

Themes and Messages Encoded in Films: A Case Study

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Abstract

The people in India have always loved films, it's music, drama and actors, and are crazy for film stories. A film expresses many things freely in itself with its duration. Short films are fast emerging as an alternative form of expression. The reasons for the phenomenon of coming of age of the short films can be the advent of digital filmmaking, the internet and social networking, as well as the technologies available in mobile phones, camera, sound and editing. This coming of age of short films represents the convergence of journalism, social activism and the art of filmmaking; and the young adults are deploying their technical skill and aesthetic sensibilities as a means to affect the public discourse on a wide range of social, political and cultural topics. Some films have a clear and overriding message. Reviewing a film for thematic content and explicit and implicit messages differs from scholarly film articles in that they encompass personal and idiosyncratic reactions to and evaluations of a film. This paper attempts to decode a set of explicit and implicit messages embedded in the randomly selected two short films which are being reviewed and presents a narrative on the two selected short films. One short film is about a mother who feels lonely and lost when her only son migrates to the USA. She regains life by picking up her hobby of photography, using a DSLR camera gifted to her by her son. The second story is about a town which has only wheelchair-using citizens. How able-bodied persons who are a minority in this town, are marginalized and excluded in the film, beautifully gives out the message of social aspect to the construe of disability. Decoding the messages is about the equilibrium of unbiased report and personal opinion.

Keywords: *Films, Narratives and review, Themes and Messages*

Introduction

The people in India have always loved films, its music, drama and actors, and are crazy for film stories. They cry and laugh with the characters in the story and in the process experience a myriad of human expressions.

Film (or Cinema or motion picture): It is the art of moving images; a visual medium that tells stories and exposes reality. Created in the dusk of the 19th century, cinema is the world's most recent art form. It is also, by far, the world's most complex, collaborative, and costly artistic expression.

Film Genre': Films are often thought of in terms of 'genre'. A genre is a particular theme or method of storytelling for a film. Common genres for film include: drama, action, comedy, thriller and so on. Thinking about film in genres can be useful in tracking down a particular type of film and filmmakers who specialize in a genre. Genre films can often be thought of as a

straight-forward piece of storytelling and entertainment, but some genre films deliberately explore complex themes (Corrigan, 2001).

Narrative film genre': One of the genres' namely Narrative film is a popular genre in Indian films. A narrative is defined as a 'chain of events in a cause effect relationship occurring in time and space' (Bordwell and Kristen, 2006). It is also known as fictional film or fiction film, which tells a fictional or fictionalized story, event or narrative. In this style of film, believable narratives and characters help convince the audience that the unfolding fiction is real. Lighting and camera movement, among other cinematic elements, have become increasingly important in these films. Great detail goes into the screenplays of narratives, as these films rarely deviate from the predetermined behaviours and lines of the classical style of screenplay writing to maintain a sense of realism. Actors must deliver dialogue and action in a believable way, so as to persuade

the audience that the film is real life. Fictional films are composed by a string of events and structured based on cause and effect.

Short films: Now creative short films are fast emerging as an alternative form of expression. The reasons for the phenomenon of coming of age of the short films can be the advent of digital filmmaking, the Internet and social networking, as well as the technologies available in mobile phones, camera, sound and editing. The potential to make films, and share them with an audience, has become accessible to almost everyone.

Before the advent of digital alternatives, the cost of professional film equipment and stock was also a hurdle to being able to produce, direct, or star in a traditional studio film. But with the advent of consumer camcorders and the arrival of high-resolution digital video, have lowered the technology barrier in movie production significantly. Further, the hardware and software for post-production can be installed in a personal computer making movie-making relatively inexpensive. The digital video technology is enabling filmmakers to conceive, shoot and edit a movie, create and edit the sound and music, and mix the final cut on a home computer.

Though financing, distribution, and marketing remain difficult, but the arrival of internet-based video outlets have changed the film making landscape, making it more democratic. A short film expresses many things freely in itself with its limited duration.

Coming of age of short films: This coming of age of short films represents the convergence of journalism, social activism and the art of filmmaking; and the young adults are deploying their technical skill, conscience and aesthetic sensibilities as a means to affect the public discourse on a wide range of social, political and cultural topics. In the present scenario, thanks to the increasing number of the short film festivals, short films find widespread audiences and take the role of being a pioneer of the Film. Although even today they are still not available for screenings at movie halls. The short films are being easily distributed via the Internet attracting large communities of artists and viewers. The young generation is expressing freely as the technology offers mind boggling opportunities for communication. However, the media and new digital technologies can also present new

challenges and be exploited to extend control and surveillance.

Narratives with Mass Appeal: Finding and capturing important stories that speak to varied audiences on subjects of public concern, with the tools that both enable and support individual expression within a social, political and cultural consciousness can change how we view our world and express ourselves. It is proving to be exhilarating as well as fostering filmmakers who are fluent artistically, technologically, socially and critically.

Decoding a film's messages: Film is a fascinating medium. It is a combination of carefully constructed (under the watchful eye of an auteur) visual imagery, combined with performance and sound. Some films have a clear and overriding message.

Decoding a film may sound a simple exercise, but it requires time, proper organization and skills related to expressions and objective analysis. It is not just about writing what happens on the screen, it goes deeper than that. It makes an attempt to assess a film's overall quality and determine the messages embedded in it. Reviewing a film for thematic content and explicit and implicit messages differs from scholarly film articles in that they encompass personal and idiosyncratic reactions to and evaluations of a film. It is about the equilibrium of unbiased reports and personal opinion. While it is accepted to state as to what you think about the film, one may have to approach certain aspects in an objective manner to get a better understanding of the film. There is a need to find a balance between subjective and objective elements of the analysis.

Methodology

Writing a review/analysis report, especially for films can be an invigorating exercise as it helps to broaden the mind and evaluate the way one can analyze material and express one's opinion and draw inspirations. This paper attempts to decode a set of explicit and implicit messages embedded in the randomly selected two short films which are being reviewed.

Narratives require a lot of preparation before one begins analyzing them. The points adopted to review these films were:

- Prior to viewing the film, one may want to get a sense of the bodies of work by the director, writer, or individual actor, etc.
- Writing a film review often requires multiple viewings of the film. The films were watched two or even three times.
- At the first viewing, one needs to surrender to the cinematic experience, immersing oneself in the narrative and enjoy the film without worrying about the messages to be eventually decoded.
- At the second viewing, one may distance oneself from the plot and instead focus on interesting messages related to elements of the film that one needs to highlight in the review.
- Messages related to thematic content that resonate with issues strongly can be highlighted.
- After watching the film, a second time, take careful notes on the focus area of the study, namely to decode the theme and the messages in the films.
- Then attempt to create a central idea for the review that brings together the film's theme and the messages in the films - both explicit and implicit.

All popular culture, including movies and television are driven by themes and messages even though they are for entertainment. A film can only appeal to audiences if they speak to their values and beliefs. Some messages in film and television are explicit, and some are implicit. The explicit messages are stated directly with no pretense of hiding them. The implicit messages are always present, although they are implied rather than stated directly. The plot can lead the viewers to infer other story spaces than those presented on the screen.

Findings and Discussions

Case I: Reviewing a short film, #Mombeagirlagain sourced from YouTube Channel and available on Link <https://youtu.be/NjBxoN4spKo>

Introduction of the Short film: It is a short film with a social message with title, #Mom is about a woman having a duration of 2 mins 12 sec in Hindi and English Language. It has a narrative style of film. It has been credited to the director Harshavardhan Kulkarni and produced by Amazon Campaign. The characters of the film

are mother, father, son (adult), delivery man. It targets audiences such as teenagers and adults, both male and female.

Plot summary: The video is about a mother who forgets about herself and her dreams when she became a mother and has devoted herself to taking care of her son and the husband. When her son grows up and migrates to America, she misses him. Her son sends a DSLR camera for her so that she can indulge in her dream of photography and can become the happy girl that she used to be. His son knows that photography is her mom's passion and it can make her happy as he is not with her anymore. She feels happy and starts clicking pictures and her husband supports her endeavour and while she is living her dream.

Description of the film:

A. Scene 1: At the commencement of the video, a mother is shown to be missing her son and is watching her son's pictures on her phone. When her husband asks for breakfast, she replies it is lying on the table in a dejected manner. The doorbell rings. There's a delivery of the package.

B. Scene 2: the mother comes outside to receive the package. When she opens it she is happy to see a DSLR camera inside the package and there's a letter in it too. Her husband asks her to read it, a letter from her son. She gets emotional reading it. The letter urges her to rekindle her passion of photography which she left behind on taking up the family responsibilities.

C. Scene 3: She is organising the DSLR and thinking about the letter of her son and starts clicking pictures. Her husband asks her "Shall I make the food today?" She is busy clicking pictures and absentmindedly says yes to that.

D. Scene 4: She is clicking pictures happily and her husband is cooking chapattis in the kitchen. And at the end, mother sets the camera and clicks the picture of herself with her husband laughingly.

Locating the Theme and Messages in the film: Filmmakers and novelists in the popular media usually make it easy for the reader to identify their main themes or messages. Most often, they will tell you either through the comments made by the narrator or by a character that you are supposed to recognize as being the hero or heroine, "good" or as speaking for the author. The intended messages are always those that are

the easiest to see or most obvious conclusions you can draw given the film or the novel.

The theme of the film is on issues related to gender, family relations and the challenges faced in the arena of personal growth in an Indian family context.

Some of the explicit messages of the film are that dreams can be achieved at any age because no one is too old to achieve a dream. It emphasizes that every human being is an artist and has special interests and the central idea is to not to forget being an artist even as we grow up. It makes one contemplate whether one can leave the art out of our life but can the art within ever leave? It gives a strong message that women need to be self-reliant and self-contained for their own happiness. In our culture it is common that a mother may forget about herself, the girl she used to be because life's responsibilities got in the way. It inspires that women too deserve to indulge in their hobbies and interests even after marriage. She has the right to utilise her time by using it the way she wants and destroy the social norms that women are born to do household chores only.

Another loud message spots the light on the need for adjustments at the different stages of the human life cycle to meet the requirements as the age advances.

There are various implicit messages delivered through the film. It showcases the contribution of a mother in raising the children and looking after the other family members, at the cost of sacrificing her own aspirations. The short film showcases a mother's struggle and sacrifices due to patriarchal norms of the society.

A precious bond of love between parents, especially the mother, and an adult son and the soft corner of the son for his mother, are shown. It displays a supporting and a sensitive husband not only helping the wife in the domestic chores but encourages her to take her interests and passions of her previous stages of life, before she got married, specifically to live her dream of indulging in photography. It encourages children to take care of their parents and dreams of their parents just like their parents did for them. There are some stereotypes too. Women as mothers are the ones who have to sacrifice their dreams and give up the things that they love the most, just to take care of their children and their dreams. If the plot had included a daughter instead of son, it

would have given a strong message too. A weak point in the plot was in the portrayal of the son's character. He asked his mother to relive her passion only when he went away from the house. What if he had attempted to give her space earlier, encouraged her to take up her interests and further helped in dividing the family's responsibilities between the parents?

Case II: Reviewing a short film, #Socialmodelanimation sourced from YouTube Channel and available on Link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4liF-zuwGxE>

Introduction: The second short film that is being profiled is a quaint animation film explaining the Social Model of Disability called 'Social Model animation' by Blane Backwith. It is a short film of 1:27 minutes duration. It is a black and white animation film depicting wheelchair bound persons in lead roles and the narrative is in a male voice in English.

Plot summary: The short animation creates a hypothetical situation of a world which has wheel chair users as the mainstream. When 'normal' people enter their world, the difficulties they face in coping with the spaces and the structuring of the world makes the 'normal' people face difficulties in coping. They feel and experience exclusion. The point brought forth is that disability is constructed more due to the way spaces have been organized in the society, which gives regard to the needs and requirements of persons with disability. The majority becomes the mainstream, hence posing exclusion for the minority, which in our society are persons with disability.

Description of the film:

A. Scene 1: The animation begins with the narrator asking the viewer to imagine a world where only physically disabled persons lived. They were all wheel chair bound. So, they all thought that they should build the world in which they live according to their own needs.

B. Scene 2: Since they were on the wheel chair and were not standing upright, they did not need tall ceilings or tall doors to go through. So they built ceilings which were 7 feet and doors that were 5 feet. The toilets and offices were built as per their requirements. The disabled persons had their own building regulations.

C. Scene 3: One day a few able-bodied people come to their town to stay. They keep hitting

their heads against the short height doors and begin to carry bruises.

D. Scene 4: Soon psychiatrists, social workers and doctors get involved for their care and well being. Committees are formed and many people get worried and begin to work for what is considered as ‘problems of able bodied’. Specially toughened helmets are designed to protect their heads and handed free to the able bodied. Braces are prepared for able bodied so as to assist them in bending while they negotiate small heights.

E. Scene 5: Special groups get together to make foundations. Money is collected as charity in their ‘helmets’ which are left in pubs and bars where people leave their small change for the ‘cause of the able bodied’. There is talk of forming special homes.

F. Scene 6: One day, it dawns on the able bodied that actually there is nothing wrong with them. It is just that society excludes them. Then in the animation one sees the able bodied taking out a protest march with banners reading ‘raise the doors/ceilings’, ‘be fair to able bodied’, ‘equal rights for able bodied’, ‘help our cause’.

Locating the Theme and Messages in the film:

Far from being a mere physical fact, disability is also a normative, cultural and legal construct. In the last decade, there has been an increasing discussion about the needs and rights of persons with disabilities and issues that concern their participation in mainstream society. The underlying effort in the past decade has put disability in the centre of debate that focuses on the idea of ‘society for all’. There is a new conception of societies that are all inclusive and espouse towards embracing all differences, both social as well as physical. Instead of expecting variously different groups to fit into a common mould of the ‘mainstream’, there is a marked shift in redefining the construe of social mainstream. There is now a conscious attempt to break the cycle of poverty, disability, segregation, powerlessness and charity, all of which lead to the denial of opportunities for persons with disabilities (Chopra, 2015)

In the current film, what comes out very clearly is that what is construed as a disability, or not being a disability, is chiefly determined by who forms the mainstream and who makes the rules of living. If the persons with disability create their own town, which they do in the current

movie, the ‘normal bodied’ would also face difficulties and barriers which would make them feel excluded, inferior and oppressed. It is the barriers that the society creates for the persons with disability, which are more disabling than the disability itself.

The movie also brings forth the concept of charity with which the doer of charity also feels a sense of power and superiority. In the movie, at first, due to the decisions of the council of disabled persons, spaces are made as per their needs. These spaces are restrictive for the able bodied. Instead of changing these infrastructural barriers, they begin to find faults with the able bodied. They decide to get assistive devices for them so that they could change as per the infrastructures. They decide to get together and come up with committees and foundations and they even propose to set up special homes for them. The subtle message is that the persons with disability do not need these measures. First barriers have been created due to unequal policies and programmes, and then they are discriminated against and are made to feel powerless as the group. Instead, the message in the story is loud and clear. The disabled persons want their needs to be recognized. When spaces are being designed, their needs should be included. In the end, the able bodied in this short film say that actually they realize that nothing is wrong with them. And this is the social model of disability.

The social model of disability acknowledges that obstacles to participation in society and its institutions reside in the environment rather than in the individual, and that such barriers can and must be prevented, reduced or eliminated. Environmental obstacles come in many guises and are found at all levels of society. They are reflected in policies and regulations created by governments. Such obstacles may be physical – for example barriers in public buildings, transportation and recreational facilities. They may also be attitudinal – widespread underestimation of the abilities and potential of children with disabilities creates a vicious cycle of under-expectation, under-achievement and low priority in the allocation of resources (UNICEF, 2007).

Social model views disability as a form of social oppression like sexism and racism. It is viewed like this since the PWD are deprived of opportunities in day-to-day life either due to

under-expectation of 'normal' people or due to seclusion due to lack of understanding / fear of the 'deviant disabled' or due to desire to control lives by taking decisions for PWD and hence rendering them powerless. The sense of 'cultural imperialism' is predominant in the discourse of 'normal lives' where a nuanced assumption is of the normal way of living being superior and desirable, leaving the disabled oppressed, weak and with a poor self and social esteem (Chopra,2015)

Conclusion

The case I film conveyed a very important and serious message in a simple way and the film proved to be successful in creating an impact as the plot, the characters were relatable. The characters were very talented and all the visuals and quality of the sound was very good. It is a perfect representation of the scenario of how a strong bond between child and mother can result in re-establishment of her free life again. Strong bonds will result in support and that support will result in helping mothers rediscover the young girl they once were and follow their passions and hobbies once again. The art remains with us, it never leaves us, it can give us immense happiness. The ultimate purpose of life is to be happy and busy. The film was enjoyable. Overall, it was a good film.

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The case II film presents in a very interesting way how disability should be viewed. Over the past two decades, there has been a paradigm shift from a medical /charity model to social model to understand and construct disability. Emphasizing the social construction of disability in no way implies rejecting medical and professional services and supports. Yet, the social model emphasizes the critical infrastructural and attitudinal barriers which persons with disability have to surmount, hence making the task of being functional and to be included in this world, difficult for them. Barriers come in the form of physical structures and accessibility, charity, pity, over sympathy and lack of opportunities to participate, all rendering the persons with disability marginalized and powerless. Society poses more challenges in the life of persons with disability and it is the responsibility of the society to make adaptations so that persons with disability are included in the normal discourse.

The review of the selected short narrative films and decoding of their embedded explicit and implicit messages, can help to broaden the mind, evaluate and analyze the issues that are presented through the film as well as enable the viewers to express their opinion.