Sociology at the Movies

Documentaries and feature films are ways of looking at the social constructions that pattern our lives and provide us with glimpses into the forces that shape our social world. Films tell stories -- stories of identity, interaction, inequality, and institutions.

*American Hollow* (1999). Directed by Rory Kennedy. This film examines the life of a close-knit Appalachian family over the course of a year. The family has changed little over the last fifty years, and wrestles with the issues of abuse, alcoholism, marriage/divorce, rural poverty, and gender roles.

*Babies* (2010). Directed by Thomas Balmès. *Babies* provides an ethnographic examination of birth through one your of life of four babies from Mongolia, Namibia, San Francisco, and Tokyo.

*Beyond the Gates* (2005). Directed by Michael Canton-Jones. Based on a true story, a young and idealistic English teacher and a seasoned priest are caught in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. They must choose whether to stay with the doomed Tutsis about to be massacred, or flee to safety.

*Color of Fear* (1994). Directed by Lee Min Wah. Two African-Americans, two Hispanics/Latinos, two Asian-Americans, and two Caucasians dialog about the state of race relations, power, ethnic identity, and reconciliation in the United States. The exchanges are sometimes dramatic and painful, but illuminate the subtleties, nuances, and the sting of racism.

*Crash* (2004). Directed by Paul Haggis. Citizens of Los Angeles with vastly different social positions and separate lives collide into each other, interweaving stories of racial identity, prejudice and discrimination, loss, and redemption.

*Dead Man Walking* (1995). Directed by Tim Robbins. A nun befriends and comforts a convicted killer on death row. The movie explores the legal, moral, and sociological perspectives surrounding capital punishment.

*The End of Poverty* (2008). Directed by Philippe Diaz. A powerful discourse on why poverty exists when there is so much wealth in the world. Examines poverty in light of the U.S. economic system, and explores the foundations of the global economy.

*Eyes on the Prize*. (1987). Directed by Henry Hampton. An award-winning documentary about the American Civil Rights Movement from 1952 to 1965.

*Gran Torino*. (2008). Directed by Clint Eastwood. A disgruntled Korean War veteran confronts dramatic economic and demographic changes to his neighborhood, and unexpectedly sets out to reform his neighbor, a young Hmong teenager. The movie powerfully confronts racism, prejudice, diversity, ethnicity, as well as the value of respect and friendship.

*The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980). Directed by Jamie Uys. A comic cultural allegory about a traveling Bushman who encounters modern civilization, an awkward biologist, and a misfit band of revolutionaries. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* illustrates the power of culture in shaping human experience, and also calls into question the notion of “progress.”

*The Help* (2011). Directed by Tate Taylor. An aspiring author during the civil rights movement in Mississippi in the 1960s decides to write a book detailing the African-American maids' perspective on the white families for which they work, and the economic, political, and social hardships they go through on a daily basis.

*The Interrupters* (2011). Directed by Steve James. The documentary examines crime-ridden neighborhoods and the power and allure of gangs. The documentary also highlights the efforts ex-gang leaders and former convicts and their call to end the violence. The film consists of interviews with gang members, families of their victims, and scenes of escalating violence.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Directed by Robert Mulligan. Atticus Finch, a lawyer in the Depression-era south, defends a black man against an undeserved rape charge, and teaches his children the values tolerance, justice, integrity, and power of prejudice.

*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). Directed by Joel Zwick. A young Greek woman struggles to accept her Greek heritage and identity, and falls in love with a non-Greek. Her deeply ethnically centered family expresses outrage and doubt, but ultimately accepts her non-Greek fiancé and eventual husband.

*The Namesake (*2006). Directed by Mira Nair. A young Indian family makes a new life in the United States. The son of the Indian immigrants, American-born Gogol, rebels against his family’s unwillingness to abandon their traditional ways. A moving story of how an immigrant family assimilates into mainstream America, yet still maintains traditional cultural beliefs and practices.

*Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Directed by Danny Boyle. A desultory drama about the life of an Indian boy (Jamal) and his brother who are orphaned as children, raising themselves in various slums in the crime-ridden neighborhoods in Mumbai. Jamal becomes a contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" but is arrested under suspicion of cheating, and while being interrogated, events from his life history are shown which explain why he knows the answers.

*The Truman Show* (1998). Directed by Peter Weir. Truman, an insurance salesman/adjuster, discovers his entire life is actually a TV show, his quaint hometown is a giant studio set, and everyone living and working there are actors, including his best friend and his incessantly bubbly wife.

*The Visitor* (2007). Directed by Thomas McCarthy. A disaffected and burned-out college professor (Walter) travels to New York City to attend a conference and finds a young immigrant couple living in his apartment. Walter develops an unexpected and profound connection to the couple, discovers a passion for playing the djembe, and helps his new friends negotiate the complicated and often disjointed institutions that enforce immigration and naturalization policies.

*Waiting for Superman* (2011). Directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film examines public education in the United States. The film follows the stories of five unforgettable and promising students as they interact with an educational system that inhibits, rather than encourages, their academic growth. Guggenheim also questions teachers' unions, which sometimes undermine the best interests of students, particularly regarding underperforming instructors who suffer no disciplinary measures due to tenure.

*With Honors* (1994). Directed by Alek Keshishian. A stuffy Harvard student finds his beloved senior thesis held hostage by a homeless man. The homeless man makes the desperate student an offer: in exchange for food and a place to stay during the harsh winter, he will return the thesis one page at a time. The student, however, learns more from his new friend than from the halls of Harvard.

**Honorable Mentions:**

*American History X* (1998)

*Big Fish* (2003)

*Brazil* (1985)

*In My Country* (2004)

*The Matrix* (1999)

*Mississippi Burning* (1988)

*The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004)

*Outsourced* (2006)

*Roger and Me* (1989)

*Shake Hands with the Devil* (2004)

*Shawshank Redemption* (1994)

*Smoke Signals* (1998)

*The Village* (2004)

*Wag the Dog* (1997)

Web listings for the best movies in Sociology:

[**http://www.flickchart.com/charts?genre=Sociology**](http://www.flickchart.com/charts?genre=Sociology)

[**http://www.angelfire.com/or3/tss4/socmovies.html**](http://www.angelfire.com/or3/tss4/socmovies.html)

[**http://thesocietypages.org/citings/2008/04/15/great-films-for-sociology-classes/**](http://thesocietypages.org/citings/2008/04/15/great-films-for-sociology-classes/)

[**http://www3.uakron.edu/sociology/Films.pdf**](http://www3.uakron.edu/sociology/Films.pdf)

[**http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/soc101y/brym/SocAtMovies.html**](http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/soc101y/brym/SocAtMovies.html)

[**http://sociologythroughdocumentaryfilm.pbworks.com/w/page/17194965/FrontPage**](http://sociologythroughdocumentaryfilm.pbworks.com/w/page/17194965/FrontPage)