A catalyst for change

Maria Tumarkin

AMERICAN HISTORIAN Lawrence Suid tells a story of about 20 leading Hollywood executives being invited by the US war department to tour Europe. This generous invitation came only weeks after the end of World War II, so there was not much of Europe left, which was exactly the point. Now that the war was over, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, Dwight D. Eisenhower, wanted the executives "to make a first-hand study of ways and means of using films to help accomplish the unfinished tasks which confront us in the transition from war to peace".

During the war, Hollywood was an important contributor to what is known so very euphemistically as the war effort - the sum total of human energies poured into sustaining combat. And Hollywood had poured and poured even before Pearl Harbour, producing everything from combat films to home-front melodramas, from agitprop (Frank Capra's famous Why we fight) to the so-called conversion narratives, which urged Americans to consider the dire moral implications of isolationism (think Casablanca).

After America entered the war, Hollywood was in the thick of it, cheerleading for democracy, making patriotism sexy and, of course, bringing its customary glamour to the rather mundane task of demonising Germany and Japan.

Actually, forget glamour. When in 1939 Hollywood proper was still keeping its mouth shut about fascism, one of the first films to take on Hitler (even before Chaplin's The Great Dictator) was the low-budget B-fare unforgottably titled Hitler, Beast of Berlin. Made by Hollywood's so-called "Poverty Row", it was cheap, overblown and starkly interventionist, full of sensationalism and exploitation as befits a proud specimen of its genre. Yet it certainly had serious ambitions to rouse public opinion with its title lifted from 1918's Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin - another B-grader notorious for inciting anti-German riots during World War I.

But I digress. The transition that Eisenhower was so concerned about was tricky not merely because of the unfinished business of the old war, but also because an altogether different global conflict was about to take centre stage. The peace evoked by Eisenhower was to be a continuation of this new, young war by other means.

It is hard to think of a more rapid shift in the public imagination than the one required by the Cold War. For Americans, in particular, the wartime enemy Germany had to switch sides with the wartime ally the Soviet Union. Chop-chop. This switch, says Suid, called for "a double-barrelled propaganda effort to distance the Soviet Union while playing down the cinematic portrayal of Germans as villains".
It was not merely the American public's opinion that was at stake. Soviet Marshal Zhukoff apparently told British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, "He who controls the cinema, controls Germany".

Of course, unlike World War II, the ensuing Cold War did not exist in happy synergy with Hollywood. The House Committee on UnAmerican Activities was very much interested in reds in and under Hollywood beds (and in the absence of reds, pinks and lilacs, too) and the wave of McCarthyism went through Hollywood like a tank, dividing, conquering and obsessively blacklisting. McCarthyism was behind all kinds of betrayals and aberrations, including the refusal to grant the American re-entry to "that commie" Charlie Chaplin, who just happened to be one of Hollywood's most influential and timeless icons.

War, cinema, politics (what the ideologically up-to-date call "the industrial-military-entertainment complex") - we have come to expect not only the incestuous relationship between the three, but also the consistent privileging of film as the choice medium of propaganda.

In fact, the power of film to shape people's view of the world was not only widely recognised but also harvested with the uncanny determination right throughout the 20th century. From liberal democracies to totalitarian states, those in power seemed to have understood instinctively just how much cinema was the bomb. Lenin declared film to be the most important of revolutionary arts, while Stalin dispensed with art altogether, calling cinema "the greatest medium of mass agitation". In fascist Italy, Cinecitta, a large film production studio built under Mussolini, had the sign above the gate saying "Cinema Is the Strongest Weapon".

As to Hitler, well, of course, Hitler had his Leni. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is still the movie that most spectacularly collapses the distinction between cinema and propaganda. And it is the one picture that gets evoked just about every time the question of cinematic brainwashing is brought up. Not that surprising really, considering that Riefenstahl's depiction of the 1934 Nuremberg rallies has very little in common with the pedestrian "agenda" films pumping out not so subliminal messages, but represents cinema at its most electrifying, innovative and accomplished.

In her famous and oft-quoted 1975 essay *Fascinating Fascism*, the late Susan Sontag called *Triumph of the Will* "the most successfully, most purely propagandist film ever made, whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker's having an aesthetic or visual conception independent of propaganda". For many thinkers such as Sontag, Riefenstahl's work was the last nail on the coffin of the argument that films made to order could transcend their role as propaganda. For others, however, it has remained a stubborn example that the matter is far from black and white.

And now that Hollywood is finally taking Riefenstahl on with Jodie Foster to play Hitler's favourite filmmaker as, you guessed it, a complex and contradictory character (who is, of course, just a little bit sexy, just a tad
beautiful and just a touch on the flawed genius side), the question of cinema refashioning history will acquire yet another layer.

After all, for Sontag, Riefenstahl’s documentary did not merely doctor reality, it accomplished a radical transformation of that reality, a masterful replacement of history with theatre. And that transformational power is one area where Hollywood will not be outdone, not by some two-bit blonde German auteur.

Interestingly, with the current war on terror, Hollywood is certainly not following in its World War II footsteps. It clearly has a far more ambivalent relationship with "the war effort". Perhaps, the widespread disillusionment with the Bush Government is making dissent a safe option. *Lions for Lambs, Rendition, In the Valley of Elah* - all mainstream Hollywood affairs with big, fat stars are questioning the course America has taken post-September 11 and, what is really remarkable, they are doing it while the war in Iraq is still continuing, not, as is usually the case, post-factum.

Propaganda itself is far more interesting and complex than we often acknowledge. For one, in separating the wheat from the chaff, it is not clear what is more critical - who is behind a particular cinematic statement (the regime, big business, military) or how this statement is hoping to affect its audience. What counts for more - the politics or the aesthetics, the filmmakers’ relationship with those in power or with those in the audience?

After all, throughout the 20th century, films have been made to rally troops of all kinds. The recent outpouring of what critics have dubbed “blockbuster documentaries” is the case in point. Just consider *Fahrenheit 9/11, Supersize Me, The Corporation, The Fog of War, Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism or Fast Food Nation* (accused by the touchy fast-food industry of being “indigestible propaganda”).

We have John Pilger’s documentaries about Cambodia, the war in Vietnam, East Timor and, most recently, the American presence in Latin America - films made with clear intentions of not merely chronicling injustices and raising consciousness but of inciting dissent. And, of course, we have the man with the still steaming Nobel Prize in one hand and *Inconvenient Truth* in another - Al Gore.

Academic Lynn Higgins argues that many of these documentaries with their desire not merely to inform, but also to persuade and incite, should be understood as continuing the tradition of protest art. She sees the current wave of documentaries “as a form of resistance to this ongoing loss of the real in a historical moment when we desperately need languages and images that will tell us what is going on”.

For Pilger, the success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a no-brainer. "It was a powerful film that helped people make sense of news that no longer made sense," he wrote. "It did not present the usual phoney 'balance' as a pretence for presenting an establishment consensus." It was free of cliches, platitudes and
all kinds of nauseating paraphernalia that permeate current affairs. And (Pilger did not say that), it was very entertaining.

Yet the relationship between "protest art" and propaganda is by no means clear cut. Michael Moore is, in fact, the pin-up boy for this massive ambivalence at the heart of cinema of dissent, with some particularly enraged conservative critics comparing Fahrenheit 9/11 to The Triumph of the Will and Christopher Hitchins calling the film "a sinister exercise in moral frivolity".

Writing in The Guardian, Mark Lawson describes the recent crop of documentaries as "aggressively editorialising". Perhaps, the biggest problem is that they are designed not to open up debates but to supply its audience with the ready-made and very definite point of view. "A viewer finishes these films certain," writes Lawson, "that the earth is burning (An Inconvenient Truth); or that a petrol-head conspiracy prevented cleaner vehicles (Who Killed the Electric Car?); or that the executives of Enron were as guilty as the Yorkshire Ripper (The Smartest Guys in the Room)."

And talking about propaganda, what if we move from documentaries to feature films, some of them unquestionable masterpieces, that have been intended as nothing less than wake-up calls to humanity? What do we make, for instance, of On the Beach, the 1959 film directed by Stanley Kramer and shot in Australia, which tells a story of total nuclear extinction?

One of the most notable pictures in "The Bomb Cinema" tradition, it was intended as a warning to the world that was, as far as Kramer was concerned, on the fast track to the nuclear holocaust. The noted scientist and anti-nuclear advocate Linus Pauling argued that perhaps On the Beach could just be the film that saved the world.

Cinema can have an unexpectedly emphatic relationship not only with the past and present but also with our future. Academic Eric Cazdyn believes that "film, with its own special language, is prophetic", because it can "flash" or predict certain larger issues that can't yet be engaged or accepted in society at large.

The point is that cinema can be a palpable historical force in a way that is not reducible to its uses as propaganda. Films do not merely have the ability to act as social and ideological brokers and to do so across national borders. They can also change history. Cinema is at its most powerful not when it is used to spin and spruik, to contrive and convince, but when films with no explicit agenda beyond telling a particular story honestly and well, inadvertently alter something about our world.

Krzysztof Kieslowski's 1988 A Short Film about Killing depicted two murders - one of an individual by another individual and another of an individual by a state. The response the film elicited in Poland, simply through the power and truth of its storytelling, was instrumental in the abolition of the death penalty.
On a less serious note, many are convinced that the release of Nanni Moretti's *The Crocodile* two months before the Italian 2006 election may have just pushed Silvio Berlusconi out of office.

And, of course, there are countless examples of films acting as catalysts for cultural change. *Bend it like Beckham*, to give you a light and fluffy example, made women's football the fastest-growing sport in Britain. Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, as a friend of mine, an award-winning screenwriter pointed out, made being neurotic cool. *Last Tango in Paris*, *Emmanuelle* and, most notably, *Deep Throat* changed the relationship between mainstream cinema and pornography.

Ironically, *Deep Throat* may have done what *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the end could not quite do by influencing indirectly the outcome of the US presidential campaign. The recent documentary *Inside Deep Throat* argues that Richard Nixon's unwavering focus on the until then obscure *Deep Throat* in his condemnation of moral evils of pornography led to his landslide re-election in 1972.

Musing about the power of cinema, British filmmaker Josh Appignanesi writes that it "above all the arts can make us literally see what we have done, what we are doing, what we could do". If propaganda can function as corrective lenses to our vision of the world, real cinema can be our two eyes that look unblinkingly, fearlessly and compassionately at things as they are, at the undiluted, undisrobed truth about our world and ourselves.

Maria Tumarkin is a research fellow at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne. Her latest book, *Courage*, is published by MUP.