

FOREWORD

by Jeanine Basinger

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I became involved very early—right at the beginning, really—with *The Story of Movies* project because I knew Martin Scorsese was a great film historian as well as a great filmmaker and I wanted to be included in his vision for a film curriculum designed for American schools. His newest project, *Portraits of America: Democracy on Film* is a practical, open-minded plan to use movies to guide students on how to think and question the bombardment of visual information they absorb every day outside the classroom.

I have always loved movies, and have been a steady filmgoer since early childhood. My parents took me to the movies, my older sisters took me to the movies, my friends' parents took me to the movies, their older sisters took me to the movies. Everybody took me to the movies. I sat in the secret space of darkness and saw wonderful things that seemed to be promised for my adult life: love, excitement, travel, singing and dancing in the streets, adventure, and a lot of very expensive furniture. As I grew older, I also learned about some bad things that might be there—murder, death, war, racism—and as the years moved forward my viewing evolved into an understanding of concepts: gender roles, civics, politics and patriotism. I even learned that films could be seriously analyzed when my English class walked downtown (it was only two blocks) to the movie theatre to study a movie: Orson Welles' 1948 *Macbeth* came with an actual classroom guide supported by our local movie house. My movie "school room" cost only 12 cents a ticket (and a nickel for popcorn) but it shaped my ideas about what it meant to be an American and a female. I realize now that I was growing up with a haphazard version of what *Portraits* accomplishes in an organized and accessible format.

I began teaching film in a University nearly fifty years ago with the optimistic idea that movies should—and could—take a rightful place in the academy. At that time, very few colleges and universities had fully developed programs of study that treated the motion picture as a discipline with its own history and its own characteristics that separated it from other art forms. It was, if taught consistently at all, treated as a minor extension of theatre, or art, or social studies, or an English department. Things have changed. Today, the liberal arts institution I began at so long ago has not just a few classes in film, not just a major in film, not just a program of study devoted to film, not just a department of film, but a multi-million dollar endowed College of Film and the Moving Image which is housed in a specially designed and equipped building that contains editing rooms (both digital and 16mm), seminar rooms, a poster gallery, an archive, and two theatres designed to show 16mm, 35mm, 70mm, DCP, 3D—you name it—and these theatres are classrooms, not public venues. Under construction are the plans for an additional 16,000 square feet to contain yet another theatre, a sound stage, more classrooms, offices, and more archival storage, as well as a "house" with movable walls that can be used to create various sets. In the past five years, our numbers of majors and minors in film have tripled. Where once I taught students who were amazed (and thrilled) to have a movie shown to them in class...and who had never heard of Ernst Lubitsch...I now teach students who own every Lubitsch film on DVD, who can stream movies into their dorm rooms, and who have been taking all sorts of scattered courses of various types and quality since they were in grade school. They arrive in my office and want to show me their demo reel or their shot-by-shot analysis of the *Psycho* shower sequence.

As I said, things have changed. We're past the point of thinking film study is new—or optional. Outside the classroom the moving image is the major form of communication among young people, and their primary source of learning about what is going on in the world. The need for teaching about film in middle schools and high schools...and doing it well...is imperative. (Learning is hard, but unlearning is harder.) Our young people are simply not educated if they cannot understand how to see moving images, how to interpret them, how to unlock their subtexted messages, how to read them for an understanding of the country they live in, warts and all. *Portraits of America: Democracy on Film* is a combination of subjective and objective learning that separates it from other film study programs, and its curriculum is not random, but carefully selected and shaped around important topics. Young people can and will embrace *Portraits* because the films tell about personal experiences that bring understanding directly, powerfully, emotionally in the moving image format they use every day. *Portraits* will reach students, not only in their heads, but also in their hearts. It's not a replacement for anything, but an important expansion of your present curriculum.

We teachers have to be optimistic. We're the people who plant sequoias. We work toward a future we'll never see, with the confidence it will be the future we'd want it to be. To accomplish this, we have to talk to our students in the language in which they're talking to each other, and the language the world uses to influence them. Frank Capra once said that there were three modern languages that had to be taught in schools: music, mathematics, and movies. Two of these are taken care of...let's get busy on the third.