

# That's Ideology!

## Politics and pontification in recent Hollywood cinema

By Jonathan Murray

Over the last 18 months or so an increasing number of onlookers have detected a peculiar stirring within mainstream Hollywood cinema. Insistently forcing its way through the comforting aroma of reheated popcorn, the sharper reek of ideology fills the air. And it's not dogged, ingenious academics and critics who are smoking the radical undertows out from under the cover of blandly, beautifully composed multiplex imagery. Heaven forefend, it's the filmmakers themselves telegraphing them to audiences on screen and in interview. As George Clooney, co-writer and director of *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), star of *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, USA, 2005), and ever more the Chic Guevara *de nos jours* recently described his occupation: 'It is not merely your right but your duty to question your government.' The incumbent Commander-in-Chief for liberal Hollywood, Clooney's elegant, eloquent credo has become something of a watchword for recent American (and/or international English-language) films which are as oppositional in their politics as they are conventional in their aesthetics.



For example: *Good Night, and Good Luck* takes pioneering US television journalist Edward R. Murrow's investigation of the McCarthy hearings as an inspirational antecedent for contemporary opposition to the Bush administration's Iraqi adventures, not to mention an elevated, quasi-Reithan ideal of the social function of moving images; *Syriana* (2006) anatomises America's structural dependence on oil and the US political-military-industrial complex's attendant nation-making and -breaking adventures in the Middle East; *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, USA/Ger, 2005) imagines Guy Fawkes reborn as a masked avenger and media saboteur in a totalitarian England of the proximate future; *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, Ger/UK, 2005) implicates the British government and pharmaceutical multinationals in the misuse and withholding of medical aid and research in contemporary Africa. A closely related strand of recent US film work attacks unelected, corporate vested interests: *Lord of War* (Andrew Niccol, Fr/USA, 2005) explores the moral crisis of an international arms dealer facilitating endless civil war and state repression in post-1980 Africa; *Crash* (Paul Haggis, USA/Ger, 2004), winner of this year's Best Film Oscar, anatomises racial stereotyping and oppression in present-day Los Angeles. And then there is resurgent cinema documentary tradition, targeting multinational corporate capital in ways that both encompass and expand beyond Michael Moore's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*-style self-mythologisation: in Morgan Spurlock's documentary *Supersize Me* (2005), the intrepid filmmaker does not just investigate the health risks of global fast food franchises, he instantiates them, his health deteriorating vertiginously as he endures a one-month exclusive diet of MacDonald's; *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Andrew Gibney, USA, 2005) chronicles the most lurid and brazen boardroom scandal of recent times; *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (Robert Greenwald, USA, 2005) documents the union-bashing, small business-destroying rampage of the supermarket behemoth.



This body of recent American and English-language mainstream work deliberately uses the diversionary as a pretext for the dogmatic. Rarely have quite so many contemporaneous Friday-night films sought so ardently to explicate and propagate politically partisan viewpoints to a mass audience. Returning to the figure(head) of George Clooney, it is perhaps his *Good Night, and Good Luck* which pursues this overarching intention to something like its logical conclusion. *Good Night ...* might also be the film that shows just how unusually combative and high-minded a lot of recent Hollywood cinema actually is. A 1958 award acceptance speech from *Good Night, and Good Luck*'s central character Edward R. Murrow opens and closes the film; the rest of the movie, depicting the journalist's celebrated stalking of Senator Joseph McCarthy earlier in the decade is thus motivated as an extended flashback. *Good Night, and Good Luck* thus literally, audaciously frames itself as a lecture. The movie is more concerned with educating rather than entertaining the viewing audience. The opening segment of Murrow's acceptance speech chastises a fictional '50s American audience (and more importantly, a material '00s counterpart) with the accusation that 'we have a built-in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Our mass media reflect this ... television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse, and insulate us'. More pointedly still, the film's final scene returns us from Murrow's early '50s confrontation with McCarthy to the peroration of the 1958 award speech which marks both the movie's narrative present and the contemporary, politicised agenda of Clooney and a range of filmmaking contemporaries:

*Just once in a while, let us exalt the importance of ideas and information. Let us dream to the extent of saying that on a given Sunday night the time normally occupied by Ed Sullivan is given over to a clinical survey on the state of American education. And a week or two later, the time normally used by Steve Allen is devoted to a thorough-going study of American policy in the Middle East ... This instrument can teach. It can illuminate, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it ...*



The studied rhetorical eloquence of *Good Night ...*, not to mention the film's self-referential narrative framing device, allow us to appreciate just how enthusiastically and unapologetically much recent mainstream Hollywood cinema has adopted an educative mission and 'I lead out' definition of education that Jean Brodie might recognise (even if Clooney et al. emphatically do not share her proto-Fascist politics).

This recent, collectively willed blurring of the boundaries between feature cinema, current affairs and political commentary has had critics scrambling for historical precedents. Significantly in this regard, in interview Clooney has acknowledged as major influences a range of politicised American auteurs whose heyday was the 1970s: 'Sidney Lumet, Alan Pakula, Hal Ashby, [Stanley] Kubrick'. Critics have tended to concur, seeing the current crop of Leftist Hollywood films and filmmakers not as *sui generis*, but rather as a renaissance of the so-called 'New Hollywood' cinema of the late '60s and early '70s. In the case of Alan J. Pakula, one of the directors Clooney publicly name-checks in recent interviews, canonical '70s works like *The Parallax View* (USA, 1974) and *All the President's Men* (USA, 1976) established the director as the *nonpareil* of an entire genre, the conspiracy movie. In *The Parallax View*, journalist Joe Frady (Warren Beatty) investigates the



assassination of a Washington senator, as an increasing number of witnesses to the murder (including Frady's girlfriend) are themselves mysteriously killed. While a government committee deems the assassination to be the act of the archetypal 'lone gunman', Frady's investigations

uncover the agency of the mysterious Parallax Corporation. Pakula's early work, like that of many present-day US cineastes, is marked by a remarkably intense attraction to an imagined everyday in which an industrial-military complex, elusive and everywhere in equal measure, relentlessly corrupts the democratic process and tramples on individual freedom and privacy. Although it's not a conspiracy movie proper, surveillance technology and the notion of the unseen, controlling voyeur plays a central narrative and thematic role in Pakula's *Klute* (USA, 1971), where



a New York prostitute, Bree (Jane Fonda), is stalked by a murderous client. If the director's later film *All the President's Men* is literally about Watergate, *The Parallax View* and much other canonical '70s Hollywood cinema expresses and explores the profound national crisis of confidence which the US's murky 1960s and '70s history engendered.

Extending the link further, out from individual filmmakers (Pakula, Clooney) to entire periods in American cinematic history (the early '70s, the mid '00s), we might note that Pakula's auteurist peccadilloes, like Clooney's in *Good Night ... and Syriana*, are of interest because they are so contemporarily resonant and representative. The conspiracy cycle of which Pakula was a major progenitor proved closely rooted in and responsive to contemporary American politics and society. The same thing is true of much work emerging from Hollywood in 2005-06. The Kennedy and Luther King assassinations, the miasma of equivocation swamping continuing US involvement in Vietnam and the trauma of Watergate lie behind '70s Hollywood's seminal visions of an America riven by concealed wires, run by corrupt plutocrats. The first two parts of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (USA, 1972; 1974) take as axiomatic the idea that public social ascent is predicated upon private moral descent. Michael Corleone's inexorable rise to criminal and political power deprives all around him of their lives and him of his humanity. Literally in-between *Godfathers I & II*, Coppola's *The Conversation* (USA, 1974) narrates a private surveillance expert's psychological disintegration in the face of his inability to decide whether he has inadvertently witnessed a murder committed in broad daylight. The same director's *Apocalypse Now* (USA, 1979) understands Vietnam as the historical fulfilment of Joseph Conrad's prophetic literary warning about humankind's Heart of Darkness. Elsewhere, Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (USA, 1975) cautions against taking a packed lunch to work, as a horrified Robert Redford watches the C.I.A. destroy first the occupants of his workplace and then America itself from inside, rather than protecting it against threat from without. Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (USA, 1976) sees central character Travis Bickle's initial idealisation of a local Senator running for re-election as equally indicative of the latter's terminally damaged psychological state as is his subsequent resolution to assassinate that politician. In Michael Crichton's *Coma* (USA, 1978), hospitals harvest, rather than heal, the helpless bodies of the sick.

A striking aspect of this cinematic ancestor for the political turn in contemporary Hollywood is the extent to which the most oppositional New Hollywood films present the journey towards knowledge of the 'real' but hidden workings of

the world as one which results not in political empowerment, but that empowerment's opposite. Understanding the state of things – and the things of the State – from an ostensibly radical point of view is to simultaneously appreciate the impossibility and futility of resistance and reform. The increasing despair and disillusionment characterising the dominant liberal consensus within '70s Hollywood offers one explanation for the radical self-transformation American cinema underwent during the latter half of the decade. *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, USA, 1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, USA 1977) and *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (George Lucas, USA, 1977) saw a definitive industrial and ideological reconstitution of Hollywood around the Blockbuster. Spielberg, Lucas et al. ushered in a notable retreat within Hollywood from overt political commentary on current affairs and/or the cultivation of an optimistic, clear-cut, moralising, Reaganite worldview.

If New Hollywood helps answer one central question about the current movement of oppositional mainstream American cinema ('Where did it come from?'), it therefore poses another ('Where will it go?') with no little urgency. In the '00s, it may be ironic distantiation from politics, rather than the anguished alienation of the '70s, that does for a brief efflorescence of celluloid radicalism. As I write, for instance, Jason Reitman's *Thank You for Smoking* (USA, 2006) reminds us that cynicism, unlike nicotine, is a drug the cognoscenti rarely try to kick. In sharp contradistinction to *Good Night ...* and the crusading Edward Murrow, *Thank You ...* presents central character Nick Naylor, a PR spokesperson for the American tobacco industry, as a hero for our disillusioned times. Nick's smiley-faced resolution to never tell the truth – Lung cancer? From cigarettes? – is presented as a supremely honest act. It is understood to acknowledge personal participation, and therefore implication, within a contemporary culture more in thrall to the *post hoc* rationalisation of ethical choices, personal or public, private or political, than the what is at stake in making those choices themselves. Unlike the civically-minded George Clooney, Reitman argues that: 'When you live in a world of spin, you understand that everything is spin, and everything is affected by spin from the other side.' Or, in Nick's more pithy distillation: 'If you argue correctly, you are never wrong.' What makes *Thank You for Smoking* amusing and provocative is not just the film's refusal to condemn its (anti-)hero's amorality. Centrally important is the way in which the movie flirts with the lionisation of this very character trait. Personified by Nick, moral disengagement becomes a perverse form of virtue for the contemporary moment.

*Thank You for Smoking* therefore stands out against the backdrop of the most critically (and often, commercially) celebrated end of Hollywood cinema



in that it is a film which abhors elevated notions of principle and political partisanship. *Good Night and Good Luck* and the kind of contemporary US cinema that film represents takes archetypal movie journalist Murrow – the man who uncovers the truth and combats vested interests – as its avatar. *Thank You for Smoking* responds with the figure of the lobbyist – a professional obfuscator in the pay of the corporate powers that be – as an unlikely moral counterweight. Railing against the prevailing critical and creative truism in Hollywood cinema, *Thank You ...* proposes that the line between politics and pontification is so thin as to be untraversable for filmmakers, however well-meaning. The calculatedly retro stylings of *Good Night and Good Luck* – narrative setting, pristine black and white cinematography, lengthy interludes of Great American Songbook-style jazz and, ironically enough, prodigious puffing – are more than a matter of conservative, classicist aesthetics. They work to suggest that *Good Night ...*'s preferred self-image, a movie that is a politically engaged and persuasive liberal utterance is, like all the things listed above, something that could be, *should* be retrieved from undeserved desuetude. *Thank You for Smoking*, by contrast, understands such high-minded seriousness and ideological certainty in much the same terms as most of its intended audience probably does smoking itself: something which collective innocence allowed us all to indulge in enthusiastically way back when, but which present-day commonsense precludes. Whether or not contemporary Hollywood's present determination to act as a domestic and international fourth estate goes up in smoke over the next couple of years or so is perhaps the most intriguing of all dramas currently screening at your local multiplex.





*Throwing Stones at the Sun*



*Serendipity, 1967*