Cinema and Popular Culture
Preliminary Notes by the Instructor

Without question, one of the most important channels of popular culture today continues to be cinema. Cinema is important not only because of its mass popularity (transcending every social structural boundary in society) but also because of its profound effect on the film viewer, sometimes for good and sometimes for evil. Films affect viewers at two levels: at the personal individual level (the micro-level affect) and at the level of society as a whole (the macro-level affect).

Films and the Individual

The micro-level affects include the following: (a) To begin with there is the emotional impact on the viewer arising out of, first, the story-line and, second, the manner in which the story is told. This may be referred to, following Boorstin (1990) as the vicarious experience of film-viewing where the viewer participates in the emotional experience of the film subject and comes away not only touched but profoundly shaken emotionally. Assuming, in other words, that the film is well made and the story is understandable to the viewer (which is not always the case, especially in relation to intelligent films), then it will precipitate within the viewer any number of emotions depending upon the story: empathy, sympathy, anger, joy, sorrow, fear, and so on.

What emotions are generated will, to some degree, depend upon the personality make-up of the viewer and his/her life experiences. From the film-maker's point of view, however, the task is to reduce to a minimum the impact of this personal baggage that the viewer brings to the film, and instead allow the film-maker to evoke the logical emotions associated with the storyline. Take, for example, the film *A Dry White Season* (1989); film-maker Euzhan Palcy would consider her film exceptionally successful if even a dyed in the wool racist (like a member of the Ku Klux Klan) came away from the film empathizing with the victims of apartheid in South Africa. But she cannot rely on the story-line alone (no matter how powerfully dramatic and poignant it happens to be) to do the job; she must also use the full panoply of methods and techniques at her disposal to achieve this objective. (In the film, for instance, she uses a cross-cutting editing approach, which not only has the usual effect of heightening tension and drama, but also reveals in a very stark and forceful way the vast distance, wrought by apartheid, that separate residents of a city, in terms of lifestyle, etc., even though they share the same spatial and time boundaries.

To take another example of a vicarious film experience: the scenes in Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982) where a Polish woman, Sophie (brilliantly played by Meryl Streep), is forced to make a choice between her daughter and her son work to produce powerful emotions in the viewer to a great extent because of the film-makers method in producing the scenes. The event in itself is of course heart wrenching; and one does not need to be a parent to feel the emotions: Sophie is

forced by the Nazi officer to decide which one of her children, the boy or the girl, must be sent to the gas chambers. Yet the full emotional impact of the terrible terrible choice that no parent should ever have to make (where the question of death is no longer limited to one or the other of the children but perforce embraces the very soul of the mother [how can she ever survive the recurring nightmare that will pursue her for the rest of her life], is evoked in the viewer by the film-maker's method: the camera pans over masses of wretched civilians herded into line by the Nazi guards next to a cattle car at a train station waiting to be transported to the gas chambers and then the purpose of the pan is realized as it stops on Sophie and her two children. A Nazi officer arrives and says a few words to Sophie and moves on. A brief exchange ensues between the two. Through tight close-up shots, rapid fire cross-cutting and a sound-track filled with the terrified screams of the little girl as she is dragged away the awful dilemma that the Nazis had thrown the mother into dawns on the viewer with a crescendo of powerful, gut wrenching emotions of empathy; only a viewer with a cold heart of stone (a non-human) can survive the impact emotionally unscathed.

(b) Films can provoke the viewer to think; making the viewer ponder and reflect on issues raised by some parts of the film, or by the film as a whole. Western film-makers, generally assert that their films are not intended to convey any specific messages; they are merely engaged in practicing their craft: to make films to entertain. Yet, no intelligent film is without specific messages (whether the film-maker intends them or not). Even though film-maker Constantine Costa-Gavras is fond of asserting, for example, that his films are not political films in that he is not making any political statements in them the fact is that his films (e.g. *State of Siege* [1973], *Missing* [1982], *Betrayed* [1988]) are almost all very 'political.' Take his film Missing; to be sure the film can be viewed as the quest of a father (an upright U.S. citizen) for his son (a political activist) whom he never understood, but who is now missing in a Latin American country (and in the search process becomes re-united with him, but only in spiritual and emotional terms [the son is found murdered]). However, at a different level, the film is very political. In the course of cinematically recounting this true story, Gavras manages to make the intelligent viewer ponder on the character of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and its horrifyingly brutal consequences for not only Latin Americans, but for U.S. citizens too.

It is not the story-line alone, however, that carries embedded in it specific political issues, the film becomes 'political' (independent of the storyline) by virtue of the film-maker's decision to tell the father's story. The very fact Costa-Gavras felt compelled to tell this particular story, and not some other story (say a boy meets girl type of story) in itself is a 'political' statement. In a similar fashion, even the viewer is making a political statement in deciding to go and see it (unless he/she was 'forced' to go and see it by a friend, spouse, etc. [which, incidentally, is not uncommon]). In both instances the political statement at the broadest level, as it applies to *Missing*, is sympathy with a political position that totally rejects the use of civilian terror and executions as instruments for effecting government policies.

Of course, the film also acquires its political intent from the essential aspects of the story that the film-maker chooses to place on the screen visually, and aspects that he/she chooses to leave at the non-visual (e.g. verbal) level. For example, film-maker Roland Joffe chose to visually show the effect of a U.S. bombing of a city in Cambodia (supposedly done in error) during the Vietnam War in his film *The Killing Fields* (1984). This particular incident, while relevant to the overall story, could have easily been left at the non-visual level without really weakening the story line. Yet via this approach in this cinematic rendition of a true story, Joffe manages to make the viewer

ponder upon the terrible consequences for civilians in East Asia of the ideological war the U.S. was engaged in with the Soviet Union.

(c) Films can also inspire the viewer--either in terms of taking action or in terms of simply maintaining/ reinforcing one's own values. Films such as Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981), or Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), (or even films such as *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken* [1991] and *The Razor's Edge* [1984]) tend to make the viewer participate (emotionally and intellectually) in the celebration of the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity and tribulations. These films facilitate for the viewer the reinforcement and/or acquisition of values that support and emphasize the decent and the positive in human beings. Some films will inspire and move one to do even more: take specific action. For example, films such as *The Mission* ([1986] another film by Roland Joffe) and *Cry Freedom* ([1987] another film by Richard Attenborough) inspire one to become actively supportive (e.g. by sending donations to relevant organizations, by going to libraries to find out more information, etc.) of the causes being covered (via the storyline) in the films (in the case of *The Mission* it is the plight of the people who live in the South American rain forests, and in the case of *Cry Freedom*, it is apartheid).

(d) The vast majority of the films that are released in the U.S. and elsewhere are not, by any stretch of the imagination, intelligent films. Viewing these films for the most part is akin to reading trashy novels instead of reading, say a novel by Charles Dickens, or it is akin to reading a sensation-mongering tabloid, rather than a newspaper such as the *New York Times*.[1]

So what purpose do these films serve for the viewer at the micro level? Why are they so popular? The answer to this question can be found by considering the following fact: in both India (with average income among the lowest in the world) and in the U.S. (with average income among the highest in the world) popular films (that is non-intelligent films) constitute one of the most important staples of entertainment. In both these countries, the ignorantsia use films as a means of escape from the reality of their day to day existence. In one instance the reality is one of tyranny--the tyranny of poverty--and in the case of the other it is also tyranny--the tyranny of plenty (symptomatically manifest via alienation). Therefore, films such as *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Pretty Woman* (1991), *Rambo* (1985, and 1988) are all films that aim to assist U.S. viewers to deal with their alienated and meaningless lives by escaping, momentarily at least, into the simplified world of sex and violence or just plain idiotic pyrotechnics. Films, therefore, can also permit the viewer to escape from reality via, what Boorstin (1990) calls the visceral thrill. Through suspenseful action and sound effects (and minimal dialogue) the film-maker not only persuades the viewer to suspend disbelief, but also thinking itself! As Boorstin (1990:110) explains: "[v]isceral

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[1] The difference between a intelligent film and non-intelligent film, at the simplest level, is that the intelligent film makes demands on the intelligence of the viewer. This difference emerges most clearly when one makes the distinction between art and entertainment. Art makes one look at the world differently, while entertainment throws back what one already knows, but in an oversimplified manner. Youngblood (1979:754) captures this distinction in relation to cinema succinctly: "By perpetuating a destructive habit of unthinking response to formulas, by forcing us to rely ever more frequently on memory, the commercial entertainer encourages an unthinking response to daily life, inhibiting self-awareness.... He offers nothing we haven't already conceived, nothing we don't already expect. Art explains; entertainment exploits. Art is freedom from the conditions of memory; entertainment is conditional on a present that is conditioned by the past. Entertainment gives us what we want; art gives us what we don't know what we want. To confront a work of art is to confront oneself--but aspects of oneself previously unrecognized." Intelligent films, then, are also works of art.

thrills are the filmmaking's dirty little secret. Though they can require considerable art to achieve, there is nothing artistic about the results--the passions aroused are not lofty, they're the gut reactions of the lizard brain--thrill of motion, joy of destruction, lust, blood lust, terror, disgust. Sensations, you might say, rather than emotions." Films, in other words, can serve as an important form of what may be called the visual narcotic. (Other visual narcotics include mass spectator sports and, of course, popular television.)

Films and Society

The way films interact with the viewer via the mediation of society, turning now to the macro-level effects, is a complex and as yet little understood process. Much of what has been written on this topic remains at the conjectural level. The research problem is obvious: how can one disentangle all the various elements of society that impinge on an individual in terms of shaping his/her behavior. For example: the agencies of socialization range from the parent through to peers, from the school through to the church, and from the government through to the mass media. Still, one can legitimately conclude that films do have an impact on society as whole by virtue of the mere fact that films are an important component of the mass media. It is possible to suggest, therefore, that films both reflect the values and beliefs of a society and they also help to shape those beliefs and values. Films, for instance, have been credited with influencing fashion in clothing, hairstyles, language, general demeanor, etc. among the young. While such types of influences may, on the surface, be considered as generally innocuous, in reality this is not necessarily so. In support of this point consider the following two types of influences: those relating to mass consumerism and those relating to stereotypes.

Mass consumerism

Mass consumerism may be defined as an ideology fostered among a large group of people that in effect states that the entire purpose of life is to 'consume' goods produced by the modern capitalist society. [2]

One of the mechanisms by which this ideology is put into effect is fashion where the trend setter manipulates the consumer to copy the trend (and thereby create fashion.) (Fashion is only possible when a large number of people copy that which is considered to be 'fashionable.') Through fashion, consumer tastes are then homogenized; making it possible for the capitalist to sell his/her goods to the widest market possible. Films help in setting fashion trends or in propagating fashion trends via the phenomenon of 'star status' of certain key film actors.

Filmmakers, or more precisely those who fund and market films, the film studios, long ago discovered that it was possible to sell to the public an artificial, glorified image of certain actors (usually with some appealing element already present--e.g. good looks) and thereby sell the film itself by the mere fact that the actor (the 'star') was in the film. Through this 'star system,' which ultimately involved the creation of a personality cult around the star, the film-viewing public then

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[2] This section grew out of discussions with A. M. McGoldrick.

became conditioned to copying what the stars, their 'celluloid idols,' were doing, wearing, etc. on and off the screen. (Needless to say, the fact that an actor is imbued with star status by the publicity machine of the studio does not necessarily imply that the star is a good actor.) Moreover, the closer the identification of the film-viewing public to the stars, the more money the stars make (through popularity of their films) and the more money they make, the better their lifestyle becomes in terms of consumer goods. This in turn further fuels the consumerist taste of the film-viewing public as they begin to envy the life-style of their idols. But of what harm is mass consumerism? At the simplest level it is that it produces an unquestioning public that is ever ready to be manipulated in behaving in a manner that does not threaten the interests of those who own the major proportion of wealth (and the means of producing it) in society, the capitalist elite. Mass consumerism, in other words, is an important device for converting people into the ignorantsia. Through mass consumerism the public becomes, in essence, lulled into accepting the status quo even if it may be inimical to its interests. The potential conflict between the rich and the poor, the employers and the unemployed, the workers and the capitalists, etc. is thereby 'sublimated' so to speak. Through this sublimation all the major ills of society (e.g. large scale corruption in the finance sector, massive environmental pollution and destruction, widespread homelessness and unemployment, rampant poverty and despair, etc.) that can be traced to the extremely lopsided distribution of wealth where a tiny group of people control a huge chunk of wealth, are, therefore, accepted as a 'normal' or 'natural' accompaniment to economic progress and industrial advancement.[3]

Mass consumerism is also inimical to the interests of the public in that it helps to hide an important byproduct of capitalism: the alienation of the individual. Alienation is an amorphous concept but here it should be understood as, first, a state of mind where the individual feels hopeless, powerless and apathetic in the face of what he/she perceives as uncontrollable and unmanageable powerful capitalist bureaucracies and institutions, and, second, a state of physical existence where the individual objectively is powerless in controlling the uses to which his/her labor is put within the capitalist system. Symptoms of this alienation include anomie; apathy, estrangement from relatives and friends; enslavement by fashion, selfishness; wanton destructiveness; suicide; loss of meaning in life; preference for mind-deadening activities (drugs, visual narcotics, etc.) and, paradoxically, an even greater push toward engagement in mass consumerism in a bid to sublimate the alienation (the very source of their alienation perversely appears as their salvation!). To elaborate on the last point: while mass consumerism is the engine of capitalist growth, it also generates within the ignorantsia the notion that their happiness and life-goals depend on the satisfaction of the false needs that mass consumerism generates. This in turn leads to further immersion in the mass consumerist ethic leading to even more alienation.

Stereotypes

To begin with: what are stereotypes? A stereotype is an oversimplified mental image of groups of people, or categories of institutions (the church, etc.), or even whole countries, continents and

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[3] Fashion, of course, is not the only way by which the sublimation of this potential conflict is achieved by the film industry acting as an important arm of the corporate mass media. It has been suggested (see Berger 1982) that the predominance of visceral type films (see above) and films that do not invite the viewer to examine and question the status quo is another mechanism by which the rich and the powerful convince the public in the 'naturalness' and hence immutability of the status quo.

regions. This mental-image is shared by a large number of people and it is usually derived from the extrapolation of the behavior of a single individual (or entity) to the rest of the community (or entities) from which the individual (or entity) comes. Stereotypes can be of both positive types and negative types. In both instances, however, the fact that this image does not conform to reality, implies that there is an inherent underlying negative element to it--even in the case of positive stereotypes. This negativity resides in the fact that it conditions behavior toward the target of the stereotype in a manner that is not warranted by the actual objective reality surrounding the target. When the target of the stereotype happen to be a group of people or a country then the injustice that underlies this phenomenon is readily obvious. In such circumstances the behavioral attitude toward the target is preconceived; it is not a product of actual interaction with the target. For example: it is not uncommon to see immigrants come into the U.S. with preconceived views of African-Americans, even though they may have never ever actually interacted with a single African-American.[4]

One of the dominant stereotypes that films in the U.S. have perpetuated concerns the racist image of people of color, especially Native-Americans and African-Americans. In the case of Native-Americans one only has to see the old 'Westerns' (the cowboy and 'Indian') films to quickly determine the stereotype. In these films Native-Americans are invariably portrayed as vermins and scoundrels who deserve to be annihilated (and many of whom were annihilated in real life), rather than as victims (which in real life they were) of a voracious and rapine land-hungry alien settler population that established its legitimacy to rob the land that belonged to the Native-Americans solely on the basis of their guns and their numbers.

As for African-Americans, the stereotypes have been at a more subtler level. In his excellent book, Bogle (1989) identifies the following types of stereotypes, among others, that African-Americans have been historically burdened with in Hollywood films: the uncle tom (the polite, patient, uncomplaining 'good negro' who did everything his/her white master desired even in the face severe oppression); the coon (the comic negro who via his/her buffoonery [either as a child, a a pickaninny, or as an adult the uncle remus] served as an object of amusement and entertainment); the tragic mulatto (the product of miscegenation who is forever the victim of her mixed parentage); the mammy (a big, fat and bossy woman, often the female version of the coon); the aunt jemima (the female version of the uncle tom); the buck (either as brutal and savage out to destroy the white man's world or as an over-sexed animal lusting after white women); the jester (the comic negro, "[h]ligh-stepping, and high-falutin' and crazy as all get-out"); the servants (respectable, uncomplaining, and entertaining domestics); the entertainers (the respectable, well dressed jester); the problem people (the victims of racism of bad whites eliciting sympathy from good whites, or angry victims of racism turned militant); and the black superstar (the race problem is over, even blacks can be superstars now). As is evident from this long list of stereotypes, the net effect has been to dehumanize African-Americans by portraying them in a manner that did not correspond with reality, not so much at the level of the individual (e.g. in reality there are some individuals who do act as uncle toms), but at the level of the group (e.g. not all African-Americans are uncle-toms). Needless to say, via this dehumanization the

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[4] While it is humanly impossible to eliminate all stereotypes from one's mind because of the enormous complexity of the world one lives in; there are some stereotypes [especially those concerning groups of peoples or a country] that demand elimination. Examples of such stereotypes abound; here are a few: whites are racists; blacks are lazy; Jews own everything; Orientals work too hard; women are weak; women cannot be understood by men; Arabs are wealthy; Americans are rich; Americans are uncouth; etc.; etc.

ideology of racism has continued to be propagated through the socialization aspect of film-viewing.

A word or two about the concept of 'stereotype' itself. One would be remiss not to mention here a very thorough and for the most part (though not entirely) convincing demonstration by Barker (1989) that, in his words, "...the concept of a 'stereotype' is useless as a tool for investigation of media texts." Moreover, he continues, "it is dangerous on both epistemelogical and political grounds." (p. 210) While this characterization of the concept may be valid from the perspective of the uses made of it in different contexts, the position adopted here is that the concept, when properly defined, is not entirely valueless in some circumstances. What does one mean by 'properly defined?' That the concept should not be freighted with unnecessary baggage (value assumptions, political agendas, etc.) such as those that he identifies. Therefore, it is possible to use the term (as it is used in this chapter) in a neutral sense to simply signify the process of extrapolation of, for example, the personal characteristics of an individual to all members of the group that the individual belongs to. However, at the same time, it is important to caution that human behavior, where stereotypes are involved, is not entirely conditioned by the stereotypes--other factors will also come into play. For example, in the case of racist stereotypes and racism, it would be a mistake to suggest that racist stereotypes leads to racism; for, in reality, the reverse is probably true. Therefore, in the context of racism, the function of racist stereotypes is that they are simply one more item in the arsenal of dehumanization. That is, they help to reinforce, not create, racism.