

Hollywood's New Censors

February, 20 2009 By **John Pilger**

[John Pilger's ZSpace Page](#)

[Join ZSpace](#)

When I returned from the war in Vietnam, I wrote a film script as an antidote to the myth that the war had been an ill-fated noble cause. The producer David Puttnam took the draft to Hollywood and offered it to the major studios, whose responses were favourable - well, almost. Each issued a report card in which the final category, "politics", included comments such as: "This is real, but are the American people ready for it? Maybe they'll never be."

By the late 1970s, Hollywood judged Americans ready for a different kind of Vietnam movie. The first was *The Deer Hunter* which, according to *Time*, "articulates the new patriotism". The film celebrated immigrant America, with Robert de Niro as a working class hero ("liberal by instinct") and the Vietnamese as sub-human Oriental barbarians and idiots, or "gooks". The dramatic peak was reached during recurring orgiastic scenes in which GIs were forced to play Russian roulette by their Vietnamese captors. This was made up by the director Michael Cimino, who also made up a story that he had served in Vietnam. "I have this insane feeling that I was there," he said. "Somehow... the line between reality and fiction has become blurred."

The Deer Hunter was regarded virtually as documentary by ecstatic critics. "The film that could purge a nation's guilt!" said the *Daily Mail*. President Jimmy Carter was reportedly moved by its "genuine American message". Catharsis was at hand. The Vietnam movies became a revisionist popular history of the great crime in Indo-China. That more than four million people had died terribly and unnecessarily and their homeland poisoned to a wasteland was not the concern of these films. Rather, Vietnam was an "American tragedy", in which the invader was to be pitied in a blend of false bravado-and-angst: sometimes crude (the *Rambo* films) and sometimes subtle (Oliver Stone's *Platoon*). What mattered was the strength of the purgative.

None of this, of course, was new; it was how Hollywood created the myth of the Wild West, which was harmless enough unless you happened to be a native-American; and how the Second World War has been relentlessly

glorified, which may be harmless enough unless you happen to be one of countless innocent human beings, from Serbia to Iraq, whose deaths or dispossession are justified by moralising references to 1939-45. Hollywood's gooks, its Untermenschen, are essential to this crusade - the dispatched Somalis in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* and the sinister Arabs in movies like *Rendition*, in which the torturing CIA is absolved by Jake Gyllenhaal's good egg. As Robbie Graham and Mark Alford pointed out in their *New Statesman* enquiry into corporate control of the cinema (2 February), in 167 minutes of Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, the Palestinian cause is restricted to just two and a half minutes. "Far from being an 'even-handed cry for peace', as one critic claimed," they wrote, "*Munich* is more easily interpreted as a corporate-backed endorsement of Israeli policy."

With honourable exceptions, film critics rarely question this and identify the true power behind the screen. Obsessed with celebrity actors and vacuous narratives, they are the cinema's lobby correspondents, its dutiful press corps. Emitting safe snipes and sneers, they promote a deeply political system that dominates most of what we pay to see, knowing not what we are denied. Brian de Palma's 2007 film *Redacted* shows an Iraq the media does not report. He depicts the homicides and gang-rapes that are never prosecuted and are the essence of any colonial conquest. In the *New York Village Voice*, the critic Anthony Kaufman, in abusing the "divisive" De Palma for his "perverse tales of voyeurism and violence", did his best to taint the film as a kind of heresy and to bury it.

In this way, the "war on terror" - the conquest and subversion of resource rich regions of the world, whose ramifications and oppressions touch all our lives - is almost excluded from the popular cinema. Michael Moore's outstanding *Fahrenheit 911* was a freak; the notoriety of its distribution ban by the Walt Disney Company helped to force its way into cinemas. My own 2007 film *The War on Democracy*, which inverted the "war on terror" in Latin America, was distributed in Britain, Australia and other countries but not in the United States. "You will need to make structural and political changes," said a major New York distributor. "Maybe get a star like Sean Penn to host it - he likes liberal causes - and tame those anti-Bush sequences."

During the cold war, Hollywood's state propaganda was unabashed. The classic 1957 dance movie, *Silk Stockings*, was an anti-Soviet diatribe interrupted by the fabulous footwork of Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire. These days, there are two types of censorship. The first is censorship by introspective dross. Betraying its long tradition of producing gems, escapist Hollywood is consumed by the corporate formula: just make 'em long and asinine and hope the hype will pay off. Ricky Gervais is his clever comic self

in Ghost Town, while around him stale, formulaic characters sentimentalise the humour to death.

These are extraordinary times. Vicious colonial wars and political, economic and environmental corruption cry out for a place on the big screen. Yet, try to name one recent film that has dealt with these, honestly and powerfully, let alone satirically.. Censorship by omission is virulent. We need another Wall Street, another Last Hurrah, another Dr. Strangelove. The partisans who tunnel out of their prison in Gaza, bringing in food, clothes, medicines and weapons with which to defend themselves, are no less heroic than the celluloid-honoured POWs and partisans of the 1940s. They and the rest of us deserve the respect of the greatest popular medium.

www.johnpilger.com

From: Z Space - The Spirit Of Resistance Lives

URL: <http://www.zcommunications.org/zspace/commentaries/3780>