**HOW TO WRITE A SOCIOLOGICAL MOVIE REVIEW**

**Overview: Movies as Sociological Data**

Sociologists collect data by conducting surveys, observational studies, and experiments. They also scavenge existing data, hunting for evidence of social patterns in newspapers, diaries, and historical archives.

Why not hunt for sociological data in movies? Movies are as much a human product as, say, newspapers are. Because they are made by and about people in particular social and historical contexts, movies can tell us a lot about typical patterns of inequality, ways of raising children, form of deviance, and just about all other aspects of social life. In fact, because movies are easily accessible, relatively inexpensive, and often a lot of fun, they are in many ways an ideal sociological data resource for study.

Movies, especially American movies, are arguably the most popular and influential part of popular culture, not just in the United States but almost everywhere. Accordingly, reviews could entertainingly show students that fresh sociological insights can be gleaned even from one of the most taken-for-granted elements of their everyday world.

Now it is your turn to try your hand at writing your own movie review from a sociological perspective. The following template outlines the steps you should take in selecting a movie to review, what to watch for and think about from a sociological angle while watching the movie, and finally, how to write your review. Good luck – and see you at the movies!

**How to Watch Movies from a Sociological Perspective**

One may assess a movie from sociological, literary, historical, dramatic, technical, philosophical, artistic or other points of view. In each case, the reviewer applies different evaluative criteria drawn from different disciplinary perspectives.

The sociological perspective suggests at least five criteria for evaluating movies, *any one or more of which may be highlighted in a review*:

1. **How does the movie reflect its social context?**
   What can we learn about social conditions in a particular time and place from the movie? How and why are the social conditions depicted in the movie different from social conditions in other times and places? For example, James Bond movies from the 1960s and 1970s have much to say about the Cold War, the rise of the United States and the
USSR as superpowers, the decline of the UK in world affairs, and men’s attitudes towards women.

2. **How does the movie distort social reality?**
   Although movies are mirrors to society, they are far from perfect reflections. Often they systematically distort social realities. Movies can therefore teach us a lot about the prejudices, ideologies, and misconceptions of particular times and places, both by directly showing them (as in the first point, above) and by neglecting to address them as issues at all.

3. **To what degree does the movie shed light on common or universal social and human problems?**
   Movies like those in the *Terminator* and *Matrix* series raise an issue that was first popularized when Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution and that has since become widespread if not universal: human inventions sometimes threaten their creators. Why is this anxiety so widespread? How do other movies tap into common anxieties or other social and human problems? Sociology’s ability to find the universal in the particular is one of its chief strengths. One way of writing an interesting sociological movie review is by identifying a universal theme in the context of a particular story. Doing so will help the viewer see the movie in a new way.

4. **To what degree does the movie provide evidence for or against sociological theory and research?**
   The 2004 movie, *Kinsey*, starring Liam Neeson, tells the story of the revolutionary American student of sexual behavior, Alfred Kinsey. Some of Kinsey’s methods were primitive by modern standards. Consequently, although some of his findings have been substantiated by subsequent research, some are suspect. As the case of *Kinsey* suggests, a sociological movie review may provide an opportunity to highlight advances in sociological theorizing and research. As you think about this point, consider some of the sociological concepts and theories discussed early on in the course.

5. **To what degree does the movie connect biography, social structure, and history?**
   The Sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that it is the role of Sociology as a discipline to be able to see people within their social and historical context. The 1962 classic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, starring Peter O’Toole, tells the story of how British Colonel T. E. Lawrence helped to mobilize the Arab national movement during and after World War I. It brilliantly interweaves several stories: Lawrence’s heroism, delusions, successes and failures; how the British and Arab societies he straddled influenced him; and the way he became an agent and victim of historical forces more powerful than any one man. C. Wright Mills famously argued that
sociology at its best connects biography, social structure, and history. Selecting a movie that allows you to showcase sociology at its best is a good starting point for writing a sociological movie review.

In short, when you select a movie to review, make sure that it affords you the opportunity to illustrate the value of the sociological perspective. Use one or more of the five criteria listed above to help you choose a movie and a theme for your review.

More than that, you should try to see beyond the obvious. Sociologists Randall Collins and Anthony Giddens argue that sociology is valuable only when its findings are non-obvious or surprising. Accordingly, when you write a movie review, you should use your sociological imagination to spot issues and themes that will allow the reader to see the world in a new way – as a place where social influences that may be hidden to people as they go about their everyday lives deeply influence the way they live. All else the same, the difference between a good and an excellent review may be that an excellent review contains more sociological surprises.

Writing Your Review

1. Format
   Your review should have a title page specifying the title of the movie you are reviewing, your name, the names of your instructor and class, your student ID number, and the date you are submitting the review. The title page should be followed by the body of the review, which should be about 4 - 5 double-spaced pages using 12-point Times New Roman or Calibri font with 1-inch margins on all sides. If you cite any sources, the full citations should appear in a separate References section at the end. Use the standard APA citation style.

2. Story, Dialogue, Action!
   Movies tell stories, and so should your review. Dialogue and action bring stories to life, and you can increase your readers' interest by quoting revealing snippets of dialogue and describing the action that takes place during important scenes. These narrative elements are especially effective when used in the introductory paragraphs because they help to engage the reader. Remember, though, that your job is not to tell the whole story of the movie but to focus on aspects of sociological relevance. Don't let the movie's narrative control you; use the movie to tell your sociological story.

3. Argument
   The main body of your review – all but the introductory and concluding paragraphs – should develop your sociological argument. This is where you tell the reader about the sociological significance of the movie, applying one or more of the five criteria listed above. Roughly two-thirds of the review should be devoted to this purpose. Look to terms and
theories discussed in the first few weeks of class to help you with this, as well as information from the unit that corresponds to the film you’ve chosen.

4. **Summary**
A summary paragraph should concisely state your main conclusion and leave the reader with something to think about after he or she finishes reading the review. You may provoke the reader by asking a telling question, identifying an intriguing paradox or mentioning an unresolved issue.

5. **Keep it Real**
Your review should use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Use sociological terms, and be sure to define them along the way (assume that I don’t know what they mean.) Write as if you are writing for someone completely unfamiliar with sociology and the sociological perspective.

**Submitting your Review**

The due date for your film review depends on the topic that you choose. Please see individual due dates listed in the course schedule, located at the end of your syllabus. Papers must be submitted by class time on the date they are due. Papers submitted after class ends will be deducted 5% (1/2 letter grade) if submitted on the same day, and 1 full letter grade (10%) for each day late after that. I will not accept papers more than 2 days past the due date.

Your review should be submitted through our D2L course page: under “content,” click “Papers and Presentations” and you will notice a dropbox where you should submit your paper. If you aren’t sure how to do this, please review the dropbox tutorial in D2L (located under “Resources,” then “student tutorials.”)