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MEDIA LITERACY

Thinking Critically About

MOVIES



Peyton Paxson

To the Teacher

IN THE 1952 CASE of *Burstyn v. Wilson*, the United States Supreme Court said:

It cannot be doubted that motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas. They may affect public attitudes and behavior in a variety of ways, ranging from direct espousal of a political or social doctrine to the subtle shaping of thought which characterizes all artistic expression. The importance of motion pictures as an organ of public opinion is not lessened by the fact that they are designed to entertain as well as to inform.

This book, one in a series of books on media literacy and critical thinking, focuses on movies, of which teenagers and young adults are the heaviest consumers. The guiding principle of this book

is that the study of movies can be used to teach critical-thinking skills. The units in this book provide students with information about movies as an art form, as a business, and as a source of social and cultural transmission. The activities require students to evaluate this information and apply it in varied exercises. Students will also analyze and assess how well Hollywood serves its public.

As the Supreme Court points out, movies are a medium for ideas. Ultimately, this book strives not only to make students better informed and more discerning consumers of movies, but also to help them think more critically in general.



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To the Student

SYDNEY POLLACK IS A DIRECTOR of popular American movies that include “Out of Africa” and “The Firm.” Talking about movie-making, Pollack said:

Some filmmakers begin knowing exactly what they want to say and then craft a vehicle that contains that statement. Some are interested in pure escape. Here’s the catch. The effectiveness and the success of all our films is determined by exactly the same standards—unfortunately not by the particular validity of their message, but by their ability to engage the concentration and emotions of the audience.

This book asks you to think about and investigate the issues that Pollack mentions: movies as a social or political statement; movies as a type of art; movies and their ability to get your attention and play with your emotions. This investigation will help you to think about how the desire to be creative and the desire to make a lot of money intersect, or collide, in the movie industry. Looking beyond audience appeal (which Pollack says is the most important issue in the movie industry), you will also identify and evaluate the validity of the messages of standard film genres.

Genre means a type of movie. Although several hundred movies are released in the United States each year, nearly all of them can be categorized into a handful of genres. This is because movies must be marketed to their audiences. And most moviegoers want at least a rough idea of what kind of movie they are going to see before they see it.

As Pollack tells us, most movies are made to be pure entertainment. However, some movies are made to make a statement about something. In addition, many movies that do not have explicit

(obvious) statements have implicit (subtle) ones. For example, a movie that shows a male executive and a female secretary is telling us something about gender roles in society.

Despite the emergence of newer entertainment media, movies continue to play an important role in society. The movie theater industry continues to sell millions of tickets each year, with box office receipts rising from \$5 billion in 1990 to nearly \$8.5 billion in 2001. While the movie industry’s focus has always been on selling theater tickets, and more recently, making money from sales and rentals of movies on video and DVD, the industry has also had significant effects on social, ideological, and political views in the United States and elsewhere.

The word “movies” has several common synonyms, including motion pictures, cinema, and films. Since most of us refer to them as movies, that is what we will call them in this book. In addition, even though only one of the major studios, Paramount Pictures, is actually located there today, this book will use the term “Hollywood” to refer to the American film industry. This is a traditional practice, just as we often refer to the American securities industry collectively as “Wall Street.” We will also use the term “actor” to describe both male and female performers. This is not the traditional practice, which used the terms “actor” and “actress,” but use of the single term is increasingly common.

There are probably several words in this book that you are not familiar with. You will find a glossary at the back of the book. Words that are defined in the glossary are highlighted in bold when introduced in the book.

The objectives of this unit are to help students

- place movies in historical and cultural context
- recognize the role movies play in social and political concerns
- understand that popular themes in movies reflect contemporary issues

In this Unit . . .

Photography and Moving Pictures: Ways of Seeing helps students investigate how technology affects humans' perception of their environment.

Talkies: Ways of Hearing includes a group exercise in which students explore the significance of sound by attempting to use nonverbal communication to express emotions.

Movies and World War II introduces students to the historical use of government-sponsored propaganda and has them examine their own willingness to participate in the creation of propaganda.

The Red Scare and the Blacklist uses a discussion of McCarthyism as a backdrop for a series of ethical dilemmas. Students investigate the balance of friendship and citizenship in this activity.

The 1950s: Movies versus Television is designed to stimulate students' creativity as they generate content changes and format changes in movies to better capture teenage aesthetics and themes.

Vietnam discusses the contrast between Americans' attitudes toward the war in Vietnam and World War II, as well as the adjustment problems many Vietnam veterans experienced upon returning to the states. Students are asked to empathize with veterans' reactions to Hollywood's depictions of the war. Students also conduct an interview with a Vietnam veteran regarding his or her view of movies about the war, and record the veteran's reflections in those interviews. This activity may require a class conversation about the possibly sensitive nature of the interview process.

Movies Buzz

PEOPLE BEGAN USING the word “photography” in 1839, when the public first became aware of still photography. Experiments with motion photography began later in the nineteenth century. The first motion pictures were shown to the public in 1894. Many people called them moving pictures, or “movies” for short. The first American movie that attempted to tell a complete story was *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. Most movie historians agree that the first movie that proved that movies could

“For the first half of the twentieth century, seeing a movie always meant going to a movie theater.”

rise to the level of art was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

For the first half of the twentieth century, seeing a movie always

meant going to a movie theater. Many older theaters were large, beautiful buildings—in many

cases, movie theaters were among the prettiest buildings in town. Because almost all Americans went to the movies, many older movies were aimed at general audiences—adults and children alike. When television arrived in homes in the early 1950s, the **demographics** and **psychographics** of movie viewers changed, and movies changed in response.

Today, few movies are created with the intent to attract all types of viewers. Instead, most movies are aimed at specific age groups. You are in the **target market** most likely to see movies. Hollywood knows this, and as a result, the majority of American movies made today are tailored to teenagers and young adults.

In this unit, you will examine how movies changed the way that people saw and heard things. You will also explore how movies reflected the feelings and beliefs of people during significant events in American society.



A Saturday morning movie crowd in 1938. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, [LC-USF33-T01-001327-M1 DLC]

Photography and Moving Pictures: Ways of Seeing - - - - -

2. Some older adults, including those who grew up with color movies, say they prefer old movies that were filmed in black and white. Why do you think they say this?
3. Today, some Hollywood directors occasionally film a movie in black and white. This is not a technological or financial decision; they could film the movie in color. This is not an effort to attract older audiences (some music videos shown on MTV are filmed in black and white). Instead, the director's decision is an artistic one. Explain why you think some directors make movies in black and white today.

One reason many animals and all humans have two eyes is to allow for depth perception—the so-called third dimension (3-D). In the 1950s, the movies felt threatened by television. To offer theater audiences an experience different from television, some filmmakers experimented with 3-D photography. The most common 3-D photography required the movie audience to wear glasses with one blue lens and one red lens. After beginning as a popular fad, 3-D photography soon became seen as a gimmick. Today, 3-D movies remain rare, although some 3-D movies are produced for distribution to IMAX theaters and other special exhibitions.

4. If 3-D photography is supposedly more realistic, why do you think 3-D did not become the common way of making movies? Explain your answer.
5. Which would you rather watch—a 3-D movie filmed in black and white, or a non-3-D (regular) movie filmed in color? Explain your answer.

Talkies: Ways of Hearing -----

UNTIL THE LATE 1920S, movies did not have synchronized recorded sound. Instead, movies were shown at theaters accompanied by music. The music was often live; small town theaters would have a piano player. Many theaters had organists. A few large theaters in big cities would have entire orchestras play during the movie.

The Jazz Singer, the first feature-length movie with synchronized sound, was shown in 1927. Since viewers could actually hear the actors talk, these movies were originally referred to as **talkies**. Talkies ended the acting careers of many actors who had become famous during the days of silent film. Some of these stars spoke with foreign accents, some had unpleasant speaking voices, and some were not able to express emotion in words as successfully as they had been able to without words.

1. Work with a classmate to complete this activity.

1. Write each of the following six emotions on a separate slip of paper.
 - Love
 - Hate
 - Sadness
 - Happiness
 - Fear
 - Anger
2. Mix up these slips.
3. One person draws one slip.
4. That person does not show the slip to the other person.
5. Without speaking or making a sound, that person uses facial expressions to convey the emotion written on the slip.
6. The other person tries to guess that emotion.
7. Then the other person draws a slip, and the two repeat steps 4–6.
8. Take turns going back and forth until all six slips have been drawn and performed.

(continued)

The objectives of this unit are to help students

- investigate the correlation between Hollywood's depictions of crime and violence and audience perceptions of crime and violence in reality
- examine and appraise Hollywood's treatment of race, gender, and disabilities
- recognize the competing interests of different groups in society and the impact of the movie industry in the balancing of those interests

In this Unit . . .

The Hays Commission and Crime has students explore the relationship between cinematic displays of criminal activity and the criminal propensities of audiences.

The MPAA Rating System introduces students to the criteria the Motion Picture Association of America uses to rate movies. Students are challenged to generate ideas for a PG-13 movie that would be attractive to teenagers.

The First Amendment provides information on the U.S. Supreme Court's definition of obscenity, which requires courts to employ local standards. Students are to respond with an evaluation of the social mores of their own community.

Hollywood, Age, and Gender asks students to investigate the disparity between roles available to young actors and older actors, and male roles relative to female roles.

Growing Up with Disney provides students with an opportunity to assess the role of Disney movies in shaping childhood experiences.

Child Actors and Labor Laws provides information about regulations for use of minors in movies. Students examine these laws and explore their own interests in acting, individually and with an adult member of their household.

Hollywood: How the World Sees Us; How We See the World requires students to assume the perspective of others in evaluating how fictional movie depictions of violence in domestic America affect perceptions of both Americans and non-Americans.

Do We See Them? has students analyze the portrayal of people with disabilities in movies.

The Hays Commission and Crime -----

IN 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) led by Will H. Hays adopted a set of standards for movies. The MPPDA believed that the "motion picture, because of its importance as entertainment and because of the trust placed in it by the peoples of the world, has special moral obligations." The so-called Hays Production Code was designed to encourage good morals among moviegoers and discourage bad morals. These standards included guidelines for things that were encouraged to be shown in movies, for example, respectful presentations of the U.S. flag. The standards also included guidelines for things that were discouraged. For example, movies that told stories about crime and criminals were not allowed to

1. teach methods of crime
2. inspire potential criminals with a desire for imitation
3. make criminals seem heroic and justified

As a result, movie studios avoided making films that showed how complicated crimes, such as safecracking, were planned and committed. Criminals were usually shown as unlikable people. And, of course, the message of crime movies was always that "crime doesn't pay."

The Hays Production Code remained in use in Hollywood until the 1960s.

Review the list of three things above regarding crime that the Hays Production Code prohibited.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Do movies today teach viewers how to commit crimes? Why or why not?

2. Do movies today encourage viewers to imitate criminal behavior? Why or why not?

3. Do movies today always tell us that crime doesn't pay? Why or why not?

(continued)

Glossary

action film—a movie in which the main purpose is to excite the viewer with graphic depictions of conflict between different characters

blockbuster—a movie that earns more than \$100 million in box office receipts. This dollar amount is considered an important indicator of the popularity, and thus the success, of a movie.

box office (more correctly referred to as box office receipts)—the dollar value of tickets sold for movies

buddy film—a subgenre of movies in which two protagonists work together to resolve conflicts, usually beginning with a conflict between themselves

comedy—a movie in which the main purpose is to make the viewer laugh repeatedly during the course of the movie. Comedy has many subgenres.

conflict—the opposition between forces in a movie. The most common conflicts are between two or more characters (person against person, or *local* conflict), between a character and the environment (person against nature, or *global* conflict), or within a character (person against one's self, or *inner* conflict).

conflict resolution—the way in which two or more people resolve their disputes. This can be done through negotiation and compromise, or through the use of one or more types of violence.

demographics—statistics about people grouped by information, such as age, gender, ethnicity, geography, and income. For example, we know that the demographic group that visits movie theaters the most often is males between the ages of 12 and 24. Compare to *psychographics* (on page 98).

director—the person who is in charge of making artistic decisions about a movie

documentary—a nonfiction movie that records events as they actually occurred. People who appear in documentaries may not be actors and are not performing scripted roles as they would in a *theatrical movie*.

drama—a movie that contains a great degree of conflict, but typically does not have a high degree of violence, relying instead on negotiation and compromise for *conflict resolution*. Compare to *action film*.

genre—a type or a category. The most common genres in movies are comedies, action films, and dramas. Within each genre, there are numerous subgenres. For example, some *comedies* are romantic comedies; some *action films* are also *buddy films*. In the movie industry, it is often very important that a movie falls into a particular genre, because many viewers want to know what type of movie they are going to see before they see it.

gratuitous violence—violence that serves no purpose for a story's plot—it is simply included in a movie for the sake of violence itself. Compare to *purposeful violence* (see page 98).

incidental music—background music used in a movie to project a mood

live-action—a movie that uses human actors instead of animation

narrative—the technique and process of telling a story. Sometimes the narrative structure is linear—it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes the narrative structure is nonlinear—the story is told out of the order in which depicted events occur, or several different stories are told at once.

plot—the series of events that tell a story

plot device—one of a large number of common movie events or situations that helps the *plot* develop. For example, one of the standard plot devices in a romantic comedy is a couple first meeting when their dogs' leashes become entangled. In action dramas, the death of an innocent person at the beginning of the movie is a frequent plot device that leads the hero on his or her quest for revenge, which occurs at the end of the movie.

producer—the person who arranges to have a movie made. One of the key responsibilities of a producer is obtaining the financing necessary to make a movie.