Sociology in Movies: Three Theories

Michael McLaughlin

Bakersfield College
Introduction

Sociology, and the theories associated with the study of societies, are prominent in movies. Three major sociological theories that are predominantly displayed are structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. In order to appropriately discuss how these theories are portrayed in film, it is important to first understand and have a working definition of each theory.

In structural functionalism societies are viewed as organisms whose parts are independent. This means that each aspect of society, or each individual within a society, operate as individuals with individual goals, but only in the respect that those individual goals lead to the benefit of society as a whole organism. In this theory the continuance of social life is dependent on consensus and cooperation amongst the different parts of society. Conflict is viewed as socially destructive, and change is viewed negatively as a disruption to the normal, correct order of life. This means that under this theory if the parts of the whole come into conflict and no longer work together to fulfill the goals of society it could lead to the eventual destruction of the society. This theory examines social patterns, their effects on society, and how individuals fit into a social pattern to form a whole known as a society (Henslin, 2011).

In conflict theory societies are viewed as competitions. A societies individual aspects are considered to always be opposed to, and in competition with, one another; with the winner achieving and earning more than the loser. At best under this theory the opposing aspects of society agree on the rules of the competition, although this is not always the case. Change is viewed not only as a positive aspect, it is viewed as an inevitable and desirable outcome of the competition inherent in social life. This theory examines social arrangements within a society and attempts to identify the competing interests within a society, as well as identifying who
benefits from certain social arrangements and how they maintain the ability to benefit over time (Henslin, 2011).

In symbolic interactionism societies are viewed as stages where the individual aspects of society are continuously acting out their individual roles that as a whole create an overall social drama. Social life is dependent on how the individuals interpret the roles they fulfill, as well as what audience they are fulfilling that role for at any given time. Change is not viewed as either necessarily positive or negative, but it is identified as something that will inevitably happen within societies. This change occurs when individuals improvise on the basic script that is assigned to the role they fulfill. This theory examines the various roles and attempts to understand how individuals interpret them (Henslin, 2011).

Structural Functionalism

A movie that exemplifies this sociological theory is *Hot Fuzz*. This movie follows two English constables who are attempting to solve a string of mysterious deaths in a quiet countryside village. When the constables arrive in the village they are immediately confronted with a plethora of minor law violations that the village as a whole has chosen to overlook. These violations include drinking under age, speeding, illegal firearm possession, and shoplifting. As they, seemingly against the wishes of the village, investigate these occurrences the individuals involved with perpetrating the violations are discovered dead due to suspicious accidents. These accidental deaths continue to pile up until it is revealed that they are in fact murders. Further it is revealed that these murders are being carried out by members of the neighborhood watch in order to maintain a certain image. The overall goal of the village is shown to be winning the title of “Village of the Year,” again and again. To achieve this goal they remove the individuals within society that instigate change by no longer conforming to the stated goals of the village.
At the end of the movie the neighborhood watch is exposed as murderers and the group is arrested. This instigates change within the village and drastically alters life within the village at the end of the film (Wright).

In *Hot Fuzz* the village prominently displayed has set itself aside as its own separate society. They have chosen, as a village, to have an overall goal of constantly being viewed as the best village in the country. In order to maintain this goal they expect each individual to act in a fashion that is in accordance with this desired goal. This is apparent during a penultimate scene where the neighborhood watch is shown having a meeting discussing who they will murder to maintain the status quo. They claim to be doing it for the ‘greater good.’ This is almost an exact definition of structural functionalism. They abhor change and want to remove the ‘diseased’ aspects within their society that are counterproductive to their stated goals.

Interestingly within the society created by this village the ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’ posited by Robert Michels is highly apparent (Henslin, 2011). The neighborhood watch has set themselves up as the inner circle that serves as the ruling elite. This ruling elite, the watch, holds dominance over the village. They determine which values are to be followed, who is to be punished, what the ultimate goals of their society are to be, and they perpetuate their dominance by creating a system where they cannot be replaced.

This movie illustrates a society with a social pattern where each individual is expected to work together in cooperation to create a society that fits the model of an ‘ideal’ village. Each individual is expected to give up some of their rights and freedoms, to make choices always being conscious of how their decisions will impact the community as a whole, and to accept any punishments, up to and including death, as determined by the ruling elite, in order to maintain the standards of their society.
Conflict Theory

A movie that is rife with examples of conflict theory is *Aladdin*. This animated film follows the story of a common street urchin who befriends, and falls in love with, a princess. The princess in her own turn falls in love with the street urchin. Despite numerous trials and pitfalls in their courtship, including magic, betrayal, social customs, social status, and near death experiences they are eventually able to wed (Musker).

There are numerous examples within the movie of conflict theory. The predominant example being the obvious social class distinction between Aladdin and Jasmine. They come from completely different castes within their society. Jasmine, being the daughter of the Sultan, is a distinct ‘Have’, while Aladdin, a common street boy who steals to survive, is a distinct ‘Have-not.’ Within these clearly defined roles however, each individual, Jasmine and Aladdin in this case, have distinct wants and desires that are in many ways opposed to the paths laid before them according to their social status.

Jasmine, despite having her every wish and earthly need catered to by her father’s servants, desires nothing more than the freedom to choose her own way in life. She feels smothered by the demands placed on her due to her status as a princess in her society. As a consequence of her desire for freedom, she secretly absconds to the common areas of the city where she pretends to be a common city dweller in an attempt to experience the freedom of movement and choice she feels she lacks.

Aladdin, for his part, desires upward movement in society to experience a different type of freedom. He desires freedom from the struggle of survival. This is intensified by his encounter with the princess in the marketplace, where he gains the additional desire to move upwards in society to a place where he is capable of courting the princess. Fortunately for
Aladdin, this opportunity is provided for him in the guise of a magical genie. This genie allows him to transcend his original status, or break the rules of the ‘game’, and become worthy of courting the princess.

Despite numerous obstacles along the way, this conflict between the impositions of their social status and their desires lead to an inevitable conflict. In the movie, this conflict is solved by the Sultan when he decides to change the rules of the game that until that point had worked to serve the ruling class of the ‘Haves.’ Due to the conflict between his daughter’s wishes and the heretofore accepted rules of conduct, the Sultan elected to alter the rules and allow a momentous change to occur, and a commoner was allowed to marry royalty. This change was ultimately driven by the conflict between the social classes.

Symbolic Interactionism

*Blazing Saddles* is a movie which exemplifies the concept of symbolic interactionism where life is a stage upon which individual actors carry out a social drama. In *Blazing Saddles* a corrupt governor and attorney general are attempting to route a railroad through an existing town, but are opposed by the black sheriff of the same town, who they appointed. The black sheriff’s goals are to save the town, win the acceptance of the town, and exact revenge on the governor and attorney general who mistreated him because of his race. By the end of the film, the sheriff, Bart, is able to achieve all three of these goals (Brooks).

Nowhere is the concept of symbolic interactionism more prevalent in this film than in the very premise of the film. The character Bart begins as a railroad worker, but ill content with his station and his position, he improvises on the commonly accepted role of railroad worker and rises up against his bosses. This lands him in jail, and would normally have had him executed except for the scheming nature of the governor and attorney general. Instead of being executed
he is sent to be the sheriff of a town that the two intend to destroy in the hope of building a railroad on the land. Again, Bart defies normal expectations by brushing aside the blatant racism displayed by the town’s inhabitants, and despite overwhelming odds manages to win a minimum of respect from some of the town populace by fulfilling his duties as town sheriff. In one instance Bart has decided to improvise on the script commonly assigned to his station, and in another has decided to adhere to the script. All dependent upon the audience to which he is portraying his role.

A scene within the film that is also rampant with symbolic interactionism is the scene where Hedley Lamarr is attempting to recruit villains for the destruction of Rock Ridge. The main concept behind this scene is that every form of villain, roughneck, and all around bad person has shown up to be paid to participate in the raping of Rock Ridge. The group of individuals is full of symbols intended to indicate that they are ‘bad.’ This includes motorcycle handlebars, masks, and Klu Klux Klan outfits. These are all immediately identifiable through two aspects. First, their dress and accoutrements. Second, the fact that they are present at a meeting of ‘bad’ people. The stage is set for evil, the symbols associated with particular groups and counter cultures associated with bad behavior are present, and the sociological connection is made between the characters present and the roles they are fulfilling.

A final example of symbolic interactionism in the film is summarized in a single line by an ancillary character. Mongo, a brutish albeit soft spoken henchman of the evil attorney general, states simply, “in game of life, Mongo merely pawn,” (Brooks). This illustrates a deeper sociological concept that Mongo feels that he is incapable of breaking out of the script that his role in life has written for him. He must fulfill the role of brute, of savage, of
indiscriminate destroyer because he knows nothing else. To society, his audience, he is nothing more than that, and so he feels that he can be nothing more than that.

Mongo’s adherence to the sociological script written for him is a stark contrast to the improvisation on the part of Bart. Together however they serve to illustrate the concept of symbolic interactionism, and how the improvisation of individuals can drive social change.

Conclusion

Film is a great distillation of sociological concepts. It can serve to illustrate not only the basic ideas of particular concepts, but the manner in which they may drive social change. Further, film can illustrate the inherent flaws in adherence to any one particular social concept. The sociological theories illustrated by these films, and the manner in which these films illustrate them, show the importance and the dangers both of change and of stagnation.
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