

Freedom, Democracy, and Communications — An Overview

By **FAY KANIN**

I'm very pleased on several counts to have been invited to speak here today.

Ken Mason tells me that I'm the first woman to have been asked to address this prestigious body at your annual luncheon. I am honored, and I can only take that as a heartening indication that women are more visible and viable in our industry; and I hope that I will be the first of *many*. After all, now that one woman has infiltrated the ASC, can more be very far behind?

I'm also glad to be here as a writer, because we writers don't often *get* a chance to communicate with our engineering and scientific film colleagues. Even though we share a "creative imagination," you in form and we in content, that is certainly the keystone of this marvel we call motion pictures.

We also share, with everybody else these days, questions and concerns about the future course of the entertainment industry. Last week, I served as moderator for a panel discussion that was part of a full-day symposium devoted to exploring just that. The one indisputable conclusion that was reached is . . . that *nobody knows the answers*. But more than 600 people turned out, starting at eight o'clock in the morning. They probably came because there is a strong sense that the visual revolution we're already experiencing has a broader significance, and portends profound changes in the

state of our culture, education, and certainly, our policies — changes that are going to alter the fabric of life as we've known it.

I recently ran into a writer in New York who, with great excitement, announced to me that he'd just bought a word processor. He enthusiastically described all its remarkable capabilities and, at the same time, told me that in his writing contracts, he now asks for income from "forms not yet invented" as the only way he can see to cope with the *peril* of runaway technology.

I left him to go to the theater, where I sat for eight and a half consecutive hours watching a brilliant company of actors bring Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby* alive on the stage. But probably what was equally exciting about it was the sense the audience had of a shared experience with all the people sitting around them — laughing and crying together, shouting, applauding — becoming a kind of extended family.

The experiences of that one day underline the conflicts we're all facing — as creators, as entrepreneurs, as engineers, as audiences. On the one hand is a desire to embrace and expand the marvels and mysteries of the new technologies — and on the other, a need to hang on to what is recognizable, human, familiar.

It is that ambivalence — the attraction of the new coupled with the anxiety that change always engenders — that makes these times so complex, and certainly provides a provocative context for your conference in this coming week.

I might add that as an organization classically concerned with standardization, you've got a heck of challenge ahead.



Fay Kanin

But probably I'm here today *most* logically wearing my *third* hat — as president of the Academy. We are, after all, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and *Sciences*. In the composition of our membership lies the best demonstration of the benevolent wedding of art and science in the process of moviemaking.

In the past couple of years, I've had occasion to travel a good deal for the Academy — to many countries of Western Europe, to Russia, to the People's Republic of China. It's been interesting everywhere to see how the impact of motion pictures has grown, and with it, the impact of the Academy Awards. With the possible exception of "Hollywood," I can safely say that "Oscar" is the single most universally recognized word relating to movies the world over.

Usually, I take an Oscar along on my trips, and I set it on a table during

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press conferences or seminars or official functions. The impact of that small, golden statuette on a roomful of seemingly sophisticated people must really be seen to be appreciated. At first it's greeted by a series of covert glances and a casual, "Oh, is that an 'Oscar'?" Then there's a desultory approach to view it more closely, followed by a rather sheepish, "Can I hold it?" and, on lifting it, "Heavy, isn't it?" And then, finally, a wide, open grin of enjoyment and an unshamed, "Would you mind if I had my picture taken with it?"

There's no doubt about it: "Oscar" has become a mythic figure — prized, coveted, admired. Even in China, it was recognized, touched, photographed by newspapers and television — a fact that amazed me in the light of China's lengthy separation from the world community.

Actually, my trip there came about as part of the first major implementation of U.S.-Chinese cultural relations after China's 30 years of cultural isolation. Under the auspices of the United States International Communication Agency (an arm of the State Department), I was invited in May of this year to accompany the first five American motion pictures to be sent to mainland China in a generation. Since there is no U.S. trade agreement in film with the People's Republic, the movies were to be shown in five of China's largest cities as an example of "Film Weeks." (The Chinese have sent five films in return that are traveling in the U.S. right now.)

The Motion Picture Association had agreed to provide five American movies gratis in the spirit of fostering better understanding between the two peoples, and had submitted a sizeable list of titles. The Chinese had selected and screened ten films, and subsequently chose *Singin' in the Rain*, *Shane*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Black Stallion*.

I don't think anyone involved — American or Chinese — anticipated the overwhelming, mind-boggling, runaway success of this first American

Film Week. In Beijing, the Chinese had planned to show the films in 16 theaters, five times a day. But the demand was so enormous, with people queuing up in the streets for tickets at 4 A.M., that the number of theaters was increased to 18, and the showings to eight performances daily — starting at 6:30 A.M. and ending at 1:30 A.M. In Shanghai, the number of theaters was increased from 36 to 45, again with eight performances a day — and in over 1000-seat theaters.

Reels were bicycled, literally, from one movie house to another, since a single print of each film served both cities. You can imagine the condition of the prints, freshly struck for this festival, by the time we viewed a couple of the showings in the second week. It was as if the movies were being seen through a hailstorm. Luckily, second and third sets of prints were on hand for showing in the last three cities.

It's interesting that the Chinese are as concerned with audience figures as we are. The attendance quoted for the week in Beijing was 670,000, and for the Shanghai engagement, 813,000. When we left China, with the films still to play in three cities, the projection was that nearly *three million* Chinese would have seen the films in five weeks!

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this experiment is that there would be an enormous market in mainland China for American movies, if a film agreement could ever be accomplished and the economic and political hurdles overcome. Motion pictures transcend language and geography and speak, people to people, as nothing else can. In addition there is a natural rapport and much experience in common among film people, which I felt strongly in China, as everywhere.

I remember particularly one seminar we had with film writers, actors, and directors in Shanghai, at which Arthur Knight, the film critic and historian who was one of our U.S. delegation, wanting to make a certain point, told a story about a man with a talking dog. When the man was com-

plimented on the animal's amazing ability, he said, "Yes, but what he really wants to do is *direct*." Well, of course, all the Americans present laughed, and while we waited for the interpreter to translate for the Chinese, I said to Arthur, "I think you're in trouble with that one. That's not going to travel." At this point, the Chinese, hearing the tag line, broke into gales of laughter, and I realized I was dead wrong.

But in spite of all of that, it's naive to think that an open American-Chinese film exchange, economic or otherwise, can come about either quickly or easily. The present Chinese cultural leaders walk a difficult and often risky path. Almost all of those we met, heads of cinema and the other arts, had been banished to work farms or imprisoned for being dangerous to the state during the period that curiously was called the "Cultural Revolution." Though I came back with great respect for the attempts of the present government to restore pride in China's cultural heritage and to revive all its arts, including its movies, what I felt while there was a *heightened appreciation of our own freedom* — to speak out, to be irreverent, to be critical, to dissent — and as a moviemaker, to make films which reflect those precious rights.

Indeed, one of the best reasons for going out of this country may be the chance it gives you to look at it from another perspective.

In Greece, I was interviewed by a young journalist who also seemed to have something *he* wanted to say. "You know, I'm very admiring of the United States," he told me. "I think it is a true democracy." I asked if he'd been here. "Oh, yes," he said. "I spent a year in your country. I visited Washington and I went to look at the White House. There were people outside shouting and parading with angry signs. So I went again the next day, and there were more people with more angry signs. Nobody stopped them or

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arrested them.” He shook his head. “That’s amazing. You see, it couldn’t happen *here*. If people did that outside *our* president’s house, they’d be carried off to jail. Or anywhere else in the world. You are a democracy,” he said again and grabbed my hand and pumped it.

As he did, I recalled that in Belgium I had shown a television movie of mine, *Friendly Fire*, to a group of several hundred European film students and moviemakers. As some of you may remember, the movie concerns an actual Iowa family whose son was killed in Vietnam by American artillery, and who waged a private war with the army over their right to know the facts of his death.

I opened the floor to discussion after the showing, and they asked me a lot of questions. Then I asked *them* a question. “Could a film like this, critical of the policies of the army and the government, have been made and shown on national television in any of your countries?” There was silence as they thought about it, and then came the answer. With the possible exception of Sweden, they felt unanimously that it could not.

For me, American movies are the greatest ambassador this country has. Beyond their extraordinary popularity with audiences everywhere for their

sheer entertainment value and their cinematic skill, what I believe recommends them to every nation is their openness in reflecting our society — with all its beauties and all its warts. They’re the movies of a country that isn’t afraid to mirror its weaknesses and its problems, to laugh at its idiocies as well as to celebrate its vigor and spirit and humanity. What better message to send to a world, a good portion of which is struggling under varying forms of censorship and repression?

I’ve felt very privileged to have spent most of my professional life working in this medium. Sitting in a movie theater and seeing your work up on that big screen — in Dolby Sound, hearing the sharp crack of laughter or feeling the joined silence of an audience — is an incomparable satisfaction.

Then a few years ago, I did my first movie for television, and I sat in my living room on the night it aired and watched it on that little box — no audience, no reactions. I must admit to being disappointed; I wasn’t sure I liked this at all. But in the next few days, wherever I went — in markets, drugstores, elevators, banks, coffee shops — I could hear people talking about it. And I began to comprehend the enormous impact of television. Even a film that earns what is consid-

ered a modest rating in prime time is seen by how many million — 20, 30, give or take a million? And in the case of *Friendly Fire*, 60 million!

When the *letters* start pouring in to the network, to the sponsor, to you — you realize something else, that this audience wants to *share its feelings* with you, to tell you how the movie affected them, their husbands or wives, their children. There is nothing like that in any other dramatic medium — it is unique.

In a theater, movies transport you out of yourself into another world, sometimes of illusion, sometimes of harsh reality, and send you away with a sense of shared experience.

TV comes into the living room and takes off its shoes and loosens its belt and opens a can of beer. Sometimes it yawns and falls asleep, but when it doesn’t, it has the ability to reach into people’s minds and hearts and change their lives, as nothing else can.

I guess the sum of what I’m trying to say is that we who are part of both these powerful media have an awesome responsibility to use them well. And with that, we have an *equal* obligation — to keep them free and open and daring and critical — so that my journalist friend in Greece and others out there, seeing them, can always know what democracy looks like.



Nashville, Tennessee, site of the 16th Annual Television Conference, to be held February 5 and 6, 1982. See you there!