

# Using Contemporary Films to Teach about Social Problems

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2007 after returning from a sabbatical that spring, I was unexpectedly assigned to teach a general education social problems course. This was a class that I had once taught frequently, but had not had the opportunity to teach it for about eight years. The class was to meet at 8:00 a.m. five days a week two hours a day for five weeks. I began to think of this as a daunting task because I also am not a morning person, and was faced with the dilemma of how to approach virtually a new class preparation early in the morning every day for a month. Still fresh from the sabbatical with renewed enthusiasm for teaching, I decided to try something different. I was intrigued with the idea of teaching a class centered on how social problems are portrayed in films. After several colleagues and I had successfully used the film *Crash* in the classroom (Cosbey, New Freeland, 2007), I was hoping that I could expand upon this experience and find films that would enable the students to connect with the social issues we were going to discuss and really care about them. I love teaching sociology classes, but have sometimes found the general education classes more challenging to teach because many students who do not have a social science background are skeptical about sociology in general and social problems in particular.

I had some additional concerns I wanted to address in the classroom that I had done a lot of thinking about during my sabbatical. I discovered a book that discussed many of the ideas I was mulling over, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (2005). This book is based on the field work of anthropologist Rebekah Nathan who found herself feeling disconnected from her students after fifteen years of teaching at a large state university. She was perplexed by the intellectual malaise she saw among her pupils: how they refused to participate in class discussions, rarely read assigned texts, and seldom came to her during office hours. And she realized from conversations with her colleagues that they shared her concern. Although the book presents a portrait of today's student in which classes often take a back seat to socializing, jobs, and extracurricular involvement, she offers a fascinating story of students who are frazzled but astute at working the system in a world that's invisible to most university faculty. Nathan reports what she learned from this experience and the ways in which she changed her teaching style and delivery methods. I was inspired by this book to find a way to reach my students more effectively and find an approach to teaching that would engage them more fully in the classroom experience. I decided to design a class that would be centered on the use of films to explore social problems combined with other techniques that would increase students reading about, thinking about, writing about and analyzing contemporary social problems. This paper offers a description of the methods used in teaching this class, the classroom experience and the reaction of the students.

## Sociology and Film

Popular films reveal our ideals and expectations about social life in a myriad of ways. Some of the most common themes in contemporary films revolve around social life and the accompanying problems that living in today's society entails. This paper focuses on how film can both reflect and create popular ideas about social problems. Novels can be used in the classroom to help students make new connections and uncover truths about social life (Cosbey, 1997). The fictional stories portrayed in film can be used to foster this learning in much the same way that novels can. Using film as a medium to study social life

allows us to exercise our sociological imaginations in a way that is easily accessible and relevant. By making connections to our personal lives it can help us make sense of the world in which we live. An appealing aspect of using films and other fictional representations in this way is that it allows for critical analysis to be done by students themselves, rather than for them by others. Films offer other advantages in the classroom as well. As Deflem (2007) notes, sociologists “continually endeavor to find new and useful ways to communicate the best of our work to a new generation of learners.” This generation of learners is more visually oriented and comfortable with all forms of media in a way that prior generations were not. For these reasons, the medium of films was chosen for a general education class that is taken primarily by non-majors who are freshman and sophomores.

The use of popular media to explore current social issues is a standard practice in sociology classrooms across the country. There has long been a relationship between sociology and film. Sociology has been used to understand film, (Mayer, 1948) and film has been used to study sociology (Prendergast, 1986) covering topics as diverse as the sociology of childhood (King, 2006) and sociological theory (Deflem (2007)). Films have been used in sociology classrooms, as have other fictional representations, as case studies for professors and their students to analyze and discuss. As early as 1971 Maynard noted that films can keep students from being bored and can facilitate interest in the classroom. Films are an efficient, and of course entertaining, way to illustrate various life situations and allow the viewers to experience them vicariously. After seeing life situations “firsthand” in film, students can more easily apply abstract concepts to concrete situations. Several colleagues and I have used the film *Crash* since it became available on DVD in the fall of 2005 to explore issues of race and ethnicity, gender, violence, crime, deviance and theoretical applications. We have found that not only does the use of the film allow students to apply the sociology they are learning to the story in the film, but have also found in our experience that watching the film as a group builds community and cohesiveness in the classroom (Cosbey, New Freeland, 2007).

#### Format of the Class

The class met five mornings a week from 8 – 10:00 am, for a period of four weeks in the summer of 2007. For all general education social problems classes at our university, we currently use the text *Social Problems* by John J. Macionis. The 2005 version was used for this class. Our departmental curriculum committee selected this text because of its balanced and fair coverage of many theoretical perspectives as well as a thorough discussion of social problems illustrated with current research. I chose eight social problems and eight, mostly current, feature films to use in correspondence with the chapters covered. In the initial class meeting I explained the way the course was to work and we began following the format the next day.

A quiz was scheduled for each chapter that was assigned. Nine quizzes were scheduled, but only five were counted; the quizzes counted for 20% of the final grade. The quizzes had short answer questions based on the chapter covered and were given at the start of the class period before the material in the chapter was discussed in class. After the introduction to studying social problems on the first day, each topic was covered over a period of two days, for two hours each day. In the first class period that a particular topic was covered, a social problem was introduced with the showing of a film, followed by a brief discussion. I gave the students a list of questions to consider as they watched the film. Most films were slightly less than two hours which allowed for a complete showing of the film and a debriefing during one class period. The next day, class would begin with the short quiz which took about 15 to 20 minutes, followed by a discussion of the chapter material and the film.

In addition to the quizzes, students were required to keep a film journal throughout the class for another 20% of their final grade. After viewing the film, they were to write a one or two page analysis based on one or more of the suggested questions or similar questions of their own devising. Journal entries were expected to be rough drafts and were graded pass/fail. No more than half a page was to be used to summarize the film’s plot. Journals were collected twice during the class. The students were then required to revise a journal entry or two and write a longer position paper either on one film, or as a comparison of two films.

The final components of the grade were class participation for 10% of the grade, which included attendance as well as participation in class and a final project for 20% of the final grade. The final project was an attempt to end the class on a positive note. One of the difficult challenges in teaching a class about contemporary social problems was that sometimes it becomes overwhelmingly depressing when we go through one problem right after another without offering any real solutions to the problems we have covered and discussed. For the final project the students were required to give a graphic presentation to the class which offered a solution to a social problem. The students were able to choose the problem they felt more passionately about and could do the presentation singly or in groups. The final projects were presented on the last day of class during the final exam period.

### Social Problems in Film

The films for this class were chosen after careful deliberation and for the most part I was pleased with the choices I made. I began the class with *Crash*, the 2005 Paul Haggis film that won three Oscars, including one for Best Picture. I have used *Crash* in the classroom before (Cosbey, New Freeland, 2006) and even when students have seen the film before, it is a powerful experience to watch it in the classroom and it serves as a frame of reference for many subsequent class discussions. The film is literally and figuratively about a crash that takes place on Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles, the place that demarcates the posh valley and the dangerous city. The movie is about the collision of cars, but it is also about the collision of cultures, races and social classes that is epitomized in L.A. and other urban areas of our country. It is a random pattern movie that tells the interlocking stories of whites, blacks, Latinos, Koreans, Iranians, the rich and the poor, the powerless and the powerful, all affected in some way by their preconceived ideas about people not like themselves. The first social problem we discussed was race, but since this film was about so much more than race per se, it set the tone for a serious discussion of many of the social problems we have in our country today.

For the second topic, poverty, I chose *The Pursuit of Happyness*, a 2007 film directed by Gabriele Muccino, which is based on the true story of Chris Gardner, a financier, who rose from homelessness to multimillionaire. The movie is based in San Francisco in the 1980s during a down turn in the U. S. economy. At first glance, this film appears to be merely telling the classic “rags to riches” story. Many in our society still believe fervently that hard work and determination are all that are needed for one to become a success. I was a bit apprehensive in choosing this film that it may contribute to my students beliefs about individualism and the American dream and they might ignore the poverty that the film so realistically. However, the film does more than suggest that with hard work and determination anyone can become a Chris Gardner. It also emphasizes the contrast between the rich and the poor in our society and illustrates the tenuous grasp large numbers of people in our society have on the American dream and how this impacts family life. Throughout the film, the contrast between the haves, such as an executive from Dean Witter who lives in a luxurious house with all the accompanying manifestations of a successful upper middle class life, and the have-nots, such as the long lines of homeless people waiting for a chance to have a bed to sleep in for one night, is disturbing. In many ways this is a difficult film to watch because it so realistically portrays the agonizing struggle Chris goes through when he reaches for something better only to face another roadblock that sets him back once again. In the film Chris is always running, to catch a bus, to get to work on time, to complete errands for his boss, to pick up his son on time, to get a bed for a night at the homeless shelter. This running does eventually get Chris somewhere, but it could have just as easily resulted in a life spent running for something he was unable to obtain. Despite the complications of his circumstances, he wins the coveted job at the end of the internship experience. The happy ending of this movie, however, is illusory. The film leaves you thinking long after it is over, about how things could have turned out much differently. Although the movie shows that Chris’s hard work and determination were instrumental in the success that was ultimately his, it also shows that luck played a part as well. The film also illustrates the structural conditions that continue to make it more likely that certain groups in our society will struggle for a living wage. The economic slowdown since the 1970s has extensively cut manufacturing jobs and African American men, in particular, who did not have college educations found their economic prospects plummet (Maconis, 2005). It is both the structural obstacles that Chris

encounters, as well as the challenges of everyday living that he meets along the way, that illustrate how easy it is for people in our society to be a paycheck away from poverty.

*North Country*, a 2005 film, inspired by a true story about the first class action sexual harassment suit filed in 1984 on behalf of the women who worked in the Minnesota iron mines, was the film used for our discussion of gender. The main character of the film, Josey, is a single mother who has struggled to free herself from an abusive marriage and just wants to earn enough money to put food on the table for her and her family. The film follows both her family situation and her experiences working in the iron mines that lead to the sexual harassment case. In both of these situations, the dilemma faced by women who are at the mercy of men in power is dramatized. Josey comes home to Minnesota to stay with her parents in an attempt to end the abusive relationship in which she finds herself. The movie takes place in the 1980s, but her parents still are focused on what she has done to make her husband so angry, rather than on her need to end an abusive relationship.

Shortly after starting work at the mines, Josey is able to make a down payment on a home that she is able purchase for her family because she is making a living wage for the first time in her life. However, all is not going well for her. She has encountered problems at work with the attitudes of the men toward her and the other women who have “invaded their space.” At first, Josey is able to suppress her concerns because the benefits of her job – the salary and all that it represents – outweigh the costs. Over time the incidents that involve rude, insulting, harassing and dangerous conditions for the women at the mine become too much for Josey to bear and she vows to take action. The film dramatizes the struggles she undergoes in order to elicit support from her fellow female mine workers, her family and the town to bring about fair and equitable treatment for the women who work at the mines. Although this film focuses on some very disturbing scenarios in the relationships between men and women, it ends on a hopeful note. At the end of the movie, in the courtroom as her case draws to a dramatic close, the town stands up to support Josey, and by implication fair and equitable treatment for all women.

The oldest film used in this course was the *Dead Man Walking*, the 1995 film based on the book of the same name by Sister Helen Prejean, a leading advocate for the abolition of the death penalty. This movie tells the story of Sister Prejean’s relationship with Matthew Poncelet, a prisoner on death row. The character of Matthew Poncelet is a composite of two young men that Sister Prejean had established relationships with on death row in her work in the prisons in Louisiana. Although the film strongly and convincingly illustrates Sister Prejean’s convictions that the death penalty is an inhumane method of punishment, it also tells the stories of the victim’s families and their feelings, which do not always support Sister Prejean. I had used a documentary on the life of Sister Prejean in previous classes and found that it usually generated an interesting, often heated discussion, so I wanted to try the fictionalized version of the story. Although for the most part, the students’ appreciated the film and found the discussion of the death penalty engaging, I was the least happy with this choice of film for the topic it was covering. It did not work as well with the chapter in the text as the other films did, because the death penalty is only a small part of the discussion of crime as a social problem. Currently there are much more pertinent issues about crime that could be discussed.

The fifth topic that we were to cover was the topic of violence and the film *Bowling for Columbine*. Unfortunately, we suffered an unexpected death in the family and I needed to miss several days of class, so this topic was skipped. The sixth topic was sex and the movie *Kinsey* was used. This film tells the story of Alfred Kinsey, who in 1948 Kinsey changed American culture and created a media sensation with his book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Using the technique of his infamous sex interviews, the movie tells the story of Kinsey’s experiences and recounts the scientist’s extraordinary journey from obscurity as a biologist studying gall wasps to global fame. When Kinsey publishes his male study in 1948, it is extraordinarily received and the press compares the impact to that of the atom bomb. But as the country enters the more paranoid Cold War era of the 1950s, Kinsey’s follow-up study on women is seen as an attack on basic American values. Although the film is a historical piece, it worked well in setting the stage for a contemporary discussion of sexuality and the problems we have with this today.

For a discussion of problems concerning families today, I chose the 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*. This movie followed a family’s road trip from Albuquerque to Redondo Beach so that the youngest child

in the family, seven year old Olive, can compete in a “Little Miss Sunshine” beauty pageant. Family tensions play out on the highway as they meet many obstacles along the way, amidst their aging VW van's mechanical problems. Throughout the trip, the mother Sheryl attempts to keep everyone, including herself, calm and sane. As they at last reach the beauty pageant to yet another obstacle, the resilience of the family shines through as they all rally to support Olive in a touching and memorable scene. I had some hesitations about this movie as well, because it touched on all the stereotypical depictions of “dysfunctional” families – overworked moms, deadbeat dads, unruly teenagers, homosexuality, aging parents, among other issues. However, I thought that the movie's message was redeeming, that good families stick together no matter what. Isn't that, after all, functional? Some students loved this movie, but others took it at face value and focused on the “problems” that the family had. I have since discovered another film that works wonderfully for this topic, a 2005 film *What's Cooking*, that looks at four families from various racial, ethnic and social class families over thanksgiving dinner. The movie focuses on the differences and, most importantly, the similarities that families from various backgrounds face in our increasingly multicultural country.

For the last topic covered, I used a feature length documentary that had played in theaters, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Al Gore's compelling attempt to educate the world about global warming gives a meticulously documented argument about the dangerous practices that we, particularly in the United States, have routinely been engaging in without much thought for future generations. Although this film fit quite well with the chapter in Macionis, it was the least favorite movie of the students in the class. Perhaps because they had been entertained so convincingly by all the other films, a documentary that featured lots of charts and graphs would pale by comparison. There were, however, several students who chose environmental issues for the social problem they wished to give a presentation on, both because they felt strongly that it was a serious social issue, but also because it was something that they felt everyone could do something to change.

#### The Classroom Experience

Using films to illustrate social problems worked quite effectively in this class. Students quickly took to the format and I found myself looking forward to coming to class every day, as students frequently commented that they did as well. I was pleased with the writing that the students did, and their performance on the quizzes was much better than had usually been the case in a general education social problems class. For me, however, the most gratifying part of the experience was the classroom discussions. They were informed discussions because the students had read the text and there were actually many occasions where students were debating what the textbook had to say about a particular topic, which had rarely been the case in my other classroom experiences. Another satisfying aspect of the class was that everyone participated in the classroom discussion. In prior classes I had used different techniques to insure classroom participation, but in this class, the discussion just flowed. It appeared to be a combination of the films, the quizzes before the chapters were discussed and the journaling. All of these methods appeared to work together to make it a meaningful and enjoyable classroom experience for all.

Because this was a new method of presenting the material, I wanted to evaluate how well it worked, so in addition to my classroom evaluations, I gave students an anonymous survey asking for feedback about the course. I told them that I had never taught the class this way before and asked them if I should do it again, if they liked the format, if they had suggestions for changes, for additional topics and/or movies and anything else they could tell me that would be helpful. Every student filled out a survey with useful information for me. One student, who was a graduating senior, a political science major with a 3.66 gpa, admitted that it was the first time he had ever read the textbook in a class. Many students commented that they “loved the class.” “I found it so much more fun and interesting.” “This format was extremely effective at stimulating discussion. I loved it.” Most of the students made comments similar to this one, “I really enjoyed the way the class was taught, the movie days helped to break the week up and made it easier to apply the different things we read about.” Another student commented, “The format was perfect. Reading the chapters reinforced the movies and the quizzes reinforced what we were learning.” This comment helped to convince me that this class been successful: “This open-ended discussion, movies and

reading allowed me to continuously think and challenge myself concerning the sensitive issues we discussed.

### Conclusion

We learn many lessons about social life from watching films. Many of the movies produced in Hollywood are unrealistic escapist fare capitalizing on dramatic situations in order to sell more tickets. However, we still look to films for messages about how we should live our lives. What we learn from the movies provides us with a template for our life which we often use to measure our own experiences. Unfortunately, most of the time Hollywood shows us life not as it is, but as the filmmaker thinks it should be. Sometimes the images and ideals we glean from film can lead to stereotypical and unrealistic expectations about social life. These expectations also can divert us from the real issues that people face in today's society, such as stresses imposed by an increasingly competitive job market, instability in terms of wages and benefits, the possibility, sometimes the reality, of losing one's job due to downsizing or other factors.

However, there are motion pictures that challenge conventional stereotypes and tell gripping stories about realistic, albeit fictional, situations. Films can be a powerful and persuasive vehicle for making us look at the world in a new and different way. Movies such as those discussed in this paper can inspire us to critically examine the lives we lead and understand ourselves and our relationships within society more clearly. Even with the dramatization that makes the stories so compelling to watch, we can see the kernel of truth that lies beneath the surface. Applying our sociological imagination to these films also enables us to develop a keener sense of awareness and understanding about the lives of others in our society today.

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