



From Narration to Action: Persuasive Films

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“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”
~ William Arthur Ward

Introduction

A film with an inspiring story is a powerful educational medium. Walter Fisher’s *Narrative Paradigm* (1989) argues that people are essentially storytelling animals and that reason is well argued through stories. There is a universality in narrative with the Aristotelian tradition defining a narrative as characters facing a problem and their efforts to reach a solution to the problem (Figure 1).

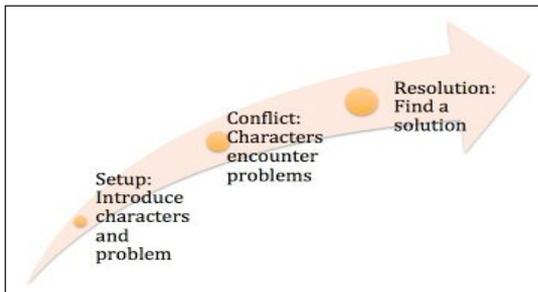


Figure 1: Classic Narrative Trajectory

Historical and Cultural Movies

Educational materials should not only educate, they should be entertaining, and beyond that, they should inspire. With this in mind, I conducted a search for persuasive films which could illustrate historical and cultural themes. Table 1 on the following page lists the feature films that I found.

Documentaries

However, not only feature films tell stories. Indeed, documentary films may be more closely focused on facts and educational issues. A search was also conducted for films which fulfilled the criteria of educational storytelling. My results are listed in Table 2 on the following page.

While feature films can support a stronger narrative, being less tied to fact, they generally are just fictitious stories (with the possible exception of biopics and reenacted dramas of events). Documentary films on the other hand, are grounded in fact, although the objectivity of the filmmaker can be at issue (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997, Nichols, 2010). Compared with a well-crafted feature film, a documentary film can sometimes appear somewhat heavy-handed and lacking in narrative continuity, coherence and cohesion. Despite their differences though, both feature films and documentary films have the potential of being persuasive storytelling devices. In an attempt to categorize both feature films and documentary films into persuasive and inspiring genres for educational purposes, I offer the taxonomy shown in Table 3.

Anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either.
– Marshall McLuhan

References

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Top Global Issue Movie List <www.tutor2u.net>	AFI’s Most Inspiring Movie List <www.afi.com/100years/cheers.aspx>	Top Environmental Films <www.mnn.com>
1. <i>Hotel Rwanda</i> 2. <i>Black Hawk Down</i> 3. <i>Invisible Children</i> 4. <i>Blood Diamond</i> 5. <i>District 9</i>	1. <i>It’s a Wonderful Life</i> 2. <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> 3. <i>Schindler’s List</i> 4. <i>Rocky</i> 5. <i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>	1. <i>WALL-E</i> 2. <i>Erin Brockovich</i> 3. <i>China Syndrome</i> 4. <i>Soylent Green</i> 5. <i>Avatar</i>