

“ROUND

UP THE
USUAL
SUSPECTS”

Anthropology Goes to the Movies

BY LOUISE KRASNIEWICZ

In 1946, while most anthropologists were exercising their professional skills and curiosities in cultures far from home, Hortense Powdermaker took on a most daring research project. Applying the training in participant-observation she had fine-tuned in the South Pacific, Powdermaker set her sights on that elusive social system known as Hollywood. That year one of the top-grossing films and the Academy Award winner for Best Picture was *The Best Years of Our Lives*. It was produced by the legendary Samuel Goldwyn, who was notorious for supposedly having warned against taking movies too seriously, stating “If I wanted to send a message, I’d send a telegram!”

Powdermaker failed to heed this warning, and she became one of the earliest anthropologists to take this form of storytelling, mythmaking, and social production seriously. In her published study, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, she combined keen social observations with unfortunately simplistic psychological generalizations, but still gave the impression that Hollywood and its movies were worth studying. For the past half-century, however, while America produced at least 20,000 mass-market movies, anthropologists for the most part have ignored or dismissed the importance of these cultural narratives. If anthropologists were this dismissive of the folk stories found in the non-western cultures that we usually study, it would be professional neglect. Yet despite Powdermaker's early steps and anthropologists' increased study of our own culture, the movies still have little place in American anthropology.

Anthropology concerns itself with showing how people living together work to structure their world and its meanings to address questions like Who are we? What is our place in the world? and What does it mean to be human? Many cultural anthropologists think that the quest for these answers drives most aspects of human social life. The stories a culture tells itself are one of the most significant ways of pursuing these answers. Commonly circulated narratives, whether in the form of poems, songs, dances, games, gossip, jokes, or movies, don't just mirror or comment on an existing culture, they actually create and recreate the culture and the individuals experiencing it. A culture can be defined by the stories it tells, the ways it tries to determine and examine who is "us" and who is "other." Stories can address questions that have ambiguous answers and try to get at the kinds of truths that each culture needs.

Many forms of traditional film study have resisted the idea that movies are cultural artifacts that look at how we answer important cultural questions. Instead they have often treated movies as an art form, as proof of psychoanalytic concepts like voyeurism, as examples of cultural repression and political agendas, or as a mirror of human mental and emotional processes.

In contrast, from an anthropological perspective movies are a shared set of culturally significant and symbolic stories. An anthropological study of movies would start with the stories themselves as examples of narratives created by a particular culture at a particular time. All the strategies used to analyze cultural narratives—discursive, structural, symbolic,

mythological, contextual, and linguistic—could come into play. Technical efforts that support or dispute the narrative—music, special effects, camera movements and positions, sound effects, acting—all would be included in a consideration of how the story is put together and what it thinks it is saying. Movie reviews, which often reach more people than the movies themselves, could act as related narratives.

More than just a textual analysis, the anthropological study of films would show how movies provide us with characters, scenarios, symbols, metaphors, and plots that structure and limit how we think about our everyday existence. We could understand these limitations by seeing how a film story gets used in everyday life. Like the myths that have provided values and identities for cultures around the world throughout time, movies may provide us with a place to go to make sense of what's happening.

As a simple example, we often use movies as a reference point to illustrate dramatic events. Large-scale bird gatherings have for years been likened to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). Recent watery disasters like the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 hurricanes have been compared to *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), while star-crossed lovers are portrayed as those in *Casablanca* (1942) or *Titanic* (1997). Even parents caught by the local news leaving their kids "home alone" are compared to the dysfunctional family in that 1990s film franchise.

Although all films do not achieve the status of a nightly news reference, many enter our everyday language, reminding us of their underlying story. The American Film Institute (AFI) assembled a list of the "100 Greatest Movie Quotes of All

THE TOP 5 MOVIE QUOTES

(<http://www.afi.com>)

1. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."
– *Gone with the Wind* (1939)
2. "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse."
– *The Godfather* (1972)
3. "You don't understand! I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I could've been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am."
– *On the Waterfront* (1954)
4. "Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."
– *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)
5. "Here's looking at you, kid."
– *Casablanca* (1942)



Above, Arnold Schwarzenegger ran for governor of California in 2003 as his movie character, *The Terminator*. Left, *Terminator 3* as a bobblehead, licensed to National Entertainment Collectibles Association by IMF Internationale Medien und Film GmbH & Co. 3. Produktions KG. Right, the infamous horse head from *The Godfather* is offered as a pillow on the Internet (http://www.kropserkel.com/horse_head_pillow.htm).

Movies are more than just the stories they tell. They are symbolic constructs, systems of symbols that help people think, feel, and act. Movies contain the claims people make about themselves, about the ways they imagine themselves to be, says anthropologist Keith Basso. According to Clifford Geertz, symbolic systems “synthesize a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.” This is not to suggest that movies tell life as it is. Most of us are not getting attacked by flocks of birds as in Hitchcock’s classic. Nor are we likely to be made an offer we can’t refuse via a severed horse head like in *The Godfather* (1972), even though Indiana’s governor, Mitch Daniels, called



The plush severed horse head: same effect - without the mess.

Time,” revealing a set of catch phrases and narrative references that have become embedded in our language. Perhaps this can best be seen in two phrases from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Terminator* movies. “I’ll be back” (#37) and “Hasta la vista, baby” (#76) became catch phrases in the 1980s and 90s and were eventually employed by Schwarzenegger in his campaign for the governorship of California in 2003.

The Godfather, “the best business textbook I ever read.” Many movies instead tell life as we collectively try to represent it to each other.

Analyzing the amazing world of related cultural objects and events associated with the *Star Wars* saga illuminates what anthropology has to offer. Since 1977 there have been six major motion pictures in the series, all among the top 25

STAR WARS

Star Wars spinoffs include preview trailers, trade show displays, talk show appearances, fan conventions, academic conferences and courses, themed foods, magazine articles, fan art and fan fiction, books, comic books, cartoons, theme park rides, websites and blogs, board games, posters, video games, T-shirts, action figures, computer software, costumes, birthday party decorations, catch phrases and slang, music, and parodies.

To the right, one of the many LEGO® building toys with a *Star Wars* theme. LEGO® building toys are distributed in the USA by LEGO Systems, Inc., licensed by Lucasfilm, Ltd.



grossing films of all time. Worldwide they have grossed \$3.4 billion and *Star Wars* merchandise has generated nearly \$9 billion in retail sales. While some critics decry the way movies have spread beyond the self-contained narrative on the screen, for anthropology this is often the most revealing data. *Star Wars* has reached into nearly every cultural category, from objects to information to a national policy on satellite protection from nuclear weapons. With the release of the sixth film in 2005, Yoda appeared in Diet Pepsi® commercials trying to steal cans of soda with “The Force.” “Saberspoons” showed up in boxes of cereal, and Darth Vader confronted some dark M&M’s® in television and Internet advertisements.

If movies already provide useful, necessary, and flexible narratives, why do we bother with all the peripheral merchandise and activities that develop around them? Why do we allow big movie traditions like *Star Wars* to flourish and overwhelm our culture? Economic and political explanations are not enough if we remember that our behaviors, as David Kertzer and many other anthropologists have reminded us, are not pragmatic and goal oriented, not utilitarian and practical, but rather are grounded in efforts to create meaningful order.

Stories have never been a passive cultural artifact for anthropologists. One thing to learn from traditional story forms, such as myths and folktales, is that while they tell us why and how the world is, they also invite us to act out these ideas and to dramatize them so that we ourselves embody the

Darth Vader as a plush M&M® toy, manufactured and distributed under license from Lucasfilm, Ltd. by Hasbro for Mars, Inc.





Above, Darth Vader Halloween costume, helmet, and light saber by Rubie's Costume Co., Inc., authorized by Lucasfilm Ltd. Modeled by Drew Leventhal. Left, *Star Wars* characters on a cereal box. Kellogg's Corn Flakes® distributed by Kellogg Sales Co., licensed by Lucasfilm Ltd.

message of the story. Often these stories are enacted in ritual activities. Rituals use symbols, meaningful objects, and stories to dramatize the relationship of the individual to society and the interdependence of people. Thus all the seemingly peripheral objects, events, and texts are really additional props in our dramatic enactments of meaning. We participate through play, reading, eating, and masquerading.

Being Darth Vader for Halloween, having a light saber duel with friends, eating *Star Wars* cereals, or playing *Star Wars* chess are all creative retellings and reenactments of the saga. So are commentaries, exhibits, and documentaries about the movies. In numerous interviews, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas insists that *Star Wars* was the enactment of a universal myth of the hero's quest, an idea he borrowed from the popular work of Joseph Campbell after the first movie came out in 1977. Campbell reciprocated by praising the movies, and then in the late 1980s, public television commentator Bill Moyers featured both Campbell and Lucas in his television series "The Power of Myth." The Smithsonian took these ideas and made an exhibit called "*Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*," which was featured at the Air and Space Museum in 1998 and toured the country in 1999.

But just combining a narrative analysis of movies with an archaeology of their cultural fallout will not develop the anthropological study of films far enough. For anthropologists movies must engage with the habitual patterns of a culture that is always looking for ways to address its existential questions. These patterns are persistent categories, cultural themes, interpretive strategies, integrated sets of symbols, and world-views that members of that society see as normal and natural. If movies didn't relate to these patterns, even in a contradictory or incomplete way, we would have less reason to see them and use them.

The way to see these habits and patterns is to look at how the movies and their related artifacts are used to define, create, and challenge cultural categories. Categories help us differentiate ideas, objects, and experiences from each other. According to cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson, we cannot "get beyond" the categories we have learned and have a "purely uncategorized and unconceptualized experience." We may push the boundaries of our established categories, showing what holds them together and what can make them fall apart, but we cannot avoid categorizing altogether.



Movies that become a part of the American conversation often end up spoofed in videos and faux film posters that are widely distributed on the Internet. The movie *Brokeback Mountain* inspired countless spoof trailers, utilizing the signature music of the cowboy story played over clips from movies like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Top Gun*, *Back to the Future*, *Goodfellas*, and *Dumb and Dumber*. Posters like this one by blogger Corey Anderson (www.AmericanIdle.net) merged the movie theme with a political subject to great effect.

The categories we use are culturally specific, not universal ways to organize the world. Movies are rich and vivid demonstrations of our categorizing, even if they are not real accounts of actual events. Instead they are idealized accountings of generic events, making a story out of possible scenarios. The criticism that often accompanies fictional movies based on real events—that the movie is not faithful to reality—becomes irrelevant if the analysis of a movie is based on describing and engaging its cultural categories, what is in them and what is left out.

Lakoff and Johnson tell us that categorizing involves grouping ideas and things around a prototype, the best example of a category. For “dogs,” we are offered prototypes like Irish Setters or German Shepherds but not hairless

Chihuahuas, even though they are also dogs. Not every member of a category is as good a fit as the prototype, but the process of comparing potential members to the prototype is what constitutes thinking. For example, Lakoff and Johnson describe characteristics that define a prototypical “mother.” They then show, through a description of different types of mothers (stepmothers, birth mothers, genetic mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogates), how we struggle to match our idealized types with the realities we have.

Many movies address the difficulties of defining some of our most important categories. Kinship is a classic category of anthropology that still has its uses, defining who qualifies as family and who does not. In the process a whole series of taboos, indiscretions, and illegalities are set up. Efforts to define and thwart the category of kin is always revealing about a culture. One of the most vivid examples in a movie is Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, where we see multiple versions of woman as mother and the havoc caused by straying from the prototype.

In *The Birds*, the small town of Bodega Bay is attacked by common birds after an attractive young woman, Melanie Daniels, comes to town. Melanie is a wealthy playgirl who attributes her own reckless behavior to the fact that her mother “ditched” the family when Melanie was young. Melanie’s love interest, Mitch Brenner, has a mother, Lydia, who is suspicious of any of Mitch’s women. This is not because she is jealous, as Mitch’s former girlfriend Annie informs Melanie, but because she is incapable of loving her children like a mother should.

Mitch himself says it is better to have his mother’s love than to be abandoned like Melanie was, but he is not convincing. Mitch’s mother, who should match the prototype easily because she lives with her two children, instead calls into question what a mother should be.

Annie is the schoolteacher in Bodega Bay who uses both her students and her garden as substitute children. Another mother passing through town anxiously tries to find a way to protect her children, while a spinster ornithologist insists that they are all misinterpreting the situation. Melanie takes over mothering roles from Lydia as the bird attacks accelerate, but by the end of the movie, Lydia remarkably becomes nurturing to an injured Melanie as they flee the birds.

The movie is populated by mothers who fail, mothers who disappear, mothers who are desperate to be good mothers, mothers who don't care, women who will never be mothers, and women who are incapable of being mothers because of age, romantic failures, or fear. Many analyses of *The Birds* have seen the birds attacking as a metaphor for uncontrolled nature or for Melanie's dangerous sexuality. But the category being challenged is not simply nature or the nature of women, but that of the natural mother. The category of the real mother suffers in the face of what we learn about so many different kinds of failed mothers.

An anthropological approach to movies would require a new way of judging the quality of a film—the best films would be those that stimulate us to think about our habitual categories. Movies provide lessons about how categories do and don't work. This may at first sound boring, but this is exactly what makes movies entertaining. During a movie's classification of an unruly world, things that don't fit neatly into established categories become much more obvious. Ambiguous things are disturbing but also very interesting. It is not surprising that fantasy, science fiction, disaster, detective stories, and horror movies are excellent venues for presenting “liminal” or in-between things. These types of stories are especially good at explicitly threatening the boundaries of the cultural order, stepping in and out of order and chaos, in and out of established categories.

Anthropology's insights are easiest to demonstrate with widely seen and merchandised films like *Star Wars* or *The Birds*, but they are certainly not limited to them. An anthropological theory of film has to work with the biggest box office hits as well as the most appalling box office bombs and the most finely crafted independent films. Some movies actively resist making a connection to widespread cultural structures of meaning, purposely scrambling accepted and expected categories. One mark of success in independent filmmaking is to subvert the tone, style, content, or telegraphed meanings often found in Hollywood studio films. Yet to approach independent films, or animations, or documentaries for that matter, as somehow different because of their style or message is to miss the point of the anthropological approach. We are looking for the important cultural categories that any type of film should be able to address as it shows us what our culture is trying to say about itself.

Like anthropology, movies show us worlds that we cannot usually access directly, safely, or practically. These alternative

views of what the world is or could be require us to think about our established categories. While we may have little individual control over our categories, it is the work of the human mind to think about changing them, fitting in new things, throwing out old ones, and squeezing and stretching the boundaries which only occasionally will break. But in the meantime we confirm what we think it is to be human, what our reality is, and what values we do or don't share with our fellow citizens. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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