Going to the Movies

By Martyn Lowe

Film, The Movies, Moving Pictures, DVD, The Flicks, The Silver Screen, or Cinema - call it what you may. How we view it, and what we get from it varies greatly with us all. Just as what we perceive from what we view upon the screen will be dependent on our previous knowledge and the experiences we have gained over the years. Plus the visual information which is being presented.

Now if you think about it, then the above statement might seem to be stating the obvious, but nothing is (as they say) just what it appears to be. The whole art of cinema started as a fairground set of visual illusions - theatrical tricks, which have just got better and better as this technical art form has grown.

Yet get past the illusion, and look at what one is really looking at, and a whole new set of options are to be found. Options which information workers should be aware of. Options which can increase the knowledge base which is available to us all.

One of the main problems with cinema is that many people just regard it as entertainment, or an extension to the theatre, or maybe just a dramatic interpretation of a novel. Yes, this is certainly an aspect of cinema, but it is more than just that.

Cinema does more - it can help to educate us about social issues via the use of drama. It can also present us with knowledge and ideas which we would or could not gain from any other information.

Yet at the same time cinema is being used as a means of just making a profit, or selling us a product. If it were any other way then we would not have any “product Placements” (or Capitalist propaganda - as I would better describe it) within any film. There is really no need for me expand upon this point, as the expression “film tie-up” says it all.

On the other hand cinema has and continues to be used to sell us an unrealistic dream, or perverted set of ideologies. One has only to think of John Wayne fighting for “democracy” or Disney products in Muckdonals to realise just what really goes down.

However, it is not my intention to make something of a political criteria of the existing cinema industry. I am more interested in how cinema might be used by information workers and for social good. So here is my take on cinema and what I get by just Going to the Movies.

One of the best aspects of cinema is what it can achieve via location filming. I don’t just mean in terms of cinematic effect, but in terms of understanding and memory. For example: in terms of how one might better understand and appreciate a drama if one knows or has visited a location.

Be it L.A. in the film “Independence Day”, New York in “Something Wild”, Rome in Fellini’s “Roma” or just “Roman Holiday”, then I get more out of these works just
because I have visited these cities. I can also view them in terms of my holiday reminiscences.

While at a local level I find films which have been shot within my own homeland, North London and Arsenal football ground in “Fever Pitch”, or Kings Cross in the 1955 Ealing comedy “The Ladykillers” are fascinating in a very different kind of way.

Seeing movies shot in places which one knows and loves has more of an immediacy than if they were to be shot within something of a more distant and exotic location. In other words - If you want to get a message over, then you should locate it within some place one both knows and loves.

Perhaps that is why the movie “The Day after Tomorrow” which deals with the consequences of global warming had such an impact within the USA. The destruction of the New York Public library within the film must have effected everyone who has ever worked within a public library. As an aside - part of the movie “Ghost Busters” was filmed in the Pasadena Public library.

Yet it is not just location which gives a film impact, but social message too. Many films are referred to as being political, or maybe political in nature e.g. the Ken Loach work “Land and Freedom” or the Sergei Eisenstein work “The Battleship Potemkin”.

There are however many other film works which while not being described as political have a social message e.g “Once we were Warriors” which is set in New Zealand, or “Bound for Glory” which is about the life and political work of Woody Guthrie.

Hollywood films such as “The China Syndrome” and “Silkwood” carry very strong anti-nukiller-power messages. The “China Syndrome” makes a particularly strong impact, as it was released just after the ecological disaster at three Mile Island.

“Soylent Green” which came out in 1973, is yet another movie which deserves a mention within this context. Based upon the Harry Harrison novel “Make Room! Make Room!” it deals with the social and other consequences of an ecological disaster.

Another movie which is not thought about as political should also be mentioned too. The 1963 Orsen Welles version of the Frank Kafka novel “The Trial”, which has a very modern message in terms of the issue of imprisonment without trial, or trial without accusation.

I have never really understood just why some films are called war movies, while they contain a very anti-militarist message. I am not talking about the John Wayne movies, or such 1950s works as “Ice cold in Alex” or “Heaven Knows, Mr Allison”, but works which show the grim reality of war. I refer to such works as “Das Boot”, “Stalingrad”, or Stanley Kubrick’s “Full Metal Jacket”, in which the grim realities of war are shown.

The Steven Spielberg work “Saving Private Ryan” might be fanciful, but it does show the full horror of the Normandy beach landing. His “Schindler’s List” fully
illustrates the reality of life in Nazi occupied Europe. These are both very powerful films. Yet for a more blatantly obvious and amusing anti-militarist movie, then nothing can beat the SF movie “Starship Troopers”.

Of course the war or anti-militarist film should also be viewed within it own historical context. Peter Watkin’s “The War Game” can only be viewed within the context of the cold war, as can such movies as “Dr Strangelove” or “The Day the earth stood still” The same thing also applies to the 1984 produced version of the Arther.C.Clarke SF work “2010”, with its cold war background as storyline.

The same applies to many other works too. The 1960s movie “Morgan - A suitable case for treatment” (one of my favourite movies) can only really be appreciated if one views it as a commentary upon the class and cultural norms of its time.

I could go on and give many other such examples, but I think that I have made my point. No movie can or should ever be seen, except within its true social and historical context, and that is the point I really wish to emphasise. For the rest there is just escapism and entertainment. Now just what movie do I want to watch tonight?