

Lights, Camera, Action: Teaching with Feature Film in the Social Sciences

Lisen C. Roberts, Eliza Dean, and Terry Nienhuis

Abstract

This paper presents a review of literature on using feature film to teach in the social sciences, including benefits and limitations as well as suggestions for how to use this method. Also included is an annotated videography of 25 films recommended for the presentation of specific social science issues.

Students watch movies. Film is “where” students naturally are. Recognizing this, we explored the educational use of feature film in higher education. Specifically, we reviewed the literature on teaching with feature film in the social sciences. In this paper, we share what we learned about first, why, and then how to teach with feature film. We present an extensive annotated videography of some of our favorite films that present social science issues, as well as one specific example of a feature film based assignment given here at Western Carolina University.

Why teach with film?

A review of the teaching-with-film literature revealed numerous references in the social sciences. For example, numerous publications exist on the educational use of film in Counselor Education (Higgins & Dermer, 2001; Toman & Rak, 2000; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998), Family Science (Imig, 1981; Smith, 2001), Human Communication (Adler, 1995; Baker, 1997; Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995; Mackey-Kallis & Kirk-Elfenbein, 1997; Proctor, 1990, 1991; Proctor & Rock, 1995), Psychology (Anderson, 1992; Boyatzis, 1994; Desforges, 1994; Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990; Hemenover, Caster, & Mizumoto, 1999; Kirsh, 1998; Paddock, Terranova, & Giles, 2001), and Sociology (Burton, 1988; Fails, 1988; Groce, 1992; Loewen, 1991; Manley, 1994; Papademas, 1993; Smith, 1982; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993; Tolich, 1992; Valdez & Haley, 1999). All social science professionals can draw on this abundance of information on the educational use of feature film.

Benefits

Feature film may present a more holistic and realistic view of relevant course concepts than textbooks (Bluestone, 2000; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995). Film is a potentially powerful educational tool because it can provide a common experience base for all students, even of otherwise unfamiliar issues (Anderson, 1992; Gregg et al., 1995; Higgins & Dermer, 2001; Mackey-Kallis & Kirk-Elfenbein, 1997; Manley, 1994; Proctor, 1990; Proctor & Rock, 1995; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998).

At its best, film can reach the emotions of students, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content presented (Bluestone, 2000; Proctor, 1990). Film can liven up the classroom and bring energy to the course. Students may identify with a character, even one of different background or experience than their own (Bluestone, 2000; Burton, 1988). Film can also illustrate course concepts and enable students to see theory in action (Adler, 1995; Anderson, 1992; Gregg et al., 1995; Mackey-Kallis & Kirk-Elfenbein, 1997; Tolich, 1992; Valdez & Haley, 1999). For example, Desforges (1994) used feature film to illustrate various theoretical concepts related to adolescent development. Higgins and Dermer (2001) used film to depict marriage and family therapy theories and both Fails (1988) and Tipton and Tiemann (1992) used film to illustrate sociological theories. Loewen (1991) and Manley (1994) used feature film as stimulus to teach race relations.

Bloom (1956) created a taxonomy to illustrate various levels of learning. His taxonomy is a visual hierarchy with knowledge at the bottom, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis in the middle in ascending order and finally evaluation at the top. He reported that too much emphasis is put on the lower levels of learning and not enough at the top. Used effectively, film can take students to the higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as they apply theories to life on the screen, analyze characters, create new scenarios or endings to films, and evaluate the quality of a film's presentation of relevant concepts.

There is ample anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of using film to teach course concepts in the social sciences. Kirsh (1998) and Tipton and Tiemann (1993) reported a high quality of student work and investment in film-based assignments. Likewise, Baker and Lawrence (1994) reported student homework assignments to be more insightful in a media-based interpersonal communication course than in a traditional section of the same course. Students themselves report to instructors that assignments

involving the educational application of film are particularly rewarding (Anderson, 1992; Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Bluestone, 2000; Desforges, 1994; Fails, 1988; Kirsh, 1998; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993).

Empirical evidence of the effectiveness of teaching with film exists as well. Imig (1981) compared student exam grades across four classroom designs: traditional lecture followed by traditional exam; traditional lecture followed by exam using film clips; traditional lecture, followed by practice exam with film clips, followed by actual exam with film clips; and lecture using film clips followed by exam using film clips. The highest exam scores occurred with the last design, involving film clips in both lecture and exam. Baker and Lawrence (1994) and Smith (1982) reported similar studies involving interpersonal communication and introductory sociology courses taught with traditional lecture and discussion compared to other sections of the same course in which lecture and discussion were supplemented with film and television depictions of course concepts. On all course assessments, the “media” section students performed as well as or better than the traditionally taught students. Smith (1982) also found those students who experienced the course with film incorporated into the classroom experience to be significantly more likely to report an interest in the larger discipline of sociology and in taking more sociology courses. Students have also been found to rate their own understanding of course material significantly higher after illustrative film clips and discussion than before (Paddock et al., 2001).

Burton (1988) stated that more thorough development of characterization and issues can be obtained through a full-length film than isolated film clips. We have found that students often have this “anti-clip” mentality. They often prefer immersion into the full film. We agree with Burton that, through the educational application of full-length film, each student “may learn something of what it feels like to stand in the shoes of a person of... some situation vastly dissimilar to his or her own” (Burton, 1988, p. 264). Yet we also remain open to using film clips in our own courses. We believe film clips can focus students’ attention to a single issue.

Limitations

We have heard colleagues argue that showing film means the instructor is not really teaching. The argument is that instead of lecturing or engaging in discussion, the instructor is simply turning on the television and letting the film deliver the material. It is our contention that instructors must be aware of

this potential abuse of class time and structure learning activities that promote critical thinking concerning the film. We advocate an active, not passive, use of film.

One potential limitation of using feature films to teach course concepts is the amount of class time necessary to view the film. Some instructors assign film viewing for students to do on their own time outside of class (Boyatzis, 1994; Gregg et al., 1995; Proctor, 1990). Others show the assigned film at a scheduled time other than the regular class meeting time, perhaps offering several time slots to allow students to view the film according to their own schedules and/or for students to have the opportunity to view the film more than once (Gregg et al., 1995; Groce, 1992; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993). Other instructors show film during regularly scheduled class time and see the time spent as worthwhile (Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Bluestone, 2000; Gregg et al., 1995). However, if class meets in a less than 3-hour time frame, the necessary starting and stopping of film viewing and discussion may be problematic for continuity (Valdez & Halley, 1999). Instructors might keep in mind that the use of film clips rather than entire feature-length films can solve this time issue.

Additional limitations remain. For example, films are entertaining and therefore may lose educational value (Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Proctor, 1990). Likewise, students may not view the film critically enough if they accept a character's view or experience without question (Anderson, 1992). To remedy these potential limitations, it is necessary for the instructor to structure the film activity educationally.

Instructors do not know what will be too disturbing in a particular film for individual students. Instructors can address this by preparing students ahead of time if a film contains violence, explicit language, or sexual scenes and, if appropriate, providing an alternative assignment (Adler, 1995; Anderson, 1992; Baker, 1997; Gregg et al., 1995; Proctor, 1991).

A final (initial, really) limitation of teaching with film is the amount of time necessary for instructors to find the right illustrative films (Gregg et al., 1995). The appendix following this paper provides an annotated videography of 25 feature films appropriate for depicting various social science curricula. This videography can save Western Carolina University instructors valuable time in finding appropriate films.

Choosing Films

While some author-instructors such as Boyatzis (1994) prefer foreign films to American ones, our experience is that undergraduate students generally respond best to American or other English-language films. Maintaining attention while reading subtitles is often too difficult for undergraduate students and can take away from the intended impact of the film. However, there are at least two foreign-language films that we have found appropriate for our own classes. *My Life as a Dog*, a Swedish film depicting the experience of childhood for a twelve-year-old boy, is an excellent film to depict child development and puberty issues. Likewise, *The Wedding Banquet*, a film that alternately uses English dialogue and Chinese dialogue with English subtitles, presents a captivating look at Chinese-American culture as well as sexual orientation. Similar to the issue of the language of film is the issue of film production date. Like Baker and Lawrence (1994) and Proctor (1990), we find that students tend to prefer contemporary over classic films and can better identify with characters in movies they see as relatively current. Again, there are exceptions. *Ordinary People* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*, for example, both over 20 years old, present in our opinion—and our students’—timeless views of troubled families.

Another area of potential concern in choosing a relevant film is its aesthetic value. We ourselves have wrestled with this issue and concluded that focus in this area is not relevant to our purpose of showing film to illustrate social concepts. We choose to leave film aesthetics to the English, Art, and Film departments. Still, there are some issues of quality in choosing an appropriate film to depict social issues. We are, for example, aware of commercial film’s tendency toward falsification, simplicity, fantasy, and sentimentality. When previewing a potential film for education use, we ask, *Is this film true to the issue?* Yet we are aware that sometimes what a film doesn’t include may be as relevant for highlighting course concepts as what it does include (Hemenover et al., 1999; Loewen, 1991; Valdez & Halley, 1999). Other relevant questions we ask are, *Is the human condition portrayed realistically?*, *Will students relate to the characters?*, *Will this film enable students to see theory in action?* and *Will my presentation of this film facilitate students’ learning of the issue(s)?* We also consider the necessity of any violence, sexuality, or explicit language depicted in a film as we assess its appropriateness for our own courses.

It is imperative, of course, that instructors view any film under consideration ahead of time to assess its appropriateness for use in a particular course and with a particular class of students (Adler, 1995; Baker, 1997; Gregg et al., 1995; Proctor, 1990, 1991). Instructors can obtain relevant films from

university or public libraries, their own collections, or local video rental stores (Baker & Lawrence, 1994).

Showing Films

Showing a feature film in class falls under the “fair use” copyright code (Title 17, Section 110(1) of U.S. Code) (Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Proctor, 1990). It is legal to show film for educational purposes in face-to-face educational settings. It is not legal or ethical to show unlawfully obtained films, such as those videotaped directly from television. It is also not appropriate to show film in television-based distance education courses without proper permission. As elsewhere, here at Western Carolina University, it is legal to show lawfully-obtained films in face-to-face courses (D. Paulson [Hunter Library], personal communication, February 20, 2003; G. Young [Office of Legal Counsel], personal communication, February 21, 2003).

Instructors may choose to show clips of various feature films, an entire feature-length film, or two or more films to illustrate course concepts (Bluestone, 2000; Gregg et al., 1995; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993; Tolich, 1992). Film may be shown before introducing relevant concepts and used as a reference point for clarification or shown after introducing concepts to illustrate the issues (Adler, 1995; Bluestone, 2000; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995). Likewise, film may be used at the beginning of a course or relevant unit to introduce overarching concepts, or at the end of a course or unit to integrate the learned material (Adler, 1995; Anderson, 1992; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998). Film may be shown continuously, or with the instructor stopping the action at relevant points to initiate class discussion (Bluestone, 2000; Manley, 1994).

Assignments stemming from film most often include at least class discussion of relevant concepts (Baker, 1997; Burton, 1988; Desforges, 1994; Gregg et al., 1995; Manley, 1994; Proctor & Rock, 1995; Toman & Rak, 2000; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998; Valdez & Halley, 1999). Class discussion may be free and open, and/or guided by instructor-provided questions. In addition to whole group discussions, instructors might have students work in small groups, each with its own copy of the film. Each group could be assigned a particular problem to explore, which later it would present to the whole class. This activity might allow students to become more involved with the film than they would watching and discussing the

film solely as a whole class. Students could be creative with their presentations – for example, they could perform a role-play or skit to express their ideas.

Film may also serve as the stimulus for application/analysis papers, oral presentations, journal entries, case studies, or examinations. Through any of these formats, students may analyze the film's depiction of course concepts and/or give examples of scenes that illustrate relevant theory (Boyatzis, 1994; Fleming et al., 1990; Higgins & Dermer, 2001; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995; Tipton & Tiemann, 1993).

Students might watch a particular film from one assigned character's point of view and apply developmental models to the character's experience (Higgins & Dermer, 2001). They might speculate what comes next for the characters and defend their opinions with course concepts and theories (Proctor, 1991). They may connect course readings with the film (Gregg et al., 1995; Fleming et al., 1990; Proctor & Rock, 1995; Valdez & Halley, 1999).

Instructors should adequately "set the stage" for students' viewing of film. A handout given prior to showing a film can provide students with a description of the general plot and list of main characters (Baker, 1997; Desforges, 1994). Additionally, the instructor might give students specific concepts or scenes to watch for, and/or questions to answer (Baker, 1997; Boyatzis, 1994; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998; Valdez & Halley, 1999). Or, questions might be given out only after viewing the entire film so that students remain open to any thought or idea during the film, without the instructor leading them in a particular direction.

Specific example

We are confident that here at Western Carolina University, there are many creative uses for using feature film to teach in the social sciences. We wish to share one. In COUN 310: Family Systems, students complete a cumulative take-home final exam in which they connect course concepts and a family depicted in feature film.

Specifically, students are given a list of about five films from which to choose. They independently obtain, view, and analyze their chosen film. They are asked to choose any ten concepts from the course that are presented in the film. For each concept, they write a summary of the research obtained from

course readings and class sessions and then present example(s) of scene(s) in the film that illustrate the concept.

This assignment began as an Honors project in a similar course taught by the instructor. After overwhelming success in terms of both the quality of papers and students' own reactions to the assignment, the instructor changed the project from an Honors experience to an optional final exam for all students (i.e., students individually chose either a traditional final exam or this film application/analysis paper). Immediately 95% of the students chose the film-based exam paper and eventually the instructor dropped the option and now requires this film paper as the final exam. Both the overall quality of students' work and students' reactions to the final assignment remain high. Though this final piece of evidence is anecdotal, it is no less compelling, we think, than our survey of the professional literature.

Conclusion

Feature film can be used in higher education social science courses to illustrate course concepts and increase students' understanding of material. Film can provide a common experience for all students, even of otherwise unfamiliar issues. Film can allow students to connect personally to course content. While recognizing some limitations, we advocate the educational application of feature film.

Students learn best when they are excited, a generalization which seems borne out both by professional research and our own experiences. Nearly all of our students come to our classrooms with a long history of watching movies, and we are suggesting that teachers take advantage of this natural enthusiasm, transferring its energy to our academic subjects. For example, our textbook's description of poverty can be naturally supplemented when we focus our students' attention to a film such as *Hidden in America*. Theoretical concepts from the textbook or lecture will thus become embodied in a compelling movie and students will discuss with enthusiasm the ways in which these fictional "case histories" exemplify or modify their growing awareness of crucial topics in the social science curriculum.

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Appendix

Annotated Videography

Avalon (1990)

Levinson, B. (Director) and Johnson, M., & Levinson, B. (Producers)

Tri-Star Pictures

126 Minutes

Rated PG

In 1914, Sam Krichinsky comes to the United States from Russia, joining his four brothers already here. In the 1940s, the large extended Krichinsky family continues close and interdependent ties. Sam continuously tells the grandchildren stories of the old days: "If you stop remembering, you forget." Into the 1950s though, times and values change. Money and privacy become new goals and the families move from their connected urban apartments to the suburbs.

Actors include: Elizabeth Perkins, Joan Plowright, Kevin Pollack, Aidan Quinn

Issues include: 1940s-1950s history, ethnic minority (Jewish), extended family, gender roles, immigration, late adulthood, marriage, family, developmental stress, intergenerational ties, parent-child issues

Baby Girl Scott (1987)

Korty, J. (Director) and Lombardo, N. (Producer)

ITC Entertainment Group

97 minutes

Not Rated

Neil and Wendy Scott are joyously expecting their first child. When Wendy suddenly goes into premature labor at 6 months of pregnancy, the couple is thrown into crisis. Katy Michelle is born at 1 pound, 4 ounces. Stressors pile up with conflicting doctor reports, family and friends' reactions, the lack of any response from Katy, medical costs, and couple communication difficulties. Eventually Neil and Wendy must decide: continue the "medical torture" of life support and seemingly endless surgeries for their baby who, if she survives, will nearly inevitably face "multiple devastations," or end medical interventions. As difficult as the decision is, it is made harder by disagreement with doctors.

Actors include: Mary Beth Hurt, John Lithgow

Issues include: marriage, medical ethics, pregnancy/birth, premature baby, social policy, unpredictable stress

Bastard Out of Carolina (1996)

Huston, A. (Director) and DiGiulio, A. (Producer)

BMG Independent Films

108 minutes

Rated R

Based on the book by Dorothy Allison, this is the story of Ruth Ann, known as Bone. Bone was born in the aftermath of a car accident and her birth certificate was immediately stamped "ILLEGITIMATE." This was the beginning of her difficult childhood with the worst moments being with her abusive stepfather. The best moments are occasions with her loving mother and aunts. There is serious physical and sexual abuse in this film, which is addressed responsibly, yet viewers need to be prepared. Actors include: Ron Eldard, Glenna Headly, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Lyle Lovett, Jena Malone, Diana Scarwind

Issues include: child abuse, child development, extended family, parenting, poverty, rural living

Boyz n the Hood (1991)

Singleton, J. (Director) and Nicolaides, S. (Producer)

Columbia Pictures

112 minutes

Rated R

In South Central Los Angeles, Tre Stiles is a bright underachiever whose mother senses trouble. She sends him to live with his disciplinarian father. In his teenage years, Tre must choose his own path—college-bound or loyalty to the local gang.

Actors include: Angela Bassett, Ice Cube, Laurence Fishburne, Cuba Gooding Jr.

Issues include: adolescence, coming-of-age, death, ethnic minority (African American), neighborhood violence, parenting, racial issues, single parenting by father, urban living

Chantilly Lace (1993)

Yellen, L. (Director) and Yellen, L., & Ehrlich, R. (Producers)

Columbia Tristar

102 minutes

Rated R

Seven women are reunited over the course of a year for weekend retreats to honor a birthday, a marriage, and a death. They have known each other for their entire lives and during these weekends are able to express to one another their truest emotions. Each has her own individual issues (religion, divorce, sexual orientation, marriage, pregnancy) that are brought to life through laughter, tears, and the threads of their friendship.

Actors include: Lindsay Crouse, Jill Eikenberry, Martha Plimpton, Ally Sheedy, Talia Shire, Helen Slater, Jo Beth Williams

Issues include: death, divorce, illness, lesbian issues, marriage, middle age, pregnancy, religion, unpredictable stress, women's issues

Do the Right Thing (1989)

Lee, S. (Director) and Kilik, J., & Ross, M. (Producers)

Universal

120 minutes

Rated R

Racial tensions and eventually violence flare in Brooklyn, where Italian-Americans own Sal's Pizzeria in a largely African-American community.

Actors include: Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Giancarlo Esposito, Spike Lee, John Turturro

Issues include: community, ethnic minority (African American and Italian-American), neighborhood violence, racial issues, urban living

Fools Rush In (1997)

Tennant, A. (Director) and Draizin, D. (Producer)

Columbia TriStar

109 minutes

Rated PG-13

Isabel Fuentes and Alex Whitman meet, make love, become pregnant, and get married-- in that order. What follows is their adjustment to marriage, pregnancy, and to each other's families-- Alex's uptight, distant European-American parents and Isabel's large, cohesive Mexican-American extended family.

Actors include: Salma Hayek, Matthew Perry

Issues include: courting, extended family, ethnic minority (Mexican American), in-laws, marriage, pregnancy/birth, racial issues (interracial couple)

Get on the Bus (1996)

Lee, S. (Director) and Borden, B., Cannon, R., & Rosenbush, B. (Producers)

Columbia Pictures

121 minutes

Rated R

Twenty men from South Central Los Angeles board a bus bound for Louis Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March. Together on the long trip to Washington, DC, they discuss and discover numerous issues, including racism, sexism, homophobia, politics, careers, shades of skin color, gangs, parenting, infidelity, adolescence, and father abandonment. It is about the journey, not the destination and as their elder prayed when they departed, perhaps each is indeed a better man.

Actors include: DeAundre Bonds, Thomas Jefferson Byrd, Gabriel Casseus, Ossie Davis, Charles S. Dutton, Hill Harper, Roger Guvenneur Smith

Issues include: ethnic minority (African American), men's issues, racial issues

Girls Town (1996)

McKay, J. (Director) and Zalaznick, L. (Producer)

Evergreen Entertainment

90 minutes

Rated R

"This ain't no 90210," says Patti of the lives she and her friends lead. It's the last few weeks of high school and four urban young women face the challenges of being female and eighteen years old. Numerous issues are experienced and discussed by these friends including adolescent pregnancy and parenthood, suicide, rape, partner violence, crime, and parent-teen conflict. What will happen to them after the summer when some leave for college and some don't?

Actors include: Aunjanue Ellis, Anna Grace, Bruklin Harris, Asia Minor, Lili Taylor

Issues include: adolescence, women's issues, urban living

Hidden in America (1996)

Bell, M. (Director) and Ginsburg, D. R., & Berner, F. (Producers)

Evergreen Entertainment & Showtime Networks, Inc.

96 minutes

Rated PG-13

Seven months after the death of his wife, Bill Jenuson is an unemployed former assembly line worker, struggling to make a decent life for his two children, Willa and Robbie. Seeing medical problems due to poor nutrition, a doctor, the father of Willa's best friend, offers to help, but Bill insists, "no one will ever catch me taking a handout." The struggle and Willa's health worsen and Bill finally, reluctantly, applies for food stamps and visits a food bank. Robbie is angered by what he perceives as his father's lack of manhood. Tragedy occurs, yet in the end there is hope. This film is sponsored by the End Hunger Network, who offer a 10-second advertisement before the closing credits.

Actors include: Beau Bridges, Shelton Dane, Bruce Davidson, Alice Krige, Jena Malone, Frances McDormand

Issues include: child development, community, gender issues, parenting, single fatherhood, poverty, social policy

The Joy Luck Club (1993)

Wang, W. (Director and Producer) and Tan, A. Bass, R., & Marley, P. (Producers)

Oliver Stone

139 minutes

Rated R

A young woman embarks on a trip to China to meet the twin sisters she does not know she has until her mother dies. Through the eyes of her mother's three best friends, the stories of generations of Chinese women are told.

Actors include: Tsai Chin, Kleu Chinh, Lisa Lu, France Nuyln

Issues include: cultural differences, death, ethnic minority (Chinese-American), extended family, parent-adult child issues

King of the Hill (1993)

Soderberg, S. (Director) and Maltby, B., Berger, A., & Yerxa, R. (Producers)

MCA Universal

102 minutes

Rated PG-13

Twelve-year-old Aaron is a bright boy coming-of-age in St. Louis during the Great Depression. His financially troubled family includes his out-of-work father, chronically ill mother, and a younger brother who is sent away to live with relatives. Eventually his father obtains work as a traveling salesman and leaves Aaron to fend for himself and protect the family's belongings despite the rent not being paid.

Actors include: Karen Allen, Jesse Bradford, Lisa Eichhorn, Spalding Gray, Jeroen Krabbe

Issues include: 1930s history, child development, coming-of-age, community, poverty, social policy

Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)

Benton, R. (Director) and Jaffe, S. (Producer)

Columbia Pictures

105 minutes

Rated PG

Ted and Joanna Kramer have been married eight years and have a six-year-old son. Ted is a workaholic and Joanna is a stay-at-home mom. Ted comes home one evening to Joanna and a suitcase-- she is leaving. Ted suddenly becomes a full-time father to Billy. A year and a half later, Joanna returns for her son.

Actors include: Dustin Hoffman, Meryl Streep

Issues include: child development, divorce, gender roles, parenting, single fatherhood, unpredictable stress

Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life (1993)

Anders, A. (director) and Hassid, D. & Colpaert, C. J. (Producers)

Cineville & HBO Home Video

92 minutes

Rated R

Lives are intertwined in a Los Angeles Echo Park gang. "Sad Girl" and "Mousie," best friends in childhood, become enemies when they both mother children from Ernesto. When Ernesto is killed, the girls come together again. "Whisper," though injured in the same shooting, shares in taking over Ernesto's drug business. "Giggles" is released from a four-year prison term and refuses to be dependent on "Big Sleepy" or anyone. Ernesto's truck becomes the financial goal for both the homeboys (locos) and homegirls in the gang. Sad Girl's sister, a college student and not a gang member, falls in love with a prisoner who is killed shortly after his release. Sad Girl says, "By the time our boys are 21, most of them will be disabled, in prison, or dead." Yet she believes, "By the time my daughter grows up, she'll own this neighborhood and she can be whatever she wants to be."

Actors include: Angel Aviles, Jesse Borrego, Gabriel Gonzales, Nelida Lopez, Seidy Lopez, Marlo Marron, Julian Reyes, Jacob Vargas

Issues include: adolescence, early adulthood, ethnic minority (Latino), gangs, gender issues, neighborhood violence, urban living

Mr. and Mrs. Loving (1996)

Friedenberg, R. (director) and Paulson, D. (Producer)

Hallmark Hall of Fame; Showtime

95 minutes

Not Rated

This is a true story of Richard and Mildred “Bean” Loving who were married in 1960. From a racially integrated community in Virginia, Richard, a white man and Bean, a black woman, fell in love and married. On their wedding night they were arrested and taken to jail for violating the state law against interracial marriage. Banished from Virginia, they unhappily moved to a Washington, D. C. ghetto. In 1963, an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer took their case and finally, in 1967, the United States Supreme Court, in “Loving versus the Commonwealth of Virginia,” found laws against interracial marriage unconstitutional.

Actors include: Ruby Dee, Timothy Hutton, Bill Nunn, Corey Parker, Lela Rochon, Isaiah Washington
Issues include: 1960s history, community, marriage, racial issues (interracial marriage), social policy

My Family, Mi Familia (1995)

Nava, G. (director) and Thomas, A. (Producer)

New Line Cinema

126 minutes

Rated R

Paco, the eldest child of Jose and Maria Sanchez, tells the story of his family and each generation’s struggle to reach the “American dream.” Jose and Maria began their lives together in the 1920s in east Los Angeles, after Jose traveled a long, hard journey from central Mexico. “Dignity and work” characterize the lives of these devoted parents. In the late 1950s, their son Chucho, tragically rebels while the rest of the now large family pulls together. In the 1980s, Jose asks Maria, “what happened to our children; what did we do wrong?” as they reflect on unmarried Paco, angry ex-con Jimmy, and former nun Antonia. Jimmy and El Salvadorian refugee, Isabella, find one another and start the next generation of Sanchez children, although tragedy ensues and the extended family must raise Carlitos until Jimmy returns. As they sit alone in their house in east L.A., Jose and Maria agree that despite the losses and downfalls, “we’ve had a very good life.”

Actors include: Jenny Gago, Constance Marie, Esai Morales, Edward James Olmos, Eduardo Lopez Rojas, Jimmy Smits.

Issues include: ethnic minority (Mexican American), family, history, intergenerational ties, parent-adult child relationships, parenting, spirituality

My Life as a Dog (1985)

Hallstrom, L. (Director) and Bergendahl, W. (Producer)

Skouras Pictures/Paramount Home Entertainment

101 minutes

Rated PG-13

Twelve-year-old Ingemar is growing up in Sweden in the 1950s. After his single mother falls ill, he is sent to live with relatives. Like Laika, the dog who was sent into space and left to die by the Soviet Union, Ingemar feels abandoned. As he moves into puberty, he struggles to understand females and to make sense of his life.

Actors include: Anton Glanzelius, Melinda Kinnaman, Anki Liden

Issues include: abandonment, child development, coming-of-age, puberty, Swedish culture,

Note: This film is in Swedish with English subtitles.

Ordinary People (1980)

Redford, R. (Director) and Schwary, R. L. (Producer)

Paramount Pictures

124 minutes

Rated R

After the accidental death of a teenage son, a family struggles to regain balance. Conrad, the younger son, works through therapy to recover from a suicide attempt and the guilt he feels over his brother’s death. Beth, the emotionally distant mother/wife, cannot deal with the unpredicted stress. Calvin tries to mediate between his son and wife but struggles as well.

Actors include: Judd Hirsch, Timothy Hutton, Mary Tyler Moore, Donald Sutherland

Issues include: adolescence, death, family, marriage, parenting, therapy, unpredictable stress

Parenthood (1990)

Howard, R. (Director) and Grazer, B. (Producer)

Imagine Productions/MCA Home Video

124 minutes

Rated PG-13

Gil, Helen, Susan, and Larry are adult siblings working at their roles as parents. Gil and his wife Karen try to balance the demands of marriage, employment, and three young children, one of whom has recently been diagnosed with emotional problems. Susan and her husband Nathan are determined to raise their only child to be gifted in every way. Helen struggles with being a divorced single mother to her adolescent children, one rebellious and one withdrawn. Larry largely ignores and ultimately abandons his young son. This is a comedic presentation of the serious job of parenthood.

Actors include: Steve Martin, Rick Moranis, Jason Robards, Mary Steenburgen, Dianne Wiest

Issues include: adolescence, adult siblings, child development, developmental stress, extended family, marriage, middle age, parenting, single parenthood

See You in the Morning (1988)

Pakula, A. J. (Director) and Pakula, A. J., & Solt, S. (Producers)

Lorimar Films

119 minutes

Rated PG-13

The movie opens with glimpses of Larry's and Beth's first marriages, and then presents the developing relationship between the divorced man and widowed woman. When they marry, there are numerous issues arise relating to their new marriage and the blended family it creates. As stressors pile up, Larry talks of frustration with playing "musical families" while his daughter wishes to simply "play family."

Actors include: Drew Barrymore, Jeff Bridges, Farrah Fawcett, Lukas Haas, Alice Krige, Linda Lavin, Frances Sternhagen

Issues include: blended (step) families, divorce, middle age, remarriage, unpredictable stress

Strangers in Good Company (1991)

Scott, C. (Director) and Wilson, D. (Producer)

Touchstone Pictures

101 minutes

Rated PG

Eight aging women are stranded after their bus breaks down in a remote country setting. They are able to find shelter in an old farmhouse and must sleep on the floor and gather food to survive while one woman tries to fix the bus and then attempts the long walk to find help. During their wait, they share memories and dreams of their lives (dancing, singing, first loves, lesbianism, working, parenting, war, religion, heritage, and traditions). Many complex issues are revealed and supported in the company of these women who have lived on different paths but now share a common bond of friendship.

Actors include: Alice Diablo, Winifred Holden, Cissy Meddings, Mary Meigs

Issues include: late adulthood, women's issues

Taken Away (1993)

Patterson, J. (Director) and Myers, K. (Producer)

MCA Universal Home Video

94 minutes

Not Rated

Stephanie Munroe is a single mother, waitress, and student. She works hard to make ends meet and is striving for a better life for herself and her eight-year-old daughter Abby. One evening, as Stephanie runs off to take a midterm exam, she leaves Abby alone in their run-down apartment. When Abby falls, she calls 911 and the police come and take her into custody, assuming neglect and abuse. Stephanie fights social services to get her daughter back. Her lawyer sums up Stephanie's situation, "Poverty-- that's your problem."

Actors include: Valerie Bertinelli

Issues include: parenting, poverty, single parenthood, social policy, unpredictable stress

Twilight of the Golds (1996)

Marks, R. (Director) and Colichman, P., Davimos, J., & Harris, M. R. (Producers)

BMG Independents/Showtime

95 minutes

Rated PG-13

A family is close yet in both subtle and obvious ways, disapproving of David, who is gay. Phyllis and Walter are proud that their daughter Suzanne is married to Rob, a geneticist. Everyone is thrilled when Suzanne announces her pregnancy. Rob's supervisor suggests a full genetic battery on the fetus and reluctantly, Suzanne agrees. It is revealed that the fetus carries the gene to make him 90% likely to be "like David"—Rob cannot even utter the word "gay." Suzanne struggles with the decision to abort or not. The discovery serves as a catalyst for the family to face David's gay orientation.

Actors include: Jennifer Beals, Faye Dunaway, Brendan Fraser, Garry Marshall

Issues include: abortion, ethics, ethnic minority (Jewish), extended family, parent-adult child relations, pregnancy, sexual orientation

The Wedding Banquet (1993)

Lee, A. (Director) and Hope, T., Schamus, J., & Lee, A. (Producers)

Samuel Goldwyn

108 minutes

Rated R

Wai-Tung is a naturalized American citizen from Taiwan. His parents hound him to get married and don't know that he is gay. With his partner Simon's support, he decides to marry an illegal Chinese immigrant acquaintance to help her establish residency and to please his parents. Wai-Tung's parents come to New York and insist on a large, formal wedding banquet. They stay longer than expected and the pretending takes its toll on Wai-Tung and Simon's relationship. Eventually new family ties are formed.

Actors include: Winston Chao, May Chin, Ah-Leh Gua, Mitchell Lichtenstein, Sihung Lung

Issues include: ethnic minority (Chinese-American), family, family secrets, immigration, sexual orientation, wedding

Note: This movie is in English and Chinese and English subtitles

Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995)

Solonds, T. (Director and Producer)

Sony Pictures

87 minutes

Rated R

Dawn Wiener, an awkward junior-high student, is tormented by her peers, humiliated by her teacher, and misunderstood by her mother, whose favorite child clearly is Dawn's bratty, ballet-dancing younger sister. Dawn falls in love with the new singer in her older brother's garage band, while alienating her only friend and slowly befriendng a tormentor. Her early adolescent fantasies don't pan out.

Actors include: Matthew Faber, Daria Kalinina, Eric Mabius, Heather Matarazzo, Brendan Sexton Jr.

Issues include: coming-of-age, developmental stress, early adolescence, parenting, sibling ties