1970s-Present: Life, Culture, Politics

American Beauty (1999)
Broadcast News (1987)
Grand Canyon (1991)
The Onion Field (1979)
Primary Colors (1998)
Silkwood (1983)
Wall Street (1987)
The Big Chill (1983)
China Syndrome (1979)
Network (1976)
Power (1986)
Save the Tiger (1973)
An Unmarried Woman (1978)

Appendix B

HISTORY WRITTEN WITH LIGHTNING

A Guide to Using Popular Film as a Tool for Historical and Cultural Investigation

INTRODUCTION

Film is one of our most accessible and familiar media. We attend the movies for diversion and entertainment, as our parents and grandparents have before us. Think of the many ways that movies have affected us both as individuals and collectively, as a society. Richard Sklar, a leading scholar in the field, points out that "throughout their history the movies have served as a primary source of information about society and human behavior for large masses of people."[1] We only have to look around to see evidence of a hit film's pervasive popularity: the bed sheets and lunch boxes, the figurines of characters packed into fast food meals, the story line repeated in comic books and video games and perhaps continued in a sequel, a spin-off television series, or a series of books.

Film also has a tremendous cultural impact. People repeat catch phrases and quote movie dialogue. Movies are so much part of the social fabric that people are frequently unaware of the origin of some familiar expressions. Have you ever watched an old picture and exclaimed, "So *that's* where that phrase came from!"? Fashion may imitate a look introduced in a film. The soundtrack may become popular, some themes frequently used to evoke certain moods and memories. Film stars or the characters they portray become powerful role models that influence the behavior of millions. How much interest in the study and profession of archaeology has Indiana Jones stimulated? The impact of film extends far beyond theater walls. "The movies are such a powerful and compelling form of popular communication," writes a scholar of cinema, "that even those not directly part of the mass movie experience have been subtly affected by them."[2]

Film often has unpredictable or unintended effects on audiences. "Whatever final rationale was on the producers' minds," cultural historian Lawrence Levine observes, "these images, once released, became the property of the viewers, who could do with them what they willed, make of them what their lives and experiences prepared them to make of them."[3] In 1954, a group of young men saw the film *The Wild One*. "There were about fifty of us, " one later related. "We could all see ourselves right there on the screen. We were all Marlon Brando." Shortly after, the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club was born—surely not the intention of the makers of the film.[4]

We don't often think of movies as literature, but they are exactly that. As Alexandre Astruc has observed, "The filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen."[5] The old conversation opener, "Read any good books lately?", has been supplemented or replaced by discussion about that great movie that *everybody* has seen. Far more people—tens of millions—see the film version of a book than will ever read it. As we discuss the profound affect that print has had on the history of civilization, we must recognize that the visual literature of our modern age—the film—has had perhaps an even greater impact on more people around the world. One man upon seeing a film for the first time in the early 1900s may have proclaimed a great modern truth when he exclaimed, "The universal language has been found!"

On Films and History

Because we are so accustomed to the moving image, we sometimes become indifferent to the hidden messages, social content, and meaning of what we watch. In other words, we do not view from a critical perspective. To some degree this attitude has been encouraged by movies. Critics may cry for quality films that challenge the audience, but for the most part people prefer light, entertaining fare. The largest part of film releases and commercial television cater to that demand. However, as historian Randy Roberts warns, "Only by critically thinking about what you read and see will you be able to move beyond passive consumption to active engagement with the subject and the issue it raises."[6]

Our subject is history, and we are interested in how film has portrayed it. Film is an invaluable resource in the study of history, but one that must be used carefully. We should remain alert to the simple but important fact that film is a popular enterprise. "No earlier art," writes Daniel Boorstin, "was so widely and so complexly collaborative, so dependent on the marriage of art and technology, or on the pleasure of the community.... The art of film would be vastly public, and have the public as its patron."[7] Filmmakers must juggle their artistic sensibilities and desire for historical accuracy with the requirements of the marketplace, the expectations and values of the audience, and legal and social realities. In the 1950s, when the best-selling novel *From Here to Eternity* was translated to the screen, the hero's love interest was changed from a prostitute to a dance-hall hostess. Today such a move would invite ridicule, but was necessary then for the film to be made and exhibited.

Even as a film and its characters reflect the time when it was made, we are reinterpreting the film from our own perspective. So, the film artifact presents us with history as filtered through the prism of a filmmaker producing a product for the mass audience of his or her own time. "Every movie is a cultural artifact," writes Andrew Bergman, "and as such reflects the fears, values, myths, and assumptions of the culture that produces it."[8] Given these complexities we might very well ask, why use films to gain insight to history? Why not just stick to the material made for the classroom, the history books and scholastic and documentary films?

First, history is an exercise of the imagination. In most other disciplines, we can observe our subjects in the here and now, but history can only be summoned through surviving documents and images. We often enliven our study with speculation and reconstruction. Movies have the power of "making us walk more confidently on the precarious ground of imagination."[9]

Second, film captures the sweep and movement of history, by definition the story of people, their (and our) failures and accomplishments. Film gives us insight to the lives that have built the present on the rock of the past. Historian R. J. Raack believes that only film can provide an adequate "emphatic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives."[10]

Third, history is movement through time, and no other medium can manipulate time in as kinetic a fashion as film. We are all familiar, for example, with the device known as flashback, which shifts the narrative back and forth through time. Flitting across the screen, films give us the dramatic highlights of a life or an era.

Finally, the very popularity of film is itself of interest. We are looking at an interpretation of history that has gained widespread acceptance. "It is precisely because such films are made for entertainment that they have value for the historian. They tell us what made people of other decades laugh or cry, what made them forget their troubles, and what they believed about their past."[11]

Many people get what they consider to be accurate pictures of history from such popular cultural sources as movies, which are the most accessible and require the least effort. Filmmakers often feel that despite some factual deviations they have effectively and honestly captured the spirit of history. In the early days of the new art form, filmmaking pioneer D. W. Griffith asserted that the new medium would present history with complete fidelity: "You will actually see what happened. There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history."[12]

One wide-eyed reviewer consequently greeted Griffith's Civil War epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), with these words: "History repeats itself upon the screen with a realism that is maddening."[13] The film certainly is maddening to today's scholars and general audiences, who see a product riddled with inaccuracies and pervaded by archaic attitudes—a work that illustrates the power the medium to convey historical information in very convincing fashion.

Griffith confidently predicted that "in less than ten years...the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again."[14] History remains an integral part of the curriculum, but the majority of people probably obtain most of their historical information and impressions through popular culture. "Today the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population," writes historian Robert Rosenstone, "must surely be the visual media."[15]

Film is an artificially created model of reality. It is our task to train the eye and mind to translate these entertaining images into data for comparative and critical analysis. The purpose of *History Written with Lightning* is to provide you with the tools to examine films from a critical perspective. As college students, you are learning the analytical skills that enable you to view what is being communicated, to whom, in what fashion, and why the subject was selected. You should not simply watch a film, but "read" it as a text. As you do when reviewing books and articles, you should actively make connections.

In the pages that follow, there are a series of questions you can ask the material as you dig behind the scenes in hopes of arriving at an enhanced vision of historical truth. The results can only benefit the participant in today's society, in which "visual literacy is an important craft of survival and intellectual growth."[16]

What to Look for in Historical Films

The film is a text. What does this mean? How does one 'read' it? This pamphlet outlines a model for the content analysis of film texts. In this section are questions you should ask and points you should observe as you are examine a film text.

1. The History

- Is it accurate?
- Are events presented realistically?
- Is the chronology correct?

Review of history texts will provide you with basic information about the period for comparison. Check to see if the events are ordered properly and if they unfolded in the manner presented in the film. When the film version deviates from historical accounts, consider why, especially since the film's creators had access to source material just as you do. Why and how has history been altered to meet the needs of studios, governments, and audiences?

2. Setting, Details, and Design

- Are locations, costumes, and sets accurate?
- Do buildings look realistic?
- Does the overall look of the film reflect the period?
- Has the filmmaker included details that enhance the historical atmosphere and viewing experience?

Compare the film's visual look with period art and historical drawings that you can find in texts covering the period. See if the period's architecture and costumes are rendered faithfully. Studies such as social histories provide a means to check the details depicted by the film.

3. Behavior

- Do the characters speak and act as people in their time, situation and class did?
- Are gender relationships accurately rendered?

Beware of one of film's greatest—at least to the historian—sins: presentism. That means having characters act and speak in the manner of people at the time the film was made, rather than of the time in which the film is set. This is common in comedy, where such a device might be a large part of what makes the film funny. Presentism is a serious flaw in any film that seriously aspires to present a believable picture of the past.

It's extremely difficult to echo the speech of the past without subtitles, but the formalities can be observed. Similarly, the differences among classes should be honestly presented. Hence, peasants would not have the niceties of speech that the nobility would possess, and servants would be properly respectful.

Of particular interest are relationships between the sexes. Modern notions of romantic love and equality were beyond the imagination of most societies throughout history. While people have usually observed rigid codes of behavior, women in particular have often been relegated to subservient and secondary positions in society. To portray medieval women, for example, as having a high level of independence and being forthright and assertive pleases our present-day sensibilities but does a disservice to history and belittles the hard-won accomplishments of women in our own time.

4. Agenda, Values, Effects

- What values underlie the film?
- What does the filmmaker do to influence feelings and emotions?
- What sort of heroic and villainous icons are presented and supported in the film?
- What messages did the filmmakers wish to convey?
- Does the film succeed in producing the desired effect?

Those most heavily involved in shaping a film—producer, screenwriter, director, actors—often have an agenda beyond commercial considerations. They may use a battlefield tale to make an antiwar statement, or a historical drama to comment on contemporary politics. Films often comment on social and cultural values.

The vocabulary of film is so rich that there are numerous means to communicate messages in subtle ways. Characters are frequently played by stars with established personas (see **Glossary**): "their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charm."[17] Filmmakers achieve quick connection with an audience that is familiar with the personalities and public images of the actors. "The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals."[18]

Camera angles, lighting, music, and editing all are utilized to support the mood and message of the film. Even while the definitive element of film is movement (recognized around 1912 when "movies" entered the language for moving pictures), the arrangement of people and objects from scene to scene is no less important than it is in painting. For example, imagine a scene in which a young American soldier dies heroically under a majestically flying flag. The visual package of how elements are arranged and photographed, called *mise-en-scene* in film terminology, are carefully assembled to influence the viewer's sympathies. The strains of a familiar patriotic melody sounding mournfully in the background underscores the moment and evokes emotions.

Types are an ancient shorthand in theater and film has helped establish them more widely than ever. "B" Western movies that filled the matinee cards and the back end of double features in the pre-television era simply put black hats on the bad guys and white on the good, a convention that is established in the American imagination. A certain look, a laugh, a few actions, and we can quickly identify who the heroes and villains are in many films.

But who is good and bad? Police men and women, for example, could be the heroic defenders of order in one film, and soulless uniformed thugs in another. *Elizabeth* (1998) presents Queen Elizabeth I as a young monarch struggling to do right, while *Mary Queen of Scots* (1971) portrays the same person as a scheming tyrant. The viewer cheers the heroic British of the imperial era in *Zulu* (1964) but is despises them in *Breaker Morant* (1980). How does the filmmaker position good vs. bad, and what are the reasons for the portrayal?

Films are often used to treat in metaphorical or symbolic ways subjects too hot to be tackled directly. The controversies surrounding the search for domestic Communist spies and saboteurs in 1950s America were the subtext in the Western film *High Noon* (1952) and the urban drama *On the Waterfront* (1954). The war in Vietnam was too hot to handle, but commentary about it can be detected the Korean War comedy *M*A*S*H* (1970) and in several Westerns such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972). It's always fascinating and worthwhile to try to discern the subtle messages filmmakers bury in the subtext of their work.

Some releases strike a responsive chord in viewers so that they have great impact on audiences. Films have had great on fashion, behavior, and speech. *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) inspired fashion fads. *The Godfather* (1972) stimulated the sale of white-walled tires for automobiles. *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) helped introduce the new music of rock and roll to audiences and linked it to rebellious behavior.

Where to Get Films

Now you are ready to engage a film text from a critical perspective. There are a variety of sources for the raw material of your viewing adventure. Your favorite video rental outlet might be of help. From a local shop to the national franchise outlet, suppliers will have some gems among the flood of current releases and popular old chestnuts.

Often your best opportunity is at your local library. Many systems now have excellent collections, particularly of classic, silent, and foreign films that commercial services may ignore. Librarians will help you locate and obtain hard-to-get videos.

Excellent films often turn up on cable channels such as Turner Broadcasting (TBS), Arts & Entertainment (A&E), and American Movie Classics (AMC). Television provides virtually the most consistent and promising opportunity to view films not readily available on a video format.

Conclusion

Film is an industry, sometimes producing dazzling profits. "American movies have always been commercial products made to appeal to the desires and tastes of a mass audience."[19] Yet, while the vast majority of films have been no more noteworthy or memorable than the bulk of today's television programs, many attempt to reach a mass audience while simultaneously communicating the kind of important cultural visions that we commonly associate with an artistic statement. They have provided a meeting ground for America and all of modern civilization, a focal point from which to discuss the values of our time. A pioneering study on the importance of the film offered this definitive statement: "The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media."[20] You are investigating a rich and deep resource, and the rewards will be great.

Most of all, have fun! You're working with the most exciting medium of our time. Even as you sharpen your analytical skills, remember that these films are made to be enjoyed.

Glossary

Casting against type: A director seeking to challenge an audience might cast a famous actor outside the expected norms. While such reversals often are played for comic effect, sometimes they are effective in capturing an audience's attention and keeping it off-balance.

Convention: Essentially, an agreement between artist and audience to accept certain aspects of a presentation as real and normal. Example: in musicals, characters break into song while dancing down a street. *Genre* films contain many conventions.

Genre: A recognizable type of movie, characterized by conformity to preestablished conventions. Some common genres are musicals, westerns, thrillers, science fiction, and many *genres* of comedies. There are literally hundreds of them; sometimes they are defined in retrospect.

Mise-en-scene: The arrangement of visual elements within a given space—in film, a frame. This also includes the way the scene is photographed: angle, lighting, shadow, distance, etc.

Persona: An actor's public image, based on his/her previous roles, and often incorporating elements from their actual personalities as well. It can be used effectively as a form of pre-characterization, so that an audience immediately assigns certain values and attributes

to any character played by a star with a highly defined persona. Examples: one expects Arnold Schwartzenegger to be a man of extraordinary strength, courage, and toughness; Woody Allen is predictably intelligent, urbane, and neurotic.

Revisionism: Conventions are reversed, often ironically. Example: in films such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the conquering whites exhibit the characteristics of savagery traditionally identified with Indians while Native Americans display what we usually identify as civilized values—spirituality, compassion, honor, integrity.

Schools of cinema: Film scholar Louis Giannetti identifies two basic schools and their synthesis:

- **Realistic:** Close correspondence of images to everyday reality. Tends to deal with people from lower social echelons, implicitly ideological. Often includes details that don't necessarily forward the plot, but heighten authenticity.
- **Expressionistic:** High degree of manipulation in narrative materials, stylized visual presentation. Expressionist films tend to deal with extraordinary characters and events and excel in dealing with ideas—political, religious, and philosophical. When Josef von Sternberg was asked why he preferred to work with studio sets rather than authentic historic locations, he replied, "Because I am a poet."[21] For an outstanding example of his work, see *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), a visually arresting biography of Catherine the Great.

The synthesis:

- Classical: The middle ground between the two schools, combining elements of both. Plot, characters, setting are focal points. High premium placed on entertainment values of story, which is often shaped to conform to conventions of a popular genre, such as western, war, private eye, road, buddy, etc. Most popular American films are of this type.

Notes to Appendices A and B

1. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), 316.
2. James Combs, *American Political Movies* (New York: Garland, 1990), vi.
3. Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 97 (Dec. 1992), 1391.
4. As told by founding member Preetam Bobo to Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 85.
5. Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 289.
6. Randy Roberts, "You Must Remember This: The Case of Hal Wallis' *Casablanca*," in Steven Mintz & Randy Roberts, ed., *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films* (St. James, NY: Brandywine Press 1993), 177.
7. Daniel Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993), 739.

8. Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money* (New York: University Press, 1971), xii.
9. Boorstin, 739.
10. Quoted in Robert A. Rosenstone, Introduction to *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 26.
11. John E. O'Connor & Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1979), xvii.
12. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1980), ix.
13. Ibid., viii.
14. quoted in Boorstin, 744.
15. Rosenstone, 23.
16. Mintz & Roberts, ix.
17. Giannetti, 5.
18. Ibid.
19. John G. Nachbar, and Sam L. Grogg, Jr., Introduction to *Movies as Artifacts* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 8.
20. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 5.
21. Giannetti, 264.

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