Cops on Film

University of Dayton

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University of Dayton political science professor Michelle Pautz investigates the image of police in films with a new study that continues her exploration of how movies influence opinions.

“Cops on Film: Hollywood's Depiction of Law Enforcement in Popular Films” is published in *PS: Political Science and Politics*. It comes as the nation renews focus on officers and their actions following several deadly incidents.

The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, provoked discussions on police response and deadly force.

“Part of that discussion is related to the nation's preconceived notions of cops and where those ideas might originate,” Pautz said. “Film has a profound ability to influence attitudes, so we need to understand what images we are getting of cops. It's another piece of the puzzle to understand where the attitudes we have about law enforcement might come from.”

She said the silver screen is an important piece because movies give people “pseudo-reality experiences.”

“I'm probably never going to be an astronaut but I can feel what it's like through watching movies,” she said. “Movies, unlike so many other forms of entertainment, are completely engrossing in the theater. Most of us have our other screens put away; very rarely do we give our undivided attention anywhere.”
Pautz chose the films for her exploratory study based on box office receipts between 1984 and 2014 to evaluate features that even casual movie-goers would have seen. The results were 34 motion pictures and more than 200 police characters.

She found a mixed portrayal of cops generally, but said overall cop characters were shown as good and hard-working — though many are in minor roles. Most individual characters are depicted as young white males, and their actions are described as typical police work, in which they were doing or trying to do the right thing.

The study builds on Pautz’ research, which has found movies can influence how people view government. Her last study surveyed people who watched “Argo” and “Zero Dark Thirty” — which both depict civil servants within the CIA during significant events in American history.

“As a social scientist, I can never say movies are the sources of our opinions,” she said, “but I think it does provide an interesting piece of the conversation about where our ideas come from.”

She is expanding that research now for a new book, Civil Servants on the Silver Screen.

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