

"GANDHI": FILM AS THEOLOGY

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As anticipated by many, the film "Gandhi" walked away with most of the Oscars including the awards for the best picture, the best director and the best actor at the recently concluded Motion Picture Academy Awards function in Los Angeles. Equally unsurprising was the fact that "Missing", also nominated for a wide category of awards including best picture, won only one Oscar, for "best screenplay adapted from another medium".

There is some logic to this. Both "Gandhi" and "Missing" deal with the effects of imperialism on the Third World - or at least this forms an essential backdrop to the two films. "Gandhi" is the story of one man who became the unchallenged leader of the Indian people's struggle to free themselves from British rule, while "Missing" is the story of a middle-aged American who goes to Chile in search of his son, missing in the aftermath of a US-backed coup in Chile which overthrew the legitimate government of Salvador Allende in September 1973.

It would be both unfair and over-simple to suggest that the American Motion Picture Academy preferred the anti-British film to the anti-US one. Unfair, because the awards should be seen as being less a result of conscious political conspiracy than a reflection of the dominant values prevailing in the system; and over-simple because the "anti-imperialism" of the films should be examined rather than taken for granted. It may be noted that while "Missing" drew angry denials from the White House and the US government went to the extent of circulating pamphlets denouncing the film as a misrepresentation of its role in Chile, "Gandhi" on the other hand has won acceptance and plaudits everywhere from India to the UK and from the US to South Africa.

Both films effectively employ the technique of deep focus, a device through which the background remains in focus along with the foreground where the main action is taking place. But while in "Gandhi" the essential movement is from wide angle to close-up (or from the general to the particular), the essential movement in "Missing" is from close-up to wide angle. In other words,

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while the focus in "Gandhi" zooms in on the very powerful and moving story of one man's life against a backdrop of the changing forces of history, the focus in "Missing" moves in the opposite direction from the tragedy of a single father in search of his son to the tragedy of an entire nation brutally crushed under fascist heel. As we follow the father in search of his son, we, like him, become eyewitness to the horrors being perpetrated by the Chilean junta. We walk through barricaded streets and demolished houses, past armed sentries who would rather shoot first than speak. We go from jail to jail, morgue to morgue, visiting ransacked homes the son may have taken shelter in, ending up in a giant stadium where thousands like him have been imprisoned, tortured and killed. Halfway through the search we know, like the father knows, that his son is dead, murdered like so many of the children of Chile. But the search does not stop. It is as if the search is no longer for one son but for an entire generation of murdered values.

In "Missing" the movement from close-up to wide angle is not merely mirrored by the movement from the personal to the political and historical, but can also be seen in the gradual widening of the father's ideological perspective. The audience, like the father, makes discovery after discovery that cannot be absorbed by the system of beliefs previously adhered to. The father starts out with typical middle-American values, believing in the essential justness of the "Free World", the evils of Communism, and the US government's commitment to freedom, democracy and the rights of the individual. By the time his search in Chile ends these ideals have been shattered, most shattering of all being the slow but certain discovery that the US is an active ally of the fascist forces unleashed upon Chile.

The depiction of this ideological voyage must be recognised as director Costa Gavras' real triumph. Right from the astute casting of that archetypal middle-American Jack Lemmon (a younger Henry Fonda would have been equally appropriate) as the father, to the manner in which the searching father makes each of his painful discoveries, not wanting to believe his country wrong, not wanting to have his value system smashed but having no choice but to probe on, the filial bond proving stronger than patriotism. Gavras reveals an astonishing grasp of the American emotional and ideological make up. As proof upon proof piles up of US connivance in the operations to cover up the extent of the atrocities committed by Pinochet's fascist regime, the father, and the audience, is led to examine a further question. Why are the Americans involved in this cover-up at all? There is only one answer and as the father realises that the Americans are behind the coup itself and therefore directly or indirectly responsible for the murder of his son, the journey is complete and the search can stop. The old ideals are seen to be bankrupt and diabolical. The ideals of a newer generation of Americans - those represented by the son who supported the left and democratic aspirations of Allende's Chile - have to be murdered in order for the old ones to survive. But the murder is in vain for the father, who once so wholeheartedly believed in the old values, now affirms those held

by his murdered son. The anger and determination in his eyes is the anger of the common man pitted against the forces of monopoly capital and imperialism. It is this anger and determination that is the affirmation, the single, most powerful emotion with which the audience leaves the theatre to face the world, and perhaps to change it.

Anger is far from being the overwhelming emotion at the end of "Gandhi". Wistful tragedy, awe, a degree of helplessness, perhaps some soul-searching - these are the feelings we are left with. Perhaps I am being unfair. Being already familiar with the life of Gandhi I did not feel more moved by the film than I had by what I had already read by and about Gandhi and about the exhilarating times in which he lived. To those unfamiliar with this body of work, or to those who have for ideological reasons chosen to belittle and ignore it, perhaps the film "Gandhi" does come as something of a revelation. It is reported that in the US a woman in the Navy after seeing "Gandhi" refused to wear her official uniform and further subjugate herself to an authority for whom she had no moral respect. She was imprisoned and kept in solitary confinement for over a month but did not change her resolve.

Whereas it may be argued that to those unfamiliar with the existing legend, "Gandhi" adds a valuable dimension in that every affirmation of the human spirit increases one's moral courage to fight injustice, it is just as likely that to those already moved by their knowledge of Gandhi, the film is an acute disappointment for it analyses nothing, reveals nothing and in selecting certain wellknown incidents and issues for wide dissemination, it buries a whole body of pertinent and provocative information. As someone moved at an early age by the life of Gandhi I was always perplexed by his attempts to harmonise the explicitly oppressive existing class forces in India. Could he not see that never in a thousand years could a big landlord and a landless Harijan live together in harmony without a change in their material relationship? Even if such a harmony could be brought about would it not be an oppressive one like the harmony between British rulers and their Indian subjects in areas where freedom consciousness had not yet penetrated?

It is perhaps to avoid this very question that Attenborough has left out one of the most fascinating and significant ideological debates of the times - the dialogue which took place between Gandhi and B R Ambedkar. Whereas Gandhi had been content to change the nomenclature of these oppressed sections - from "untouchables" to Harijans - hoping thereby to overcome the stigma they bore, Ambedkar advocated class struggle to change their condition.

Almost as if he does not have faith that the real Gandhi can maintain undiminished stature without his help, Attenborough throughout his film chooses the path of least resistance, avoiding all controversy. Personalities in the independence struggle who achieved heroic proportions in their own right but whose heroism did not reflect upon or from Gandhi himself are written out of the script. Hence there is no room for a scene in which Gandhi visits Bhagat Singh

in prison where he awaits execution at the hands of the British. Gandhi had pleaded with Bhagat Singh to recant his belief in armed struggle or at least to draft a compromise letter that would stay his execution. Bhagat Singh refused and was hanged. For Gandhi it had been a moment of acute anguish, perhaps even a moment of doubt for in Bhagat Singh he had encountered a man of equal integrity and principle as himself.

There is no room in the script for Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army which set out to oppose the British empire militarily; nor is there room for the entire 1942 Quit India movement, led as it was by socialists who had deviated from Gandhi's non-violent path. It may be uncharitable to suggest that a further element of controversy was thus avoided by not depicting the roles of Jaya Prakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and other leaders of the 1942 movement many of whom later opposed the Congress leadership and the ruling party of today.

The only movement of human weakness Gandhi is allowed is the scene in which he throws Kasturba out of his house for not agreeing to clean her toilet. Even here there are two conflicting principles and Gandhi opts for one of them and is repentful for breaking the other - the love and respect for his wife. The essentially ambivalent and patriarchic approach he had towards Kasturba and, by extension, towards all women is not an issue in the film.

Right from the first sequence in South Africa where it is never questioned or explained as to why Gandhi did not fight equally for the rights of black Africans as he did for brown Indians (indeed hardly a single black face can be seen in the frame even though we are meant to be in Africa), no element of doubt or potential criticism is allowed to creep in. What unfolds is an epic drama of one man's heroic attempt to save the world from itself by preaching the gospel of turning the other cheek - an attempt that ends in martyrdom. The parallel with Christ is unmistakable. Small wonder then the eight Oscars and the adulation in the Christian West. We should perhaps be grateful that no statements like "Gandhi dies so that we may live" have yet been heard and no posters and T-shirts which proclaim "Gandhi Saves!" have yet been spotted.

As the audience leaves the theatre (unlike in "Missing") the finger does not point at any enemy in particular, but to the tragedy of the human condition. British imperialism shown at its dastardly worst during the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh is ultimately more of a spectator than an active participant in the unfolding tragedy of events. In the bloody aftermath of partition, from the bloody and mutual butchery of Hindus and Muslims with not an Englishman in sight, to the final assassination of Gandhi at the hands of a fanatic Hindu, we have long forgotten Jallianwalla. Nowhere are we shown the desperate alarm with which the British had always viewed Hindu-Muslim unity during the active freedom struggle. Nowhere do we witness the well-documented incidents of their divide-and-rule policy which culminated in the inevitability of Partition. Nowhere do we see satyagrahis crushed to death under the wheels of British

locomotives or the torture of political prisoners by British officers. Even the condemnation of the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre stops short of indicting the whole system focusing instead on the misdeeds of a single officer, General Dyer. Having witnessed the massacre in vivid detail we are next shown General Dyer facing a commission of inquiry. We leave this scene with the unmistakable feeling that British justice will prevail and the general will be brought to book for his monstrous crimes. We are not told what really happened. General Dyer was exonerated (the Hunter Commission merely found that he had been "unduly severe") and Parliament voted to give him a handsome pension in reward for his services to the Empire.

Everywhere British judges, officers and administrators are shown to be reluctantly carrying on their duty to King and country. This was certainly true of some of them but it is far from being the entire truth, and it hides its uglier counterpart - the fact that no Empire worth its name can rule another nation, especially one whose people aspire to freedom, without resort to cruelty, injustice, exploitation and terror.

Attenborough has repeatedly maintained that his film is not a history and it is true that he appears more interested in the metaphor than in the reality of Gandhi. In this respect just as films like "The Ten Commandments" or "King of Kings" have some historical basis but are essentially religious versions of the lives of Moses and Christ, "Gandhi" may be seen as a theological version of the apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi. It is not as though this version has no value, for in those areas of the world where the prospect of a nuclear holocaust looms large and wild consumerism flourishes, the power and simplicity of Gandhi's message is a welcome shot in the arm for activists fighting the system. Perhaps had the film been released six months earlier, there may have been more protests in UK against the Falklands War by people who are convinced that "an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind".

But there is a crucial difference between "Gandhi" and "The Ten Commandments". The events described in "Gandhi" are part of recent history; many eyewitnesses to these events are still alive and documentary film footage to corroborate them also exist. Indeed, Attenborough has clearly taken pains to ensure that he is not caught in factual inaccuracies (although occasionally a lapse does occur such as in the depiction of the Calcutta riots as having happened after Partition rather than before). The existing documentary footage of Gandhi meticulously collected by Vithalbhai Jhaveri has been carefully studied and a number of key scenes in "Gandhi" (such as the Dandi March) have been shot from the same angle and with the same framing as the documentary footage. Those familiar with this footage - and many Indians are, having seen it incorporated in numerous Films Division documentaries - experience an immediate feeling of *deja vu* enhancing the "truth claim" of the film "Gandhi".

It is this implicit "truth claim" that forces us to evaluate "Gandhi" historically rather than as a mere metaphor of one man's struggle for truth and justice. Like it or not (and I suspect Attenborough himself rather likes it) Attenborough's "Gandhi" is pop history which, because of the speed and widespread nature of its dissemination, is replacing the real thing. The complexities of the Indian freedom struggle, the philosophical and ideological debates between the Gandhians, the Marxists and others endeavouring for this freedom, the strengths and pitfalls of each approach and its practice - all this is lost as we zoom in from a wide angle perspective on history to an idealised giant close-up of a man who was already a giant before the cameras started zooming in.

It is perhaps this lack of context, the lack of a sense of history that allowed Attenborough to accept an invitation to attend a whites-only premiere of "Gandhi" in South Africa. The fact that public pressure forced him to reconsider his decision should not cloud the fact that such an act was considered. Nor should it stop us from asking as to why the South African regime finds the film "Gandhi" so acceptable as to allow it to open in South Africa at all.

There are two possible explanations. One is that because Gandhi stood primarily for Indians and not for blacks, the film may strengthen the separate identity of the Indian Community in South Africa and therefore further facilitate the racist regime's policy of dividing the non-whites. The second is that after many years of fruitless non-violent protests, the South African resistance movement in the form of the ANC (African National Congress) and the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) have taken to armed struggle as the only means of liberation. The racist regime's decision to show "Gandhi" both to whites and blacks (albeit separately) may well be intended to promote "non-violence" at this historic context.