

# The power of cinema and cinema obscura



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The Power of Cinema and Cinema Obscura Uploaded by warningsign on Aug 12, 2006  
The Power of Cinema and Cinema Obscura Cinema has been used ruthlessly for their own ends since its creation, by politicians, entrepreneurs, generals, zealots, bishops, mass murderers, pedants, pedagogues, and snake oil salesmen.

The early establishment of major studios, along with the creation of Hollywood and its subsequent emergence as the world centre of cinematic production, resulted in the ??? studio system???, which concentrated power over the medium in the hands of a few studio heads, who even owned the cinemas themselves. Consequently, the philosophies underpinning the message of most films became those of a few conservative men like Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner.

In 1934, all the major Hollywood studios signed a ??? treaty??? that merely rubber-stamped what had been common practice ??“ widespread adherence to ??? moral??? guidelines in cinematic productions. The document was known as the Hollywood Production Code and was administered by the Hays Office, headed by the Catholic League of Decency??™s nominee, Joe Breen. This entity eventually gave way to the formalised Government censorship that exists to this day, but the industry retained a culture born of those days that perpetuated the cinematic viewpoint of white Christian male dominance of society. Consequently, the medium of cinema has been used to brainwash generations of us to accept, for the advancement of their own ends, a semiotic dogma consisting of the following premises White people and the Christian God are superior, and others are inferior Men are superior, women are inferior The white, male-dominated, Christian family unit is superior,

other relationships and people are inferior. As a member of this majority, it is morally superior to share the preferences of your peers in politics, morals, looks and adornment, sexuality and personal conduct, lifestyles, and products, as expressed to you in films and filmed advertisements. Everyone who is not part of a traditional white male-dominated Christian family unit can become less inferior by imitating these preferences. Cinema has also been used by persons of broader views, but an imbalance existed, and the more sinister forces prevailed for most of the century. Social consciousness in films gradually forced its way to a more prominent position, partly as a reaction by Hollywood's creative artists to the persecution of their peers in the early 1950s by Senator Joseph McCarthy who accused the industry of fostering Communists, and received the studio heads' fawning assurances that they would eradicate such people from the industry. Proponents of a more open and unblinkered medium hoped it would better protect the civil liberties of its public and its artists at the same time.

Cinema Obscura and the Democratic Dollar The title, 'Cinema Obscura and the Democratic Dollar' is drawn from my belief that cinema obscures as much as it reveals, and that economic pressure is the main factor determining what cinema reveals and what it obscures. Camera Obscura, one of the basic technologies that eventually became cinema, provides an analogy for the predicament of humankind in understanding the effects a century of dogmatic cinema has had on its collective conscious. The audience sits in a closed and darkened room (hence the term: camera = room, obscura = dark). Through a very small hole in the wall, a scene of the world beyond the room is naturally projected, inverted, onto the opposite

wall. Our knowledge of the world beyond our direct experience consists of what we see projected on screens, including the screen of our memory, from through the pinhole-sized aperture of the medium's dogmatic point of view. We are inside the box, trying to see the exterior of the box. When cinema developed as a commercial medium, the effect of the democratic dollar was to only allow cinematic works to dominate that space that fitted the world view of the audience segment most enfranchised by it's ticket-buying power, the white family unit, as perceived through the lens of commercial interest and government and religious doctrine. No brainwashing technique, persuasive doctrine, or force of arms could be more effective a tool for enabling social control.

**Effects of the Technology** It is the nature of cinematic technology, even, it's definition, that it creates such a verisimilitude of reality as to suspend disbelief to some degree in the audience. This is mainly because, to the eye of the viewer, the narrative space employed by cinema is apparently infinite. The vision fills, or almost fills, the viewer's entire field of vision, and the audio surrounds the audience, creating experiential virtuality. Such an effect is very powerful in its ability to coordinate sensory stimuli holistically, and therefore imbues upon its content a particular potency. The vision of cinema as an infinite narrative space is a myth held by the consumers, not the creators, of the medium's works. The process of creating a cinematic experience involves many competing factors that limit the outcomes within that space.

One of those limiting factors is the very vastness of possibilities the medium has the potential to explore, the consequent power causing powerful forces

to seek to control it, and allowing art to be consumed by artifice, and reality to be outranked by appearance. The nature of the medium also has inherent limitations not immediately obvious to the consumer ??“ the narrative space is crowded beyond the margins, like the wings of a stage, crammed with lights and anxious people. Those who perform in it are often huddled together to fit the frame, splitting takes of a momentary emotion over shoots taking days, holding positions for close-ups, getting coffee and a pedicure between instants of filmic time, and production time costs dictate urgency over precision and focus of intent. Of all the forces applied to it, the creativity of cinema is most strongly influenced by money.

The artist??™s imagination is curbed by the exorbitant costs of film production, and the need to make a product that fulfils the expectations of studio heads, producers, directors, and stars, and the demographic groups most likely to spend heavily at the box-office. Cinema??™s power to enlighten will continue to be obscured while the Democratic Dollar decrees it should be so. Race and Ethnicity in Film Depiction of race in cinema has a sorry history. The attitude most prevalent in Western Cinema has been ??? White is right, and the rest are heathens!??? Races other than whites were portrayed as less than truly human in many films, or ignored, or patronized. Some pivotal early films were pure racist propaganda, most notably D. W.

Griffith??™s ??? Birth of a Nation??? (1915), which was made far more powerful than it??™s script deserved, by the use of new effects and applications of the technology that were to become central to the language of film thereafter While such techniques as fades, close-ups, use of perspective, juxtaposition of symbols, tracking shots, reveals, dissolves and

wipes, would be used by the industry to make cinema more effective in communicating with its audience, they would also later be used by Leni Reifenstahl to glorify Hitler with her production virtuosity, and blame Jews for the economic woes of Germany. African-Americans, Islanders and Aborigines of various races, Arabs, Jews, Hindus, and Asians were the groups most mercilessly lampooned, patronised, defamed, insulted, demeaned and maligned in films “they were the sneaky, restless, natives, usually vicious and untrustworthy, or merely stupid and harmless. African-Americans and Asians were particularly victimised by the medium. When these cultures were not being portrayed as vicious villains as in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), they were generally depicted as ridiculous and humorous such as in *Little Black Sambo* (1935), the Rastus movies such as *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1911), and the smiling fawning Chinamen of westerns, to the weird Oriental in such performances as Mickey Rooney’s Mr. Moto in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), or Peter Sellers in *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980). Even the most benign efforts of film-makers in engaging race usually merely reinforced the view of the person of another race as an inferior, essentially happy in their role in society, and respectful of white superiority, as in the *Mammy* and *Uncle* roles depicted in *Gone With The Wind* (1935) and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903 – 1976).

Essentially all of the principal players were white actors in blackface or yellowface or redface, often with bizarre prosthetics or silly ethnic makeovers, underlining the fact that the cinema industry considered that non-whites were not actually capable of making films about themselves.

Film-makers of recent times have attempted to compensate for the mistakes of the past, and more production control has passed into the hands of individuals from a much broader race spectrum, but the imprint the past century of race portrayal on film has had on our social fabric is not easily washed away. Gender in the Cinema Since the earliest days of cinema, gender roles and sexual politics in most films have followed clearly defined parameters with a didactic precision. The dogma reads that men are inately aggressive and dominant and must battle to overcome their rivals, and a woman??™s resistance, while women are weak, flighty creatures, subject to extreme emotional outbursts and irrational actions, and incapable of sustaining themselves, physically or emotionally, without the support of a man. Most of the female characters who were not ??? the marrying type??? were ??? femme fatales??? who either repented, reformed, and married, or met with a bitter end, while the male roles were either heroes, villians, or cowards.

Politics and Propaganda in Cinema As early as 1898, film was used as propaganda to enlist support for the war effort in Spain, and in 1900, films were screened in Britain showing alleged Boer atrocities that had been staged by English actors. Both sides of the conflict in the First World War used propaganda films extensively, and between the wars and beyond, propaganda was used to extol the virtues or expound upon the evils of political ideologies such as capitalism and communism, dependent on the Government??™s point of view, and to convince voters to support domestic politicians. During World War I, Woodrow Wilson had formed the Committee on Public Information, while Britain, Australia, and most European countries

also used similar bodies to coordinate their propaganda efforts from that time on. Classic examples of blatant socio/political propaganda such as the anti-Marijuana ??? Reefer Madness???(1935), and the anti-Communist ??? Bolshevism on Trial???(1917) achieved much of their goals, but cinematic propaganda has had it??™s most profound effects in influencing the moral imperatives of films made primarily for entertainment. Violence in the cinema Violence in the cinema is as customary as popcorn.

Since the phantasmagorie in pre-cinema times, one of the main functions of the cinema was to allow people to come together and be afraid, be very afraid. Vampires, monsters, ghosts, demons, dragons, sharks, crocodiles, aliens, and worst of all, human maniacs, have scared the endorphins out of audiences to the present day. Murder, combat, and other forms of violence are major tools of cinematic expression, even in children??™s films and cartoons, the only apparent moral dimension being whether the violence is being conducted by ??? the goodies??? or ??? the baddies???, and is it too realistic or is it make believe. Cultural anthropologists and others have posited for decades that the preponderance of violence in cinema might create a more violent society. Other social commentators have argued that film has merely reflected the trend, not inspired it. Empirical research is extremely difficult since no readily-available control group exists that has not already been subjected to cinematic violence, or at least been in contact with those who have. Now and beyond In the modern world, the discourse in and about cinema is much broader than ever before.

Modern humanity has seen the tricks up the conjurers??™ sleeves, and while some are happy with the status quo, a vast number of people worldwide are

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working specifically to redress the imbalances and repair the damage by creating more diversity in films. Governments throughout the world have thrown huge amounts of money toward these goals in recent times, and not all of it has been wasted. The Australian film industry is a good example of how government funding has often lead to the success of good films with original, positive messages inclusive of culture and gender, that might not have been made without such assistance. But the results of the star system in inflating wages bills, and the threat of being consumed by the video industry, digital television, and the internet, mean that the democratic dollar will hold sway with the big players for a long time to come. Whether consumers continue to be fed a diet of dogma via the cinema will depend most on whether they continue to support such films at the box-office. Advances in technology mean that anyone can access the means of creating an effective film now for about as much as the cost of a new car.

This potential broad banding of the production base, and its flow on effect to the creative base, should have an extremely liberating effect on human culture??™s ability to express itself with minimum distortion through the medium of cinema.