

Meyer Lansky's Fantasy Island: what America is seeing at the movies

by Michael J. Minnicino

In Part V of EIR's exposé of the modern film industry, Michael Minnicino documented the takeover of Hollywood by the international drug cartel-linked U.S. Mafia interests, who incorporated America's movie industry into their giant post-World War II media conglomerates. This is the concluding section of our series.

The Mafia-fantasies imbibed by today's "entertainment" society go far beyond the forms of psychological manipulation pioneered by the classic Western. In fact, the films that are being produced in America today—particularly the low-

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

budget horror films and the "sword-and-sorcery" epics—are conditioning the population the way the Weimar population was conditioned for Nazism. These films dull the mind to homicidal violence and lend an air of unreality to that violence.

This situation had its origins in the 1960s, when as the old studio structure disintegrated and all movie production was taken over by the six organized-crime linked multinationals. Three trends came out: (1) romanticization of crime, (2) demonic possession, and (3) sword and sorcery.

The criminal film

The Gangster Film of the 1930s—really a variant of the Western—had always tended to romanticize the criminal element, but crime was never really allowed to "pay." At the end of the 1950s this changed. Arthur Penn directed *The Left-Handed Gun*, publicized as the first "Freudian Western"; this was a sympathetic study of Billy the Kid. In 1967, Penn directed *Bonnie & Clyde*. This was the first film to imply that criminals are simply poor revolutionaries who lack more intellectual outlets. Penn was the third director to take over

the production of *Bonnie*; the first two were François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, both of the European avant-garde film movement known as the New Wave, and some of their scenes remain in the final version.

The 1970s were dominated by films in which crime did pay or criminals are overwhelmingly sympathetic:

1969: *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid*—turn of the century bank robbers, a remake was released two years ago by *Superman* director Richard Lester.

1972: *Boxcar Bertha*—Martin Scorsese's first film, a Depression-era female trainrobber, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*—Robert Altman was the director; the heroine is an opium-addict madam.

1973: *Badlands*—Altman's *Thieves Like Us*, a Depression-era fictional version of *Badlands*.

1972-74: *The Godfather*, Parts I & II—crime begins to pay very well.

All of the above are by major directors, most were hits. Almost all are roughly based on factual incidents; the narration in *Badlands*, for instance, is based on the diary of George Wallace failed-assassin Arthur Bremer. This romanticization has led to films in which there is a deliberate blurring of the identities of criminal psychotics, terrorists, and revolutionaries.

The demonic possession film

Satan becomes a major film topic in the 1970s, prepared for by a series of films in the 1960s which began discussing psychosis *from the point of view of the psychotic*. Thus, when the real demonic possession films like *Rosemary's Baby* came along, audiences asked: is it a psychotic fantasy, or is she possessed? The lines, again, became significantly blurred.

The transitional film was Don Siegal's 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (re-made in a druggy, special-effects version two years ago). Whereas many horror films had previously shown evil forces taking over the mind, here for the first time the bad guys were never clearly defined. The actual source of what followed was Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho* followed in 1963 by *The Birds* (in which evil takes over the bird population of a California town). Then:

1963: *Dementia 13*—Francis Ford Coppola's first film, an explicit, low-budget remake of *Psycho*.

1965: *Repulsion*—child-molester Roman Polanski's first film in the West; Salvador Dali advised on the rape-fantasy sequences.

1968: *Rosemary's Baby*—Polanski again, first real demonic possession film.

1971: *Duel*—made originally for TV; Steven Spielberg's first film, a truck becomes possessed and homicidal.

1973: *Sisters*—Brian De Palma.
The Exorcist—Billy Friedkin.

1975: *Jaws*—Spielberg, *The Birds* under water; *Jaws III* is now released; a thousand variants have been produced starring whales, ants, piranhas, bees, etc.

1976-8: *Obsession*—mass murder; *Carrie*—telekinesis; *The Fury*—telekinesis. All by De Palma.

Exorcist II—by *Excalibur* director John Boorman.

From about 1976 on, it would take too long to list the hundreds of low-budget horror films released all involving psychotic and/or demonically possessed murderers. These films are very popular and their low cost (under \$3 million) makes them enormously successful financially. Their primary audience is 14 to 18 year olds, 60 percent women, 40 percent men. The invariable plot device is: coed group of fourteen to eighteen year olds is off having fun; couples go off for sex, often first sex; murderer discovers them and brutally kills them. The most important thing is that the deaths in these films are absolutely graphic—hatchetings, disfigurement, etc.—the kind of thing that would make the gleeful kids watching it vomit if they saw it for real. *This is cold-blooded conditioning to violence.*

It has been suggested that another root of these films is the so-called “snuff film.” Snuff films are a kind of super-pornography which show or purport to show the *actual* death of a person (sometimes a dog) by beheading or hanging . . . the kinkiest of the kinky. Los Angeles District Attorney Bugliosi has suggested that Charles Manson knew Roman Polanski and his wife Sharon Tate *before* the former arranged Tate's murder, because they had collaborated on snuff films.

Sword and sorcery

This genre is the most recent and closest to the original theories of early film theorists Lindsay, Münsterberg, et al. In effect, you combine the romantic villain/criminal with demon aliens in a Western-style “shoot-em-up” environment. Magic is arbitrarily thrown in.

The first real such film was not officially sorcery oriented: *2001*. *2001* (1968) started as a sci-fi film in which the computer becomes demonically possessed; by the end of the film an alien monolith has magically intervened. (Kubrick went through several versions until he came up with the famous monolith. He said later that it was the closest thing he could find to “a Jungian archetype”).

Star Wars and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (starring François Truffaut as an actor) came in 1977, setting off the current mania. *Star Wars* and its sequel, the first two of a planned seven-part series scheduled over 14 years, are very

much Westerns if full of Zen Buddhism. An interesting note is that the first *Star Wars* was composed of filmic “tributes” (i.e., thefts) to other films; *Star Wars*'s last scene is lifted from Leni Reifenstahl's paean to Hitler, *Triumph of the Will*.

The last years of the 1970s were filled with more explicit sorcery films: *Excalibur*, *Dragonslayer*, etc., and the early 1980s will see over two score such monstrosities released.

It was from *Star Wars* and its imitators that the entertainment industry controllers spun off today's video-game hysteria, a form of fantasy manipulation that has proven extraordinarily profitable as well as potentially addicting for youth.

Specialty films

Several films that don't fit these categories are worthy of special note:

Anti-religion films: The first was Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*, on which the popular TV series is based. Even the *New York Times* noted this was the first film in U.S. history to ridicule a legitimate belief in God. The motif has been picked up since that time (1970), most recently in *True Confessions* (1981), a *roman a clef* of the Cardinal Cody watergate attempt, and *Monsignor* (1982), another portrait of “clerical corruption.”

Political films: Mike Ritchies's *The Candidate* (1972), starring Tom Hayden's buddy Robert Redford, is the earliest. The plot featured an environmentalist super-liberal challenging a California machine politician. At the time it was noted that the film curiously mirrored the career of Jerry Brown; Brown tried to buy the rights to the film and he and Redford arranged to have it shown to the delegates to the 1972 Democratic National Convention.

Watergate/CIA conspiracy films: *Three Days of the Condor* (1975; Redford); *All the President's Men* (1976; Redford again); *The Conversation* (1974; Coppola). Finally, there are several films that have discussed actual assassinations. The first was *Targets* (1968; Peter Bogdanovich's first film, based on the Texas University tower murders); *Greetings* (1968; Brian De Palma's first film, the Kennedy assassination); *Badlands* (1973; George Wallace assassination attempt); *Nashville* (1975; Altman; Wallace assassination attempt); *Taxi Driver* (1976; Scorsese, Wallace assassination attempt); *Blow-Out* (1981; De Palma, Chappaquiddick as assassination-attempt).

Who produces these films?

The directors of these films are quite insane; it remains to be seen whether they are witting conspirators or themselves so zombified that this stuff comes out “naturally.” The most important factor is the influence of film schools—University of Southern California, UCLA, NYU, Columbia University, and the American Film Institute in Hollywood. All these directors, with the exception of the older Penn and Kubrick, have spent years doing papers on Münsterberg and Jacques Barzun's theories. By 1968 there were 100,000 film students in 205 colleges, taking 3,000 film courses; by now that figure

is much higher.

Francis Ford Coppola: UCLA; most deeply influenced by Eisenstein; started doing soft-core porn films; wrote screenplay for *Patton*; chosen for *Godfather* because he was only major director at time with Italian surname; Jerry Brown's media advisor in 1980 presidential bid; took over *Apocalypse Now* from friend George Lucas and had nervous breakdown while trying to complete this modern remake of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Arthur Penn: trained at Black Mountain College, a project of Walter Gropius of Bauhaus; studied under John Cage, Wilhelm de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller; a recent film is the drug-saturated *Altered States*.

Martin Scorsese: flunked out of Fordham Divinity School; says Catholicism is like "an acid trip"; major figure behind documentary *Woodstock* which greatly helped to popularize counterculture; in 1976 joined New York's Cinetracts Collective, a super-left film group; speaking of the hero/psychotic of his *Taxi Driver*, he said, "Well, I'm not homicidal, but both Bob [the star, Robert De Niro—MM] and I identify with the character. The guy is very quiet but intense." Scorsese himself played a bit role in the film—a psychotic. *Raging Bull* came next.

Brian De Palma: Columbia, Sarah Lawrence; gave first roles to current superstars Jill Clayburgh and Robert De Niro; "I'm very turned on by Hitchcock . . . Godard."

Roman Polanski: convicted child-molester; National Film School of Poland; "I've seen all of Bunuel's films. Like him, I'm an anarchist."

The New Left/radical-terrorist connections of all these people is very strong. Haskell Wexler, America's leading cameraman—who gave many of these people their start by getting their films distributed by the underground distribution company Grove Press Films—was arrested after he made a documentary featuring then-underground Weatherman Bernadine Dohrn (1975). The three British directors who made films here—Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, and Tony Richardson—were all part of the Maoist-Trotskyist "Free Cinema" group at Oxford. The Frenchmen are notorious and most of the current Italian directors (Antonioni, Bertolucci, the late Pasolini) are close to the wing of the Italian Communist Party which is soft on terrorism.

The Americans, particularly the California-based ones, are part of the Jerry Brown set, as are many of the starring actors. There is one politically coherent group, the Zoetrope group (named after Coppola's short-lived American Zoetrope directors' collective), which includes Coppola, Spielberg, Lucas, Scorsese, Milius (writer/director), and Lawrence Kasdan (screenplay, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.)

The European New Wave

It was with the postwar European developments that the phenomenon later replicated in the United States originated: the university departments of anthropology and psychology took over filmmaking, and turned films into little more than

experiments honing down the techniques originally described in 1915. The most notorious case is France, where *Cahiers du Cinema* was founded in 1951 by Andre Bazin. Bazin was trained in epistemology by Teilhard de Chardin at the "Christian Socialist" journal *Esprit*, which Teilhard ran. Godard, Truffaut, et al. were recruited out of the university to be the *Cahiers* staff. The whole affair was sanctioned by the University of Paris, which gave Bazin the first chair for studying films, and by the French Government, which set up the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDHEC).

Using Teilhard, Merleau-Ponty, and Bertrand Russell as textbooks, Bazin claimed that filmic images should not simply be left as "signs" or mere potentials for language; they must become real in themselves, replacing language. Thus Hemingway and Dos Passos are the best writers, since their minimal language forces the reader to invest what few words there are with deep emotion.

Inspired by this high genius, the New Wave youngsters made some of the most minimal—and boring—films in history. (It is a tribute to the immersion of the French population in post-war existentialism that possibly the slowest-moving film ever commercially released, Eric Rohmer's *Claire's Knee*, was a big hit in that country.) These films conditioned filmmakers and audiences to produce and expect even less by way of content or dialogue, thus enhancing the brainwashing potential in film. For instance, Ingmar Bergman's dialogue-free *The Silence*, the grunting "spaghetti Westerns" of Italy or "kung-fu" films of Hong Kong—even Martin Scorsese's 300-word vocabulary *Raging Bull*—followed the path cleared by Bazin's minimalists.

When Bazin died unexpectedly in 1958, his mantle was given to Jean Mitry, an instructor at IDHDC. Mitry threw off Bazin's niceties and openly proclaimed that Münsterberg had said "all there was to say about film." Mitry also officially introduced the then-new techniques of linguistics into film study. (Bear in mind that whatever was done at IDHDC was soon heard of and replicated in Nancy, Berlin, Berkeley, UCLA. Most Americans got the scoop from *Cahiers du Cinema in English*, founded and run by the *Village Voice*'s film critic Andrew Sarris.) The work of British SIS's Tavistock think-tanker Michel Foucault started being taught at film schools, and European filmmakers used anything, no matter how mundane or revolting, so long as it was all "real" and contained its own "language." The key, as Mitry stressed, was to be realistic so that the objects could be more powerfully desired as objects, as Münsterberg had stressed.

After Mitry comes almost complete incoherence. The terrorist sympathizing Jean-Luc Godard is one variant. Godard is a follower of the Althusser *Tel Quel* group in Paris; they claim that the use of perspective in camera shots is "propagating the visual codes of Renaissance humanism" and thus serves the ruling class! Christian Metz now runs the IDHDC; his book *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, attempts to find linguist Noam Chomsky's phoneme, morpheme, and "deep structure" in films.