

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Theo: Whatever you say, whatever you do, movies always got there first. Even that line you just said comes from a movie.

—*Dot the I* (2003)

American Society and Film

In U.S. society, “going to the movies” has been a favored pastime since the opening of the first movie theaters over 100 years ago. It is hard to imagine a small town, Anywhere, USA, without envisioning the movie theater on the town square, complete with marquee and ticket booth and moviegoers lined up to pay their admission fee. Not only was the movie theater an integral part of the creation of community on the movie set, but in-life, off-screen movie theaters were built in towns and cities across the United States. Indeed, the image of the town movie theater is a staple in movies and is often used, along with other institutions such as the pharmacy and barbershop, to convey a sense of community, a *gemeinschaft* haven in a changing world. For example, in the classic *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), we see from the Bijou Theater marquee that *The Bells of Saint Mary’s* is playing in Bedford Falls, a community protected from capitalist and political greed by the goodness of George Bailey (James Stewart). In a similar vein, when Marty (Michael J. Fox) in the first *Back to the Future* (1985) travels 30 years back in his hometown, Hill Valley, he orders a soda at the downtown drugstore and observes that the nearby Essex Theater is playing a Ronald Reagan film.

The antithesis of this communal setting is what towns could or would become if small-town values were sacrificed to modernization. When George Bailey is rescued from his Christmas Eve suicide attempt by his guardian angel, Clarence, he is shown the town that Bedford Falls would have been without his influence. Pottersville is a tawdry town with a main street dominated by pawn shops and sleazy bars. The theater marquee now boasts “Georgia’s sensational striptease dance with Girls! Girls! Girls!” Community values have been replaced by individualism, cynicism, and distrust. In *Back to the Future’s* alternate 1985 we see a run-down Essex Theater, now an adult movie house showing “Orgy,

American Style.” The deterioration of these theaters, along with the commodification of sexuality (in a place formerly reserved for family entertainment), symbolizes the alienation that accompanies modernization.

The process of modernization, however, included the rapid expansion of the motion picture industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1914 and 1922, 4,000 new theaters were built in the United States (Starker 1989). Many of these were built in residential areas, signaling a new trend in the industry: the “neighborhood theater.” During the 1920s, about 100 million people attended movie theaters each week, twice the number that attended church (Library of Congress N.d.). The popularity of the movies could, in part, be attributed to the low admission prices and unreserved “democratic” seating, making this leisure activity widely accessible to diverse audiences.

One of the functions of the theater in the early twentieth century was to aid in the assimilation of immigrants into the community, ensuring that a shared way of life was protected and passed on. For example, in some communities, theaters ran special features on Sundays (when theaters were not ordinarily open) “to educate and familiarize foreign speaking people with the customs, principles, and institutions of our American life” (Abel 2004:107). Many films during this period focused on the immigration story and life in the new country. Films such as *Making of an American* (1920) were sponsored by state level committees on Americanization with the goal of encouraging immigrants to assimilate by learning American customs and the English language (Roberts 1920).

Assimilation into the American mainstream was, of course, reserved for immigrants who most resembled the dominant group. Theaters, like other public institutions, reflected the racial, ethnic, and class-based divisions of the larger society in the content of the films shown and the treatment of the attending audiences. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the policy of racial segregation was enforced at movie theaters by time (showing films for African American audiences late at night), by section (seating African American viewers in the balcony), by entrance (requiring African Americans to enter off a side alleyway), and by neighborhood, with black-only theaters serving patrons in African American neighborhoods, especially in northern cities (Hearne 2007). This history of racial segregation in theaters has been portrayed in recent movies. In *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008), set in 1964 South Carolina, Lily (Dakota Fanning) goes to the movies with Zach (Tristan Wilds), and she follows him to the balcony so they can sit together. Zach is dragged out of the theater and beaten by white men outraged at their transgression. In the film *Ray* (2004), Charles (Jamie Foxx) refuses to perform at a segregated concert after encountering young civil rights activists protesting outside the theater. In a less known movie, *Hope* (1997), a young African American boy dies in a theater fire when he is trapped in the balcony where there is no emergency exit.

In southwestern states, schools, public facilities, and movie theaters were segregated, with Asian and Mexican immigrants and citizens forced to sit in the balcony, even if seating was available downstairs (Ross 1998). In Kansas, Mexican Americans were restricted from some sections of city parks, churches, and other public facilities, and were routinely segregated in movie theaters through the mid twentieth century (Oppenheimer 1985). This institutional segregation, visible across communities, was based on an ideology of racism reflected in the official policies of organizations, businesses, and homeowners associations. Two of the most common settings of segregation, aside from schools, were movie theaters and swimming pools (Montoya 2001).

Moving through the decades of the twentieth century, changes in the film industry reflected societal and cultural changes. The location and structure of venues for movie viewing changed from the picture palaces of the early twentieth century, to the art deco architecture of the Depression era, to the drive-in movies of the mid twentieth century, to the multiplex and megaplex of the mid to late twentieth century. Just as the content of film celebrated the culture of consumerism and individualism, the way we watched movies became less public with the expansion of in-home movie viewing services and options. However, while 75 percent of Americans say they would rather watch a movie at home, between 1995 and 2006 there was only a 5 percent decline (from 31 percent to 26 percent) in those reporting they go out to see a movie at least once a month (Pew Research Center 2006). Among the group most coveted by the theater industry—younger, better educated, higher-income consumers—the decline was more pronounced (from 56 percent to 43 percent). However, 71 percent of Americans reported watching a movie once a week or more, while an additional 18 percent watched a movie at least once a month. As at-home and on-the-go movie technology become more widespread, our viewing practices may change, but regardless of where or how we watch, we are still “going to the movies” in our leisure time.

Sociology and Film¹

All over the world, people go to the movies—to escape, to be enlightened, to be entertained. Indeed, movies are among the world’s most popular social experiences. In 2007 there was a decline in movie attendance, but two years later, with a “teetering” economy, there was a “box-office surge” (Cieply and Barnes 2009). Amid complaints of rising box office prices, movie attendance dropped again in 2010 and 2011. At the same time, movie-on-demand rentals and online downloading numbers are increasing (Verna 2010). While rates of cinema attendance ebb and flow, the myriad forms of movie watching mean that even in times of economic crisis, we still watch movies.

Going to the movies is a social event; we view movies with significant others and are affected by the experience in a social context. Consider the young dating couple who share a soda (or something stronger) after watching a movie together, talking earnestly, seriously, about their feelings for the characters. Or the child, seated between her parents, munching popcorn and watching *March of the Penguins* and deciding to become an oceanographer. Or families who share their anguish and deepen their understanding about social issues such as AIDS (*Philadelphia*), sexual harassment (*North Country*), race and ethnic relations (*Do the Right Thing*), personal heroism and sacrifice (*Saving Private Ryan*), or the cold cruelty of the Holocaust (*Schindler’s List*). Or even the everyday people who, hit hard during troubled economic times, watch a musical or comedy and momentarily laugh their troubles away. As the lead character in *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) said in the final lines of the movie, “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that that’s all some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan.”

Finn: I’m not going to tell the story the way it happened. I’m going to tell it the way I remember it.

—*Great Expectations*
(1998)

Reading a Film Sociologically

Every field of study offers a slightly different way of seeing film. An Anthropology of Film class might integrate ethnographic films as a means of “seeing” culture. Older films might be considered historical artifacts, offering a window into the culture at particular points in time. Many documentaries are themselves products of anthropological interest in disclosing the practices and ceremonies of other peoples and cultures. A film course in the history department would take a look at historically significant films and question their authenticity, accuracy, and interpretation. For example, you might take a film like *Glory* and discuss the cinematic treatment of the Civil War; a film such as *Sense and Sensibility* might enhance discussions of class and gender relations during different historical periods.

In a Film Studies class, attention would be directed to film production, cinematography, mise-en-scène, film genres, film history, and film theory. In the mass media and cultural studies departments, perhaps the cousins of sociology in terms of film analysis, you might be asked to consider social and cultural “powers” at work in the film and in the film industry that remain largely unchallenged as social disseminators of cultural ideas. How does cinematic “form” work with (or against) the cinematic content?

Sociological perspectives draw from these traditions. In this text, we are less concerned with the technical aspects of film production and more concerned with the stories told through film, and how these stories are told. Is there something specific that a sociological perspective brings to the study of film? More important for our inquiry, sociology *through* film, how can film be used by sociologists to better understand the society in which we live?

The core of any sociological curriculum revolves around four interrelated themes: (1) identity, (2) interaction, (3) inequality, and (4) institutions. Sociologists can use films as social texts to explore these core themes.

Identity: Many films involve the development of individual characters as a central theme: how they come to know themselves, how they try out identities until they find one that fits, how they adapt their identities for strategic purposes. The sociological concept of the “looking glass self” and the dramaturgical metaphors made popular by Goffman and others are amply illustrated in films such as *In and Out*, in which a closeted gay teacher is outed in the national media and comes to accept his homosexuality, just as the small town in which he lives comes to accept him. In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest (Tom Hanks) and Jenny (Robin Wright) come to know who they are in very different ways. Forrest moves through his life, unconcerned about whether others see him as heroic, iconic, or mentally ill. In fact, we do not learn that Forrest is aware of his “difference” until late in the film when he asks Jenny about their son: “. . . is he smart or is he . . . ?” Jenny responds, “He’s very smart. He is one of the smartest in his class.” Jenny, on the other hand, is very aware of how others view her, and her sense of self develops in the context of unloving and abusive relationships beginning in her family of origin.

Interaction: All film involves social interaction, even when the story is one of isolation from others. For example, in *Cast Away*, Chuck (Tom Hanks) develops a friendship with Wilson the volleyball, who becomes his companion and confidant. As the viewing audience, we come to know Chuck through his interaction with Wilson. By watching film, we learn about social interaction in the context of relationships, everything from friendship (*Sisterhood of*

the Traveling Pants) to romance and dating (*The Break-Up*) to family life (*The Joy Luck Club*) Indeed, many people probably first know what sex and intimacy look like from having seen it in the movies.

Inequality: A common theme in movies is inequality based on social class, race, gender, or nation. Many people who live in relative comfort encounter the stark reality of people oppressed in systems of inequality through the movies. A student spoke of her political apathy until she saw the film *Hotel Rwanda* at the university cinema. The film so moved her that she became involved in campus political organizations that confronted inequality and eventually changed her major to public sociology, making her newfound awareness of politics her future.² A friend told of his first memory of learning about the Holocaust while watching *Exodus* with his parents and grandparents as a young child, and for the first time his family began to talk about what had happened to the Jews of Europe. They had been silent; the film enabled them to give words to the unspeakable. How many films reveal the brutal injustices of the prison system (*Cool Hand Luke*; *The Green Mile*), or the Jim Crow South (*Driving Miss Daisy*; *To Kill a Mockingbird*), or slavery (*Amistad*; *Beloved*), or any other type of structured inequality? Films can engage us viscerally, making inequality palpable and real—and thus far less tolerable.

Institutions: Finally, film enables us to locate ourselves in the institutions that shape our lives. Films such as *Patton* and *A Few Good Men* illustrate more than the atrocities of war—they provide a lens into the military as organization and institutional force. In the same way, movies about work and the workplace (*Working Girl*; *Michael Clayton*) reveal the often invisible structural barriers encountered in institutions, whether it's the glass ceiling encountered by women or unethical business-as-usual practices. Institutions such as work, school, and religion shape our identities, and films, usually without our awareness, provide us with understandings of the social structure of these “spaces” where we live, work, learn, pray, and are entertained.

Sociologists explore these four themes in the film “content”—the stories presented in films. Sociologists also might look for patterns in viewership—the ways some movies target specific audiences by class, race, gender, or sexuality. Or they might examine the centrality of film in childhood socialization: many Americans might say that some of their most tender and powerful memories of childhood involve going to the movies. Sociologists may also consider the ways that films, like other media texts, elicit, structure, and facilitate the expression of different emotions to which we, as humans, need access. We consider the social dynamics of audiences, the effects of images on social life, the complex interaction of cinematic technique with the experiences of viewers. We consider the ways in which social problems and identities are represented in film—the manner in which films both reflect and create culture.

Reading films with a sociological eye makes us conscious of ourselves as we watch movies. In a sense we move from our seats in the theater to the projection booth. From there we can look at the audience as they “see” the film. Also, we can appreciate the film as *film*: a strip of material that produces images and ideas. From this angle we can recognize the social nature of the movie experience—people coming together for entertainment, for storytelling, for a view of our culture as well as the cultures of others. Movies are social experiences, and we often remember family events and experiences from our childhood

through their associations with movies. Baby boomers (including the editors of this book) can probably still recall when small theaters sold pickles from a big jar at the concession stand, or biting through the outer layer of a Good & Plenty to get to the chewy licorice inside, or the sticky-sweet smell of black Jujubes that got stuck to the soles of your shoes in the theater. For many, a social life in high school meant meeting friends at the movies on a weekend night, where they would see dozens of classmates—friends and foes.

The dynamics of social interactions—homophobia, racial awareness, class interaction—are evident as we take our seats to watch the movies, just as much as they are in the movies themselves. For example, when two women go to the movies together, how many seats do they take? The answer is, invariably, “Two.” But ask men how many seats they take. The typical answer is three; they leave the middle seat open, or put their coats there, because they don’t want anyone to think they are “together.”

The Film as a Text

But it is mostly what is on the screen that rightly preoccupies the sociologist of film. Like other forms of art—music, literature, paintings—films speak to us, exposing us to the ideas of writers, actors, and directors who use various techniques to explain, explore, or exploit our experiences. We can look at the history of cinema—the ways that a film will reference other “texts”—or the actual technology and technique, but only insofar as they enable the director, screenwriter, and actors to make a particular case to viewers. Applying the sociological imagination to film involves awareness of the economic, political, and social forces at the point in history when a particular film or set of films is produced. In fact, this is one of the strengths of film as a pedagogical tool: it can provide access to multiple sociohistorical contexts. However, it also reflects the (biased) view of the filmmaker(s) telling the story. Our interests are sociological—social—not aesthetic. We can appreciate the aesthetic beauty of, say, a Merchant Ivory production,⁴ but our sociological imaginations are animated by the actual story and the moral lessons they present to us.

At the same time, reading films sociologically does not mean that we drain the fun out of the experience. While a sociological reading asks us to look beyond common sense thinking and long-held interpretations (in short, to be critical thinkers), we can still appreciate the entertainment value of movies. We can critique expressions of gender in film without dismissing Disney, a central piece of our childhood movie memories. Seeing films through a sociological lens does not make movie watching laborious. Rather, it should enhance our viewing experience, further developing our understanding of the society in which the film was produced and the people it portrays.

This book is about the ways in which films speak to us. It’s about film as a text in the same way that a novel is a text—not only telling a story, but providing moral instruction, social observation, social context, and political judgment. In 1963, Lewis Coser’s edited volume *Sociology through Literature: An Introductory Reader* sought to fuse social science and art, specifically literature. Coser made sociological thought within literary works visible and explored how classic works of literature express various classical preoccupations of sociologists. More current writing continues this tradition through analyses of literature and group identities, decoding systems, and the impact of life experiences on reader response (Griswold 1993). Works of literature are seen not only as products of the authors’

imaginations and examples of shared meanings, but also as *social* texts that speak of culture, socialization, identity, inequalities, and social structures.

Literature is appreciated not only for the telling of a good story, but for the ways in which authors go about capturing social context, social and psychological struggles, and social problems. The great novels leave us with commentaries on social class (*The Great Gatsby*; *Pride and Prejudice*), race (*Huckleberry Finn*; *The Bluest Eye*), and gender (*The Awakening*; *The Scarlet Letter*). Narratives such as these provides frames through which we can understand a social class to which we do not belong, *feelings* associated with racial tensions, and social constraints associated with being male or female. Before motion pictures, these were the stories on which we relied.

In today's world, Americans attend movies far more often than they read fiction. In this sense, films have become a new kind of text through which we are provided stories, frames, and representations of social life. Films, of course, require a different kind of "read" than a novel. For instance, while the author of a novel might also be encouraged to consider production and sales, there are fewer investors to whom the author must answer. With film, there is the ever-present issue of currency—films cost an enormous amount of money to produce and, thus, must earn an even greater amount upon release. The issue of money has the potential to change the telling of the story so that it "satisfies" a much larger community. The novel can be as controversial as the author intends, since he or she has more autonomy. A film, on the other hand, must often play down controversy to reach a broader market. The novel is one voice—that of the author's. Film is the product of many voices—the screenwriters, the director, the actors, and so forth—thus potentially diluting the original voice (e.g., the author of the text on which the film is based). The interpretations of a novel lie mostly in the active imaginations of the reader. A film can use technology, utilizing visuals and sound to guide viewer response. Thus, while film is a modern text, we must read it conscious of the ways in which symbols, language, and author intentions are specific to this medium. Film studies' entrée into "film as text" attests to how we think of movies as "comprising visual language, verbal systems, dialogue, characterization, narrative and 'story'" (Shiel 2001: 3). Films reflect our culture while simultaneously serving as an element that constitutes it. We see our society through film and we see film through the prism of our social norms, values, and institutions.

Sociology of Film/Sociology through Film

Much earlier social scientific thought about popular culture was steeped in deterministic thinking. For example, the Frankfurt School warned that the "liberatory" power of jazz—antiauthoritarian, sensual, rebellious—actually served to further authoritarian domination because it temporarily "freed" individuals and thus muted or siphoned off anger at an unjust system. Any system that gives us such pleasure can't be all bad—thus the systemic domination is, ironically, legitimated by embracing its own resistance. Popular culture was an "opiate of the masses," to use Marx's famous phrase about religion, numbing us to the pain of inequality. "Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV/So you think you're so clever and classless and free," sang John Lennon in his devastatingly plaintive song "Working Class Hero."

Historically, too, sociology's interest in film had a deterministic bent. From the origin of the moving picture, social scientists worried that film would instruct people to passively

follow the normative instructions contained in the film. Somewhat like contemporary anxious parents, they worried that a film about crime would inspire a young person to commit crimes. Surely, pornography would cause rape, and cowboy movies would inspire violence. Ultimately sociologists renounced this image of the film audience as a passive sponge, soaking up messages and responding as Pavlovian dogs, with a more elitist conception of the audience as a gullible mass, somehow incapable of deciphering the descriptive from the normative.

In contrast, sociologists today have come to see the film audience more as decoder of symbols and meanings, actively engaged with the film itself, and as “contextualizer,” constantly interpreting images within the contexts of social life. Film neither causes social problems nor simply reflects them.

This notion of the active audience lies at the foundation of current sociological interest in film—both in sociological studies of popular culture as they have gained broader acceptance and in the college courses on film and sociology that have become available to students. Some call the course “Sociology of Film.” It is likely that classes will include topics such as filmmaking, film production, and film distribution as well as the content, form, and impact of films. Certainly when a course is “of” something, that something is the unit of analysis—gender, for example, in a Sociology of Gender class.

Others call the course “Sociology *through* Film.” In these classes, *film* is not the unit of analysis per se. Rather, film is used as a concrete means of illustrating principals in the study of social life. The goal of the course involves learning to recognize sociological concepts in our life experiences (in movies, rather than relying solely on textbooks). Here we are concerned with the social construction of reality. (What do different films suggest about the meaning of gender or race or social status for people in society today? How does the “language” of film produce different meanings?) We are concerned with the repetition of images in our culture. (How is a group or a political system presented to us? Does this change over time?) We consider the socializing effects of film. (How and what do films teach us?) Our goal is to “see” movies differently.

We see this *of/through* distinction in studies of sociology and literature. Coser’s text was called *Sociology through Literature*, not *Sociology of Literature*. Coser compiled an impressive (and abundant) collection of excerpted literature from Shakespeare to Norman Mailer, arguing that literature was yet another source from which we gain knowledge about society, and hence, ourselves. He said, “. . . if a novel, a play or a poem is a personal and direct impression of social life, the sociologist should respond to it with the same openness and willingness to learn that he [sic] displays when he interviews a respondent, observes a community, or classifies and analyzes data” (1963:xvi). This was a bold stance during a time when sociology tended toward more “serious” matters of scientific study (and typically relied on functionalist theory). What is important here is that Coser set out to explore literary works not for purposes of literary analysis, but as data to be analyzed regarding social experiences for sociological inquiry. He wrote:

This book is not meant to be a contribution to the sociology of literature. Sociology of literature is a specialized area of study which focuses upon the relation between a work of art, its public, and the social in which it is produced and received . . . The attempt here is to use the work of literature for an understanding of society, rather

than to illuminate artistic production by reference to the society in which it arose . . . This collection, then, should help to teach modern sociology through illustrative material from literature. (P. xvii)

Coser went on to teach such substantive sociological topics as stratification (through George Orwell’s “The Lower Classes Smell” from *The Road to Wigan Pier*); sex roles (through Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*); race relations (through Mark Twain’s “Huck Breaks the White Code” from *Huckleberry Finn*); poverty (through Charles Dickens’s “I Want Some More” from *Oliver Twist*); and family (through Lev Tolstoy’s “The Perils and Dilemmas of Marital Choice” from *Anna Karenina*).

This book follows the model set forth by Coser. Thus, we consciously call it sociology *through* film. This book will teach you about the field of sociology, using film as the source. Thus far we have delineated the sociological perspective used in the analysis of film. But how exactly do sociologists do it? How do we decode a film as text? What tools do we have available to us?

The Sociological Toolkit

The sociological viewing, analysis, and interpretation of film require an understanding of the relationship among historical context, social structure, and individual experience (Shiel 2001). In Mills’s (1959) terms, the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two. Engaging our sociological imaginations allows us to see how events that seem extraordinarily personal are in fact produced and shaped by social forces.

Take, for example, divorce. This life event seems to those involved to be the most private and personal decision two individuals can make. But as sociologists we note social factors contributing to the likelihood of divorce (e.g., marrying as a teenager, being poor, becoming unemployed, having a low level of education, perceiving that the division of household labor is unfair; see Amato 2010). Thus, divorces *are* personal and individual, occurring at the micro level, but they are also influenced by macro level societal structures. Divorces occur in societies with structured social orders, at a particular time in history, with different types of men and women inhabiting that place and time. Consequently, when we view *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a 1979 film about a couple who separate, leaving the dad to learn childcare and housework until the working mom returns and the custody battle begins, we must place it within context. Rather than viewing this as one couple’s struggle with divorce—or even as *representing* divorce—our sociological imaginations allow us to read this film from the micro to the macro perspective. Consider the historical context of the 1970s: second-wave feminism was barely a decade old, so how might gender politics have impacted the telling of this story? We might also consider

Andrew: Everyone is born with blinders on, knowing only that one station in life to which they are born. You, on the other hand, Madam, have had the rare privilege of removing your bonds for just a spell to see life from an entirely different perspective. How you choose to use that information is entirely up to you.

—*Overboard* (1987)

social structure: how were “working moms” and “caregiving dads” represented in this film, considering “appropriate” gender roles at the time? And at the level of individual experience: what did the characters’ emotional states and priorities reveal about divorce and child custody?

One of the benefits of studying sociology is the “toolkit” it provides for analyzing and understanding the social world. In this section we present theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that can be used as a frame for reading films sociologically. As we have noted, film can be thought of as text in the sense that it provides material (data) subject to observation and analysis.

Theoretical Perspectives

In any Introduction to Sociology course, the student is introduced to theory. We need theory, after all, to guide both the questions we ask and our interpretations of the responses. More often than not, an introductory class will highlight the Big Three theories: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. While the utilization of these theories is much more nuanced than a few bullet points can detail (as you will see from many of the readings within this book), it is also helpful to keep some of these points in mind, since the theoretical perspective you use depends on the types of questions you ask. If you want to consider macro level societal change, you might benefit from using *functionalism*. If you intend to explore power relations, including political power, patriarchy, or racial dominance, then a *conflict perspective* would be more appropriate. If your questions have to do with issues of representation (“meanings” in a film), socialization, or the social construction of reality, *symbolic interactionism* would provide the framing necessary.

Structural functionalism stems from the work of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim was concerned with social order—why does it exist and under what conditions will it fail? What holds society together? Thus, a classic functionalist perspective assumes the following:

- Society consists of “parts,” all working together to maintain order (these parts include institutions such as law, family, economics, and religion).
- When a change or shift occurs in one part of society, changes and shifts occur in other parts as well.
- Cohesion is maintained via mutually agreed-upon norms and values.
- “Dysfunctions” occur when order and balance are upset.

Watching movies through a functionalist lens allows us to consider the interdependence of social institutions as well as how an event or behavior functions in society. Watching a movie about a family would lead us to consider how the family, as an institution, helps maintain an ordered society. A classic (and somewhat dated) functionalist view would argue that the family, especially the “traditional” family consisting of the breadwinner and the homemaker, helps maintain the equilibrium of society; each member has his or her roles. “Dysfunctions” occur when change occurs. For example, greater numbers of women from all social classes begin to enter the workforce. The “instrumental” and “expressive”

roles of men and women become blurred as both men and women become responsible for economically supporting the family and taking care of the home and children. These changes in the family lead to changes in other institutions, such as education and religion. With more women working, fewer can volunteer at schools or in religious organizations. What, then, from a functionalist perspective, is the function of the homemaker? Her manifest (intended) function is to maintain societal equilibrium by raising children and creating a home to which the breadwinner can return. Her latent (unintended) functions include supporting the smooth running of other institutions and the community (through “free” labor or volunteerism).

At the core of conflict theory is the work of Karl Marx. Unlike functionalists, who focus on order and maintaining the status quo as society’s goals, conflict theorists would claim that if stability lasts too long, then some group has too much power (and is enforcing it on others)! For instance, conflict theorists welcome shifts away from clear divisions of labor in the family, as men *and* women now have access to varied resources. Marx divided society into two classes (the owners and the workers). Because workers, during his time, had nothing to sell except their own labor, owners were able to exploit them, resulting in the workers’ alienation, or separation, from themselves, others, and the products they made. Conflict theory holds the following assumptions:

- There is a scarcity of resources in society (e.g., money, education, jobs).
- Society consists of groups struggling for (scarce) resources.
- Conflict and change are good for a society, as they challenge the status quo.
- Power enables some groups to dominate others.

The conflict perspective reminds us that film is not a documented recording of social events or alternative worlds; film is carefully crafted and produced within industrial and economic relations of power (Giroux 2002). In contemporary sociology, many perspectives fall under the umbrella of conflict theory. For instance, a continuous critical approach (Lehman and Luhr 2002) allows for a view of film that shifts the center (Collins 2000) from dominant discourse to the matrix of domination along the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and geopolitical location. These interlocking systems operate from the individual to the social structural level. Critical theories provide the best vehicle for this approach. Feminist theory allows us to ask about prevailing attitudes and assumptions concerning gender as well as the structure of patriarchy. Critical race theory and critical white studies frame questions concerning racism, racial discrimination, and the acceptance of whiteness as the norm. Marxist theory can address power in the making of movies: who has the power to (re)produce ideologies? Pierre Bourdieu’s theories allow an analysis of power via cultural capital: how do tastes and knowledge of culture “locate” people in social classes?

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) borrows from Max Weber’s assertion that sociology should seek “to understand” society. The work of George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley also form the basis of SI. In the SI (or constructionist) tradition, knowledge, truth, and reality are determined by “the context in which they are practiced” (O’Brien 2006:9). We engage in an interpretive process in which schemas and culturally specific common

sense realities help us to arrive at meanings. Helping to shape those meanings are the values, norms, and ideologies of a culture that inform what is real. Thus, some assumptions of SI would be:

- Nothing has meaning until we give it meaning.
- Meanings are established through *interaction* with others.
- The exchange of symbols allows for the establishment of meanings.
- If we believe something to be real, it becomes real in its consequences (our interpretations guide our actions).

SI and social constructionism reminds us that race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class have no meaning until a society attaches meaning to a particular status or social location. Watching film and engaging with the content is part of the interpretive process where repetitive images take on meaning and become “real,” often turning into “common sense knowledge.” Through films we are told what it means to be man, woman, gay, lesbian, black, white, Asian, Latino, middle or working class. Whether the images and information are “objectively” real is irrelevant in terms of the consequences. Mediated images and information become part of the material that supports or contradicts our notions of what is real in the social world.

Methods

There are many methodological approaches to the study of film. We recommend the two processes outlined below.

The first approach is based on the process for conducting research, revised for film analysis.⁴

1. The Research Question
 - a. What is the sociological question motivating the research?
 - b. What is significant about your question?
 - c. What is your argument?
2. Literature Review
 - a. How have others approached this question? (Keep in mind that others may or may not have used film in addressing this question.)
 - b. What were their contributions regarding the findings?
 - c. What theories and methods have been used?
 - d. What questions are left to be asked?
 - e. Did reading this literature shape the way you are approaching your question?
 - f. Is it important that you ask your question in another way?
3. Methods and Data
 - a. How did you select your sample of films?
 - b. How did you collect data?
 - i. How did you watch the film(s)?
 - ii. How did you take notes while watching?

- iii. Did you code the data, looking for patterns and trends?
- iv. What did you do with your notes when you were finished watching?
- v. Did these data help you to answer your question?

4. Data Analysis

- a. What are your findings?
- b. What do the data tell you regarding your research question?
- c. Use your data to make your argument (convince the reader).
- d. Relate your findings back to the literature review. Is this something new?

5. Conclusion

- a. Sum up your findings.
- b. What is the significance of this work?
- c. Are there implications for future research?

This model has several advantages. First, it does not deviate from traditional research models; thus, there may be some familiarity with the structure of the project. Second, it specifically guides not only the kinds of questions one might ask, but also the order in which to address them. While this model is familiar, the second recommended approach is representative of a different kind of qualitative methodology.

The second approach to analyzing film involves a five-step process drawn from the work of Norman Denzin (1989). The goal is to help students orient themselves to the content of film in the research role of nonparticipant observer (Tan and Ko 2004). In addition to honing skills of observation, this process incorporates an ethnographic tool called “thick description” (Geertz 1973). The key to thick, as opposed to thin, description is that even the simplest act can mean different things depending on the social and cultural context. Thus, it is the responsibility of the researcher to report not just actions, but the context of the practices and discourse within the society being observed. This means reading the text of the film at multiple levels and attending to implied as well as explicit content. The guiding question is how the film creates multiple meanings through language, action, and “what-goes-without-saying” (Barthes, as cited in Denzin 1989). This process should help you to “bracket” taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world to first observe and then analyze the content of the film.

1. Select the film and view it multiple times. While there are disadvantages to viewing a film outside the context for which it was made (e.g., large screen, particular sound system), one benefit to viewing a film at home is the ability to stop, rewind, and review throughout the process.
2. Outline the narrative themes of the film. Themes are patterns or constructs that, in qualitative research, are induced from texts in a process of open coding. Two strategies are worth mentioning here: the “social science query” and the “search for missing information” (Ryan and Russell Bernard 2003). In the first, the text is examined for topics important to social scientists, such as social conflict, cultural contradictions, methods of social control, and setting and context. In the second, attention is on what is not represented, including topics addressed in this text, such as class, culture, race and ethnicity, and sex and gender.

3. Conduct a realistic reading of the hegemonic interpretations of the text in terms of their dominant ideological meanings. This step involves a close reading of the film's characters, content, and dialogue. What universal features of the human condition are addressed? What stories are told that reproduce existing relations of power and inequity?
4. Develop a “subversive” or oppositional reading of the text such that the taken-for-granted hegemony is revealed by making the connections between particular lives and social organization visible and explicit (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Shifting away from characters, content, and dialogue, this analysis “focuses instead on how the film creates its meanings through the organization of signifying practices that organize the film's reality” (Denzin 1989:46). In this step, it is critical to attend to the individual-as-subject bias that structures much of film ideology—in other words, to apply the sociological imagination.
5. Compare the realistic/hegemonic and oppositional readings of the film. In this step the analysis is further developed as the results of the two previous steps are evaluated in relationship to one another. What is the story being told through the film, and how is it supported explicitly in how the characters are portrayed, what they say (and how they say it), and the events that construct a storyline? How does this compare to the “underlying ideological forces of the film” (Denzin 1989:46)?

In short, the way to apply sociology to film as data about social life is to answer the following questions when viewing the film (Brym 2008):

1. How does the movie reflect the social context?
2. How does the movie distort social reality?
3. To what degree does the movie shed light on common or universal social and human problems?
4. To what degree does the movie provide evidence for or against sociological theory and research?
5. To what degree does the movie connect biography, social structure, and history?

In This Book

Atticus Finch: If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point

As Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) explained to his daughter, the best way to understand others is to suspend what you think you know and see the world through their eyes. In sociology we call this the practice of *verstehen*, the term Weber used to refer to the social scientist's attempt to understand both the intention and the context of human action and interaction (Munch 1975). In this chapter, we have provided you with a toolkit (theory and method) and a data source (film) to put sociology into practice. Films can be effectively used in this way because they (1) give viewers access to social

worlds beyond their own and (2) create the opportunity to understand the relationship between individual experience and “the broader social context which structures one’s actions and choices” (Prendergast 1986:243).

Chapter 2 explores sociological theories and how they can be used to analyze and interpret film. In the Outtake, Rubinfeld applies the three theoretical perspectives to the Hollywood enterprise and the pictures it produces. Both readings in this chapter use the classical works of Marx and Weber and their critiques of modern society. Kimmel focuses on the transition of society from a traditional, feudal system to modern capitalism and the contrast between society as “an idyllic, pastoral culture, at peace with itself and deeply connected to nature, and a technocratic, bureaucratic modernist machine.” The effects of rationalization as society becomes more bureaucratic are what Weber called the iron cage (or “a steel-hard casing,” as Dahms points out in the second reading).

Dahms distinguishes between two types of social theories: reflexive and reflective. Reflexive (critical) theories identify the conflicts and contradictions in modern society, while reflective theories explain that all of society (institutions, individuals, inventions) are reflections or manifestations of the values and beliefs of that society. Dahms explores these two theoretical orientations in *The Matrix*, noting that the trilogy “cuts to the heart of what *alienation* and *iron cage*, respectively, were meant to convey: that something rather insidious is at work in modern societies, that social theory is the means through which it can be illuminated—and what this means both for our lives and for the research orientation and self-understanding of sociology as a social science.”

Chapter 3 addresses social class and inequality, Chapter 4 examines race and ethnicity, and Chapter 5 covers gender and sexuality. While the readings in these chapters focus on social class, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, these are not separate dimensions in the lives of individuals or in larger social structures; they are intersecting systems of oppression (Collins 2000). Individuals have intersecting identities and locations; social organizations and institutions are structured in terms of intersecting inequalities. However, there are many methodological challenges to observing and analyzing intersectionality.

The readings in these three chapters use what Betsy Lucal (1996) called a “relational model” that includes both oppression and privilege: those who benefit (directly or indirectly) as well as those who are disadvantaged by inequality. In Chapter 3, Dowd introduces the concept of social mobility and cultural loyalty to the idea that upward mobility is not only possible but certain if individuals are motivated and industrious. Bulman directs our attention to the tension between middle class perspectives on education and upward mobility, and the realities of living and going to school in poor urban areas. In the Outtake, Feltey discusses two educational films about social class, one produced in the 1950s and the other at the turn of the twenty-first century, that address key sociological concepts regarding social inequality and opportunity.

Chapter 4 covers the topic of race and ethnicity in the movies. In the Outtake, Martinez applies the sociological imagination to her experience of watching *Pocahontas* and seeing a woman of color speak for her people and the ecosystem, both threatened by European conquest and colonization. In the third reading, Basler identifies stereotypes (in film and in life) that have been used by the dominant group to exclude or marginalize Latinos/as over time. She notes that “American film representations of Latinos/as help unveil persistent and

of view . . . Until you
climb inside of his skin
and walk around in it.

—*To Kill a Mockingbird*
(1962)

pervasive stereotypes that ‘other’ Latinos/as, reinforcing their position as outsiders.” This process operates in “trickle-down” fashion, as Guerrero illustrates in his discussion of the film *Rosewood* in the first reading. The film ends with the beating of a lower class white woman by her husband, offering resolution (payback?) for genocide by displacing the responsibility on what Guerrero calls “yet another Hollywood out-group, disenfranchised women.” Both Basler and Guerrero claim that one hope for change lies in shifting the source of the story from the dominant group, who have historically controlled both access and resources, to tell the story of the “other.” However, the knowledge produced from a privileged perspective cannot encompass the stories of those at the margins who have been excluded from film writing, filmmaking, and often even acting (as in films where people of color are played by white actors in “black face”). Basler notes a gradual change in film images, attributing it to the presence of Latino/a filmmakers in the industry. Guerrero describes the need for “wave after wave of new black filmmakers” with diverse experiences and standpoints. For example, gender differences in the filmmaking of black women and black men are apparent in the focus on character and drama versus action and violence.

In the second reading, Searls Giroux and Giroux go further than opening the field of film production to “others.” They argue that the fight against racism on the screen and in the streets requires the commitment of all citizens to “critically engage and eliminate the conditions” that both produce structural racism and prevent true democracy. Further, the political arena is not the only site of action, since it is the responsibility of all citizens to create alliances across perceived racial differences in the community settings where they meet (and sometimes collide).

In Chapter 5, the readings on gender and sexuality provide new frameworks for thinking about power, patriarchy, and the social construction of gender and sexuality. In the Outtake, Sutherland spotlights the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, an organization that uses social science research and the power of Hollywood to draw attention to the representations of girls and women in film and the paucity of women behind the cameras and the storytelling. In the third reading, Lucal and Miller call the sex/gender/sexuality binary, in which people are defined as male (masculine) or female (feminine), into question. They point out that the result of enforced categories (homosexual, woman) is the blinding erasure of identity where people’s experiences, history, interactions, and emotions are collapsed into narrowly scripted roles. Bree, in *Transamerica*, is offered as a sign of hope in that she “queers the gender binary,” not by going through sex reassignment surgery but by “comfortably mixing masculinity and femininity.”

Bree’s story is one of personal transformation: finding her place in a binary social world. She is persistent in reaching her goal of completing the transition from male to female, and in the process discovers the power she has to create change. In the second reading, Sutherland tells us that this would be the “power-to” model of social change for women. Like Bree, Ana in *Real Women Have Curves* and Celie in *The Color Purple* become increasingly aware of their objective conditions, and ways to get free. However, unless this form of empowerment is linked to collective action (“power-with”), gender as structure remains intact and unchanged. The real challenge to patriarchy and gender inequality is represented in films like *North Country*, where the oppressed come to see their circumstances as shared—or in Marx’s terms, develop class consciousness.

As Josie (Charlize Theron) explained, sexual harassment is not a personal problem, and as a social issue it can be effectively challenged only by collective action. In a similar vein,

Messner in the first reading calls for collective action based on an ideal not of power-over, where might is the means to achieving desired ends, but rather of care and compassion. He challenges the masculine hegemonic, embodied in the film roles of Schwarzenegger (as the Terminator, for example) and Stallone (as Rambo).

In Chapter 6 we turn our attention to the public and private worlds of social life, work, and family. The division between public and private has been criticized for concealing “the underlying gender structures of the society” (Acker 2005:328), obscuring, for example, the ways that women are engaged in productive economic activities in the home. The readings in this chapter address the intricate links between public and private. In the Outtake, Rebecca Erickson introduces another dimension that crosses the public and private realms: the emotional labor involved in work performance and taking care of home and family.

In the first reading, Karla Erickson applies sociological questions usually reserved for research on family life to the workplace. She uses the films *As Good as It Gets* and *Office Space* to explore the public interactions that connect us to one another at the same time that these interactions become more controlled by corporate versions of self and community. Erickson encourages us to ask how film versions of work compare to our own experiences as workers and consumers in the modern marketplace.

In the second reading Cosby suggests that we can use films to examine how the challenges of balancing work and family are represented. Beginning with the gendered division of labor, Cosby explores the organization of the family with a stay-at-home mother, breadwinner husband, and dependent children. Although this family form is a historical anomaly, it is standard fare in film. When roles are reversed, as in *Mr. Mom* or *Daddy Daycare*, with mothers as breadwinners and fathers keeping the house and minding the children, it is comedy, a play on the expected social arrangements. Even when traded, the roles are intact: the person who cares for the children also cleans the house and provides support to the wage-earning spouse. Cosby explores this further with the film *The Children Are All Right*, where the parents are both women but replicate traditional roles within the family.

Films that draw attention to the juggling act required of women who work for pay outside the home (since the division of household labor is still not equitable), such as *I Don't Know How She Does It*, present women's dilemma as one of identity (between occupation and mother). As sociologist Phyllis Moen (2003) points out, “In contemporary society, family and work roles are at odds with one another” (p. 17). Focusing on married couple families, Moen and other sociologists argue that organizations in the public domain still operate on a breadwinner model of family life, with built-in expectations about full-time (40 or more hours per week) work and the priority of work success in relationship to family (with the assumed “wife” fulfilling necessary duties). Change in this case cannot be crafted through individual adaptation, although couples do accommodate their relationships and lives to manage their public and private worlds. However, larger-scale structural changes are called for to address the realities of work and family today.

Chapter 7 explores the areas of deviance, crime, and law. In sociology these are three different, but related, subfields. Deviance encompasses behaviors, attitudes, or conditions that violate social norms in some way. Crime is behavior that violates norms codified in law. Whether or not an action, attitude, or condition will be defined as deviant or criminal depends on the time, place, and social order. In the first reading, Wonser and Boyns provide an overview of the sociology of deviance and crime, explaining the primary theoretical

perspectives that have been developed and used by sociologists. Using the Batman films, the authors apply these theories to the world of Gotham City and the behaviors, identities, and statuses held by its inhabitants. They point out that which side of the law one stands on is shaped by “a rich interplay of sociological forces.”

In the second reading, Rafter suggests that movies about crime are a form of “popular criminology” where many people learn about crime and criminals. The academic study of these films can give insight into the ideas people have about the nature of crime. Using films about sex crimes, Rafter demonstrates that some of these ideas overlap with academic criminology (e.g., the great frequency of sexual offenses and the threat of victimization from trusted members of the community, rather than the threat of “stranger danger”). These films also raise what Rafter identifies as “ethical, philosophical and psychological” issues outside the domain of academic criminology.

In the third reading, Callanan uses a constructionist approach to explore the sociology of law through film. The three films chosen, *Music Within*, *A Civil Action*, and *Erin Brockovich* all involve individuals who are willing (eventually) to take on a battle of David-Goliath proportions, fighting against all odds for justice. In the process, they are changed into better people, and the legitimacy of the legal system is upheld. As Callanan points out, viewers enjoy seeing the underdog prevail, but the individualist focus (on the protagonists and their clients) keeps the inherent class bias of the system safely out of the public eye and mind. The Outtake for this chapter also takes up the issue of corporate crime, in this case the largest criminal antitrust case in history and the subject of the film *The Informant!* The main character in this film, while providing evidence to the FBI for prosecution of his company, is also embezzling millions of dollars. The lightheartedness of the film is revealing in terms of societal views of “serious” crime, and Maume points out that white collar offenders often escape the label of criminal because of their respectability and social status.

Chapter 8 considers different stages in the life course as represented in film. The life course approach provides a framework for studying people in the context of statuses, roles, social groups, communities, and social institutions over time. While we generally think of the life course as unidirectional, from birth through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, Orange, in her Outtake, questions whether this still applies in society today, when nonlinear life stories are becoming more normative. In this chapter the readings focus on different age-graded trajectories in the life course: childhood, becoming a parent, and old age.

In the first reading, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo look at four animated films for children (*The Road to El Dorado*, *Shark Tale*, *Dinosaur*, and *Toy Story*) as examples of influential agents of socialization. Analyzing the themes in these films, the authors conclude that the content and delivery of the stories teach and reinforce stereotyped representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Children learn from these films stereotypical depictions of colonialism (good Europeans save childlike indigenous people), race and ethnicity (Mrs. García in *Shark Tale* is presented as an overweight, middle-aged, single, Mexican-accented female fish—with permanent rollers in her hair—who lives in the ghetto), and sexuality (in *Dinosaur*, boys and girls receive separate lessons on attracting the “opposite” sex, with girls being told to “keep the boys guessing”). Early research on the effect of movies on children and adolescents found that movies teach children about life, including attitudes, appearance norms, and sexual intimacy (e.g., how to kiss), and that 90 percent of children remember what they see in a movie long after the movie is over (Charters 1933).

The second reading moves from childhood to a transition point in adulthood: choosing to become a parent. In this reading, Holcomb explores alternative paths to motherhood using the films *Baby Mama*, *The Switch*, *Juno*, and *Knocked Up*. Rather than following the traditional route to motherhood (courtship and marriage), the main characters in these films are unmarried and off-age (a teen in one case, women over 35 in three others) as they grapple with the choice to become mothers. While the films provide models of nonnormative paths to motherhood, the effects of social class, race, and heteronormativity are assumed and audiences are given the standard happy ending of love and family, albeit out of order in terms of timing and context in the life course.

In the third reading, King uses three films—*About Schmidt*, *Gran Torino*, and (the animated) *Up*—to explore old age as a life stage, focusing on white men who have exited long-term social statuses that provided a source of identity and meaning in their lives (marriage, employment). Now widowed and retired, the story becomes one of isolation and, in sociological terms, alienation. However, in true Hollywood fashion, the main characters are rescued through a mentoring relationship with young male characters who are themselves at a transitional point in the life course. While the resolution is unrealistic (and even fatal in one case), King points out the ways in which aging masculinity is socially constructed and the high cost paid by men for their gendered power and privilege at earlier stages in the life course.

In Chapter 9, social institutions become the focus with four readings on different institutional domains: religion, sports, medicine, and the military. Social institutions, as defined by sociologists, are “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment” (Turner 1997:6). Further, institutions are interrelated through social practices, processes, and structures, as can be seen in the four institutions covered in Chapter 9.

In the first reading, Monahan explores the institution of religion in terms of structure and function. Religion, like all institutions, has a hierarchical set of social relations based on statuses and roles, as well as norms and beliefs separating the sacred and the profane. An inherent tension in institutions is the impetus toward or resistance to social change. Religion has served as a source of tradition, stability, and order at the same time that it has been a vehicle for radical social change extending beyond the realm of religious practice and into politics, economics, family life, and so on.

In the next reading, Montez de Oca examines sport as a social institution by focusing on football films. Central to the stories of football told through film are the themes of race, redemption, and social mobility. Sport intersects with the economic institution both to support competition and structured inequality and to reproduce inequality through the myth that playing hard and winning can contribute to upward class mobility. Boys are made into men through football and, as Montez de Oca points out, minority boys are given the opportunity to choose a normative life over deviance and crime.

The medical institution is the topic of Pescosolido and Oberlin’s article. Using two central concepts from the subfield of medical sociology, the illness career and health disparities, the authors consider both the micro and macro level processes of health, illness, and disease. Institutional settings are central to the stories of the first two films considered,

Frances and *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. The main characters in each film spend time in a mental hospital, having been labeled by others or self-labeling as mentally ill. The relationship between politics and medicine is explored in the story of Frances, who is hospitalized in response to her unorthodox beliefs and behaviors.

The role of politics in health and illness is further developed as the authors focus on public health threats (e.g., industrial contamination of local water sources) and the legal battle to protect the public from disease and death. The reading ends with a discussion of the problems of health disparities and the probability of living (healthfully) or dying based on social class and access to resources. The Outtake in this chapter also addresses issues of health and illness with the zombie movie *28 Days Later*. Hund points out that preservation of human health is central to the story, as is the practice of “othering” those who are ill or infected.

The last reading of the chapter examines war as a social institution, complete with a social hierarchy based on status and power. Those who make the decisions are far removed from the soldiers engaged in the practice of war on the ground (or in the air or at sea). Martinez uses two films about the 1991 invasion of Iraq, *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*, to address the politics of war from the vantage point of soldiers. With their carefully delineated role expectations for soldiers (obeying orders, loyalty to the group and to the mission), these films tell different stories about structure and agency in the context of war.

In Chapter 10 the readings address economic globalization in the twenty-first century in terms of its effects on workers, whether they immigrate to global cities in search of employment or look for opportunities in their home countries in the midst of economic transformation. The concept of neoliberalism is central to understanding this economic transformation, since neoliberal globalization is “a process characterized by intensified economic exchange of goods, services, capital, labor, and new technologies across national borders” (Bandelj, Shorette, and Sowers 2011). In the Outtake for this chapter, Shaheen considers the question of global politics and what happens when governments and corporations “mix together greed, oil and terrorism in order to maintain their monopoly on Arab oil.” He identifies two films that break the pattern of demonizing Arabs and Muslims, *Syriana* and *Munich*, pointing out that peace is not possible when force and violence are the mechanisms used to gain economic control.

In the first reading, Gonzales focuses on the role of low-wage migrant workers in the global economy with the film *Dirty Pretty Things*. Gonzales argues that the new economies of the global market have created a new “serving class” to meet the needs of a time-strapped professional class. Immigrant workers fill this need as a flexible, low-wage source of labor. From a functionalist perspective, immigrant labor keeps “society and economy running smoothly”; conflict theorists would argue that they are exploited labor. In *Dirty Pretty Things*, the effect of complex global economic systems on the individual lives of immigrant workers is made apparent. The intersection of the social institutions of economy (labor needs) and politics (regulatory power of the law) in the lives of individuals is seen in the ways that immigrant workers (barely) survive day to day. The costs for this survival are high as the immigrants are exploited not only for their labor, but for their very being—symbolized in the body parts that become marketable products in this new world economic order.

In the second reading, Moss and Hendricks use the film *Slumdog Millionaire* to explore the intersecting social processes of globalization and neoliberalism underlying the expansion of

Western capitalism. The authors point out that Mumbai can be seen as a *character* in the film as the different parts of the city “are shown to demonstrate social extremes; depressed economic conditions or booming capitalist industry, the wealth of crime bosses in mansions or the shacks of the slums, the bright lights and modern highway infrastructure or the dusty, grimy garbage dump with a makeshift tent where Jamal, Salim, and Latika sleep.” While this film is largely celebrated as a “feel-good” movie, turning a sociological eye to the global economic and political processes at play reveals the ways that transporting a market economy fails when the history and culture of the receiving state are ignored.

The topic of Chapter 11 is social change, the environment, and social movements. The three readings in this section are concerned with the sources of social change, the nature of social relations (among social actors), and the relationships among social structure, the environment, tradition, and the anticipated future (Sztompka 1994). The readings consider questions related to the quality of life in human communities and how we envision and act toward a future that is more peaceful, egalitarian, and just.

In the first reading, Podeschi begins with the most basic of survival relationships: between humans and their environments. This focus has long interested sociologists; in the early twentieth century, the Chicago School conducted research on the city with the explicit goal of studying people, taking into account relations with the material environment and processes of adaptation (Gross 2004). Podeschi brings this concern into the twenty-first century using science fiction films to explore potential future scenarios for humankind and nature. The central theme is that of resistance (to the exploitative relationship between society and nature) versus reproduction (where nature is a resource to be exploited).

In the next reading, Feltey explores film stories involving nonviolence, both as an organizing principle in social movement activism (India’s campaign for home rule; the civil rights movement in the southern U.S.) and in a *gemeinschaft* subculture (the Amish). Pointing out that violence is the dominant model of social relations from the micro to the macro level, Feltey suggests looking for models of nonviolent social order and change. Rather than power-over, dominance, and exploitation, what would society look like if the social order were based on cooperation, nonkilling, and peaceful coexistence?

In the third reading, Langstraat uses the films *The Long Walk Home*, *Norma Rae*, and *Milk* to explore the sociology of social movements. These three films focus on historical social movements in the U.S. that transformed social relations on the basis of race (the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s), class or worker status (the labor and unionization movements of the twentieth century), and sexuality and gender (the LGBT movement of the late twentieth century). This reading, along with the Outtake for this chapter, offers hope that social change is possible and is rooted in the beliefs and actions of individuals working together toward envisioned change.

In the Outtake, Farr identifies what he calls “great activist movies” that “portray the ongoing struggle between the welfare of working people and larger societal forces.” He encourages us to view these movies to understand the importance of taking a stand and fighting with the most vulnerable of society’s members for the right to a decent life. The readings in the last chapter are ultimately concerned with questions of power—and leave us with important questions to consider about the future: will we create a social world where domination and exploitation of people and nature are the status quo, or will we engage in “progressive self-transformation” (Sztompka 1994) of ourselves, communities,

and societies? In sum, *Cinematic Sociology: Social Life in Film* provides a way to explore our social world and the lives of those who share it with us. It is our belief that sociology offers the tools to interrogate and change the conditions that produce discord in relationships—individual, communal, national, and global. It is our hope that by turning the sociological lens on the movies we watch, we will be better equipped to contribute to these changes, together “dream better futures” (Feagin 2001:17), and create a world in which happy endings are not only found in the movies.

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Notes

1. This section was developed largely through conversations with Michael Kimmel. His contributions have made it possible to write about "sociology and film."
2. Jess MacDonald, presentation in Introduction to Sociology class, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2008.
3. "Merchant Ivory Productions (MIP) has a special essence and meaning in the minds of viewers all over the world. Cultural interchanges, period pieces, lush photography, and an idyllic and charming world..." Retrieved December 28, 2011 (<http://www.planetbollywood.com/Features/s021303-175631.php>).
4. Bulman, R. 2007. Handout presented in Teaching Sociology through Film session, American Sociological Association, New York.