society (p. 141–2)

   This is Durkheim's fairly straightforward theory about rituals and relationships. Key questions you might ask if you decide to use this theory are:

   a) Does a particular activity bring some characters together? Does a particular activity drive some characters apart?
   b) What might the act of bringing characters together/driving them apart *mean*? That is to say: What do you think the film is trying to say to us by showing us an activity that affects characters' relationships?

2. Ritual and neurosis (p. 143)

   This is Freud's theory about ritual and repetition, explained by Nye in just one paragraph. When thinking about your film with this theory, you might ask: Does a repeated action performed by a character indicate that they are avoiding dealing with a problem? In other words, is the repeated action an indication of neurosis? If so, do you think that the film is trying to tell us something through this character's unhealthy behaviour?

3. Ritual and memory (p. 143–4)

   This is Whitehouse's theory about ritual and repetition. Note that he identifies two different types of ritual practices: the "imagistic" mode and the "doctrinal" mode. There are three questions to think about here: First, what mode would you classify a particular action (or experience) as? Second, what is the character learning from that action (or experience)? And third, why does this matter?

4. Ritual and power (p. 149–50)

   The basic (and possibly most useful) discussion of rituals and power is Nye's summary of the theories in the first paragraph on p. 149 (remember that this is not Nye's theory; he's simply summarizing common scholarly views about rituals and power). The second paragraph on this page describes Bloch's point that the meaning of specific rituals needs to be understood in each ritual's social and historical contexts. On p. 150, Nye explains Bell's similar point that the same ritual can have different meanings for different individuals.

   Focusing on Nye's summary of rituals and power, you might simply ask: Does a particular action reinforce power relations between characters (or groups) in the film? If so, how? Alternatively, does a particular action represent an attempt to resist or overturn certain power relations? If so, how? And again, what might the film be trying to say to us through its depiction of rituals and power?

3. TEXT

Note that, when applying a theory of text, you must focus on the ways in which texts function within the world of the film. "Texts" may of course refer to anything written that appears in the film (e.g., books, signs, notes, etc.). "Texts" may also refer to anything that a character says, sings, shouts, etc. In this regard, the "author" of a text will be the character(s) speaking, and the "reader" will be the character(s) listening.

Do *not* apply a theory of text to the screenplay of the film, looking at the writer of the screenplay as author and the viewer of the film (i.e., you) as reader.

1. Authorship (p. 169–71)

   Most of this section discusses Barthes' idea of the "death of the author" (p. 169–70). The phrase refers to his argument against the idea that "an authoritative meaning can be made of a text, which depends on the author's own intentions" (170). To be honest, this theory might not be that helpful to you. Basically you will simply need to ask if some text in the film has meanings beyond the speaker's intention, and then figure out if the answer is meaningful in any way. (Again, I suspect that most often it won't be meaningful.)

   The other idea here (which is more likely to be helpful to you) is Foucault's notion that "authors are created within a context of social power relations and deriving from a particular set of historical circumstances. What we see as an author is what we as readers impute them to be, to allow us to give sense and meaning to a text" (171). This theory will be relevant to many films. The point here is to think about how the way in which one character's understanding of another character's words is affected by their view of that character. Whether a listener likes the person who is speaking, for example, or fears them, or has authority over them, may well affect how they view what that person is saying. Look for instances of this in your film that strike you as important or meaningful in some way, and think about what the film might be saying to us as a result.

   For instance in *The Lion King*, who is Simba more likely to believe (or listen to): Mufasa, Scar, or Timon and Pumbaa? Mufasa's philosophy is that we should live up to our responsibilities; Scar's philosophy is that we should think only of ourselves and take what we want; and Timon and Pumbaa believe of course in "hakuna matata." Based only on the identities of each "author," which philosophy do you think the film wants us to pay the most attention to? Why?

2. Readers (p. 176–8)

   Iser's idea is fairly general, which is that the meaning of a text results from "the interaction between text and reader" (176). As Nye points out, this idea "produces a simple set of questions — in particular, where does the meaning of a text come from, or who gives such meaning?" (176).

   Fish expands on this point by arguing that "how one reads a text and gives it meaning comes from one's particular cultural location" (177). Nye gives several examples of this phenomenon, but in some ways it's a fairly straightforward idea. For instance, a Christian will read the Bible differently than a Hindu would, or an atheist. So in your film the question becomes: how does a character's background affect their understanding of a "text" in the film? And why does this matter?

3. Gender (p. 178)

   Nye does not provide much detail in this chapter about the question of gender in relationship to texts and interpretation. He briefly mentions two ideas:

   a) Fetterley's argument "that what is taken as 'classic' literature often consists of masculine texts, written by and for men" (178).

   b) Leslie's research into the notion that the "ways in which women read and give significance to key religious texts . . . may be quite different to the more authorized, and academically reported, readings done by men" (178).

   Fetterley's idea is focused more on how people respond differently to *authors* based on their gender. So, for instance, you might think about whether gender is relevant to which characters' words are given more authority. For instance, Simba doesn't go back to the Pride Lands when Nala says that they need his help; but he *does* go back when Mufasa tells him to go reclaim the throne. Regarding Leslie's point is focused on the *readers* of texts, and so you might ask whether characters of different genders respond differently to the same text in a film.

4. Language and interpretation (p. 158–9)

First, it's important to note that Derrida does *not* agree with logocentrism, which is the idea that language offers us a "'window onto the world,' or a means of accessing reality" (159).

One reason why Derrida disagrees with logocentrism is because he believes that "the links between language and reality are not reliable" (159). He still thinks that language is very important, however, in the sense that "we all live in worlds that are shaped and formed by texts" (159). So if you're using Derrida a key question you might ask would be: How is a character's world shaped by text? As discussed in tutorial, for example, Simba's view of the world at one point is shaped by the words "hakuna matata." This doesn't mean that "hakuna matata" describes the way the world actually *is*, only that Simba's experience of the world is affected by these words.