

Do films offer anything more than an escape from reality?

Pandora of 'Avatar', Middle-Earth of 'Lord of the Rings' and Gotham City of 'The Dark Knight' epitomise what is at the heart of a good movie: the ability to immerse viewers into a fictitious world. The function of movies is to create a surreal experience starkly different from mundane reality, through visual depictions, in order to provide entertainment. Some superficial individuals might argue that the function remains as such, nothing more. However, there is so much more that films provide, apart from an escape from reality. On a deeper level, they have the ability to touch us poignantly, impress upon us fresh perspectives, and even influence our attitudes and behaviour. Films have the power to capture and to inspire.

Films, through impressive visual displays and state-of-the-art cinematographic technologies, create a surreal experience of ethereal beauty. Such feast for the eyes allow individuals to become immersed in a fictitious world, distanced from dull reality.

The ability of films to imagine and create what is different from daily life gives it a unique position — an escapade and respite for stress from the fast-paced hustle and bustle of modern cities. Envision the pristine idyllic fields of Shire in Middle-Earth, the bioluminescent flora and fauna of Pandora and the breathtaking, boldly imagined technologies that defy gravity found in the surreal dream world of 'Inception' — they all seem to transport us to another world. The few hours in the cinema removes one from reality and allows one to revel in the fantastic world-building done by the director, through a myriad of senses being engaged. Evidently, graphics are a defining feature of films, ostensibly suggesting that the most important and primary function of films would be to provide an escapade through engaging viewers' senses. The biggest prize of any film lies in the sheer grandeur and majesty of the big screen. Recent years have seen a further advancement, from 3-dimensional display to IMAX images to Dolby Atmos Audio Technology, further adding to the experience where everything seems to come alive and surround viewers. The biggest progression in films across years is visuals; it clearly shows that the priority of films is to provide a transcendent experience — one that makes us momentarily forget the world we live in and instead revel in another imagined world, thereby offering a sanctuary from the distressing issues of reality.

However, fiction and graphics are but a facade; films often have far deeper and more meaningful messages and lessons to convey beyond all the action and effects on screen.**This is precisely because the impact of films reaches beyond its short span of a few hours, to influence an individual.**

In fact, it would be acute to realise that important lessons and moral instructions leverage on the impactful delivery of films to transmit and become entrenched in viewers. The entertainment created probably generates a far more positive response towards cliché ideas of moral values. 'The Dark Knight' by Christopher Nolan, shows how Bruce Wayne (Batman) selflessly dedicates his life to the protection of Gotham City. His unconditional sacrifice, compassion and tenacity in face of setbacks are not just traits of a legendary hero, but also important values that should be inculcated in the everyday man. Viewers are propelled to emulate this impressive and endearing character, thereby fulfilling

the role of this film in relating important values. Even in a world of fiction, films go beyond that visual joyride to deliver powerful messages. 'The Legend of Korra', an animated series, also emphasises Korra's commendable strengths and virtues. It sends a strong idea that the confident, undaunted, and charismatic lady on screen can be anyone as long as they choose to trust in themselves and persevere on. Similarly, the various Disney films 'Finding Nemo', 'Brother Bear' and 'Frozen' underscore how values such as loyalty, friendship, determination and a willingness to confront the unsavoury, form the indispensable recipe for success and happy endings. Once again, it is highly evident how it simply does no justice to reduce the role of films to a mere escape from reality, while forgetting its powers to inspire and touch lives.

Often, reality can be haunting and instead of shying away from it to show fiction, films can give a perceptive look at problems beleaguering mankind and society. In doing so, they get viewers to confront the problems of reality rather than escaping. This has a paramount importance of raising awareness and even galvanising viewers to press for change and address these issues. Through films, the issues are presented in a less didactic manner, thereby letting people be more receptive and willing to act since it stems from genuine fervent emotions. 'X-Men' is a case in point; on the surface it's an action science-fiction movie, but underneath the flashy display is a comprehensive criticism of discrimination. The mutants are condemned and mercilessly persecuted simply because they are different. Intolerance and fear of what is different has drove people in the film to irrationally feel threatened and unleash the dark side of their nature. This resonates resoundingly with our world where many face the savage blade of systemic discrimination, from homosexuals in Syria, to the Rohingya people in Myanmar, to women in rural India. In 'X-Men', viewers are probably more inclined to empathise with and support the mutants since they are the protagonists, and this can translate into a poignant desire to champion the cause of victims of discrimination. Similarly, 'Spirited Away' by Hayao Miyazaki, who is no stranger to infusing his works with hidden symbolic content, confronts the tenebrous issue of child prostitution by demonstrating its egregious and deleterious nature. The protagonist in her journey also shows the perils of youths growing up and realising the brutal realities of the world — this invites viewers to reflect upon the state of societies today, and perhaps mend the dearth of compassion and kindness. Even 'Avatar' itself, through the appeal of Pandora's magical forest and inhabitants, is essentially addressing the problem of environmental degeneration by human beings and convincing viewers the importance of preserving what is natural and beautiful, that is our earth. Films' potent function of inspiring action against problems proves their worth lies beyond a mere escapade.

Furthermore, films are often microcosms of reality by being a repository of historical occurrences and rich cultural diversity. Instead of simply depicting an artificial world, they can reflect the very world we live in. Films are essentially an archive to record events across the passage of time, except that they acutely contain not just facts, but also the overwhelming



emotions that transpired. Through them, the zeitgeist of a time and volksgeist of a people are profoundly portrayed. Having such an instrumental role indubitably stands testament to the importance of films beyond mere entertainment. 'Schindler's List' by Steven Spielberg, for instance, highlighted the atrocities and callous carnage that happened in the Holocaust. The horrors, despair and utter abomination of the event was depicted. Through the film, the Holocaust was not a simple statistic of 6 million deaths but an iniquitous and dark phase of human history. Such a brilliant film was one of the few able to do sufficient justice to the immense gravity of the event, through a chilling and heartwrenching portrayal. In the same fashion, 'Saving Private Ryan', having won five Academy Awards, conveys the brutal realities of war by showing the devastation and desperation from the perspectives of American soldiers. The unyielding camaraderie in the movie underscores the unspeakable sadness in loss and sacrifice. It was a film that managed to strike at the core, something that other forms of historical records have trouble accomplishing. Films even in entertaining us, tell a story of human struggles and experiences. Through films, we are given an invaluable glimpse into events that have taken place and long past in our world. In fact, history is often turned into content for films and that certainly give films a unique role as a compendium detailing historical events and the atmosphere that was present. Therefore, as the examples demonstrate, possessing such a unique ability in capturing not just the facts, but also the tapestry of history and its events renders films way more than mere entertainment.

Films also skilfully encapsulate ideas of the human condition and human psyche. All films speak volume about human nature and tendencies; they help us better understand ourselves and our struggles. These complex concepts are elegantly expressed in films because of their preeminent ability in portraying human beings and the intangible. Hence, through films, we are not simply enjoying a trip out of reality, but instead experiencing a journey of discovery as we develop more self-awareness and maturity. Even when we cannot really grasp our psyche, films have the power to effectively elucidate it and get to the heart of the issue. One of Pixar's most innovative films, 'Inside Out' is widely-acclaimed for its deep themes. In personifying the different human emotions, the convoluted emotional struggles are greatly simplified. 'Inside Out' literally exposes the human mind and chart the process of depression and its cure. It rectifies our erroneous thinking that depression is conquered by a tug of war between happiness and sorrow; instead, it involves confronting the sadness and undergoing a cathartic process in order to dispel the negativity and move on. The fight against depression starts with a willingness to confront and accept sadness, thereby opening up the valves of regenerative healing. 'Inside Out' efficaciously weaves deep themes into its simple plot, epitomising the importance of films to portray and facilitate understanding. Likewise, 'Black Swan' featuring Natalie Portman, reveals and warns of the dangers of excessive stress and unhealthy obsession leading to a complete emotional collapse in us. The Black Swan symbolises the dark side of human nature which takes centre stage and wrecks havoc when an individual's natural emotional and psychological processes are overturned. The film educates viewers on a nuanced understanding of our own psyche. From the above examples,



it is clear that films are so much more than just fiction because they can capture reality and deep ideas in a way that reaches new heights.

In essence, it seems the *je ne sais quoi* in films lie beyond the domains of mere visual displays afterall. The value, importance and role of films is to use the storyline and graphics as mediums to poke at something deeper. Be it life's lessons, societal problems, historical events or human nature, the wide span of content stands testament to the irreplaceable function of films to touch emotions, provoke thoughts and change behaviour. Thus, it would be blinkered to contend that films only have one role and only one; films are a treasure chest full of meaning if only we look.