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Overview

But who will come to see it?

Two quotes define the basis of this book. The first, from John Berger:

Ever since the Greek tragedies, artists have, from time to time, asked themselves how they might influence ongoing political events. It's a tricky question because two very different types of power are involved. Many theories of aesthetics and ethics revolve around this question. For those living under political tyrannies, art has frequently been a form of hidden resistance, and tyrants habitually look for ways to control art.¹

The second quote, from Ed Lasky, brings Berger's statement into the specific context of the proposition that although Hollywood very often can be very shallow in its messages that address our quality of life, "it wields a power which defines America abroad [and] influences our own self-image: a power that can create desires, influence opinions, distort history and create facts."²

We could go down a long list of films that deal with social, political, economic, and other critical issues in our society and out of them select a fair number that not only addressed crises that existed at the times the films were made, but also had greater or lesser impact on the public in drawing their attention to the given problem and/or having an impact toward solving the problem. Out of the hundreds that we could put in that category, we will deal with only a relative handful that were particularly effective as examples of what Hollywood can contribute to society – other than chewing gum for the eyes (to use television critic John Crosby's description of that medium). Some of the films that are discussed in the following chapters had significant impact at the time, actually changing official or unofficial practices and

in some cases even leading to legislation or local, state, or national agency rules and regulations. Some of these films continued to have impact long after their release, insofar as the problems the films addressed continued with little abatement or reappeared in subsequent years.

For example, a 1979 film, *Norma Rae*, was a dramatized account of a true story of an attempt to organize a union in a fabric mill in the American South, with a woman playing a key organizing role. The concepts of resistance to cruel exploitation and the virtues of solidarity among workers made the workers victorious. The film reflected the struggle of labor against management and provided strong motivation for workers who weren't sure of the benefits of a union in their non-union workplaces or who were afraid to speak out because they felt they were standing alone. The labor movement continues, to this day, to show *Norma Rae* at union organizing meetings as a motivation for employees who feel they are being exploited by the companies and bosses they work for. Of course, not all "content" films have been so successful over a long period of time in achieving their purposes. Some that seemingly had no impact when they were made, years later became political cult movies when the time appeared to be more conducive to dealing with the particular issue. Most of the films of protest, given the specific nature of the subject matter addressed, were dramas. Some, however, in order to be released by the Hollywood mogul gatekeepers and to be accepted by a public that by and large did not and still does not want to sit in a theater being forced to think about serious issues, were produced as comedies or satires.

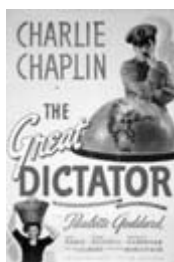


Figure 1.1
The Great Dictator
(Charlie Chaplin, 1940)

For example, two of the critical issues in the twentieth century were the Holocaust, and the possibility of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union that could leave the entire Northern hemisphere radioactive.

The only Hollywood movie that dealt with the plight of the Jews and with concentration camps – although it was made before the death camps of the “final solution” – was Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). Chaplin had a difficult time making the film and getting it distributed. That he was able to do so at all was principally due to his reputation as the world’s most popular and creative performer of the time and because he used satire to present a

serious subject. Some critics have argued that the use of humor limits the seriousness of a message. Despite the studios' fears and the overt objections to the release of *The Great Dictator*, the use of humor – satire – and Chaplin's own beloved comic techniques made both the release and its success possible.

During the entire period of Nazi horror, the favorite and most honored Hollywood films, as designated by Academy Awards for Best Pictures, barely acknowledged what the Nazis were doing throughout Europe, no less the genocide going on in German concentration camps. Beginning in the first year of Hitler's chancellorship, 1933, we find the Oscar going to *Cavalcade*, a pageant of the twentieth century up to that time. In 1934 it went to *It Happened One Night*, a romantic escapist comedy. In 1935 it was *Mutiny on the Bounty*, in 1936 *The Great Ziegfeld*, and in 1937 *The Life of Emile Zola*, which did touch on anti-Semitism in terms of Zola's opposition to the persecution of Captain Alfred Dreyfus in France. In 1938 the comedy, *You Can't Take It With You*, won, in 1939 it was *Gone With the Wind*, in 1940 *Rebecca*, a period piece, and in 1941, *How Green Was My Valley*, about coal-mining life in Wales. In 1942 the war's impact on England was the subject of Academy Award-winner *Mrs. Miniver*, which did not, however, acknowledge concentration camps and genocide. In 1943, *Casablanca* showed the opposition to Nazism by the Free French and alluded to concentration camps, but not to genocide. *Going My Way*, about a young priest saving his parish church, won the best picture award in 1944, and *The Lost Weekend*, a picture of protest against alcoholism, won in 1945, the year the Third Reich was defeated and the war ended.

Subsequent films about the Holocaust – made well after the time when their release might have had enough impact on viewers everywhere to launch protests that might have saved many lives – have been accused of trivializing the message by the very nature of the Hollywood economic system – censorship and Hollywood's standards of filmmaking that pander to the largest audiences possible. Some after-the-fact films have dealt effectively with some of the practices of the Holocaust, films such as *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, and the *The Pawnbroker*. Whether they have had the kind of impact to energize their viewers to take actions to combat current genocides or to prevent future ones is problematic. One criticism of the post-Holocaust Holocaust films is that most end on an upbeat note – the liberation of the people on Schindler's list, the survival of the pianist. Hollywood "can't claim to make a

Holocaust movie if an audience leaves its seat feeling hopeful about humanity. The impulse to honor the good in man is noble, but disingenuous and misapplied when depicting an atrocity.”³

Researcher Danielle Randall wrote:

Had Hollywood taken the strides to produce feature films about the Holocaust, during the Holocaust, the way in which this dark portion of history is regarded in film today would have been altered drastically. While today’s Hollywood pictures have evolved greatly over the past sixty years and the popularity of films that address current events, however unpleasant, have grown immensely, it does not change the fact that such an important part of history came and went virtually unrecognized by the feature film industry.⁴

Nostalgia and sympathy frequently are used to convince the audience that it is emotionally involved while the intellectual realism of the subject may be subverted, in effect allowing the audience to go home without the burden of examining its own attitudes and its own role in a society that permits genocides of greater or lesser natures to occur and reoccur throughout one’s lifetime. Critic Henrik Broder, commenting on the reduction of the real message in films, stated:

This is particularly true of Holocaust films, specifically commercial films, where such reductions or miniaturizations serve the function of diversion from the gigantic cataclysm of the Nazi genocide. By condensing and displacing the massive rupture in our history, such films often write around precisely the most problematical aspects of both the event itself and representation of the event.⁵

Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1963) dealt with the ultimate possible atrocity of the Cold War between the United States and Russia – atomic warfare. The film revealed the stupidity, ineptness, and inherent evil of American and Russian leaders in even considering the possibility of using a weapon that could destroy a considerable part of humankind. A leading character was a thinly disguised characterization of an American government official who was a principal proponent of atomic warfare. As with *The Great Dictator*, it used satire as its base, in some scenes reminiscent of some of Chaplin’s films and of some other early movies with political satire, such as the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (1933). But here’s the rub: Considered one

of the strongest protests against the United States starting an atomic war, *Dr. Strangelove* was a British production.

When Hollywood wants to affect the world for the better, it can do so. Unfortunately, most of the time the bottom line – the hundreds of millions in gross receipts possible from even the most innocuous movie – rules the content. But sometimes those hundreds of millions are paid to see films that attempt to right a wrong by protesting that wrong. We will examine some of these films as examples of what Hollywood can do when and if it wants to, even in an atmosphere of political and social repression and the fear of not making as many of those millions as might be possible.

This book is oriented to Hollywood entertainment films. Many pictures of protest have been made in other countries, including pseudo-documentaries aimed at achieving a specific political goal, as with the British film, *Jew Suss*, later made as a German film, *Jud Seuss*, a purported revelation of how the Jews were destroying the German culture and economy and must be gotten rid of to save society. Hollywood, despite increasingly lagging behind some other countries, such as India, in the number of films produced each year, produces the “blockbuster” entertainment films that have the most impact not only on American audiences but on audiences all over the world. The Hollywood entertainment films discussed here that can be labeled pictures of protest are offered as examples of what Hollywood has done, can do, and could do to forward the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice within our interconnected global community.

A quote attributed to Andy Warhol – “They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself” – seems to be true of Hollywood. Almost every film of protest required foresight, courage, and a dedication to change things. Many if not most of these films were dependent on the few people willing to stick their necks out, risk their reputations, and who weren’t afraid to alienate movie moguls who were responsible for their employment, in order to stimulate the audience to think. On occasion, it was a lone producer or director or performer or writer who moved from push to shove to get a film out.

Sometimes the times are right. That is, when the public – despite the steadfast alliance of virtually all of the media to maintain the status quo and not make waves for the media moguls controlling the press, television, radio, and cyberspace as well as Hollywood entertainment

films – was willing to support issues that were either not common themes or were disturbing to owners, financiers, distributors, and others needed to get a movie produced and into circulation.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw an upturn in the production of protest films. Increasing numbers of the public protested an increasing number of situations. Many people protested the invasion of Iraq because they thought it was not the way to catch the perpetrators of 9/11, who were in Afghanistan, or because they thought the weapons of mass-destruction excuse was not credible, or because they believed the attack was a thinly disguised motive to control foreign oil. Other protests focused on a wide range of social, economic, and environmental issues such as increased global warming, tax breaks for the rich, the costs of health care and the lack of health insurance, corporate malfeasance scandals, the continuing dangers of smoking, the lack of institutional response for the victims of hurricane Katrina, and the Patriot Act's goal of tracking potential terrorists becoming a tool for the invasion of personal privacy and the loss of civil liberties, among other issues. (The American Civil Liberties union stated that the Patriot Act "expands the ability of law enforcement to conduct searches, gives them wide powers of phone and Internet surveillance, and access to highly personal medical, financial, mental health, and student records with minimal judicial oversight" and "permits non-citizens to be jailed based on mere suspicion and to be denied re-admission to the United States for engaging in free speech."⁶)

Americans were angry and protested "business as usual," giving Hollywood permission and, from a profit point of view, motivation to make pictures of protest. The result has been a number of films protesting oil and pharmaceutical industry practices, continuing racism and homophobia, the dangers of tobacco and its industry's machinations, and, despite some government attempts to stifle democratic dissent, the war on Iraq. More and more people wanted the media, including Hollywood, to warn the public about what they believed were dangerous inroads on democracy, and more and more artists, including filmmakers, wanted the opportunity to do so.

Protest films appear to be emerging in greater numbers than in the recent past. Back in the 1930s, the Great Depression affected all but the wealthiest Americans and even destroyed the fortunes of some of the economic elite. Comedies with name players could draw audiences and Hollywood writers who cared about the common weal created

scripts that dealt with some aspect of economic inequality, but put it into gentle satire to convince producers that audiences would come and money would be made. For example, *My Man Godfrey* (1936 – remade and updated in 1957), starring fan favorites William Powell and Carole Lombard, satirized the upper economic class’s supercilious and stereotyped attitudes toward the rest of the public, those who suffered most during the Great Depression. Other films satirized the insensitiveness and frivolousness of the rich while much of the rest of America was starving and homeless. Some films, such as *One Third of a Nation* (1939), dealt head-on with the inequities of wealth; an agitprop (agitational propaganda, applied to politically oriented artistic work) film, it took a hard and tragic look at the plight into which the economic system had thrust one-third of the United States. *Dead End* (1937) was one of the better of the genre that showed the hopelessness and crime that economic inequities had spawned.

Possibly because artists, including Hollywood creators, are, by the nature of their artistic environment, more sensitive and more open to individual and group feelings than the general population, in the latter years of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first century Hollywood has produced a number of films protesting homophobia. Beginning with *Philadelphia* (1993), which dealt with AIDS, but carefully avoided showing actual love and or physical tenderness between the principal character and his male partner, to *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), which dealt openly with the brutality of homophobic violence, to *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), which depicted both the emotional and physical relationship between two otherwise-appearing macho males, pictures of protest against homophobic bigotry moved closer to the reality of the issue with each passing year.

Another continuing issue has been the role of big oil, particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century in regard to the invasion of Iraq. Massive protests against the war before and continuing after the invasion featured signs such as “no blood for oil.” This was not only pooh-poohed by the government and the media, but was characterized as a gross exaggeration fomented by a politically radical minority. However, as all the other reasons given for invading Iraq were proven to be false, the “no blood for oil” protests became increasingly valid to more and more Americans. Hollywood, at least in one film, attempted to deal with that issue; *Syriana* (2005) protested the United States’ involvement in the Middle East for the purpose of

controlling more and more oil sources in order to gain greater and greater profits for the US oil industry, even if it took a war and the lives of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of others to get those profits.

Author Ron Kovic, whose memoir, *Born On the Fourth of July*, became one of the strongest condemnations of the Vietnam War on film, has stated that the invasion of and continuing war on Iraq had corporate profit as its sole motive – the control of Iraqi oil, and that he didn't think the United States

will ever allow a democratic government because a democratic government would be a direct threat to the very reason they [the United States] went over there to begin with, and that is to dominate the oil, to control the region, and to literally steal the resources of that region for this administration, for the corporations and the businesses of our country."⁷

Commenting on *Syriana*, Mark Levine wrote in *Mother Jones* that

Given the increasing numbers of Americans who believe the Bush administration deliberately misled the country to justify the Iraq invasion, many film-goers will no doubt be willing to accept the film's argument that America's thirst for oil – not the threat of terrorism and certainly not a concern for human rights – drives the country's policies in the Middle East, even when those policies violate our core ideals."⁸

Sometimes Hollywood has been in the vanguard of protesting practices harmful to society. For years the mainstream media ignored the dangers – and deaths – imposed on people in many countries by pharmaceutical companies that were willing to sell products that were harmful, in order to increase their profit margins. Alternative media and alternative newspapers occasionally carried such revelations – such as the deaths caused by a leading food company in Third World countries by distributing contaminated infant-formula products. But the mainstream media's ignoring of drug-company practices made it possible for them to continue with little public outcry. Ostensibly based on an adventure novel by John le Carré, Hollywood produced *The Constant Gardener* in 2005 as a clear protest not only against the practice of pharmaceutical companies, but about the cooperation of the companies

and various governments to silence protesters and restrict information about the drug firms' activities.

Over the years Hollywood turned out a number of excellent films relating to the labor movement and to union-management issues. A few, such as *Norma Rae* (1979), are considered pro-union classics; others, such as *On the Waterfront* (1954), are considered anti-union icons. During the early postwar years, during the McCarthy era of political repression, unions were considered by many to be left-wing sympathizers with communism. It was only after the decline of McCarthyism that pro-union films were given credence in Hollywood as a means of addressing legitimate concerns of workers.

Ironically, Cold War fears prompted Hollywood to undertake an anti-union effort that significantly contributed to the pervasiveness of McCarthyism. In 1949 the Hollywood moguls were concerned that the formation of a film writers' union would infringe on their then virtually unlimited powers and cost them money. It was at a time when the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union appeared to be heating up. Congress's House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was established to root out communists, wherever they happened to be. The movie moguls met in New York at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in what became known as the Waldorf Conference, and decided that because some members of the writers' union were known to be or were rumored to be former or current members of the US Communist Party (it had been a legal party, despite media condemnation, with over one million acknowledged members and, at one, time, an elected member of Congress), they would use this to break the union. The movie moguls called in HUAC to hold hearings on the alleged infiltration of communists in the film industry. The members of the Committee were eager to do so, gaining headlines for themselves through the appearance of movie-star witnesses. Many Hollywood personalities, such as leading men Robert Taylor and Ronald Reagan, fearful for their own livelihood and in many cases out of political conviction, eagerly cooperated with the Committee and destroyed the careers of many friends and acquaintances by "naming names," alleging without necessarily any proof that they were communist supporters or sympathizers. The tenor of the times supported this anti-communist nationalism. What resulted was a blacklist in film, radio, and television, and a "red under every bed" climate of fear, in which the rubric was guilt by accusation. A senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, censured by the Senate

some years later, capitalized on the public's fears, giving the name McCarthyism to that era.

Many people – in all professions – lost their jobs through false and unwarranted accusations. Individual and national civil liberties were under siege. This applied to unions as well. An accusation that any given union had members who were communists or were influenced by communist ideology could bust that union. One prominent radio personality, John Henry Faulk, was a board member of the radio performers' union, the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA). To weaken the union and frighten other union members from seeking fair negotiations with management, Faulk was falsely accused of being a red. He was blacklisted. He eventually won a lawsuit against his accusers, but as with others, the accusation alone destroyed his career, and he worked only sparsely after that and was forced to return to Texas, his home state, where he became a chicken farmer. Many other performers had the same fate; some went into other fields; some, unable to support their families any longer, committed suicide.

Long after the fact, Hollywood did make some powerful movies protesting the blacklist, including *Fear on Trial* (the John Henry Faulk story) in 1975, *The Front* (1976), about blacklisted writers, and the more recent *Good Night and Good Luck* (2006), about journalist Edward R. Murrow's and his writer-producer Fred Friendly's exposure of Senator McCarthy. *Good Night and Good Luck* is interpreted by many as an analogous protest against what was happening politically in the 2000s, at the time it was made. Writer Howard Good stated that "new films are nostalgic for outrage . . . perhaps they are saying that we have to look to the past for people who represent individualism and conscience, like Edward R. Murrow in *Good Night and Good Luck*."⁹ These films are discussed more fully in other chapters. It is noteworthy that Hollywood had never produced a movie about Hollywood's role in facilitating McCarthyism. A radio docudrama, *The Waldorf Conference*, has for several decades served as the only major dramatic production about that role. An independent 1976 film documentary, *Hollywood on Trial*, summarizes the HUAC hearings.

In his book, *Here's Looking At You: Hollywood Film and Production*, Ernest Giglio wrote:

The [Hollywood] industry remained silent rather than attack the committee [HUAC] for violation of fundamental American rights and

liberties. Instead, Hollywood knuckled under and contributed to the red scare through motion pictures like *Big Jim McClain*, *My Son John*, and *The Red Menace*, which lent credence to the mass hysteria of an imminent communist conspiracy to take over the world.¹⁰

The media industries never fully recovered from the McCarthy-era repression. The blacklist became the gray list, then the strong influence of conservative advertisers and the consolidation of the media into fewer and fewer conservative hands, and the country's political swing to the right, including the ascendancy of elements of the radical right, resulted in, with few exceptions, right-wing content and the eschewing of "liberal-issue" protests. But by the mid-2000s Hollywood took the lead in addressing protest issues while television turned further and further away from meaningful content with innocuous so-called reality shows and inane sitcoms.

The impact of films is undeniable. Richard Corliss wrote in *Time* that

Every movie is propaganda. Every character is a walking placard – for capitalism or idealism or monogamy or the status quo. Every shot, by its placement and rhythm and duration, is one more Pavlovian command to the viewer. A narrative movie is usually successful to the extent that it obscures these facts, transforms the thesis into entertainment and the placards into persuasive semblances of human beings.¹¹

Perhaps the most memorable and effective seminal film of protest – in this instance protesting the principles of equality and freedom – was D. S. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which portrayed African-Americans following the Civil War as ignorant, scheming, and bestial, and promoted the saving of purported American principles, culture, and white society through the actions of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Although the Civil War had been over for some time and the KKK had been in existence for an appreciable time, the first significant stirrings for equal rights in decades began to be heard during World War I, and this Hollywood movie not only protested the possibility of rights for all, but had a great impact on a large part of the American public in fighting against such rights. Gerald Clarke wrote in *Time* that "Movies and TV are probably the most effective means of persuasion ever devised. D. W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation' was the history of the Civil War for many moviegoers." He added a more contemporary example, from

television, of comparable impact: "So far as millions of TV viewers are concerned, *Roots*, in 1977, told them all they need to know about slavery."¹²

Hollywood content, with rare exceptions, reflects the attitudes of the times. For example, when Charlie Chaplin made *The Great Dictator*, a satire on Nazi leaders and a poignant plea against the plight of the Jews in Germany, it was still peacetime in the United States (the film was produced during much of 1939 and released in 1940). The United States maintained a semblance of neutrality with the promise from President Franklin D. Roosevelt that "our boys" would not be sent to fight on foreign soil. In addition, anti-Semitism continued to be pervasive throughout the country. Even though *The Great Dictator* was billed as a comedy, the public did not want to deal with controversial issues during peacetime and the movie received much prejudicial criticism.

Sometimes the imposed atmosphere of fear for the purpose of control has superseded public attitudes. During the counter-culture revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, public protests grew against the US military involvement in Southeast Asia. But Hollywood did not produce protest films concerning the Vietnam War. Stephen Farber wrote in the *New York Times* that Hollywood's "cowardice can ultimately be traced to the Vietnam War . . . [Hollywood] did not want to take a chance on alienating part of the audience by making either pro-war or anti-war movies . . . the studios' growing fear of controversy affected other subjects as well."¹³

In the 1980s, as a further example, the me-me-me-philosophy made it both easy for Hollywood to avoid producing films that might be considered controversial, and at the same time presented a target of protest to many filmmakers who matured during the previous decade's counter-culture revolution. Change continued into the 1990s, with the rise of independent filmmakers who began to break away from dependence on traditional Hollywood studios. Their work and its influence on Hollywood studios resulted in movies protesting many issues, perhaps the most prominent of which was politics itself. Films such as *Dave* (1993), *The American President* (1995), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Primary Colors* (1998), and *Bulworth* (1998) took deep bites into the alleged hypocrisy of political leaders, parties, and practices.

Even the Academy Awards for Best Film appeared to shift from pure entertainment to social purpose. For example, *Million Dollar Baby*, a film

that examined the controversial issue of assisted suicide, won the Oscar in 2004, and *Crash*, a film that dealt with bigotry and racism – albeit criticized by some critics as being too tame and oversimplified – won in 2005. Every once in a while a film will protest a practice that has been demonstrated to be harmful to society, but which continues to remain legal through the influence of powerful business and legislators who gain monetarily and politically from continuation of the practice. Cigarettes kill hundreds of thousands of people a year in the United States alone, but the selling of the poison continues to remain legal. So powerful are the tobacco lobbies that any protest against their products could be met with devastating retaliation. Yet, two Hollywood films of recent years, *The Insider* (1999) and *Thank you for Smoking* (2006), have confronted big tobacco head-on. Their impact: Possibly educating some people away from a practice that will likely eventually kill them, but no dent in the Congressional steel cover protecting cigarettes and the companies that make them.

In *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write about social commentary films:

The susceptibility of the genre to political change was demonstrated in the fifties when, during a period of conservative ascendancy, the percentage of social problems films fell off markedly. The leftist revival of the sixties brought with it a renewal of interest in the genre. Indeed, one of the major generic transformations of the era is a revival of the social problem film in the seventies and eighties.¹⁴

While many filmmakers believe that films reflect society and should be responsive, not proactive, in regard to social issues, others take the opposite view. One of the former is George Clooney, whose films of protest include *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Syriana*. Clooney has said, “Film reflects society; it doesn’t lead society. I don’t think we’re first responders. It takes us two years always.”¹⁵ On the other hand, Steven Spielberg said he made the film *Munich* (2005), a condemnation of how retribution diminishes all causes, in this case that of the Israelis, as a “wake up call to all studios.” Spielberg stated: “We need to stop worrying only about making the number one film for the July 4 weekend and realize we can all contribute something in terms of understanding the world and human rights issues.”¹⁶

Whatever specific differences in their motivations, Hollywood producers, directors, or stars who make pictures of protest are subject to political and social criticism – especially if the content questions the actions of the establishment – whether government, corporate, religious, or otherwise. Clooney was vilified by many on the right for his work with *Syriana* and *Good Night and Good Luck*. His response: “I was sick of the idea that any sort of dissent would be considered unpatriotic. To me, the most patriotic thing you could do was question your government.”¹⁷ Clooney reflects the point made by many that if you truly love your country, you will do what is necessary to make it better when you find it is wrong, even at the risk of approbation; this is the mark of true patriotism.

Another reason proposed by some critics for Hollywood’s emergence in the early twenty-first century as a purveyor of protest relates to the increasing closure of controversy and, especially, dissenting ideas in other media. As noted above, consolidation or conglomeration has resulted in an emphasis on status-quo, conservative content in electronic media. The elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 has resulted in stations presenting only their side of a given issue without fear of having to present any of society’s alternative viewpoints. With the print press falling into the same category, only the Internet remains a principal source for alternative ideas and beliefs. Concomitantly, the increasing rise of independent film production morphed into an increase in films designed to fill the information gap. To the surprise of many, some of these films not only achieved critical acclaim but made money as box-office hits. These hits spurred other filmmakers to take a chance on more protest films.

A look at the history of films reveals a much higher number of pictures of protest than common beliefs might imagine. Below are just some of them, selected at random to provide an overview of the kinds and issues that were generally popular enough to reach a large audience with their messages.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, *Birth of a Nation* was an early protest film, albeit the opposite in content to films that want to change society for the better and are frequently labeled “liberal.”

Antiracism became a frequent film theme after World War II, with *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Issues were presented that were critical in society at those times. To the extent that

racism was and is a continuing practice in the United States – and, to varied extremes in the rest of the world – almost any contemporary film on racism would have an application to this contemporary problem. That paradigm doesn't necessarily apply to all other genres.

For example, in peacetime, films protesting the horrors of war might not appear to have an immediate and current application, despite the fact that in humanity's current limited state of evolution, murdering other people who disagree with you is still accepted as a right and duty of the social organization we label government, whether a village, a city, a state, or a country, and is occurring every day in many places on our planet. When *All Quiet on the Western Front* was released in 1931, World War I was over and World War II had not yet started. Most of the world was not at war. Yet, this film, arguably the most powerful antiwar film ever made, appears to have had a profound effect on people who saw it and purportedly influenced many to take a moral and, when appropriate, active stand against war. The same might be said for an early Marx Brothers' film, *Duck Soup*, released in 1933 when no major wars were raging. Nevertheless, it satirized the nationalism and militarism that developed after World War I and that not only threatened but ultimately resulted in another war, World War II. As noted above, other films that dealt directly or indirectly with war or the threat of war included one of the most telling antiwar films of all time, *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964), released during the Cold War, when half the world went to sleep at night not knowing whether they would be annihilated by an atom bomb before they woke the next morning. As also noted above, but worth reemphasizing in terms of the orientation of this book, *Dr. Strangelove* was a British, not a Hollywood film. While Hollywood made many movies about the heroics of the Vietnam War, one is hard put to find any film echoing the ongoing protests of the vast majority of Americans against the war, similar to Hollywood's stance, until 2007, about the Iraq War.

The medical system, including hospital treatment, has been a frequent subject of protest by Hollywood and includes such films as *The Snake Pit* (1948) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), both condemning the treatment of people in mental institutions.

Anti-Semitism has not been a frequent subject of Hollywood movies, although, like racism, that bigotry also continues in the United States, although not as openly or as flagrantly as prejudice against people

of color and, in the mid-2000s, against immigrants, particularly of Hispanic, Asian, or African origin. Yet, right after World War II, in 1947, two powerful films protesting anti-Semitism were made, *Gentlemen's Agreement* (which won several Academy Awards, despite efforts by Hollywood moguls to prevent its being made) and *Crossfire*, set in the rubric of a crime story. Some Hollywood films, such as *Elephant Man* (1980), dealt with society's ongoing prejudice against people who look "different."

Poverty, as defined during America's Great Depression of the 1930s, has been directly confronted in a number of films, ranging from stark drama such as *Dead End* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), to satire or comedy with a message, such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941).

The justice and prison system was also protested in many Hollywood films. Perhaps the most significant film was *I Am Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), which was credited with forcing changes in the prison systems in a number of states. Other films dealing with various aspects of justice and prison, from the jury system to capital punishment – continuing issues in society – include *12 Angry Men* (1957), *I Want to Live* (1958), and *Dead Man Walking* (1995).

American politics, also a continuing target for criticism, too much of the time justifiably so, has been a subject of protest in many films, such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *The Candidate* (1972), and, as noted above, several key films in the 1990s.

Even the media, including Hollywood itself, have been subjects of sharp protest by Hollywood films. Examples are *All About Eve* (1950), a revealing stereotype of ego and cutthroat competition in theater; *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), a searing indictment of Hollywood practices; and *Network* (1976), a condemnation of the television industry.

People don't want to be preached at in movies. They want to be entertained. As befits Hollywood feature entertainment films, protest films that were generally most successful were the ones that held their audiences by being entertaining (whether comedy, satire, or drama) even while they protested.

The above are only some of the genres and subject areas, and only a sprinkling of sample films that could be categorized as pictures of protest. In this book only a representative selection of subject areas and an even smaller selection of films will be covered. Hopefully, the material presented will nevertheless provide a useful overview of

Hollywood's feature entertainment films that have been pictures of protest, their possible impact at the time they were released, and their relevance, where applicable, to films and issues in society today. The following subject areas will comprise the chapters that follow: war, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism (women's rights), poverty, the prison and justice system, labor-management, politics, technology, and a final chapter, "Hide or Seek," a brief introduction to several other protest categories not covered in this volume.

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