



March, 2001

In this month's bulletin:

**The Business of Awarding Oscars II Film Study Guides
Media Clips II Recommended Resources II Upcoming Events
The Final Word**

The Business of Awarding Oscars: A Succinct Overview

by Derek Boles and Barry Duncan

"The solemnity of the annual Nobel ceremonies in Stockholm with the cheerful bad taste of the grand opening of a shopping center in Los Angeles."

Vincent Canby



The Oscar telecast promotes Hollywood movies and the entire broadcast is virtually a commercial for the previous year's films. For the winners: prestige, truly international stardom and economic benefits result from winning an award (though grateful recipients value the peer recognition as much). Watching the Oscar telecast has become the equivalent of a secular religious experience for many: The Oscars occur every year at the same time and there are strict rules and regulations and hundreds of commandments.

- The Oscar itself has become a sacred icon within the industry, prominently displayed above the "altar" during the ceremony. Many of those who participate by watching the ritual don't really understand what it's all about and find themselves bored by much of it. Yet, for the average viewer, it's all beyond criticism. The vast majority of the television viewing audience has seen few, if any, of the films nominated.
- Oscar "sacrileges" include overly long acceptance speeches and presenters who take advantage of the media exposure to pontificate about pet political causes. When the stars leave their seats to present or receive awards, prepare for production numbers, or go to the toilet, a team of 128 "seat fillers" is prepared to fill the empty seats until they return. This is done so that the television cameras will not linger on apparent gaps in an otherwise perfect symmetry of stars. The fillers are volunteers who are under strict instructions not to converse with the celebrities or to ask for autographs.



- Certain film genres have been historically ignored for Oscar nominations for Best Picture (horror, youth). It helps an actor's chances of winning an Oscar if the character dies during the movie.
- The Oscars affirm many of the values associated with the dominant American culture. These include: democracy, equality, hard work, individuality, competitiveness, upward mobility, occupational achievement and monetary success. The Oscars are the most visible example of US dominated cultural imperialism. American values and ideology are embraced by hundreds of millions of people around the world who are unaware of the contradictions.

According to *Entertainment Weekly*, what makes films Oscar-worthy? First, there's got to be an intriguing subject, like illegal drugs (*Traffic*) or perfectly legal ones (*Chocolat*). It doesn't hurt to have amazing combats (*Gladiator*, *Crouching Tiger*) or character/cleavage everyone will remember (*Erin Brockovich*).

Classroom Activities

- Have students compare a list of the top moneymaking films for this year with the films nominated for Oscars.
- How do they explain the discrepancies between profitable films and those which are critically honoured?
- Circulate a list of the Best Picture Oscar winners for the past fifteen years. Have students discuss how the films reflect the social priorities and ideological concerns of the times.
- Judging by the Oscar winners since 1995, what are today's social priorities and ideological concerns?
- Distribute an Oscars ballot (which can be obtained from newspapers or from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and The Envelope Please Web sites). Have students determine which films are familiar to them. Have them vote according to their personal preferences and then have them vote again according to their understanding of Oscar ideology and politics. Compare the votes with the actual results immediately after they are announced.
- Gossip about the private lives of the nominated stars, (which couples are breaking up, who is Meg Ryan's new love) is always part of our conversations about the Oscars. How does such gossip have an impact on people's responses to the actors, the films and even the awards?
- The Oscars are all about spectacle, fashion, gossip, the unexpected moment or pratfall and just plain bad taste. How would you rate these elements in this year's show?. How does it compare with those in recent memory? How effective was Steve Martin as a host?
- Film critics are often divided about which films and actors deserve to win Oscars. Compare the choices of two or more critics and, based on their choices and their explanations for them, try to determine their biases. For example, some critics may not be willing to endorse some films with excessive sex or violence; some critics are not fond of foreign films, or small, modestly ambitious productions.

Resources:

Books

Two of the best are also the most recent. John Harkness: *The Academy Awards Handbook* (Pinnacle, 2001) and Emmanuel Levy: *Oscar Fever* (Continuum, 2001).



Web sites

There are numerous Web sites for the Oscars.

- For constant updates before the awards night and information about a comprehensive press kit, check www.oscars.org.
- For material on what will be worn by the stars and an Oscar trivia test, check out www.oscars.com
- *Variety* magazine www.variety.com (weekly) offers an industry point of view and contains a good section, continually updated, on the Oscars several months before the March event.

Film Study Guides

Busy teachers are always grateful for good study guides to a special television program or a feature film their students may see in class. Over the years, I have perused many study guides to feature films. The dismal ones usually emanate from the folk in the movie industry and were written mainly to be an uncritical celebration of the content. The good ones openly address critical issues in helpful and engaging ways but still allow you to formulate your own ideas.

The following report on film study guides is a good news story since it concerns outstanding resources, mostly free, from three different sources of high quality materials: Film Education from England; Pacific Cinematheque in Vancouver and *Scanning the Movies* from the Canadian Bravo Channel in Toronto. (North American Media educators who have looked beyond their neighbourhood hedge row will know that the UK media educators, together with their Australian counterparts, have long been world leaders in preparing materials for media studies. Ian Wall, formerly a media teacher in the UK, has been the head of the Film Education program for over 10 years.)

On the basis of reviewing these three sources, there seems to be no standard format for an ideal film guide. The reason is simple: every film is different. Thus *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Gladiator* evoke quite different responses and hence merit specially tailored pedagogical approaches. Do yourself a big favour: Check out the three Web sites below for these outstanding teaching resources.

Pacific Cinematheque: An Impressive Vision for Film Education

If British Columbians begin to consume movies more critically and also more enjoyably they may have Stuart Poyntz to thank. Stuart is the education director for Pacific Cinematheque (PC) in Vancouver and a graduate in communications and cultural studies from Simon Fraser University.



PC has an ambitious mandate: to serve not only BC but the rest of Canada and, if Americans want to come on board and purchase the guides, well, they are welcome. PC is assembling an impressive Canadian database of key groups such as teachers, librarians, and youth leaders who will be encouraged to stimulate interest in the art of film. Stuart's goal is to have PC become a media centre engaging people in workshops not only in film analysis and media criticism but also in video production. PC will also consider the study of other dimensions of popular culture such as pop music.

The PC film study guides, 16-24 pages in length, examine both new films and classics from the history of Hollywood cinema. Twenty titles are listed, twelve are currently available and others will follow shortly. Sample titles include: "Visual Story telling and the Grammar of Filmmaking" (one guide in this series uses *Star Wars* to show the use of myth in narrative structure); "The Business of Filmmaking"; "Women in Film" (using *The Piano*); "Canadian Cinema" (narrative and the outstanding film *The Sweet Hereafter*.) The guide to *Romeo and Juliet* (the Baz Luhrmann



version) concludes with an interesting media spin on "Violence in Romeo and Juliet" and proceeds to discuss the typical arguments about how violence in the media affects audiences. The guides are \$12.00 each or five for \$49.00. To check out the teaching strategies of typical PC guides, you are invited to download the guide to the film *The Mighty*. The guides may be purchased from:

Pacific Cinematheque
200-1131 Howe St.,
Vancouver, BC V6Z 2L7

Phone (604)-688-8202
www.cinematheque.bc.ca

Film Education UK: Britain Rules!



Film Education is a registered charity supported by the film industry and the British Film Institute in the UK. It describes its aims as: "to develop the use of film in the school curriculum and facilitate the use of cinema by schools." To this end, it publishes a variety of free teaching materials. Film Education offers extensive workshops and is coordinated by Ian Wall, a former media teacher.

There is an amazing range of films and cinematic topics among the dozens of guides that Film Education has published. Getting at film fundamentals would include guides like "Film Language," a 35-page guide which takes students through the conventions of film language using a variety of analytical and creative tasks. As part of the package, but not available to North Americans, is the video containing excerpts from films like *Citizen Kane* and *Schindler's List*. (Incidentally, isn't there a way for North American film companies to cut a comparable deal with educators?) Click on "Secondary Resources/Archives" for specific guides including, "Adapting Shakespeare to Film," *The Colour Purple*, *Babe in the City*, *The Grinch*, and *Being John Malkovich*. Perhaps the most exciting and challenging material I found was in the in-depth units on "Representation of Youth" (from *Stand by Me* to *Clueless*); "Blockbuster Films" (tailor made for our blockbuster-obsessed students); and an outstanding unit on "Censorship and Violence."

For further information, contact

Film Education,
Alhambra House,
21-31 Charing Cross Road,
London WC2H 0AU

www.filmeducation.org

Scanning the Movies: A Canadian Achievement

In three years, *Scanning the Movies*, from Bravo's Canadian division has gained impressively high ratings for its semi-weekly program (Fridays at 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m.) Hosted by John Pungente SJ, our dynamic and affable Toronto-based media education colleague and friend, *Scanning the Movies* is helping to fill a gap in examining recent films from an educational perspective. (As noted in the February Bulletin, there are already weekly television programs which review films such as *Ebert and Roeper* and *Flick*.)



Working under tight deadlines, John and his colleague, Neil Andersen, see a new and useable Warner-Brother's film; write a script for the program in which suitable excerpts are used; interview – when feasible – the director and some of the leading actors; and discuss areas such as the social relevance of the themes, the use of lighting and sound, and the challenges the actors faced in getting into their roles. Increasingly, John gets out of the studio: *Best of Show* (about a competitive dog show) revealed John talking about the film while holding on to a lovable pooch, and for the re-release of *The Exorcist*, used a Roman Catholic church as a backdrop in which a priest and yours truly were interviewed about the religious and popular culture implications of the film.

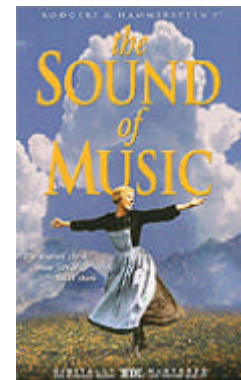
A study guide written by Neil Andersen, Toronto media educator and consultant, is posted on the Web when the program is aired. Neil's guides – approximately 25 of them – can be downloaded and are absolutely outstanding. They are models of critical thinking and key concepts of media literacy that will stretch the mind of teachers and students, whether examining the mythic dimensions in *The Wizard of Oz* or looking at the skillful use of film noir lighting and sound in *LA Confidential*. Neil told me that he has had teachers make return visits to films because his observations made them reassess their original perceptions. The study guides are obviously available to everyone, but the Bravo program has yet to negotiate arrangements to be telecast in the United States. Finally, *Scanning the Movies* hopes to eventually make deals with film companies other than Warner-Brothers. There have been times when John and Neil have had to discuss and write about some forgettable works such as Kevin Costner's *Message in a Bottle*. Fortunately, most of the films on *Scanning the Movies* are very worthwhile.

Scanning the Movies can be found online at: www.bravo.ca/events/scanningthemovies/

Media Clips

Re-release of *The Sound of Music*: The hills are alive with participation

"Audiences negotiate meaning" is a central concept in media analysis. What we bring to the text in terms of our gender, race, class, age, personal experiences, childhood memories are all relevant. Like the cult film *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the re-release of *The Sound of Music* (1965) encourages people to participate: singing the words to the well known songs and occasionally shouting at the screen their own thoughts – mostly parodies – of the action. Possibly the greatest family movie ever made, today it is an exercise in nostalgia no doubt, but one of rich postmodern significance: recycling the past and having guilt-free fun. The film may be saccharine but it's probably good for you.



Discussion questions:

- Account for the enduring appeal of the film.
- What are the most memorable moments?

Encounter With Naomi Klein



Naomi Klein, the Toronto author and journalist of the influential book of cultural criticism *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, recently galvanized 150 media educators in Toronto. "In light of global forces and communication systems, media literacy must be radicalized," she asserted. Her research reveals the power of corporate control especially with the incredible success in the last five years with the branding of products – Coca Cola and Nike have become today's rock stars dominating the global mall. With public space and public discourse threatened, eliminated or co-opted, it is incumbent on media educators to defend or reclaim public space where we operate as independent thinkers and free agents. Now that's radical!



Recommended Resource

Media Matters: Critical Thinking in the Information Age

I will have an in-depth review of this project in the forthcoming issue of *Telemidium* and in the journal of *Australian Screen Education*. The kit consists of a student book, an instructor's guide, a choice of using two videos or a DVD, and an audio CD and CD-ROM containing worksheets and further investigations. This kit is nicely packaged and, on the surface, appears well organized. Approximately five of 13 units hang together nicely and are inspired; many of the other units are a mishmash. Above all, the critical media theory behind Media Matters seems intellectually impoverished. By choosing the units that work for you, however, Media Matters can be salvaged.

CNN - Turner learning package published by South-Western Educational Publishing, 2000. (National Text-McGraw-Hill)

US price \$250.00
Canadian \$375.00

(Canadians should order through [Theatre Books](#) in Toronto.
Americans should order through the [Center for Media Literacy](#).)

Upcoming Events

National Media Education Conference: Unleashing Creativity

June 23-26

Austin, Texas

<http://www.nmec.org>

The National Media Education Conference will focus on the liberating role of media literacy and media arts. Media educator Neil Andersen from Toronto will deliver the keynote address to open the conference. Workshops will focus on media literacy in the Language Arts and Across the K-12 curriculum. In addition to the conference, the newly formed AMLA (Alliance for a Media Literate America) will be officially launched.



The Final Word

"Fashion is the new sports arena. Celebrities add positive friction to the runway."

- "On the New Models" as reported by *Entertainment Weekly*
March 2, 2001

"By weighting political discourse toward symbols, images, and sound bites, TV rewards simpler messages. It forces politicians and journalists alike to be more exposure – and image conscious, focusing their attention on the cosmetic and superficial values and away from issues and ideas"

- from the important book *The Sound Bite Society* by Jeffrey Scheuer, 1999.

- Jon Pareles, music critic for the *New York Times* makes the positive case for controversial rapper Eminem after his wins at the Grammy Awards February 20, 2001

"Unlike many of his detractors, Eminem makes a distinction between words and action. Meanwhile, the music connotes comedy: bouncy keyboard lines, whiz-crunch sound effects. Eminem leaves it to the listener to separate his Grand Guignol humour from his position statements, and so far, the fans may be better literary analysts than the horrified adults."

Barry Duncan is an award-winning teacher, author, consultant and founder and past president of the Ontario-based Association for Media Literacy. Co-author of the best selling text book, *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, he has presented workshops and keynote addresses to thousands of teachers in Canada and around the world. You can contact Barry at baduncan@interlog.com.

