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**CURRICULUM**

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum – English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach films studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

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**THE GRAPES OF WRATH  John Ford, 1940**

Perhaps the greatest Hollywood film made during the Depression era, John Ford’s adaptation of John Steinbeck’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel follows a clan of Oklahoma farmers forced to migrate to California during the “dirty thirties.” During the 1930s, the Oklahoma “dust bowl” was ravaged by agriculture disaster and economic ruin, as was much of the rest of North America. The story of the Joad family is symbolic of the plight faced by many American and Canadian families, forced to uproot their lives in search of land, food, and a home.

In the film, the Joads migrate from Oklahoma to California, a land filled with milk and honey, or so they’ve been lead to believe. Unfortunately, once in California, the Joads, like so many other migrants before them, are unwelcome. They threaten the jobs of locals and as a result are harassed by police unmercifully. The migrants form unions in self-defence and strike for decent fruit-picking wages, which only serves to multiply the violence of the police and corrupt bosses. Ultimately, the journey of the Joad clan is spiritually triumphant, but Ford’s film never shies away from showing the brutality and cruelty of a world that has little time for the common man and his struggle for hope and salvation.

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**Preview Questions**

Keep the following questions in mind as you watch the film, and when you have finished viewing it, discuss them as a class:

1. The photography in *The Grapes of Wrath* is memorable in the history of cinema. Think of the opening image in the film, showing Tom walking alone along a road returning to his family’s home after spending four years in jail. How does this shot foreshadow what will eventually happen to Tom as he and his family migrate from Oklahoma to California?

2. There are three main characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*: Tom and Ma Joad, and Casey, the ex-preacher. In one way or another, each of these characters represents the struggle of good over evil. How do the actions of each of these characters suggest this?

3. Near the end of the film, the Joads arrive at a government-run camp where they and other migrants can rest and relax. The director of the camp is a government official who is meant to be symbolic of a real political figure popular in America during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Who was that popular figure?

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**Note:** Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.
HOLLYWOOD AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

During the heyday of Hollywood’s studio system (1930-1948), the Great Depression raged throughout much of the industrialized world. Factory closings, a farm crisis, unemployment, and community breakdown made life especially difficult in Canada and the United States. In the midst of all this suffering, perhaps surprisingly, audiences for Hollywood movies were as large as they’ve ever been in the history of film. At the beginning of the Depression there were minor downturns in box-office receipts. But by the mid-1930s and into the 1940s, Hollywood was seeing some of its greatest box-office returns ever. If this all sounds rather strange, perhaps even more ironic were the kinds of movies that tended to appear in theatres during this period.

Throughout the Great Depression, Hollywood films were mostly elaborate, glamorous, and happy affairs. While people suffered in the streets, the major Hollywood studios released grand musicals (The Wizard of Oz [Victor Fleming, 1939]); historical recreations (Marie Antoinette [W.S. Van Dyke, 1938]); prestigious literary adaptations (Of Human Bondage [John Cromwell, 1934], Anna Karenina [Clarence Brown, 1935], and Gone With the Wind [Victor Fleming, 1939]); and lavish sex-and-violence-soaked spectacles (Cecil B. De Mille’s Cleopatra [1934], The Buccaneer [1938], and Union Pacific [1939]). Warner Brothers, one of the era’s minor studios, released a series of low-budget melodramas and musicals set in the Depression, but the content and style of these films were largely determined by the financial limitations of Warner Brothers itself, rather than any attempt to address the suffering of moviegoers.

But how could this be the case? In the midst of the greatest economic upheaval in the history of North America, how could film, the most popular medium of mass culture at the time, ignore reality and benefit from doing so?

The answer to these questions lies in what audiences were looking for when they went to their local theatres. During the dirty thirties, for many people the cinema was an escape from the day-to-day grind. Movies helped people to imagine the good life happening somewhere to someone, even if it was not happening to them. This is not to say that movies were simply cotton candy. Rather, they were a salve for the pain of the unemployed and the disenfranchised, who knew all too well the difficulties of day-to-day life. Which is to say that during the Depression, movies provided an escape for audiences looking for happiness and comfort in a time of pain and disappointment.
activity 01

It’s pretty clear that most people go to movies to be entertained. Of course how we’re entertained by movies depends on the audience and our own personal responses to movies.

If during the Great Depression, audiences went to movies to escape the day-to-day grind of life, think of some of the reasons you go to movies. What do you expect or hope movies will provide for you? Choose examples of movies that have been satisfying to justify what you hope movies will provide for you.