

## ARTICLE




# The Feature Film as a Vehicle for Disseminating Principles of Conflict Resolution

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## Abstract

In modern societies, feature films play a profound role in the formation of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. The mainstream entertainment media industry currently relies heavily on methods of dehumanising the other and glorifying violence, which nurtures a fear of the other and a belief in the legitimacy of violence as a means of resolving conflict. This article argues that the opposite, nurturing a belief in universal humanity and the efficacy of peaceful alternatives to violence, can be achieved by modelling such behaviours, beliefs and attitudes in mainstream film. The resulting films would be 'humanising' as opposed to 'dehumanising' and thus constitute a positive contribution to society. Deconstructing the necessary elements of 'successful' mainstream films, the author further suggests that humanising films have the potential to be more successful than dehumanising films because they resonate on a deeper level with audiences. Providing specific suggestions of how to develop humanising elements within films, this article is an initial step towards establishing a framework for transferring conflict resolution's advanced knowledge of conflict dynamics to professionals in the film industry.



## Keywords

peace studies, conflict resolution, film studies, film production, cinema

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## INTRODUCTION

This article constitutes an initial step towards linking the field of conflict resolution with the film industry, presenting arguments and methods for incorporating conflict resolution theory and principles within cinema. Beyond the pursuit of theoretical, academic exploration, this paper also aspires to generate a practical framework for creating 'humanising films' which, as this paper argues, can contribute to a culture of peace.

More than merely a form of entertainment, the author purports that cinema plays a profound role in the formation of human beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Various fields of study have recognised opportunities associated with embedding persuasive content in entertainment, most

notably in the areas of advertising and marketing, but also in the humanitarian fields of promoting democracy, women's rights, and health. One area of study that is noticeably absent in existing literature on entertainment-based persuasion, however, is conflict resolution. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the potential dissemination of conflict resolution principles to the public through dramatic entertainment – in particular, via feature films.

Although there have been several attempts to include the public in the various theoretical undertakings within the field of conflict resolution, little progress has been made towards incorporating conflict resolution techniques and values into mainstream culture. In this paper the author identifies a recent notion from various conflict resolution theorists that the arts are an underutilised tool for



peacebuilding. While a significant body of the field's literature has suggested linking music and fine arts with conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, curiously, the potential of film remains virtually unexplored.

Modern mainstream entertainment media, a force that permeates cultures worldwide, wields tremendous potential for positive social change. This paper's thesis is that filmic messages that humanise the other and explore alternatives to violent resolution of conflict are valuable tools for conflict transformation, conflict prevention, and for nurturing the development of what conflict resolution theorist John Paul Lederach calls a "moral imagination" (Lederach, 2005).

The first section of this paper explores the feasibility of spreading conflict resolution principles through film. It identifies various principles that are appropriate for the medium, anticipates potential obstacles, and suggests a framework for this new field of study and practice. In the following section this framework serves as the basis for a case study in which the author performs a conflict analysis of three highly successful recent mainstream films. The conclusion provides a comprehensive summary of, and further suggestions for the linking of film production with conflict resolution.

## PART 1: CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND FILM

"Logic will get you from A to B.  
Imagination will take you everywhere."  
Albert Einstein

### Contemporary Conflict Resolution – A Shift Towards 'Creative Modes of Knowing'

Conflict resolution is a field of study that has grown out of a wide spectrum of disciplines to produce various theoretical frameworks and approaches for peacefully managing conflict at all levels, from personal to international. Emerging from an obvious and urgent need for alternatives to warfare in the nuclear age of post-WWII, conflict resolution initially focused on methods of averting the global nuclear holocaust that human ingenuity had made possible. Traditional realist approaches to international relations had to be re-examined, and concerned professionals from biology, to psychology and political science began searching for, and developing new ideas that eventually gave birth to this new field of study.

A core premise of the young field was that there are alternatives to 'zero-sum' conflict outcomes, where one party 'wins' and the other 'loses', or the even more prevalent outcome of violent conflict where both sides lose. (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Mial, 2005). When the 'needs' of conflicting parties are assessed rather than their 'positions', conflict resolution theory argues that it is often possible to find solutions where both parties can gain, thus generating a 'positive-sum' (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Mial, 2005).

In the early 1990s, conflict resolution pioneer Adam Curle began to argue the importance of empowering individuals in peace processes (Curle, 1994). The idea that peacebuilding should be done from 'below', i.e., by the general public instead of strictly by elites, became an idea that gained substantial acceptance in the field of conflict resolution. The relationship proved to be reciprocally beneficial: the field of conflict resolution being substantially enriched by the traditional and cultural expertise that the grassroots community had to offer.

Recognition of the value of creativity within conflict resolution theory has paved the way for the inclusion of the creative arts in contemporary conflict resolution processes and research. For example, in the forthcoming third edition of the seminal text for teaching conflict resolution, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Tom Woodhouse contributes a new chapter: "Conflict Resolution and Peace Culture: Conflict Resolution in Art, Theatre, Music and Sport". In this work he describes the evolution of the concept of peace culture and explores how art, culture and sport provide "a powerful source of peacebuilding energy and passion that is not always apparent in the formalised processes of political conflict resolution" (Woodhouse, 2011). This new direction has gained momentum to the point where the United Nations have adopted terms such as 'culture of peace' into their official rhetoric and have begun including the arts in many of their agencies' peacebuilding programmes (United Nations, "Culture of Peace", 2010).

### Toward Combining Conflict Resolution with Film

The notion of the "powerful source of peacebuilding energy" (Woodhouse, 2011) that the arts can generate is the basis for the following arguments for combining the field of conflict resolution with the film industry. While the abovementioned examples indicate that conflict resolution is ready to incorporate the creative power of imagination and the arts, as yet, the possibility of exploring the inverse of this relationship, of using the creative arts as tools for the widespread dissemination of conflict resolution principles, has been minimal. Instead, the valuable lessons of conflict resolution have remained confined within the limited sphere of academics and have not been shared with those who could benefit most from their wisdom – the general public.



The following sections of this paper present (1) the arguments for including conflict resolution principles in film, (2) the goal of rebalancing modelled approaches to conflict in film, (3) various methods of consciously creating humanising elements in films, (4) the necessity for collaboration and (5) the obstacles that the process faces. As a whole, these arguments and proposals represent the first steps towards creating a framework that would facilitate transfer of conflict resolution's advanced knowledge of conflict dynamics to the creators of mainstream entertainment films.

## Arguments and Support for Conflict Resolution Principles in Film

Nurturing what Louise Boulding calls the “creative modes of knowing” (Boulding, 1990) and what John Paul Lederach describes as a “moral imagination” (Lederach, 2005) can be beneficial for everyone, since coming up with creative solutions to the conflicts that we inherently confront on a daily basis increases productivity, decreases stress and creates pleasant working and social environments. One way of nurturing such processes is by modelling examples of people successfully employing moral imagination, their resulting behaviours, and peer reactions. Film, an art form which has the power to depict human behaviour more lucidly than any other, has the potential to portray conflicting parties respecting one another and creatively finding peaceful win-win solutions to conflicts.

Contemporary research from the fields of sociology, psychology, neurobiology, and neurophysiology purports that humans do indeed learn beliefs and attitudes observationally.<sup>1</sup> Either through personal role-models, or modern society's more prevalent media-generated role-models, people learn beliefs, attitudes and behaviours through observing those who they respect and aspire to emulate. If a film's plot is sufficiently engaging, and its characters are believable, likeable, and capable of inducing empathy in audiences, the ‘modelled behaviour’ in the film can cultivate similar beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in audiences through observational learning processes.

The academic field of film studies has long acknowledged this influential power of cinema. In his most recent publication, film theorist Douglas Kellner claims that dramatic cinema shapes our world more profoundly than we may realise:

“There is an aesthetic, philosophical, and anticipatory dimension to films, in which they provide artistic visions of the world that might transcend the

social context of the moment and articulate future possibilities, positive and negative...” (Kellner, 2010)

Some theorists believe that the ‘future possibilities’ that films provide have tended to be more negative than positive (Boggs & Pollard, 2007). However, a framework for intentionally creating positive influences, currently lacking in the film production industry, can be of tremendous value to society. Film professionals, as members of an industry that inspires the imaginations of countless viewers, have a unique potential, and perhaps even a moral responsibility, to spread positive, conflict resolution-oriented messages through their films.

Recently, this subject has been confronted by an initiative at the UN Department of Public Information. The aim of the Creative Community Outreach Initiative (CCOI), mandated by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, is to connect film industry professionals with UN staff in order to nurture a mutually beneficial relationship between the UN and filmmakers. The UN provides stories, advice, and exclusive access to UN information and property in exchange for filmmakers “promoting peace and raising awareness of critical global issues” (United Nations, About CCOI, 2010). To date, several films and television programmes including *The Interpreter*, *Law & Order*, and *Ugly Betty* have taken advantage of this opportunity. While this initiative seems to point to progress towards this paper's thesis, the implementation of the CCOI has been piecemeal and so far lacks comprehensive and transparent access protocols for filmmakers.<sup>2</sup> Also, there is still no practical framework available for guiding film professionals who may want to create conflict resolution-oriented content that has no direct relation to the UN. The subsequent sections are an initial attempt to develop such a framework.

## Rebalancing Modelled Approaches to Conflict in Film

Just as conflict is ubiquitous in our lives, it is at the core of every film. Whether internal, personal, or extra-personal conflict, the essence of film is the exposition of people attempting to resolve some conflict in their lives. Unfortunately, resorting to violence to resolve conflict is common within contemporary mainstream films (Kellner, 2010; Plantinga, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2000). In order to make audiences comfortable with this violence, filmmakers often find it necessary to ‘dehumanise’ or ‘infrahumanise’<sup>3</sup> one side of the conflict. They accomplish this by framing conflicts dualistically, as good-versus-

1 Chapter One of the dissertation from which this article is extracted is entirely devoted to an exploration of this topic.

2 This observation is based on the author's first hand experience of working for the CCOI at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from June to August 2010.

3 ‘Infrahumanisation’ is a term that refers to the lessening of one's humanity, while literally, ‘dehumanisation’ infers the complete removal of one's human qualities. In common discourse, however, the latter term is used in both senses. Following this trend, this paper will employ the term ‘dehumanisation’ for both the both the reduction and removal of one's humanity. For more information on the concept of infrahumanisation see: Castano and Giner-Sorolla (2006) and Motyl, Hart and Pyszczynski (2010).



evil, thus diminishing one party's humanity. To utilise conflict resolution terminology, such polarised conflicts are frequently presented as 'zero-sum' situations where the only potential outcomes are one side 'winning' and the other 'losing'. When one party has been dehumanised, violence against them becomes a reasonable and justifiable course of action. Sometimes described in terms of 'destructive' versus 'constructive' storytelling (Senehi, 2002), this paper refers to the dichotomy as 'dehumanising' versus 'humanising' films.

While dehumanising films that portray 'good' triumphing over 'evil' are surely intended as positive messages, the underlying assumption that evil is omnipresent, generates a conscious fear of the other in audiences, rather than striving to find their humanity. While there are indeed countless real-life examples of humans performing horrific deeds, many researchers believe that such behaviour is over-represented in entertainment media:

"In addition to modeling violent behaviour, entertainment media inflate the prevalence of violence in the world, cultivating in viewers the 'mean world' syndrome, a perception of the world as a dangerous place." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001)

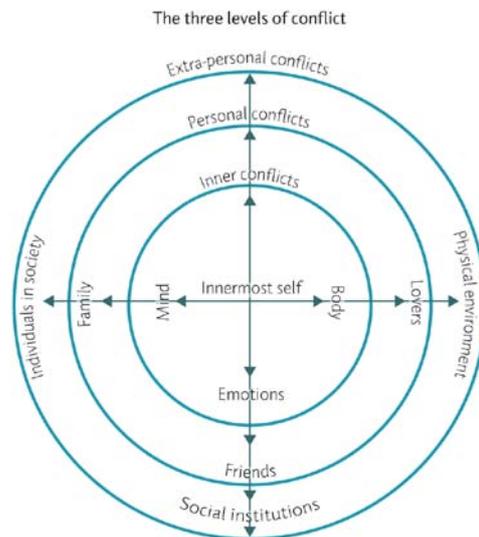
Assuming positive messages are of greater benefit to society than negative messages, the challenge for film professionals is to frame conflicts as positive-sum and to be conscious of dehumanising behaviours, while maintaining compelling narratives that will absorb audiences. The following section identifies the obstacles for doing this, and suggests ways in which film creators can borrow from conflict resolution to contribute to a global civic culture by opening audiences' imagination to the possibilities of non-polarised conflict, and of the non-violent resolution of conflict.

## The Conscious Creation of Humanising Elements in Films

While it is important to acknowledge that creative processes such as filmmaking require freedom from excessive directives, and indeed it is the unique imaginations of the filmmakers themselves that is the most valuable tool for bringing scenes 'to life', this section identifies specific techniques that can be used to create humanising content.

Drama theorist Robert McKee's theory of effective narrative revolves around the notion, often explored in conflict resolution, that "to be alive is to be in seemingly perpetual conflict" (McKee, 1999). According to McKee, internal, personal, and extra-personal conflicts are at the core of the human experience and as far as storytelling is concerned, "nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict" (McKee, 1999) (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Robert McKee's "The Three Levels of Conflict" (McKee, 1999).



McKee argues that a good story requires complexity, which can only be achieved by developing conflict on all three levels. Narratives that shy away from conflict, or deal with it in an unauthentic manner, miss the opportunity to connect with audiences and thus fail to achieve what psychologist Michael Slater refers to as "absorption". Narratives that do achieve absorption, however, touch audiences at a deep emotional level, making it possible to effectively transmit stories, or 'messages', about ways of thinking and behaving that may not have occurred to them before.

Audiences are full of anticipation to see how the characters act and react to conflicts in a story, particularly at the climax of the central conflict, because it gives them a rare glimpse at human nature – the aspect of story that has intrigued audiences throughout human history (Aristotle, 1996). It is in these moments that audiences subconsciously learn appropriate behaviours for when they find themselves in similar situations. If a character decides to show mercy or respect for their counterpart, the story can take on this 'humanising nature'.

The climax alone, however, cannot make a film resolutely humanising. Instead, humanising elements must be established throughout a film; not only for positive messaging considerations, but for the overall effectiveness of the film. If, for example, the potential for a humanising action in the climax has not been nurtured throughout the story, it may seem unauthentic or unrealistic<sup>4</sup> to the audience. This will cause them to be pulled out of their state of absorption, so the opportunity to influence them is lost: to create an effective humanising climax, filmmakers must build the potential in the earlier, 'character development', sections of a film.

There are many places in a script where filmmakers committed to contributing to a culture of peace can develop characters that model positive, humanising behaviours.



Subtle acts of kindness for example, or depicting characters showing disdain for racist, sexist, xenophobic or any other dehumanising behaviours of other characters, could contribute to a consciousness of tolerance and respect for the other in audiences. It could be as simple as a disapproving look towards dehumanising behaviour, or it could be as complex as the script's thematic structure revolving around challenging an institutionalised process of dehumanisation. An example of the latter would be the anti-racism message of Paul Haggis' Academy Award-winning film *Crash* in which the lives of fourteen different characters intertwine to present a scathing critique of a society divided by racism (Haggis, 2004).

Although depicting humanising behaviour or disdain for dehumanising behaviour is valuable for generating positive messages, it is important to acknowledge that a crucial aspect of a good story is characters going through change, or what film theory refers to as a 'character's arc' (McKee, 1999). The arc that a character goes through can potentially change them from being despicable, exhibiting violent and dehumanising behaviours, into a character who grows past these hurdles to see and respect the humanity in the other characters. However, this arc cannot materialise from nothing: it must result from events or the actions of others. Just as Newton's laws of motion teach us that "for every action there must be an equal and opposite reaction" (Tait, 1971), dramatic theory teaches us that, to be believable, a character's arc must stem from a cause that is proportional to the change in the character (Aristotle, 1996).

This necessary element of storytelling presents a significant conundrum for film creators: How can they avoid depicting violence or dehumanising behaviours, which by their mere presence could inspire similar behaviour in audiences, while creating powerful and effective character arcs. The answer must come from the filmmakers' intuition of balance. Their use of violent or dehumanising behaviour should be with cautious apprehension and with a conscious effort to resist glamourising or sensationalising the behaviour. Films such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) and Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land* (Tanovic, 2001) that treat violence as what it really is – "a human behaviour that causes suffering, loss and sadness to victims and perpetrators" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001), affect audiences deeply precisely because the violence seems real. This is in stark contrast to the violence depicted in films where dehumanised characters are killed and fall from the frame without a second thought. Both types of films teach viewers attitudes; the former that violence is terrible, and the later that violence is normal.

Humanising films are difficult undertakings that require skilled craftsmanship to effectively develop characters

and provide authentic insight into the human condition. Dehumanising films, on the other hand, are comparatively simple undertakings that rely heavily on violent spectacle and stereotypes. While the depiction of some violent or dehumanising behaviour may be necessary to fully develop a character's arc, with the conscientious use of craft and imagination, this can be framed in a negative light so as to offset unintended dehumanising-behaviour learning in audiences. The next section of this article explores the difficulty of finding this balance, and the danger of the unnecessary utilisation of, and glamourisation of violent and dehumanising modelling.

## Framework for Creating Humanising Films: A Collaborative Process

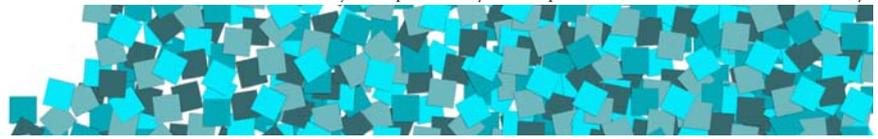
Films are essentially the manifestation of the imaginations of many people. This section attempts to establish who exactly the creative-content contributors of a film are, and proposes ways in which they, if so inclined, can adopt the non-polarising, non-violent and non-dehumanising principles of conflict resolution in their work while maintaining effective and engaging narratives. There are six key roles on a filmmaking team that can do this, here referred to as the 'key creatives': writers, directors, actors, cinematographers, editors, and producers.<sup>5</sup>

While there is indeed a clear power hierarchy on a film team, where producers can fire anyone, and directors can refuse to move on from a scene they feel has not been shot, lit, or acted in accordance to his or her 'vision', typically there is a significant amount of respect of craft given to each of the key creatives. There is an understanding that the people hired for the job are hired because they are the best people for the job, and in order for a film to be made on schedule and within budget, the importance of cooperation and mutual respect is regularly reiterated by producers.

Scriptwriters create the original story and structure of a film either from personal experience, the experience of others, directly from their imagination or by adapting an existing work. As the original creator then, the writer is responsible for framing the story's actions and conflicts, and thus plays a principal role in the fate of a film being either humanising or dehumanising. Nevertheless, it is common practice in the film industry for a script, once sold to a producer or studio, to go through several changes in the pre-production stage based on input of the producers, the director, and sometimes also the actors. The resulting 'shooting script' is used during the production stage, however, what is actually shot is rarely identical to what is

<sup>4</sup> This ironic notion that there can be anything 'real' in a fictional film stems from the drama theory phenomenon of 'suspending disbelief'.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to undermine the important creative work of wardrobe, make-up, lighting (electrics) and shading (grips) professionals, but when speaking of the building blocks of a film's 'story', these five are the most influential.

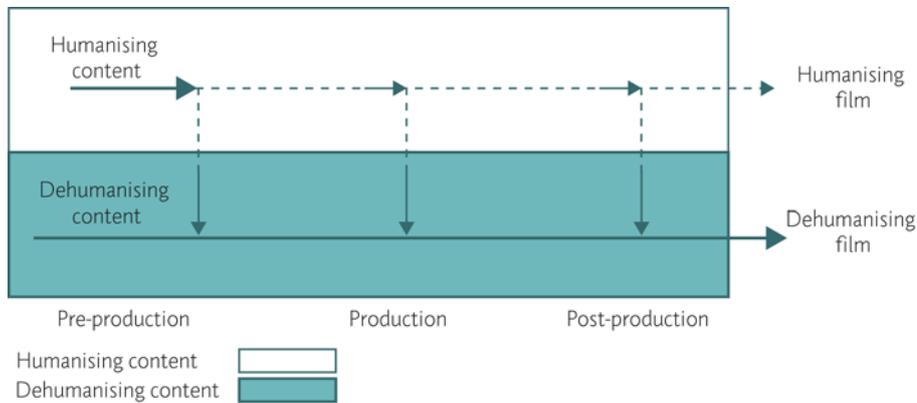


written in the shooting script. Subsequently, the story and dialogues go through even further changes in the editing, or post-production stage (Murch, 2001). Responsibility for the messages in the final product is thus clearly dispersed amongst all key creatives.

Since each of the key creatives contribute to the outcome of a film, it is logical to put the onus of contributing humanising aspects on each of them. Breathing life into a vile antagonist by showing a glimpse of his humanity, or creating a tense mood in reaction to a bigoted comment, are tools at the filmmak-

ers' disposal for creating humanising content. However, while a writer may imagine and create a perfectly humanising scene, if the director is not thinking in terms of humanisation, he may not direct it in a way that captures the writer's vision. Likewise, a cinematographer might frame the shots in a way that does not optimise the opportunity, or an actor might contribute a different emphasis or motivation if they are not thinking in humanising terms. Finally, the editors and producers have the power to cut shots or scenes and to select takes, so having them on board is also essential (see figure 2).

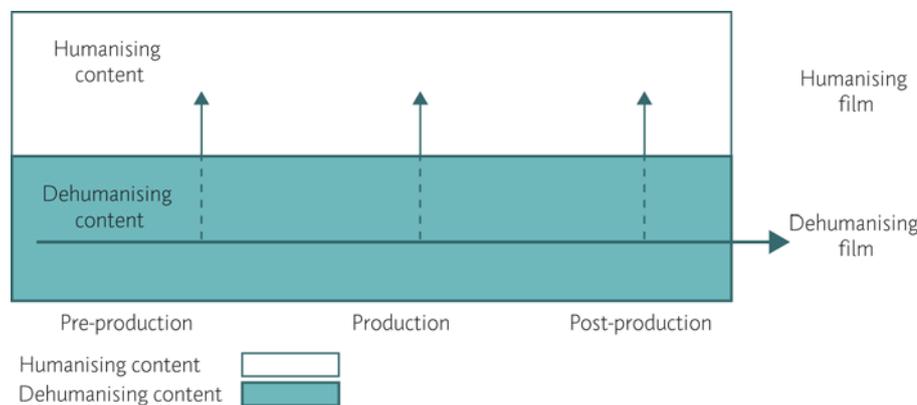
Figure 2. Creation of humanising and dehumanising films. (Bryan Nykon)



Unfortunately, the inverse of this process, the creation of a humanising film from a dehumanising script is not feasible. If the director, actors, cinematographer, and editor have a commitment to creating humanising content, but the writer and producer have not supplied a humanising core to

the story, short of a complete re-write, it not possible to create a humanising piece. There could be successful creation of humanising moments, but the core, dehumanising message of the film would not be changed (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Humanising elements in dehumanising films. (Bryan Nykon)





In summary, to borrow from conflict resolution terminology again, each of the key creatives could potentially be a 'spoiler' of a humanising scene or film, as graphically depicted with the vertical lines in figure 2. Creating a humanising film is thus a fragile collaborative process that requires the commitment of all the key creatives. It has to begin with a humanising script and the humanising intention should be clearly communicated to, and supported by, all of the key creatives at every stage of production.

If the key creatives are successful at framing conflict as 'non-polarised' and portraying creative, non-violent solutions to the problems that arise in the story, filmmakers can create humanising content without sacrificing narrative value. On the contrary, such films are quite often the ones that are celebrated by audiences and critics because of their obvious value to society. For better or worse, filmmakers have the tremendous power of being able to influence the way people see the world, and have an impact on their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. This great power should be taken seriously as the implications are substantial: humanising films contribute to a culture of peace while dehumanising films fuel a culture of violence.

## PART TWO: CASE STUDY

"With great power comes great  
responsibility."  
Stan Lee (Spiderman, 2002)

### Case Study Introduction

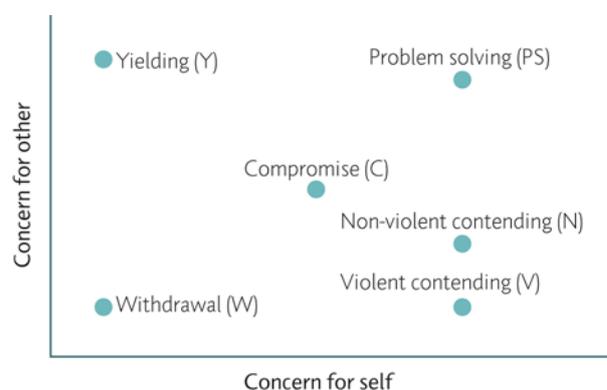
The previous sections explored the possibility of the film medium being a vehicle for proliferating humanising, conflict resolution-based attitudes and behaviours. This premise leads us to this examination of three of the world's most popular and most critically acclaimed<sup>6</sup> contemporary films: *Up* (Docter & Peterson, 2009), *District 9* (Blomkamp, 2009), and *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009). Employing an original framework for performing a 'conflict analysis' of films and scripts, this chapter surveys the framing of and approaches to conflict in each of these films. Subsequently, the author provides suggestions for how each film could have taken on a more humanising perspective, thus further contributing to a culture of peace.

## Conflict Analysis Methodology

An overall assessment of whether a film is humanising or dehumanising is to some extent subjective because, as examined in the previous sections, there are a multitude of factors to consider. It is, however, possible to assess specific humanising and dehumanising elements of scripts and films by gathering data regarding the characters' approaches to conflict. This requires an in-depth contextual assessment of (1) the type of conflicts, (2) the framing of the conflicts, (3) the methods that characters use to resolve the conflicts, (4) the outcomes of the conflicts, and (5) the characters' reactions to the outcomes. The author designed and utilised a conflict analysis form to record these data for the three films of this case study.

The categories for the various components of the form were derived from the concepts presented earlier in this paper. The type of conflict was taken from McKee's work on narrative conflict which defines conflict as internal, personal, or extra-personal (see figure 1). Furthermore, as in McKee's dramatic theory, the conflicts were categorised as either central or secondary; the former reserved for conflicts that form a film's thematic basis. The framing and outcome components of the conflict analysis form were derived from the conflict resolution theory which employs either a zero-sum (-), or a positive-sum (+) categorisation. Finally, the categories for the method-of-resolution component were derived from a modified version of the "Approaches to Conflict" graph (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005), where the x-axis indicates 'concern for self' and the y-axis indicates 'concern for the other' (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Methods of Resolving Conflict in Films.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> All three films were nominated for the coveted "Best Motion Picture" award at the 82nd Academy Awards ceremony on 7 March, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> This figure is a modified version of Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall's "Approaches to conflict" and was designed by the author specifically for this paper. 'Contending' in the original model was divided into 'Violent contending' and 'Non-violent contending'; sub-categories in the author's model. The original is from Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2005).



As shown in figure 4, the conflict analysis form categories for possible methods of resolving conflict were: (1) violent-contending, (2) non-violent-contending, (3) compromise, (4) withdrawal, (5) yielding, and (6) problem-solving. Violent-contending is the approach commonly modelled in Hollywood films, while problem-solving is the less-frequently modelled approach that conflict resolution advocates.

A formal analysis process was used in this methodology, in which I and an assistant screened and assessed the three films. The conflict analysis data constitutes the basis for the summaries and arguments below. The conflict resolution-based assessments which follow were a result of comprehensive examination of all the central conflicts and a selection of secondary conflicts, for each film. From these assessments, suggestions are given for ways in which each film could have (1) humanised the characters more effectively, and (2) employed conflict resolution principles for framing and resolving the character conflicts.

## *Up* – Conflict Analysis Summary

The conflict analysis for *Up* revealed two central conflicts and eight secondary conflicts. The two central conflicts, which are the focus of this section, are (1) protagonist Carl Fredricksen's internal struggle to come to terms with the death of his wife, and (2) a personal conflict between Carl and his antagonist, Charles Muntz.

This initial central conflict is at first framed as zero-sum, where Carl appears to feel that there is no way of both honouring the memory of his wife and continuing his life. However, through well-constructed narrative progression, this framing evolves into a positive-sum perspective, culminating when Carl discovers that his wife had wanted him to "have a new [adventure]".<sup>8</sup> From this point, Carl realises he can cherish the memory of his wife and also live in the present. What starts as a non-violent-contention method of resolution (Carl resisting change), evolves into a problem-solving method (Carl finding a win-win solution), so the initial central conflict represents an excellent example of conflict resolution-oriented principles in a film. The second central conflict however, which emerges from the resolution of the initial central conflict, does not have a conflict resolution approach.

Carl's problem-solving approach to the first central conflict, choosing to carry on with his life, segues into the second primary conflict: saving his friends from the film's antagonist, an evil explorer named Charles Muntz. This personal conflict is framed as zero-sum: either Carl or Muntz can prevail, but not both. Muntz's motivation to capture Carl's friend Kevin<sup>9</sup> is well established early in the

film in a humanising manner that encourages the audience to sympathise with Muntz's plight.<sup>10</sup> However, when Muntz is re-introduced to the story, he is progressively dehumanised. He is presented as a deranged and irrational person to whom violent-contention is the only feasible course of action.

In the ensuing showdown, the film's climax, both men use violent weapons against one another and Muntz ultimately meets his death by falling out of a floating house while fighting Carl. As McKee purported, this moment facilitates a glimpse into Carl's true nature. As the audience waits in anticipation to see Carl's reaction to Muntz's demise, rather than expressing concern, regret, or remorse for the death of Muntz, Carl immediately rejoices in his victory: this is an example of a missed opportunity to create a humanising message.

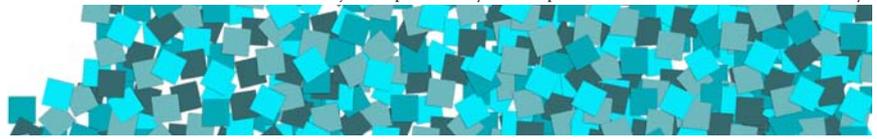
*Up* contains various examples of both humanising and dehumanising belief, attitude, and behaviour modelling. However, assessing the overall value of the film from a conflict resolution perspective, it unfortunately fails to retain any significant merit because of the climax. This is unfortunate because it was completely unnecessary. The film constructs an excellent character arc for Carl, changing him from miserable and violent, into a caring and compassionate character – until the point of his violent and fatal battle with Muntz. There are several ways in which the key creatives of this film could have prevented the film from taking on a dehumanising nature. If, for example, Carl had attempted to employ a problem-solving approach instead of a violent-contending approach with Muntz, regardless of the effort's success or failure, it would have generated a message to audiences that such attempts are of value. No such attempt was made in *Up*.

Although a problem-solving approach was not modelled in *Up*'s second central conflict, it is important to reiterate the fact that violent-contending solutions are extremely common in mainstream films. Filmmakers frequently seem to feel obliged to demonise villains, polarise conflict, and have one side definitively 'lose', perhaps in order to prevent counter arguing in an audience base that expects such framing. Nevertheless, as argued above, even such polarised scenarios can maintain a humanising nature if the filmmakers simply show the 'winner' expressing remorse or regret for the tragic outcome of the 'loser'. In *Up*, a moment of Carl looking down at Muntz' disappearing body with regret, or perhaps a reaction of lament rather than rejoicing may have been sufficient. Instead, one of the key messages that audiences take away from the film is that the death of your opponents is reason for celebration. For this reason, *Up*'s key creatives narrowly missed a tremendous opportunity to contribute to a global civic culture with this film.

8 At 1:13:07 in *Up*, Carl finds a note from his deceased wife that says: "Thanks for the adventure – now go have a new one!"

9 Kevin is a personified, yet non-speaking, nearly extinct bird.

10 At 00:02:07 in *Up*, the audience learns that Muntz had been defamed by the National Explorers Society when they deemed his skeleton of Kevin's species a fake.



## *District 9* – Conflict Analysis Summary

The analysis of *District 9* revealed two central and six secondary conflicts. The two central conflicts employ both violent-contending and problem-solving methods of resolution, and one of the secondary conflicts utilises predominantly problem-solving methods. These three conflicts are the primary focus of this summary.

The two central conflicts in *District 9* are (1) alien society versus human society, and (2) the protagonist versus his own body. The first has been described as a satirical critique of the contemporary, real-world issues of refugees, mass immigration, and prejudice (The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2010). In the back story development of the film, the audience learns that when the aliens first arrived on earth, twenty years earlier, the humans had attempted humanising measures of inclusion and integration by providing “proper status and protection” for them. However, the two cultures ultimately clashed in what was framed as irreconcilable differences, and the humans’ problem-solving methods gave way to violent-contending methods.

The humans dehumanise the aliens<sup>11</sup> both verbally, by referring to them derogatively as “prawns”, and physically, through forced segregation and internment. The film begins with a government-hired company, Multi-National United (MNU), attempting to evict the aliens from their slum, District 9, to an internment camp far from any human settlements. This extra-personal conflict thus shifts from having a potential positive-sum framing (peaceful co-existence) to a contending approach with zero-sum framing. Despite a multitude of commonalities, and the apparent ability of both sides to understand the other’s language, the humans consciously decide to use their monopoly of violence to strip the aliens of the few freedoms and rights they had initially been given – clearly a dehumanising transition. This central conflict is not resolved by the end of the film.

The second central conflict is the main human protagonist, Wikus Van De Merwe’s battle with his own body. Following McKee’s narrative development theory, the story puts Wikus through a steadily escalating series of challenges. First, as a result of exposure to an alien fluid, Wikus experiences an embarrassing confrontation with his colleagues, and then begins to notice his body metamorphosing – a literal dehumanisation. Next, he is separated from his wife, quarantined and subjected to medical experimentation without anaesthetic, emotional torture, and eventually starvation. The effect of these escalating challenges is that the audience sees, and empathises with, a non-violent individual who is gradually stripped of his humanity. All of

these dehumanising elements facilitate a character arc that turns Wikus from a kind and light-hearted worker into a ruthless, half-alien murderer fighting for survival.

The conflict of Wikus versus his own body is initially framed as zero-sum. At first he considers employing a violent-contending method of resolution by cutting off his alienised arm, but realising the futility of this action, he shifts to a creative problem-solving approach by turning to the aliens for help. When he learns that the aliens have the technology to reverse the metamorphosis, he gains hope that he will ‘win’ against the transformation. This hope drives his motivation to carry on with his struggle and to further cooperate with the aliens. Through this cooperation, Wikus comes to realise that the aliens are intelligent and compassionate beings, and that there is a positive aspect to the metamorphosis, i.e., that he can operate their advanced weapons and technology. This realisation shifts the conflict’s framing from zero-sum to positive-sum, as win-win solutions emerge.

The third conflict in *District 9* which models problem-solving approaches is a secondary, extra-personal conflict of the aliens versus oppression. The film’s central alien protagonist, Christopher Johnson (CJ), has been peacefully scavenging technology scrap yards near District 9 for twenty years trying to find enough fuel to power a control ship, under his shanty, back to the mother ship. His goal is to return to his home planet to get help for his oppressed species.

CJ consistently employs problem-solving approaches in his plight. By cooperating with Wikus, and with the help of his young alien child, CJ manages to obtain the necessary fuel, survives various violent attacks on his life, and makes it to the mother ship. While this conflict is framed as zero-sum because of the extreme situation to which the humans have subjected the aliens, CJ’s character models refrain from violent behaviour, and shows expressions of love for his son, compassion for Wikus, and desire to liberate his species from oppression. These factors ironically frame CJ as the most humanised character in the film.

In the various other secondary conflicts, *District 9* portrays a world trapped in a cycle of violence. Greed, selfishness, and sadism (“I love watching prawns die!”) depict a human world devoid of humanity. While the aliens are shown cooperating with one another, the humans, in contrast, are obsessed with violence and with amassing personal wealth and power. Although this film models countless dehumanising behaviours, attitudes and actions, it manages to do so without glorifying them. On the contrary, these beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are framed as deplorable, and do not seem remotely fair or justified.

Nevertheless, contrary to using violence sparingly, as suggested earlier in this paper, the amount of violence in

<sup>11</sup> The author acknowledges the apparent contradiction of referring to a non-human being in ‘humanising’ and ‘dehumanising’ terms, but argues that the humanistic traits attributed to the aliens effectively personifies them, and thus justifies the terminology.



*District 9* verges on the absurd, and at times could indeed be categorised as gratuitous. If the key creatives of *District 9* had been so inclined, they could have made an equally powerful film without modelling excessive violence. Although the gore and violence makes this film inappropriate for sensitive viewers, those who are willing and able to overlook it, and to employ a broader, contextual understanding of the filmmaker's critical message, paradoxically receive a positive message of the importance of maintaining our humanity. For this reason, on a certain level this film can be considered a humanising film which, through contrast and hyperbole, transmits conflict resolution principles to desensitised audiences, and thus contributes to a peace praxis.

## Avatar – Conflict Analysis Summary

The conflict analysis of *Avatar* revealed two central conflicts and six secondary conflicts. The central conflicts are the primary focus of this summary; (1) the extra-personal conflict of humans versus the Na'vi people, and (2) a personal conflict between the protagonist, Jake Sully, and the antagonist, Colonel Quaritch.

*Avatar* is set in 2154 A.D. when, according to the narrative, humans have destroyed all nature on Earth and have begun to exploit resources on the planet Pandora. Pandora's human-like inhabitants, the Na'vi, are initially portrayed as 'savages' that are impeding, what at first seems to be, a reasonable human quest for economic security. As the audience learns more about the Na'vi, however, it becomes difficult to see them as any less than 'human'.<sup>12</sup> They are honourable, dignified, and always act respectfully towards one another, the animals they hunt, and the plant life that abundantly surrounds them. In contrast, humans are gradually exposed as self-centred, greedy, arrogant, and lacking any connection whatsoever with nature. In a conscious process of dehumanisation, the filmmakers metaphorically liken the humans to parasites; they steadily extract life from Pandora and give nothing in return. Thus, similar to the first central conflict in *District 9*, this one is between two extra-personal groups, one alien and one human, where the alien characters are humanised and the humans are dehumanised.

The film's protagonist, Jake Sully, a paraplegic ex-US Marine, is hired to take part in a scientific programme of plugging human minds into man-made versions of Na'vi bodies, or 'avatars'. The purpose of the programme is to facilitate human infiltration of Na'vi society. While the human scientists working on the program seem to respect the Na'vi, and have a genuine interest in their biological connectedness to the planet, the profit-motivated management of the human corporation, RDA, ultimately control the op-

eration. The management's initial objective with the avatar program is to be able to communicate with the Na'vi when they need them to move from their homes to make way for new mining sites. This is not out of concern or respect for the Na'vi, but instead because "killing the indigenous looks bad". Thus their declared commitment to a non-violent-contending method of resolution is merely a disingenuous public relations tactic. In private, RDA's manager tells Sully that: "There is one thing that the shareholders hate more than bad press, and that's a bad quarterly statement." The implied meaning is that if their non-violent relocation initiative is unsuccessful, they are perfectly willing to turn to a violent-contending method of resolution.

Although the Na'vi are portrayed as a peaceful people, they are prepared to do everything within their power to protect their homes and their planet. Their commitment to this cause requires them to engage in combat with the military forces that RDA has hired to support the mining project. The Na'vi's low-tech weaponry is no match for the military's high-tech helicopters, bombers and robot 'suits'; but the alternative, of surrendering and betraying their planet, is not an option for the Na'vi. When reflecting upon the situation, Sully aptly notes that there is no point in negotiation because "there's nothing we have that they want". Thus, this film portrays an asymmetrical conflict clearly framed as zero-sum because the two parties' interests and needs are entirely incompatible. There is no possibility of a peaceful outcome that will satisfy both parties, and the violent-contending solution of war is framed as the only feasible option.

While this notion of inevitable war is contrary to the fundamental principles of conflict resolution, it also embodies the complexities of the conflicts that our world regularly confronts. Nevertheless, while this central conflict in *Avatar* does, perhaps inadvertently, succeed in accurately depicting the complexity of deep-seated conflict, it does not display an ideal conflict resolution framing.

At the film's climax, Sully leads the Na'vi into battle with the humans, and the previously explored extra-personal conflict evolves into a personal conflict between Sully and the RDA military leader, Colonel Quaritch. This second central conflict is prototypically framed as good versus evil. The filmmakers methodically portray Quaritch as a diabolical antagonist who completely lacks humanity. He does not show kindness, compassion, or caring towards anyone, and instead, clearly enjoys destruction and murder. In this polarised framing, as in all traditional heroic stories, the audience is urged to sympathise with the protagonist and despise the antagonist. Quaritch's obstinacy, even in the face of certain defeat, results in the death of countless human soldiers, Na'vi warriors, and animals. In the final confrontation, Sully's Na'vi mate, Neytiri, kills

<sup>12</sup> Similar to the case study of *District 9*, once again the filmmakers' personification of alien characters lead the author to, somewhat ironically, refer to the 'humanity' of non-human characters.



Quaritch with two arrows to the chest. Unlike previous scenes where Neytiri had taught Sully that taking the life of even a vicious animal is “very sad only”, there is no sense of remorse or sadness when Quaritch dies. The filmmakers effectively dehumanise Quaritch to the point of his life being worthy of less respect than that of an animal.

The intended overarching message that *Avatar* seems to attempt to transmit to audiences is that respect for nature is virtuous, and that greed and environmental exploitation is loathsome. While this can be seen as a positive message, the other, likely unintended, message that *Avatar* conveys to audiences is that violent-contention is an appropriate method of conflict resolution against dehumanised adversaries. When the humans in *Avatar* cannot convince the Na’vi to peacefully leave their habitat, their solution is violence. Likewise, when the Na’vi cannot convince the RDA management to abandon their destructive methods, their solution is also violence. The two central conflicts culminate in an all-out war that results in the celebrated death of the antagonist and the unconditional surrender of the surviving humans to the morally superior Na’vi. The lesson that audiences likely take from such an approach to conflict is that violence is necessary, exciting, and effective.

Had the creators of *Avatar* opted for non-violent solutions to the film’s central conflicts, they may have disappointed an audience base that has, through conditioning, come to expect extravagant portrayals of violence.<sup>13</sup> However, if they had been concerned with creating an overarching humanising message, they could have shown the characters being affected by the destruction and tremendous loss of life that their violent behaviour had caused their adversaries. This could have been achieved even within the zero-sum framing and violent-contending method established in *Avatar* by way of a few additional scenes or reaction shots.

It should be noted that there were indeed glimpses of human soldiers hesitating to kill Na’vi, and ultimately the Na’vi acted magnanimous in victory by peacefully expelling the surviving humans from Pandora; however, similar to the climax of *Up*, there was no sense of regret for loss of either human or Na’vi life during *Avatar*’s climactic battle. Unlike the early message in the film that killing is “sad”, there was no such feeling for the fallen soldiers of either side, and instead, battle was glamourised. This is in stark contrast to the approach of the creators of humanising war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Crash*, and *No Man’s Land*, mentioned earlier in this article.

In addition to glamourising violence, in *Avatar*, both sides were guilty of dehumanising the other to the point of murder seeming fair and reasonable. If the filmmakers had chosen not to model dehumanising attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, they may have been able to generate a posi-

tive, humanising message with this film. Unfortunately this was not one of their priorities. Instead they employed the classic, simplistic, and non-conflict resolution oriented plot of good versus evil. In this way, although the intended messages of *Avatar* may have been pro-environment and pro-social, the effective message, from a conflict resolution perspective, contributes more to a culture of violence than to a culture of peace.

## Case Study Conclusion

This case study has analyzed three popular mainstream films for their value to the goals of the field of conflict resolution. While the hypothesis that film can contribute to the dissemination of the principles of conflict resolution, was not ‘proven’ by the chosen examples, the analysis and suggestions provided are an attempt to demonstrate how each film *could* have taken a more humanising perspective without sacrificing the quality of the narrative or the film’s commercial success.

This section has offered several ideas on the framing and portrayal of conflict in mainstream films, but it is the decisions of the industry’s key creatives that can translate these ideas into a positive contribution to society. The decision to make humanising content must stem from their consciences, and should be guided by a sincere consideration of the impact their work has on the minds of millions of human beings. The quote at the beginning of part 2 of this article, taken from a scene in the popular film version of the Marvel comic-book hero, Spiderman, was originally intended for a young man with newfound superpowers. Perhaps it could also be read as a message to the filmmakers of the world.

## CONCLUSION

There is currently no framework to assure that the messages contained within films are of benefit to society. Instead, the glamourisation of violence and the dehumanization of entire groups of people has unfortunately become common fare in mainstream entertainment media. Films which contain positive modelling, or at least show negative reactions to dehumanising behaviours, can positively affect audiences by reducing racist and xenophobic attitudes, and instilling a sense of shared humanity. ‘Dehumanising films’, on the other hand, divide people and instil a sense a fear of the other.

This paper identifies three core ideas from the field of conflict resolution that advocate peaceful human relations and delegitimize violence as a means of bringing peace:

<sup>13</sup> As noted earlier, the phenomena of audience expectations of, and desensitisation to violence are issues demand a thorough inquiry that would go beyond the scope of the current paper.



(1) that there are viable alternatives to violent-contending methods of conflict resolution, (2) that positive outcomes for both parties can often be created, and (3) that all parties are worthy of being treated humanely. What is often needed to activate these ideas in people affected by conflict is creativity and imagination. The author argues that once a person can imagine a peaceful resolution to a conflict, that option becomes real. The role that filmmakers can play in this process is to stimulate such thought processes in audiences by modelling problem-solving approaches to conflict and humanising beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in the content they create.

Humanising messages are especially crucial in difficult times – such as the current global economic recession. History has shown that extreme right-wing and fascist groups enjoy their highest popularity in times of economic hardship as people look for simple reasons and solutions to their

immediate problems. Minority groups can become scapegoats, and xenophobia can replace appreciation of cultural diversity if the narrative is twisted in that direction.

A conscious effort to counteract messages of hatred and fear of the other with messages of a common struggle and creative solutions to problems is crucial in such situations. The author argues that humanising films constitute such an effort and can be a source of positive inspiration leading to an increase in cooperation and creative problem-solving. It is feasible that humanising the other, framing conflict as positive-sum, and the adoption of creative problem-solving approaches to conflict are concepts that could infiltrate our collective aspirations. Until this occurs, the creative, humanising messages of conscientious filmmakers will be there to remind us of what the world *could* be like. ■

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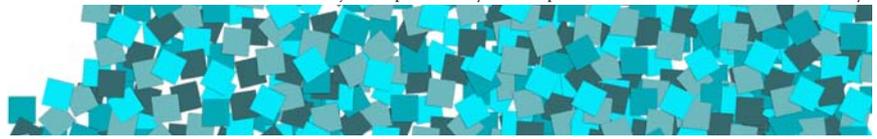
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