The Growing Use of the Cinematic Medium as a Tool for Educating the Masses on Relevant Social Issues and Conventions

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how cinema, originally a medium of entertainment, has evolved over the course of the 20th and 21st-centuries into a potentially new vehicle for educating the masses on era-specific social issues and conventions. Because of its foundation as a tool for spreading easily-digestible social commentary, the development of cinema into an educational tool has been a topic of interest for several decades, dating back to the early 1900s and continuing well into the modern era. By examining the beginnings of how the general public and filmmakers came to perceive films as a possible method of education, one can better understand the current trajectory of cinema development for these purposes and the direction in which this development may be headed. Within the context of 21st-century society, the breadth of topics that will be explored include how cinema appeals to different social hierarchies, addresses modern social issues, explores unique moral and ethical questions, and overall stands as an additional, valid pedagogical field. Due to cinema's easily-digestible nature and the ever-evolving methods that it is utilizing to convey information about these topics to consumers – especially modern-day adolescents and young adults in European countries – it is possible that it could be used to improve educational quality for future generations.

KEYWORDS: Cinema, Cinematic, Documentary, Film, Pedagogy

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Introduction

A Brief History of the Cinematic Medium's Beginnings in Education

The modern appeal of the cinematic medium is gargantuan. Statistics show that the global box office revenue has been rising year over year, with 2017's box office revenue totaling over $40 billion. These numbers serve as an indicator of not only financial potential, but also of the ability to reach a massive audience, which presents filmmakers with the opportunity to promote ideas on an enormous scale. While other media such as the press are also effective at disseminating ideas relating to modern society on an equally large, if not larger, scale, none are arguably as capable as cinema at doing so in a way that is multilayered, subtle, and rhetorical. This is because cinema was and is still primarily a medium of entertainment that relies on a variety of techniques to appeal to a variety of audiences across as many social hierarchies as possible. The press, while highly informative by nature of its purpose to spread relevant news and ideas, is ultimately restricted by its roots in non-fiction. It is capable of entertaining through techniques such as satire and presenting rhetoric through engaging, multi-perspective pieces, but the entry point for enjoying what the press has to offer is higher than cinema's because its informative nature prevents it from relating to a wide audience on a deeply personal level. Cinema can provide an interesting story and premise; it can feed information to a passive audience and it has the liberty to do so without being grounded in realism.

While cinema did not burst into the mass market scene as early as the press, Anne Morey notes that during the 1910s and 1920s, the relationship between moviegoers and moviemakers began to evolve into a participatory culture rather than the previously established passive one; under the right conditions, people outside of the Hollywood film industry could potentially become members of it (Morey, 2001). A passive moviegoing culture would essentially be one in which the audience passively partook in any of the material that was given to them. The participatory culture that Morey mentions, however, was one in which the general public – moviegoers and potential producers alike – could become deeply intertwined with the filmmaking process. Hollywood's original insiders and producers were creating material whose success rode on the reception of the public, but unlike the press, this material was artistic rather than realistic. This allowed the material to connect to the public on a broader and arguably deeper level because any amateur filmmaker with enough talent to create an acceptable screenplay or luck to be noticed by the right people could achieve riches and fame (Morey, 2001). Morey notes that this led to a brief screenwriting craze where schools competed to find and train talented screenwriters, while film studios and newspapers held amateur film competitions (Morey, 2001). Economic reasons aside, cinema's potential was apparent from the beginning because its success was dependent on how skilled a writer was at connecting to an audience – a prospect of great danger and great potential to educators. In the 1930s, many writers acknowledged the importance of having

control over the film industry due to its potential as a danger to society and as a vehicle to improve society (Morey, 2001). By that time, there were already high school courses that taught film appreciation and character education, the latter of which used films to make better citizens.

Terry Bolas further explores the history of the attempts made to connect film and education, further elaborating on the potential dangers and improvements that Morey noted and taking note of the monumental strides made by the British Film Institute in promoting film as an asset to educating children. In terms of improvements, books were published in the US and UK that examined the two most distinct links between films and education: film could be used as a visual aid across a wide range of subjects, and film itself was also a subject of study (Bolas, 2009). In terms of dangers, Bolas noted that the bulk of the initial investigations were unsystematic and biased, and that when the London County Council approached the issue more professionally, their concerns were primarily about eye-strain and any potential permanent damage that frightening or evil films could inflict on children. Despite these concerns, there was no evidence of any real damage that warranted mention (Bolas, 2009). In other words, there was no substantial proof that films were particularly harmful to children, and by the late 1930s, Britain's growing accommodation of cinema was made apparent by the formation of the Northern Counties Children's Cinema Council, whose objectives were "To foster interest in and promote the use of the film and other visual

aids in education… To encourage the training of film taste and discrimination in children… To act generally as a clearing house of experience in film matters amongst Educational Administrators, Teachers, Parents and Social Workers." (Bolas, 2009, pp. 30). With the help of the British Film Institute, teachers were trained on how to better understand film as a medium and in turn better execute the objectives of organizations promoting the use of film in education. The growing relevance of cinematic pedagogy would become more and more pronounced from this point onward not only in the UK, but also in other parts of the world.

Film and Education
Early Stages of Film Adoption in Modern Education

Of the many modern-day articles and journals written about how film is being adopted in modern education in a supporting role, one by Henry A. Giroux raises a relevant point about film as a form of public pedagogy, especially in relation to the American educational system. While Giroux does not explicitly discuss films as a method of education within schools, he does discuss them as one of the many new forms of media that make it clear that in the recent decades, the most significant sites of education are located not in physical schools themselves, but in what he calls a wider screen culture – electronic media and devices ranging from digital film to computers and phones. (Giroux, 2008). He points out that films in particular "…must be understood in terms of their political and educational character and how they align

with broader social, racial, economic, class, and institutional configurations…they shape habits of thinking by providing audiences with framing mechanisms and affective structures through which individuals fashion their identities and mediate their relationship to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of critical citizenship." (Giroux, 2008, pp. 7). As technology evolves, so too will the methods through which society educates its people. Currently, society is trending towards imagery, with cinema serving alongside the Internet and the iPhone as an effective image-based medium for conveying ideas and knowledge to students and consumers alike. Cinema provides people with a basic and, most importantly, highly relatable idea of how their current society is structured and how they fit into that structure. It is through the relatability of the cinematic medium that relevant social issues, conventions, and ideas can be readily disseminated, and it is through the ease of this dissemination process that cinema can serve as an effective contributor to the improvement of modern educational systems.

Paul Reeve, the CEO of a British organization called Into Film, is also in agreement with the broad appeal of cinema as an educational tool. He notes that using film in the classroom is helpful in developing literacy, as well as the skills and confidence required to improve writing skills. (Reeve, 2015). His organization has made strides in implementing film into British education systems through a UK-wide program that teaches with and about film that is available free to all state-funded schools and colleges, claiming that the medium has many cultural and social benefits. (Reeve, 2015). The wide availability of the program, as well as the steady implementation of it throughout the UK, shows that the acceptance of film as an educational tool is, at the very least, at a stage where it can be taken as a serious experimental method.

Cinema and Positive Psychological Development
While it is worth noting that Giroux does not claim that the adoption of film in education has a concretely positive or negative effect on student learning and that Reeve does not provide any statistics or data supporting his claims, a study by Chuchai Smithikrai about the positive effects of a movie-based teaching course does manage to both show a positive result of implementing film into class curriculum, as well as present statistics to support the result. The purpose of Smithikrai's study was to determine whether a course based on teaching through cinema could promote positive characteristics and behaviors in students in Thailand. Smithikrai measured these characteristics through the "positive orientation" construct, which he describes as an individual's tendency to perceive their life positively and how that tendency acts as a common factor in contributing to better self-esteem, satisfaction, and optimism (Smithikrai, 2016). Experimental groups were enrolled in classes that taught through movies such exhibited characteristics and behaviors ranging from senses of personal responsibility to leadership and teamwork, while control groups were enrolled in normal social psychology classes. By analyzing the increase in positive

characteristics in students that were enrolled in the movie-based courses versus students enrolled in regular courses, evidence was found suggesting that a movie-based course could orient students' perceptions of their lives in a more positive direction (Smithikrai, 2016).

This points to film's overall potential as an effective educational vehicle for developing specific ways of thinking. Much of the effectiveness regarding how cinema can influence and develop ways of thinking can be attributed to the mass appeal of the medium. Because cinema was originally designed for the purposes of entertainment, many of the film techniques used in creating a cinematic experience are designed to maximize viewer enjoyment and therefore maximize the amount of relevant information that a viewer can digest in order to keep them drawn to the production. The historical commodification and inclusive nature of cinema has served to encourage filmmakers to build upon this foundation of filmmaking techniques, which are further proving themselves to have potential as teaching tools, as evidenced by Smithikrai's experiment. Films designed to exhibit positive characteristics were effective at influencing viewers to exhibit these same qualities, suggesting that they can be designed to influence viewers in other ways as well.

An Anecdote Relating to Cinematic Pedagogy

Experiments with statistics such as Smithikrai's shows that there are more empirical studies that can be done on cinematic pedagogy. There also exist several anecdotes, however, such as the ones by Kelvin Shawn Sealey, that show a different side to the cinematic-educational experience by demonstrating how "…combined with each educator's individual pedagogical style, and with an academic intention behind a given lesson plan, the cinematic can add visual and intellectual rigor unparalleled by other modes of expression…film speaks…in a way that lectures, readings, and argumentative orality cannot." (Sealey, 2008, pp. 8). One of his anecdotes is his experience with students and fellow teachers regarding how their reaction to a scene from a movie called *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* points to a film's potential to act as a starting point for discussion on the many potential topics that emerge from viewing a film (Sealey, 2008). Three viewings of the scene were shown to students and teachers, with the first containing only visuals, the second containing visuals and audio, and the third containing only audio. All three viewings produced discussion topics in a variety of different fields; in physics, a teacher envisioned a discussion on the laws and theories of physics that the characters broke in the scene; in civics, a teacher mentioned that students could talk about how the forests in the film could act as a catalyst for a discussion about the value of conservation; in English, a teacher noted the potential for a discussion about the differences in dialogue in a screenplay as opposed to dialogue in a novel or stage play; in art, a teacher found that the use of color in the scene could serve as a foundation on which they could build a lesson on color (Sealey, 2008). In summary, Sealey's short screening was, in his personal experience, able to provide many vastly different topics

for discussion, all of which were valid within the context of their subjects.

Sealey's work also contains the perspectives of several other instructors on various films and how film can be used to expand the scope of education. Other instructors in his book state that the use of film in the traditional classroom already establishes it as a practical part of the classroom experience that can be further expanded, that audiences can be identified by the film that they are viewing, that film has connections to the teaching of architectural history, and that film has even potentially planted the seeds for educating students in Brazil about the importance of peace.

Disseminating Social Issues

With these perspectives in mind, cinema's influence is especially important due to its ability to educate many people on social issues. As just mentioned previously, Brazil, a country known for internal political strife and violence, is potentially using cinema to promote the importance of peace amongst its students. Whether or not this could lead to a solution to the country's turmoil remains to be seen and is an incredibly deep and separate subject altogether, but the mere prospect of cinema bringing about social change in some way is groundbreaking in and of itself. Caty Borum Chattoo and Angelica Das demonstrate this through their examination of how documentary storytelling can make a social impact. Their examination operates from the premise and principles of social impact as a broad concept that encompasses changes to individuals, groups, systems, and institutions without including measurements of their

financial success and with the intention of improving public states of affairs (Chattoo & Das, 2014). In order to capture the impact of the issues that these documentaries are telling a story about, there are four main categories of research methods, which are digital and media coverage metrics, audience impact, content and cultural impact, and institutional impact.

These information-gathering methods are all grounded in socially relevant realities, which increases the likelihood of the result making an impact and, therefore, creating social change. Digital and media coverage metrics have the objective of measuring the use of digital tools, such as social media, to promote the agenda of a campaign or film. Any media articles that reference these campaigns or films are measured by the number of articles and readers, as well as by the way the content is framed. Additionally, the number of people who watch a film is also assessed across multiple platforms, ranging from theaters to TV and streaming services. (Chattoo & Das, 2014). Audience impact assesses changes in knowledge and perception among recruited and real-world viewers. The assessments range from changes in perceptions of a social issue during and after watching a film, emotional responses to the issues presented, acquired knowledge on social problems, changes in attitudes on different issues, social actions taken on social issues relevant to the film watched, and comparisons between how people that watched these films and people that did not watch these films react to the same situation in the real world (Chattoo & Das, 2014). Content and cultural impact examines and compares how internet

discussion sites reflect public discourse about key issues, as well as assesses the impact of a film in the public online environment. (Chattoo & Das, 2014). Institutional impact qualitatively examines how key individuals, institutions, subcultures, and groups respond to and are affected by campaigns or films. (Chattoo & Das, 2014).

One important takeaway from this examination is the fact that it is using relevant information obtained through meaningful, ground-level interactions – interactions with social media networks, real-world audiences, media coverage and conversations, and important individuals and organizations. Modern audiences are surveyed so that filmmakers can gain perspective on current situations. Media content related to the situation is analyzed in order to further understand the best way to make an impact. Experiments are performed to ensure that the final product can achieve maximum impact. Interviews are conducted to ensure further accuracy. Ethnography is utilized to ensure that the storytelling is as accurate as possible down to specific groups or even individuals. All this data, combined with the uniquely visual and relatable nature of cinema, allows the story to make an intensely personal social impact.

This type of social commentary is also not limited to social impact documentaries. Javed Mohammed notes that motion pictures can bring not only bring social issues to the forefront – issues ranging from economic and environmental justice, gender equality, domestic violence, health and welfare, and human rights abuses – but also educate people about cultures and provide a broader

context to politics, religion, and society (Mohammed, 2010). He compiles a list of new films that tell socially-conscious stories, briefly describing the relevance of three in particular: *Wall-E, Happy Feet,* and *Persepolis.* Social films have an advantage over social impact documentaries because although they are more likely to be lacking in individual stories, they possess a much broader appeal, and with the advent of more and more narrative techniques, this appeal is set to grow more and more wide. After all, the three films are all animated features, each one dealing with a social problem of its own. *Wall-E* revolves around a robot whose purpose is to clean a waste-filled Earth; *Happy Feet* addresses individual uniqueness and talents; and *Persepolis* explores the perspective of a Middle Eastern girl's life in a society that is known for gender inequalities that are severely unfavorable to women.

Relevant Ethical and Moral Questions in Cinema

There have also been many films released that deal with a variety of moral and ethical questions in contexts that are highly relevant to real-world situations. Carnegie Council has compiled a list of films that pose these moral and ethical questions, as well as provide differing perspectives on historical events and policies worldwide, all of which serve as evidence of the medium's ability to capture and illustrate important information in a digestible manner for both entertainment and education (Carnegie Council, 2019). With regards to colonialism and anti-colonial movements, the list references 2009's *Avatar*, which is described as an allegory against Western colonialism

that explores ethical issues such as the overuse of natural resources and the clash between tradition and technological advancement (Carnegie Council, 2019). Other topics, such as totalitarianism, covert operations and espionage, genocide, war, and many others, all grounded in real history and events, are also gleaned over in the list, with brief summaries of each film provided to link their premises to these topics as well as any additional moral and ethical questions they pose.

Ioanna Semendeferi, however, delves much more deeply into how film techniques can be used to educate viewers about ethics, focusing specifically on a film called *Dear Scientists* and how the film mixes science ethics education – defined as a rational analysis of principles and facts, as well as an understanding of rules and regulations – with humanities and arts (Semendeferi, 2014). Rather than provide a brief, mostly surface-level skimming of the film's premise and the questions it poses with the premise, Semendeferi explores how the film uses what is called the feelings method – a highly intense and continuous mixture of music and visuals – to leave a strong impression of the ethical and social responsibilities of scientists (Semendeferi, 2014). In other words, *Dear Scientists* breaks away from traditional styles and attempts to educate viewers about science ethics through the experimental use of strong audiovisual imagery. Instead of the traditional runtime of 90 minutes to three hours, *Dear Scientists*'s runtime lasts about 25 minutes, which provides ample time for classroom discussion and analysis of the film's purpose in changing viewers'

attitudes toward science ethics (Semendeferi, 2014). This act of attempting to change the viewer's attitude toward something is something shared with films that deal with social issues; despite the vast difference in the core material, issue-focused and science ethics films both function through the cinematic medium, which serves as further evidence of cinema's versatility as an educational tool. In particular, the experimental techniques that *Dear Scientists* uses to execute this purpose is evidence of the malleability of the medium, as it is a clear example of how it can be adjusted for a more education-oriented environment as opposed to a traditional entertainment-oriented one – and in a way that does not rely on the documentary format, which could be perceived as less engaging to younger audiences.

That said, the usage of traditional films to teach morals and ethics is, according to Ray Cotton, also a valid method of ethics education, especially with the presence of a parental figure. Cotton notes that movies contain different ideas about life from different people, and that exposing children to these different perspectives helps to develop healthy minds (Colton, 1997). He lists and discusses several popular films, all of which posit moral and ethical questions, and demonstrates how the plots and premises of these films could serve as springboards for teaching different types of morals to children. For example, when discussing *Jurassic Park*, Cotton notes that, in the film, an area of ethical discussion is computer ethics, which could be interesting to younger audiences (Colton, 1997). While Colton's article leans heavily towards being

an opinion-based piece rather than one based on an empirical study, it is still a relevant article because it exemplifies the flexibility of the cinematic medium on the simple end of the spectrum. Educational value can be derived from an analysis of the complex audiovisual techniques utilized by the filmmakers or, in this case, it can be derived from a very simple analysis of any overt moral and ethical questions posited by the film's basic premise. It is essentially a perfect example of how broad film's appeal can be and how its potential to reach virtually every audience, young and old, demonstrates its massive potential in education.

Propositions for Implementation of Cinema in Education

Despite the potential use of films for educating future generations, there has yet to be a universally accepted method for implementing film into educational systems. A study on the European Commission's Digital Single Market shows that in European schools, film literacy is not yet recognized as a subject, and that film is instead used to illustrated other subjects. Legal issues also serve as a roadblock to the implementation of films as standalone curriculum, ranging from licensing problems to uncertainty on the conditions in which films can be used for teaching (European Commission, 2015). However, there are many propositions about potential types of film curriculum, and many countries in Europe are attempting to implement some form of this curriculum into their children's studies as well as analyze how film-centric material can help promote the expansion of

knowledge. Even though this is all experimental, European success could signal a paradigm shift in education, and considering the potential of film in expanding the awareness of social issues and promoting more expansive ways of thinking, this could lead to a more efficient homogenization of global values and standards.

The British Film Institute currently has over a dozen propositions for implementing film into British curriculum. Some of these propositions include a new research agenda tailored towards better understanding technology and how audiences learn, as well as recommendations that the BFI be given permission to work with European and global partners as well as skills development organizations to create better curriculum that prioritizes the medium's relevance in the economy (British Film Institute, 2014). Many of these propositions have led to what Sean Mumford calls the development of some of the best national film education initiatives in the world, such as The Film Space, the English and Media Centre, and the previously mentioned Into Film program (Mumford, 2018). Mumford further elaborates on many of the recent activities, tools, and techniques that schools utilized to teach, with many of them emerging based on tried and tested methods to provide structure for filmmaking students (Mumford, 2018). Many of these activities are based on activities from the BFI's own education resource, which contains many core basic teaching techniques, as well as free resources from Into Film's website.

Mumford also discusses the Bradford Film Literacy Programme, which was a temporary program for British primary schools in 2010 through 2011 and 2012 through 2015, and the implications of the program's successes. She notes that, depending on partners and the availability of funding, the program continues to run in different manifestations throughout the years after 2015 as well. The purpose is to explore whether learning about and using short film in language education could improve student literacy, with data showing that, on average, students in the program have made more progress in writing and reading (Mumford, 2018). While this does not necessarily suggest that cinema is a substantially useful new form of education, the improvement in their scores is nevertheless a positive result that will help in the grand scheme of demonstrating cinema's potential.

Other European countries have also acknowledged the importance of film as an education tool. According to the European Commission, France includes film as a part of its arts education to promote awareness of cultural heritage both nationally and internationally, teaching subjects such as film history, theory, and practical workshops; it is generally regarded as a core part of France's media education (European Commission, 2014). While not all European countries have taken to film as deeply as France – Belgium is an example – nations worldwide are slowly, but surely taking notice. With Europe taking as many steps forward as it currently can, it is likely that other countries and continents will follow suit, adopting their own culture-specific methods of film education.

While there do not seem to be any programs in America that are as substantial as the ones offered by European countries – especially Britain – universities in America are aware of the methodologies in teaching through movies. Pablo Gonzalez Blasco of the University of California, Irvine mentions that movies create a new learning process by promoting reflection acting as a catalyst for new discussions. (Blasco, 2015). The mass appeal of the cinematic medium, as well as how the stories derived from the movies can connect to learners' desires and expectations, gives film an advantage in facilitating discussion in a way that is likely more natural than the discussion one would derive from more standard texts and material (Blasco, 2015). Gonzalez also discusses the movie clip methodology, which is a discussion-based methodology in which multiple movie clips are shown in rapid succession in addition to comments from the instructor interspersed through the session. The use of the method began within the field of medical education and grew in popularity over time in international lectures, courses, and faculty development workshops aimed at a wide range of learners and departments (Blasco, 2015). While the methodology does not seem to have been integrated as a main part of any country's curriculum, the fact that it has been used worldwide, albeit in a limited number of scenarios, does suggest that the use of film in education is, at the very least, being considered in more than just European countries.

Conclusion

The Ever-Evolving Status of the Cinematic Educational Medium

Film, a once-strictly entertainment medium, has made rapid progress towards becoming a deeply integral part of education and the proliferation of era-relevant social issues and ideas. This can be seen in the increasing number of analyses on the effectiveness of cinema in educating people on topics such as social hierarchies and ethics. Countries throughout the Americas, Europe, and Asia have all been shown to be receptive to these ideas, as well, with America demonstrating that they have film education methodologies in development, Europe experimenting with the limited implementation of film into some of their curriculum, and Asia – Thailand, to be more specific – performing studies based on student reception to film-based courses. Additionally, statistics, while currently limited, all point to positive trends when film is experimentally adopted, and the growth of the film industry has also made it easier to track its correlation with audiences' desires to pay to see their social issues presented and elaborated upon in films. Although there has yet to be a solid, standardized nationwide curriculum with cinema built into its foundation in any countries in the world, Europe, and Britain in particular, shows much promise for the future, where this could be the norm. With this, cinema as a medium can only continue to evolve and flourish in the wake of an increasingly image-saturated society. It is optimistic, but not entirely unrealistic, to hope that the growth of the industry and its effectiveness as an educational vehicle will assist in homogenizing the moral and ethical standards of modern society, as well as foster new ways of thinking in future generations.

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