

I met someone recently who works in the diamond industry. She runs the UK office of an international company that mines, polishes and sells the super-sparkly stones. I was told that she is allowed to borrow jewellery for special occasions so I tried to big-up our night at the local, but she isn't that stupid.

We got to talking about the history of the diamond industry and she admitted she knew little about it before she took the job on. It was only when she was aware of their efforts to suppress the film Blood Diamonds that she made the effort to find out a bit more. I had to confess that the film has provided my sole source of information of the history of diamond mining and the exploitation of the people who worked them.

There is so much information that I just can't take it all in. Reading a history book is, sadly, a sure-fire way to send me to sleep although I do enjoy a good novel. Authors like Nigel Tranter and James Michener have been my historical education as an adult.

I also enjoy when people tell me about history. Visiting sites and being able to look at and, as importantly, to touch things brings history alive for me. I also like to be told stories, to go for a walk and have someone knowledgeable to show me around.

I admit that since our newsagent closed down, I have been reading fewer newspapers than I used to. I am interested in domestic politics, but foreign affairs don't really do it for me. I listen to the news and hear about what is going on at a superficial level, but rarely take it beyond that.

I find it hard to relate to news when it doesn't feel personal. I have never lived in a war, experienced hunger or been subject to dictatorship. Numbers like 3,000 dead or the thought of being locked up for 20 years without trial is so beyond my comprehension that I can't connect with the people these things are happening to.

A friend shared a poem with me this week, that she had written about Gaza and it had the power to really make me think about what is happening there. Unlike me, she has a wide interest in these things and wrote with a real passion and talent about the recent fighting. Somehow she was able to put me in Israel and she got me thinking and our group talking about what is driving Israelis. One simple poem stirring debate that hours of news reports never managed to do.

And that is the power of art; be it cinema, writing, theatre, music or visual. It can take complex ideas and present it in a way that is accessible to a wider group. It really can change the world.

Who can forget the photograph of Kim Phuc running away naked after a napalm bomb hit her village in Vietnam? Or the film-montage of children dying in Ethiopia that launched the Live Aid movement? And who had heard of Eva Peron before Andrew Lloyd Webber got his hands on her?

As a teenager I was a regular at The Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, and am sure that what I saw there helped shaped my political leanings now (along with a teenage crush on a pre-sun bed Tommy Sheridan).

I know these things are not always strictly truthful. Artistic license I believe they call it. It turns out that William Wallace was not an Australian Braveheart, and Nurse Ratched in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was a fictional character. But both of these films have influenced public opinion over the subject matters they represent on celluloid.

One of my must-watch films, *Bride & Prejudice* may or may not be accurate but be sure that it has shaped my impression of middle-class Indian life. I am just as sure that *Slumdog Millionaire* will add to my perception of Mumbai much to the disappointment, I believe, of Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan who fears it

misrepresents the city. He obviously is aware of the power of quality cinema. If the film had been panned like “Australia” (which the government were hoping would boost tourism to their country), he may not be so concerned.