

MOVIES OVERVIEW

If magazines are a young person's cultural handbook and if television celebrates their friends, home, and social affairs, movies are more epic—depicting significant personal struggles or cultural dramas.

In his neat little book (*Movies in Close-Up*, 1992: 11-12), Alan McDonald describes the allure of movies:

Film reaches the parts of us that other arts don't reach. It can combine the excitement of a rock soundtrack with that twists and turns in the plot of a paperback thriller. It offers the visual magic of television but (at the cinema) on a bigger, brighter, more spectacular scale. Nothing can touch the spectacle of cinema—when Indiana Jones is chased by a gigantic bolder we feel it bearing down on *us* in the audience. Today, multi-million dollar budgets are spent on locations, lavish costumes and special effects. The sum total can be a total all-out assault on the senses that is irresistible.

The power of movies may be diminishing for many reasons. From the 1920s to the 1960s, they were seen once a week. Kids had a week to talk about that adventure or love scene, to process the story. Now kids may see seven or so movies a week, TV specials, cable, and on video, as well as going to the theater with friends. Still, film producers know all this and are working hard to provide sensational special effects that will compensate and hook viewers surrounded by so many other entertainment possibilities.

There are differences between television programs or watching films on videos and going to the movies. You pay to go to the movies; that's a commitment. You usually go to the bathroom and get something to eat or drink before the film starts—to give it all your attention or not to bother some grump down the row. Although TV screens are bigger and some movie screens smaller, the characters in a film still tend to be larger than life and you look up to them from your seat. Movies also last well over an hour with no commercial breaks. These subtle differences help make movies special.

Movies are a medium of the young especially. It is estimated that 70% of those who go to the movies in the UK are under twenty-five, and in America, that figure goes up to 75%. More than half of all video rentals are to teenagers! Writing in *Variety* (16 January 1987), Don Albert notes that "while TV networks, radio programs, the music world, magazines and the world video all cater to the young, the strongest attempt to win the minds and souls of young people probably occurs in the film industry."

In the 1930s and 40s teenagers were just part of the movie crowd. But beginning in the 1950s, adolescents were noticed as more than a niche market and a new genre of teen flicks (teen pics or kidpix), which tended to overlap other genres of sexploitation, slasher and horror films, emerged. The 1980s were a big decade for teenage films.

Young people probably go to the movies mostly to be with their friends or a date. They also go to escape, to be excited, to laugh and have fun, to feel romantic, to be sexually titillated, and to be scared. At least this is our surveys show. But I think they also want to be informed, to be challenged, and to be inspired.

So there are the great epic films of national (or ethnic) origins and crucial struggles. Conflicts between good and evil, stories of individual and collective heroism and personal quest are universal themes. Dramas of the heart and personal relations also capture popular imagination. To these can be added the film genres of adventure, romance, comedy, science-fiction or fantasy, slasher, and cult films.

In 1952 Samuel Arkoff and Jack Nicholson formed the independent American International Pictures (AIP). Here is how they expressed their philosophy for providing the drive-ins of that time with cheap, short, double-bill features:

We'd like to make nice family pictures, but we're in this for the money. If the kids think it's a good picture and the adults don't, that's all right. Seventy-five percent of the drive-in audiences are under twenty-five, and seventy percent of our gross comes from drive-in theaters. God bless the whole 5000 of them. (From Z as in ZZZ, or Zowie. *Newsweek*, 5 May 1967, p. 61 as quoted in Schultze, et al. *Dancing in the Dark*, 1991, p. 217)

The age of drive-ins may have passed, but this gives us insight into what kinds of movies are made and why. AIP based their philosophy on research that came up with this marketing strategy in the 1950s and 1960s. It is called the "Peter Pan Syndrome."

- A younger child will watch anything an older one will watch.
- An older child will not watch anything a younger child will watch.
- A girl will watch anything a boy will watch.
- A boy will not watch anything a girl will watch.
- In order to catch the biggest audience, the film must focus on the 19-year-old male.

(Nicholson further explains): They like stories about people their own ages (and the trend toward youth in writers as well as actors continues in Hollywood)...As for tastes they rate action first followed by horror stuff, sexual scenes and rock n' roll. (Birth of an action-pic nation. *Variety*, 17 October 1956, p. 1 as quoted in Schultz, et al. 1991: 218)

These principles have been modified in time as society reacts against male domination and teen fascination. The point is how much have these principles been changed and on what principles are movies now being made in the U.S. and globally.

More important is the influence movies are having on young people. Along with music, movies race around the world. In many places, there is tension between U.S. and locally produced films. In 1998 movie attendance in France rose dramatically, from 150 to 175 customers. The second highest-grossing film that year was a French film, "Le Diner de Cons" ("Dinner of Idiots") which sold 8 million tickets. But the highest grossing film was the American "Titanic," selling 20 million tickets—a significant gap. And this in a country where many eschew American influence.

We hope for small independent and regionalized efforts. In 1991 an urban young person, Matty Rich, used a couple of credit cards and his grandmother's apartment to produce an urban drama called, "Straight Out Of Brooklyn." At around \$50,000 its total cost much less than one day's promotion of a current Hollywood film. By 1999, it had grossed \$2,712,000. There are many issues in this film for fruitful consideration and discussion.

An 18-year-old Iranian girl heard about a 65-year-old neighbor who kept his twin daughters locked inside their house (they were 12 at the time of discovery). With her father's help she filmed the twins and produced "The Apple," lauded as a stunning debut effort. "It mixes simple, potent symbols—a mirror, a watch, an apple—with surprisingly natural performances and cinematic sophistication, yet its true charm stems from the extraordinary gentleness and humor with which it surrounds the frail participants in this social tragedy." It is a teenager's creative expression about the position of women in Iranian society. (Camhi, L. Daughter of Iran, shade of her father. *The Boston Globe*, 21 February 1999, p. 21)

Most know very little about Kyrgyzstan. But in this central Asian country, Aktan Abdykalykov has produced a realistic coming of age story, his debut and the first film coming out of that nation. When Abdykalykov was 17 and drafted into the army, he found out he was adopted, given up by his mother, a geography teacher and already mother of nine. She had given her new son to her brother to raise in a way accepted at the time. This director has had little contact with his

biological mother to this day. Haunted by the question, "Why did it happen to me?" he produced "Beshkempir: The Adopted Son" and kept its cost under \$500,000. His own son plays the leading role of the adopted boy.

From blockbusters to independent films, from westerns to science fiction, from epics to personal dramas, there is much to learn from movies with young people. There is excitement in the viewing of good movies, and also in hearing fresh ideas in youthful discussions of films.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was the last movie that impressed or excited you? Did you have the opportunity to discuss it with anyone?
2. What was the most recent discussion of movies among young people you've been in on? How profitable did you find the dialogue?
3. What in the article above might initiate youthful conversation about movies and their own lives?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Since movies are so big and youth oriented, we need to understand them as art and big business and consider their influence on young people.
2. We are surrounded by so much media—and so much of the movie medium—that we are apt to pay it little attention. But films should be appreciated and critiqued.
3. Powerful harmful aspects of the movie industry and particular films can only be effectively critiqued by those who understand and appreciate the medium and discuss particular genres and films positively before asking for negative reactions.

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