Geography Goes to the Movies
Nat Geo recommends films using the geographic perspective

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From dramas to documentaries, comedies to cult films, Nat Geo makes some suggestions for your next dinner-and-a-movie!

Rated G

The Wizard of Oz
This is a movie about geography.
- Varied transportation? How about hot-air balloons and ruby slippers! And flying monkeys!
- Diverse habitats? From black-and-white Kansas tornadoes to the dazzling Technicolor of Oz! Urbane emerald cities, suburban Munchkinlands, and rural poppy fields!
- Immigration and legal boundaries? Is Dorothy a refugee? Illegal immigrant? Political dissident? Is landing a house on someone considered vehicular homicide? Are the flying monkeys an invading military or domestic law enforcement quashing a revolt and assassination plot?
- Biodiversity? Only the meanest apple trees you'll ever meet! And flying monkeys!
- Ethnic diversity? Munchkins and witches and tin men, oh my!
- Cultural diversity? About that witch: Don't judge her by the color of her skin, but the (villainous) content of her character. And her flying monkeys!
- Endangered species? The only cowardly lion in known existence! Did I mention the flying monkeys?
- Engineering marvels? The Emerald City! Monkeys that fly!

—Caryl-Sue, producer

Rated PG

The Englishman Who Went Up A Hill But Came Down A Mountain
Surveyors from Her Majesty's Ordnance Survey Office in Great Britain are sent to a small town in Wales to measure the elevation of the local mountain to determine if, indeed, it qualifies as a mountain at all. To the local townspeople, the mountain has almost mythic importance in their town history and personal identity. The fact that it may not be tall enough to be an actual mountain sets the surveyors at odds with the locals, and hilarity and creativity ensue. The movie is a great look at the important role ordnance surveyors have always played, and makes you realize how much hard and ongoing work goes into making accurate maps.
—Kim Hulse, director, Geography Education Programs & Education Policy Initiatives

Rabbit-Proof Fence
This is a film based on a true story of Molly, Daisy, and Gracie; half-caste Aboriginal children in the 1930s in Western Australia who were abruptly taken to "school" and then their daring escape home. Although the film touches on heavy content such as forced acculturation of minorities, domestic and physical abuse, and blatant discrimination, the film does a superb job in showing the strong character and proud culture of Australia's first people and the empowerment of the cultural spirit.
—Penny Anderson, geography teacher
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
As many already know, Harry is an 11-year-old boy who discovers on his birthday that he is a wizard, and goes off to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There are many imaginary geographies at play in this story, which present fun opportunities for mapping and discussions on political geography. Have each student create their own map of Hogwarts school and grounds, and have a class discussion on both the physical and imaginary boundaries that exist at the school. For example, who is allowed to go to Hogwarts (i.e., wizards, muggles)? Where do certain student groups (i.e., Houses) go and not go (i.e., each others' dorms, the Forbidden Forest)?
—Sam Zuhlke, program specialist

The Endless Summer
This 1966 surf movie follows two surfers on a trip around the world. It introduced American surfers to far-flung surfing locales in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Tahiti, and Hawaii. It also shows how the surfers utilized geography in their quest to find perfect waves.
—Stuart Thornton, reporter and writer

Rated PG-13

Into the Wild
Into the Wild is a movie, originally based on a novel written by John Krakauer, about a young man who chooses to travel across North America to live in the Alaskan wilderness. Though his journey rough, he must understand the dynamic relationships between the weather, native ecosystems and himself in order to survive.
—Brooke Barry, geography intern

Local Hero
A Texas oilman goes to Scotland at the beginning of the North Sea oil boom in the early 1980s. He interacts with locals in a village that his company wants to buy for a terminal. The film is a humorous comedy about potential new wealth, corporate and village culture, and even includes a Russian fishing trawler. It might be a little dated but is still relevant given the recent shale boom in the U.S.
—Tom Maraffa, faculty (Youngstown State University)

Australia
Very evocative and beautiful landscapes. Good demonstration of climate and soils.
—Vicky Juett, teacher

"The Lord of the Rings Trilogy" (The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, The Return of the King)
Based on the books by J.R.R. Tolkien, "Lord of the Rings" is a three-part adventure story taking place in fictional Middle-earth. The map of Middle-earth is prominently displayed throughout the film, and the various landscapes of Middle-earth repeatedly affect the protagonists' journey and the people who live there: mountains, bogs, prairies, wastelands, and fertile cropland. Physical geography is relevant in Middle-earth, and it could get students interested in reading maps.
—Rebecca Bice, geography intern

Rated R

The Sheltering Sky
A film based on the book written by Paul Bowles. Three young Americans take off for a trip to North Africa . . . Wonderful scenes in North Africa!!!
—Gotze Kalsbeek, teacher trainer

The Descendants
This film is an accurate portrayal of modern life on Hawaii. The inner conflict between indigenous rights and current land owner rights, mixed among our everyday struggles, is subtly portrayed by the characters in this film.
—Elena Takaki, program manager

Not Rated

Paddle to Seattle: Journey Through the Inside Passage
Follow two friends as they build their own kayaks and paddle together for 97 days through the wilderness on a journey from Alaska to Seattle—only to survive to talk about . . . most things.

Join adventurers Josh Thomas and J.J. Kelley as they masterfully navigate the 1,300-mile Inside Passage, traveling through waters that border North America’s largest temperate rainforest. Brown bears guard the shores. Rain pelts them for weeks without rest. They’ll even encounter deadly—not to mention deadly—marine life. Enriched with interviews of colorful locals, our charming heroes’ stories are threaded together by their unconventional humor and wit. Ultimately, this is a story about friendship and how it survives the...Paddle to Seattle.
—Alison Michel, producer

Life and Debt
This film documents the impact of IMF and World Bank policies on Jamaica.
—Cathleen McAnneny, professor of geography

Long Way Round
This 2004 documentary series follows the 19,000-mile journey of Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman as they motorcycle across 12 countries in just over 100 days. Ewan and Charley cross Europe, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia, ride the Road of Bones through Siberia over to Alaska (they of course fly this section), cross through Canada, part of the lower 48 and finished in New York. The Long Way Round challenges their view of the world.
—Zach Dulli, director of operations, National Council for Geographic Education

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
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<td>documentary</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>non-fiction film.</td>
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<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>media, such as books or films, that are imaginative and not true stories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>geographic</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>a way to understand a topic or area using spatial features and relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>perspective</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>geography</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>study of places and the relationships between people and their environments.</td>
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For Further Exploration

Instructional Content
• University of Hawaii: Geography of Film
• College Board: Using Films in AP Human Geography

Websites
• National Geographic Movies

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