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Text and Subtext in Commercial Movies: An Educational Perspective

With the proliferation of actual film study in school classrooms, and the extensive awareness of and interest in current Hollywood movies on the part of young people, it is very useful, to say the least, for teachers to understand the workings of commercial films, both individually and in the aggregate. Even when movies are not a part of actual curriculum, young people often use them as a point of reference for ideas and values in general. One might even say that all educators ought to have a basic awareness of movies in the same way that all educators ought to be literate. In most cases teachers have had no formal instruction in film study themselves, and are left to ingest and pass on assumptions about value and the nature of content in movies from the culture in general, and especially from the more "respectable" sources of cultural judgement. In so doing they are naturally a prey to the limitations and blind spots of a cultural establishment traditionally suspicious of movies, and still prone to assess Hollywood films in a cursory fashion, rarely looking beyond the surface of a phenomenon which is often assumed to be *only* surface.

I want here to emphasize an aspect of commercial movies which I believe is too frequently unrecognized in attempts to identify their social impact or moral implications. This aspect is the pervasive existence in many films of subtextual meanings running parallel or often directly counter to the most obvious levels of meaning. A failure to see these undercurrents leads naturally to mistakes about what is really going on in a given film, and seriously weakens any generalizations about the content and effects of popular cinema.

The notion of subtext in film is scarcely an original one, and indeed the notions of text and subtext employed here are commonly exercised in film studies, and are directly comparable to the ones already long in use in literary criticism and elsewhere. My remarks here are aimed at putting a familiar tool of film studies in the hands of educators in general. I would like first to offer some definitions and a brief historical perspective, and then to cast a glance at two contrasting paradigms of text/subtext in recent movies asa more precise illustration of its operation.

Text, in my usage, is the surface, literal level of a film: what it presents itself as. Text may even encompass some deliberately-fostered expectations about the film which are not strictly part of the film itself, such as its generic affiliations, the images attached to its stars, its perceived place within the hierarchies of budget and pretension, even its advertising. *Subtext,* on the other hand, is a level of hidden (or at least not so obvious) meaning, consisting of secret, unacknowledged signals to the audience which function to interpret or cast new light on the text. These signals may occur in the

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acting, in the visual or verbal emphasis given to things by the director, in unarticulated patterns in the scenario, or in a symbolic treatment of objects, places or people. Very often the relation between text and subtext is one of opposition: the subtext subverts the text.

The operation of certain kinds of subtext in older movies has been obvious to us for some time now. For instance, the presentation of blacks as foolish, childlike, incompetent and stupid, fit only for menial tasks or for dog-like devotion, is a regular feature of American films from the time of D.W. Griffith to the 1960s — and it is a feature which remains constant whether the films are liberal or conservative, and whether their genres are popular or exclusive. It is no part of the *text* of most of these films to present blacks in this fashion; but it is part of their actual attitude towards blacks, of their interpretation of what blacks are. In a word, it is part of their *subtext*. Similar patterns exist in the presentation of women. But here things are somewhat different, because women (unlike blacks) actually constituted a large percentage of the audience towards which the films were commercially directed. Also, women are seen differently in genres aimed primarily at men (adventure films, westerns, thrillers, etc.) than in genres aimed primarily at women (romances, domestic melodramas, bestseller adaptations, "women's pictures" in general). In the latter context one frequently finds heroines who observe the dominant social norms for women — accepting submission to men, the goals of marriage and family, general social powerlessness — but whose innate rebellion against these things, or awareness of the limitations of their prescribed role and the frustration it can cause, is conveyed in indirect ways. For example, the heroine may take self-sacrifice to such an extreme that her moral superiority becomes a weapon of some effectiveness in the world; or she may develop a fatal disease whose action represents her subconscious rejection of her ostensibly enviable domestic situation. Men's genres, on the other hand, will often present women as symbolically idealized (as in many westerns), or sexually menacing and evil (as in many tough thrillers), depending on how the individual work or the genre as a whole regards this Other. Again, as in the presentation of blacks, these cinematic embodiments of "what a woman is" or "what a woman ought to be" are not at all necessarily part of what the films are superficially about.

Indeed, subtexts need not at all be even conscious. Certainly consciousness makes no difference *per se* to the force or effectiveness of subtextual messages as far as the audience is concerned — although it may well have a bearing on an aesthetic evaluation of the work in question. When a mother punishes a child she may tell him she is doing it because she loves him (text), but actually be doing it out of anger (subtext); and whether or not the mother is conscious of the disparity between text and subtext is of no consequence to the fact of that disparity, nor to the degree of its impact upon the child. Nor, in fact, is it necessary for the *audience* to be fully conscious of the existence of a subtext for it to be effective: the audience may perceive duality or disparity subliminally, just as the child may, and be none the less affected for the lack of consciousness. Consequently we arrive at a situation in which a movie's complexity, both on the screen and in the intellectual and emotional response of the audience, may occur at a level which is only indirectly perceived by the filmmakers, by the audience, and also by critics and commentators.

The classic pattern of Hollywood films is a pattern of well-defined genres and strongly-enforced narrative conventions. Genre is partly a commercial habit devised to service popular tastes efficiently, for the public is genre-oriented and is constantly looking for facsimiles of what it has liked in the past, while genre-pigeonholes are welcomed by the industry both as a useful sales pitch and as a massive conceptual shortcut. Conventionalism in narrative has been emphasized by similar considertions (as well as by a series of storytelling traditions which date back to the Greeks). In Hollywood's case narrative conventions have been even further codified by the presence of a self-censorship scheme (beginning with the Production Code of 1930) which, in its efforts to allay discontent with movie immorality which might affect the box office, has exerted a strong controlling

hand over such wider matters as story shape and character type. The public was doubtless not unhappy with this development (if indeed it even noticed it), since the effect of most of the strictures was to create a pleasant picture of the world and an undisturbing experience for the paying customer. Yet a sanitized view of the world could never be wholly satisfying to audiences who wished to find in movies not simply escape or even reassurance but also some version of their own feelings and experiences. The text/subtext division so characteristic of Hollywood movies was a response, perhaps, to this contradiction. While maintaining a surface of order and satisfied expectation via genre and narrative conventions, movies could respond to the other (in some instances suppressed) needs of its audience by inflecting genre and narrative patterns in subtle, unexpected ways.

Or sometimes not so subtle. The first wave of gangster movies (a new genre which arrived more or less with the talkies around 1930) depicted energetic, ambitious, amoral criminals played actors like James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson. Although they observed the "rules" by dying in the end, they had a vitality, a wisecracking defiance, which made them true heroes in the eyes of audiences. Films like *The Public Enemy, Little Caesar, Scarface*, and many others were so popular, particularly with young people, that the guardians of public morality became seriously alarmed, and successfully brought pressure to bear on the Hollywood studios to stop depicting criminals as charismatic figures. The gangster cycle ceased almost as abruptly as it had started, to be replaced a few years later by a different animal: the movie in which the tough, wisecracking, heroic wielder of violence was a cop or an FBI agent. This new protagonist wore the same clothes, blasted away with the same .45 automatic, talked in the same hard, aggressive, nasal voice, and, indeed, was usually played by the same actor, as his criminal predecessor. He was in fact virtually indistinguishable from him except that he was now on the "right" side. Censorship bodies greeted this transformation with enthusiasm — and it has proven to be a durable tactic, as a glance at any of the most popular television "cop shows" of the past decade will demonstrate. Obviously, though, the dangerous and antisocial impulses embodied in the early gangster heroes and echoed in the breasts of their audiences had not been swept away; they had merely been put in sheep's clothing. They had been driven further into subtext, where they would be comparatively safe from persecution at the hands of those who found them objectionable. It hardly needs to be said that this does not represent any sort of real progress in educating public response except as a refinement of the art of hypocrisy.

On the whole, cultural commentators, and especially those grounded in the older and more respectable art forms, have been insensitive to the subtextual level in films. Well-educated viewers, indeed, tend to be characterized by the habit of assigning value in films by the degree of *textual* complexity. Hence the widespread, easy distinction between "art" films (adaptations of literary classics, refined period movies, the works of European filmmakers whose complexity is plainly visible) and "entertainment" films (largely the conventional Hollywood movie), where the former are automatically taken seriously and the latter automatically denigrated. When it comes to "entertainment" films ordinary moviegoers (among whom young people figure significantly) are sometimes actually more sophisticated than intellectual ones. Instinctively understanding and accepting the operation of genre and convention, they are more sensitive to small inflections in these areas. And being, perhaps, more unconscious in general in their responses, they are less hampered by preconceptions and received ideas, and more in tune with underlying mood. Thus the notion that it is necessary to keep strict watch over movie content, and the corollary notion that it is desirable to educate movie audiences to understand the true value of what they see, must take into account the actual abilities of movie audiences, and the traditional myopia of "art"-oriented commentators in forming conclusions about popular "entertainment".

Perhaps the weight of these general remarks will be greater if we take a closer look at the operation of text and subtext in current movies. It is particularly crucial to see how subtext actually functions in

films which are on exhibition right now — for what is easy to identify in an abstract idea or as a set of historical facts is much more difficult to spot in concrete instances taken from our own culture, where we are naturally more prone to conditioned responses and preconceptions. And it is with up-to-the-minute films that teachers will of course be most directly concerned. With this in mind, I would like to turn to two recent Hollywood movies, *Absence of Malice* and *The Seduction*, which seem to me to show the workings of text/subtext in an especially paradigmatic way.

Both movies were glossy studio-made films with star performers, but *Absence of Malice* was obviusly aimed at, and attracted, "up-market" audiences, while *The Seduction* was just as plainly directed towards a more genre-oriented and sensation-seeking public. *Absence of Malice* delivered certain clear messages as to its seriousness of purpose and its social and moral concerns even to people who had not yet seen the film; for one thing its two principal stars (Paul Newman and Sally Field) and its director (Sidney Pollack) are well known for their liberal views and social consciousness, and for another the posters and print ads for the movie emphasized its focus on specific social issues, and boldly asked "In America can a man be guilty until proven innocent?" The expectation created was of a militant liberal confrontation of difficult issues, a balanced and rational but unflinching analysis. On one level the film sustains this expectation, particularly in its sensitivity, its refined workmanship, and its attention to detail in the areas of dialogue, staging and acting. However, the story, about a mobster's son (Newman) whose life is terribly disrupted when a newspaper reporter (Field) reveals that he is under secret investigation for murder and then refuses to name her source, eventually takes the audience in a very different direction from the one anticipated. Under a veil of liberal concern, and in place of a covert promise of redneck-bashing, *Absence of Malice* is profoundly conservative, even reactionary, film. Its bright-as-a-button, plucky, independent career woman turns out to be absolutely wrong about everything, and her unthinking smugness results not only in damage to the Newman character, but also in the suicide of a totally innocent bystander. Its hero meanwhile is a strong, laconic, small businessman whose blue-collar style and unassuming manner disguise a very sharp mind and a tenacious determination, not to mention a distinctly traditional attitude towards sexual relations. In the end, the Newman character not only outwits newspapers, lawyers, and federal officials, but he also asserts the strong patriarchal male's superiority over the foolish, presuming, and finally incompetent liberated woman. Socially speaking, the villains of the piece are the liberal newspapers and the federal government, while the values which are endorsed are those of untrammeled individualism, capitalist self-reliance, minding one's own business, and massive mistrust of government and public institutions. The *text* of *Absence of Malice*, then, is liberal and rational; its *subtext* is vengefully conservative. This circumstance went virtually unnoticed when the film was first released, and *Absence of Malice* pleased both the critics and its chosen audience of more selective filmgoers. Certainly the "higher" tone of this film, as of its audience, in comparison with the debased commercial norm (as it is perceived), is no guarantee that the audience will be aware of the subtextual level.

The other side of the coin is illustrated by the case of *The Seduction*. Its blonde-bombshell star, Morgan Fairchild, comes from the culturally-suspect world of television (the soap opera *Flamingo Road*), and its packaging promises a conventional genre-entertainment generously spiced with sex and violence. Its dramatic formula, instantly recognizable, is scarcely culturally respectable either: beautiful woman is sexually menaced by psychotic male. The conventional, and sensational, aspects of the movie are beyond dispute; but like a number of other films of its type, it also has a rich and complex subtext which subverts the vulgarities of the text and becomes the locus of meaning. The sub-genre as a whole has symbolic dimension in which the archetypes of woman-as-sex-object and man-as-sexual-predator are thoroughly exercised, and in *The Seduction* its force is augmented by

the explicit identification of woman-as-image (the heroine is a television newscaster) and of man-as-voyeur (the predator is a photographer who collects images of the heroine and spies on her through a telephoto camera lens). As is often the case in subtextually-complex genre-films, the "monster" is seen as himself a form of victim. Various secondary characters place the responsibility for his sickness on an image-inundated society which encourages vicarious emotion and propagates actual isolation. The predator is in love with the heroine, and simply assumes that she must reciprocate his feelings because she has no real existence for him independent of his fantasies. In this respect the film is a clear symbolic commentary on the dangers of a too-great involvement with images and fantasy (thus in a sense is a warning against *itself*), and also of publishing oneself as an image and encouraging fantasy in others. Furthermore the movie subtextually examines the confrontation of the dominating male and the liberated female. But whereas in *Absence of Malice* the victor is unequivocally the traditional male, with the liberated woman left in abject apology, in *The Seduction* the anticipated humiliation of the heroine is dramatically reversed. Audiences looking forward to the spectacle of a beautiful woman rendered powerless and fearful are rudely disappointed. *The Seduction* is a classic example of the Hollywood "entertainment" movie which observes the conventions of genre and story type while inflecting those conventions symbolically to produce subtextual meaning.

The general point I wish to emphasize here is that a superficial consideration of these two films, and particularly one which does not take account of subtext, will produce a very distorted assessment of how they actually affect audiences. *Absence of Malice* will be perceived as a worthy attempt to inform viewers of anomalies in a social system where the liberal press and the government sometimes act irresponsibly, while *The Seduction* will be casually dismissed as cheap sensationalism. But in fact audiences of *Absence of Malice* have been influenced subliminally to endorse a set of patriarchal, politically conservative values; whereas *The Seduction* subtextually delivers exactly those things — information about the workings of society, the effects of those workings on the individual, and a liberal questioning of unconscious assumptions — which *Absence of Malice* promises in its text.

I believe these two cases to be paradigmatic of a general climate of misunderstanding of commercial movies. Educators (though not students) too frequently accept the blanket judgements of a cultural establishment unwilling to dig deeply into movies. Especially within the more sensational genres, whose public is very largely young people, the subtext bears the primary message. And since subtext is usually not recognized or analysed as an important source of significance, there is widespread misunderstanding about what is really going on when, for example, a teenager visits a horror movie. Whole areas of cinema are condemned as valueless or pernicious on *textual* grounds, just as others are endorsed on that basis, and there is puzzlement or depression when young viewers continue to act according to their own tastes — which are in tune with subtextual meanings, and more understanding of the actual operation of genre and convention. Amongst other things this means that on those occasions when educators do succeed in "educating" their students, they have often succeeded only in promulgating establishment value judgements based on unwarranted assumptions, and have thus actively interfered with their students' true understanding of movies.

I am far from suggesting that the instinctive comprehension of subtextual meanings by ordinary moviegoers is preferable to a conscious and rational analysis. Viewers may know what a film is doing, but not *know* that they know, and this is surely not a good thing. Rather, what is needed is for those who talk about movies and try to assess their impact (teachers included) to acquire an awareness of this extra dimension. In a word, educators must educate themselves in this area if they hope to communicate effectively in the schools when the subject of movies arises.