

Filming war

Cinema, war, struggle and protest



Cian O'Neill

The significance and impact of cinema is a point easily forgotten. It is hard to avoid one's attention being affixed to Hollywood's effluxion of torpid rubbish. The art house theatre is perhaps the sole enclave for non-aggressively commercial film left, if one likes not *ouais deso* hedroplexes stuffed with the smell of sweets. From the first jittery cinematographic images one can get something of the sense of bewilderment which must have been experienced in the sight of moving pictures. The power to bewilder it perhaps still has.

The obvious technological advances of the last century (Television, Video, Internet, Digital Technology) also tend to obfuscate the memory of film's power. The voidance of the daguerrotype by the negative photograph presaged the surpassing of the still photograph by celluloid. Not that cinema has ever truly done away with the still picture, and photography. Film does however offer an entire sense field other than that of the photographic image.

Amongst the first people to try to understand the impact of cinema were politicians and the politically sensate. Both Goebbels and the Dadaists appreciated that with cinema one can fuse perception in a way that a painting or lithograph will not.

Bunuel worked with Dali in the 1920s on one of the first art films, **Un Chien Andalou** (France, 1928). The Director is recorded as having described the work a call to murder. The shock of the old, to borrow and adapt from Hughes, is palpable. The two images of a razor crossing an eye and ants perambulating a punctured palm remain affecting still. Yet they antedate Dario Argento and Roger Corman by decades. In **Un Chien..** the anarchic sensibility of dadaist mimetic is crystallized in a fascinating film of cultural manifesto.

Goebbels and the Fascists worked to another agenda, appreciating the power of film to affect politics so much that the German Government created a department and industry for film. His purpose was that of instructing the people in the correct means of loving the fatherland, loving nature and blanching semites. It is important to note that the leading of the witness in the German picture houses from the 1930s onto the fall of the Third Reich was not of itself alone.

In the UK, USA and Europe some pictures made the identical blur of art and doctrine. A case in point is the French work, **La Grande Illusion**, made in the time of the Spanish Civil War. Whilst pacifist prolepsis, it was additionally a scouring lampoon of the Germans. It depicted a people who possessed a happy obeisance to mindless authority. It was unsurprisingly banned in Germany.

War movies, historical and contemporary in theme, were bran in the social feed of patriotic garble from the '30s on, alongside information films, newsreels such as Pathe shown in cinemas, certain newspapers, and radio. Extremists and racists like Father Charles E. Coughlin were given primetime on the US airwaves to disseminate views as pestilential as those of the Nazis. Such as the good Father's allegation that the Jews sponsored the Russian Revolution. Popular tunes of the wartime 1940s, such as 'We've got to slap the cheeky little

Jap', were broadcast on American radio in profusion.

The war movie industry of early and mid twentieth century America had the dubious benefit of convincing the electorate that it would be a good idea to have a purely cinematic war-hero such as Reagan as Governor of California and then, later, President. Ronald may have been a soap bar bitch for big business and not seen much action out of the dailies room, but he was fabulously composed in debates. He recited his lines in a mogodon timbre smacking of the assurance in the fictive that an experienced actor lives not *with*, but *through*. Neither his opponents nor the Press men could get through his pacific bluff. This makes him the avatar of cinema; for he was lent all his credibility by celluloid. He was as heavily invested in the role as his country.

McCarthy's House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had tenure in Hollywood, and pursued a pogrom of resident Communist Party Members and Liberals from 1947 to 1950. The repercussions of the purge were felt throughout the film making industry in America (as in other art forms; Miller's **John Proctor** is the sublime consubstantiation of the black-listee), not least because of the awful emotional damage suffered by those purged, but also the spoiled air in the film making community. Amongst the informer pack was the aforementioned Uncle Ronald.

The informer's statement of no remorse that was **On the Waterfront** (1954) shows how the maelstrom of hatred and persecution could directly affect the cinematic vision. Elia Kazan, one of the informers for the Committee, seemed to aggrandize the pigeon, in thematically going back to his stool.

One accusation of the committee was partly true. The black-listed had been informing their work and activities with their political ideals prior to the HUAC hearings. An unconnected Errol Flynn starred in a politically toned down **Never Say Goodbye**, which pointed to the lullings of WASP family life founded on patriarchal power. The film was co-scripted by black-listees Ben and Norma Barzman. The original script of *From Here to Eternity* made the army system, and not personal excess, the key to the tragedy. *Song of Russia* was a particularly pro-Communist work.

John Wayne was a high profile supporter of the HUAC. In **Back to Bataan**, he was obliged to perform painful stunts without a double, true to his métier as quondam bard man. The stunts were especially written in for him after Wayne pitched in for the Committee. Said scriptwriter — Ben Barzman.

The inculcation of the Committee was total. Its impetus was irresistible. Hollywood lost many fine writers at this point, and the glorious opacity of Bertold Brecht's testimony before the Committee shows all too clearly that there was only one real option for those called: rescind and reform, or emigrate. Cinema was seen as a potential vehicle for political rhetoric which should not be left in the hands of liberals or Communists.

Films and documentaries such as **I was a Communist for the FBI** (1951), nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as best Feature length Documentary,

compounded the message. Communism was not an option for Americans.

Many cultural shifts of the occidental democracies in the 20th century were heralded by cinema. Most such cultural trends are most famously explored in the films of the US. That state and the art form coalesced in the 20th century and as it was the century of cinema so was it America's century. The social documents are numerous—see the malaise of a newly created American teen-hood in **Rebel without a Cause**; the 1960's counter culture and its demise in **Easy Riders**; the struggle of old faiths and fealties to sustain in new urban environments—**Catholic Boys**, **Mean Streets** and almost all Scoresse.

There is of course a strong tradition of issue films in Cinema, as are specifically set apart from pure entertainment movies. The issues are often of political import. Costner's **Dances with Wolves** is one exceptionally successful film as it proves that if the Academy is behind the message the work will carry financially as that years gestural big film. HIV/AIDS feature film **Philadelphia** benefited from the overt praise of a guilty America. Hanks outdid the acclamation with his mewling Oscar acceptance speech (later parodied in **In and Out**).

A more sincere Oscar speech was delivered in the 1973 Awards by Native American tribeswoman Sasheen Littlefeather. Marlon Brando sent her to the Awards after **The Godfather** to pick up his Best Acting gong. This was one of few political protests to occur in such ceremonies. Brando refused to attend due to the portrayal of the Indian in American media, and the Government's actions in the AIM siege at Wounded Knee. A less sobering protest was that of the peace sign wagging nude man who streaked past David Niven in another Awards ceremony from the 1970s. Niven was left to suggest with characteristic largesse that the chap might have just secured the only laugh of his life.

Niven himself had refused to overdub **Happy Anniversary**, post production and pending approval of the film and award of the vital seal for distribution by the Motion Picture Association of America. The sticking point was that a relationship begun by the two central characters outside wedlock did not end badly, per the Old Testament logic of the wages of sin etc. The proposed overdub was an expression of regret for the sinful arrangement.

Other political or issue films without that backing of the Academy and the big studios have a more difficult time. Films such as Spike Lee's **Malcolm X**, which only came to completion with the donation of vast sums by mainstream African American celebs like Bill Cosby and Whitney Houston. It exists as political biographical document or polemic more than film, unlike Lee's crackling **Do The Right Thing**.

Both films took a strong line, as did **The Hurricane**. This ready-made for proto-Poitier, Denzel Washington, follows in the line of very human portrayals of life in prison. There is something of a sub culture in cinema of such works. One of the first in the field, **Birdman of Alcatraz** (the Lancaster vehicle which alongside **...to Eternity** makes his reputation) still compares well with Tim Robbins' **Dead Man Walking** (Robbins having starred in **The Shawshank Redemption** which also had a prison schema).

Yet also have many important films about imprisonment (in the more social sense) come from afar. The delicate poise of Gong Li in Yimou's **Raise the Red Lantern** does not distract but rather augments the political significance of the work by allowing access to the quiet tragedy of the story. In doing so it makes more appreciable the greater tragedy of The People's Republic, where decrees and liberty jar and do not, per Milton's phrase, better consist. The technique is



Harrison Ford playing Patriot Games

Euripidean (**The Women of Troy**); Shakespearean. The relationship of Yimou to the Chinese authorities has been a balancing act, and the tenure of such a star as Gong Li made possible only by her marked tact when prodded in interviews on matters political.

Some choose the alternate route of course. Mainly because, like the little puppy, they can. The career of Oliver Stone is easily traced by a trail of rubble leading from Washington to Rushmore, circumnavigating Tinseltown. For Stone, Tinseltown may be in the rain, but American politics are permanently in the shitter. His Vietnam trilogy (**Platoon**, **Born on The Fourth of July**, **Between Heaven and Earth**) napalmed the official record of the US enterprise in South East Asia. **Nixon** was a hijab on a par with that which he postulated in **JFK**. **Natural Born Killers** doodled with a Browning in the miasma of TV ratings culture.

He has been a figure of controversy. Yet he is revered and well paid, proving a certain Irishman's maxim that the selfishness of the selfish is in probability the secret of their charm. Stone has few prisoners in his phalanx. He has though created superb political cinema from the hubris of his profound disaffection with America. His work is manifest deconstruction of the myths which make his nation.

Some films about Ireland have been, contrariwise, overfull with myth and redundant imagery. From Hughes' soporific **The Quiet Man** one would think that in this country braised knuckles and porter make that man. **High Spirits** presented an island of token laden fairy trees, hoisting and blarney. The addition of Steve cynocephalus Gattenburg and his deplorable chest hair helped little. Cliche is best served cold. This appears to have eluded some.

Not Neil Jordan. Not Jim Sheridan. Whilst Jordan has tapped lycanthropic myth successfully for **The Company of Wolves**, and made Anne Rice's work accessible to non-cave dwellers in **Interview with the Vampire**, Sheridan is less famous as a mythographer. Both are perhaps best known for overtly political works about Ireland and the ongoing quiet war in the island.

Michael Collins (1990s) is an important social document about the Rising and the Civil War. The film is both historiographical and intimate, particularly in its treatment of the collapse of relationships forged in rebellion in the worst of wars, a civil war. Dev comes out badly thanks to a sibilant Alan Rickman. This is perhaps unsurprising—Collins was the greater human by any reckoning. Jordan earlier directed **Cal**, and **The Crying Game** which similarly focus on the personal

toll of Ireland's tragedy.

Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* is one of the great political/prison dramas. It allowed a wider audience to see the potential for injustice within the parameters of Scheduled Offences Law in the UK at the time. In Day-Lewis' preparation for the role (solitary, abuse, water-dousings) one finds a perfect example of the extremes of the method. The film was rightly perceived as political—incidences of (in)justice in war are political. Sheridan was tagged pro-Provo in some British tabloids. Such is the readily appreciated power of cinema to bestir the political sense.

What of the now? Julian Schnabel took on the human rights record of Cuba in *Before Night Falls* this year. Ken Loach continues to sustain a thankless yet miraculous belief in an Old Labour Social Conscience long after everyone stopped believing in anything. One might see some parallels between the digi-can enabled Dogma 95 movement and that of *No Logo*: in that there is a rejection of commerce as first / last value.

Yet perhaps more politically significant is the technologi-

cal change in film-making mentioned at the outset and central to the now-disbanded Dogma project, which in its manifesto was described as a rescue action for film as art form. The Super 8 camera was the democratizing force of moving image in the mid 20th century, providing in the Zapruder film the JFK turkey shoot and so the single most important political document in film. Now the Internet, Streaming video and Digital film making are opening the medium further through cost-reduction. Even cranks like Ken Russell can continue to produce films, when no-one will pay for the benefit he thus confers.

Of great political worth are more serious lo-fi productions such as the many hours of footage taken by participants/bystanders in Genoa, Prague, Seattle. *The Battle for Seattle* video in circulation is proof, if it were needed, of the part which cinema and, more generically, film will continue to play in politics. The role which politics has played throughout the history of film makes it manifest. As a tested means of political communication, film is dreadfully effective. ♦

Dangerous words

The genesis of the Irish Republican Writer's Group

♦
Anthony McIntyre

The Irish Republican Writers Group emerged at a crucial time in the history of republicanism. The Good Friday Agreement had just been accepted by 96 % of the Sinn Féin membership. It seemed, in Foucaultian terms, that the anti-systemic soul of Provisional republicanism was being erased as easily as a face in the sand at the edge of the sea.

The republican leadership had for long made much of the concept of 'community as one'. There would be no alternative voices. Sean Russell rather than Peadar O'Donnell being the role model that suited best. The idiocy of the *Green Book* ultimately came to be preferred to the intellect of *The Bell*.

The ceasefire of 1994 changed little. A group of ex-prisoners had set up the Bobby Sands Discussion Group. It's role was to throw about ideas generated from whatever quarter and to stage public debates. After one lively debate in Derry in early 1995 the leadership closed down the discussion group. Members of DAAT (Direct Action Against Thinking) began to attend discussion group meetings. One assured us that the leadership was so clever it was even right when it was wrong.

Writing within a supposedly progressive and forward-looking republicanism became so blandly conformist that many seemed able, in Joachim Fest's phrase, to 'bring utterly incompatible elements into equilibrium without a hint of inner discomfort'. All questioning was met with a look as if you were stupid. It is a 'transition' they told us. All uttered in a manner which brought to mind the nineteenth century art critic who said of Berlin that it is forever in the process of becoming and never in the state of being. A regime of truth was being constructed. And so the Irish Republican Writers Group emerged. It's task was to prick the inflated balloons that buoyed up the truth regime. As writers it was not their role to strategise. That was the job of a political party.

Progress was slow. People wrote what they liked and when they wanted. The Group appeared to draw strength in adversity. On the verge of calling it a day toward the end of 1999 a shot in the arm came by way of an anonymous attack in the

letters column of the *Andersonstown News*. Support rallied and Group membership increased. *Fourthwrite* magazine was published and the Irish Republican Writers Group had been placed on the map. It was not the strength, clarity or coherence of the critique that continued to make the headlines but the fact that people were prepared to say something different—even differing from each other; that for all its powers of life and death the Army Council could simply not silence its critics.

With the killing by the Provisional IRA of Real IRA member Joseph O'Connor in October 2000, the IRWG, because of the public stance taken by some of its members in opposing that action, was pushed into the heart of media discourse—and trouble. The Sinn Féin leadership had homes picketed. Much harassment and intimidation followed. The writers involved held firm. Support for them against the intimidation was pouring in from writers and human rights activists abroad. Irish, British, American, French, German and Spanish media outlets all addressed the matter and the role of the Writers Group. The intimidation was raised at a conference of Armenian journalists.

On the crest of a wave the Group suddenly malfunctioned. The old spectre that had long haunted the main body of republicanism had weaved its way into the IRWG—a committee would examine writers' contributions for their suitability. The game was up. Those long time believers in the concept that nothing is impossible until given to a committee called it a day.

Perhaps it goes with the turf. Maybe republicanism is generically determined to be subject to the rule of centripetal forces. And few of those who manage to break out of the corral can resist the call of centralism for long enough to make any real impact. Yet, who can claim with any validity that the historical record has remained exactly as the republican power elite wished it to and that the IRWG made no difference? Those who control history shall decide. But the success of the IRWG lies in having subverted that control. ♦