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"It's Just a Movie:" A Teaching Essay for Introductory Media Classes

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The question arises almost every semester. My introductory film class and I will be hip deep in analyzing the details of a particular film, and then a hand will creep up, usually from the back: "Aren't we reading too much into this? After all, it's just a movie." Taking a deep breath, I then launch into a spirited defense of our analytic activity. After five or ten minutes of this, the student usually has a shell-shocked, what-did-I-do-to-deserve-this look on her face.

I've never been pleased with my spur-of-the-moment justifications of film analysis, which tend to come across as a bit defensive. Worst of all, they don't deal with the full complexity of the question, and I do believe that it is a very profound question. Why are we spending so much time finding new meanings in something as insignificant as a movie? Aren't we just "reading into" the film? The student's question deserves a fuller answer, or rather, it deserves several answers. As a way of finding those answers, this essay extends the dialogue started by that series of brave, inquiring students in my classes.

Nothing left to chance

"All right, do you really think that every little thing in the film is there for a reason?"

Lots of things in our everyday world are there by accident. If I trip over a stone that causes me to bump into someone, that jostling encounter is probably not part of a higher design. It's just a random occurrence of the sort that happens all the time with no enormous significance in the real world. There is a temptation to treat a film in a similar manner, as if spontaneous things occur by chance. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A Hollywood film is one of the most highly scrutinized, carefully constructed, least random works imaginable. Of course, we know this, having seen Entertainment Tonight. We all know that it takes thousands of people to create a blockbuster film: directors and actors, grips and gaffers. We know that producing a film is a highly coordinated effort by dedicated professionals, but to most people it's a bit of a mystery what all these people do. When we start watching a film, we are encouraged to forget about all that mysterious collective labor. A Hollywood film usually asks us to get caught up in the story being told, in the world that has been created for us, not to be aware of the behind-the-scenes effort that brought us this story and this world. We tend to forget the thousands of minute decisions that consciously construct this artificial world.

When I put on a shirt in the morning, I do so with very little thought (as my students will tell you). A movie character's shirt is chosen by a professional whose sole job is to think about what kind of shirt this character would wear. Similar decisions are made for props, sound, cutting, and so on. Filmmakers work hard to exclude the random from their fictional worlds. Sets are built so that the filmmaker can have absolute control over the environment. The crew spends a great deal of time and expense between shots adjusting the lighting so that each shot will look as polished as possible. When filmmakers do want something to appear random in the film, they carefully choreograph this random-appearing behavior. For instance, extras who are merely walking by the main characters are told where to go and what to do to appear "natural." Even seemingly random events and minute details in a film are chosen and staged.

But what about directors who don't sanitize the film set, who try to let bits of the real world into their films (from the Italian neorealists to Kevin Smith's Clerks)? What about actors like Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams who like to improvise? What about documentary filmmakers who don't script what happens in front of the camera? Don't these let a little bit of chance creep into the film? Not really. One could say that these strategies let some chance occurrences make it onto the raw footage. However, the filmmaker and the editor watch the collected footage over and over, deciding which portions of which takes they will assemble into the final film. They do so with the same scrutiny that was applied to the actual filming. Even if something occurred on film without their planning, they make a conscious choice to use that chance occurrence. What was chance in the filming becomes choice in the final editing.

"Come on, do film professionals from editors to set designers really spend all that time scrutinizing such details?" Think of it this way. A Hollywood blockbuster may cost up to \$200 million. If you were to make something that costs that much, wouldn't you scrutinize every tiny detail? Even a "low budget" film can cost \$10 million or so. With so much money riding on a film, the scrutiny is enormous, and it extends to all levels. Of course this process, like all human effort, is fallible; mistakes do sometimes creep in (for example, extras in a film set in ancient Rome might be seen wearing wristwatches). All too often, beginning film scholars have a tendency to assume that odd moments in the film are mistakes, when the opposite assumption is more likely to be true. Nothing in a final film is there without having been examined by scores of professionals who have carefully chosen the components. You can trust that if something is in a film, it's there for a reason.

A movie is not a telegram

"Okay, so the director really cares about the details. But do you think your interpretation is what she really meant to say?"

In high school English classes you may have been taught to look for the meaning of a literary work, a single sentence that summarizes what the author was trying to convey. So you might have boiled Shakespeare's Macbeth down to a single sentence that reveals the moral lesson to be learned from the play (perhaps "Greed for power corrupts people"). One can reduce a literary work or film to its message, which makes the game of interpretation a fairly simple one. All we have to do is figure out what the author/director was trying to say.

Some filmmakers have scoffed at the idea that their movies contain any such messages. Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn is alleged to have said, "If I wanted to send a message, I would've called Western Union." What is at issue here is a the conception of what communication is. The traditional understanding of speech considers a sender trying to relay a message to a receiver (often called the S-M-R model). A sender has a clear intention of what she wants to get across to the receiver, but she may not present her message particularly clearly. The receiver tries to understand the message, but she can misunderstand the sender for a variety of reasons. By comparing the sender's intention with the receiver's understanding, one can discover how effective the communication was. For example, if a receiver gets a telegram asking for bail money and then starts collecting the necessary cash, then a successful instance of communication has taken place.

It is tempting to conceptualize of a film as communication in this way. To see how effective the film is, one could compare the filmmaker's intentions with our interpretations and see if we "got it." If the audience member didn't receive the message, then perhaps the film is poorly made or perhaps the viewer is not very savvy.

Films, plays, and novels, however, are not telegrams; they are infinitely more complicated. One of the first traps that the budding critic should avoid is thinking that a film can be understood as having a single message which we either "get" or not. To do so is to treat a film like a telegram. The cinema is a richer form of communication than can be conceptualized as sender-message-receiver.

"Okay, so perhaps the filmmaker isn't just sending a single message. Maybe she's sending several messages. If we can figure out what those messages are, then we've got it, yes?"

First of all, there's a big question concerning who the "author" of a film is. Thousands of people put their work into a major film. If all of them trying to convey meaning, do we have to consider all their combined intentions? Or if some people's contributions are more important than others (actors, director, cinematographer, producer), then can we understand a film as the sum total of their intentions? The question of the film's authorship is a much thornier one than the question of a book's authorship.

Let's make it easy on ourselves. Let's assume that the author/filmmaker of a movie is the person who is in charge of coordinating all decisions in the shooting process: the director. If we can figure out what the director intends, then we've got it, right? If we could interview Hitchcock and gain an understanding of what was going through his mind when he made Vertigo, then we would have gained a pretty solid hold on the film, yes?

But can we reduce the film to what the director consciously intends? At times we all express the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of our times without necessarily being conscious of doing so.

Did Hitchcock fully understand his attitude toward blonde women, or was he propagating a widely held belief in his society? Sometimes the ideology of our day speaks through us with little awareness on our part. In addition, we can unconsciously express personal issues as well as social attitudes. Many believe that the unconscious seeks to express painful things that we have repressed and buried within ourselves. These tensions can emerge in our everyday lives through dreams or Freudian slips or the artwork that we make. Perhaps Hitchcock was unconsciously working through his own personal obsession with cool, aloof women in ways that he didn't even understand as he made Vertigo. Since human beings cannot be reduced to their conscious thoughts, films should not be reduced to the director's conscious intentions.

"Okay, okay, so if we get a sense of what the director's conscious intentions are, what ideological beliefs she gained from her socialization, and what her unconscious issues are (admittedly a difficult process), then we've arrived at a well-grounded, comprehensive description of what the film is trying to communicate, right?"

We have, if we stay within the sender-message-receiver model that works for telegrams. But let's step outside that model. Why should we limit the viewer to making only those meanings which come directly from the sender/filmmaker? If I get meaning out of a film and apply it to my life, why should I have to check with the filmmaker to see if that's the right meaning? In other words, why should the filmmaker have more authority over interpreting the film than I do?

"Because she's the filmmaker. It's her movie," you may reply. I would respond, "You're the audience. It's your movie, too." If you let go of the notion of a filmmaker trying to convey a message, then the audience's activity is to interpret the film according to their lives, their experiences, their tastes -- not the filmmaker's. That activity is just as valid as the filmmaker's. The meaning of a movie does not lie solely within the film itself but in the interaction of the film and the audience.

As we learn more and more about how film audiences interpret a movie, we discover what a striking range of interpretations people make. If we consider those interpretations to be somehow less valid than the filmmaker's, then we lose much of the complexity of how movies work, make meaning, and give pleasure in our society.

"Reading into" films

"But those audiences are just reading things into the movie, right?"

Let's think about what "reading into" a movie is. "That's simple," you might reply. "It's when an audience puts things into the movie that aren't there." That certainly seems straightforward enough. But is it?

Picture yourself watching a horror film in which a group of teenagers are staying at a spooky cabin deep in the woods. It's midnight. A couple sneaks off to a back bedroom and has sex. The attractive young woman then gets up, decides that she's going to take a shower, and says that she'll be right back.

You know that this woman will be toast in a matter of minutes.

But how do you know? There's nothing in the film itself which says that this woman will die. The same incident (romantic rural location, sexy couple) could take place in a romantic film, and the

shower would not raise any hackles. No, the knowledge of her imminent death comes from you, the experienced horror film viewer. You have "read into" the scene.

Like the characters in Scream, you know that horror films operate according to a set of rules or conventions that have been established by previous films in the genre. The filmmaker depends on you knowing these conventions. She knows that by sending the woman to the shower, she can create tension in the audience ("No! Don't go, you crazy girl!"). The filmmaker can toy with the audience, delaying the inevitable, because she knows that we expect the girl to be slashed. It is our job as audience members to read into the scene; filmmakers count on that.

Movies rely on the audience to supply information that is only hinted at in the film, like the shower convention in horror films. This "reading into" even occurs at the simplest levels of filmmaking. When we see a shot of someone getting into a car and driving away, followed by a shot of the car pulling into another driveway, we understand that the driver drove from one place to another. We understand this without the film actually showing us the drive across town. If we were limited to what was explicitly laid out in the film, if we didn't read into the film, then we wouldn't be able to make basic sense out of the movie. There's not a choice of whether you read into a film or not; audiences always read into a movie.

This is not to say that you can read a movie in any way you want. Certain pieces of information in a film are established beyond dispute. If you don't think that Raiders of the Lost Ark is about an explorer archaeologist looking for the Ark of the Covenant, then you've missed something. If you believe that it is a film about Arctic beekeeping, then you are doing a remarkably perverse bit of reading into.

Between the pedestrian kind of reading into (the driving-across-town example, which some would call an inference or expectation) and the ludicrous kind of reading into (Raiders-as-Arctic-beekeeping-film), there is a wide range of possible readings. Some of these you may find to be too much of a stretch. What I would ask is that you be open to the possibility that some of these readings may be interesting. Don't close down your mind simply because an interpretation involves "reading into" a movie, because all film viewings involve reading into. Instead, look at the movie with an open mind and see if there is evidence to support a particular interpretation. If someone says that Raiders is really a film about finding God or a film about Freudian revenge on the father, look at the film to see if there is corroborating material. Based on the film, decide if there is a case to be made for that particular interpretation.

Just a movie

"Okay, maybe I see the value of coming up with new interpretations of Hamlet or Citizen Kane, but Raiders? Or Evil Dead 2? Come on. Aren't you taking these a bit too seriously? After all, it's just a movie."

You wouldn't say, "Why are you analyzing Hamlet? After all, it's just Shakespeare." Why is it okay to analyze Shakespeare and not Evil Dead 2? The answer has as much to do with the social status of these works as it does with the works themselves.

There was a time when the study of Shakespeare would have been questionable as being not

serious enough. At first, scholars in the West didn't think that anything written in English was worthy of study as the classics written in Greek. Homer, Sophocles, and Aristotle were the serious works which should be taught in school, not Shakespeare's plays or Dickens's novels. Lawrence Levine has traced how the status of Shakespeare's work has changed in America, from a rather lowbrow standing in vaudeville productions to its current highbrow connotation as Art-with-a-capital-A. Dickens's novels, now clearly considered classics, were serialized in newspapers as pulp fiction. In that day, to argue that Dickens's work should be taught in schools would seem almost scandalous. Such trash obviously could not withstand the scrutiny applied to great works like Homer's Odyssey, or so it must have seemed.

Instead of relying purely on our society's understanding of what kinds of artworks are good enough to be taken seriously, we should instead look to the artworks themselves. If we look for rich interpretations of a work, we may find them or we may not. The point is not to dismiss the process outright simply because it's "just a movie." The proof is in the pudding, as the old saying goes. If your analysis produces insightful, well-grounded interpretations in a film, then that film is definitely fruitful for analyzing, even if it is titled something like Evil Dead 2.

No one will argue that all media works are equally rich for analysis. Probably Hamlet is a more complex text to examine than Evil Dead 2 is. But that shouldn't lead us to neglect a text that is "just a movie." You should take insight where you can get it. And even if a certain film is not particularly complex, it can still provide hints about the society that produced it. Events don't have to be overtly complicated to yield knowledge.

For example, Robert Darnton, in his essay "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," analyzes a particularly unpromising-sounding phenomenon: a mock trial and execution of some cats by the apprentices and journeymen in a Parisian printing shop in the 1730s. What could this bizarre, sadistic, and unusual ritual possibly tell us about French society of that time? Reading closely, Darnton shows how this odd ceremony can reveal much about the relationship between workers and bosses, the sexual and class structures of the society, and the tradition of a craft. His essay demonstrates that even the slightest cultural artifacts bear the imprint of the society that made them. Examining a film can give us clues about the meanings and assumptions that are shared by the members of a culture. If a mock trial of cats can reveal social interrelationships, then an uncomplicated film that doesn't bear much aesthetic scrutiny can be examined for its social insights. All cultural products carry cultural meaning.

Ruining the movie

Part of the resistance to applying analytic tools to a film like Evil Dead 2 is the belief that such analysis will kill the pleasure we have in watching the film. After all, the movies are intended to be "mere entertainment." We've already dealt with the question of the filmmaker's intention, so let's not deal further with whether or not we should be limited to the filmmaker's conception of the film as "mere entertainment." Instead, let's deal with the fear that analyzing a film will destroy the simple pleasure of watching it.

Sometimes it seems that the surest way to ruin a good book is to have to read it for a class. English classes are supposed to make you read things that you wouldn't normally pick up yourself. They force you to read Chaucer or Joyce, and the process of analyzing these works hopefully gives you insight into your life. But that's a very different thing from reading Michael Crichton or John Grisham in the airport. There you're reading to escape. If we start thinking too hard about airport novels or

mainstream films, doesn't it ruin them?

When people learn that I am a media studies academic, they frequently ask, "Are you ever able to just sit back and enjoy a movie, or are you always analyzing it?" The question never rings true to me because it's phrased as an either/or option. For me, it's not a matter of substituting cerebral analysis for visceral pleasure; I experience both simultaneously. I don't lose the pleasure of rooting for the good guy while I'm admiring a film's editing and thinking about the plot's social ramifications. After taking media studies classes, I can add the pleasures of analysis to the pleasures of moviegoing.

I realize that as you are taking an introductory film analysis class, it may not seem like there's much pleasure in analysis. It probably seems more like tedious, difficult work. At first it may seem that you're losing the pleasurable experience of the movie as you dissect it, but as you get better at film analysis, you will be able to recombine those activities. The end result, I believe, is a richer kind of pleasure. I believe that I respond more fully to the movies than I did before I started analyzing films. I now feel joy at a well-composed shot, a tautly constructed narrative structure, and an innovative social commentary, as well as the simpler pleasure of finding out whodunnit. The outcome we hope for in a film analysis class is not to ruin a film but to increase the complexity of your enjoyment.

Why do that? Why tinker with the simple pleasure of watching a movie? This question goes to the foundation of what education is. The basic faith underlying education is that an examined life is better, richer, fuller than an unexamined life. How do we really know that self-examination is better than the bliss of simple ignorance? Like most statements of faith, there's no way to prove it. But by being in a college classroom, you have allied yourself with those of us who believe that if you don't examine the forces in your life, you will become subject to them. You can go throughout your life merely responding to the movies, but if you are an educated person, you will also think about them, about what they mean and how they are constructed. In so doing, you may pleasures and insights that you could not have obtained any other way. This is the promise of the educated life in reading, in living, and in watching movies.

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