Issues raised by the career of US filmmaker John Frankenheimer

David Walsh
19 July 2002

The American film director John Frankenheimer died in Los Angeles of a stroke July 6 after complications from surgery. He was 72. Frankenheimer is best known for works he directed in the 1960s, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Seven Days in May* and *The Birdman of Alcatraz* in particular. After suffering a decline in the 1970s and 1980s, Frankenheimer returned to some prominence, primarily as a director of historical films for television (*Andersonville*, *George Wallace*), in the mid-1990s. His most recent effort was *Path to War*, which examined the process by which the US, under Lyndon B. Johnson, became embroiled in a full-scale intervention in Vietnam.

Frankenheimer had the distinction of bridging several eras in studio filmmaking. He began directing television dramas in the early 1950s, when he was only in his 20s, and lived and worked long enough to direct feature and television films in a new century. However, his body of work is extremely uneven and needs to be carefully sifted for films of value. Possessed of a liberal sensibility and shaped by the Cold War era, Frankenheimer was an artistic eclectic, capable both of rising to the heights of challenging material and of adapting himself to truly miserable projects.

Born in Queens, New York (to an Irish Catholic mother and a German-Jewish stockbroker father) and educated at Williams College, Frankenheimer first made films while in the Air Force. In 1953 he obtained a position with CBS television in New York as an assistant director and within 18 months of his discharge from the military he was co-directing a weekly dramatic series. Between 1954 and 1960 Frankenheimer directed 152 live television dramas, including 42 episodes of the *Playhouse 90* series. He is considered one of the leading figures of American television's so-called "Golden Age."

No doubt, compared with today's generally debased television fare, the live dramas of the 1950s may seem an idyllic era. The scripts ranged from adaptations of stage works (Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, etc.) to original teleplays by writers such as Rod Serling, Paddy Chayevsky, Gore Vidal, Reginald Rose and Tad Mosel. Frankenheimer's productions included *The Last Tycoon* (based on the Fitzgerald novel, with Jack Palance), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (based on Hemingway, with Jason Robards, Maureen Stapleton and Eli Wallach), *The Comedian* (with Mickey Rooney, Kim Hunter and Mel Torme), the original *Days of Wine and Roses* (Cliff Robertson and Piper Laurie), *Old Man* (Geraldine Page and Sterling Hayden *)*, *The Turn of the Screw* (based on the Henry James novella, with Ingrid Bergman), *Face of a Hero* (Jack Lemmon) and John Gielgud's television debut in *The Browning Version*.

However, any medium which emerged as the profit-driven property of large American corporations and under the close scrutiny of the US authorities in the midst of the Cold War, with its anticommunism, conformism and generally stagnant intellectual climate, would inevitably be deformed by those processes.

Anna Everett in an essay, "Golden Age" of television drama, comments: "Scripts exploring problems at the societal level (i.e. racial discrimination, structural poverty, and other social ills) were systematically ignored. Instead, critics complain, too many 'golden age' dramas were little more than simplistic morality tales focusing on the every day problems and conflicts of weak individuals confronted by personal shortcomings such as alcoholism, greed, impotence, and divorce, for example.... [I]t is important to note that the 'golden age' did coincide with the cold-war era and McCarthyism and that cold-war references, such as avoiding communism and loving America, were frequently incorporated in teleplays of the mid to late 1950s."

Frankenheimer worked and apparently thrived within this overall artistic and ideological framework. His first films (*The Young Stranger*, *The Young Savages*, *All Fall Down*) dealt generally with issues of juvenile delinquency, criminality and the social environment. *All Fall Down* is a fairly silly work, based on a novel by James Leo Herlihy and a screenplay by William Inge. Warren Beatty plays the impossibly named Berry-Berry Willart, a ne'er-do-well son of a quarrelsome middle class Cleveland couple, who uses his good looks to exploit older women. His abuse of a family friend, Echo O'Brien (Eva Marie Saint), leads to her death and the disillusionment of Berry-Berry's younger brother.

The film is vaguely moralistic and conformist, and the scenes of the Beatty character's comeuppance contrived in the extreme. *All Fall Down* is saved by the portrayals of Eva Marie Saint, quiet and gracious, as the unfortunate Echo, and Angela Lansbury, extravagant and outlandish, as Berry-Berry's mother, within whom incestuous fires appear to blaze. Critics have noted that Annabell Willart was the first of three desperately controlling mothers in Frankenheimer's films of 1962: the other two played by Thelma Ritter in *Birdman of Alcatraz* and Lansbury again in *The Manchurian Candidate*. In all three films, the father is either weak or absent.

Birdman of Alcatraz is a genuinely moving film, based on the story of convicted murderer Robert Stroud (Burt Lancaster), who became one of the world's leading experts on avian diseases while incarcerated in federal penitentiaries. Stroud, serving a nine-year sentence for killing a man, slays a prison guard in a fight and is vindictively sentenced to life in solitary confinement. The film follows his transformation from a sullen misanthrope into a humane and thoughtful individual.

Birdman has its tedious and turgid passages, but the work is held together by a genuine sense of protest, first of all, against the brutality and irrationality of the penal system. Certain conceptions advanced in the film seem positively revolutionary when contrasted with the present state of official opinion, which cannot seem to find any punishment too "cruel or unusual." Frankenheimer's work is hostile to the notion of lengthy, much less, perpetual imprisonment. Prisons are treated, as they should be, as a nation's shame. The film argues that human beings can and will rehabilitate themselves, given the opportunity.

The Manchurian Candidate is a peculiar film, perhaps Frankenheimer's most important, but certainly not entirely coherent or convincing. The story of a Korean War veteran, Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey),

brainwashed by Soviet and Chinese doctors into becoming a cold-blooded "sleeper" assassin, the work (with a screenplay by George Axelrod) seeks to criticize both "Communism" and the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s.

Shaw's mother (Lansbury, who was only three years older than Harvey) and his stepfather, Senator John Iselin (James Gregory), are monsters, right-wing demagogues with their eyes on the White House. Iselin is a fool, who can never remember how many "card-carrying Communists" (an obvious reference to Senator Joseph McCarthy's slander techniques) work for the Defense Department. Other members of Shaw's platoon have been hypnotized and manipulated as well, including the eventual unraveler of the mystery, Captain Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra).

The film critic Andrew Sarris once commented that Frankenheimer was a director "obviously sweating over his technique," adding, "Instead of building sequences, Frankenheimer explodes them prematurely, preventing his films from coming together coherently." He suggested that the filmmaker was possessed of "a modern form of social consciousness in search of a more sophisticated means of expression."

There is some justice to these remarks. *The Manchurian Candidate* is a film that literally drips with "sweat," quite consistently off the characters' faces as they undergo their psychological torments. It is trying far too hard. Nonetheless, with all its limitations and implausibilities, Frankenheimer's film does manage to convey something of the paranoia and delirium of the Cold War years. When Shaw simultaneously assassinates both Iselin and his mother, who has turned out to be his "Communist" controller, one assumes Frankenheimer and Axelrod are making the ultimate liberal statement about "extremism."

It is another indication of the extent to which official politics has shifted to the right in the US that *Seven Days in May* had the approval of the Kennedy administration. Indeed, President John Kennedy helped persuade a Hollywood studio to finance the film, according to one account, and offered White House locations for shooting. Frankenheimer's next project, after all, centered on a plot by the head of the US military's Joint Chiefs of Staff to organize a coup and overthrow the elected president.

James Mattoon Scott (Lancaster) is an egomaniacal air force general convinced that he must save the nation from a president who is "soft on Communism." Violently opposed to a disarmament treaty signed with the Soviet Union, Scott sets in motion his coup attempt, with the aid and assistance of other members of the Joint Chiefs. His assistant, Jiggs Casey (Kirk Douglas), gets wind of the plot and eventually convinces a skeptical president, Jordan Lyman (Fredric March), of its seriousness. Lyman and those loyal to him organize opposition and forestall the plot.

The film, scripted by Rod Serling, is remarkable in a number of aspects. First of all, there is the fact that a major motion picture, with the backing of the administration in Washington, could point to the dangers represented by extreme right-wing elements with the US military. The word "fascist" is even used in reference to one high-ranking officer. Such concerns were obviously in the air.

That such reactionary forces within the military might move against the rights of the American people had been officially recognized in President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell speech of January 17, 1961, in which he famously remarked: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes." By the time Seven Days in May reached movie theaters, Kennedy had been assassinated, in an operation widely believed to have been organized by those with CIA or military connections.

Before his death Frankenheimer remarked that such a film could not have been made in contemporary Hollywood (although it was redone as a tepid television film, *The Enemy Within*, in 1994 with Forest Whitaker, Jason Robards and Sam Waterston). Whether he was referring to financial or political considerations, he was no doubt correct. In 2002, after the US has witnessed a decade of nearly unending attempts by the extreme right, who have close ties to the military, to unseat a president and install one of their own by fraudulent and unconstitutional means, such a story would cut too close to the bone. It would take, or, dare one say it, it will take a filmmaker of some courage to build a truthful story around the Lewinsky-Whitewater scandals or the hijacking of the 2000 election—setting aside Rod Lurie's fairly wretched *The Contender*. (It is worth noting in this context that when President Lyman is given the opportunity to bring General Scott low by means of a sex scandal, he considers it beneath his dignity, even in the interests of preserving constitutional rule in the US.)

Another of the points Serling and Frankenheimer are anxious to make is the need for the military to be subordinated to elected civilian rule, a principle very much in question under the Bush administration. When Lyman asks Colonel Casey what he thinks of the treaty with the Soviet Union, the latter replies that he does not agree with it, adding, however, "I think it's really your business. Yours and the Senate. You did it, and they agreed so, well, I don't see how we in the military can question it. I mean we can question it, but we can't fight it. We shouldn't, anyway."

There is no reason to idealize *Seven Days in May* either intellectually or artistically. It is an honest and straightforward film, but no work of genius. The film has its moments, but as a whole, even while treating a subject that ought to arouse considerable passion, it generates relatively little heat. This is surely connected to Frankenheimer's outlook and the extremely limited outlook of American social reformism. The most remarkable feature of the film is the fact that the president and his advisors never consider warning or appealing to the American people. Indeed General Scott and the other conspirators, in the end, are merely forced to resign, without their activities having been made public. The president explicitly declares that the population, which has barely avoided coming under the heel of a military dictatorship, must not be told about the conspiracy, because it would create disorder!

The Train (1964), *Seconds* (1966) and *Grand Prix* (1966) are lesser works. *Seconds*, about an organization that provides older people with a new and younger identity, is particularly wrongheaded, strained and foolish. *Grand Prix*, a story of race-car drivers, is largely a technical exercise, whose dramatic narrative seems accidental. The work did not appear to have engaged Frankenheimer a great deal. It was about this time that Sarris suggested that the director's style had "degenerated into an all-embracing academicism, a veritable glossary of film techniques." Certainly by the end of the decade social and political processes had intervened to deflect Frankenheimer's course.

The attempt to reconcile reformism and the existence of the profit system, the project of American postwar liberalism, inevitably failed. The Vietnam War and the radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s unmasked a considerable section of the Democratic Party and drove it to the right. The end of the postwar boom, the loss of American economic hegemony and the growing social polarization within the US completed the process in the 1980s and 1990s. It is impossible to see Frankenheimer's evolution outside this process. He identified strongly with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and suffered with its collapse. This is literally so: on the final day of Senator Robert Kennedy's life in 1968, he was staying at Frankenheimer's house and the director drove him to the Ambassador Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, the site of his assassination.

Frankenheimer attributes much of the difficulties of the next phase of his life to a drinking problem, "Because you make decisions that are not totally in your best interest." Clearly, however, the personal decline took place at least in part because the filmmaker had considerably less to live for.

Frankenheimer's social concerns largely disappeared from his work for

the next two decades. He became identified more and more as an "action director," with competent and uninspired works such as *French Connection II* (1975) and *Black Sunday* (1977). The first is memorable principally for the strain of violence, indeed sadistic violence, which appears in Frankenheimer's work. This reached something of a height in the grisly and pointless *52 Pick-Up* (1986) and endured in Frankenheimer's work through his final feature films, including *Ronin* (1998) and *Reindeer Games* (2000).

Black Sunday has a somewhat specific political significance in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Bush administration has insisted that no one in official US circles had ever considered the possibility that aircraft might be used as bombs against public buildings. The 1977 film concerns a plot to use the Goodyear blimp (which obtains television pictures of sporting events) to bomb the Super Bowl football championship, killing tens of thousands of people. The film has two central figures, a Mossad agent (Robert Shaw) and a Palestinian woman (Marthe Keller)—presumably inspired by the airplane hijacker Leila Khaled—who is responsible for the operation.

One of the more politically telling moments occurs when the Israeli agent meets his Egyptian counterpart and asks for information about the female terrorist. The former explains the uncovered plot and suggests that its execution will have the most dire consequences, in the long run, for the Arab cause. Then, why do you not simply let it take place?, the Egyptian asks. Are we to assume that this option, which occurred to an American novelist (Thomas Harris) or screenwriter (Ernest Lehman) a quarter of a century ago, has never occurred before or since to the US intelligence and military apparatus?

Starting in 1994, having apparently dealt with his drinking and perhaps revived by the Clinton election, Frankenheimer emerged from his hibernation and began making a series of historical and biographical television films: *Against the Wall* (1994), about the Attica prison uprising in 1971; *The Burning Season* (1994), which treats the struggle of a Brazilian rubber tapper against the destruction of the Amazon rain forest; *Andersonville* (1996), the story of the notorious and murderous Confederate prison in the US Civil War; *George Wallace* (1996), the life and career of the Southern demagogue who led the struggle against civil rights; and *Path to War* (2002), about the Johnson administration and the Vietnam War.

That it was Frankenheimer who directed or was asked to direct these efforts cannot have been entirely accidental. No doubt he was one of the few individuals remaining in the film and television industry possessed of both the necessary technical skill and the liberal temperament to undertake such projects. He executed them honorably enough, endowing the works with his particular social vision. Nonetheless, one cannot help but note that in the final decade of his career Frankenheimer made no effort to animate purely fictional works with his brand of social reformism. His works are neatly divided between docu-dramas, most often concerned with issues of the 1960s and 1970s, and feature films, which pandered disastrously to prevailing tastes (*The Island of Dr. Moreau* [1996], *Ronin* and *Reindeer Games* —the latter in the Pulp Fiction vein.)

Frankenheimer's contribution to art and filmmaking was real, but distinctly limited. He entered into artistic life under unfavorable conditions in the 1950s and never transcended the narrow contours of studio filmmaking and American intellectual life of that era. The life and death struggle for artistic and social truth was never his. One can recall few, if any moments of truly liberating and spontaneous artistic inspiration.

To be fair, it would be difficult to argue that any of those who began directing films in the US at approximately the same time—Sidney Lumet, Blake Edwards and Arthur Penn, for example—outshone Frankenheimer by any immense degree. To reject the constraints of liberal anticommunism and a general satisfaction with the American status quo, as well as the pragmatic and eclectic aesthetics that generally accompanied such positions in the postwar period, is the task of another generation of filmmakers.