Sociology Goes to Hollywood (or why we must use Hollywood clips in our sociology classes)

11/20/2014

As critical movie goers, we sociologists can go crazy when we watch Hollywood movies. In an effort to appeal to mass audiences, they often rely on gender stereotypes and misrepresent other cultures with overly simplistic characters. They are frequently driven more by superstar celebrities than intelligent writing. They are willing to rely on gimmicks to manipulate the viewer's emotional responses and awe them with dazzling special effects to entertain viewers—often at the expense of complicated plot lines. And these are some of the reasons why we *must* use clips from Hollywood films in our classes.

The mass appeal of Hollywood films make them especially powerful vehicles to engage students. Consider Disney's Pixar film, *A Bug's Life,* which was a widely successful film and immediately invokes warm and fuzzy feelings in our students. The plot follows the life of a young ant, Flik, who leads a rebellion against greedy grasshoppers that feed on food harvested by the ants.

Through very engaging story telling and award-winning animation, *A Bug's Life*, has entertained audiences of all ages. What probably has not occurred to students, however, is that it is an excellent illustration of Marxian theories and concepts; see our full analysis of how it illustrates Marx's theory of exploitation, class consciousness, and ideological control.

What makes Hollywood films so entertaining and useful in the classroom? One reason is they skillfully develop emotionally charged scenes with talented actors and actresses that can move audiences. Consider *Mona Lisa Smile* featuring a passionate performance from Julia Roberts, who has won several awards for best actress.

In the film, Julia Roberts' character encourages her students to be independent women, seeing their potential to be more than subservient accessories to a man's household. Her advocacy for an uncompromising lifestyle is met with criticism and resentment from conservative students, who argue that it challenges "the roles you were born to fill." Hollywood films like this do not derive their power by claiming to be some unvarnished truth (like with documentaries) but rather from their capacity to tap into powerful emotions. Through a form story-telling, they resonate with viewers based on a relationship, feeling, or experience that is perceived to offer a view of truth, even when the characters and events are, strictly speaking, fictional. For viewers that might view our gender roles as biological phenomena, this type of affective learning can help them to see through the eyes of others in ways that were not previously possible.

Another reason Hollywood films are so powerful is that they are drawn from popular culture, which also means that they have already been voraciously consumed, widely shared on social media, and come across as immediately relevant. Instructors therefore do not generally need to devote much class time to establish the context of scenes or characters. Consider *Fight Club*, in which a scene ends with the following line: "The things you own end up owning you. It's only after you lose everything that you're free to do anything."

Characters like Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, and the film more generally, are immediately recognizable to most students. When they can relate such material to concepts like the culture industry, students can more easily see how sociological theory is relevant for everyday life; they can overcome their fears of theory as some overly abstract thing that is disconnected from their own experiences.

As such, Hollywood films have unique strengths for addressing a particular set of learning goals. For example, they can promote humanistic values by emotionally connecting with viewers and illustrating the constraints of gender (as with *Mona Lisa Smile*) or by teaching students to think theoretically (as with *Fight Club*). They can also teach media literacy, or the ability to critically interrogate media by identifying intended messages, assumptions, and meanings.

For other examples of sociological theory applied to Hollywood film clips, see these examples:

- Weber's concept of bureaucracy in *Office Space*
- Goffman's concept of a total institution in *Full Metal Jacket*
- Institutionalization in *Shawshank Redemption*
- Stereotyping in *Up in the Air*
- Du Bois' concept of double consciousness in *The Tuskegee Airmen*
- The politics of menstruation in *Super Bad*
- Distinction in Dr. Seuss' *The Sneetches*
- Forms of capital in *Pretty Woman*
- Theories of crime and deviance in *West Side Story*
- Game theory in *A Dark Knight*

In fact, in our research on teaching with video (see our full article in *Teaching Sociology*), we argue that Hollywood films share these properties with several other types of video. We situate them in a broader category of videos that we call pop fiction, which also includes short films, music videos, and television shows. As with pop culture media in general, the intent of pop fiction videos is to entertain audiences. Using situations that promise powerful punch lines and characters with whom viewers can emotionally identify, these videos will keep our students captivated by the power of sociology.

Paul Dean

Paul Dean is co-creator and co-editor of The Sociological Cinema. He is also an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Ohio Wesleyan University.