

Lights, Camera, Influence - How films change our minds and actions

“Who says my dreams have to stay dreams?” Many people ask themselves this question after watching an inspiring film. Some stories make us believe that anything is possible, that we can reach our goals if we don’t give up. Have you ever felt motivated after an inspiring story? Or maybe a horror film kept you awake at night? This leads to the following question: To what extent do films influence our behaviour and mental health?

In today’s world, films are everywhere. Whether in cinemas, on television, or on streaming platforms, they are easy to access. Because we watch so many, it’s important to understand how they affect our emotions and decisions. They shape our opinions, influence social norms, and even impact our mental health. By becoming aware of this, we can think more critically about what we watch.

Films have the power to open up new perspectives and break down prejudices. For example, watching a film about the life of a person who comes from a foreign nation or culture can help us understand that person from a new perspective and maybe even give us a deeper respect for their challenges and achievements. They can raise awareness of social issues such as disability or environmental protection.

A good example is *The Day After Tomorrow*. Sure, it is mostly an action film, but there is a serious message behind it: climate change is real, and it can have drastic consequences. After seeing a film like this, perhaps more people will think about how they can live more sustainably. And that shows just how powerful films can be: They trigger discussions and can even make us change our behaviour.

The Day After Tomorrow

Jack Hall is a recognised climatologist who has been criticising mankind’s climate-damaging behaviour for years and warning of its consequences. According to his theory, we should even expect a new ice age, but not for many years. Reality catches up with the professor sooner than he would have imagined in his wildest nightmares. Within weeks, the global climate is completely out of balance. Tornadoes rage around the globe, a murderous hailstorm descends on Tokyo, and it suddenly starts snowing in New Delhi. Despite Hall’s warnings, the American government sees no reason to act and does not take his predictions seriously ...



Also, films influence our feelings and our mental health. Everyone maybe has experienced this: a sad film can make us cry, a comedy can lift our spirits, and a horror film can leave us feeling uneasy long after it ends. The emotions we feel while watching can stay with us for a long time.

A good example is *The Hunger Games*. This film explores themes of social justice and survival. Katniss Everdeen fights against an unfair system and faces difficult choices. Watching her journey makes us think about what we would do in such a situation.

The Hunger Games

North America in the future: After natural disasters and a brutal war, the totalitarian regime of Panem rules over twelve oppressed districts. Every year, the cruel government organises the “Hunger Games” - a deadly spectacle in which 24 teenagers have to fight for survival in an arena. When her little sister is drawn by lot, 16-year-old Katniss takes her place. At her side: Peeta, who has loved her for years. But there can only be one winner in the games ... right?



Another film is *Interstellar*. It raises deep questions: How far would we go to save humanity? What is the meaning of love and sacrifice? These ideas remain in our minds long after the film is over, making us reflect on our own responsibility for the environment and the world in general.

Interstellar

Humanity is facing a global food crisis; the Earth’s resources are almost exhausted, and the future looks dark. In this world lives Joseph Cooper, a former pilot and farmer who is obsessed with the idea of finding a new future for his family. When he and his daughter Murphy discover a secret NASA base, Cooper learns of a secret government plan to launch a mission into space through a wormhole. Will he join the mission, and can they save the earth?



Furthermore, films not only do influence our thoughts, but they also affect our brains. For example, a 2011 study showed that watching a horror film resulted in an increase in feelings of fear among viewers. A similar effect was also noticed with watching a sad film. These studies highlight the strong connection between movies, emotions, and mood.

The cause for this connection can be attributed to a process called the “mirroring rule”. When we see a smiling face on the screen, our natural tendency is also to smile, which results in feelings of happiness. Similarly, when a sad situation arises in a film, we not only *mirror* the character’s emotions, but this “mirroring” also causes us to feel the emotion that is associated with it. When we cry during films, our brains release oxytocin, a hormone associated with feelings of empathy and compassion.

But the impact of films goes beyond emotions. They can also change our mood and mental health. Watching a comedy, for example, can help us feel happier because laughter releases endorphins, also known as “happiness hormones.” When a character smiles in a film, we often smile with them.

In contrast, horror films can cause sleep problems and increased anxiety. The intense scenes activate our stress system, causing our heart rate and adrenaline levels to rise. Some people, especially children or sensitive people, may even develop long-term fears after watching frightening scenes.

Besides emotions, films can also influence our behaviour. Many young people look up to heroic figures in films and try to be like them. Characters such as Wonder Woman, Black Panther, or Harry Potter and Hermione Granger inspire confidence, strength, and positive values.

However, not all influences are positive. Some films make risky behaviour seem normal. Studies show that when films glamorize smoking, drinking, or violence can unintentionally promote these behaviours among viewers. If a character in a film smokes to appear rebellious and cool, some teenagers might want to try it too. That is why it is so important to watch films with a critical eye: What is the real message behind the film?



Do you know that watching films with an audience in the cinema creates a stronger emotional reaction? Studies have shown we are 33% more focused when watching on the big screen vs. small screens. In the cinema, you are generally more focused because they have fewer distractions, such as mobile phones or similar.

As a result, we feel more connected to the story and experience emotions stronger. When an entire audience laughs at a joke, it feels even funnier. If a thrilling scene makes everyone silent, the suspense becomes even greater. This shared experience makes the film feel more intense.



All in all, it can be said that films are more than just entertainment – they can influence our perspective, emotions, mental health and even our behaviour. They help us to discover new perspectives, make us think, and can touch us deeply emotionally. At the same time, we should be aware that not all films have only positive effects. It is therefore important to consume films aware and think about the messages they portray.



The extent of this influence depends on various factors, such as individual sensitivity, the type of film, and the context in which it is watched. While some films inspire and educate, others may reinforce negative emotions or unhealthy behaviours. Being aware of this impact allows us to engage with films more thoughtfully and benefit from their positive effects while reducing potential risks.

When we watch films with an open but critical eye, we can get the most out of them - be it inspiration, knowledge or just a good time. So next time you watch a film, pay attention to what emotions it triggers in you and how it influences your thinking. Because who knows? Maybe a film will change the way you see your life, or even the world.

Sources:

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