Designing Pacifist Films

Paul Goodman

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I am asked for my thoughts about the content and style of anti-war films, and how to make such a film.

First of all, such a film must at least not do positive harm by predisposing its audience toward war. The images of senseless violence, horror, and waste that are usually employed in the commercially successful "antiwar" films do have a titillating effect and remain in the soul as excitants and further incitements. Let me show how this works.

1. In cinematic conditions of bright screen and dark theater, lasting for many minutes and tending to fascination and hypnosis, images of horror easily detach themselves from the kind of intellectual and ethical framework in which they are usually presented, and they attach themselves to quite different subliminal ideas. We must bear in mind how a child wakes up screaming with his nightmare of the animated cartoon he has seen, the nightmare now expressing a kind of wish.

2. Also the response of a theatrical mass audience is different from the more intellectual and ethical response of a small company or an individual reading. (Perhaps TV is a special case.) What a theater audience experiences most vividly is how it has, anonymously, shared in breaking a taboo, in witnessing with accomplices the forbidden and shocking. The "message" of the spectacle is then employed as a rationalization. Of course it is only the rationalization that is mentioned outside the theater or in the reviews, though the advertising hints at the shocking.

3. This dual process is specific for the heightening of guilt: a forbidden stimulation with one's censorship lowered by crowd feeling, disapproved by one's ethical and social self. Now, the effect of guilt is not reform or, finally, deterrence; but inevitably resentment for having been made guilty, and perhaps then clandestinely or unconsciously choosing more congenial buddies. (Pacifist propaganda in general, let me say, is prone to arouse guilt just because it is irrefutable and on the side of the angels. This is an important reason why accompanying persuasion some immediate *action* must be available — just as a loving sexual seduction must lead to acts or it does harm.)

4. The arousing of lust and self-disapproval leads to the specific pornographic effect of wished-for punishment (the hallmark of popular sexual art). The image of punishment is often provided in the film itself, as its poetic justice. Such self-punishment is evil in itself; but worse is that usually it is projected far and wide as vindictive hatred of scapegoats. And alternatively, it seeks for allies in mass suicide, as if to say, "*We* are not worthy to live."

5. Especially in cinema, the conditions of fantasy and the habits of the audience are so discontinuous with behavior in the waking public world that the shock of strong images is sentimentalized: the rationalizing sorrow and regret is used to *insulate* the experience from any possible action. The energy of revulsion turns into pity, a pornographic emotion, rather than active compassion or political indignation — not otherwise than with Christians who exhaust their neighbor-love in the sentimentality of the Cross. The next step is for the sentimentalized horror to be taken as matter-of-course in the public world, just as for those Christians the poor *must* always be with us, so Christians can be charitable.

6. Finally, bad audiences cannot be relied on to respond to a whole work of art; they will select from it what suits their own repressions, and interpret according to their own prejudices the very fact that they have been moved despite themselves. The lovely is taken as dirty, the horrible as sadistically thrilling. This derogation is partly revenge against the artist. Bad audiences follow the plot as a story; they do not identify with the whole work as the soul of the poet, but they identify with the actors of the story and take sides. Given a film about capital punishment, for instance, a Camus will notice, and be steeled in revulsion by, the mechanism of execution: he will deny the whole thing the right to exist because it is not *like* us (this is the reaction-formation, denial, that is characteristic of active compassion); but a vulgar audience will identify with the victim, get involved in the suspense, thrill to the horror, and weep with pity. The effect is entertainment, not teaching or therapy; and to be entertained by such a theme is itself damaging.

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By a good audience, of course, a work of genuine art cannot be easily taken amiss and abused in this way. By definition, the images of genuine art do not allow themselves to be detached from its idea, for the whole is solidly fused in the artistic activity. But this standard of excellence is useless for our present purposes, since such works are not conveniently had for the asking. And when they do occur, they are just as likely to be embarrassing to our rhetorical purposes. For example — I choose classics of literature that are beyond debate — both Homer's *Iliad* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are infused by, and teach us, a profound pacifism, a lofty and compassionate dismay at the infatuated violence of men in their armies. Yet they certainly also express, and even celebrate, the demonic in war, the abysmal excitement of mankind gone mad. This was interesting to these artists and it *might* be to any contemporary artist — how could one know? The counter to such demonism in a great artist would have to be a kind of saintliness. We are here clearly outside the context of planning pacifist films.

Again by definition, in a work of genuine art the images of horror, etc., do not have a pornographic effect and do not incite to repetitions, for the experience is finished and cathartic: the fearful images are purged, transcended, interpreted, or otherwise integrated with the rest of life. An art work leaves its audience with a saner whole philosophy (more congenial to pacifism in so far as pacifism is truth); and it has taken some of the venom from the cruelty and arrogance in the soul. But such a re-creative "finished" experience is precisely not rhetoric; it does not lead directly to action or any *immediate* policy. The Athenians seeing Euripides' *Trojan Women* were no doubt wiser and sadder about the very course of folly that they continued plunging along. (I do believe, however, that great art, forcibly confronting us with a more meaningful universe, does *initiate* conversion, and pacifists do well to perform these achieved monuments of their tradition.)

My guess — I judge from my own art-working — is that a serious modern artist who happens to be a pacifist (and how could he not be, if he once attends to these matters?) — if such an artist begins to move artistically among the scenes of war, his art action will soon lead to the exploration and expression of his *own* horror, rage, pain, and devastation. The vegetarian will disclose his own cannibalism, the pacifist his murderousness. Such works, e.g., *Guernica*, are monuments of how it is with us; they have no leisure for a practical moral, nor even for the

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luxury of indignation. The eye lamp flamingly thrust forward over Guernica does not light up the deed of Nazi bombers, but the violent soul of Picasso, brought to a salutary pause.

If we consider spurious, kitsch, or propagandistic antiwar art, on the other hand, its actual pornographic and provocative effect is equally to be expected, for the fantasy and the art-working convey the disorder of the weak artist and speak to the underlying wishes of the bad audience.

We thus have, by and large, the ironical situation that precisely the best cause, which has irrefutable sense and common humanity, ought to avoid "psychological," "artistic," and mass-rhetorical effects.

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What, then, are the available resources of pacifist persuasion that can be used for a pacifist film? They can be roughly classified as:

1. Factual education

2. Analyses of character-neurotic and social-neurotic war ideology, and the withdrawal of energy from the causes of war spirit

3. Opportunities for positive action, and pacifist history and exemplars.

(1.a) As a strictly prudential argument, pacifism has an easy case, perhaps too easy a case, so that people do not take it seriously, it is too obvious. People have always known that war is a poor expedient, inefficient for any plausible purpose. And "present-day war," not only *our* present-day war, has long been out of the question. It is best if the facts, of the senselessness of it, are allowed to speak for themselves, without admixture of moral or emotional appeal or any grandiose references to saving the human species. The matter is much simpler. War talkers are pretty close to fools or else not a little crazy; their postures and remarks are not proper to normal grown men. This can be simply demonstrated, relying on logic, statistics, and history. The framework must be an irrefragable and unmistakable structure of verbal propositions, even printed subtitles, however "uncinematic"; for we are dealing with a deeply neurotic and even schizophrenic phenomenon, and the *reality of ordinary reasoning, and ordinary dismissal of stupidity*, must be strongly affirmed.

(b) On the other hand, the dangers of pacifist action — e.g., the risks involved in unilateral disarmament — should also be dispassionately and *fully* presented, so far as they can be fairly estimated. *It is not necessary to have an answer for every argument*, even grave arguments, for we cannot do what is senseless and unworthy of men anyway. Pacifism is a decision. The "serious" position is not, as Niebuhr, for instance, seems to think, to choose a lesser evil; it is to realize that we cannot have been so wrong for so long without purgatorial suffering.

(c) The facts of war policy, war makers, and war economy ought to be exposed with unsparing honesty and detail, at the risk of inevitable censorship. E.g., delineating the personalities — a Teller, Kennedy, or J. Edgar Hoover — on whom so much is allowed to depend. But further, the immense network of the power structure must be made clear and diagrammed, so that a person comes to realize how nearly every job, profession, and status is indirectly and directly involved in making war.

(2.a) Psychologically, our "tough" warriors live by a conceit of themselves as strong, to ward off the anguish of their spirits broken by authorities they could not face up to; and a conceit of themselves as hard, to ward off loss of love and fear of impotence. A film might profitably analyze the military posture, pelvis retracted, belly kept hard, exhalation restricted; the military ethos of inhibited feeling; the conceit of superiority by slavish identification with authority symbols. For comparison, analyze the social and family genesis of an underprivileged gang tough. Explain the details of Marine discipline as a means of destroying manliness. The system of griping fostered in armies as a means of maintaining childish dependency and avoiding mutiny. But further, show how in our times the classical sociology of the armed services as a substitute for civilian responsibilities is combined with the use of the services as complements of, and training for, organizational civilian life. The soldier seeks for ratings like a junior executive, while the Organization Man has a tough as his secret ideal. A thorough social and psychological analysis of these types might immunize the young.

(b) Analyze the notion of the Enemy as a projection (scapegoat) and also as a political red herring. Show in detail how Enemies have been manufactured and miraculously reformed by techniques of press and promotion. Show also how foreign nations have thus manufactured the Americans as the Enemy and assigned to us Enemy traits and wishes.

(c) But probably the chief factor of war spirit that must be analyzed is not the military character nor the projection of the Enemy, but the paralysis with which the vast majority of people of all countries accept the war that they oppose both by conviction and feeling. This must betoken an inner, fatalistic attachment to the feared disaster, and it is best explained as "primary masochism" (Reich): the hypothesis that, because of their rigid characters, people are unable to feel their pent-up needs, especially of sexuality and creative growth, and therefore they dream up, seek out, and conspire in an external catastrophe to pierce their numbness and set them free. The prevalent conditions of civilian peace and meaningless jobs tend to heighten this lust for explosion. (My experience, however, is that in analyzing this factor of war, one is opposed precisely by the more moralistic pacifists themselves. Rather than condone normal homosexuality or encourage the sexuality of their children, they would, apparently, accept the brutality of armies and see people blown to bits. One is dubious about the sanity of their pacifism, which seems to be rather a defense against their own hostile fantasies.)

Social and psychological subject matter of this type is sufficiently interesting in itself and is only confused by attempts at drama or case history; a straight classroom approach, the illustrated lecture, is most quietly effective.

(3.a) Factual exposure of the political and corporate operations of war society, and psychological and social analysis of its war ideology and spirit ought to disattach and release the energy that had been bound up in conventional symbols and habits of life. We must then have uses for this energy and opportunities for pacifist action. In principle, any animal satisfaction, personal self-realization, community welfare, or humane culture will draw energy from the structure of conceit, projection, and fatalistic masochism of the war spirit. "Waging peace" is the best means of preventing war, and pacifists do well to invent and support programs for the use of our wealth and energy freed from the expense, fear, and senselessness of war. In my opinion, let me say, there is also natural violence that diminishes war, e.g., the explosion of passion, the fist fight that clears the air, the gentle forcing of the virginal, the quarrel that breaks down the barriers to interpersonal contact. War feeds on the inhibition of normal aggression. (Of course, many pacifists disagree with this point of view.)

(b) Specifically pacifist action — usually in the form of refusing — is called for when people are required to engage directly in war-making, e.g., by the conscription, the civil defense, working in war science or war factories. The defense of civil liberties, also, seems to be congenial to pacifists, because the libertarian attitude goes contrary to the power state.

(c) Finally, the preferred pacifist means of exerting social force has gotten to be nonviolent direct action, shared in by the group. Any instance of this, even if it fails, is proof of the feasibility of the pacifist position, for it shows that sensible and moral individual and small-group action is possible, and thereby it diminishes our masochistic paralysis in the face of an approaching doom "too big for men to cope with." (The history and the heroes of civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action, achieving or failing to achieve happiness, social welfare, or cultural progress, constitute the mythology of pacifism. They have the heartening exemplarity and the, perhaps, sentimental irrelevance of any mythology.) To my mind, pacifism is like Rilke's unicorn, it *"feeds on the possibility of existing."* For the resistance to modern warfare is natural and universal; the arguments against pacifism are weak; and the spirit of war is reducible by analysis; but what is needed is stories, examples, and opportunities for action concrete in the experience of the audience.

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Factual and analytic handling of images of war can neutralize their pornographic effect. My bias is that even the exemplary images of pacifist action are best handled in a documentary fashion, avoiding audience identification with their heroes and keeping the real situation in the foreground. The purpose of the film is not so much inspiration as to point to opportunities in the audience's real environment. *It is better to err on the side of dryness. The heart is already enlisted.* Emphasis on the pacifist "movement" with its charismatic symbols and "leaders" betrays us into the field of public relations, where we are swamped. The charismatic excitement that gives courage and solidarity must emerge in each concrete occasion of pacifist action, and it will emerge, if it is really a man's own occasion. We are in the tradition of bearing witness. It was just the genius of Gandhi to notice faultless occasions.

The kinds of theme I have outlined could be the substance of a useful series of documentary pacifist films. Developed forthrightly and in particular detail, they would certainly prove offensive to many audiences, including some pacifist audiences, but they could hardly fail to hit home. They would rouse anxiety both by the character analysis of the audience and by the need for the audience to make decisions in their actions. The shared shock of the truth and of possibility is, in our society at present, equivalent to breaking a taboo. For most, I guess, the effect of such films would be uneasy silence, a dangerous but transitory state of feelings. The hope is that some of this feeling would be mobilized to decisive action, just as some would surely result in ugly reaction. Perhaps most persons would be made deeply thoughtful.

For its makers, such a document would certainly be a pacifist action, a commitment, and a bearing witness.

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