

Our movies, ourselves

How you react to the latest film can reveal as much about you as your religion, car or job

By Sean Mitchell

When a friend of mine broke up with the woman he had been seeing for six months, he said a surprising thing to me: "I knew it wasn't going to work out after she liked *Cape Fear*." My friend's own reaction to the movie, the story of a vicious psychopath terrorizing a family, had been rather different.

Another friend, experiencing job difficulties, told me that he'd made a big mistake with his boss: One day he had let slip that he really enjoyed *Dances With Wolves*. His boss, a man who couldn't abide the sight of Kevin Costner dressed like an Indian, never acted the same toward him again.

Possibly, those are isolated instances, but they raise an alarming thought: Do movies really have this sort of power over us, or deserve it?

It's often said that the movies are a mirror held up to America. They show the world who we are and how we dress and what L.A. looks like from a helicopter. True enough, but what's overlooked is that, closer to home, the movies locate the fault lines in our culture and dramatize our differences and shared beliefs in a way that is rivaled only by quarterback controversies and political sex scandals.

For decades, the movies have told us how to act and talk and dance and kiss. But let's face it: Today the movies are serious business. With *Entertainment Tonight* beaming Hollywood's weekly box-office results across the dinner table, popular movies have come to seem like periodic voter initiatives on the state of the nation and its values. And we all are asked to take sides, like it or not.

Your answers could very well be vital to your job, your standing with your friends or even your love life. Once it was considered highly significant whether someone was registered as a Republican or Democrat. Today it's more critical where you stand on *Thelma & Louise*. (They're

either mythic heroines for our time or female versions of cartoon thugs. Think carefully before you answer.)

And you don't need to have seen the movies in question to take part. Powered by multimillion-dollar ad campaigns and endless publicity, Hollywood's latest products are inescapable. Who among us can say he or she has no opinion about director Oliver Stone's *JFK*, a movie that got more attention at Christmas than Santa Claus? While only a fraction of the U.S. population actually has seen *JFK*, 200 million more feel as if they have, and can argue passionately whether Stone is a hero who single-handedly pulled back the slab of government secrecy covering up a military coup — or an irresponsible sleight-of-hand artist who obscures history with deliberate fabrications.

Is *Grand Can-*

yon a brave depiction of a nation torn by inequity and racial hatred, or a collage of clichés about upper-middle-class angst? How you answer at a party might say as much about you as the church you belong to, the car you drive or what you do for a living. And if you don't feel up to a debate, you can simply wear a T-shirt indicating endorsement of *The Addams Family*, *Beauty and the Beast* or *House Party 2*.

Can an advocate of gun control be a friend or lover to someone who admired Arnold Schwarzeneg-

ger in *Terminator 2*? Maybe, but only if they have a lot else in common.

Is it any wonder that "personal" ads soliciting companionship in newspapers commonly list movie titles or favorite directors as an indication of who the person is and whether you might be able to spend your life with him or her? "Single white female, 35, loves Italian food, long hikes, fast cars and Clint Eastwood movies."

Forget what this woman looks like or whether she wants to have your children. She loves Clint? That's a sign either that you'll understand each other right away or that there's big trouble ahead. You make the call.

Perhaps it's just as well my friend learned now about his "philosophical incompatibility," as he puts it, with his latest flame from her positive reaction to *Cape Fear* rather than from something she might have revealed on, say, the first day of their honeymoon.

But this can get tricky. I remember being at a party some years ago arguing with a woman about which was the more truthful movie about Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter*. The two of us did battle into the night, movie against movie, Coppola vs. Cimino. Friends drifted over, took sides and drifted away. The odd thing is that today, 12 years later, my opinions about those two films have reversed, and I can't believe the things I said other than to blame the punch.

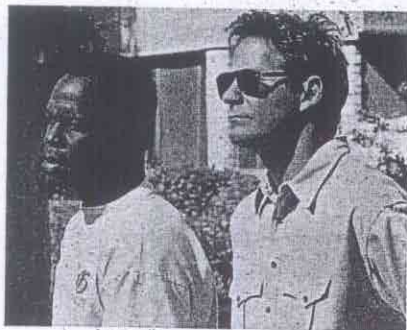
Luckily, this woman was not my boss or someone I hoped to marry. Today I'd be more careful, which is why I'd rather not say just now which movie I preferred then and which one I have come to realize is, of course, the better movie, the one with a window to my soul. From here on, I plan to keep my opinions about movies to myself.

Mitchell is an entertainment writer who profiled Dustin Hoffman for a December cover story in USA WEEKEND.



CAPE FEAR: RIVETING OR REVOLTING?

Debating a movie can generate as much heat as a good argument about politics or football



CANYON: GRAND OR GOOFY?



JFK: HISTORY OR HYSTERIA?