
Film and Social Change:

Plus The Top 101 Films that Inspire Social Change



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Overview: Cinema, Social Consciousness and Social Change

In the world of cinema the words 'film' and 'movies' are synonymous. A movie usually refers to a motion picture for the masses whereas a film is something with more artistic and or educational appeal. The primary purpose of a movie (or feature film) is entertainment and for the studios that make them, profit. The purpose of a film (typically documentaries) is to build awareness. However, the two are not mutually exclusive.

Auteur theory holds that, 'a director's films reflect that director's personal creative vision, as if he/she were the primary "Auteur"', meaning author. From the earliest silent films to contemporary times motion pictures have crossed over and both entertained and educated the viewing audience.

Films use allegory through symbolic representation to convey a meaning other than the literal. In Charlie Chaplin films, the literal is the story of a tramp and the comedy arising from everyday events. The allegorical is the reflection on the times from the effects of automation to the class difference between rich and poor in films like *Modern Times*.

Filmmakers are one of the social conduits reflecting and commenting about society and the times. Motion pictures can highlight social issues from economic and environmental justice, women's health, violence against women, worker rights, homelessness, discrimination and poverty to all forms of human rights abuses. Good films can raise awareness and be a start to addressing local and global issues. They can educate about cultures, and give a broader political, religious, or social context. They can dispel long-held misconceptions as well as be a catalyst for social change.

Most of all if they can entertain and engage they can cross the chasm of feature films and documentaries. What follows is a brief narrative and history of social film and MyFavoriteReview.com's top 101 social change films. The list is composed mainly of feature films that not only entertain but also educate as well as some documentaries that do the reverse.

History of social film and film movements

Since the dawn of film in the early twentieth century, many social issues have been addressed from abortion, labor issues, voting rights, domestic violence, mistreatment of minorities, and others.

American director DW Griffith and his pioneering and controversial 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and the subsequent 1916 film *Intolerance* are the most well known of films that made social commentary in that time. *Birth of a Nation* turned out to be a controversial film because of its depiction of slavery and the Ku Klux Klan. The film was considered sexist and reinforced representations of African-Americans. It generated so much criticism and controversy that Griffith followed it with *Intolerance* which showed the dangers of racism and prejudice. However, it too was deemed racist with tones of anti-Semitic and anti-Arab representations. *Birth of a Nation* generated so much criticism that an entire movement, race cinema, evolved to counter the negative stereotyping of African-Americans.

In Europe, Italian neo-realism set the stage of films that addressed the difficult social conditions brought about by World War II in the 1940s. Films like *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* reflected the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances facing poverty and anxiety. There were similar movements in Germany, with the rise of New German Cinema. France followed the Italians in the late 1950s and 1960s with 'The New Wave' which not only addressed cinematic form but also addressed the social and political issues of the time with films like *The 400 Blows*.

In India, the Indian New Wave, also known as Art or Parallel Cinema set the stage for films that made social commentary. Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal are two of the many famous directors that helped set the stage for the new wave. Many of these films won major prizes at the film festivals at Cannes, Venice and Berlin including Bimal Roy's *Two Acres of Land* (1953) and Ray's Apu Trilogy consisting of *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *The World of Apu* (1959).

Film movements know no boundaries and the baton of neo-realism and socially conscious films have been passed onto many a nation over time. One of the most striking examples is that of socially conservative and religious Iran. Although the New Wave of Cinema in

Iran started in the 1960s, Abbas Kiarostami in the 1970s and beyond with *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us* has given Persian Cinema visibility on the world cinematic stage. Other directors such as Majid Majidi, Tahmineh Milani and Jafar Panahi have taken Iranian Cinema to new heights, including awards at major festivals.

Social film ecosystem and genre

Films about social change and commercial films that are successful in the box office are normally considered mutually exclusive. Art films are usually shown at festivals and those that gain distribution are usually shown in Art theaters and other venues. Other films may go directly to DVD. The landscape of films that address social change is dynamic and there are many innovations and interesting inflexion points that have happened.

Filmmaker Michael Moore redefined the documentary. Moore single-handedly made the documentary a commercial success. *Fahrenheit 9/11* grossed over \$220M worldwide. Not only have his films about violence (*Bowling for Columbine*), healthcare (*Sicko*) or the financial crisis (*Capitalism: a love story*) made headlines, but they do so in an entertaining way.

Jeff Skoll, the first president of auction giant eBay, started Participant Media. Participant has produced a string of feature films and documentaries that not only entertain but as Participant's Mission statement says, 'tell compelling, entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives'. Participant is the production company behind Al Gore's *An inconvenient truth*. This documentary film has brought world-wide attention to the problem of climate change. Other films address issues or build awareness of problems from Darfur (*Darfur Now*) to providing insights into the global oil industry with the political thriller *Syriana*. Participant not only produces the films but then works with other organizations and finds ways to get audiences involved. Participant has working relationships with 112 non-profits that collectively have the potential of reaching over 60 million people. This is the potential power of social change through film.

Social commentary is not limited to documentaries and features. A new wave of animated features extend the social commentary dialogue. *Wall-E* follows a robot designed to clean up a waste-covered Earth far in the future. He eventually falls in love with another robot named Eve, and follows her into outer space on an adventure that

changes the destiny of both his kind and humanity. *Happy Feet*, an animated feature with live-action, addresses the subject of being unique and using talents and skills from the point of view of a tap-dancing penguin. *Perspolis*, a French-Persian animated feature, looks at the revolution in Iran.

Persepolis unfolds from a young Iranian girl's perspective who is growing up in Tehran and the cultural conflict she faces as she moves to Paris. *Waltz with Bashir* is an animated feature that deals with the recurring nightmares of a former Israeli soldier who witnessed the war in Lebanon and the subsequent massacres of refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps. The soldier has suppressed memories and to discover the truth, he interviews his peers to reveal the realities of what happened in those fateful days.

Film, whether narrative, documentary or animation can be used to build awareness of issues. Besides funding and making a film, getting distribution is the other major challenge. In the social change eco-system, distributors too are focused on this genre. An example is Mongrel Media, one of Canada's leading film distribution companies specializing in art house, foreign and independent feature films and documentaries. There are many others including Facets Multimedia, Film Movement, Kino International and the Global Film Initiative.

MyFavoriteReview.com's top 101 social change films

There are many lists of films compiled in books as well as online. One of the most popular lists is the American Film Institute with its '100 Greatest American Movies of all time'. On Amazon, there are thousands of film lists put up by individuals under Listmania. The question may arise as to why create another list? To answer this question goes to the heart of why MyFavoriteReview.com was created.

With large databases of films on IMDb, Amazon and other sites it becomes a challenge to find good films that are independent, international, and have a social theme. Just as with best-seller books, primarily big-budget movies get the lion's portion of the marketing and publicity dollars. This leaves many a good film buried until someone makes it their mission to discover them.

At MyFavoriteReview.com reviewers watch thousands of DVDs in all languages and genres. From the best, socially conscious, independent or international content, reviews of the best are written.

Selection criteria

In a sea of films produced since the last century, how does one select a film that makes it to the top 101 social change films? It is not an easy proposition. The finalist films were rated on narrative, direction/editing, the entertainment and education value and finally the uniqueness of the way the filmmaker has carried that message.

The following is a disclaimer. Reviews and lists by their nature are subjective. Ratings and numbers even though apparently having a scientific feel to them are still based on the reviewers' assessment. Add the number of films out there and the task becomes a problem. The reviewers at MyFavoriteReview have painstakingly gone through most of the collections of the libraries in the South San Francisco bay area. From Milpitas to Mountain View and San Jose to Sunnyvale, no DVD has been left untouched. However, no list is perfect, in inclusion or ranking.

A film's primary purpose is that of entertainment. Social awareness, consciousness, commentary and change are all by-products. that a film may invoke. Just as with food, good food provides not only calories but nutrition. If a film makes a connection with the audience, if it entertains, inspires, and motivates then that is a film that is reviewed and included. Below is the list.

101 Must See Socially Conscious films

Description

101	Grbavcia, the land of my dreams	A Bosnian mother and daughter deal with the repercussions of the Balkan wars
100	Angels in the Dust	is the story of a courageous, self-sacrificing, fiercely loving woman who chooses a spiritual path over a material one
99	Blessed by Fire	The suicide of an old soldier buddy brings up some old memories for an Argentinian man.
98	Man Push Cart	A night in the life of a former Pakistani rock star who now sells coffee from his push cart on the streets of Manhattan.
97	The Last Emperor	The story of the final Emperor of China.
96	The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum	Katharina Blum is a young handsome German maid. She meets Ludwig, and they fall in love at once. They spend the night together...
95	Witness	A young Amish boy is sole witness to a murder; policeman John Book goes into hiding in Amish country to protect him until the trial.
94	The Road to Guantanamo	Part drama, part documentary, The Road to Guantánamo focuses on the Tipton Three, a trio of British Muslims who were held in Guantanamo Bay for two years until they were released without charge.
93	A Beautiful Mind	The downside of brilliance in the life of a mathematical genius
92	A day without a Mexican	How life would be if there were no Latinos in California
91	American Gun	Seemingly disparate portraits of people -- among them a single mother, a high school principal, an ace student -- Distinctly American -- all affected by the proliferation of guns in American society
90	Arranged	A Jewish and Muslim woman become friends in a Brooklyn school
89	Away from her	A man coping with the institutionalization of his wife because of Alzheimer's disease faces an epiphany when she transfers her affections to another man, Aubrey, a wheel chair-bound mute who also is a patient at the nursing home.
88	Bamako	A mock court in Africa tries the IMF and World Bank for the peoples woes
87	Bhopal	A replay of the events that led to the Bhopal chemical leak in India
86	Blood diamond	A fisherman, a smuggler, and a syndicate of businessmen match wits over the possession of a priceless diamond.
85	Cape of Good Hope	A Drama revolving around 3 women's lives and how they are intertwined.
84	Erin Brockovich	An unemployed single mother becomes a legal assistant and almost single-handedly brings down California power company accused of polluting a city's water supply.
83	Food, Inc.	An unflattering look inside America's corporate controlled food industry.
82	Good Night and Good Luck	Broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow looks to bring down Senator Joseph McCarthy.

81	Men with guns	Humberto Fuentes is a wealthy doctor whose wife has recently died.
80	My Family	Traces over three generations an immigrant family's trials, tribulations, tragedies, and triumphs.
79	North Country	A fictionalized account of the first major successful sexual harassment case in the United States Jenson vs. Eveleth Mines, where a woman who endured a range of abuse while working as a m filed and won the landmark 1984 lawsuit.
78	Rendition	A CIA analyst questions his assignment after witnessing an unorthodox interrogation at a secret detention facility outside the US.
77	Schindlers List	Oskar Schindler uses Jews to start a factory in Poland during the war. He witnesses the horrors endured by the Jews, and starts to save them.
76	Side Effects	A corporate pharmaceuticals executive struggles with ethics
75	Smoke Signals	Young Indian man Thomas is a nerd in his reservation, wearing oversize glasses and telling everyone stories no-one wants to hear...
74	Soldier Child	Soldier Child tells the stories of the atrocities and brutality endured by children forced to serve the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).
73	Standard Operating Procedure	Errol Morris examines the incidents of abuse and torture of suspected terrorists at the hands of forces at the Abu Ghraib prison.
72	The Dove's Lost Necklace	The second part of Nacer Khemir's Desert Trilogy
71	The Killing Fields	A photographer is trapped in Cambodia during tyrant Pol Pot's bloody "Year Zero" cleansing campaign, which claimed the lives of two million "undesirable" civilians.
70	The story of Qiu Ju	A pregnant peasant woman seeks redress from the Chinese bureaucracy after the village chief her husband in the groin in this comedy of justice...
69	V for Vendetta (dup)	A shadowy freedom fighter takes on a dystopian regime in the near future
68	Bawandar	Faced with a corrupt police force, an even more corrupt judicial system fueled more by wealth, influence, and caste rather than the rule of law, will a rape victim succeed in getting the justice s deserves?
67	Bury my heart at wounded knee	A chronicle of how American Indians were displaced as the U.S. expanded west.
66	Charlie Wilsons War	A drama based on a Texas congressman Charlie Wilson's covert dealings in Afghanistan, where efforts to assist rebels in their war with the Soviets have some unforeseen and long-reaching effects.
65	Children of a Lesser God	A speech teacher falls in love with his deaf student
64	Chop Shop	Two Latino orphans struggle to make a better life in a chaotic world
63	Darfur Now	An examination of the genocide in Sudan's western region of Darfur.
62	Dil Se	The clash between love and ideology is portrayed in this love story between a radio executive and a beautiful revolutionary.
61	Fireproof	In an attempt to save his marriage, A firefighter uses a 40-day experiment known as "The Love Dare".

60	Heaven and Earth	The final movie in Oliver Stone's Vietnam trilogy follows the true story of a Vietnamese village g
59	Human Trafficking	Hundreds of thousands of young women have vanished from their everyday lives-forced by viol
58	I am Sam	A mentally retarded man fights for custody of his 7-year-old daughter, and in the process teache
57	Ikiru	Kanji Watanabe is a longtime bureaucrat in a city office who, along with the rest of the office, sp
56	John Q	A down-on-his luck father, whose insurance won't cover his son's heart transplant, takes the
55	Lord of War	An arms dealer confronts the morality of his work as he is being chased by an Interpol agent.
54	Monsieur Ibrahim	In Paris, a Turkish shop owner befriends a Jewish boy in his mid-teens.
53	Norma Rae	A young single mother and textile worker agrees to help unionize her mill despite the problems
52	Not Easily Broken	A car accident and shifting affections test the bond between a married couple.
51	Prisoner of the Mountains	Two Russian soldiers are captured by Chechen fighters and taken to their village.
50	Pursuit of Happiness	A struggling salesman takes custody of his son as he's poised to begin a life-changing professio
49	Super Size Me	While examining the influence of the fast food industry, Morgan Spurlock personally explores th
48	Taxi To the Dark Side	In 2002, a young cab driver picked up a few passengers near his home in Afghanistan... He nev
47	Thank you for smoking	Satirical comedy follows the machinations of Big Tobacco's chief spokesman, Nick Naylor, who
46	The Visitor	A college professor travels to New York City to attend a conference and finds a young couple liv
45	The World According to Sesame Street	A documentary which examines the creation and co-production of the popular children's televisi
44	Tsotsi	Six days in the violent life of a young Johannesburg gang leader (Chweneyagae).
43	Wag the Dog	Before elections, a spin-doctor and a Hollywood producer join efforts to "fabricate" a war in orde
42	Waltz with Bashir	An Israeli film director interviews fellow veterans of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon to reconstruct
41	Water	The film examines the plight of a group of widows forced into poverty at a temple in the holy city
40	Bagong Buwan	This movie is about the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao, Philippines and its effect on civilians.
39	A walk to remember	Two teens deal with growing up, love, and death

38	Absence of Malice	Suppose you picked up this morning's newspaper and your life was a front page headline... And everything they said was accurate... But none of it was true.
37	Born into Brothels	Two documentary filmmakers chronicle their time in Sonagchi, Calcutta and the relationships they developed with children of prostitutes who work the city's notorious red light district.
36	Capitalism: A Love Story	examines the disastrous impact of corporate dominance on the everyday lives of Americans
35	Control Room	A drama about a mother and daughter hiding from violent criminals in a secure room in their new home
34	Dances with Wolves	Lt. John Dunbar, exiled to a remote western Civil War outpost, befriends wolves and Indians, making him an intolerable aberration in the military.
33	Dr. Strangelove	An insane general starts a process to nuclear holocaust that a war room of politicians and generals frantically try to stop.
32	Firaaq	Deals with the aftermath of Gujrat riots and effects on everyday people.
31	Goodbye Solo	Two men form an unlikely friendship that will change both of their lives forever.
30	Guess Who's Coming to Dinner	Matt and Christina Drayton are a couple whose attitudes are challenged when their daughter brings home a fiancé who is black.
29	Kundun	From childhood until adulthood, Tibet's 14th dalai lama deals with Chinese oppression and other problems.
28	Maria Full of Grace	A pregnant Colombian teenager becomes a drug mule to make some desperately needed money for her family.
27	One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest	Upon arrival at a mental institution, a brash rebel rallies the patients together to take on the oppressive Nurse Ratched, a woman more a dictator than a nurse.
26	Prince Among Slaves	The True Story of an African Prince who Survived Slavery in America.
25	Pay it forward	A young boy attempts to make the world a better place after his teacher gives him that chance.
24	Platoon	A young recruit in Vietnam faces a moral crisis when confronted with the horrors of war and the duality of man.
23	Rabbit-Proof Fence	In 1931, three aboriginal girls escape after being plucked from their homes to be trained as domestic staff and set off on a trek across the Outback.
22	Sin Nombre	Honduran teenager Sayra reunites with her father, an opportunity for her to potentially realize her dream of a life in the U.S...
21	Stand and Deliver	A dedicated teacher inspires his dropout prone students to learn calculus to build up their self-esteem and do so well that they are accused of cheating.
20	The Crime of Padre Amaro	Politics and sexual passions threaten to corrupt a young, newly-ordained priest in a small Mexican town.
19	The Fourth World War	Documentary about the conflict in the Middle East
18	Trade	The story of a Mexican girl taken by sex traffickers
17	Traitor (dup)	An FBI officer is drawn into an international conspiracy
16	Wall-e	In the distant future, a small waste collecting robot inadvertently embarks on a space journey that will ultimately decide the fate of mankind.

15	The Message	The Story of the life of the Propet Mohammed
14	Paradise Now	Two childhood friends are recruited for a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.
13	Blood and Oil	The film unearths declassified documents and highlights forgotten passages in prominent presidential doctrines to show how concerns about oil have been at the core of American foreign policy for more than 60 years -- rendering our contemporary energy and military policies virtually indistinguishable.
12	Bordertown	A journalist investigates a series of murders near American-owned factories on the border of Ju and El Paso.
11	El Norte	?
10	Wall Street	A young and impatient stockbroker is willing to do anything to get to the top, including trading on illegal inside information taken through a ruthless and greedy corporate raider whom takes the young man under his wing.
9	An Inconvenient Truth	A documentary on Al Gore's campaign to make the issue of global warming a recognized problem worldwide.
8	Bowling for Columbine	Filmmaker Michael Moore explores the roots of America's predilection for gun violence.
7	Crash	Several stories interweave during two days in Los Angeles involving a collection of inter-related characters...
6	Khuda Kay Liye (In the name of God)	The film is about the difficult situation in which the Pakistanis in particular and the Muslims in general are caught up since 9/11...
5	Babel	Tragedy strikes a married couple on vacation in the Moroccan desert, touching off an interlocking story involving four different families.
4	Citizen Kane	Following the death of a publishing tycoon, news reporters scramble to discover the meaning of his final utterance.
3	Ghandi	A biography on the life and times of Mhatama Ghandi
2	Slum Dog Millionaire	A Mumbai teen who grew up in the slums, becomes a contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" He is arrested under suspicion of cheating, and while being interrogated, events from his life history are shown which explain why he knows the answers.
1	Syriana	A politically-charged epic about the state of the oil industry in the hands of those personally involved and affected by it.

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