

For Hollywood, 'Vice' Is Remarkably Astute About Politics

Adam McKay's movie may be flawed, but it's still must-see for his depiction of how Cheney amassed power by exploiting Watergate, an inexperienced president and 9/11, writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

Special to Consortium News



In 2015, director Adam McKay did something unusual in Hollywood. He made a good film out of a good book. In fact, one could argue that McKay's movie "The Big Short" is even better than Michael Lewis' book. It is funnier, has a faster pace and is much more innovative stylistically.

McKay has now done something even more unusual for Hollywood. He has made a good film about an unattractive and unlikeable character, former Vice-President Dick Cheney. Appropriately, the film is called "Vice." I am going to say some critical things about "Vice." But let me start by recommending that everyone who reads this website see this film. It's not often that Hollywood produces a film this honest, ambitious and intelligent about the contemporary American political scene.

Early in his life, Cheney flunked out of Yale and was tagged with two DUI's. His wife Lynne—who later became a prolific author—helped straighten him out and put him on a path toward a political career. From that point on, McKay, who also wrote the script, frames Cheney with the following

epigraph, which is written across the screen at one point:

“Beware the quiet man. For while others speak, he watched. And while others act, he plans. And when they finally rest, he strikes.”

The warning applies to three key sections covered by the film.

Watergate Power Vacuum

During the Watergate scandal, Cheney believed that any Republican not touched by the scandal should be valued like gold. So he and Donald Rumsfeld schemed to fill a power vacuum in the Gerald Ford White House. In order to compensate for the laws sapping executive power after Watergate, he met with a young up-and-coming lawyer named Antonin Scalia. The future U.S. Supreme Court justice supplied Cheney with the unified executive theory, a doctrine Scalia drew from article two of the U.S. Constitution that vests “executive power” in the president. Cheney tried to utilize this doctrine as chief of staff under Ford.

George W's Search for VP

The dangerous quiet man reappears during the presidential campaign of George W. Bush. As the film depicts, due to an agreement he'd made with his wife, Cheney was only supposed to lead Bush's search for a vice president. But sensing that W was tentative and unsure of himself on the national stage of foreign policy, Cheney made an agreement with George W. that would make him the most powerful vice-president in history. Through this pact, Cheney achieved something that

Lyndon Johnson had tried for but failed to attain with John Kennedy: a co-presidency. He set up offices for himself at both the House of Representatives and the Senate. He also had virtual offices at the CIA and the State Department.

Post 9/11

These arrangements put him in a propitious position during the 9/11 attacks. Cheney advised President Bush to stay in the air for safety purposes while he—without clearance from Bush—issued a shoot-down order to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. And that was just the beginning of the Cheney domination of the War on Terror.

As McKay shows in the film, it was Cheney who almost unilaterally chose the suspects that he wanted the CIA to pick up and deport for rendition purposes to foreign black sites, or secret prisons. It was Cheney, aided by neoconservative lawyer David Addington and State Department analyst Doug Feith, who constructed the “stove piping” of intelligence in order to avoid any rigorous review of sources and methods for intelligence reports.

Like the Plan B neocons of the 1970s, who overrode the CIA's estimates of the Soviet military threat, Cheney descended into the spy agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and rode herd on its officers and analysts. The vice-president demanded access to *all* the information, no matter how dubious the source or how much duress had been applied in attaining it. It was this imperiousness that allowed disinformation by the likes of German-born informer Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, also known by his CIA moniker of Curveball, to lay the false foundations for the invasion of

Iraq.

And Cheney made sure that as much duress as possible was applied to the suspects he had chosen. Through Addington, Cheney recruited [John Yoo](#), a Yale-educated lawyer at work in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel. Yoo agreed with Scalia's unitary executive theory. He wrote legal memoranda that stated that, in the War on Terror, America could discard the [Geneva Convention's](#) guidelines on the treatment of prisoners. Yoo's memos infamously stated that the CIA should only ban physical pain equivalent to organ failure or death. It was Yoo's almost complete denial of international law that set America on the path to [Abu Ghraib](#), the Iraq prison where the CIA and U.S. Army infamously oversaw the extreme abuse and torture of prisoners.

Still Incomplete

It is remarkable that McKay managed to get all this information about Cheney into a film that runs only slightly over two hours.

But the trail of perfidy is incomplete. For example, [as chronicled by the late Bob Parry](#), it was Cheney who led the counter attack to the Iran/Contra affair from Congress. Cheney was at a meeting at the home of Evan Thomas where it was suggested that National Security Advisor John Poindexter commit perjury to protect President Reagan.

But all of the above tells you little about the experience of watching the film. As with "The Big Short," the exceptional thing about "Vice" is McKay's cinematic approach. Once again, he uses a battery of visual devices

that are unprecedented in contemporary film. About halfway through the film, for instance, before Cheney becomes vice president, the film appears to reach an abrupt ending. The credits roll, with cornily cheerful music on the soundtrack. Meaning we all would have been better off if Cheney had not become co-president.

In "Vice," however, such clever innovations don't necessarily help the overall storyline. "The Big Short" was about an event, namely the economic meltdown of 2007-08. "Vice" is about a man's life and career.

Had McKay lessened, rather than increased, his visual inventiveness he might have done a better job explaining how Cheney ended up as a character worthy of Shakespeare's treacherous Iago. (A spoofy bedroom scene written and performed in Shakespeare's iambic pentameter—which happens—does not solve the riddle of character explication.) A bit more straightforward story telling would have also given the actors—Christian Bale as Cheney and Amy Adams as his wife—more to work with. They are quite adequate here, but because of McKay's attention to other matters, neither can be really good.

None of this makes me any less enthusiastic about the film or about McKay. How can someone not admire a millionaire film director who identifies himself as a social democrat? And makes films like this? More power to him.

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‘Hostiles’ and Hollywood’s Untold Story

Hollywood’s recent attempt to depict Frontier life captures the reality of “hostiles” shooting various weapons at one another, but the real history is more interesting, Jada Thacker explains in this essay.

By Jada Thacker

A theatrical poster for the recent American Western movie “Hostiles” depicts its principal characters – a Frontier widow, a hardboiled Indian fighter, and an Indian chief – with a helpful blurb stating the story’s theme with the subtlety of a striking rattlesnake: “We are all hostiles.”

Some critics think the movie somehow ought to have been a different one – that it should have included a bit more of this, or a bit less of that...whatever. Maybe they have a point. Though it hardly seems fair to ding “Hostiles” for being an imperfect example of the ideal Frontier fantasy.

But it is fair to criticize a movie for being a perfect example of a movie genre that consistently ignores the most essential themes of the American Frontier. “Hostiles” succeeds brilliantly as the latest addition to a very long list of movies that focus laser-like attention on hostile Frontier characters, rather than on the consequences of Frontier hostility.

The American Frontier was not, as Hollywood formerly portrayed it, merely a canvas background prop for a violent soap box drama starring Cowboys & Indians – or, as more recently re-imagined, an ethnic melodrama featuring white Bad Guys versus Noble Indian resistance.

Nor can the American Frontier be considered a particularly hostile place without

expunging from history the slaughter-grounds of Cannae, Verdun, Stalingrad, or even America's own Gettysburg – each of which produced more bloated corpses than any number of Wild Wests. In an encyclopedia of human violence, the massacres at the Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee would be relegated to a footnote.

Yet, the significance of the American Frontier endures. William Faulkner was not referring to the Frontier experience when he said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," but he was right.

Unacknowledged by the silver screen, contemporary America remains as hostile as it ever was to the Frontier dwellers of tee-pees, log cabins, wigwams, or army outposts. Every American today who rages at corrupt and incompetent government, who counts out their pennies for rent or mortgage, or who despairs of the growth-driven, mechanized rape of the American landscape can thank the American Frontier experience for their trouble.

Frontier Anarchy

No government existed in North America at the time of European contact. The societies that pre-existed there lived in a condition of anarchy.

Although the term "anarchy" is used casually to denote a condition of chaos, it literally refers only to a society without government (from the Greek: *a* [without] + *archy* [rulers]). Anarchy is the *voluntary* self-organization of people without the use of authoritative force. Thus, anarchy does not denote an absence of social order, but only the absence of a *forcible* social order.

Anarchy is not an exception to human organization, but the rule – if we can forgive the pun. All non-governmental organizations are anarchic, voluntary associations: sports teams, business entities, civic groups, church congregations, trade unions, symphony orchestras, and marriages included. American Indian societies had thrived just so without authoritative force for some 20,000 years before Europeans appeared to set things straight.

Immediately upon European arrival, the Frontier materialized as a lethal No Man's Land where the alien hierarchical order of government clashed catastrophically with indigenous anarchy. At issue was not just the survival of hostile individuals, but the survival of fundamentally hostile political cultures.

Unlike anarchy, government has nothing to do with the voluntary self-organization of society. Nobody ever volunteers to be arrested, pay fines, go to jail, or be executed – or pay the taxes necessary for doing so to others. And no such elements of coercion existed in North America prior to the importation of European authoritarianism. (When so-called "democratic government" later

purported to banish British tyranny, it made certain to keep prisons and capital punishment intact.)

Moviegoers, no less than movie-makers and history textbooks, blithely assume that Indian leaders wielded the same authority as did government officials in white society. Not so. Indians had no officials because they had no offices. Indian chiefs led by example and inspiration only; they possessed no more coercive ability than a scoutmaster or a captain of a football team.

In any event, Indians had no written laws that begged enforcement. Anarchic political culture does not depend on the enforcement of rules and regulations, but upon free consent to them. A Wikipedia article summarizes the Abenaki people's consensual customs:

"Group decision-making was done by a consensus method. The idea is that every group (family, band, tribe, etc.) must have equal say, so each group would elect a spokesperson. Each smaller group would send the decision of the group to an impartial facilitator.

"If there was a disagreement, the facilitator would tell the groups to discuss again. In addition to the debates, there was a goal of total understanding for all members. If there was not total understanding, the debate would stop until there was understanding.

"When the tribal members debate issues, they consider the Three Truths: Peace: Is this preserved? Righteousness: Is it moral? Power: Does it preserve the integrity of the group?

"These truths guide all group deliberations, and the goal is to reach a consensus. If there is no consensus for change, they agree to keep the status quo."

Not all Indian self-organization was this formal, but it all was intensely democratic. The hierarchical European political culture which ruled by indelible law, dictated by police and military forces and financed by forcible taxation, decidedly was not.

The collision of anarchy and government in America was not a melodramatic struggle between "good" and "evil." But it did involve a spiritual choice – between a circle and a pyramid.

The Indian way was represented by a circle or hoop, symbolized physically by the Puebloan people's *kiva*, a circular, ceremonial meeting place. The Lakota and other tribes conceived of universal order as a hoop. The symbolic meaning is one of balance and equality, with each member of society located equidistant from a

common core. Indian leaders did not occupy the position of “top dog” or “king of the hill” but as central mediators among equals.

In contrast, all civilizations – including the white civilization that hovered in the wings of the Frontier stage – are pyramidal structures. In pyramidal culture, authority resides at the apex and flows only downward, forcibly if necessary. While pyramidal culture was not unique to the colonizing European culture of the day – Ancient Egyptians and Aztecs expressed their pyramidal culture in stone, just as current organization charts express our pyramids on paper – it was utterly foreign to the Indian consciousness.

So-called “Indian Nations” were conceptual fallacies that did not in fact exist. Even the famous Iroquois League, or Haudenosaunee, was not an example of “Indian government” and certainly not of pyramidal structure. It was a decentralized, voluntary confederacy – a hooplike “League of Peace” (ca.1140 – 1784) of its six constituent tribes – not a hierarchical command-and-control structure that dominated Indian society.

Frontier Economics

Lest the Right-Libertarians among us applaud too loudly the absence of Big Government (or any government) in Indian society, the central conflict between white and red men (a term Indians used to describe themselves) was a contest between individualistic vs. collective property rights.

To be clear, Indians had a keen sense of territorial sovereignty. But this did not include personal property ownership, which was both unknown and an anathema to the Indian way. T.R Fehrenbach, a notable commentator on Frontier culture and author of the encyclopedic *Comanches: The History of a People*, put it simply:

“Hypocrisy was perhaps inevitable in a people [whites] who convinced themselves that they were creating something new in the New World, while actually carrying out the most primordial form of conquest.”

But then he adds:

“Amerindians resisted all sincere imitation of their conquerors. Broken warriors refused to become economic men, to accept the concept of private property or the discipline of incessant labor.”

Quite frankly, the Comanche people (the *Nermernuh*) of whom Fehrenbach spoke were without doubt the most rapacious Indians that whites ever encountered. (Other Indians were intimidated by them, too, and for good reason, a point “Hostiles” duly observes.) Alongside hunting buffalo, raiding and stealing constituted the *raison d’etre* of their predatory society.

In fact, hostility and theft generally characterized Indian between-group behavior both before and after European arrival; they did not need the presence of whites to justify their elevation of lethal larceny to an art form. By the same token, European pioneers needed no particular excuse to exterminate Indians, or each another, while committing Grand Theft Continent.

Ironically, armed robbery was the primary economic activity whites and Indians shared in common. "Making a killing" by "hostile takeovers" of others' property is not a new pony trick invented by corporate raiders.

But the ruthless exploitation of one's own kinsmen and their resources is something else. This was as unthinkable to tribal peoples as it was premeditated by the bringers of civilization. The privatization of shared resources proved to be the profound and irreconcilable issue that separated the two peoples' concepts of economic justice.

Even in abject defeat, Indians never shared the whites' notion that the land's resources could, or should, be monopolized as private property. Since Indians perceived themselves essentially as children of the Earth, private ownership of land made no more sense to them than a child claiming to own its parents.

Unlike whites, the Indian concept of territory was communal. What they possessed in common they defended in common. Their view of communal property rights flowed naturally from their egalitarian culture, which did not tolerate landlords or economic class distinctions.

Within any Indian band, no privileged economic class could exist simply because there was no hierarchical power structure to sustain one. Since no Indian had the power to control the food supply of another, they were liberated at birth from the private monopolization of the "means of production." Possession of property was not justified by individual privilege but was their common birthright.

Thus, Indian society was devoid of both private property and the State. This is inconvenient news for today's Marxists and Right-Libertarians, alike.

Indian society repudiated the Right-Libertarian (anarcho-capitalist) notion that individual liberty requires the sanctity of private property ownership. No humans have exercised more individual liberty, nor owned less private property, than American Indians. Ownership of private property – which cannot and does not exist in the absence of government-sanctioned privilege – would not have conferred any liberty to Indians they did not already possess.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, Indian society also belied the Marxian notion that economics is determined to evolve from capitalism, through

socialism, to the ideal of communism. In reality, American Indians had beat Marx to the punchline 20,000 years before he set pen to paper.

In modern parlance, Indians were communists long before communism was cool. Contemporary Indians may disavow Marx as an industrial materialist with no respect for their spiritual way; that doesn't mean their people were not original communists, but only that they are not Marxists.

Marx was the latecomer – and then he got it all backwards. The American Frontier experience graphically demonstrated that humanity was not advancing toward a stateless, economic Utopia but was rooting out and laying waste to prehistoric communism wherever it still persisted.

All “isms” aside, reality reveals that whoever exercises effective ownership of a place rules it for their benefit. First and foremost, the Frontier was a place of a hostile and involuntary transfer of economic property from communal Indian ownership into the itchy palms of the private white owners who usually stood at the apex of an authoritarian pyramid.

Frontier Ecology

Pre-contact Indians lived in Stone Age societies. They possessed no metal implements, and the highest level of tool technology available to them employed only stone, bone, and clay.

In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins famously referred to Stone Age people as the “original affluent society” – not because they possessed much material wealth, but rather because they required so little and because their modest needs were so readily fulfilled when compared to the far greater requirements of us Moderns.

On the other hand, we would be mistaken to believe Indians were conscious “environmentalists.” Like any society, theirs took from nature what was needed for survival. Stone Age people had no reason to conserve that which was beyond their power to despoil.

As Sahlins “original affluence” implies, the trick to achieving environmental sustainability does not lie in *not taking* what is needed, but in *not needing to take* more than the environment can afford. “What the environment can afford” is known in ecology-speak as *carrying capacity*.

More formally stated, carrying capacity is the ability of the environment to sustain a given population of organisms indefinitely. “Sustain” usually means “to feed” and “indefinitely” simply means “with no end in sight.” Thus, a given number of organisms that continues to live (and reproduce) within the means of

its food-energy supply is “ecologically sustainable.”

In any event, “living sustainably” should not be conceptualized as “living in harmony with nature.” Nature is not a Barbershop Quartet. Nature is nothing if not a relentless, biological gang fight encompassing every organism on the planet. Each organism will lose the fight eventually, only to decompose into the itinerant molecules from which it was temporarily pasted together.

In fact, the natural *danse macabre* preserves ecological balance at the expense of harmony. Any cosmic harmony on the American Frontier, existed only under the influence of mezcal and peyote.

Moreover, just because an organism manages to survive individually does not imply that it lives in a sustainable society. Sustainability requires that a given *number* of organisms must be able to survive *indefinitely*. No environmental carrying capacity can sustain too many needy organisms, or even a few organisms that consume more food-energy than the environment can replace.

By any measure, however, American Indians had been living sustainably for millennia before Europeans waded ashore with their metallurgy, animal husbandry, intensive agriculture, literacy – and their marked tendency toward epidemic plagues, famine, industrialized warfare, and commercial-grade slavery. Upon arrival, the benighted invaders found practically nothing to remind them of their ecologically stressed homelands, which they had abandoned.

Nowhere in America did the colonizers find the privation, starvation, social depravity, and ecological wastage that characterized their soil-ravaged and forest-denuded homeland. Having accidentally stumbled upon a Stone Age population that lived sustainably, civilized Europeans set about at once to destroy it, as they had done at home. Indeed, had Europeans possessed a sustainable culture, they would not have needed to ditch their depleted continent in search of lootable resources elsewhere.

The supreme irony of the Old-World invasion was that Europeans never realized the “savages” inhabiting the Americas were practically identical to their own ancestors, though a couple of hundred generations removed. Ecologically, the European invasion did not represent the wave of the future, but a retrogression to their own Edenic past.

The environmental devastation that had taken several thousand years to accomplish in Europe was replicated in three centuries in the Americas. Such was the price and the speed of the “progress” achieved on the American Frontier.

Frontier Armageddon

The Frontier did not disappear just because the westward movement had run out of geographical space, its few Indian survivors having been herded into open-air prisons. Rather, the Frontier itself was destroyed by the westward migration of the Industrial Revolution – a truly monstrous creation of unrelenting factory toil, rolling on steel rails, powered by steam, and financed by perpetual human servitude to debt.

The terminal theme of the Frontier was not to be man's conquest of nature, or even of man's conquest of other men, but instead the industrial conquest of humanity. Metastasizing far beyond the "primordial form of conquest" of Indians by hypocritical whites, this final act of destruction was so complete that not even whites survived it.

A Stone Age world bound by blood kinship, loyalty, courage, intuition and revenge was within a single lifetime displaced by the depersonalized tyranny of contract law, freight schedules, time zones, taxes, universal debt and 'no trespassing' signs. Proud Indian warriors, brave Texas Rangers, indomitable pioneer sod-busters – all alike swept away only to be reincarnated by industrialized karma as sweatshop wage-slaves, coal mining troglodytes, and corporate lackeys.

After this cataclysm, we can rely on Hollywood to remind us now and again that the Frontier was where some hostile hombres ran amok shooting various weapons at one another – as if that is not the daily fare of modern-day America. The theatrical poster blurb "We are all hostiles" could be a permanent contemporary subtitle to American civilization.

But the American Frontier was not a blurb or a subtitle. It was a war that raged westward for 300 years before its place was lost to history. Yet, the ultimate loss of the Frontier was not *by* those fortunate few who once lived within the warzone; the greater loss was *to* those unfortunate multitudes who were fated to live thereafter without it. And that would be us.

Possibly lost to us forever has been our egalitarian self-determination, our common possession of the means of survival, our ecological sustainability, and our sense of the primacy of personal human worth. These hallmarks of human society have been eradicated so thoroughly that even celluloid fables of our own history betray hardly a trace of their multi-millennial existence. Unwilling to recall such a way of life, we retell only tales of hostility that surrounded its death.

But lest old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind, Americans everywhere now commemorate the first day of each calendar month with a nagging sense of loss – as befits the date on which the rent is due in this erstwhile

Land of the Free.

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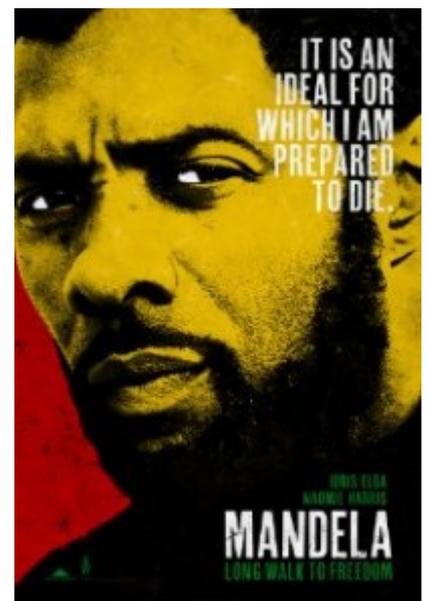
Mandela Movie Faces Long Oscar Odds

Only a month ago, Nelson Mandela's death brought much of the world together to honor his legacy in overturning South Africa's white supremacist regime. But the new film about his life may get short shrift as the movie-award season opens, says Danny Schechter.

By Danny Schechter

The whole world recognized and paid tribute to South African icon Nelson Mandela when he died at age 95 on Dec. 5, 2013. Ninety-one heads of state attended his funeral. The UN General Assembly organized a special tribute. Mandela's legacy is secure in official circles, and in the hearts of South Africans, but will there be recognition in the place that seems to matter to the media even more: Hollywood?

The Oscar nominations are due on Thursday, and early on, it seemed, as if "Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom," the epic movie about the world's most revered icon was a sure thing for Oscar consideration. Most of the big newspaper reviewers loved it and its American distributor Harvey Weinstein has specialized in influencing Academy decisions.



But of late, it lost its buzz and appears to be treated as an also-ran, buried

by the hype machine for other movies. The entertainment media no longer seems to take the movie seriously, as Oscar-worthy. All the focus is on other films and the big U.S. stars.

The producers of the movie, made in South Africa, albeit with a British director, Judson Chadwick, and Oscar-celebrated screenwriter William Nicholson, were earlier hopeful that they had a good chance of winning at least one of the statuettes that quickly translate into a place in cinema history and more bang at the box-office.

For them, however, making this film was always far more than a commercial endeavor. In my book, *Madiba A to Z: The Many Faces of Nelson Mandela*, producer Anant Singh shares his passion for the subject and explains that it took 16 years and as many as 50 versions of script to put together the money and the cast.

He was making it not only to honor Mandela but also tell the story of his country's liberation. His team worked as independents with no major studio behind them.

They were also very commercial in their calculations, doing what they felt they had to do to get it made and get it out, also conscious of deferring to Hollywood formula, by focusing on the love story between Nelson and Winnie and, in effect, depoliticizing the story of a very political figure once known for saying, "The Struggle Is My Life."

On the Left, there was disappointment as the review in Britain's *Counterfire* expressed this way: "This absence of ideological perspective is probably to be expected but the concluding effect of the film is to produce a sanitized and depoliticized Mandela that does not help us comprehend his massive impact. The apolitical Mandela in the film is the one neoliberal warmongers like Blair, Bush and Obama are happy to eulogize."

I am sure if the filmmakers had tried to please ideologues on all sides, the movie probably wouldn't have even been made, much less released, with the small fortune in marketing monies required to be considered competitive. That said, it did make news with lots of star-studded attention grabbing premieres and some media write-ups, especially, after Mandela died while a Royal screening was underway in England.

The movie itself got less attention than its stars and its connection with a well-known leader. Some say that's because of the movie format, as in this review by Wamuwi Mbaao in South Africa:

"The biopic genre further restricts the possible creative directions the

narrative can take, and the result is a movie that tries to do a lot but ultimately does not succeed in rising above the textbook facts to give us the story of this larger-than-life man. At every point, the discerning audience member feels dissatisfied, goaded by annoying inaccuracies, and manhandled by soaring strings doing their frenetic best to convince us that this is the story as it should be told. It isn't."

Most of the South African reviews were positive, but this reviewer found the film not South African enough, unhappy that it was made for a global audience.

Other critics were even less enamored, putting it down as too conventional. Writes reviewer John Beifuss, "a no-show in best-of-2013 year-end critics' polls, 'Mandela' is not vivid, daring or passionate enough to exploit, for better or worse, the unexpected current-events context of its arrival. It is not an adequate tribute to South Africa's first black president nor is it a disgrace to his memory. It is a rather conventional and pious movie biography that misses the opportunity to be more to use art and imagination to bring insight to a life history that otherwise might be better served with a straight documentary."

That was a comment that raised my eyebrows because I made six documentaries about Mandela and had been documenting the making and meaning of the movie. Dramas and documentaries can rarely be fused. Terms like "might be better served" are vague and often pretentious.

What these critics rarely do is to get specific and say what they wanted to see, or how they felt the story could have been handled differently. Perhaps that's not their job but vague prescriptions are often a cop-out. There is often no substance in their calls for more substance.

Also, the Academy voters are hardly hostile or naive about the topic. Mandela was a big hit when he visited Los Angeles on his national trip in 1990. A reception drew every major black star in town, including many pols, liberal luminaries and sports icons such as Muhammad Ali. Mandela received the key to the city and a rally packed the old Los Angeles Coliseum. The Artists for a Free South Africa has been based in Los Angeles and kept some public attention focused on the "beloved country's" artists and needs.

Years ago, one of my Mandela documentaries was passed over for Oscar consideration, but the Academy, out of interest I am sure, hosted a screening in L.A. under their auspices. I was pleased to be there and got lots of positive comments from the audience. That was the closest I got to the Oscar people.

So, yes, there is sympathy in Tinsel Town, but, perhaps, not much more because commerce, celebrities and movie grosses not newsy issues are always topic #1 in

the industry city. Movies about the great and the good have an uphill battle in challenging Hollywood product that, this year again, seems more mesmerized by big-time crime dramas like "American Hustle" and "The Wolf of Wall Street" that make con men appear cool and groovy. Their only morality is amorality.

Those movies feature better-known stars and more made in the USA storylines, aided and abetted by even bigger and more recent advertising budgets. "Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom" didn't have the deep pockets to compete with the blitzkrieg of new ads when the film went into "wide release" on Christmas Day. By then, it was already considered old.

The Golden Globes did give "Mandela" three nominations, one to Idris Elba, the male lead, and two for music, one to the Irish band U2 for the hardly political upbeat end song, "Ordinary Love," which did win the award for "best original song."

Getting the band to the awards ceremony enhanced that show's appeal, but everyone knows the Globes reflect the picks of many self-styled foreign correspondents, not died-in-the-wool movie industry Americanos.

The NAACP image awards also honored Elba. In Britain, the film academy nominated "Mandela" for the best *British* film of the year, even though it was primarily made by Videovision, a South African company. The director, screenwriter and a producer did hail from England. Curiously, the nationalism and racial identity embedded in those awards represented the very values that the real Mandela rejected.

"12 Years a Slave," which won the Golden Globe for best drama, is the "black" movie that seems to have the best chance to win an Oscar. In that drama, a white man played by superstar Brad Pitt took action to free one African-American who had been kidnapped into slavery. There was no people's revolt overturning an unjust system.

The movie's major appeal may be its careful depiction of slavery and the lack of attention this historic human rights crime has received in the land of slavery. Recall black activist H. Rap Brown once observing "violence is as American as cherry pie."

"Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom" features violence too, but oppressive state violence, more than individual bad guys whom you can hate. Apartheid may be a more recent crime than slavery but the latter is part of a U.S history that some Americans not all, for sure are ashamed of. We know more about it than what happened in faraway Africa albeit with U.S. support. (Apartheid was modeled partially on our brutal system of relocating Indians to reservations.)

Slavery as a subject is also presented only as American, while Mandela dramatizes a freedom struggle in Africa that has not been front and center much lately in a news system that routinely treats Africa as a backward continent of wars, massacres and coups.

Mandela was one of the few African leaders even reported about in the U.S. news media and the fact that his death occasioned considerable coverage may have reinforced the idea that his story has been over-exposed. Why see a movie version when the real man was on TV, etc.?

That's a perception that certainly cut into the film's ticket sales. If "Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom" is not on the Oscar list, it will be gone from theaters quickly, probably to return on TV movie channels and video. See it while you still can. You will be glad you did!

Danny Schechter made documentaries about the making and meaning of the movie "Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom." He also wrote the book, *Madiba AtoZ: the Many Faces of Nelson Mandela* (Madibabook.com) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

A Comedy at the 'End of the World'

Exclusive: A comedy about people living their final days, as a massive meteor zeroes in on Planet Earth, may seem an unlikely movie concept. But "Seeking a Friend for the End of the World," starring Steve Carell, is one of those rare moments when Hollywood breaks out of predictable molds, writes Lisa Pease.

By Lisa Pease

It's rare to find a movie these days that surprises, moves and entertains. Screenwriter Lorene Scafaria, in her directorial debut, brought us just such a rare gem in "Seeking a Friend for the End of the World," a story about how a few people deal with the imminent end of the world. The film opens with the information that a meteor is about to collide with earth, and that no one will survive the impact.

The film is remarkably funny and sweet, given the dark context. The writer/director explores through foreground stories and background incidents reported on the news the way different people deal (or won't deal) with the fact that they are all about to die. It's a creative and thoughtful film that is

grounded in a remarkable performance by Steve Carell.



What is it about Carell that makes him seem so wounded, so vulnerable? I don't know, but I find him incredibly compelling to watch because of that.

As the film opens, the world has 18 days left. Carell's character, appropriately named "Dodge" because he tends to avoid confrontations, has to face the result of his choices over the years. His wife runs off, leaving him without an ally as he faces not just his own death but the imminent destruction of the planet.

Dodge's downstairs neighbor Penny, played by Keira Knightley, pushes her way into his life, handing him some undelivered mail that includes a letter from a high school sweetheart of Dodge's who had written him a few months earlier to say Dodge had been the love of her life. Penny insists that if Dodge still has feelings for her, he must find her. So the two set off to find the letter writer.

There are numerous humorous bits throughout, but there are some amazingly poignant ones as well. Meanwhile, in the background are the constant ominous news reports. Oil is running out. Power is about to be shut off. Chaos is erupting.

Throughout, you can't help but wonder, what would you do if you knew that not only you, but everyone else around you, had only a few more days to live? Would you throw out your usual morality? Would you try to kill yourself? Would you rush out to find your one true love?

Each character these two encounter along the way is dealing with the imminent end of the world in different ways. And the past relationships encountered tell us much about the present characters who are the focus of the story.

I really don't want to give away any of the story, as the fun is in the little twists and turns the story takes. But I will say this is Carell's most endearing performance to date. Dodge's world has already ended, prematurely, with the sudden departure of his wife, for reasons he doesn't understand. Dodge is forced to make choices he normally wouldn't, and therein lies the adventure at the heart of the film.

The only jarring note, and this is minor, was Keira Knightley's performance. She is so naturally charming and interesting that when she *tries* to be charming and interesting, it comes across as over the top. She has a marvelously expressive face, so there's no need for her to consciously manipulate it. We know, through the dialog, what she's going through. I wish she had been told to dial it back a bit. Even so, she delivers a bubbly counterpoint to Carell's more morose character.

The script has a freshness to it that makes it a welcome change from all the remakes hitting the theater this summer. This is a story you really haven't seen before, with characters that are not cookie cutters that could have come from other films, as so many are these days.

There are a few especially poignant scenes, so bring some tissue if you tend to tear up. But know that, for all the darkness of characters facing the ultimate end, the film has a remarkably light, even uplifting spirit. I found the film deeply satisfying, which is an increasingly rare experience.

Lisa Pease is a writer who has examined issues ranging from the Kennedy assassination to voting irregularities in recent U.S. elections. She is also a movie buff.

Iran Critiques Hollywood

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta sees a growing chance that Israel will attack Iran's nuclear sites this spring despite resistance from the Obama administration. Meanwhile, Danny Schechter attended a conference in Iran on how Hollywood spreads propaganda.

By Danny Schechter

Iran seems to many observers to be next in line for the Iraqi freedom treatment, the latest in a long line of "enemy" nations menaced by overt and covert military threats by the United States and its allies.

As the psyops operations and media propaganda intensifies, you might think war is imminent and that Iran is doing what countries under threat do in these circumstances, such as mobilizing their people and preparing for a bombing onslaught.

Think again. While I have been told that military targets have been or are being moved around, the atmosphere in Tehran is relaxed with more talk of a cultural battlefield than a military one. There's a commemoration under way of the 33rd anniversary of the Iranian revolution and an international conference on "Hollywoodism and Cinema" as an extension of an annual Fajr film festival

And that's what I am doing here, as a guest participant in an event that sees Hollywood as a bigger enemy than the Pentagon. It has become for them an "ism" and is the subject of discussions over its global role in shaping positive attitudes towards what passes for American "civilization," its relationship to the awakenings and uprisings throughout the world Iran's Press TV probably devotes more coverage to Occupy Wall Street than any TV channel and Hollywood's alleged support for Zionism and Israel, a country that's only cited here as "the Zionist Regime."

Israel, in turn, is even more hostile seeing Iran as an "existential threat." Sometimes it looks like both countries both under the influence of religious fanaticism need a stereotyped enemy to rally their own populations. It is Israel that is banging the drums loudest for war.

The conference was opened by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who didn't have much good to say about Hollywood, which, paradoxically, celebrated its 125th anniversary on Feb. 1.

"All those who work in Hollywood push ideas, based on getting the maximum of profit and pleasure using any possible methods," Ahmadinejad said. "We do not expect anything from Hollywood." Speaking softly and philosophically, Ahmadinejad noted that people must "deliver truth and facts," so that "masses would follow up."

About 48 foreign scholars are here, and one News Dissector (me). Most of the president's speech was really about values more than politics emphasizing the importance of the cultural environment. He believes it is impacted negatively by a movie industry that does little to educate customers about the world's crises.

He rejected Marxism and Liberalism, instead speaking of man as a creation of God who is caught between conflicting pressures to be selfish or to serve humanity. I am not sure that he knew that one of the Hollywood companies leading the charge against Iran is owned by Disney (and is one I used to work for): ABC

News.

Fairness and Accuracy in Media singles out a recent ABC newscast as an egregious example of propaganda. "America's top spy warns that Iran is willing to launch a terrorist strike inside the U.S.," announced anchor Diane Sawyer at the top of the program. "We'll tell you his evidence."

The ABC report was actually very light on evidence. It did, however, pass along numerous incendiary allegations from U.S. government officials without the skeptical scrutiny that is real journalism's primary function.

Echoing the government, Sawyer set up the report with an assertion that Iran is "more determined than ever to launch an attack on U.S. soil." Correspondent Martha Raddatz, claiming that the "the saber-rattling coming from Iran has been constant," told viewers that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper delivered "a new bracing warning ... Iran may be more ready than ever to launch terror attacks inside the United States."

Reports like this are barely criticized in Iran because there have been so many of them for so many years, with ABC's earlier "America Held Hostage" series in 1980 a well known example of reporting as incitement.

After Ahmadinejad's talk, an Iranian friend pushed me into the president's path where I tried to engage him, asking if he would be willing to talk to American leaders. He smiled, responding, "Washington does not want to have any dialogues." So that was a non-starter.

I then smiled back and asked if the American people have reasons to fear him and an Iranian nuclear bomb. This time, he laughed as if I was being naive. (I was trying to be provocative.)

Looking up at me, he asked if I thought he was scary, and then denied that Iran was building bombs or threatening the American people. He was very calm as he spoke. Admittedly the evidence for Iran doing so is not very strong and, in fact, a recent report indicated that the U.S. military wants Israel to chill out its agitation and bombing threats.

(Gareth Porter reports on IPS: "Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey told Israeli leaders Jan. 20 that the United States would not participate in a war against Iran begun by Israel without prior agreement from Washington, according to accounts from well-placed senior military officers.")

I then told President Ahmadinejad that I have been covering Occupy Wall Street and asked what his advice would be to them. As a charter member of the Iranian student movement, he was quick to express admiration for those in the streets

struggling for justice in America, but added, "The Wall Street movement has to deepen its work" by intensifying its organizing efforts.

At that point, his security intensified its presence, and after welcoming me to his country, I was pushed gently to the side as he went back to work. My "interview" was over.

The conference continued in the afternoon with more reports on the Occupy Movement and analysis of Hollywood's impact. On hand to receive an award for his father Oliver Stone was his son Sean who spoke about the growing power of social media. If nothing else, his dad has proven that Hollywood can produce topical dramas and social criticism.

The Zionism issue was spoken to by three anti-Zionist Rabbis and raised in an interview that I did live on Press TV on Thursday night, which I found not so much anti-Semitic as totally uninformed about many in the Jewish community worldwide who are not only not ardent Zionists but are critical of the Israeli occupation of Palestinians and the suppression of their rights.

The host was startled by the vehemence of my views that may not have much support at high levels in the government. I was glad to have an opportunity to publicly challenge Holocaust denial in Iran and combat stereotypes, even as Hollywood legitimately stood accused of creating them of Muslims.

This is my second trip to Iran, a country that is being embargoed, sanctioned and put down in our media with nary a chance to talk back. That's why I came, to learn more about Iran's views that have been banished from the airways in Britain, and rarely, if ever, given airtime in what passes for our "free" media. Iran is escalating its media efforts with a new channel in Spanish.

There is more to come, and I am already on kabob overload.

News Dissector Danny Schechter writes the newsdissector.com blog and edits the new [Mediachannel1.org](http://mediachannel1.org). He has just finished a book on Occupy Wall Street. (ColdType.net) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org
