The China Syndrome. Director: James Bridges; Producer: Michael Douglas.

China Syndrome arrives much ballyhooed, as an enthralling political thriller, overflowing with gripping action, desperate circumstances, and stunning performances. The publicity for the picture emphasizes its entertainment value, and in the United States, the stars — Jane Fonda, Jack Lemmon, and Michael Rogers — carefully downplayed the film’s highly political theme. ALR readers who heard Dale Bridenbaugh, the ex-General Electric employee, on his lecture tour of Australia some time ago, will be familiar with the film’s focus: an accident at a nuclear reactor, the discovery of wholesale breaches of the safety regulation procedures, and a ruthless attempt at cover-up by the nuclear energy company.

During the film’s initial release in America, the nuclear energy industry campaigned vigorously against it — until the events at the Three Mile Island reactor near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, gave it some concrete, rather than fictional, bad publicity to deal with. So as China Syndrome comes to us, it has not only a prophetic quality, but also a militant quality, as a film under siege from Big Business, under attack by corporate interests trying to quash the film’s “truth”. Given this context, it is not surprising that the China Syndrome has been hailed by anti-uranium, and anti-nuclear energy groups, environmentalists, and those with a comprehensive critique of monopoly capitalism — and the picture has been viewed as a weapon in the struggle against the Forces of Darkness.

In this review, I want to sound a note of caution. It is true that the film graphically portrays Big Business baddies, and the ruthlessness of corporate strategies which put profit before people. It is true that it also graphically illustrates the flaws in nuclear technology, flaws inescapably linked to the political economics of the industry. And it is the case that it is heavily critical of government regulatory and licensing agencies, portraying them as perfunctorily ineffective and/or compromised. You will almost certainly walk out of this movie uneasy about the safety of nuclear reactors. You will almost certainly regard any claims by the nuclear energy industry to self-regulation as a sick joke, and you will view with scepticism the claim of the technology to be foolproof and “fail-safe”.

Now, given the film’s hey-hold-on-there input into a debate which has been dominated by the nuclear energy “realists” who proclaim the safety of this energy source, why have any reservations, especially when Three Mile Island gives credence to the film’s “message.”

Well, the film’s message, in many ways, is less about the need to scrutinise the capitalist context of the nuclear energy industry than about the strength of the democratic system to expose the baddies and, implicitly to rectify any errors which might have crept in. The film celebrates the capacity of ordinary people, no matter how squeezed and trapped in corporate structures, to let their consciences be their guide, to feel civic responsibility and, when the crunch comes, to manifest that responsibility and to tell the truth. Most particularly, China Syndrome is about the capacity of the media — in this case, television — despite its own monopoly corporate nature, to be the voice of the people, to be the guardians of fair play, democracy, truth and liberty. The “hero” of China Syndrome turns out to be The Power of the Media, and the film explicitly devalues citizens’ organisations, the anti-nuke lobby, etc., portraying their public protests as weird and irrelevant.

Some of you may remember Watergate, that mammoth indictment of American democracy which, over the intervening years, has undergone an amazing transformation in people’s minds. Watergate is no longer seen as the product of an economic distortion which is systemic, but is rather viewed as an aberration, attributable in large measure to the particularly paranoid nature of Richard Nixon’s personality, and his personal abuse of presidential power. And the proof that nothing is actually amiss with American democracy — despite Watergate’s wholesale involvement of elected officials, agencies of repression, etc., etc., — lies in the capacity of two unknown and inexperienced journalists (Woodward and Bernstein) to tell the truth, to expose the whole maggotty mess. Out of the ruins, out of the incontrovertible evidence that American democracy is systematically distorted by economic power and privilege rises, new and shining, American Democracy cleansed by freedom of the press.

China Syndrome is simply a nuclear Watergate, and the plot essentially the same as in All the President’s Men. Jane Fonda is a reporter for a Los Angeles television station and normally covers those way-out stories with which LA is wondrously replete: the doctor who makes house calls to ailing fish, tiger’s birthday parties, and the like. She wants to break onto “hard” news, the kind of TV that exposes the machinations of the big bosses, the kind that might have crept in. The film celebrates the capacity of the media — in this case, television — despite its own monopoly corporate nature, to be the voice of the people, to be the guardians of fair play, democracy, truth and liberty. The “hero” of China Syndrome turns out to be The Power of the Media, and the film explicitly devalues citizens’ organisations, the anti-nuke lobby, etc., portraying their public protests as weird and irrelevant.

While doing a series on energy sources in Southern California, she and her cameraman are present and surreptitiously film an accident at a nuclear energy plant. They rush back with their scoop to the TV station, which cautiously refuses to run it on the 6:00 news, preferring to check with the energy company first. The company’s PR man, a plausible cross between Jimmy Carter and Uriah Heep, denies the “accident” and the station refuses to run the film. Fonda’s free-lance cameraman, narked at this insult to his professional competence and at the station’s gutsless kowtowing to corporate power, shows the film to ex-nuclear industry experts. These experts, now part
of the anti-nuke lobby, confirm that an "accident" happened, although meltdown was avoided.

Meanwhile, although the incident is examined by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the energy company gets a clean bill of health — vital for its application for the licensing of a new reactor — the company's professional expert on duty at the time of the accident/incident (Jack Lemmon) has nagging doubts. He discovers that the company which built the plant falsified its safety inspection reports. There may be serious faults in vital welds; the crucial water coolant might be lost; lose the coolant and...melt-down. The incredibly hot core could melt through to China — the China Syndrome — although the most likely result, once the core struck the earth's water table, would be the emission of great clouds of radioactivity which would spread over hundreds of miles. Lemmon shows the falsified inspection documents to his plant supervisor but the latter, under heavy pressure from the energy company's Board to get the plant economically viable again, orders Lemmon to disregard his suspicions and to bring the plant "on-line" after its temporary shutdown.

Lemmon's conscience, his duty as a professional, leads him to contact Fonda. They try to get the documents to the Licensing hearing, as evidence against the opening of the new plant, but industry heavies in a Mafia-style operation "rub out" the evidence. Recognising both the irresponsible corporate conspiracy of silence and the dangers in the plant, Lemmon takes over the control room to prevent the overloading of the plant's system. He also wants to go on television to proclaim his findings and their implications. The corporate management want to prevent this at all costs and call in a police SWAT squad to break into the control room and also attempt to engineer a "fault" so that Lemmon will be too busy to tell his tale.

The finish is thrilling. Can the TV cameras get to the plant in time to interview this rebel who puts his professional competence and public responsibility before company loyalty? Well, they do — and Lemmon's anxieties about the plant's safety have been more than vindicated: there is almost a second meltdown. But there also has been a shoot-out. Lemmon is dead, and the film footage taken of him, nervous and distraught in the control room, make him look like a fanatic, a madman. Our hearts sink — the "image" is all wrong, the truth will not be believed. Already the smooth energy company PR man is rewriting the event as a personnel problem — an employee having a nervous breakdown rather than a nuclear plant almost having a meltdown. But Fonda, the crusading journalist, doesn't give up. She finds a 25-year company man and friend of Lemmon who throws company loyalty to the winds and, inspired by loyalty to his dead friend, backs up Lemmon's story and tells the Truth, captured "live" on TV. Phew! Wasn't that a close one?

Yup, a narrow squeak. But the ordinary, common man can't be beaten for sheer pluck. Nor can professionalism, in industry or in journalism. Friendship, conscience, individual professionalism and a free media comprise a democratic team which can confound the most malevolent and accomplished of big business corporate strategies.

So the new Hollywood, unafraid of tackling sensitive political issues, looks a lot like the old Hollywood. Admittedly in China Syndrome nuclear energy corporatism certainly looks dangerous and irresponsible. But don't worry, the democratic virtues of the common man and investigative reporting will protect us. What need have we of organised resistance? After all, Hollywood would never let the bad guys win, would they?

— Kathe Boehringer

* Jane Fonda as television reporter Kimberley Wells: the power of the media is the message?