

Hollywood Speaks Out

To Mary Ellen for imbuing Mark and Mara, and Linda for imbuing Carl, with the understanding of and passion for protest;

to Mark, Mara, and Carl for opening their hearts and minds to the reasons for protest;

to Mara and Carl for implementing the meanings and purposes of protest and passing them on to the next generation through Marlowe;

to Zeke, as Shakespeare wrote, play on!

Robert L. Hilliard

*Hollywood
Speaks Out*

Pictures that Dared to
Protest Real World Issues

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“If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.”

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

“Millions of tons of celluloid for millions of people to see and hear. But what do they see and hear? And does it make them and the world any better?”

From Robert Hilliard, *The 48th Parallel* (a play)

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Foreword

In Hollywood, political films traditionally were often considered “box-office poison.” Then along came Gillo Pontecorvo with *Battle of Algiers* (1965) and Costa-Gavras with *Z* (1968). Both – ironically, from across the Atlantic – were considered box-office successes internationally. *Battle of Algiers* was even shown in the White House in September of 2003 to “educate” the staff and others on aggressive tactics against guerrilla warfare which they could apply in Iraq. *Z* was awarded an Oscar for Best Foreign Language film in 1969 and was censored by the Greek junta until 1974. The floodgates were opened. Robert Hilliard’s book documents the evolution of political film. Although political films emerged with D. W. Griffith’s controversial Civil War classic *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, as Robert Hilliard points out, they have covered many and diverse areas. A study of them can become a veritable labyrinth. Hilliard’s approach is a thematic one, creating an umbrella for each category of political film . . . war, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, to name just a few of the dozen topics Hilliard confronts.

Robert Hilliard’s knowledge of the films is very extensive. He has lived through most of the protests represented in the book from World War II (GI with a Purple Heart), through the Cold War, Vietnam, and currently the war in Iraq. Hence he comes to the book with rich personal experiences that amplify the narrative. The chapter on war, for example, is very enlightening, given Hilliard’s World War II action in the Battle of the Bulge and his very well-articulated antiwar stance today. In another instance, in the chapter on anti-Semitism dealing with such films as *Gentleman’s Agreement* or *Crossfire*, Hilliard has a keen historical approach with a current concern about more subtle prejudices against Jews, as well as other minorities

throughout the text. The chapter on racism is a very good microcosm of the history of race as depicted generally in society, on television, and in today's controversial and complicated films by Spike Lee, *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*. Hilliard's lament is that Hollywood and society in general downplay racial issues in film, although as we have seen, it was a big issue in the Democratic nomination in 2008 – “playing the race card” – and the subsequent election of the first African-American as President of the United States.

With respect to the chapter on labor vs. management films (*Salt of the Earth* and *Norma Rae*), the book offers excellent examples of two films, two decades apart, which reflect a strong plea for unionizing against harsh labor conditions either in the mines or textile factories. (Hilliard has seen close-up the retaliation of institutions against union activity.) He makes the union concerns of *Salt of the Earth* very relevant by shedding light on the immigrant workers' situation in 2008.

As a Professor of Communications before his recent retirement, Hilliard has taught many of these movies, revealing the profound issues presented dramatically in the film and showing their relevance today. His course on “Pictures of Protest” brought to light for a younger generation many of the issues depicted in this book. Here Hilliard has grounded his observations in solid research. One needs only to look at all the resources he has at hand in the endnotes of each chapter, for example, film critics, film historians, and general newspaper articles from the respective time period. This will certainly help the reader pursue each of the issues touched upon in the text.

Throughout the text, Hilliard is realistic enough to see that Hollywood has on occasion invested in protest films, but for financial or other reasons, does not go far enough to have a strong “bite” to them and make an extensive impact upon the audience. His concern is voiced near the close of his text: “Where have all the protest films gone?”, echoing the antiwar song of the Vietnam era. His conclusion is that Hollywood remains conservative and unwilling to go out on a limb to make a provocative and timely film that would generate true social action. We have miles to go before we sleep . . .

John J. Michalczyk (author of *French Literary Filmmakers*,
Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film,
and *Italian Political Filmmakers*)

Introduction

One can't say enough bad things about Hollywood and one doesn't say enough good things about Hollywood. Hollywood has entertained and Hollywood has bored. Hollywood has educated and Hollywood has obfuscated. Hollywood has stimulated and Hollywood has fed us pap. Hollywood has produced films that have dealt with critical issues in society and Hollywood has deliberately avoided controversial subjects. Hollywood has dealt with reality and Hollywood has retreated into fantasy.

Hollywood has tried to be everything to everybody. And sometimes it has succeeded in being nothing to nobody. Before radio and then television challenged its influence, Hollywood's feature films were the most powerful factors for affecting people's minds and emotions – and even actions. Hollywood had – and still has – the power to cloud people's minds on one hand and to open and excite them on the other. With such power comes responsibility. Has Hollywood lived up to its responsibility?

Some will look at films such as "Gentleman's Agreement," which dealt with anti-Semitism at a time when such bigotry was openly rampant in America; "Do the Right Thing," made when institutional racism kept the urban streets of America on fire; "The Grapes of Wrath," made when America's great depression created millions of Joad families throughout the country struggling for survival; and "Fail-Safe," made when the Cold War prompted people all over the world to go to bed wondering whether a button pushed during the night would atomize them, their families, and most of civilization before the next morning. ("Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Love the Bomb" is usually thought of as the seminal protest film against nuclear war, yet it was not a Hollywood film, but a British production.) And there are dozens more.

Some critics believe that every movie advocates something. For example, Richard Corliss wrote:

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.¹

But the other side of the picture shows thousands and thousands of feature films dealing with pure escapism or pretending to deal with reality by dealing with controversial subjects at a safe time and distance from when the issues or events had occurred. For example, no amount of rationale can absolve Hollywood from its failure to make a single picture about the World War II Nazi Holocaust – the deliberate and systematic murder of at least eleven million people – while the Holocaust was happening. Decades later Hollywood made numerous films about the Holocaust, too late to influence the world to try to stop that genocide. It has too often acted similarly in regard to other genocides. Entrepreneur Jeffrey Skoll, founder of Participant Productions, designed to develop socially pertinent films, discussed the scarcity of Hollywood movies with political messages: “The system’s set up for safe bets: sequels, superheroes, romantic comedies . . . All the people I met [in Hollywood] had a particular interest in doing something more meaningful. I thought if I could start a company [Participant Productions] that takes risk out of doing these films, they’ll get done.”²

Similar to the two-faced symbol of thespis, comedy and tragedy, Hollywood has shown two faces in its productions, sometimes using its power to try to change society for the better, but most often abandoning its responsibility to society by deliberately avoiding content relating to the real world.

That is not to say that Hollywood should have spent all its time making feature films oriented to political or social or economic issues. Hollywood has offered much psychological surcease to its patrons with comedies and family drama unrelated to any of society’s problems. It is to say that Hollywood has had incredible opportunity to influence the world we live in for the better, but has chosen to do so only

sporadically and too rarely when an entertainment film on a given subject could have had an immediate positive impact on people's lives.

Why? The bottom line says it all. A common perception in show business, attributed to Sam Goldwyn, one of the great movie moguls, is, "Pictures are for entertainment. Messages should be delivered by Western Union." (For some of the younger people reading this, Western Union was once the premier agency through which one sent messages via telegraph.) That "message movies" don't make money is part of the general wisdom of Hollywood. More accurately, many message movies don't make money; some do. Conversely, movies made for the lowest common denominator – third- or fourth-grade intelligence – usually make a lot of money, so a lot more of them are made. If you have any doubts, just check out the biggest grossing releases of any given week.

There is a distinct difference, however, between documentary films and feature films. Many documentary films deal with real extant issues. Robert Flaherty is a seminal figure in the development of the documentary films. His "Nanook of the North," in 1922, established a pattern for the documentary that went beneath the exterior of life and carefully selected those elements that dramatized peoples' relationships to the outer and inner composition of their worlds. Flaherty eulogized the strength and nobility of his subjects struggling against a hostile or, at the least, difficult environment. Pare Lorentz, noted for his documentary productions of "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and "The River" under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administrations in the 1930s, presented problems that affect numerous people and showed ways in which the problems can be solved. Lorenz's documentaries called for positive action by his viewers to remedy an unfortunate or critical situation. A third documentary type is exemplified by the work of John Grierson in England. In the film "Night Mail" he presented the details of ordinary, everyday existence – in this case the delivery of night mail in the UK – in a dramatic but non-sensational manner, showing us people and things as they really are without an obvious political or social message. In all such documentaries, however, the producer has a purpose, a point of view that he or she wishes to convey to the audience. There is an old saying that to make a good documentary, you need to have a "fire in your belly." Documentaries go beyond entertainment alone, and therefore can be and have been, in many cases, realistic pictures of protest.³

In this book, however, we are not dealing with documentaries, but with the Hollywood genres that have had the most influence, reaching the largest audiences – feature entertainment films. We are dealing with those feature entertainment films that represent the needs, struggles, failures, and achievements of individuals and groups who fought and continue to fight to overcome prejudice, discrimination, injustice, poverty, and physical and emotional violence by challenging America's status quo in regard to race, religion, lifestyle, and economic, social, and political beliefs and practices. As noted earlier, many Hollywood films have been about these controversial subjects at a “safe” time and distance. We will deal principally with films that protested conditions that existed at the time the films were made and released. In some cases the current issue is confronted through analogy to a comparable situation in the past – or in the future – presented in the given film.

This is a selective process. We cannot cover all the films in the “protest” category, so we will use examples from a number of genres and try to relate them to the genre as a whole. Some of the films we will deal with in detail, others we'll mention in passing. Hopefully, all the films we select will in some way represent some degree of protest within the particular genre and give a sense of the protest within the genre as a whole. We know that many readers will be concerned that their favorite films may not be included within a given genre. But, just as everyone's list of the greatest fifty or one hundred films ever made will always have some differences compared to anyone else's list, so too will the films chosen here have some differences from the films anyone else might have selected for inclusion.

Some of the categories this book will cover are war, anti-Semitism, the justice and prison system, labor vs. management, poverty, racism, politics, homophobia, technology, and sexism. Where appropriate, we will set a given film in the context of the times it was made, the status of the given issue, the critical judgment of and impact of the film, and the application of that film and issue to comparable films and issues today – that is, the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Why the emphasis on the historical context? History moves the media and the media move history. To study the media, one must understand the context and the issues of the times in which a given media event or production took place, whether a television series (e.g., “Roots” or “All In The Family”), a radio play (e.g., Norman Corwin's scripts for the CBS Radio Workshop), a TV news and public affairs special

(such as any of many Edward R. Murrow's and Fred Friendly's "See It Now" programs), or the Hollywood films discussed in this book. (Can you think of any television programs you've seen in recent years that fall into these categories? "Boston Legal"? "Frontline"? "Now"? "Bill Moyers"?)

This book developed out of a course that I taught for some years at a college in Boston, "Pictures of Protest." In this course I emphasized the historical context. I have encountered too many college students who are abysmally ignorant of the world that existed before they became aware of the world in which they are living. Platitude or not, Santayana was right in saying that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. In another course I taught entitled "History of Broadcasting," when we chronologically reached the infamous blacklisting period of the 1950s, I would ask the students, "Who knows who Joe McCarthy was?" Rarely did anyone know. Sometimes an answer would be, "wasn't that the dummy with that ventriloquist?" (Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen, if you're stumped.) Sometimes I'd get a correct answer, but the wrong person: "Joe McCarthy was the New York Yankees manager who won four straight World Series." Thus, the necessity of making students aware of the real world of the past that established the foundation for the world in which they are living and in which they will produce the new media content or, at the very least, will be affected by it.

In the course, therefore, the students' research, writing, and reports were a mixture – depending, as other professors know, upon the size of the class and the orientation and capabilities of individual students – of critical and historical analysis. The course organization included research into all legitimate sources and verification, when possible, of secondary sources used, shared in class through papers and reports; lectures primarily used to motivate class discussions; and viewing of at least one film illustrative of the genre being studied.

A filmography – that is, basic information about the key films in the various genres – is useful for students. Rather than try to include it in this book, it is strongly recommended that in a course using this book an additional reference be considered: one is *Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide*. The current, 2009 edition is published by Signet Books in New York. Its 1,664 pages include, for each film listed, the film's name, year produced, director, key cast, short description, awards, and Maltin's quality rating. Another is *VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever*, edited

by Jim Craddock and published by GaleCengage. Its 2009 edition is available in book and e-book versions.

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One of the students in my “Pictures of Protest” course, Kief Sloate-Dowden, wrote in a class paper, “Many of the themes and issues can be applied to the state of the world today. By viewing these protest films and understanding the problems with society that they bring up, one can be influenced to take action to change the conditions that are

presented in these 'pictures of protest.'" What more could a professor want from a student? Hopefully, this book will make some of its readers feel the same way!

Notes

- 1 Corliss, Richard, "Persuasive Pictures," *Time*, January 30, 2006, p. 11.
- 2 Hempel, Jessi, "Lights, Action, and Bleeding Hearts," *Business Week*, November 7, 2007, p. 102.
- 3 The material on documentaries is taken from Robert Hilliard, *Writing for Television, Radio, and New Media* (9th edn, Boston: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2007).

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 by 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.

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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

Figure 1.1
The Great Dictator
(Charlie Chaplin, 1940)

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, has 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, *Jüid Süss* (1940), 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* (2005), 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