

14 Social conscience movies

Thought-provoking and character-forming themes from the movies

In my growing up days, without a TV service in my neck of the woods, much time was spent in cinemas because they were an important window on the world outside. Indeed, some might even recall the accusation of having a misspent youth from being a frequent cinema patron. Regardless, to the young enquiring mind, some of the better-made motion pictures¹² posed both speculative and practical questions about one's world.

I nominate three motion pictures which were influential in my character-building:



Released in 1966 (first watched in 1968) Director: Fred Zimmerman
Winner of 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture

Man For All Seasons. This motion picture deals with the final years (1529 - 1535) of Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor of England (played by Paul Scofield who won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for this film).

Sir Thomas grapples with his conscience and the authority of his king, Henry VIII. The king (played by Robert Shaw) wanted him to sanction the annulment of his marriage

to his then Queen (Catherine of Aragon) so that he can marry Anne Boleyn, and for Sir Thomas to take an Oath of Supremacy acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church of England (this was the period in which the English church broke away from Papal Rome).

¹² Motion pictures are so called because 24 pictures (known as frames) per second are shown in continuous sequence to give an optical effect of motion (the human eye cannot discern individual pictures at that frame rate). Motion pictures are also known as moving pictures and hence the short form term "movies" arose. Today high definition motion pictures (such as IMAX) display at much higher frame rates. Even YouTube clips are now available at 60 frames per second. I learnt how to operate 16 mm motion picture projectors from my father at a very young age and would show news reels and movies at home and other places, including the time I went around with my Dad to show a NASA movie of the first moon landing to various schools. You can think of 16 mm film projectors as the video players of their day. Films could be loaned for free from the British Council or US Council in Kuching.

Sir Thomas' conscience and Catholic faith did not allow him to recognise Henry VIII's authority¹² above that of the Pope in Rome. For this, Sir Thomas was convicted of treason and was sentenced to be beheaded (a common fate of those who crossed Henry VIII). Here, the moral dilemma is one of having to choose between what one's conscience guides us to do, and what an authority has decided. In my career, I have stood at this point before many a bridge - only that in all instances it did not involve regal authority but rather that of clowns in normal attire (*sans* their circus clown costumes).



Sir Thomas More by Holbein the Younger (1527)

Sir Thomas is venerated as a Catholic martyr and was canonized a saint in 1935 by Pope Pius XI. If you have ever used the word "utopia" then you may know that it was a word coined by Sir Thomas in his book of the same name in which he described the utopian political system of an imaginary island state. In



1975, without prior design and almost by accident, I entered Saint Thomas More College, a residential hall at the University of Western Australia in Perth. That was the start of a three-year enriching stay at the college. I almost returned to STMC in 1981 as a Residential Tutor but chose Currie Hall next door instead because the latter offered a double room while STMC only had

single rooms for Tutors. At the conclusion of the end of year dinner at Currie Hall in 1981, in an act of appreciation/admiration (or so they say), a group of first years to whom I had tutored, carried me all the way from the Hall, via the Stirling Highway underpass to throw me into the Reflecting Pool beside Winthrop Hall.



The Reflecting Pool, UWA

¹²The formal title of the monarchs of England (and later the UK) is '[name], by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of His/Her other Realms and Territories, King/Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith'.

The title 'Defender of the Faith' was conferred upon Henry VIII by Pope Leo X in 1521 in recognition of Henry's book *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (Defence of the Seven Sacraments) which ironically, defended the sacramental nature of marriage and the SUPREMACY of the Pope. 'The Faith' in the title refers to the Roman Catholic faith and not the Church of England faith. Such conundrums are not restricted to the past ages. They exist in today's world especially in bureaucracies.



Released 1970 Director Martin Ritt

The Molly Maguires. In the coalfields of Pennsylvania in the 1870s, a secret society of mainly Irish-American and Irish-immigrant coalminers organized against mine owners and the railroad company for better working conditions and pay. This secret society was known as the Molly Maguires although its existence due to secrecy, is difficult to confirm.

The motion picture brings to my mind issues regarding what the law provides (to mine owners), what is just (decent work for decent pay for the miners), and the morality of informing/treachery.

The Molly Maguires (lead by Sean Connery playing Jack Kehoe) were waging a war of resistance against the mine owners for better working conditions by using sabotage and even murder. The mine owners themselves were using brutal tactics to make the miners subservient.

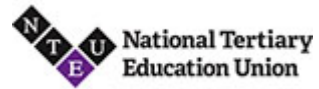
The mine owners wanted to eradicate the Mollies and hired a Pinkerton detective (Richard Harris) to infiltrate the group. This detective gained the reluctant trust of the Mollies but in the end he provided evidence of the Mollies activities which resulted in many of them being sentenced to death.

Do people such as wealthy mine owners have the right to impose their will on their workers with no regard for a decent wage for decent work? Is application of



the full weight of the law to crush dissent morally acceptable (think of recent protests for different causes in the US, and for democratic norms in Hong Kong)? For the Mollies do the ends justify the means? For the Pinkerton detective, is informing on your colleagues especially in a matter for which the penalty could be death, morally acceptable? Informants are generally not tolerated in society but they have a place because they are useful to those in authority to control and manage. Clandestine societies around the world in different cultures dish out cold retribution to informants in the form of death. Even in school culture, sneaks (low level, juvenile informants) are ostracized. "Judas" is a term which is used for betrayers and such import it does have because the betrayed was the Christ. In my time, I have known too many who profess to be friends to people only to reveal their true colours later by their treachery. My guess is that these people are propelled by some flaw in their character and by the lure of reward from being the tools of authority. Toilet brushes and rectal thermometers are also tools.

My family has had an association with the union movement. My father Joseph Aloysius was Vice President of the Sarawak Government Asian Officers Union in the mid-60s. He was "rewarded" by the government by his being "cold stored" at an outpost away from his young family (I was only ten at the time). Later, the union was dissolved by government action. As far as I know, there has been no Sarawak union representation for government officers since that time. Years later in the mid-1990s, I became the President of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) of the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur campus. The NTEU is the nationwide union in Australia which represents the rights of university academics. I had an awakening to unionism early in life even though my later involvement was not long-lasting. I did not renew my office with the NTEU after I became disillusioned with the stance taken by the union to fight for wage increments no matter the circumstances. I had counselled that such constant pushes despite budget cuts will only result in one thing: redundancies amongst our members as the universities struggled to pay their staff. This was indeed the outcome although those who remained did benefit from higher wages. I don't think that the union did every member a favour in those days.



I also remember this movie for its cinematography by James Wong Howe. He was able to



James Wong Howe (next to movie camera) on the set of "The Molly Maguires"

convey the grim and stark reality of the hard conditions in the mining town and mines by the choice of colour palette. The director, Martin Ritt wanted to make the film in Black and White but the studio did not give its approval. Wong was able to help give a B&W effect by the strong use of greys and a muted palette to convey a gritty atmosphere. I was also intrigued by evidence of a Chinese person (he was born in Guandong, China) making good in Hollywood (he won two Academy awards

and eight nominations for his cinematography).



Released: 1970 Director: Arthur Penn

Little Big Man. I still, feel guilty for all the times in my younger days when I cheered upon seeing the US cavalry charging into a movie scene to save some pioneer folk, the virtue of a damsel in distress, or usually the hero of the film, from Red Indians. I blame my "brainwashing" on simplistic¹³ Hollywood movies which reduced a complex history of the North American west and the clash of cultures, to white and red; right and

wrong. The sad truth is of a First Nation and its peoples who were poorly treated and robbed of their land. I never saw the American Red Indian and their culture in the same way again after watching the film "Little Big Man".

This motion picture relates the fantastical (and fictional) story of Jack Crabb (played by Dustin Hoffman), who at 121 years of age when the film opens, was the oldest man in the world. Jack and his sister were raised by the Cheyenne tribe after his parents were killed by the Pawnee. Later, he was named Little Big Man because of his lack of height and manifest bravery when he saved his tormentor Younger Bear from the Pawnees. Portending a part of the premise of "Forrest Gump" (released in 1994), Jack recounts contemporaneous encounters with Wild Bill Hickok and General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Through Jack's eyes we are given a sympathetic view of the American Red Indian in a way never seen before in movies. This is a revisionist Western movie. A particularly moving scene was the depiction of the Battle (read that as massacre) of Washita River where Jack's wife and child were killed by the US 7th Cavalry. "Little Big Man" is one of the better movies I have watched but also one which I do not re-visit much because of some scenes which I wish to avoid going through again.

¹³ Early cowboy movies telegraphed who you cheer and who you boo. The good guys wore white hats and the baddies wore black hats. This gave rise to the terms "white hats" and "black hats" in reference to ethical (white) and malicious (black) cyberhackers in the computer age.

The depiction of cowboys or US soldiers in this instance as anything but good in a US movie was sobering and mindset changing. But it made it easier to believe the real story behind the 1968 My Lai massacre in South Vietnam where 504 women, children and old men were slaughtered by US army soldiers (182 women [17 of them pregnant] and 172 children [65 of them infants]). All this carnage was produced by 100+ men of Charlie Company of the 11th Infantry Brigade of the Americal Division).



Massacre at Washita River: Scene from "Little Big Man"



Massacre at My Lai

Indeed, "Little Big Man" was an anti-establishment film made at a time when protest against the US conduct of the Vietnam war by its own concerned citizenry was peaking.

Years later, completely by random chance, I became a Father-in-Law to someone who escaped in a boat as a 1-year old from South Vietnam after that country's fall to the forces of General Võ Nguyên Giáp from Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnam. Her family spent some years in a refugee camp in Malaysia after which they were accepted into Australia. Now, my three fine grandsons are part Vietnamese by ethnicity.