

The Death Penalty: An Annotated List Of Films To See

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These films are covered in this order

BILLY BUDD (1962)

THE IDIOT (1951)

THE CRUCIBLE (1996)

SACCO AND VANZETTI (1971)

DEAD MAN WALKING (1995)

DEATH BY HANGING (1968)

DANTON (1983)

M (1931)

DEATH OF A PRINCESS (1980)

THE LAST DAYS (1998)

BEYOND RANGOON: THE LIFE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI (2000)

LA STRADA (1954)

FORBIDDEN GAMES (1952)

Introduction

Both my mother and my father opposed the death penalty long before I was born in 1947, an unpopular position in the southern United States back then. So it should come as no surprise that I am glad to assist in any way I can those engaged in the long struggle to end the death penalty. Amnesty International has for some time courageously opposed capital punishment, having seen thousands of people die for such crimes as proposing democracy, petitioning for grievances, practicing their religion, or speaking freely.

I have written on two documentaries, one TV interview, and 10 narrative films dealing with the death penalty, summary execution, and the hurt caused by a death. The 10 films are ones to see in thinking about the community we live in killing people deliberately and premeditatedly.

To sharpen our thinking on capital punishment, we can go to filmmakers from around the world who have thought about the issue and created masterworks. Even if they only touched on the death penalty as one of the many threads they were weaving together in their work, such as in *THE IDIOT*-- if that part is good enough, it should be seen. And if they have talked about the effect of a death on others well enough, as in *LA STRADA* and *FORBIDDEN GAMES*, those films are worth seeing too. The documentaries are only two of many that make an effective protest to capital punishment as a part of their overall statement.

The Annotations

BILLY BUDD (1962)

Directed by Peter Ustinov, who also stars as Captain Vere. Peter Ustinov produced the film and co-authored the screenplay. Robert Ryan plays Claggart. Terence Stamp has his film debut as Billy Budd. The film is in English.

Ustinov's *BILLY BUDD* is an eloquent statement against capital punishment, even if that punishment meets the letter of the law and takes a life for a life. Terence Stamp put

in many great performances, including in William Wyler's THE COLLECTOR and in Federico Fellini's episode in SPIRITS OF THE DEAD. But he puts in the best performance of his life as Billy-- a boy so open and likable it is heartbreaking. BILLY BUDD is about a teenaged boy on a ship as it used to be and laws inflexible as they are.

This film is the powerful retelling of Herman Melville's work, "Billy Budd, Foretopman." Melville was inspired to write his original story based in part on the Somers affair of 1842 in which three sailors were executed under American law on an American ship named Somers. This was controversial for several reasons, one of which was that a full court on land was not far away. And there was no war going on; it was peace time. Melville, who resets the story on a British ship, raises questions about Billy's sentence, even though it is wartime and even though the ship is in the Mediterranean far from home port. So in his writing in 1885, Herman Melville had the lonely task of calling into question a use of capital punishment.

The great actor Peter Ustinov carries on this work and brings it to all audiences, regardless of educational level. I recommended an 8th grade public school teacher take her class to this film; she says these urban 14- and 15- year olds were absolutely outraged by Billy's unjust hanging in the last few moments of the film and talked about it excitedly for a long time.

BILLY BUDD is by far the most clear and accessible older film on capital punishment listed here. While the more recent DEAD MAN WALKING provokes thought and shows all sides, BILLY BUDD makes us face Billy's fate with a single response filled with raw, justified, unstoppable reason-emotion-outcry. I first saw BILLY BUDD when I was 10 years old and I haven't gotten over it yet. If there is one classic film all supporters and opponents of the death penalty should see, BILLY BUDD is it. It gives new meaning to the words "extenuating circumstances."

BILLY BUDD actually has the potential to change minds or open minds to the thousands of possibilities of what could go wrong with a procedurally correct death sentence. It and DEAD MAN WALKING are the only two films on this list I would recommend without reservation for showing to people opposed to the death penalty. The others are good and anyone could enjoy them, but I doubt that they would have that much effect on most people in relation to 21st century death verdicts in the real world. They would be interpreted in other ways.

In BILLY BUDD, there is only one interpretation possible and in the fight to end the death sentence I consider BILLY BUDD to be an ace on the table.

THE IDIOT (1951)

Directed by Akira Kurosawa. In Japanese with subtitles.

Japanese director Akira Kurosawa made his reputation with three films: RASHOMON, IKIRU, and SEVEN SAMURAI. But within the same four year period he produced these films, he made a fourth film: THE IDIOT. In THE IDIOT, Kurosawa tells the story of a man second in line to be executed by American troops after World War Two and his witnessing the apprehension, suffering, and death of the man who was first in line.

Although the protagonist is spared, the event changed his whole life and if we just watch the first 64 minutes of this 3 1/2 hour film-- to the end of the party scene-- we will get to hear him tell how and why. And we will also see the resolve it gave him to live with overflowing sympathy for all, which is on his face at every moment in the film-- not easy to act or capture.

Kurosawa takes Fyodor Dostoevski's novel The Idiot and sets it right after World War Two in Japan. The men being shot are war criminals, certainly people who, for most of us, have earned the least sympathy. Yet the protagonist, found to be innocent at the last moment, feels so much, as his story bears out. His behavior toward each and every person is changed.

I say just watch to the end of the party scene, because it seems Kurosawa was not in a position to stop the studio from butchering the editing. Watching the whole-- very slow-- film is an intense game of intellectual chess just to keep track of who the characters are, at least in the subtitled American version. But all about capital punishment is in the beginning and it is all there, intense human feeling watching someone being killed.

THE IDIOT contains the most sensitive and beautiful reaction to watching someone being executed ever captured in a classic film. This hour and four minutes would make an excellent conversation starter on the issue. But I recommend most people stop there.

The whole 3 1/2 hours of THE IDIOT in the American subtitled version is not accessible to any but the most determined cinephile who will have to watch it two or three times just to figure out who the characters are.

THE CRUCIBLE (1996)

Directed by Nicholas Hytner. Starring Winona Ryder, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Paul Scofield. Arthur Miller wrote the original play "The Crucible" and also the film's screenplay. In English.

The play "The Crucible" is a great work to experience. It describes the injustices of the 1692 Salem witch hunts and, by direct parallel, the witch hunts against communists led by Senator Joe McCarthy that were going on when Arthur Miller's play was first produced in 1953. Because of 30 minutes worth of blunders into Hollywood schlock by the director, the film THE CRUCIBLE is a lesser work, though for 1 1/2 hours it is great and at a world class level.

In the play and film a man named Giles Corey is legally executed by having stones piled on him. He would not cooperate with the Salem, Massachusetts authorities who were executing people for witchcraft. During his research for the play, Miller found that American law did allow such executions for people like this stubborn hero.

Capital punishment is one of the central themes of the film THE CRUCIBLE. A total of 19 people were executed in Salem for refusing to name other innocent people for a state-run torment and inquisition. THE CRUCIBLE is a good reminder American government has not always been infallible in deciding who is to die and who is to live.

THE CRUCIBLE applies to today's court procedures in three ways. First, in some countries today such as Zimbabwe it is a very serious crime to bring a "false" charge of witchcraft, even in a verbal statement to only one other individual. Courts still hear these cases. Second, pressure to falsely finger a defendant for capital crime can be equally intense today as it was in the film-- as Bob Marley said, "Read it in the news." Third, capital defendants, like those in THE CRUCIBLE, can face a bigoted judge and outrageous legal procedures and rules-- watching the travesty unfold with their lives in the balance. So overall, although we may cheerfully say THE CRUCIBLE is no longer relevant, I'm afraid what a real individual can potentially face today is no different from

1692 in Salem. There may be no difference in degree; and unfortunately, not even a difference in kind.

This is a useful film for both pro- and anti-death- penalty people to meditate on. It makes a strong case against the death penalty and offers a good taking off point for discussion of all the issues just covered.

SACCO AND VANZETTI (1971)

Directed and co-scripted by Giuliano Montaldo. Joan Baez co-authored and performed four songs about Sacco and Vanzetti especially for this film. The film is mostly in English, but some brief statements and conversations are in Italian with no subtitles.

Sacco and Vanzetti was *the* death penalty case for the first half of the 20th century in the United States and parts of Europe. I was well aware that the two men were unjustly put to death, even as a boy in the 1950's some 30 years after their execution. In the early 1960's I was told that Sacco's last letter to his son was one of the finest letters ever written and I found it and read it and was moved by it, particularly what he tries to tell his son in the last paragraph. The letter is read to us as we watch the actor writing in his jail cell in the last part of the movie.

"Dagos," as Italians were contemptuously called, were widely hated in the U.S. at the time Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested in 1920 for a double-murder/robbery and finally put to death by electric chair in 1927. I will mention here two examples, two generations, of this hatred in the South.

1. A group of 11 Italian Americans were lynched by a mob in 1891. They had just been acquitted of murder in a trial, but a group of bigots forcibly removed them from a city jail and hung them all. My father talked about this often, always in grief.
2. My grandfather was born in 1889. As a youth in a small town, he had his heart set on a woman-- who had her heart set on marrying him. But her brother married an Italian woman and she told my grandfather in fury: "I will never marry now. I don't want my children to be related to dagos." In particular, she couldn't stand the thought of her children being related to Italian children. My very

articulate grandfather begged her many times to relent, but failed. The woman never married.

These were not just isolated events. As the film brings out, those vicious attitudes are what Sacco and Vanzetti were up against in New England when they tried to bring Italian-American witnesses who knew where they were at the time of the murders.

SACCO AND VANZETTI has a 100% hard-core political script and as a result a few interchanges between the characters are overwritten. The facts in the case can and do speak for themselves. Also, the video I saw had multiple technical imperfections. But the film is well conceived and well acted and once the trial begins, entirely engrossing. It is not unusual for a legal case to have terrible flaws in it before, during, and after a trial. But this 1920's capital case sets a standard of unfairness, arrogance and prejudice that, while it has been equaled, is impossible to surpass.

In addition to being Italian, Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists and pacifists who tried to assault or harm no one. People who take their avoidance of war and nonviolent anarchism seriously have existed in fair numbers in northern California and London, England, during my lifetime. Between the 1880's and 1930's there was a major movement of anarchists; it included both violent and nonviolent branches. In the first part of the 20th century when communism and capitalism were mortal enemies, American and European anarchists opposed both with equal vigor. During the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's communist and anarchist armies fought battles and there was an anarchist police chief of a Spanish city. The best American work covering the anarchist movement is Eugene O'Neill's 5 1/2 hour play "The Iceman Cometh." So Sacco and Vanzetti had plenty of company for their views in their period, although their worldview was shared by only a small percentage of Americans.

The outcome of many death penalty cases depends on how well the prosecutor and jury can relate to those accused. The case of Sacco and Vanzetti is a textbook example of how a despised ethnic minority with pariah political opinions can get treated in the real world, unless restraint and checks and balances are in place.

Vanzetti said during his trial in Massachusetts they tried to hide their anarchist beliefs from the police, because they had a friend, a brother Italian anarchist, who just two days before had fallen 13 floors to his death from police offices in New York City. They were

quite afraid that something similar might happen to them. In fact, something of the kind did happen to them anyway, because they were charged, tried, and convicted in large measure because they were Italian anarchists, even though they had not even the remotest connection with the crime that was pinned on them.

There is an eerie resemblance between the New York death, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and a fatal fall of an anarchist from a police building in Milan, Italy 50 years later. In 1978 in Milan right after it happened, people there were very worked up about it and even showed me where the anarchist hit the pavement. The Milan man in custody too had not even the remotest connection to the crime being investigated and was arrested and questioned solely because of prejudices and presuppositions about his anarchist political philosophy.

Dario Fo, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote a play about this case called "The Accidental Death Of An Anarchist." In his hilarious farce, Fo gives the series of ever weaker police descriptions as to what actually happened a major roast, the roasting in hell they deserved.

While the film SACCO AND VANZETTI makes dead serious work out of showing the New York fall again and again, Dario Fo gets his ample revenge-- in as much as is humanly possible-- for the Milan man through wildly-conceived ridicule and the absurdity of the evolving excuses.

Four real-life Italian anarchists who had broken no law died due to mindless, angry stereotyping. Two of them die in falls whose best explanation seems to be summary execution and two of them die in the electric chair.

A person may say the 1920's issues of Sacco and Vanzetti's day are gone, but are they? For if 1/10th of what the film says is true, and unfortunately it is, there is the potential for a miscarriage of justice in any trial such as theirs where the judge, prosecutor, jury, or governor get out of hand. As in THE CRUCIBLE, this is certainly as possible today as it was then, particularly where the treatment of evidence or the closing of minds to new facts are concerned.

From 1977 to 2000 the state of Illinois executed 12 people... and had to release 13 others from death row after it was proved they were wrongly convicted. This is certainly not

reassuring. How did those 13 people *get* on death row? It turned out that the same thing was going on in other states. If we are going to execute even one innocent person, it is just not worth it, nor is it right-- the whole system ought to be scrapped permanently. I feel just as strongly now about this as I did in high school when I read Nicola Sacco's last letter.

Since he was silenced, I want to end by quoting part of his letter; it was written to his only child-- a seven year old boy-- right before he was killed:

* * * * *

"My dear son,

"I have dreamed of you day and night. I did not know any longer if this was life I was living or death. I wanted to return to embrace you and your mama again.

"Forgive me my child for this unjust death, which takes you away from a father while you are still so young.

"Today they can burn our bodies, but they can not destroy our ideas. Those will remain for the youth of the future, for the young people like yourself.

"Remember, my son, the happiness you have when you are at play: don't keep that happiness all for yourself. Try humbly to understand your neighbor. Help the weak. Help those who cry. Help the persecuted and oppressed. They are your best friends."

* * * * *

So wrote Nicola Sacco. How many of us, facing immediate death, could say it so well?

DEAD MAN WALKING (1995)

Directed by Tim Robbins. Starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Based on the autobiographical book Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean. In English.

Tim Robbins has created that rarity, a Hollywood film that is without flaw on all levels. The excellent use of reflections visually, music by masters Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Cash, and Ry Cooder, Sarandon's understated acting done mainly through her eyes, and Sean Penn's 100% convincing performance as a contemptible rapist/murderer filled

with hate, all make the film a success. DEAD MAN WALKING looks more squarely than any other film on this list at what the death penalty is about in the U.S.A. of today.

The film is set apart by a balanced view of the material, letting everyone have their say without censorship or being put down. The parents of the two dead teens, the inmate and his mother and three brothers, the defense lawyers, and the staff in the prison, all get their full say. This is above all a thoughtful film where people will get to test their views on the death penalty again and again. It stands for accepting full responsibility for violence and for compassion towards all, even if that compassion comes with a high personal price tag and is difficult to live.

It also stands for acknowledging full responsibility of our government for violence against people who are strapped down and can't move. I make excuses for no man or woman's crime, nor do I lessen its impact and horror. I do not believe the slate can be wiped clean for severe acts of violence, that is impossible for all concerned. Crime victims and their families need support and aid for years, not days, after a heinous crime; and they certainly don't get what they need in today's world. DEAD MAN WALKING takes all these positions.

However, we have no business killing off people we hate or want to punish; we simply don't have the right. To date, over 100 countries-- in law or practice-- agree with me. DEAD MAN WALKING makes this case very carefully and very well.

DEATH BY HANGING (1968)

Script co-authored, narrated, and directed by Nagisa Oshima. In Japanese with subtitles.

This entire film is a protest against the death penalty, done by one of Japan's foremost directors. In Japan they still use hanging. The first time I saw this film I loved it and thought about it for years. International audiences also give it a high rating. It is about the punishment for a rape/murder by a Korean, a looked-down-on minority in Japan. The second time I saw it I liked it less. There is a lot of abstract repetition of numbers without meaning and it is slow. But it does get you to meditate on the actual act of society taking a life, the moment of execution, which takes up much of the film. DEATH BY HANGING is an odd but valuable film.

DANTON (1983)

Based on a play, this film was co-scripted by Andrzej Wajda, four others, and the playwright. Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Starring Gérard Depardieu as Danton. In Polish with subtitles.

The lengths someone will go to avoid being executed compose the entire plot of this film. Wajda made some great Polish films under Soviet domination and this film has more to do with the situation in Poland in 1982 under the Soviets than about its apparent topic, the French revolution. DANTON is about someone who is condemned to death but has just one chance to get a reprieve.

M (1931)

Directed by Fritz Lang. Starring Peter Lorre. In German with subtitles.

Peter Lorre is a child killer pleading for his life so he will not be killed, the role that made his reputation. Hollywood took note of the performance of this unknown German actor and invited him to come to the U.S. where he went on to make films such as CASABLANCA and ARSENIC AND OLD LACE.

The whole film M shows how enraged everyone is with Lorre as he kills one child after another. Organized crime begins to hunt him down because he is giving them a bad name. Lorre's face does not appear until he goes before the organized crime figures, who put on their own trial for him. Each of them denounces him and are eager to find him guilty and kill him. Lorre only gives one speech in the film and that is a long, brilliantly-written speech in which he begs to live, even after confessing all the crimes. M is excellent for trying to understand the impossible to understand or accept. In M, as in THE CRUCIBLE, an entire community is enraged and calling for death, not an uncommon occurrence in the sensationalized crimes of today's news headlines.

Two Documentaries
And One Interview

DEATH OF A PRINCESS (1980)

Written and directed by Anthony Thomas. This TV documentary was broadcast in London, England. In English.

The royal family in Saudi Arabia did everything in its power to stop the broadcast of this documentary. Their effort during the weeks leading up to this broadcast was front page news, especially the final two weeks when the government of Saudi Arabia and its royal family threatened to break all contracts held with British companies and withdraw all their assets from Great Britain unless the show was pulled. This involved billions of dollars. A delegation from Saudi Arabia was sent to 10 Downing Street and demanded that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher personally intervene and block the broadcast. Thatcher tried to explain that she had no legal power to do so and could not do so in any case in a democracy; but the demands were even more aggressive and shrill following the meeting than before. This meant great ratings for DEATH OF A PRINCESS.

The show was all true and very innocuously and unsensationally presented, except for the central facts. A Saudi princess had fallen in love with a commoner, had sex with him, and was trying to flee the country so they could marry and make a life for themselves abroad. The sex alone was a capital crime and, when they were caught on the way to the airport, they were beheaded by sword in a public place. The Saudi royal family was not ashamed of keeping these two lovers from freedom or of killing them. That they were satisfied with. What they objected to is that the truth of what happened be told on TV.

I, like most other people I knew, watched this tame recounting of facts. After the broadcast, the Saudis, realizing they had lost the battle, left their investments in place, but recalled their ambassador in a fury. And that is how an Arab Juliet died beside her beloved Romeo. Local customs differ; but the death penalty can look quite ugly when looked at closely.

THE LAST DAYS (1998)

Directed by James Moll. In English.

Steven Spielberg initiated, gave first money to, and oversaw a large-scale Holocaust visual/oral history project involving over 50,000 survivors in 57 countries who gave their testaments in 33 different languages. In 1998, THE LAST DAYS won an Academy Award for best feature documentary. It is a moving documentary about the lives and losses of five Hungarian Jewish survivors. Very importantly, the lives of the five are given in full-- before, during and after their losses-- and their lives are covered into old age. This is an excellent perspective from which to view the loss of a beloved one to an execution-- who were, in these cases, either relatives or siblings or parents. Although nothing is thrown in your face in THE LAST DAYS, nothing is spared you either, which is as it should be.

The film contains a piece of execution footage that stands out; it is documentary footage that shows real people dying. It is winter in Latvia. Several people are standing at the bottom of a 9 foot deep, by 7 foot wide, by 12 foot long hole in the ground. Nazi soldiers shoot them there to be free of the trouble of having to throw their bodies in. Then the soldiers shovel snow on the living and the dead.

Always before I had heard of people being shot in various countries so they would fall into an open grave behind them. This film footage exceeded my wildest fantasies for how bad it could get, to be in your grave, looking up without hope.

There are many accounts of summary executions in THE LAST DAYS and the pain of such losses is clearly shown to last 50 years and beyond.

BEYOND RANGOON: THE LIFE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI (2000)

Hoda Kotbe interviewed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a NBC Dateline segment entitled BEYOND RANGOON: THE LIFE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI. The segment was shown in the U.S. nationwide on August 13th, 2000. The TV program is not to be confused with the earlier feature film BEYOND RANGOON, from which it draws its title. Both Kotbe and Suu Kyi spoke in English for the interview.

Ms. Kotbe underwent some danger to get this interview. For example, British national James Mawdsley is serving a 17 year sentence for handing out human rights leaflets in Burma, while Burmese citizens doing the same thing, with the same persistence, could get the death penalty. While Hoda Kotbe was not in the same extremes of danger, she

deserves much praise for being the first journalist in 11 years to obtain a broadcast interview with Suu Kyi.

Aung San Suu Kyi was given the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. And she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for seeking nonviolent change in Burma. She is a capitalist who believes in an open society, with freedom of religion, association, and the press. She was already under house arrest when the party she heads won over 80% of the seats for parliament in 1990. However, the election was 'canceled' by the military so they could keep ruling, which they do to this day. Suu Kyi should be prime minister, yet she has spent over a decade under arrest. Even when she hasn't been under arrest, her movements have still been harshly restricted. As she says in her writing, when she gave a speech across her garden wall, some people would bring a change of clothes in case they were taken directly to jail for listening to it: there would be no change of clothes in jail. Burma expert Dan Orzech reports, "Most of the elected members of Burma's parliament are either in jail, in exile, or have been killed."

Suu Kyi's press secretary was sent to prison with a 20 year sentence. Her godfather Leo Nichols got her weekly column (collected in Letters From Burma) to a newspaper in Japan. The newspaper association there gave the 52 columns its #1 prize for journalism for that year, 1996. For his effort, Nichols was arrested and imprisoned for "illegal use of a fax machine." He died 2 1/2 months later in a hospital; his body was not released to his family, who were advised not to attend a government-arranged funeral. It has been a long time since I heard of someone giving their life that we might read the book of an acclaimed writer and speaker.

I will quote brief portions from Suu Kyi's Letters From Burma so you can get a feeling for it:

* * * * *

In 1995 on Burmese Independence Day, nearly 2000 people gathered outside Suu Kyi's house for a traditional entertainment by a youth troupe. "...As soon as... U Pa Pa Lay started to speak it became obvious, to the surprise and untold delight of the audience, that this was going to be an act such as had not been witnessed in Burma for several decades." The comedian said he had spent a year in jail for making a joke and that he expected to be imprisoned again for this performance, which would be in accordance

solely with what the troupe and he wanted to say. "The thunderous applause that greeted U Pa Pa Lay's introductory remarks was a fitting prelude to a performance (of) witty skits, brilliant jokes, sprightly dances and lively music." The event had been expected to go on for three hours, but it lasted six hours because the audience wanted it "to continue for as long as possible... The audience reveled in the artistic skill of the whole performance and were filled with deep admiration for the courage of the company, in particular for U Pa Pa Lay and his fellow comedian U Lu Zaw who so bravely gave voice to what the people had been wishing-- but not daring-- to say for many a year." Later "the troupe came to say goodbye to me... They knew that they were very likely to be arrested soon but they were extremely cheerful. They assured me nothing would detract from the great satisfaction achieved from a performance conducted entirely in accordance with their own wishes." The next day "they were all taken away by the authorities. We are now waiting for the next act in the drama of this most courageous troupe. Come what may, we shall stand by them."

* * * * *

And now we need to review some final hard facts. Suu Kyi has been kept from seeing her children except for a handful of times times briefly since 1989. When her husband was dying of cancer, his request for a visa to see her was denied. He said "I want to die in her arms" yet he died without ever seeing her.

When she was the U.S. Secretary of State, Madeline Albright cited Burma, then a nation of 48 million, as the second largest producer of heroin in the world. The State Department still says that Burmese government officials are "involved in the drug business or are paid to allow the drug business to be conducted by others."

Also, there is the notorious practice of soldiers burning down a village and making the villagers do forced-labor work under pain of death for no pay for years-- in some cases, for 10 years. According to a U.N. body of employers and workers called the International Labor Organization up to 10% of economic activity in Burma-- that is, 10% of its gross national product-- is generated by forced labor. The International Labor Organization has expelled Burma, the only country ever to be expelled in its history. After Suu Kyi requested the meeting for a decade, the junta finally held its first talks with her-- then broke them off.

In a resolution in October 2000, both the U.S. House and Senate called for the recognition of democracy by Burma's military rulers and the release from prison of all

elected members of parliament. And this 'Sense of Congress' resolution condemned the Burmese junta's "record of forced labor, exploitation, and sexual violence against women." Over 50 companies, of their own will, decided to pull out of the country entirely, including Levi Strauss, Toyota, Macy's, UPS, Texaco, Eastman Kodak, Hewlett-Packard, Heineken, and Pepsi. In 2003, the U.S. Congress, with only three dissenting votes, banned all American companies from doing business in Burma, just as it had done with apartheid-era South Africa before it.

Suu Kyi has always said that other individuals-- including members of her party and people from Burma's ethnic minorities-- have suffered much more than she, which unfortunately is true. In NBC's Dateline episode you see a really fine person speaking calmly about living under great sacrifice for democracy and freedom for her people. Then at the end of it, you learn the military has charged her with high treason, a charge they threaten could carry the death penalty. So you go along in this 15 minute interview learning more and more about the world's most celebrated dissident, only to find that capital punishment is an option for the dictators, to be visited upon this woman whom their U.S. ambassador describes as "Just a housewife-- nothing more than that."

On The Hurt Of Death

There are another two films about violent death-- and its effect on a witness to that death-- which should be mentioned. These offer us something to think about in relation to the children and families of those put to death. And, also importantly, they sensitize us to how hurt people can be by any death.

LA STRADA (1954)

Directed and co-written by Federico Fellini. The film stars Anthony Quinn and Fellini's lifetime muse and partner Giulietta Masina. There is an Italian-language version with subtitles. Also, there is an English-dubbed version in which Anthony Quinn speaks his own lines.

Pain at witnessing a death from a blow struck in anger agonizingly destroys Giulietta Masina; then her response destroys Anthony Quinn. The whole macho ethic that is so callous about creating death in this world is described in detail. Quinn is a circus strong man who breaks links of iron by expanding his chest. The price Quinn pays for his

insensitivity is shown in one overpowering scene by his reaction to his irrevocable losses. The value of human life and respecting it-- and what happens when we don't-- are basic to this film.

FORBIDDEN GAMES (1952)

Directed by René Clément. In French with subtitles.

A four-year-old girl sees both of her parents die in the opening seconds of this film, as German Nazi aircraft strafe French refugees who are struggling along the road of escape. Clément made this film to show the effect of death on one single life out of those affected amidst World War Two's massive toll, 52 million dead.

Considering it from the viewpoint of capital punishment, it shows the brutalizing effect and suffering that loss brings those who are left behind, just as LA STRADA and THE IDIOT do. The little girl who stars in FORBIDDEN GAMES earned it the Academy Award-- her breathing while crying, every moment of what she does is absolutely flawless-- and she and her grief are the main subjects of the film. She is young, so her behavior takes unusual turns, but there is no doubt in this film that human life has so much value that losing her loved ones has destroyed her own life in a way that we will have to see this film to imagine.

Conclusion

The Nazi's and their heirs today in countries like Tibet, Uzbekistan, and Sudan have put many innocent people to death in summary or "fake judicial" executions. For me, the U.S. should abolish the death penalty because we can easily afford to. If the developed G-8 nations don't do it, the dictatorships can simply point to us as an example for their practices, which run along the lines of THE LAST DAYS and the slaughter of 3,000 demonstrators on 8/8/88 in Burma as they called for free and fair elections. Antidemocratic regimes glory in the indiscriminate, raw use of power to kill-- put simply, killing because you can.

Dictatorships take major comfort in our continued use of capital punishment. It makes their own practices stand out less. By gratifying ourselves in killing each "evil doer" here in the U.S., in fact we are setting it up for thousands of good people to be killed by

dictators with the words back to us: internal matter, broke the law, you have the death penalty too. Until we let the death penalty fall into our own history and isolate military rulers who kill their own, we add significantly to the world's problems. Carefully planned and premeditated killing is very wrong, as wrong for us collectively as a community as it is for the criminal.

Now you have heard my positions, which may or may not be yours. If you want to think more about this issue, you can see those films I've named that are of interest to you. If you have suffered a personal loss from a crime and want to even the score, I am not talking directly to you: we all deserve respect, including you and me.

Most of the films I name can be rented for a small sum. And most of them can even be rented and mailed to you by Facets (800-532-2387. facets.org) or Net Flix (800-585-8131. netflix.com) They are world class films on capital punishment and are worth seeing.