

LIGHTS, CAMERA,

Agriculture?

The scene is dark, and only a silhouette of Scarlett O'Hara is visible. Hungrily, she pulls a lone carrot out of the baron ground, begins to eat it, and spits it out, disgusted. With vigor, she proclaims the famous quote from "Gone with the Wind", "As God is my witness, I'll never go hungry again."

Just like that, a viewer has a depiction of how hard life can be when agricultural resources are depleted. The viewer instantly perceives the hardships associated with rural living and simultaneously an opinion is made.

Since the birth of film in the 1890s, many movies and television programs have had an agrarian theme.

Agriculture's prevalence has always been a part of the United States occupational backbone and the entertainment sector is no exception. Consequently, the public often gains its understanding and beliefs about the industry as a whole have been made through past and present cinematic productions.

Annie Specht, an assistant professor at Ohio State University, recently did a study about agriculture in the cinema. Using these themes identified by the Kellogg Institute, Specht examined 23 motion pictures and television programs for the presences of the themes and relationship to agriculture at the time of their release. The three themes were pastoral fantasy, the traditional family farm, and the decline of the agrarian tradition.

Pastoral fantasy describes movies based in rural settings are perceived as dream-like farmlands with rolling hills and an abundance of produce.

This is a nostalgic combination of small farming operations bounded by scenic, hilly terrain, lush forests, and dirt roads and is represented in almost every film and television program.

"Charlotte's Web", for example, featured a romanticized farm with fields full of happy livestock, and a newly painted red barn. This perception of agricultural cinema portrayed an agrarian life from

the eyes of a child. In these movies, farm or ranch life was easy going and very few hardships ever occurred.

Other films, such as "East of Eden" and "Giant" featured everyday agricultural activities as exciting escapades and over exaggerations of the color and abundance in terms of the setting.

In the traditional family farm theme, there is commonly a husband and a wife with an exceptional work ethic and grounded morals. The children

featured in this theme work hard and are seen using farming equipment and milking the cows.

Most of these films feature a small farm ran by one family. According to Specht the Kellogg

researchers found that Americans hold dear the image of the traditional family farm as part of the nation's cultural memory.

When people who have very little knowledge about agriculture see these movies, they perceive agriculture as a cluster of small businesses. In movies such as Babe, there is a small-scale operation with just enough livestock to keep the rancher and his wife in business.

Although a large chunk of Americans are agriculturally employed, many citizens are moving toward large cities for employment and living. The US Census reveals only 21 percent of the United States population lives in rural communities.

Because of this decrease in rural living and lack of agricultural experience, third and final concept, "The Decline of the Agrarian Tradition" is also present in movies and TV programs. In this theme, industrial agriculture production or seen as a destructive force that depressed crop prices and force small farms out of business thus impacting the rural economy and culture.

Shows, such as "The Fantastic Mr. Fox" and "Babe", have possessed an underlining inference of large-scale agriculturist as poorly educated and

"This makes sense: It's a very David-and-Goliath dynamic, and no one roots for Goliath."

ruthless. Depictions of agriculturist in this manner have the ability to tarnish the image of agriculture to those who maybe are unfamiliar.

With these themes, Specht examined 23 award-winning movies and television programs related to agriculture dating from 1950 to 2012.

“One of the reasons I wrote my dissertation on film and television portrayals of agriculture is that these media are the primary way many young people learn about the world,” Specht said.

With each movie or television program, she found the concepts were continuously portrayed.

“Interestingly, in films that don’t adhere to the pastoral fantasy, the other two themes – the traditional family farm and the decline of the agrarian tradition – come to the forefront,” Specht said. “It seems as though in trying to realistically portray the lives of farmers, the filmmakers’ focus lands entirely on “traditional” farmers struggling against their larger counterparts.”

So how does cinema affect how people view agriculture? Specht concluded that entertainment media continues to impact how agriculture is perceived.

“There are really powerful images of farming that are embedded in our culture, and these images – the farmer in his overalls, cattle roaming freely in green pastures, red barns and haylofts – that are continuously repeated in entertainment-media portrayals,” Specht said. “Even though they’re years, even decades, out of date and out of touch.”

Specht stated that if this perception of agriculture continues, it might lead to mistrust in farmers and ranchers.

“If media portrayals of the modern food and fiber industry remain negative in tone, public perceptions of agriculture as a bastion of traditional values and may erode,” Specht said, “leading to decreased trust in the farmers, ranchers, and processors who provide the United States with necessities of life.” **T**

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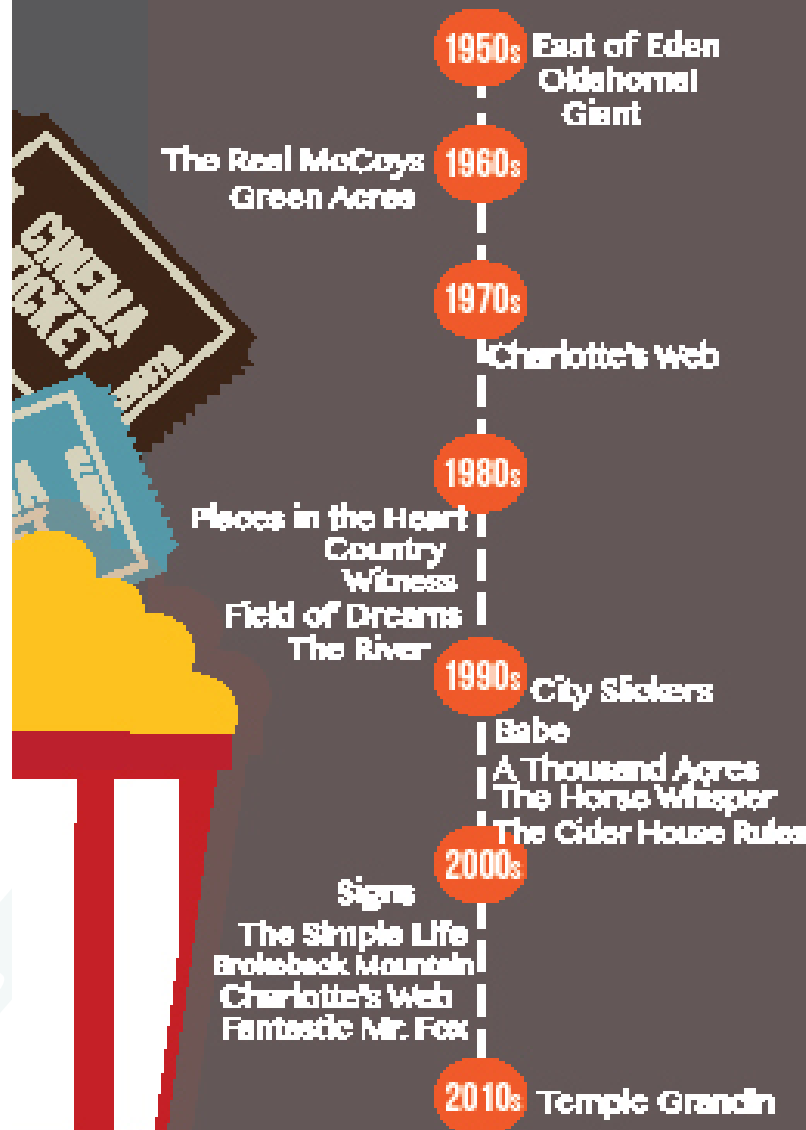
LOOKING BACK AT AGRICULTURE'S

TV

&

CINEMA

PAST



MOVIES HAVE AN AGRICULTURAL THEME. FILM DATES START IN THE 1950S TO PRESENT

SOURCE: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FILM AND TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF AGRICULTURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN CULTURAL MEMORY BY: ANNIE RUTH SPECHT