

Hollywood Films and Popular Culture

Introductory Notes

In this course we will be seeing a number of films in support of course objectives. Given the relationship between popular culture and cinema it is important that you understand that these films are what I would call *intelligent* films, in contrast to *soporific* films. Soporific films are usually films produced by subsidiaries of the TMMC (transnational multi-media conglomerates) in this country who collectively are known as Hollywood. (For a definition of the TMMC see the course glossary.) The hallmark of soporific films is that they can be best described by adjectives such as asinine, banal, *soporific*, degenerate, mediocre, idiotic, decadent, and so on. (Two examples of such films are *Indecent Proposal* (1993) and *Wayne's World* [1992].) A legitimate question this brings up, however, is this: What is it about Hollywood that prevents it from coming out with *intelligent* films?¹

Surely, if the principal objective of Hollywood is to make money then does it not make sense to produce intelligent films; that is films that, presumably, will make money for Hollywood because, one can reasonably assume, more people will go to see intelligent films? Or is the underlying suggestion that intelligent films do not make money because the masses are not interested in seeing such films--therefore, Hollywood cannot be expected make films that will lose them money? Or is there an underlying suggestion that there is a conspiracy in Hollywood not to produce intelligent films--regardless of whether people want them or not? The answer to both questions is, in actuality, yes.

To explain, starting with the first question: the perception by Hollywood seems to be correct that soporific films make more money because they attract larger audiences than do intelligent films. But why do soporific films appear to more popular among the masses (the *ignorantsia*)? (The

¹ What does one mean by *intelligent* films? In general terms intelligent films are those that are, at once, immensely entertaining, and yet powerfully thought provoking, emotionally challenging and intellectually enriching. Most importantly, they fulfill the mandate of true art: via the medium of the aesthetic experience to comment upon and/or question the status quo--at whatever level it may be (global, regional, national, local, etc.) and from what ever perspective (the family, society, polity, economy, the environment, etc., etc.)--in the service of a better future. To explain this point in another way: the difference between an intelligent film and non-intelligent film, at the simplest level, is that the intelligent film makes demands on the intelligence of the viewer. This difference emerges most clearly when one makes the distinction between art and entertainment. Art makes one look at the world differently, while entertainment throws back what one already knows, but in an oversimplified manner. Youngblood (1979:754) captures this distinction in relation to cinema succinctly: "By perpetuating a destructive habit of unthinking response to formulas, by forcing us to rely ever more frequently on memory, the commercial entertainer encourages an unthinking response to daily life, inhibiting self-awareness.... He offers nothing we haven't already conceived, nothing we don't already expect. Art explains; entertainment exploits. Art is freedom from the conditions of memory; entertainment is conditional on a present that is conditioned by the past. Entertainment gives us what we want; art gives us what we don't know what we want. To confront a work of art is to confront oneself--but aspects of oneself previously unrecognized." Intelligent films, then, are also works of art. (For a sample of intelligent films, see the recommended films list at my web site.)

masses here also includes those who advise them on what films to go and see, namely the so called 'film critics' who work in the corporate media.) This is an extremely difficult question to answer, assuming that one accepts the underlying premise of the question. One should be reminded of the fact that the masses have never really been presented, by Hollywood, with a film menu dominated by intelligent films, and one that is accompanied by the kind of advertising blitzkrieg traditionally reserved for soporific films. It is possible to conjecture that had the public access to such films on a wide scale then they would go to see them. Yet, evidence seems to suggest that the masses do have a proclivity for soporific films--especially if one also takes into consideration the popularity of Hollywood films in Canada and Western Europe; that is places where the domestic film industry is geared more toward the production of intelligent films. Plus in any case Hollywood has released intelligent films from time to time (see the discussion at the end of this chapter), but they haven't made as much money as the soporific ones. So the question is why? There are several possible answers:

1. The proportion of the population with the requisite intelligence, education, and other related factors to permit the enjoyment of intelligent films is quite small, in almost any society. Added to that is the factor of the dominant age range of the audience: from teens to late twenties. This group is less likely to be interested in thoughtful films in an age that glorifies banality, decadence and mediocrity. ²

2. The history of the masses in North America and Europe (excluding groups with Third World heritage) has been such that they have nearly always been drawn to mediocrity and banality in the arts and entertainment. The cultural heritage of the masses, which can be traced as far back as the time when the first major social structural divisions appear between the upper and the lower classes around the 6th and 7th centuries in Europe, has throughout the centuries up to the present day *born all the marks of a class that (until the present century) was denied access to education, the arts and ample leisure time* .

Unbelievable though it may appear at first sight, the majority of the white and blue collar working classes can trace their ancestry to the lower classes of the 6th and 7th centuries! Political and economic systems may have changed radically over the centuries, but the original central divide between the upper and the lower classes has remained more or less permanent. To give an example: those who were once conquered and subjugated are also the same people who in different time periods became transformed into slaves, serfs, peasants, the blue collar working class, and finally the white collar working class (this last group is also referred to as the middle class in North America). Given these circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that the *ignorantsia* (for a definition of this term see the chapter on the ignorantsia elsewhere in this work) will be drawn to soporific films and avoid intelligent films.

² There is also the possibility here that Hollywood has trapped itself into catering to this age group primarily by driving away a potential audience comprising intelligent adults to other forms of entertainment. If Hollywood were to seriously court this segment of the population it is possible that it could broaden its audience.

3. The preference by the *ignorantsia* for soporific films and other similar low culture forms of entertainment is probably also attributable to what one may call 'ideological resonance' that the masses find in these forms of entertainment. That is, taking the cue from Barker (1989), one can posit this hypothesis: that the ideological messages contained in soporific films appear to make sense to the *ignorantsia* because of their material circumstances. Take, for example, the kinds of films that were so popular in the 1980s among the *ignorantsia*, such as the violence ridden, special effects dominated, fantasy films like *Star Wars*, *Gremlins* and *Batman* films, and the equally violence ridden racist and stupid *Rambo* and *Rocky* films. The basic underlying ideological messages of these films spoke to the state of the political-economic circumstances of the U.S. that had produced the ultraconservative Republican reigns of Ronald Reagan and his acolyte, George Bush. What specifically were these circumstances? They were those that emanated from changes that were working toward *dialectically* weakening U.S. economic strength in the domestic and international arenas on one hand, and on the other, U.S. strategic geopolitical strength--thereby precipitating in their wake falling standards of living and a psychological sense of global impotence among the masses in the U.S. These changes included:

- (a) the rise of powerful trading blocs and cartels (e.g., the EEC and OPEC);
- (b) the rising tendency toward privatization of international capital as Eurocurrency markets and international banking conglomerates grew in strength, thereby undercutting U.S. ability to influence international monetary policies;
- (c) falling competitiveness in international markets in the face of stiff competition from allies such as Japan and West Germany brought on by such factors as: (i) misuse of national resources via the escalating armaments budget, (ii) obsolete technologies and machinery, (iii) misguided production/ marketing arrogance and (iv) general complacency on the part of both labor and management--born of years of prosperity and economic superiority--that led to falling productivity (qualitatively and quantitatively);
- and (d) increasing dissension and confusion within the Western alliance as Vietnam first, and later countries such as Angola, Iran, Nicaragua and Afghanistan began to slip out of Western hegemonic orbit, often aided and abetted by the Soviet Union.

Not surprisingly, by the time Reagan had surfaced to challenge the incumbent, President Jimmy Carter, in the 1980 presidential election, U.S. geopolitical and economic global hegemonic power was definitely on the wane with serious negative implications for how the *ignorantsia* saw its future and that of the country as a whole. Yet failing to comprehend the causes for this trend, it fell for the media blitzkrieg of 'feel-good' rhetoric and symbolisms that harked back to the 'good old days' of yesteryear (when jobs were plentiful, gasoline and other fuel was cheap, refrigerators were full, women were firmly subordinate to men, blacks at home and abroad (in the *World/Majority* countries) 'knew their place' and budget deficits were manageable), that the Reaganites so masterfully launched, and for which Reagan was so well suited with his motion-picture acting background.³

³ Moreover, aided enormously by the power of television with its 30-second slick commercials, substance was replaced with the trivial and the superficial as criteria for judging the worthiness of a candidate (the Reaganites with their huge campaign war chest were able to exploit the soporific effects of the medium to the full via their well orchestrated manipulation of images and slogans).

Easy solutions to complex problems were drummed into the minds of the gullible, e.g.:

- (i) Massive tax-cuts for the wealthy will solve the economic problems of the unemployed and the poor.
- (ii) U.S. power and image abroad will be strengthened by astronomical rearmament budgets, bellicose pronouncements and unashamed belligerency.
- (iii) Domestic social tranquillity can be restored by emphasizing, supposedly, the sanctity of the family (which, in turn, would depend on restoring male chauvinism, patriarchy and opposing abortion) and by repressing blacks (which would require new forms of racist practices: the substitution of effect for intent in proving discrimination, providing legitimacy to the false concept of 'reverse discrimination' to attack affirmative action programs, etc.).
- (iv) Economic recovery will be hastened by tax-cuts for the rich, government deregulation, privatization, and attacks on trade unions.

It is in the context of these circumstances that one begins to comprehend the immense popularity among the *ignorantsia* of the Hollywood films of the 1980s, such as those just mentioned. And the ideological messages contained in these films dealt with explaining these circumstances as well as assisting in coping with them. But what, specifically, were these messages? Three immediately stand out:

- (i) Forget about your immediate circumstances and and become a child once more; just simply relax by escaping into a fantasy land where good and evil are clearly defined, where good always wins in the end, and where the solution to all problems is so simple: violence.
- (ii) The reassurance of the continuing presence of the Great White 'Father.' "The Father must here be understood," As Wood (1986:172) in his highly perceptive work explains, "in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential: patriarchal authority (the Law), which assigns all other elements to their correct, subordinate, allotted roles: the actual heads of families, fathers of recalcitrant children, husbands of recalcitrant wives, who must either learn the virtue and justice of submission or pack their bags; the young heterosexual male, father of the future, whose eventual union with the 'good woman' has always formed the archetypal happy ending of the American film, guarantee of the perpetuation of the nuclear family and stability."
- (iii) Do not think and worry over your problems and difficulties, because either nothing can be done to change the system that produced them, or because others (the transnational conglomerates) will take care of them. So, instead, why not escape into a fantasy world of sex and violence.

These, then, are some of the possible explanations one can offer for the inability of Hollywood, judging by its track record, of producing intelligent films, except on rare occasions.⁴

Turning now to the second question concerning film audiences: Is there a Hollywood conspiracy not to produce intelligent films. The answer is yes in that there is a form of conspiracy at work of the unspoken and unwritten kind, a form of conspiracy that one may call *systemic conspiracy*, and it is manifest in the fact that the Hollywood filmmaking system is not interested in producing films that are 'controversial' (these are usually films that are referred to as 'social realist' films). By controversial, here, one is referring to films that question the status quo by seriously raising issues concerning, for example, the existing iniquitous power relations between the rich and the poor, or between blacks and whites, or between men and women, or between labor and capitalists, etc., etc. Such films become controversial because those who would like to maintain the status quo (usually because they are the beneficiaries of it), will attempt to discredit the films. Part of the reason why Hollywood is afraid of controversial films has to do with Hollywood history and part of the reason has to do with ideology.

Historically, Hollywood never fully recovered from the unconstitutional activities of a bunch of rabid, paranoid and opportunistic ultraconservatives that assaulted it at two different times, in 1947 and in 1951, during one of the darkest periods of post-War U.S. history: the period of the anticommunist hysteria. As a result of hearings held in 1947 by the self-styled Congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities (which ironically was itself engaged in an un-American activity of no small magnitude by massively and arrogantly infringing on the freedom of speech of hundreds of Americans) to attempt to prove the preposterous notion that Hollywood had been infiltrated by communists, Hollywood became gun-shy of producing films that had the potential to be controversial and thereby draw the ire of conservative forces--who usually dominate the higher echelons of power.⁵

The last thing Hollywood needed at a time of declining film attendance was potential calls by powerful conservatives for boycotts of Hollywood films. In fact, the Hollywood moguls became so frightened of this possibility that they actively cooperated with the committee and proceeded not only to falsely accuse a number of people (mostly screen writers) of being communists, but helped to develop a 'blacklist' of names (usually falsely accused), obtained via cowardly and despicable internal (Hollywood) informers. (Once blacklisted, it usually meant the end of one's

⁴ Consider, for example, the special effects fantasy film, *Jurassic Park* (1993), constituting yet another milestone in luring the ignorantsia to see soporific films via skillful combination of technical wizardry and large doses of violence. Once again the film is aimed at transforming the adult into a child, and once again it helps the audience in dodging consideration of such fundamental issues of our time as the awfully disastrous exploitation of the environment by the transnational monopoly conglomerates, and symbolized by the destruction of the last remaining rain forests and the relegation of all plant and animal species in them to extinction. Yet, ironically, the film is about fascination with animals that became naturally extinct millions of years ago.

⁵ The House Committee on Un-American Activities was established by the Democrats in 1938. Later, however, this act came back to haunt them when the Republicans used it to harass them. Ironically, the 1947 hearings were held at the request of a militant ultraconservative organization founded in 1944 going by the colorful and absolutely unfitting name of Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals--as if American ideals did not include freedom of thought and freedom of speech.

career in Hollywood.) Informers who contributed names to this 'blacklist' included, it is alleged, Ronald Reagan (the former U.S. president), and Walt Disney.

The second set of hearings (in 1951) by the House Committee on Un-American Activities took place under the aegis of the notorious Joseph McCarthy.⁶

Both the 1947 and the 1951 hearings, not surprisingly, produced no evidence to even remotely suggest that Hollywood had become a haven for communists. Nevertheless, Hollywood came to realize that producing what is sometimes called 'social realist' films was not in its best political or economic interests. But this is not all, however. There is also the ideological dimension.

Ideologically, Hollywood is not in a position to train its guns, so to speak, on the status quo (not withstanding suggestions to the contrary by such McCarthyite equivalents of the 1990s as Richard Grenier [1990]). Hollywood, as a corporate world, is imbued with the same corporate ideology found in other sectors of the U.S. economy: which is that the capitalist system must be maintained at all costs.⁷

Which implies that ideas and activities that challenge the power of the wealthy in any way or form must neither be encouraged nor be permitted to receive legitimacy. Consequently, Hollywood is not likely to permit the making of films that fundamentally challenge the status quo--especially ones that would challenge the legitimacy of the capitalist credo that the salvation of humankind lies in permitting the corporate rich to make as much money as they can and however they can, regardless of consequences for the rights of others--though every now and again a few will slip through, given that this is not a totalitarian society.

To follow up on the last point: surely not all movies that have come out of Hollywood in recent years may be considered as trash. There have been some Hollywood films that are definitely good. So how did these films come to be made in light of what has just been said above? Interestingly, it is due to a combination of two factors: the emergence of Hollywood independents coupled with the continuing presence of film stars. Hollywood independents will produce intelligent films if they can get funding for them, and the ticket to such funding are a special and, sadly, an uncommon breed of film stars. That is, the chances that a good film will come out of Hollywood are highest when well known actors and/or directors with star status and

⁶ McCarthy was an inconsequential Republican senator from Wisconsin who discovered, much to his delight, that merely hurling a false accusation at the federal government that it was infiltrated by communists was enough to get him reelected (in 1952) by the *ignorantia*. McCarthy launched his misguided and opportunistic anticommunist 'crusade' during a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia in February 1950, and together with his two notorious cronies, Roy Cohn and David Schine, proceeded to simply terrorize the nation for the next four years, until he was stopped dead in his tracks by the Army in 1954 after he began attacking them. At the Army-McCarthy hearings (which were televised) McCarthy made a public mockery of himself and soon became a laughing stock of the nation, to be eventually censured by the Senate in December 1954 for "conduct unbecoming a senator." Three years later, he died in ignominy, as the anticommunist hysteria he had help whip up subsided. (The cause of death it is thought was alcoholism.) For more on the McCarthy era see Cate [1978] and Kutler [1982]. For an informative book that examines Hollywood's victimization by McCarthyism see Ceplair and Englund [1983].

⁷ Reminder: regardless of what the conservatives will tell you, capitalism is not synonymous with democracy (nor is socialism, of course). The millions who live under various dictatorships in the capitalist (and socialist) countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America will testify to this.

a political consciousness decide to engage themselves with a good film project they believe in. And since they have star status, they are able to obtain funding for the film projects; though usually in amounts far less than if they were making the traditional soporific Hollywood film. (Specific examples of intelligent films that have been produced by Hollywood over the years are listed in my recommended films list at my web site.)

In light of the foregoing, one more question: while the solution to the *systemic* conspiracy of Hollywood to avoid producing intelligent films is obvious, what is the solution to the preference of the *ignorantsia* for soporific films? There is no complete solution, because it is dependent on a total transformation of society involving concrete material changes in the lives of the masses. However, a partial solution is to find ways of educating the masses to appreciate intelligent films, beginning with greater advertising opportunities for the work of independent filmmakers. Such advertising can assist not only in attracting the film-theater audience, but also the video store audience as well. Additionally, a channel on pay or cable television transmitting films made exclusively by independent filmmakers would be of enormous value. This last suggestion cannot be underestimated, considering that the full potential for that medium has yet to be completely realized.

Copyright © by ItinerantObserver. All rights reserved.

This document, either in whole or in part, may NOT be copied, reproduced, republished, uploaded, posted, transmitted, or distributed in any way, except that you may download one copy of it on any single computer for your personal, non-commercial home use only, provided you keep intact this copyright notice.