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Film and the Political

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'It is extremely difficult to make a good political or social film because the issues are complex and, to some extent, abstract, and have to be embodied in human antagonists to make them come alive... In effect, the film maker is caught between the Scylla of de-personalization and the Charybdis of oversimplification... It is much easier to make a film with political overtones or social implications, and not confront the problems head-on.'

John Simon
Movies into Film

In the winter 1982 issue of *NEWS*, Professor Sidney Wise ponders the treatment of the politician by Hollywood's film makers. Wise was prompted to write in response to a previous discussion of Robert Altman's *Nashville* by G. Alan Tarr, who argued that such a film is "above all commentary on political life." Tarr's claim was that such a film could provide a useful tool for teaching students about American politics — a claim justly questioned by Sidney Wise. Yet, Wise does not carry his criticism far enough. The problem with Hollywood's treatment of American politics in such films as *Nashville* (and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, etc.) is not simply a failure of nerve or a "reluctance to tackle... genuine political themes." This may be true, but the inability to examine political themes goes beyond the reluctance of an entertainment industry to sell a product with less ostensible appeal than violence, sex, or extra-terrestrial beings. Professor Wise like most political scientists sees "politicians as continuously engaged in suspenseful, meaningful drama with incredibly high stakes," but most movie-goers will find politics-as-usual much less exciting. Hollywood's journeys into political areas have mostly focused on the unusual and extreme or on the corrupt, and hence presumably the exciting. Some of these political films have been exciting, but there remains a fundamental inability of the medium itself to deal adequately with the political. The problem is not a reluctance, but an inappropriateness of the medium. By its nature, this medium distorts the message and reduces it to cliché.

Film is an inappropriate medium for any serious discussion of political themes. There are several reasons behind this harsh assessment which goes beyond arguing that film makers simply have not yet made good political films. The point is that film makers *cannot* make such films if by "good" one means a profound and philosophical consideration of political ideas. Any such attempt is bound to fail by virtue of the inherent limitations of the medium of expression. No matter how beautiful a score by Beethoven, it will fail as *music* if played on a kazoo.

The first and most obvious objection to film as a medium for political discourse actually revolves around the way in which films are made. The major studios (and even small film makers) are engaged in a business enterprise, and most of them

like it that way as long as the industry is profitable. Any industry selling a product to a broad (might I say mass) audience will inevitably rise or fall to the level of that group. Hence, Professor Wise's quite accurate point that: "Long ago, Hollywood determined that serious politics was not what mass audiences wanted for entertainment and so those that have been attempted have usually been sitcoms steeped in cynicism or heavy dramas focusing on the personal foibles (usually sexual) of the protagonists." The point is not that Alan Alda or Robert Redford cannot appear in *entertaining* films based upon some political theme, but rather that one would not expect to learn very much from such films which have an obvious appeal to a mass audience.

The quality of Hollywood films can range widely in terms of technique, but it is not likely that serious dialogue will emerge in any mass-audience film. This may appear to be an underestimation of the intelligence of the American audience, but one must remember that the largest sector of the movie-going population is young and immature. Consequently, the prevalence of youth films lacking in any degree of intelligence. Obviously, not all Hollywood films are this vulgar, but even serious attempts must inevitably aim at a level below competent scholarship. If one wishes to learn something about politics, even a poor academic treatise will be superior to a film produced by an entertainment industry. It is hard to understand why Professor Wise is so surprised at this. Unfortunately, entertainment is at odds with serious thought in a mass society. Those who teach their students about American politics via *Nashville* may be underestimating their intelligence; on the other hand, the semi-literate young nourished on *Star Wars* may be only capable of learning through this medium.

One might object that by focusing upon films made by major Hollywood studios, the argument has been weighted against the possibility of serious discussion. I have focused first upon Hollywood because this is where Professor Wise has directed his attention. Specifically, he claims that the three best American films to deal with political themes have been *The Best Man* (1964), *The Candidate* (1972), and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1978). Obviously by "political," Wise means that which portrays candidates, politicians, and Congress. This is an overly narrow conception of the political, but not one uncommon within the profession among those studying American politics. According to Professor Wise these films deserve a showing in the classroom not because of the high quality of their analysis, but for the more mundane benefit of being able to "generate thoughtful discussion about the political process." I find it hard to believe that these films could really generate "thoughtful discussion" about anything, but I do accept Wise's assessment that there are not any Hollywood films which are much better for the purpose.

If one considers films outside the

range of the commercial Hollywood studios, the level of intelligence often rises while the conception of the political broadens. If the commercial and mass-audience aspects of Hollywood film making are the reasons behind the serious short-comings of political films, greater possibilities would be expected from the independent and more adventurous film makers, especially the more political *auteur* directors. Yet, considering the intellectual level of these artistic ventures, it seems as if the limitations are inherent in the craft of film making itself. The art form is at odds with the enterprise.

The political *auteurs* of the past decades have been mostly European and mostly of the Left. In retrospect, one wonders at the shallowness of their visions. Looking back, the depth of thought in the works of a film maker such as Jean-Luc Godard is hardly impressive. Perhaps Susan Sontag, who once defended Godard from his detractors ("Certainly ideas are not developed in Godard's films systematically... They aren't meant to be." *Partisan Review*, Spring 1968) also has had a change of heart on this matter. Godard's giddy infatuation with youth, Mao, and revolution has not aged very well. While there are perhaps better representative examples of political film produced by more creative and artistic directors (Antonioni, Costa-Gavras) none can be considered lasting works of political thought. Any serious political themes discussed in film pale in comparison with the thought of the great (and even not-so-great) political philosophers. Think of Lina Wertmüller's wildly overpraised (and now justly forgotten) *Swept Away* compared to Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. Is the problem then that film makers are not political philosophers? Or is it that political philosophers would be unable to express themselves adequately through film?

I think that the latter is the case. Film is a medium of communication ill-suited for a discussion of political ideas or concepts. To echo Plato's criticism of art and drama, film presents only an image or reflection (no pun intended) of reality. This does not imply inferiority to philosophy except in regards to the ability to analyze political concepts. Film's strength is its ability to portray human emotions and relations, often elevating the audience, at times only manipulating it. This quality makes film a powerful artistic vehicle, similar to drama. However, neither film nor drama is capable of engaging in a true philosophical discourse. The differences between *The Symposium* and *The Republic* (and those within the text of *The Republic* itself) reflect the differences in the kind of ideas that Plato wished to discuss. The point is that different vehicles of expression may be better suited than others for a particular enterprise — in this case, understanding politics. One shudders at the thought of a Hollywood version of *The Republic*. As film, the work would come perilously close to soap opera.

As a powerful medium for stimulating and manipulating the emotions of the audience, film possesses a political power of its own. It is a tool of partisan persuasion. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* illustrates this point all too well; her art is not intellectual, but purely emotional with political intentions. Critics must be wary of such overt efforts at manipu-

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The Power of Film can also be its Intellectual Weakness

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lation, as James Roy MacBean cautions:

If Revolution is to be truly liberating, it must be much more than just the emotional revenge of the oppressed. And if a film maker's commitment to revolutionary liberation is more than just an emotional identification with the oppressed then his cinematic practice must address itself to the viewer in a way that calls forth *all* his human faculties, rational and emotional, instead of relying on the emotional manipulation of the viewer's tendency to identify with the characters on the screen.¹

Unfortunately, this is precisely what film cannot do — rely upon rational discourse rather than emotional manipulation, whether it be *Mr. Smith* or *State of Siege*. Film is successful to the extent to which it utilizes the emotional power of cinematography.

Perhaps one final example is in order. Consider the recently acclaimed *My Dinner With Andre*. As film (although probably not theater) this discussion of life and death, and

the resurrection is highly entertaining and stimulating. Yet, when the text of the script alone is read (a paperback version has been unwisely revealed to the public) the shallowness of the ideas involved becomes evident. What passes for an intellectual film is nothing more than sophomoric conversation, enhanced by the artistic medium. The ability to turn this mush into an interesting experience is the power of film, but it is also its weakness. Returning to Professors Wise and Tarr — *Nashville* is indeed an interesting film with political themes running throughout. But it too entertains more than it instructs. Unfortunately, there is no short-cut here for students of political science; there is no substitute for the traditional tools of the academy. Students may find the traditional forms of discourse less stimulating and more tedious than watching an Alan Alda or Robert Redford film, but then that is the nature of students.

¹*Film and Revolution*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p.9.