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DAILY NEWS

'Flicker' gives fresh take on movies

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"Flicker: Your Brain on Movies" by Jeffrey M. Zacks. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2015, 342 pages, \$27.95.



"Sitting in a theater, it is not at all uncommon to experience bodily responses – to feel as though you are preparing to move, perhaps even squirming a little in your seat," Jeffrey M. Zacks explains near the beginning of *"Flicker: Your Brain on Movies,"* the new bestseller based on the author's academic research as well as his personal passion. "You may feel as though you are ready to jump into the action at a moment's notice, yet you are sitting perfectly still and nothing is touching you. What is going on? Your eyes and ears are telling you that something exciting is happening in front of you and your brain is preparing you to react. Of course, you know it's just a movie. But large parts of your brain don't process that distinction."

In a nutshell, this short passage pretty much sums up the premise behind this fascinating look at how movies influence the way human beings think and, in many cases, the way they act. We are all aware of well-publicized instances in which people have done horrible things because they were not able to distinguish fact from fiction. Usually these folks end up

with a diagnosis involving some form of mental illness; many are often institutionalized. But as Zacks makes abundantly clear, the phenomenon may be a lot more pervasive than previously thought.

Full disclosure: Movies have been an important part of my life since pre-kindergarten. Some of my earliest memories revolve around going to see Elvis Presley films with my mother. My dad, on the other hand, typically only went to see Westerns, and I think I accompanied him to every Western shown in my hometown during the 1960s. My enthusiasm for movies has only grown stronger since those humble beginnings at our one-screen theater in Waverly, Tenn.

Flicker is extensively researched, with 23 pages of source notes and a 25-page reference section at the conclusion of the 10 chapters that comprise the main text. The book is presented in two major sections, each purposefully designed to complement and reinforce the main ideas covered in its counterpart. Part I, "From Up on a Screen to Inside Your Head," consists of five chapters that basically describe how the brain interprets motion pictures or "what it's like to experience a movie." Part II, "The Tricks That Make Movies Work," is made up of five additional chapters that

highlight and explain how the realities discussed in the first half of the book can be manipulated by filmmakers in some truly extraordinary and surprisingly amazing ways, or “all the things that happen outside our awareness to produce the rich illusions we experience when watching films.”

Zacks is a professor of psychology and radiology at Washington University in St. Louis, where he also serves as director of the Dynamic Cognition Laboratory. He has a master’s degree as well as a doctorate from Stanford; his undergraduate work was completed at Yale. One of the courses he teaches regularly is “The Cognitive Neuroscience of Film.” His books include “Event Cognition,” with Gabriel A. Radvansky, and “Understanding Events: From Perception to Action,” with Thomas F. Shipley.

Coming from a fairly heavy-duty scholarly orientation, it is evident from the first few pages of this captivating volume that Zacks knows his subject matter in considerable depth. He has spent a large portion of his adult life investigating the concepts he writes about effortlessly in this groundbreaking treatise on how consciousness works. By the same measure, I was equally impressed by his ability to communicate complex and complicated ideas in such a clear, concise and accessible manner. Those with a professional interest in the underlying science associated with his work will not be disappointed. Similarly, those with only a passing curiosity in the manifestations he describes so intimately will be intrigued by the eloquence of his prose. Certainly, movie buffs will be particularly enthralled by the countless references to films (some major motion pictures and some much more obscure) Zacks makes throughout the book.

One of my favorite chapters was “How Movies Make Memories,” which deals with cognitive processes and how they can potentially be manipulated by movies. Here, Zacks goes to some lengths to illustrate how memories get encoded and how they can become contaminated by exposure to cinematic depictions. “Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, served in the military in World War II,” Zacks writes. “In that capacity he was involved with editing movie footage taken in the Nazi death camps at the end of the war. Later, it was reported that as president he confused that footage with his own personal experience, even though he had never left the country during the war.” Zacks argues persuasively that whereas these kinds of incidents receive a great deal of attention when they involve high-profile individuals, this type of confusion is more common than most realize.

Another chapter I found equally thought-provoking was “Sleight of Hand.” In this perfectly executed installment, the author discusses how those responsible for creating some of the best movies often take advantage of the way the brain processes information to make the story they are trying to tell more visceral. “You can make major continuity gaffes, and most of the time your audience won’t catch them,” Zacks notes. “Actually, film editors and directors know this. Despite all the work that goes into managing continuity, they often choose shots with errors rather than select an alternate take that is ‘clean’ or reshoot the scene altogether. Expert filmmakers know that they can sacrifice continuity to the higher goals of the storytelling. Consider James Cameron’s ‘Titanic.’ Continuity buffs have found more than 250 continuity errors in this film.”

“Did you see ‘Titanic?’” he then adds wryly. “Do you remember being bugged by any of these?”

As you may have surmised, I really liked “Flicker.” It provided a fresh take on many movies I have seen multiple times. My sense is that it would have the same impact on many readers. I suggest picking up a copy before you buy your next movie ticket.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.