Cinematic Sociology

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How does society remain functional? Why do some groups seem to have power, while others do not? Why and how do people assign labels to one another? Sociologists spend their careers trying to answer these and other important questions. Although countless theories about human behavior have been developed, three theories have prevailed: Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interaction. These theories can be applied to social behavior both in the real world and the fictitious worlds in popular movies.

To explain functionalism, different sociologist have compared society to organisms or machines with separate parts that must all function properly in order for the whole entity to persist (Henslin, 2015). When one part fails to function, often the whole machine does not work properly, or begins to become dysfunctional. One cinematic illustration of Functionalism is *Monsters Inc.* Although most of the movie’s main characters are not human, this film mirrors the ways in which humans strive to make society functional.

Sulley and Mike, as well as many other monsters, work at Monsters Inc., a company responsible for providing the town of Monstropolis with power generated from the screams of human children. This company is a functional bureaucracy, as it is an institution with separate levels, a division of labor, written rules and communication, and impersonality and replicability of its employees (Henslin, 2015). In this company, Mr. Waternoose is the monster with the highest position, equivalent to a CEO. There are also other positions, all with their own specific obligations, such as receptionists, scare instructors, those in charge of filing paperwork, those who run the company daycare center, the “Scarers,” (like Sulley and Randall, who functions as the villain) and scare assistants, like Mike. Like any bureaucracy, all the parts function in a systematic way, and certain procedures and protocols must be adhered to. By far the most important rules at Monsters Inc. are related to safety. The monsters in this society believe that human children are a valuable resource because their screams generate electricity. Although
valuable, the children are also believed to be harmful. As Watenoose states, “There is nothing more toxic or deadly than a human child” (Rivera & Docter). Because the structure of the company has placed so much emphasis upon the rule to not touch children or their possessions, any monster who deviates from this rule will be punished. For example, one repeating joke involves a monster who continually comes into contact with children’s objects. Each time, alarms are sounded and the CDA (Child Detection Agency) arrives in protective clothing and gas masks to give the offending monster a chemical shower and shave his fur.

To increase productivity, Monsters Inc. encourages competition for recognition and positive media exposure. Sulley is usually the “Top Scarer,” but Randall wants this position, instead. Deviating from the acceptable, Randall cheats by keeping doors, or portals to children’s bedrooms, available for entry past closing time, when these doors are supposed to be safely inaccessible. Sulley sees one of these doors one evening and decides to investigate. A little girl whom he later refers to as Boo escapes, and her door is made inaccessible before Sulley can return her to the human world. Sulley stuffs her into a bag and takes her with him to a restaurant to seek advice from Mike. Boo, who does not belong in this world, escapes and scares everyone, an event that sends Monstropolis into a panic, or a dysfunctional state.

At Monsters Inc., Sulley and Mike try to return Boo without arousing any suspicion, but Mike is captured by Randall, who mistakes him for Boo. Mike is strapped into a torturous machine that extracts screams. Watenoose, much to Sulley and Mike’s disgust, knows about this machine, and plans to implement it in the future to increase efficiency and productivity. Since they broke the most important rule of the company and now know some of its secrets, Mike and Sulley are given the ultimate punishment for deviant monsters: banishment. This illustrates the importance of the rule that children should be avoided at all costs. This, as a taboo in the monster world, has serious consequences. Those who disobey this rule are deemed harmful, deviant,
dysfunctional, and not fit to live within the society anymore. Since deviant monsters do not act in accordance with the other parts of the “machine,” they are evicted from the company, as well as the monster world, and sent to the Himalayas. This also illustrates the concept that workers can be replaced within a bureaucracy. This banishment suggests that Sulley and Mike are not valued within the company for personal reasons, but for their positions and contributions to the company’s productivity.

Although deviance is most often considered dysfunctional, according to Henslin (2015), deviance can actually contribute to a functioning society. In *Monsters Inc.*, deviance has the potential to positively change the structure of a society. During Boo’s time with Sulley and Mike, the monsters discover that a child’s laughter actually generates more power than screams. This, they realize, solves the town’s energy shortage, and a new era begins for the Monsters Inc. company, now run by Roz, the paperwork monster who has been posing undercover as a member of the Child Detection Agency, who has replaced the corrupt Waternoose. The power of laughter ultimately changes the structure of the company, evidenced by a shift of roles for the employees. Previously, the bigger, scarier monsters held more prestige, and were matched up with less-scary assistants. With shifting goals come shifting roles, as the funny-looking sidekicks generate more laughter, and have thus become higher in prestige than their scarier assistants. Had Randall not cheated and deviated from the accepted ethical structure and order of the company, Boo would not have escaped, and Mike and Sulley never would have made the discoveries about the power of laughter, nor about the corrupt and harmful plans that Waternoose had for the company. Because all of this is revealed, however, the company can now be more functional and productive than it ever was in the past.

In Functionalism, the purpose of competition is to ensure that each part of the “machine” functions at maximum capacity, thus improving the productivity of the whole system. For
Conflict Theory, however, it is the defining driving force, as different groups compete for power, prestige, and property. Conflict Theory imagines society as an arena in which various groups compete for resources, power, property, and prestige, as well as control (Henslin, 2015). Such groups are at odds with one another, and often do all in their power to keep other groups from winning. On a large scale, this often leads some groups to become enemies with other groups, as illustrated in the movie *Hairspray*. This film takes place in Baltimore during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. The protagonist, Tracy, is an overweight girl with a love and talent for dancing. Her dream is to be on a local dance program called *The Corny Collins Show*. The cast of this show are the ironically named, “Nicest Kids in Town,” (Meron, Zadan, & Shankman) who are all Caucasian, well-dressed, and obviously upper-middle class. To balance out their show, once a month, they have “Negro Day,” on which the show is dedicated to African-American dancing and singing acts. Corny believes that the show should be progressive and become racially integrated, which seems to be a pattern in the nation at this time. Velma, the station manager, disagrees completely, and instead insists that Negro Day should be eliminated completely, claiming that children are impressionable and depend on adults to “steer them in the white direction” (Meron, Zadan, & Shankman). She is prejudiced against other races, as well as people she deems inferior, such as Tracy, who, in spite of this prejudice, is selected to dance on the show, and is entered into a pageant in which the girls on the show compete for the title of Miss Teenage Hairspray.

This new competition angers Velma, whose daughter Amber has won the pageant for years. This competition becomes symbolic of the struggle between those pushing for social change and those staunchly opposed to it. Tracy, who becomes Amber’s rival for popularity, both on the show and with Amber’s boyfriend, is overweight, and her parents are obviously in a lower income bracket than the blonde and perfectly-dressed Amber’s mother. Not only does
Tracy threaten Amber’s popularity and dancing ability, she also is very pro-integration and has a group of African-American friends. She is deemed a corrosive influence of Baltimore’s youth by white adults who want African-Americans to maintain their “place” as an oppressed minority.

The group in power, in this case, those who are white, use their power to keep the minority groups oppressed. In this movie, for example, one notices that the high school students in detention are overwhelmingly African-American. Since it is highly unlikely that the white high school students misbehave less often, it is more likely that the African-American students are punished more often and with fewer warnings. Those who go against the other whites and try to include or advance the position of African-Americans are punished, as well. For example, Tracy decides to go on a protest march to advocate television integration. Link, the show’s heartthrob who has lately become attracted to Tracy, elects not to march because it might lead Velma and the other television authorities to remove him from the show. The group in power often uses this power to skew events unfavorably against those in the minority. For example, Tracy gently taps a police officer with a picket sign, and the media makes it sound as though she had brutally assaulted him with a weapon. Had she not been marching for integration, this probably would not have been exaggerated. Because she is seen as a bad influence, Tracy is not allowed to compete in the pageant. However, she refuses to accept this, as she thinks that the possibility of social change is worth any punishment she might receive.

With the help of her family and friends, Tracy makes a grand entrance and performs a grandiose dance number, along with Little Inez, one of her African-American friends. Much to the chagrin of Velma, a last-minute rush of voters calls into the station, causing Little Inez to be voted Miss Teenage Hairspray. In anger, Velma cries out that this outcome is impossible, especially since she had cheated in order to give her daughter, Amber, more votes. Unbeknownst to her, the camera had been pointed at her at this particular moment, making the whole television
audience aware of the corrupt and unethical methods that she would use to ensure that herself, her daughter, and her group, could maintain power. She is then fired from her position as station manager. Furthermore, a victory is won, as Inez, as Miss Hairspray, has also won the position of Head Dancer, thus opening the door for the show to be completely integrated. This victory and integration is symbolic of the integration of American society which was beginning during this time, confirming Tracy’s comment that “People who are different: their time is coming” (Meron, Zadan, & Shankman).

In Conflict Theory, different groups compete. It is Symbolic Interaction, however, that creates the labels for these groups and decides who belongs in them, and how these members should act. Symbolic Interaction differs from the other two theories because it applies to the interactions of individuals rather than society as a whole. Central to this theory is the idea of dramaturgy (Henslin, 2015). Dramaturgy imagines society as a set of theatrical stages upon which people act out various roles. To present certain images, people use symbols to communicate, such as “costumes,” “props,” and linguistic characteristics. Based upon one’s self-presentation, labels are assigned. These labels are symbols, as well as categories, each of which includes its own values and expected behaviors.

The theory of Symbolic Interaction is central to the plot of My Fair Lady. Professor Henry Higgins is a Phonetics teacher and scholar, but actually takes on the role of a sociologist. His sociological experiment begins when he comes across Eliza Doolittle, a lower-class girl who sells flowers for a living. He exclaims that she is, “A prisoner of the gutter, condemned by every syllable she utters” (Warner & Cukor). She is poor because of her accent, which Higgins refers to as a “verbal class distinction,” and not because of her “wretched clothes and dirty face” (Warner & Cukor). Higgins claims that speech, and more specifically, accent, is a status symbol. Good grammar and a proper accent indicate schooling, and those who are educated have enough
money to afford either tuition or time spent away from wage-earning. The lower class, however, cannot afford to leave their jobs long enough to earn an education. To prove his theory, Higgins resolves to teach the ill-spoken and rambunctious Eliza, change her accent, and make the attendees at a ball for the Queen of Transylvania believe that she is a duchess. He is actually engaging in a Symbolic Interaction experiment. He seeks to assign a new “role” to someone labeled as lower-class. If she behaves, dresses, and speaks like a duchess, her past will be irrelevant.

Higgins’ theory that one’s accent is the only symbol separating one group from another proves to be untrue, illustrated by the other obvious status symbols in the movie. The movie begins with shots of rich people in bright, shining clothing in cars, juxtaposed with the flower market, in which the people are wearing dark, unstylish clothing, and must dodge puddles and mud. It is obvious that Higgins himself is financially secure, as he lives in a luxurious home, wears clean and well-tailored clothing, teaches phonetics with the help of complex electronic equipment that must have been expensive, and has a large staff of live-in maids and housekeepers who wear uniforms which function as symbols denoting their status.

After several months of work on Eliza’s accent, Higgins prepares a dramaturgical dress rehearsal to see how she is progressing. For this event, Eliza will accompany Higgins to a horse race with his mother and her upper-class friends. Eliza is given the proper black-and-white clothing and large hat that is similar in style to the attire of the other ladies at the race. This is her costume. Higgins also gives her lines to say for this “performance.” She is only supposed to make comments about the weather and everyone’s health, subjects deemed proper by London’s stoic upper class. Eliza, however, decides to improvise on her role with comedic effects. In her new upper-class accent, but with Cockney grammar, she tells a tale of a suspected murder which shocks, amuses, and charms those around her. Because of her accent and dress, however, the
others do not seem to realize that she is actually a poor flower girl. They just think that she is a very oddly-behaved rich person. Outraged at Eliza’s behavior, Higgins realizes that he must also teach her upper-class manners in order to present her as a duchess. On the night of the ball, she is completely transformed into the role that she must play, and is dressed in an evening gown and diamonds. She is also much more subdued and quiet. In this time, she has also learned to dance so well that a prince asks her to dance. Her grammar and accent have become so polished that a language expert present at the ball believes that she is a Hungarian princess who has taken lessons from the best English teachers. Higgins’ project is a success.

Just as behavior can create labels, the reverse can happen, as well. According to Henslin (2015), if a label is placed upon a person, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the person begins to internalize a status or label and attribute it to herself. This phenomenon is present in the movie, as well. As Eliza states, “The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated” (Warner & Cukor). Throughout the movie, Eliza rebels against the lessons that Higgins teaches her. This frustrates him, and he usually claims that her negative behavior and slowness is due to the fact that she is a common, dirty, flower girl. To Higgins, Eliza claims, she has always been, and will always be, a flower girl. Colonel Pickering, who has been assisting Higgins, however, has always treated Eliza like a lady. Because of this treatment, she has begun to believe that she could be a respectable lady, and this idea helps her to learn her lessons with less frustration. While Eliza learns behavior and phonetics, Higgins, it seems, learns a lesson in sociology.

Movies are not merely entertaining. They are mirrors which reflect society. In these films, society is a machine that functions when all of its parts work together. It is a competition in which groups do all that they can to maintain favorable conditions. It is a series of stages on which symbols are used to communicate various roles. Society is our reality.
References


