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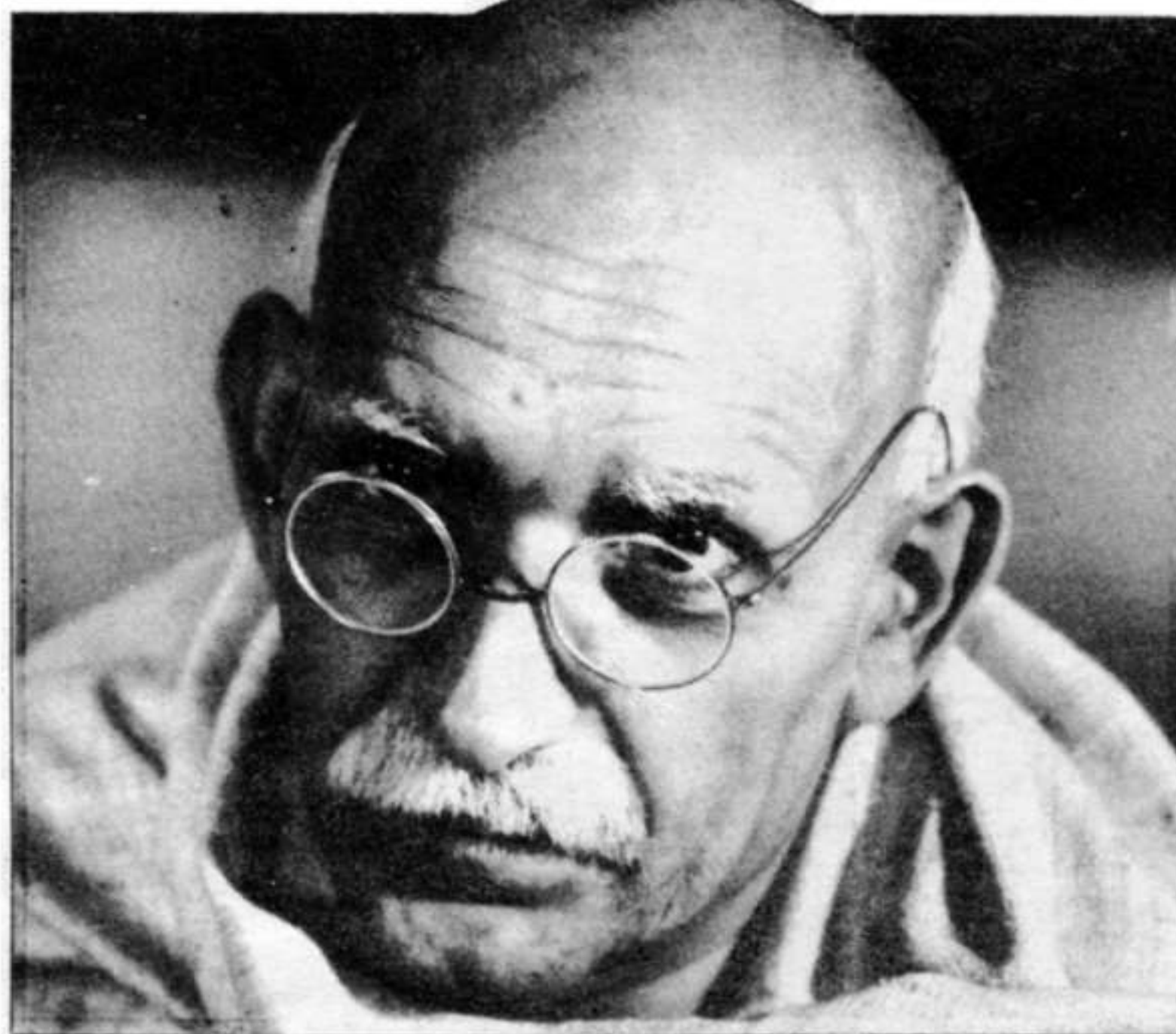
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A Viable Epic

GANDHI. Produced and directed by Richard Attenborough. With Ben Kingsley, Candice Bergen and Martin Sheen. At the Piedmont.

By George Csicsery

Most film epics about well known historical events or characters are doomed to esthetic failure from the outset. All too often they try to set a tone of reverence for their subject, employing heavy handed dramatic techniques, the writer, director, and cast, all pointing with both hands and feet at *the message* to convince their audience that what it is seeing is really important. The effort usually collapses in a jumble of clichés and ridiculous moments. For example, in the recently aired TV docudrama about the American Civil War, *The Blue and the Gray*, the scenes of Abraham Lincoln's assassination and death are portrayed with unbearably sanctimonious imprecision. Once Lincoln is dead, his Secretary of State enters the room to pronounce, "Now he belongs to the ages." This is the kind of stuff we get when filmmakers know that



pains to establish the humanity of Mohandas K. Gandhi by showing the relationship of momentous acts with the mundane, and by tracing the sublime elements of the Mahatma's philosophy to its pragmatic roots. In one scene Gandhi comes close to death from fasting in an attempt to put an end to the murderous rioting between Hindus and Moslems throughout India. After receiving assurances from the leaders of all factions that the violence has stopped he calmly turns to his disciple Mirabehn to ask for a glass of orange juice.

The effectiveness of the scene, and many others like it, is due largely to the versatility of actor Ben Kingsley, who plays Gandhi. The half-English, half-Indian Kingsley convincingly moves through fifty years of Gandhi's life, helping us see how a stuffy English-educated Indian lawyer became the political/religious leader of India. The evolution of Gandhi's character is no easy trick to render on film, because the personality, political, and spiritual aspects of Gandhi's life abounded with contradictions.

It would have been easy to show Gandhi as merely a shrewd political leader bent on challenging the anti-Indian discriminatory policies of 19th Century British South Africa, and then carrying his struggle for Indian independence to a successful conclusion. There would be good guys and bad guys, and Gandhi, of course would be on the side of the good guys. It would also have been easy to show Gandhi as primarily a religious hero, the saintly 'Mahatma,' spiritual charisma emanating from every pore. It must have been tempting. There are enough biblical epics of this type (*The Ten Com-*

mandments, *The Robe*, etc.) to guarantee good box office returns. But this is precisely what Nehru wanted Attenborough not to do.

It would even have been possible to make a film critical of Gandhi's lofty ethics and simplistic politics. There was enough failure in his life to justify this approach. His assault on the Indian caste system caused his wife, family, and friends undue hardships. His attempts to bridge over hatreds between Hindus and Moslems never had more than temporary success. The on-going litany of bloodshed between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh since Gandhi's death is a testament to that failure. But Attenborough's film and Ben Kingsley's acting convey all of these themes in a balanced coherent work. The unifying element is the treatment of Gandhi's internal struggles and the strength which emerges from them. The conflicts inside Gandhi are universal. They are no more paper tigers than the political and personal quandaries facing any man or woman alive today. The need to integrate the conduct of one's own life with one's larger objectives has, if anything, become magnified since Gandhi's assassination in 1948.

The film shows how Gandhi gradually accomplished this integration. Early in his long career of civil disobedience, Gandhi developed the visionary notion that it is more effective to win over one's enemies than to destroy them. The cycle of violence in which we trade "an eye for an eye for an eye results in everyone being blind," in Gandhi's words. Although Gandhi was an admirer of Jesus Christ, the message here is not abstention from violence for the sake of goodness, but a much more

practical one of striving for a resolution to conflict which is mutually beneficial to the conflicting parties. It simply makes more sense than gaining a victory which will breed resentments leading to a rematch once the defeated party regains his strength.

Gandhi called the policy he based on this idea *satyagraha*. Roughly translated it means: Soul Force. He explained it in his writing as "the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self." Gandhi's willingness to turn the other cheek, to accept violence and imprisonment without returning it, resulted in success when applied to British colonial authorities. It literally won them over by disarming them. Non-violent civil disobedience has never worked as well as when it was applied by Gandhi, because it has never been adopted on so large a scale. In most causes and movements the non-violent faction is incapable of prevailing over more bellicose elements seeking the same goal. They are often reduced to well-meaning bit players, upstaged by the more dramatic and newsworthy guerrillas or terrorists.

Gandhi's most unique accomplishment was that he was able to attract and hold the near unanimous support of all factions struggling for the independence of India. He did so by identifying with the most destitute elements of Indian society, and by putting their needs before all else, thus constructing the most broad-based mass movement in history. This allowed him unprecedented leverage in his dealings with politicians and parties representing the educated elite. They became powerless without his support.

Gandhi was worshipped by India's masses because he became one of them. Giving up the technological and cultural privileges accruing to him from his class and education, he adopted an exemplary life of self-abnegation and poverty. One would expect such a saintly life to fill a man with an inflated sense of himself. But Gandhi resisted that temptation and most other traps set by the ego for the successful. He took a vow of celibacy at the age of 37 and stuck to it until his death. He pre-occupied himself with domestic concerns at the model ashram where he lived outside Delhi at the height of his influence. He had the humility to recognize his own mistakes and change course when he saw a particular political campaign failing. Above all he maintained a sense of humor about himself.

Attenborough's film combines all of these aspects of Gandhi's life

without getting bogged down in any one of them. It is a dramatic success because it capably evokes the deeper themes while skirting the clichés. With the exception of South Africa's General Smuts (who after being defeated by Gandhi became one of his staunchest supporters and admirers), and Pakistan's first president Jinnah, the film presents the major characters in Gandhi's life with amazing fairness and sympathy. The most interesting of these is the portrayal of British Brigadier General Dyer (played by Edward Fox) who in 1919 ordered his troops to butcher a non-violent meeting of fifteen thousand Sikhs in their holy city of Amritsar. Fox portrays him as a complex villain, inflexible but aware that he has done something terribly wrong. The weakest scenes are those with American journalists played by Candice Bergen and Martin Sheen. Their presence sometimes destroys the illusion that Ben Kingsley is really Mohandas Gandhi, and reminds us that we are watching actors in a film.

Even so, these scenes do nothing to diminish Attenborough's accomplishment. The scale on which *Gandhi* was made could easily have subverted his initial intent. The three hour and seven minute film contains an all star cast and a total of 150 speaking parts. It required 126 days of cinematography, mostly in India, and has scenes with more extras than any film since Russia's Sergei Bondarchuk shot *Waterloo* using sixteen thousand costumed Russian soldiers trained in Napoleonic tactics. Attenborough re-staged Gandhi's funeral in New Delhi with three hundred thousand people. Less than two minutes of the scene are used in the finished film. This discipline is evident in many of the throwaway scenes other directors (like Bondarchuk) would have dwelt on, passing over them in slow motion sweeping pans so we can count the extras yet again. What is even more commendable is that a film like *Gandhi* was made for \$22 million in 1981-82; or by comparison, half of what it cost to make *Apocalypse Now* five years earlier.

The best thing about *Gandhi* is that it revives the viability of the historical epic film. It finds balance amidst all the temptations which could have led to disaster. And it does so by taking the big with the small and showing how one influences the other. "No man's life can be encompassed in one telling," writes Attenborough over the opening scene. "What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one's way to the heart of the man."

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the audience knows the subject. Everyone freezes up and sacrifices the muses of creativity on the altar of history.

Gandhi could easily have become this kind of film. Director Richard Attenborough certainly had the qualifications for performing another act of filmic lobotomy. He has been a life-long disciple of non-violence, and spent twenty years planning the production of a film based on the life of Gandhi. Unable to convince the European or American film industries to back him, he turned for support to people who knew Gandhi. Lord Mountbatten, the last English viceroy of India, provided an introduction to Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru in the early '60s. It was quite possibly Nehru's advice which kept Attenborough on the right track. During an interview in 1963 he told Attenborough, "Whatever you do, don't deify Gandhi. Don't make him sacrosanct and place him on a pedestal as we have here. He was too great a man."

To Attenborough's credit, the film approaches one of the century's greatest figures as an ordinary human being. Attenborough took great