**UNDERSTANDING MOVIES**

**Most of us are IMAGE ILLITERATE.**

We watch moving images, but uncritically, passively, rarely analyzing how they work on us, how they shape our values (Louis Gianetti, *Understanding Movies*). Movies are bigger business than ever, most of Hollywood’s products aimed at teenagers, who more than other groups, spend inordinate amounts of time awash in an ocean of images, influencing their core values, emotions, and conduct.

High school curricula have kept up with literary developments in the world of print, but until the Visual Media class, not much learning went on about how to navigate the world of movie sight and sounds.

**People don’t want to understand.**

Some people would rather not understand filmic techniques behind “the magic of movies” because they are afraid they won’t enjoy the movie as much. Afraid to lose our “childlike sense of wonder.”

Most children realize that movies involve cameras, but have no real idea about how a movie is made (not filmed in sequence, scenes shot and reshot, without backgrounds, special effects added later, etc.). This knowledge was not needed to enjoy the movie. They don’t need to understand that Sinbad is one of the oldest of all archetypes, the rogue, living by his wits, owing nothing to anyone and tied to no place. They can just say “WOW,” cheer on the hero when he/she wins and have good memories of the movie.

However, when we get older, we can understand movies on a deeper level and can actually use what we learn to enrich our own lives. The first step in understanding a movie is to look beyond what Bruce Kawin (critic and author) calls “Wow.” He says people tend to look *through* a movie as if it were a window instead of looking at it as if it were a painting. The painting is a better analogy because film is composed of individual pictures called FRAMES which are strung together to make shots.

Details of understanding film go further. First one must accept that NOTHING IN A MOVIE HAPPENS BY ACCIDENT. Someone consciously made a series of decisions concerning what to place in each scene, who will be in the scene, what props will be in the scene, and what each character will say. EVERYTHING (each person, event, and object) HAS A PURPOSE. Once this is understood, one can begin to see how objects and people are arranged in the frame, how the film is put together out of individual shots, and how the shots are spliced together to create SEQUENCES, SCENES, and MOVIES.

We can then understand why certain artistic decisions were made, what an object means as a symbol, what events foreshadow others, how a visual metaphor works, etc. Then slowly, we will feel as if we are going through a tunnel and at the other end is a new understanding.

**Why should we care?**

Mainly because movies are special. They have unique capacities to

1) entertain

2) allow vicarious escape

3) present a fragment of history as it occurred

4) show a totally unfamiliar landscape

5) jump instantly from one unit of time and space to another, virtually at the speed of thought

6) create an emotional experience from images alone

7) drive home a message without the audience being

aware the message is being sent

8) arouse our interest. Movies are an art form and

can be just as interesting and worthy of study as any art form.

Some movies people can watch over and over and keep finding new things to learn from them: Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (romantic obsession through Hitchcock’s warped, but clear, lens), *Casablanca* (ultimate example of macho cool, honor, sacrifice).

**SOCIAL PRESSURES AND NORMAL EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIETY**

We base our decisions about how to live and what sort of person to become in response to upbringing, social pressures, and normal expectations of society. Movies can contribute to and define such social codes, at times, even become a force for social control.

Movies can effect us in subtle ways that have little to do with entertainment or enlightenment: *Mad Max, Lethal Weapon, Terminator*, *Running Man* (boys may internalize “correct” masculine behavior).

A girl may internalize a host of sex-role stereotypes such as the good girl, bad girl, wife, mistress, careerist, adventurest, and then go model herself on one of these or begin a search for a more appropriate role model.

Movies are a way that society “talks to itself” and exchanges information with other cultures. Our movies tell other cultures more about the U.S.A. than any actions of our government.

Movies as an art form: “Art for art’s sake” (interesting in and of itself). Cinema has a unique structure, and to understand that structure is an engaging and rewarding project.

**MOVIES and IDEOLOGY**

An ideology is a set of interlocking assumptions and expectations held by a person, a group, or a culture – a set of ideas about the way the world works, a system of values.

Unlike philosophy which we internalize, ideology can easily become a program for action. An ideology can become so ingrained into a culture that it is taken for granted that our way is the “natural way,” the way the world works or should work. Since we absorbed this ideology at the same time we learned how to think and express ourselves, our thoughts are probably little more than a reflection of that ideology and our perceptions get continually filtered through it.

A good ideology gives its subscribers (those who believe it) a sense that they live under conditions of freedom and justice, that their world or system of values is the right one. Because we are indoctrinated at the earliest possible age, we accept the tenets of our ideology as the best way to live, rarely examining who the ideology favors or whether it actually is right or wrong.

For example, an ideology that asserts the “natural link” between democracy and free enterprise may actually work in the interest of major corporations rather than private individuals. On the other hand, one that denounces the link between free enterprise and heartless capitalism may work to keep its p eople in a cleverly disguised social factory.

During every war, both sides see themselves as good – fighting for freedom and justice – and sees its enemies as bad. This position also describes the majority of Westerns, political melodramas, police thrillers, and horror films.

Emotional associations are manipulated so that one set of characters becomes more appealing than another, and the audience is encouraged to root for the good guys and to anticipate the punishment or the destruction of the bad guys. When the good triumph, so does the ideology that they’ve been encoded to represent. Because of this, the narrative film can be as potent a form of social control and propaganda as seen anywhere in the world.

In Fred Zinneman’s *High Noon,* Will Kane finds that he alone has the courage and conviction to stand up to a band of ruthless killers. Everyone else in the town has placed their short term personal safety above the need to uphold the law and protect the community.

Even his new wife Amy, a Quaker who believes absolutely in nonviolence, has deserted him. We cheer as Kane makes the decision to stay and fight, and we cheer when Amy decides to help him. In the end, Kane can triumph only because Amy has decided to forgo her religious convictions. She kills one of the outlaws herself and helps Kane to kill the outlaw leader, Frank Miller. At end, audience has been thoroughly entertained and left with a satisfied sense of the rightness of the film’s ending. Kane is a true Western hero, an idealist in a world of moral cowards, and Amy is a true pioneer woman, standing by her man through rough times.

However, while the movie was entertaining its audience, it also presented a program for the roles of the sexes. Zinneman manipulates us into rooting for Kane to be a “real man” and follow his sense of duty, which is more important than the demands of marriage. We also want Amy to be a “real woman” and abandon her demands of faith to fulfill her sense of duty. *High Noon* is a solid example of how a film can imply a social program and encourage the audience to endorse a certain kind of behavior.

In a more recent example, *Armageddon* (1999), while they were caught up in this gripping, action-adventure, save-the-world romantic nonsense, how many audience members noticed that the moviemakers were also enforcing the idea that the only “real men” in the world were uneducated, sexist, macho, blue-collar Philistines?

The working-class heroes of this story are men of action, brighter, smarter, better looking, and much more courageous than all those NASA-geeks, who while educated, have to consult an authority before they act even while the world ends. The bumbling college educated class is represented by the sexless Steve Buscemi and Billy Bob Thornton. The heroic working class is represented by sexy Bruce Willis and Ben Affleck.

If you look at Jerry Bruckheimer’s films, you will find this theme: the rough-tough, working man hero is triumphant, while the educated and wealthy come off as second place at best (*Die Hard*, The Rock’s movies, C*on Air*, *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, *Coyote Ugly*, etc.).

A movie, good or bad, intentionally or not, sells an ideology. To read the ideology of a picture, you need to be able to read the picture in the first place. To do that requires a familiarity with the vast number of structuring codes, not all of which are obvious.

Ideologies change. Before 1961, movie heroes never killed with a joke. Death was always taken seriously. Then came James Bond, and action movies have not been the same since. And neither have we.

**STRUCTURING CODES**

**Visual vs. Written Images**

When describing a movie, some aspects can be difficult for your listener to understand because images show us what is happening much better than the written or spoken expression. However, it is NOT TRUE that visual images ALWAYS communicate better than words. Writing, speech, and visual images all communicate very well within their own particular spheres, with some overlapping and some basic differences.

**Mental Differences between Words and Images**

Visual images stimulate our perceptions DIRECTLY, while written or spoken images stimulate our perceptions INDIRECTLY. When we read, we must “translate” the symbols to discover the meaning. For example, the letters F-I-S-H do not mean “fish” until we put them together. Small children who have not yet mastered reading skills are hindered in their understanding of words because they have to spell out F-I-S-H every time they encounter the word and then try to translate it. Skilled readers comprehend what they read much more quickly because of experience, but they are still translating symbols before they understand the meaning of words, no matter how quickly they do it.

However, when we see a picture of a fish, no translation is needed. We understand the image directly and at all levels of consciousness. When reading, the author describes and the reader creates the scenes based on that description; in a movie, the director creates the scenes. Kind of a scary idea: if images work directly on all levels of the mind, including the subcon-scious, what messages are being subliminally passed by directors to audiences?

**Direct Link to the Mind**

Within the context of film, any message can be passed directly to the subconscious without the average viewer being away that the transfer of information is even taking place. Many of these messages are positive images that reinforce core American values: the triumph of good over evil, the idea that justice is available to all, love is a good thing, etc. However, many messages are unethical, appealing to the basest human instincts.

What message is being conveyed when images show the youthful, handsome hero kill someone on screen and then follow this act with a joke, or when heroes engage in casual sex without consequences, or when all smokers are young and beautiful and never, ever cough, or when a teen can’t be accepted without wearing Nike (“just do it”) shoes, etc. *ad infinitum.*

Positive or negative, we are constantly bombarded by these images, and unless we understand them and how they work, we are literally helpless, unaware of our drowning in a subliminal sea.

**The Subconscious**

The subconscious is a fusion of brain activities, both mental and physical, operating just beneath our active perceptions of the real world. For many years, teachers of psychology and art have used centuries-old knowledge to demonstrate the subconscious.

Demonstration of the subconscious: Science has long known that COLOR is a phenomenon of the way the brain perceives the world. In actuality, there are no colors, just different wavelengths of gray separated into colors by eyes and then the mind, which only perceives three primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) and two neutrals (black and white), which are then “mixed” as necessary to form the other colors.

Anything you see is preserved for a moment or two as an afterimage on the retina of the eyes. This physical phenom-enon is then interpreted by the brain which, according to theory, sees all colors in every perceived image. As a result, when you look at anything, you see all three colors, but your mind separates some colors to your conscious mind so that when you are looking at a red fire truck, you see red. However, your mind also sends the other primaries (yellow and blue), to the subconscious.

Because of a physical phenomenon of the eye, the preservation of an afterimage on the back of the retina, we can see the process at work and prove the subconscious is real.