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Introduction to Understanding Film
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Since its beginnings, the American cinema has shaped the national identity of its audience, and it has also continually adapted to the audiences' changing preferences and tastes. Through movies, American directors and their audiences have continually explored and analyzed controversial issues such as race, prejudice, and culture, and the way societies over time have dealt with and have been affected by these issues. In the process, an ever-evolving American identity, cultural expression, and cultural product have emerged. This essay explores the effect that the American movies have had on the development of the American culture. Additionally, this essay examines how the viewers' movie experience has changed over time, induced by evolutions in technology and tastes.

Just like a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's sonnets, today movies are used as a tool to better communicate with the audience. The director is the one who controls the mise-en-scene, and "projects" to the viewers the image he wants. A director can make a prince out of a young 18-year old actor—if he acts his part right—can "transport" the viewers through time and space, and can manipulate the viewers into believing in happy endings or eternal damnation. It all depends on what is presented on the screen (mise-en-scene) and how it is displayed (the director's talent). Should one see the sets and props behind the scenes, the spell would be broken and no one would "buy" the story. Over

time, these stories have shaped the taste of the American public, whose expectations for better sets, new scripts with interesting plots, or special effects have continually increased. In order to accommodate these increased expectations, the movie industry continually and promptly adapts to the technological advances that help them satisfy the needs of their customer: the American public.

A great example of how movies create or re-create the mood of a certain period is two different movies—*Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones' Diary*—with similar interactions but not time-frames and, consequently, customs: “Actually, I just stole the plot from *Pride and Prejudice*,” says Fielding, 40. “I thought it had been very well market-researched over a number of centuries” (Essex, Par 3). In *Pride and Prejudice*, the director tries to re-create a period 200 years ago. Many things accepted today, were simply unacceptable then. The mise-en-scene in this case is very important in setting the right mood, from old-fashioned costumes, classical music, and picturesque sceneries to the very formal way in which the actors interact with each other. In *Bridget Jones' Diary*—based on the same plot as *Pride and Prejudice*—the director brings the action forward in time, by using contemporary mise-en-scene and dialog. There was no point in remaking *Pride and Prejudice* by keeping the same time-frame; but since the love story between the protagonists is so wonderful, the director chooses instead to bring it forward in time, so that even someone not interested in old-fashioned movies—an acquired taste for sure—can appreciate it, and even find it appealing.

If in *Pride and Prejudice* talking about one's weight was taboo, in *Bridget Jones' Diary* this is a commonly talked about subject—just as it is in our society—as Bridget unsuccessfully tries to lose weight. As our society has evolved over time, so did the standards and cultural perceptions—for example, Bridget's weight, 200 years ago, would have been classified as normal, while today she is 20 pounds overweight. Women drinking and getting drunk is not unusual either in our times—although unfortunate. So many times, out of disappointment, Bridget drowns her sorrow in Vodka, while in *Pride and Prejudice*, crying or rebelling with a rude attitude or words is the most one can do. If Bridget would like to be accepted for her extra 20 pounds and her unique personality, Elizabeth hopes that one day she will be accepted for only 50 pounds per year—her alimony—because of her wonderful predisposition and personality: "If I could love a man who would love me enough to take me for a mere fifty pounds a year, I should be very well pleased. But such a man could never be sensible and you know I could never love a man who was out of his wits" (*Pride and Prejudice* video). We can see that in each movie the director provides clues about people and the norms of their times, so that the viewers can relate to the little dramas and tragedies that the characters experience in the movie. In each case, the mise-en-scene supports the ideas and customs expressed in the movies, from music, clothing, dialog, facial expressions, and range of subtleties—blunt, theatrical, or hardly obvious. A good example of how the two directors manage to manipulate one's opinion about a character is by using exaggerated melodramatic gestures—quite theatrical—and unpleasant voice fluctuations, in the case of Elizabeth's mother, Mrs. Bennet, to portray her as a not very sophisticated person, while in Bridget

Jones' boss case, his bad-mannered computer messages are more than enough to confirm the viewers' bad opinion about him, supported by Bridget's thoughts and remarks.

Watching the two movies sets two different moods, even if they are filmed only five years apart, and this is exactly what the directors had intended to do. Although the plot is similar, one can hardly realize that at first. While Elizabeth projects a flawless image, and her troubles in getting married are only caused by the fact that she's not rich, Bridget is not afraid to take chances on guys and make silly decisions, just because she can. Watching *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time, one may be surprised that couples had to get married before living together, while in *Bridget Jones' Diary* this is portrayed as a normal thing. If in *Pride and Prejudice* one director reveals the purity and innocence of the old times, in *Bridget Jones' Diary* the other director appeals to people's emancipation and their freedom of living life the way they see fit—a common trait of our society today, which has evolved through trying times, as one deduces after watching the two movies. In this case, movies through their wide variety of genres can educate the younger generation that is not always aware of their freedoms, precisely by providing information about different times and the customs and life styles of various societies.

“The musical score of a film, which is written by the film's composer, functions as a commentary upon the action. Music serves to direct the audience's attention to specific characters or details, to provide information about the time or place of action, or to establish mood....Melodramatic moments will be underlined with musical crescendos....[thus] the musical score comments upon the action without the character's

knowledge. The musical score provides yet another level of interpretation of the drama in addition to those already built into the mise-en-scene” (Belton, 53). In *Pride and Prejudice*, classical music sets the mood for a calm and sophisticated society interaction, while in *Bridget Jones’ Diary* modern tunes like “Respect” and “All by Myself” are self-explanatory, and their rhythm brings the viewers forward in time, to where women are not afraid to demand rights and handle the consequences and advantages that come with them.

Perhaps, the most surprising and pleasant liaison of the two movies is both directors’ choice to cast Mr. Colin Firth in the role of Mr. Darcy. Firth's performance in *Bridget Jones's Diary* was no accident. Helen Fielding, who created Bridget in a British newspaper column and then in two best-selling novels, invented the character with Firth himself in mind.

“I had just finished watching the miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* (1995)," she recalls in a separate interview, "and, like most of London, I fell in love with his Mr. Darcy. As a wink, I named Bridget's 'Mr. Right' Mark Darcy. I described him to look like Colin Firth. In fact, part of me was worried that the actor would feel my descriptions were too close to him.

“In my wildest dreams, I never thought he would actually play Darcy in the movie," Fielding says. "But a girl can dream." (Pearlman, Par 13)

Mr. Colin Firth’s interpretation and ability to adapt his acting style to the fine nuances of both characters he plays is proof that the universal standards about common sense and the inner beauty of people haven’t changed much over time, and that two different societies

so far apart technologically—and even psychologically—can still find common grounds. That is why the two movies, based on the same plot, are equally successful in their two different ways of portraying two different types of societies.

It is the viewers' gain that the directors have the ability to mold the plot and its mise-en-scene to better serve the interest and needs of different audiences. With the passing of time, the audiences can only benefit from a wide range of styles and innovations in cinematography, because the final result—the movie—sometimes educates, sometimes serves as an alternative, or perhaps allows the viewers to compare and experience the best of two worlds. No matter what, the movies will always represent a portal to one's imagination and hidden aspirations and desires; and despite the fact that over time technologies improve and the presentation styles may change to something hard to imagine today—holograms, virtual reality and so forth—as long as humans have feelings, the movies are here to stay.

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