

“Going to the Movies”
By Bruce Paddington

You may wonder why an article about going to the movies finds itself in a column dedicated to educational matters, but I believe we learn as much from informal educational sources as we learn from formal education. Newspapers, magazines, billboards, video games, the Internet, radio, television, and films can entertain and distract us, but can also influence, inform, and, dare I say it, educate us in many profound ways. I reflected on this as I attended the 8th Annual European Film Festival held at Movie Towne from 14 October – 2 November, 2004.

The festival has become more and more popular over the years and many screenings play to full houses. This is especially encouraging as it proves that there is an audience for intelligent films which do not feature well-known stars and which are not produced by the Hollywood studio system. The audiences had the opportunity to enjoy nineteen films from France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. They were all subtitled, except the ones from the UK, thus refuting the view that Trinians would never pay to see films they had to read (although I don't remember that being a problem when Kung Fu films were the rage in the 1970s and 1980s). So why are these films so popular, especially with more and more young people?

The films offer a chance to visit other countries and, unlike in Hollywood films, your experience is guided by persons (directors and actors) from those countries. This helps to counteract the stereotypical representation of most foreign countries in the majority of American films that are shown in Trinidad (Tobago has no cinema and will not have the chance to see these films). The films allow one to enjoy the culture of these countries, and by that I mean the lifestyle of the people, as well as such things as the architecture, music, and other aspects of traditional culture. They also provide the opportunity to listen to foreign languages, although unfortunately Spain was not represented at the festival at a time when the government is promoting Spanish in order to make Trinidad and Tobago a bilingual society.

These arguments are not in themselves sufficient to ensure that such films should attract such large audiences. For this, credit must go to the hard work of the embassies involved, their effective marketing campaign, the quality of the films screened over the years that have built up a loyal audience, and the existence of comfortable and state-of-the-art facilities at Movie Towne. There has also been a tradition of foreign language film festivals being run by NIHERST, while the Kairi Film Festival, the Argentine Embassy, and the Studio Club's weekly screenings at CCA7 have all helped to create an intelligent and interested film-going audience that craves an alternative type of film.

The attendance of so many young people also attests to the fact that the education system must be doing something right in the area of foreign language teaching. NIHERST, The University of the West Indies (UWI), and the many hard-working foreign language teachers in the secondary education system have all helped to motivate their students to improve their language use. And if you do not have the chance to visit foreign countries,

then what better way to appreciate such cultures than from viewing a film made by persons from that country?

The films are not only of interest to foreign language students, as they provide insights into many different areas and issues. One of the most interesting films shown at the Festival was “Kurz und Schmerzlos” (Short Sharp Shock), a German film directed by Fatih Akin. This film reveals the new Europe, a Europe of immigrants. The film is set in Hamburg and focuses on three friends, a Turk, a Greek and a Serb. Gabriel, the Turk, attempts to reform himself after his time in prison, and the film emphasises the influence of his family and the importance of the Muslim religion. Costa, the Greek, a small-time thief, is involved with Gabriel’s sister and the film explores his religious beliefs as we witness him in church and wearing a crucifix. This, however, cannot save Costa and Bobby, the charming Serb hustler, as they become entangled with an Albanian mafia boss. The films thus act as an allegory for the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s in Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Albania. It is also a sad testament to the condition of many immigrants in the new Europe who suffer racism and unemployment as they strive to adapt to their new homelands.

The festival also offered a number of films for children, including the French animation film “Kirikou and the Witch,” which is set in Africa and follows the adventures of Kirikou as she frees her village from the witch’s evil control. This film is a beautiful example of storytelling and moral values and can be used to encourage students’ creative writing.

These films offer a delightful and thought-provoking alternative to the average mindless Hollywood films seen in this country. They offer an educational experience that should not be missed. The embassies should make these, and other such films, available to schools and tertiary-level institutions so that many more can enjoy going to the movies, even in their classrooms. In this regard, the teacher plays a critical role in previewing the film, determining its suitability, and deciding on the most appropriate way to present it in an educational setting.

Hopefully, the success of this festival will encourage other embassies, and Movie Towne itself, to show more international and independent productions on an ongoing basis and help to make Trinidad and Tobago a less parochial and more informed and educated nation.

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