Film Debates

How they could help to improve our real life relationships in the internet era
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There's always been an old Chicago newspaper joke: "Everyone has two jobs: Their own, and *sports writer*." In Hollywood, it rather reads "Everyone has two jobs: Their own, and *film critic*."

In our daily life we experience that the showing of a film doesn't end with the end credits.

Quite often the spectators feel the need to talk about what they have seen, in either positive or negative terms. At first glance we could describe the film watching activity as a passive one. In fact it arouses all sorts of reactions.

In the last year and a half, we worked on the Slow Tech project and we made a journey from virtual life to real life. Better: we made several journeys into the screens of electronic media – to understand better how we function in contact with them – and then back to the real world.

The film debate activity could be a great way to do this journey in a very simple way and with basic tools. The idea is to watch a film together with other people – family, friends, association, church groups, film-clubs, etc. – and then talk about the film: it is that simple!

Positive aspects of film-debates

There are many positive aspects about exchanging after watching a movie and I want to underline that it is a very simple activity.

We just have to name our emotions, to describe our feelings, to list the sequences of the film which we preferred or that we disliked. Or to name the main characters and the way they move on in the plot: just to give a few examples.

Putting words on emotions and expressing ideas can help us to « tame » the screen: to take a distance from that object – the screen – to which we are often too close.

The fact of talking about the main sense – or message if we prefer – of the film, could lead us to talk about values; and this is a « must » when we are dealing with young people[1].

Another important subject to arise with young people is « choices »: in fact the main characters move on the film plot making choices all the time. This could be a good starting point to better understand the importance of choices in our daily life.

Experts say that « when members of a film audience view a film, some let it wash over them, some intellectualize its ideas, some read its aesthetics, and some experience it[2] ». I think that most people consider film watching mainly « entertainment ». The Slow Tech project underline that the cultural aspects are also very important. Story, geography, language: just to name some of the fields where films could improve our skills. But I consider another aspect still more relevant: movies could help us appreciate other people, from different countries and cultures. Even people against whom we may have prejudices. Overall, film watching and debating could be a great mind opening.

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1 The novelist A. S. Byatt wrote: "The human capacity to think, and to make feelings into thoughts, is the way out of narcissism." (*Novel Thought*s, 2007)

2 *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past*

Methods

Overview

First of all we need to know our audience a little bit: age range, social background, and experience in film watching. In my experience the main question remains: are these people ready to watch something challenging to start with, or we should rather go through an easy approach? (which means a « lighter » movie…). As a consequence, the days before the session, I have to choose a movie and watch it with the audience in mind. Sometimes I understand that my first choice was not appropriate.

Time

Time factor is very important: how much time do we have for the overall process? (introducing the film, watching it, discussing afterwards). This will influence our film choice. Example: if only 2 hours are available, the film should last less than 90 minutes. Or we could opt for a longer film to watch in two sessions.

Place

The choice of the place is very important, and it is often under estimated. It should be:

- easy of access ;
- quite dark, in order to see the screen well ;
- the screen should be placed opposite the entrance door (people arriving late will disturb less) ;
- without background noise ; (I once projected a film for teenagers next door to a Turkish wedding : the background music was a real pain)
- with a decent temperature: not too cold or too hot.

Equipment

This is another point which is often under estimated. It is important:

- to see well = the screen should be big enough and bright enough ;
- to hear well = to have a decent sound without distortions ;
- to avoid shaky or jerky projection: this is often happening when we use a laptop unsuitable for video playback.

Extras

The fact to allow popcorn or drinks during the projection sets a climate which plays often against the goal of a cultural event. Drinks, pizzas, ice-creams, etc. should be kept for the end of the session.

Three steps procedure

1. *Introduction*

Especially the first time, it is important to make it clear from the very beginning that we are not meeting just to have fun. Entertainment is part of the session, but the main goal of a cine-debate is <u>to grow together</u>.

We should then say something about the movie:

a) why we have chosen this one, conveying the feeling that we like this film very much and we would like to share it with our audience ;

b) without anticipating the plot, one or two possible paths to help to « read » the film; (e.g. the importance of colours, the evolution of the main character, the usage of music and silence, etc.);

c) that a debate will follow in order to understand better the plot and the meaning of this work of art; people should not be worried about not understanding everything because some explanations will follow the show.

2. *Watching the film*

In the case of a foreign film, it is correct to ask the audience if they prefer the original soundtrack with subtitles or the local language version. This is only possible if the option is present on the DVD.

It is also fair to show the existence of a « physical » DVD, which has been bought or borrowed: this is a simple statement against illegal downloading, which should not be encouraged.

3. *The debate*

This is the most important and more delicate part. First of all, depending on the subject of the film, we should allow some idle time just to « digest » it. Let the end credits roll to the end, may be lowering step by step the soundtrack (it's often music). If possible, switch on the lights gradually. May be some extra minutes of silence are required.

One person (or 2-3 maximum) should then stand in front of the audience and start the debate.

The procedure depends a lot on the kind of public we are facing, and also on our personal taste. I give here just a few examples.

In the beginning, all together, we can leave the discussion very open, just asking: « … *and so, what do you think?* » or « *How do you feel?* » This could be a good starting point: just to let feelings be expressed freely.

We could then pass to a more structured exchange. This could be done:

1. all together ;
2. in small groups ;
3. in small groups for a given time, and then all together.

We could help the debate with questions.

Some of these questions could be quite general, for example:

    a) Who are the main characters and why are them important?

    b) The plot unwinds in a long or a short period of time? (hours, days, months, years?)

    c) Which are the most important moments of the film?

    d) What did you struggle with in the movie?

    e) How the relationships among the characters change? Why do they change?

    f) Did the director have a main goal?

There are then questions which are specific to each film: this is another important reason for watching the film <u>before</u> the cine-debate session and prepare ourselves.

More tips about debates

If we are all together, questions could be projected on the screen, one by one.
Small group debate will give to everyone the opportunity to speak, even to the shy. In fact it is much easier to have a conversation among 5 to 8 people, rather than 20 or more.
Questions could be prepared in advance: one series of questions on sheet of paper for each group. Or, for every single group, a set of questions, each on a small piece of paper, so that participants could dip into the lot.

By discussing themes in a film, it is often possible to talk about the deep themes of life: love, loss, hope, despair, joy, pain, etc.

One of the main tasks of the animator(s) is to help people to connect their lives with the content of the film.

In any case it is essential:

    a) to focus on the subject of the movie ;

    b) to avoid that very talkative people talk too much ;

    c) to help people speak about themselves, rather than about philosophy, or aesthetics, or the last piece of news ... ;

    d) to help people to be polite, respectful, etc.

For web links, please visit : www.slowtech.eu

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