

## **Cinema and Ideology**

Lent Term, 2016

17th January, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Cinema and Ideology Introduction

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There is an old story of a father at the dinner table, teaching his son different words that different languages have for cutlery. And he picked up the spoon and said, 'In German, this is called a Löffel, in French it is called cuiller, and in English we call it a spoon – which after all is what it is.' Our way of describing the world is the right, proper and natural way – and those other people out there can only see the world through the tinted spectacles of their own second-rate language.

Ideology is working most effectively when its victims are unaware of it – when we look down on the world out there because they are shaped by ideology, whereas we – the enlightened ones – are free from ideology. We just see the world as it is, without looking through any ideological lens. Those pitiable fools, whether they are the mindless medieval peasants who bought into Christianity, or contemporary mindless foreigners who buy into Islam, whereas here in the modern west – in a scientific age, we see simply see the world as it is! We call a spoon a spoon.

The trouble is, we cannot think without ideas – and we cannot have ideas without an ideology, some kind of mind set in which ideas form and take shape. Of course, there are multiple ways of describing this: we all have a worldview, or a mind-set, or a narrative or a belief system. Whatever we want to call it – our identity is formed by a thousand different cultural forces. But one of the easiest to isolate and examine is that cultural force of cinema. That is why this term, we look again at the power of cinema to shape our ideology.

I suppose the perfect example of modern cinema to illustrate what I am trying say, is offered by Hollywood's response to the terrorist attacks on New York on September 11th, 2001. Because in the words of Peter Griffin, '9-11 changed everything.'

Five years after those attacks, two films were released. Paul Greengrass's *United* 1993 and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Centre*. The first thing that strikes you is about both movies is that they set out to be deliberately anti-Hollywood. They both focus on the courage of ordinary people, no Hollywood superstars, no special effects, no grandiose heroic gestures. Just a gritty portrayal of ordinary people caught up in horrific extraordinary circumstances. The trouble is, that it is the very authenticity that reveals a disturbing ideology.

There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the story that both films tell is the story of an exception. *United* 1993 tells the story of the only one of the four hijacked airliners the one that – did not hit its target. *World Trade Centre* tells the story of two out of the twenty or so rescue workers – police and firemen – that were rescued from the rubble. The disaster is thereby turned into a triumph, especially in *United* 1993. It's worth comparing this for a moment, to the movie *Schindler's List* – where the story of a German saviour, raises disturbing questions about whether it really was impossible in a brutal totalitarian context for German civilians to address, for individual civilians to resist the mass extermination of Jewish people. In *United* 1993, however, the focus on the success of a mini-rebellion, shields us from asking the really pertinent questions.

So, for example, if you imagine both films, *United* 1993 and *World Trade Centre*, but with a slight change. What if, instead of *United* 1993 the movie was called *American 11*, one of the planes that did hit its target. Or imagine *World Trade Centre* as the story of two fire-fighters who did die trapped in the rubble after prolonged suffering. Without in any way justifying this mass crime – telling the story this way would confront us with the true horror of the situation.

It would compel us to think, to start asking serious questions about how such a thing could have happened. And this leads to a second feature.

Both films refrain from taking a political stance, and there is no engagement with external circumstances. And it works well – people just find themselves in a horrific situation and they have to make the best out of it. Both films just focus upon ordinary people who find themselves affected by the sudden, brutal intrusion of historical circumstance. We don't see any of the causal circumstances – just the effects. In World Trade Centre – all you see is the street level passing of an ominous shadow of what the viewers know to be a hijacked airliner. That apparent refusal to be political – is the most disturbing political statement of the movies.

So – it is easy to imagine the same narrative with the collapse of the building due instead to an earthquake. Or perhaps we could be more mischievous: what would happen if you took the same narrative from this film and situated it in Dresden in 1944 after Royal Air Force had obliterated the city. Or even more pernicious – what if this was the story of a high rise block in Southern Beirut after the last Lebanese conflict. If that was a movie – and it made no reference to who had bombed them - it would be instantly, instantly condemned as subtle pro-terrorist propaganda.

All of this means that the ideological and political message of these films, resides in their apparent refusal to have a political message. There are plenty of commentators and cultural critics who point out that this refusal to have a message betrays implicit support and agreement with your own government.

When disaster strikes, just be compliant and do your duty. It is what the philosopher Slavoj Zizek for instance, calls the Britney Spears theory of Action. Being a well known authority on US Foreign Policy, journalists asked Britney what she thought about the war in Iraq. And her response was simply, 'Well, I don't quite understand it but there comes a point where good citizens have to stop asking questions and trust their leaders.'

Of course, there is nothing wrong or evil about this. It is simply to show what Cinema, even when it refrains from making any explicit political and ideological claims, still situates us inside a narrative, an ideology, a way of viewing the world that simply seems right, natural, objective and free of ideological baggage. When an ideology grips a society and culture, it is virtually impossible to do anything about it – impossible for others to reshape the ideology, impossible for its victims to escape it. You won't convince them that a spoon is anything other than a spoon. Enter Jesus!

Jesus bursts onto the pages of history with one resounding message: Repent. And when we hear this word, we think of it as a religious word. We tend to think of it as a way of clearing our moral state in the shadow of a God who will judge us if we don't. But the real dynamic of repentance is not religious at all – certainly not in any modern sense. To repent, is simply to abandon one ideology in favour of another. And it is virtually impossible!

And yet from start to finish, the words and actions of Jesus are geared towards effecting repentance in a nation where ideology was as deeply rooted as it was possible to be! A particular set of beliefs about who Israel was, and was called to be – and what faithfulness to Jewish laws meant. Many of these beliefs were about political independence from Rome – from the subversive hymn of Mary that we call the Magnificat, to the failed rebellion of the terrorist we call Barabbas, countless Jews believed that the defeat of foreign leaders was a necessary part of Israel being who Israel was called to be. And growing movements in Jesus's day were railroading Israel into a headlong drive to rebellion against Rome – and in light of that mass movement, Jesus's message was to turn, to

abandon that ideology, to repent – to be reformed into the utter depths of one’s being. Repent was not merely a religious word – it was a desperate call to abandon a deeply treasured ideology.

You find it in the contemporary secular literature of first century Galilee. The historian Josephus, had been an officer in the Jewish resistance against Roman rule in the late 60s of the first century. And as he attempted to unite the Jewish factions into a cohesive fighting force – he went to one resistance leader and tried to convince him to abandon his plans for rebellion, and to put his trust in the strategy of Josephus. And in Greek, the words Josephus used to the rebel leader, were these: “Repent, and believe in me!”

In what he said and in what he did, and in ways that translate poorly through the centuries of Christendom, Jesus sought to effect repentance. Repentance in the sense of exploding one ideology and replacing it with another. That is why he told parables – they were ideological explosive devices that invited hearers to adopt a new worldview. That is why he performed what we today call miracles: they challenge a person’s belief about how the world works, who God is, and who they are.

Of course, if you call a spoon a spoon – then you don’t need to repent! This term will explore what ideological repentance looks like, both in the medium of cinema and in the life and ministry of Jesus.