

Cowboys and samurais: how film is used to enforce national ideologies

by Michael J. Minnicino

Parts I and II discussed the earliest work on the use of film as a medium of mass social control, which was carried out in the second decade of this century by Harvard professor Hugo Münsterberg and sometime-poet Vachel Lindsay. Münsterberg and Lindsay's work, which has yet to be superseded by film theorists or critics, specified three leading elements that render the motion picture an effective mass brainwashing tool: 1) an emphasis on the technically hypnotic components of the medium, such as supernatural effects, portrayal of physically impossible experiences, and gigantic enlargement of discrete objects; 2) an emphasis in plot-line and photography on objects; and 3) the total banning of dialogue.

The movies: psychological warfare as a fine art *Third of a six-part series*

Nearly seven decades after this prescription was set forth, author Michael Minnicino documented, it is still being adhered to by modern filmmakers. Here Minnicino discusses its application in national schools of filmmaking.

The Fabian purpose to which the ideological warfare of the early masters of social control through films was bent was

perhaps best outlined by J. R. Rees, the leader of the Harvard team's British compatriots at London's Tavistock Institute. Rees, more the technician, felt no need for the literary varnish that H. G. Wells or Bertrand Russell were often forced to use. The "World Society," for which Lindsay pined, Rees described as one divided into elites and what he called "dullards." In fact, Rees complained later in his life that

Aldous Huxley in his book *Brave New World* was planning to produce a section of subnormal men who would do the dull jobs of the community; we really don't need to produce them for there are too many already.

The task of the psychological profession, according to Rees, was to keep the dullards docile (much of today's field of "labor relations," for instance, comes out of pre-World War II Tavistock and Harvard studies in how to subdue workers' "neurotic" need to strike occasionally), but at the same time easily transformable into cannon fodder, ready to kill and be killed for the elite. This careful balance was to be accomplished through the development of synthetic ideologies—each geared to the psychological differences of each national sector—by which most people would be kept permanently in a childlike fantasy of "insiders" and "outsiders." The "insider" side is emphasized when periods of social cohesion are necessary; the homicidal tantrum inherent in all people is unleashed against outsiders when that is necessary . . . or so Rees's maniacal theory goes. This in itself is not new; one of Rees's most venerable forebears in the ideological warfare wing of the British intelligence service, Thomas Hobbes, had developed precisely the same thesis 300 years previous with his discussion of humanity's "war of each against all."

Not so strangely, film—sector by national sector—followed this profile completely. Lindsay picked up on it im-

mediately, demanding that the new art, "in asserting its genius," had to feel "its way toward *the most primitive forms of life it could find*. In his book, Lindsay made a case history of the development of the Japanese film (which had just barely got off the ground in 1916), criticizing the fact that Japanese films had modern and often Westernized themes. Rather

we should have the story of the Ronin, not a Japanese stage version, but a work from the source-material. We should have legends of the various clans, picturizations of the code of the Samurai.

It is interesting to note that the Japanese did not take Lindsay's advice immediately and continued films more in line with the massive efforts to Westernize and industrialize their country. It was only after they had lost World War II and came heavily under Anglo-American influence that Japanese filmmaking became dominated by Samurai and Ronin, the masterless cowboy/warriors of Japan's period of social collapse.

Elsewhere, Lindsay's dictum was followed. The biggest hits in Italy in the earliest period of filmmaking were the "Roman toga epics," the most important being *Cabiria* by Gabriele D'Annunzio, the poet-adventurer who was crucial in assisting Benito Mussolini in his fascist coup d'état. After Mussolini's coup in 1919, fascist propaganda rested very heavily on the "new Roman Empire" theme inculcated by these films (a theme, incidentally, which had been thought absurd for the decades previous).

French screens were filled with the Revolution and Napoleon. Notwithstanding a natural tendency toward nationalism, these films emphasized the primitive Jacobin mobs of the Revolution as true heroes of French history. To be fair, it should be noted that the indigenous French film industry was quite weak; most of the most monstrous of these films came from Germany.

Eisenstein and the assassination of language

Germany and the Soviet Union are by far the most strident examples of the Fabian plot for film. In both cases, the film industry started in earnest only after World War I and after Lindsay, Münsterberg, et al. had done their original spadework.

Much has been written about the central figure of Sergei Eisenstein, whose films—shot by shot—are still the basic textbook for film students around the world. Eisenstein was a fraud, a cultist, and a philosophical fascist who took Rees and Lindsey's foul intent perhaps farther than any other major director.

Trained as an engineer, Eisenstein quickly turned to stage direction after the first year of the Russian Revolution of 1917. From the beginning, Eisenstein identified himself as a Cubist and part of the Futurist art movement's "cult of the new." The Futurists were the closest thing that the early 20th

century could come to today's "Yippie" super-anarchists (albeit a bit more literate than the latter), and played a very important role in especially Italy where they praised Mussolini as their avatar and joined his movement early and in droves. Mussolini, and less directly, Adolf Hitler, flirted with their Europewide movement.

To be a "Cubist/Futurist stage director" meant to operate on the then-famous theory of "neutralization," by which was meant the attempt to "decompose" reality into its neutral component parts. On stage, all this mumbo-jumbo covered for an attempt to assassinate literate language by instructing one's actors to scream nonsense syllables instead of words and to use outlandish lighting and set design specifically so that the dialogue would become deemphasized and coequal in importance with the scenery.

By his own admission, when Eisenstein moved from the stage into film he intended to bring these theories to a fine science. He solicited and got the advice of I. P. Pavlov, the dear of Russian psychology and, if not a direct collaborator of Rees, then a strikingly similar cothinker. Pavlov, most well-remembered today for his brainwashing of collies via pain conditioning, felt that all cognitive processes could be broken down into "images." It was particularly when he was under the influence of the Pavlovians, that Eisenstein conceived (with the aid of the American Fabian and novelist Upton Sinclair) of his project for the film version of Karl Marx's multivolume economic treatise *Das Kapital*. Marx's fairly complex conceptions, Eisenstein insisted, could easily be conveyed by the appropriate juxtaposition of Pavlovian-determined key images.

Later, as he was building his reputation as a film theorist, Eisenstein even more closely approached Rees's viewpoint, falling under the influence of the Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget, and the latter's Soviet disciple, Lev Vygotsky. Piaget claimed that the mental processes of infants are characterized by an "inner speech" based on perceptual images (i.e., comparable to Münsterberg's thesis that "the outer world [was] woven into our mind . . . by the acts of our attention," quoted above). This inner speech is "tamed" and over the years replaced by "public syntax," Piaget's phrase for literate speech

Vygotsky went a step further, adding that the obverse of this process was true for schizophrenics: the psychotic, claimed Vygotsky, regresses to an infantile world where perceptual images are immediately and uncritically adopted as "truth." Thus, psychosis is a "communications" or "perceptual" disorder; via speech the schizophrenic is merely trying to communicate perceptions unanalyzed by his or her defective reason. (After World War II, Vygotsky's work was apotheosized by R. D. Laing, the Tavistock Clinic's fair-haired boy, who popularized the hideous notion that psychotics were really sane, but with different modes of communication.)

With this nonsense in mind, Eisenstein embarked on a

major study of “primitive peoples” in search of the archetypal images which represented the keys to inner speech. By his own admission, Eisenstein wanted to treat his film audience as the infant described by Piaget; it is also clear, though unstated, that his goal was to reduce audiences to the permanently childlike state described by Vygotsky. Those readers familiar with Eisenstein’s films will immediately recognize in this context the lavish attention paid to such alleged archetypes, such as the peasants coming out from under rocks like lizards in *Alexander Nevsky*, or the crosses and skulls which dominate the never-commercially-released *Que Viva Mexico*.

Otherwise, Eisenstein’s much-vaunted contributions to film were robberies from the more quirkish Fabian theory, and from outright fascists such as Ezra Pound. The theory of the montage for which he is most well known is directly lifted without attribution from Lindsay. In fact, to buttress the theory Eisenstein used the example of the hieroglyphic, as did Lindsay. He also brought his uncompromising hatred of the rational use of music and language from the Cubist stage to film. Music and speech could exist in film, he taught, but only if they acted as isolated stimuli “dialectically” placed in montage against the Lindsayan “toys” which his actors and sets had become. If films had to be musical, then it must be the scores of the noted anti-musicians Scriabin and Debussy.

Eisenstein’s net “contribution” was to popularize Lindsay and Münsterberg’s theory among the subsequent three generations of filmmakers—aided by American Fabians like Sinclair who had him tour North and South America, and by the British Fabians who lionized him in Western Europe. In the Soviet Union, Eisenstein’s legacy are grey, totalitarian films hardly distinguishable from the pedantic Nazi epics of the same period.

Psychosis film in Weimar Germany

But Germany was to be the special pilot project of these movie-making manipulators of the modern Isis cult. Long before the Fabian movement came into being, the British intelligence services at the command of the oligarchy were fixated on the problem of how to ideologically control Germany via its art and literature. Even at the turn of the 19th century, Madame De Staël, a rather notorious British operative from the days of the French Revolution, had worked up a psychological profile of the Germans, *De l’Allemagne*.

The same forces who later end up as the ultimate sponsors of the Harvard/Tavistock researches previously had worked to develop Wagnerism in Germany. The work of Richard Wagner had appealed especially to the kooky “spiritualist” wing of the oligarchs’ psychological warfare division because Wagner’s music, pretty much by his own admission, was merely a vehicle for racialist tales of gods in unending battles against dwarfs and other weird creatures allegedly from Germany’s mythic past—all very much in line with Madame de Staël’s analysis that the key to Germany psy-

chology was “terror . . . ghosts and wizards please the people as much as men of culture.”

For this reason, these forces directly aided Wagner in setting up his cult headquarters in Bayreuth, and in sponsoring Wagner’s philosophical public-relations men, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and later “cultural pessimists” like Oswald Spengler and Adolf Hitler.

By the time film took hold in Germany, Wagnerism still held sway but had split into various wings. The most radical of this cultural pessimist movement’s factions was the so-called Expressionists, whose philosophy became popular slightly after the turn of the century. The Expressionists managed to fuse a militant Futurist hatred of rationality (a leading Expressionist described his movement as a “total revolt against the existing order”) with the racialism of Wagner.

The Expressionists felt that their revolution in art and culture meant renewing the philosophy of people like Julius Langbehn—whose 1890 *Rembrandt als Erzieher (Rembrandt As Educator)* claimed that the master painter was a “true Aryan” because his use of “gloomy” blacks and browns corresponded to the Aryan “soul”—or like Wilhelm Worringer, who in his 1921 *Abstraktion und Einfühlung (Abstraction and Feeling)* attempted to demonstrate that abstraction in art was natural only to “Nordic man” who, as a perpetual “hunter” (Spengler’s phrase exactly), is in a constant battle with nature and therefore must always tear the object out of nature and make it an absolute.

Before World War I the Expressionists became hegemonic in German and Austrian theater, particularly when the directorship of Germany’s premiere stage, the Grosses Schauspielhaus in Berlin, was taken over by Münsterberg’s favorite, Max Reinhardt. Under Reinhardt’s leadership, Germany’s stages were handed over almost completely to Expressionist experiments and even the classic dramas of Shakespeare and Schiller were reduced to shambles by actors screaming their parts and direction which openly inserted racial overtones.

After World War I, the Expressionists, especially those trained directly by Reinhardt, moved whole-hog into film. Among them Fritz Lang (the most well known to Americans); Paul Wegener, the first Expressionist filmmaker; Conrad Veidt, who started his career playing the zombie in the famous Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and ended it playing Nazi villains in innumerable Humphrey Bogart films for Warner Brothers; Werner Krauss, the leading German actor under the Nazis; and Ernst Lubitsch, who achieved international fame as the director of Hollywood “madcap” comedies in the 1930s.

While it can hardly be said that these lunatics added anything to film technique with their starkly lit and exaggerated films, the Expressionists conducted the most concentrated experiment in psychological warfare in film’s history. They tested everything that could “primitivize” the German population. The first major Expressionist film was *The Stu-*

dent of Prague (1913) which hinged upon the famous theme of the *Doppelgänger*, the schizophrenic double-self. *Student* kicked off a whole wave of excitement about the use of the *Doppelgänger* as a brainwashing tool with one contemporary study (Dr. Leon Kaplan's 1927 *Das Problem der Magie und der Psychoanalyse*) noting that as races become more primitive they find nature increasingly hostile and are prone to narcissistic fantasy images like the *Doppelgänger*. *Student* was re-made two more times, the last under the Nazi regime, and the original scenarist, Hans Heinz Ewers, later became one of Dr. Goebbels most prolific writers of *Blut und Boden* (racialist "Blood and Soil") propaganda.

Schizophrenia and the endless battle between Wagnerian gods and dwarfs (in many variants) dominated subsequent Expressionist film. Everywhere lurked zombies, often in collusion with "mad" scientists (an Expressionist invention that would serve well in the United States): *Homunculus* (1916) *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919); *Der Golem* (several versions starting in 1914); etc. Much of the rest of the Expressionist output was re-makes of Wagner's mythos and racially tinged costume dramas.

Finally, there is Fritz Lang, who deserves a special mention because of his influence and the fact that his anti-Nazi profile is largely undeserved. Lang started with a film version of Wagner's *Nibelungen* and then went on to his famous *Dr. Mabuse* series in which, as in his later *M*, the world was divided into rival conspiracies of dark and light forces. He capped his career in Germany with *Metropolis* (1926). Film writers, influenced by Lang's emigration to the United States in 1933, universally refuse to admit that this science fiction film uncannily presages the filmic images that the Nazis would use extensively in their own propaganda films. Lang himself attempted later in his life to disassociate himself from the film, claiming that the most blatant Nazi propaganda was inserted by this longtime scenarist Frau Thea von Harbou—later a favorite hack for the Nazis. But Lang's hindsight is, of course, self-serving.

The success of these experiments on a German population already half-crazed by a grinding economic depression can be gauged by the fact that when the Nazis took fingertip control of cultural activity in Germany, they did little to change the content and style of film.

Josef Goebbels himself, an avid film fan, at the height of his power and reaping the rewards of a population prepared for the Nazis by the Weimar film industry, claimed in 1942 that the real "masters" of taking racist themes and turning them into psychologically useful films were not the Germans . . . but the Americans. For it was the method of Harvard's Lindsay and Münsterberg that had been used to remodel the German national soul.

The 'Western' conspiracy

It was not until the 1960s that American film audiences were prepared to accept the hysteria-inducing experiments

performed on Europeans in the 1920s and 1930s. Some crudely racist domestic films like D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* were popular, but were heavily attacked from many quarters. However, America did have its own Expressionism—the Western—and the success of the genre in manipulating the U.S. population is surely to be numbered among the sources of Goebbels's praise of Hollywood and the school of Münsterberg and Lindsay.

The Western, the "whirlwind of cowboys and Indians," as Lindsay put it in 1916, is the closest thing to a portrayal of the Hobbesian world outlook that was acceptable to American film-goers. In the world of the Western, each man goes around armed to the teeth; if he goes into a bar, someone invariably tries to shoot him, and, relying on some primitive code of honor, he shoots first. If the hero travels, he is constantly threatened by savage creatures (Indians) who want to kill him and his family in various horrific ways, and they too must be shot first. Every Western—from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to today's sadistic "spaghetti Westerns"—recapitulates some form of this scenario: the perfect "war of each against all."

The Western genre was developed solely for the purpose of psychological war. For well over the first century of American history, the West and the men and women who settled it were always a symbol of the nation's commitment to progress. The most noted example of this was the nationalist circle around James Fenimore Cooper. Around the turn of the century, Mark Twain and other "Gilded Age" authors began the subversion of the symbol, culminating in a direct attack by Professor Frederick Jackson Turner, who held the history chair at Harvard at the same time that Münsterberg and the James brothers controlled the university's other departments.

Turner's famous "Frontier Thesis" completely reversed the commonplace concerning the West, claiming that the frontier was not civilized under the banner of growth and progress but was raped by greedy internal imperialists. Turner's thesis became the corollary of Fabian professor Charles Beard's contemporary analysis that the American Constitution itself was merely a license to steal concocted by the rapacious capitalists that made up the Founding Fathers. Turner and Beard's ideas were both heavily publicized by Henry Adams, a close colleague of the Jameses at Harvard, an adviser to President Wilson, the president of the American Historical Association, and the best-known "intellectual" in America.

Barely had the debate over Turner's thesis begun than film in America became dominated by its false image—an image that has been hammered into the American population unceasingly for the last 80 years. The macho lone individual was turned loose against the prevailing conception of a republican citizenry committed to scientific and technological progress.

(to be continued)