

CLARK GABLE'S NAKED PECS MIGHT HAVE started it. In a racy scene with Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night*, Gable unbuttons his shirt to reveal—to the shock of 1934 audiences—a bare chest. No undershirt. Legend has it that undershirt sales dropped 75% that year. While never verified, the tale lives on because Hollywood loves it. If Gable's chest can have that kind of mass cultural impact, the thinking goes, then movies, far from being just passive entertainments, can influence audiences to change their behavior in more significant ways. If a movie can doom undershirts, can't it also end war, poverty, global warming, torture, obesity, junk mail?

More and more, Hollywood is betting on its powers of social engineering. Stars like Leonardo DiCaprio, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney and Charlize Theron have taken pay cuts and strolled red carpets for features that further humanitarian or political agendas. Big-name directors have put their reputations on the line, and rich men have risked fortunes for passion projects. This spring there are at least eight projects with a strong social agenda hitting U.S. theaters from such noteworthy filmmakers as Errol Morris and Morgan Spurlock as well as from message-movie newcomers like Ben Stein.

"In college I was really cynical about the idea that film can make a difference," says Brett Morgen, 39, who directs activist cinema's latest entry: *Chicago 10*, the animated political history of the Chicago Seven. "To me, that all changed with *An Inconvenient Truth*. It became an inspiration for all of us." Former AOL executive Ted Leonsis coined the term *filmanthropy* to describe his four-year-old production company, Agape (Greek for unselfish love). "It's difficult to rationalize independent movies as a business," says Leonsis, who financed *Nanking*, a 2007 documentary about the "rape of Nanking," and *Kicking It*, a film about the Homeless World Cup, which premiered this year at the Sundance

Film Festival. "Filmanthropy changes the metrics of measurement from box office and revenues to number of volunteers and amount of money raised." As August a body as the United Nations is getting in on the act, announcing in January a \$100 million U.N. film fund aimed at combatting stereotypes—in other words, undoing the work of almost all the other media we see.

But even using Leonsis' metrics, how can you measure a film's success? *Chicago 10* was financed by Participant Productions, founded in 2004 on a "double bottom line" premise. "We want to make a social return and a commercial return on our investment," says Participant president Ricky Strauss. The production company has backed 39 other movies, both documentaries and features, including *Syriana* and *The Kite Runner*, and has more than 20 films in development. All its movies have social-action campaigns: Participant encourages audiences to visit its website (takepart.com) and register to vote, contact the U.S. Congress or urge divestment from Sudan. About 2.7 million people have gone to the activism section of the site, 400,000 of them to calculate their carbon emissions. After the 2005 release of *Syriana*, Clooney's movie on the oil industry, the audience sent 8,000 e-mails to Congress.

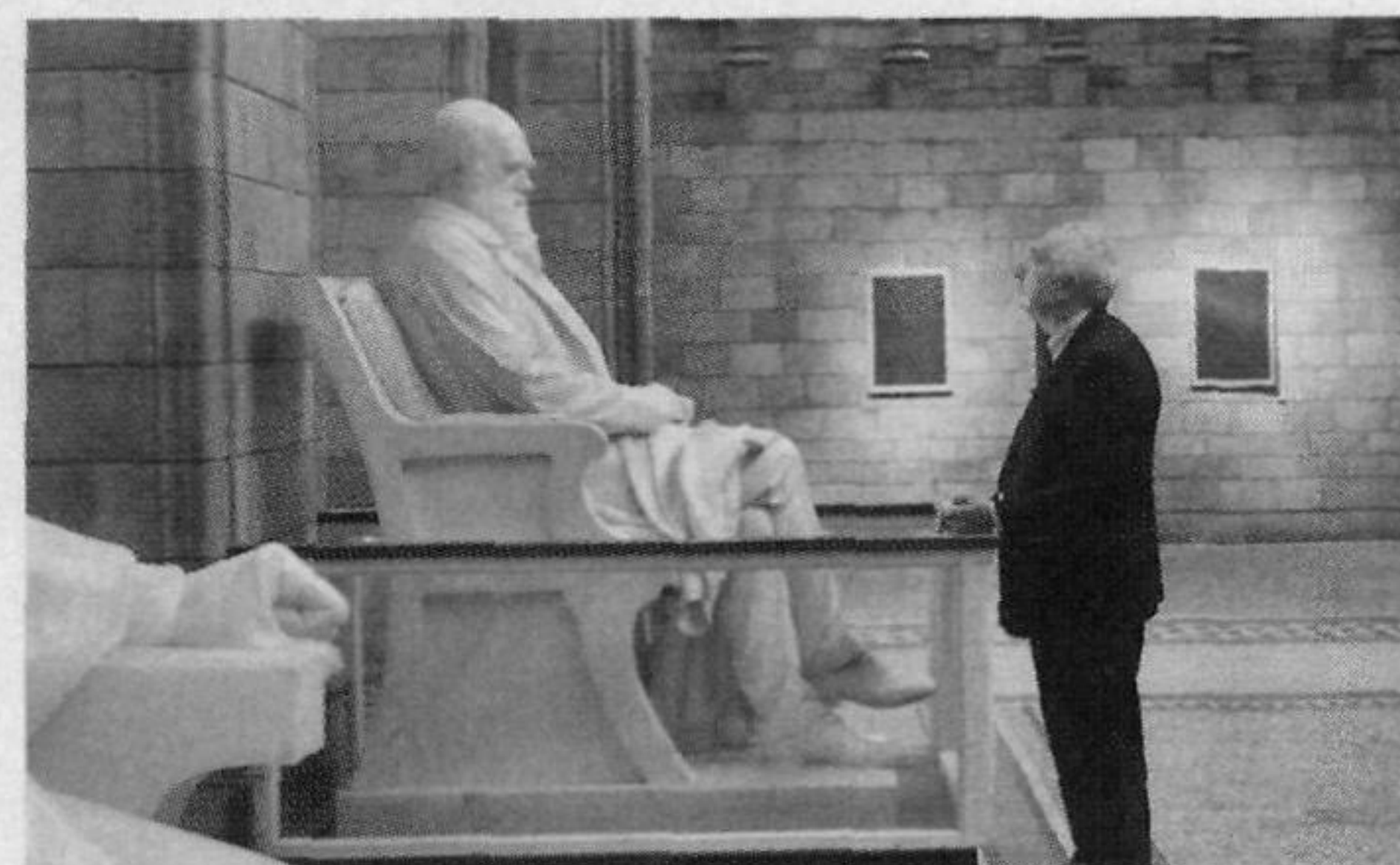
But Participant also financed *North Country*, a feature based on a historic sexual-harassment case, which left no real mark. People weren't interested in the issue, and Theron, even in coveralls, couldn't get them to be. DiCaprio has also mapped the limits of his drawing power. His African thriller *Blood Diamond* showed the connection between some diamonds and war. It did a not-too-shabby \$57 million at the box office, but activists say there are still conflict diamonds in the mix, and diamond sellers have not reported a surge of young engaged couples asking for a diamond's certificate of origin. Meanwhile, DiCaprio's greenie documentary *The 11th Hour* made just \$700,000. "There's a 99% chance your film won't have an

Convincing Soon. New films with social aims



Chicago 10

Nick Nolte and Hank Azaria did voices for this animated tale of the Chicago conspiracy trial



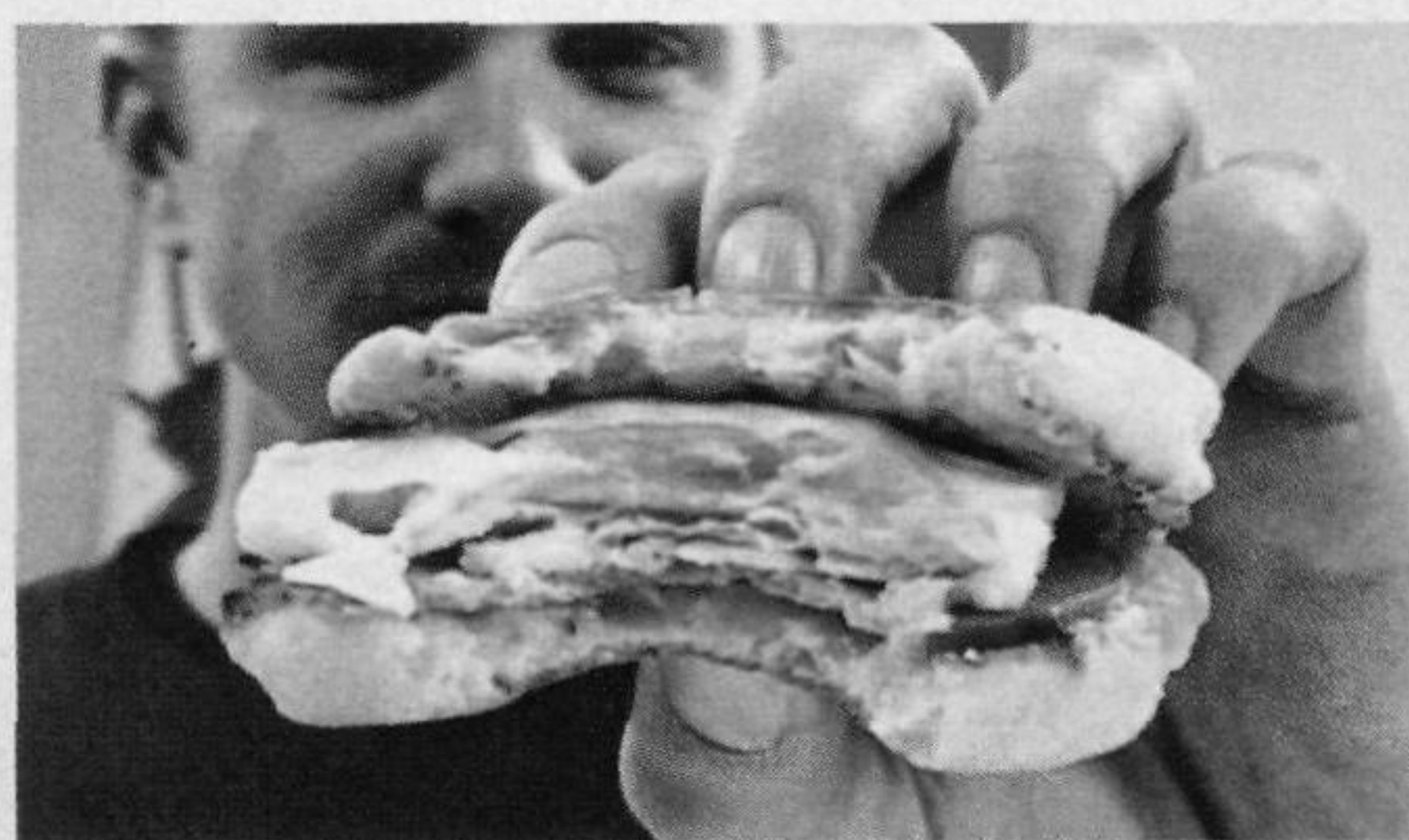
Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed

Ben Stein takes on Big Science for persecuting believers in intelligent design

impact," says writer-director Paul Haggis, whose movies have tackled racism (*Crash*), euthanasia (*Million Dollar Baby*) and the mental health of Iraq-war veterans (*In the Valley of Elah*). "It would be hubris to think otherwise."

Not everyone agrees. "Does a movie change policy? Change behavior? Do movies have an influence on people? Of course they do! Who would argue otherwise?" says Morris, whose documentary *Standard Operating Procedure*, an examination of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, comes out April 25 in the U.S. Morris has reason to believe in the persuasive power of cinema: his 1988 film about the murder of a police officer, *The Thin Blue Line*, got a man out of

Popcorn Policy.
It's hard to quantify the real impact of a film. But here are small changes wrought by five recent movies



Super Size Me 2004

Morgan Spurlock eats only McDonald's for 30 days, gets tummy ache, earns \$11.5 mil

OUTCOME: McDonald's changes menu, adding salads and ending supersizing, but says that was planned before the film premiered



Blood Diamond 2006

Leonardo DiCaprio, Djimon Hounsou and a diamonds-and-war story make \$57 mil

OUTCOME: The diamond industry launches a p.r. blitz to educate consumers about conflict-free diamonds; stone sales are unaffected