[Assignment: Write a short essay making a point about education by responding to the essays we have read and the issues we have discussed. You may use your own experience in order to support, oppose, or expand a premise.]

(1) In his essay "TV Can't Educate," Paul Robinson makes a convincing argument that although television and movies can provide excellent entertainment, they fail as primary sources of knowledge. My experience as a student and parent confirm Robinson's thesis--partially. The two media can be of some value in education but their value lies, rather, in their unique ability to enhance and supplement our learning experiences.

(2) At the small parochial grade school I attended, films were a welcome break in our daily routine. I remember crowding into our cafeteria-cum-gymnasium with my classmates on a winter afternoon to see a film as part of our history lesson. We fourth-graders were especially pleased to be included that day with the upperclassmen--fifth- and sixth-graders. In retrospect, I understand why the younger children were excluded. The documentary consisted of newsreel and archival footage of the Jews in concentration camps during World War II. It was not a long film, but it left images in my nine-year-old mind that will never fade. The starved, hollow-eyed human beings with their shaved heads peered from behind endless rows of bunks and spoke to me in their sadness. The frozen, naked corpses stacked and waiting for mass burial in some lime pit conveyed a message that I never could have read in a text. This wasn't ancient history in some old book! The people getting off those trains looked like people I saw every day--they were just wearing old-fashioned clothes. I was shocked and horrified--but I was not educated. Not until years later, when I was able to read the cultural and historical context of those events, did I begin to understand what I had seen. Viewing the film that day, we children thought of it merely as a grisly curiosity. Perhaps all we really learned from the experience was that the Nazis were "bad guys." Education is more than that.

(3) Another documentary illustrates film's powerful capacity to enhance what we learn from books. When Shoah was aired on Chicago's public television station recently, I saw it that my eleven-year-old son watched it with me. Of course, he didn't understand all the details, but the movie presented an excellent opportunity for him and me to discuss the Holocaust, its victims, and those who continued about their daily lives in the midst of it. We saw no footage of the camps during the war, yet from the interviews with survivors, relatives, and historians, and from the scenes of the camps as they are
today, my son gained a certain perspective that would have been difficult to duplicate in a text. His knowledge of this tragedy was given a reality in painfully human terms.

(4) Used creatively, films can add human interest to dry historical fact and sketch in the cultural setting of a period for us, but they can never replace the primary source of knowledge—books. Anyone who ever read a classic literary work and then experienced the disappointment of seeing the much-anticipated film version would concur. War and Peace lost much in the leap from book to movie, and it isn’t fair to compare Moby Dick, the novel to Moby Dick, the movie (Gregory Peck notwithstanding). It would, however, be fun to see Dr. Zhivago during the semester you study the Russian Revolution or to see the movie version of Evita after reading the chapter in your history book on the Peronist regime in Argentina. We must remember that what we are getting is an artistic interpretation of a time, a place, and a people. The actors, the director, the editor, and others hold that particular retelling of history in their hands.

(5) I remember sitting through two consecutive showings of the movie The Greatest Story Ever Told when I was twelve years old. It didn’t matter that I later had to explain my lengthy absence to my worried mother. There, in the darkness of our little community movie house, I was caught up in the spectacle of it all—the miracles, the scenery, the human drama, the heavenly glory, Max Von Sydow! It was a wonderfully moving experience, similar to seeing The Ten Commandments some years earlier with my parents—but it wasn’t education. Biblical epics can familiarize us with religions and cultures, but Yul Brenner and Charlton Heston earned their salaries as entertainers, not theologians.

(6) When Paul Robinson speaks of television’s inadequacy as an educator, he states "In learning one must be able to . . . make mental comparisons . . . to measure it against the formal rules of logic and evidence—in short, to carry on a mental debate." The book we can close, ponder, and return to at our leisure, but the television show doesn’t stop for our reflections (unless we are handy with our VCR’s). It would be difficult, if not impossible, to learn to cook by watching Julia Child or "the Frugal Gourmet," Jeff Smith. These experts entertain us and demonstrate nifty techniques, or perhaps take us with them to a fresh fish market in Brittany, but they won’t show us how to get dinner on the table tonight. My husband and I are old and loyal fans of Channel 11’s This Old House, but when the time came to install three-way wiring in our barn, he had to pull out the Popular Mechanics Do-It-Yourself Encyclopedia. Bob and Norm are never around when you really need them.
The first priority of movies and television has to be entertainment. It is the nature of those two powerful and wonderful media. They can present educational material to us, but it is only by reading and through practical experience that we truly learn. In these two modes, we are allowed to make those mental comparisons and do those mental functions that solidly fix the knowledge in our brains and make it real for us. Other modes are just supplementary. As Robinson states, television and movies are structurally unfit to bear the weight of being primary sources of education. Whether the subject is something as serious as genocide, or as pleasant as preparing a souffle, they can give us vivid pictures and lasting impressions. If we use them wisely, television and movies can make learning more interesting, more enjoyable, and can provide a unique and valuable contribution to education.