Brainwashing elements in film and how they are used

by Michael J. Minnicino

Part I discussed how two books generated out of the Psychological Laboratory at Harvard University in 1915-16 set the standards for the use of the motion picture for purposes of mass social control. These were Professor Hugo Münsterberg's The Photoplay: A Psychological Study, *and the Fabian poet Vachel Lindsay's* The Art of the Moving Picture. *Both emphasized the use of film for modern-day cult creation on the model of the ancient Egyptian Isis cult.*

With these two very influential books (Lindsay's, for instance, became the textbook of the first film course ever given at a college—at the Columbia School of Journalism in

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1917), the Harvard crowd had, by the time of America's entry into World War I, completely defined what film, and later television, was to accomplish. Between the two, the following key elements were mandated.

1. The technically hypnotic components of film had to be intensified. For Münsterberg this suggested a wider use of "the changes of rhythm, the passing through of physically impossible experiences, the linking of disconnected movements, the realization of supernatural effects, the gigantic enlargement of small details. . . ."

2. As a corollary, photoplays had to emphasize objects. Linsay had noted that the huge appeal that the so-called "chase film" has for most audiences is that it shows an object, then takes it away; the rest of the film is concerned with the search for, and ultimate recovery of, the object. Münsterberg concurred, citing the fact that mysteries usually made the most involving films since they were dominated by object-clues. Both men had hit upon a psychoanalytic concept which would be developed decades later: infantile object elation. The best way to entertain the childish masses is to treat them as children, showing them a cookie in a jar and letting them gleefully while away the time trying to reach it. The close-up film technique only heightened this effect.

3. Dialogue must never be allowed in films, lest the fantasy state which the film so well creates be broken. Music could be allowed since it easily heightened the magical effect, but actual human communication would disrupt the film's attempt to deeply implant messages.

Over the subsequent 65 years, the movie industry has strictly kept to these principles of mass manipulation. But what, one may ask, of *Battleship Potemkin,* of Al Jolson opening his mouth to sing, of Hitchcock, Welles, Ford, what about *Casablanca* and *Star Wars*?

The destruction of dialogue

Well, what about them? There is nothing in the last 80 years of film and television or in the millions of pages of media theory and criticism which significantly differs from the vicious ideas of these two Isis cultists.

There has never been dialogue in film. In fact, as Lindsay and Münsterberg demanded, the reverse has been encouraged. This has been admitted by every major sound filmaker. For instance, Alfred Hitchcock, speaking to an agreeing François Truffaut in 1955:

> When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. . . . It seems unfortunate that with the arrival of sound the motion picture, overnight, assumed a theatrical form. . . . One result of this is the loss of cinematic style, the other is the loss of fantasy.

Or take a 1968 statement by Stanley Kubrick, speaking about his "groundbreaking" *2001: A Space Odyssey:*

> *2001* . . . is basically a visual, non-verbal experience. It avoids intellectual verbalization and reaches the viewer's subconscious in a way that is essentially poetic and philosophic. The film thus becomes a subjective experience which hits the viewer at an inner level of consciousness, just as music does, or painting.
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> Actually, film operates on a level much closer to music and to painting than to the printed word movies present the opportunity to convey complex concepts and abstractions without the traditional reliance on words. I think that *2001,* like music, succeeds in

short-circuiting the rigid surface cultural blocks that shackle our consciousness to narrowly limited areas of experience and is able to cut directly through to areas of emotional comprehension. In two hours and forty minutes of film there are only forty minutes of dialogue.

. . . The problem with movies is that since the talkies the film industry has historically been conservative and word-oriented. The three-act play has been the model. It's time to abandon the conventional view of the movie as an extension of the three-act play. *Too many people over thirty are still word-oriented rather than picture-oriented* [emphasis added].

Almost every other major director concurs: the battle of the last six and one-half decades has been to *extirpate* the influence of the stage on film. The film media have attempted to eliminate language, and thus contributed to the decline in our power to receive and impart profound conceptions.

Neither does the dialogue play any real part in non-journalistic television. Take, for example, the case of the situation comedy, a major portion of television output. *Three's Company* does not depend on witty dialogue, but on the technical *suggestion* of wit, the so-called laugh track ("They are all laughing, so I should"). The key is not the skill of the joke writers but the high degree of training of the audience with undraped female bodies and sexual innuendo acting as the "shill" or come-on.

The film's techniques of object-fixation

The original requirements that the film reduce everything to objects (Lindsay actually used the word "toys") for the child-viewer to fixate upon has hardly been strayed from. Alfred Hitchcock, widely believed to be the most influential filmmaker in history, hinged all of his films on the emphatic use of inanimate objects: the four-fingered hand in *Thirty-Nine Steps*, the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, the shower in *Psycho*. In fact, Hitchcock gave a generic name to all these objects—"MacGuffins"—and often had over-sized props of these made so that they would appear more-than-normally emphasized when shot.

What else is the odd fascination that Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* has for so many but the basically infantile desire to know what the hell "Rosebud" is? All the rest of the film is, in the final analysis, merely murky mystery with striking sets photographed in the unique depth-focus technique of Welles's cameraman, Glegg Toland (which allowed Welles to place physically—and psychologically—disparate objects within the same shot).

A recent director, George Lucas, responsible for the monumentally successful *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* cycles, let it all hang out when he spoke in an interview a couple of years ago:

I like action, adventure, chases, things blowing up, and I have strong feelings about science fiction and comic books and that sort of world. . . . I was at a film

conference with George Cukor [the famous 1940s director—M.M.]

filmmaker is like a toy-maker, and I'm a director." Well, I'm a filmmaker. I'm very much akin to a toy-maker. If I wasn't a filmmaker, I'd probably *be* a toy-maker. . . . Just give me the tools and I'll make toys. ·. . I don't think that much about whether it's going to be a great movie or a terrible movie, or whether it's going to be a piece of art or a piece of shit.

The development of the film's hypnotic power via technical means over the last years is unquestionable. One need only look at the "sword and sorcery" films, the *Star Wars* spin-offs, and the spate of "demonic possession" films—all relying heavily on wild special effects—which dominate today's screen to see Münsterberg's demand for "the changes in the rhythm of action, the passing through physically impossible experiences . . . the realization of supernatural effects . . . the glaring electric signs which flash up."

Most films are quite similar to common parlor hypnosis: they are viewed in the evening during periods of high susceptibility; they start off boring, like the lulling action of a swinging gold watch, before they shock you with their message. This in turn is played on by the makers of movies, as Billy Friedkin, the director of *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist,* said to a group of film students in 1974:

I figured [Hitchcock] had about 45 minutes in *Psycho* where absolutely nothing happened. It's a dull sort of story but the audience is expectant. The audience knows they're coming in to see this horrific suspense film and they're not getting it. They're getting edgy and then suddenly, he whacks them with it and BOOM, you've got them in your back pocket.

So I figured what I'm going to try and do is make this *Exorcist* go on for about an hour with nothing happening and then see how long I pull the string.

The techniques that make film a powerful manipulator were also not lost on another, more-famous film addict:

Mass meetings usually took place . . . late in the evening—they usually began at 8 p.m.—when, as Hitler knew, man's suggestibility was high, and his resistance at its lowest ebb. . . .

The opening moves of every speech [Hitler] were hesitant. The attitude of his body was stiff . . . his voice was muted and monotonous. After a few minutes, this apparent unwillingness to communicate gave way to a steadier, louder flow of sentences. . . . Then the flow increased into a torrent; the punch-line was delivered in a loud, sometimes hoarse, high-pitched voice; the end was abrupt. . . . The onslaught on the eardrums of the audience was tremendous: it was estimated that the frequency of Hitler's voice was 228 vibrations per second, whereas 200 vibrations per second is the usually frequency of a voice raised in anger.