

What's wrong with this picture?
Critical documentary film as a catalyst for
change

Using Feature Films as 'Critical
Documentary' in Management Education

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Why use feature films?

- Feature films are usually fictional, produced for mass 'entertainment' rather than for information, education or critical/political analysis.
- They are produced by powerful media conglomerates whose main motivation is to make a profit
- They are highly 'conventional' and 'stereotypical', using narrative forms such as character and plot and temporal structures, established through the 'Hollywood' film system
- They use specific cinematic techniques designed to manipulate the emotions and sometimes the intellect of audiences
- They are dominated by the 'star' system and use actors with box office appeal rather than any political agenda
- So, (how) can they be 'critical' or 'document' organizational life?



A rich resource for teaching and learning

- Film enables the 'visual exaggeration' of behaviour and characteristics (Champoux 2001) and the 'textual exaggeration' of storylines and dialogue: these help to illustrate and reinforce organizational issues and debates
- They present topics in ways which are more graphic, engaging, sharply defined, motivating and memorable than conventional classroom methods
- They may cover issues which are difficult to raise through other classroom methods
- They enable students to encounter situations, events and contexts which they may have had no access to in their own lives and experiences



Towards a critical approach

- Although by no means offering an unmediated window on 'reality', their representations and interpretations of organizational behaviour can be useful in triggering critical questions and lively debate
- A growing range of films exist which explore issues of power, inequality, oppression, exploitation, conflict and resistance. These are often contextualised in international political landscapes, enabling critical readings of management and organizational decision making in global contexts (Billsberry, Charlesworth and Leonard, forthcoming)



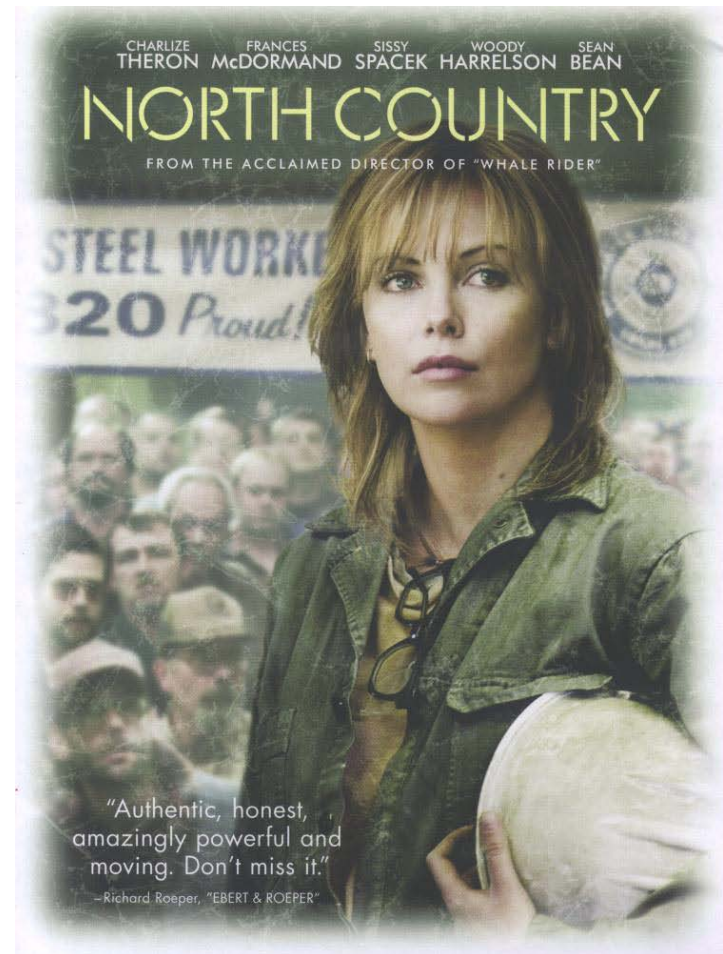
Using feature films as 'critical documentary'

- Feature films cover wide-ranging topics including:
- health and safety
- environmental pollution and climate change
- mergers, acquisitions, liquidations
- the effect of consumerism
- employment hierarchies and relations
- sexual/racial harassment and discrimination
- the impact of unemployment (personal and community)
- exploitation (national and international)
- use and abuse of knowledge, power and technology
- strategic management



Seeing diversity

- Allow us to see events through *multiple* voices and *diverse* standpoints: not just through a managerialist lens
- Although often feature dramatic and large scale events, they can provide a metaphor for the everyday and small scale, and thus resonate with students' own lives



Representation vs Reality

- However, using feature films in management education demands acquisition of 'film literacy'
- Feature films *represent* rather than *reflect* reality, and tend to 'exaggerate, sensationalize and glamorize characters and events' (Buchanan and Huczynski 2004: 314) often through the use of 'stereotypes'
- A narrow range of subjects, contexts and identities are favoured (eg large American corporations, corruption and takeovers, white heterosexual young/middle aged, able-bodied masculinity)
- Students need to be equipped to 'deconstruct' filmic representations, or 'read' the 'language' and 'grammar' of films (Hassard and Buchanan 2009) to recognize that there are multiple ideological discourses at play
- Students also need to be aware that there is no singular 'correct' reading: diversity of audience biographies mean multiple responses and readings



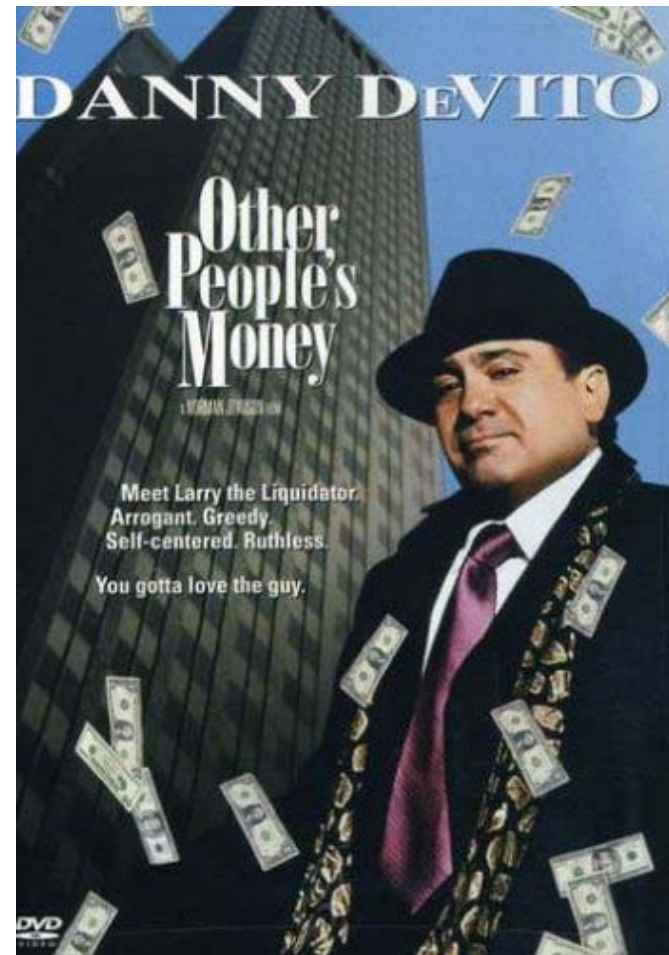
Pedagogic techniques

- Facilitator identifies a film to explore a particular ethical issue or responsibility (nb multiple resources exist to help with this!)
- As a group, watch some key scenes together and discuss reading/viewing techniques and strategies:
 - **Segmentation /Connotation:**
- break the key parts of the film into segments to describe *inter alia* time, place and action, record key dialogue, nonverbal communication (eye movement, facial expression, bodily comportment) , signs and symbols, music, cinematic techniques (connotation)



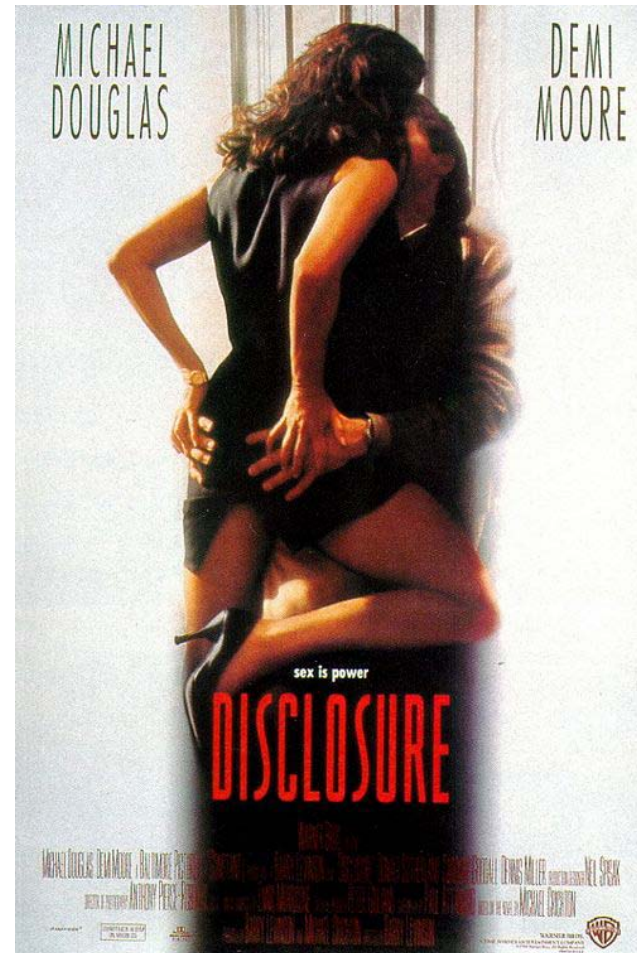
'Watching for a purpose'

- **Analysis:** to interpret or 'decode' the meanings of events, symbols and dialogue
- Key questions identified by facilitator for exploration and contemplation, at the level of the whole film and/or key segments
- E.g. Is there an ethical/moral dilemma for the organization/manager and what is this?
- How is this represented?
- What ethical guidelines are used to decide a course of action, and how do these vary by character (standpoint)?
- Who behaves ethically or unethically?
- What is the impact on others and is this justified?
- What questions are raised about Rights? Justice? Social responsibility? Utilitarianism? Leadership? Integrity? Equality/diversity? Representation of race and gender?
- What are the multiple ideologies of the film? (i.e. messages of film vs American production context?)



Personal response

- Students record their own responses to the film as they watch
- Group discussion:
- What is the impact of the film?
- What is my (ethical)position on this issue?
How would I act?
- Do films such as these enable or achieve resistance?



Conclusions: film literacy as a key management skill

- The ability to read/deconstruct films is a skill which can *also* be usefully applied to critique organization and management theory
- Organization theory *also* uses conventional rhetorical devices and in the process makes intertextual links with aspects of narrative and genre (Leonard 2002, 2004)
- Whilst this can limit their potential to achieve change, developing awareness and skills encourages creativity and new knowledges



References

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