

Have the Movies Lost Their Cultural Impact?

BY PHIL COOKE

I just finished watching the Oscars alone, sitting in the concierge lounge at a hotel. Not that I don't watch lots of things from a hotel (because I travel so much), but for some reason, this year made me realize how little I cared. But it wasn't always that way.

Ingmar Bergman's "The Seventh Seal" was mesmerizing back in college. An atheist who honestly portrayed his struggle with faith captivated me. Then, it was David Lean's epic "Lawrence of Arabia" that really made me understand what a camera was capable of capturing.

In those days, films had a remarkable impact on culture. I'll never forget the horse's head in the bed from "The Godfather." I suggested my parents see "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid" until I remembered Katherine Ross undressing. When they came home, I thought my mom would kill me.

Remember The Graduate, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, or The Deer Hunter? And during that period, filmmakers like John Cassavetes were literally inventing the independent film movement.

Back then movies really mattered. They dictated cultural norms, helped give a generation a voice, and were the dictionary definition of "influence."

But now? We live in a far more disjointed, distracted culture. Water cooler conversation is far more likely to focus on TV shows like "Breaking Bad" or the latest mobile app. Young people follow other gamers on Twitch more than they follow talented film directors.

In the past, a significant part of the enjoyment of a movie was in the communal nature of the screening. All those people sitting in the dark watching the screen was something akin to a religious experience. But today? We have a generation who doesn't even know how to behave in a theatre. I've lost count of the number of people I've asked to turn off their phone or stop talking. It's easier – and far less stressful – to just watch on an HD screen in my bedroom. And how much cultural impact can you really have when the mainstream movie industry admits the target audience has become 14 year old boys?

And apparently I'm not the only one who's lost interest. I haven't seen the ratings from last night yet, but last year's drop in Oscar viewers (a new low of 37.3 million viewers in 2015) was obviously an indicator that something has changed. And the uproar over diversity in this year's films was telling as well. After all the grandstanding from a handful of stars, it only generated contempt from Chris Rock during the actual show: "Other years, black people didn't protest the Oscars because they were too busy being raped and lynched to care about who won Best Cinematographer. When your grandmother's swinging from a tree, it's really hard to care about Best Documentary Foreign-Short."

The bottom line is that for all the promotion, publicity, and celebrities on the Red Carpet, the film industry simply isn't influencing the culture as it did. But the question becomes, "What is influencing culture today?"

