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## Political Entertainment

**M**ake-believe. The term connotes the playful fantasies of our childhood, a pleasant way of pretending. But in the world created by movies and television, make-believe takes on a more serious meaning. In some way or other, many people come to believe the fictional things they see on the big and little screens. The entertainment media are the make-believe media; they make us believe.

Today, very little of our make-believe is drawn from children's games, storytelling, folktales, and fables, very little from dramas and dreams of our own making. Instead we have the multibillion-dollar industries of Hollywood and television to fill our minds with prefabricated images and themes. Nor are these just idle distractions. I will argue that such images often have real ideological content. Worse still, they discourage any critical perception of the great and sometimes awful realities of our lives and sociopolitical system, implanting safe and superficial pictures in our heads. Even if supposedly apolitical in intent, the entertainment industry is political in its impact.

How can we speak of Hollywood films and television shows as being "purely" entertainment when they regularly propagate certain political themes and carefully avoid others? To borrow Robert Cirino's phrase: "We're being more than entertained."<sup>1</sup> Hollywood and television are permeated with class, racial, gender, and other political biases. George Gerbner argues that all media carry a "hidden curriculum" of values and explanations about how things happen.<sup>2</sup> The sociologist Hal Himmelstein believes that through its settings, music, words, and stories, television has become "one of our society's principal repositories of ideology."<sup>3</sup> A leading communications critic, Herbert Schiller, writes that "one central myth dominates the world of fabricated fantasy: the idea that [media] entertainment and recreation are value-free, have no

point of view, and exist outside . . . the social process."<sup>4</sup> Another critic, Erik Barnouw, concludes: "Popular entertainment is basically propaganda for the status quo."<sup>5</sup>

In accord with those observations, I will try to demonstrate in the chapters ahead that over the years, films and television programs have propagated images and ideologies that are supportive of imperialism, phobic anticommunism, capitalism, racism, sexism, militarism, authoritarian violence, vigilantism, and anti-working-class attitudes. More specifically, media dramas teach us that:

- Individual effort is preferable to collective action.
- Free enterprise is the best economic system in the world.
- Private monetary gain is a central and worthy objective of life.
- Affluent professionals are more interesting than blue-collar or ordinary service workers.
- All Americans are equal, but some (the underprivileged) must prove themselves worthy of equality.
- Women and ethnic minorities are not really as capable, effective, or interesting as White males.
- The police and everyone else should be given a freer hand in combatting the large criminal element in the United States, using generous applications of force and violence without too much attention to constitutional rights.
- The ills of society are caused by individual malefactors and not by anything in the socioeconomic system.
- There are some unworthy persons in our established institutions, but they usually are dealt with and eventually are deprived of their positions of responsibility.
- U.S. military force is directed only toward laudable goals, although individuals in the military may sometimes abuse their power.
- Western industrial and military might, especially that of the United States, has been a civilizing force for the benefit of "backward" peoples throughout the Third World.
- The United States and the entire West have long been threatened from abroad by foreign aggressors, such as Russians, Communist terrorists, and swarthy hordes of savages, and at home by un-American subversives and conspirators. These threats can be eradi-

cated by a vigilant counterintelligence and by sufficient doses of force and violence.

The Hollywood director Samuel Goldwyn once said that if you want to send a message use Western Union. Hollywood is strictly an entertainment business and not a purveyor of social messages or political causes, he maintained. In fact, Hollywood, like television, is very much in the business of sending political messages. Certainly not the kind of reformist or dissident messages that Goldwyn objected to, but ones—like those listed above—with which he felt comfortable, so comfortable that he did not think they had political content.

What the media actually give us is something that is neither purely entertainment nor purely political. It is a hybrid that might be called "political entertainment." The entertainment format makes political propagation all the more insidious. Beliefs are less likely to be preached than assumed. Woven into the story line and into the characterizations, they are perceived as entertainment rather than as political judgments about the world. When racial subjugation is transmuted into an amusing Sambo and imperialist violence into an adventuresome Rambo, racism and imperialism are more likely to be accepted by viewers, who think they are merely being entertained. "Beliefs, attitudes, and values are more palatable and credible to an audience when they are molded and reinforced by characters and program plots than when they are preached by a newscaster or speaker for a particular cause."<sup>6</sup> To quote Schiller:

For manipulation to be most effective, evidence of its presence should be nonexistent. When the manipulated believe things are the way they are naturally and inevitably, manipulation is successful. In short, manipulation requires a false reality that is a continuous denial of its existence.

It is essential, therefore, that people who are manipulated believe in the neutrality of their key social institutions. They must believe that government, the media, education, and science are beyond the clash of conflicting social interests.<sup>7</sup>

## Seeing Is Believing

People are affected by social forces sometimes far removed from their immediate perceptions. They perceive only a relatively small portion of the influences that play upon them. In modern mass society, people rely

to a great extent on distant imagemakers for cues about a vast world. In both their entertainment and news shows, the media invent a reality much their own.<sup>8</sup> Our notion of what a politician, a detective, a corporate executive, a farmer, an African, or a Mexican-American is like; what rural or inner-city life should be; our anticipations about romantic experience and sexual attractiveness, crime and foreign enemies, dictators and revolutionaries, bureaucrats and protestors, police and prostitutes, workers and Communists, are all heavily colored by our exposure to the media.

Many of us have never met an Arab, but few of us lack some picture in our minds of what an Arab is supposed to be like. This image will be more a stereotype than a reality, and if drawn largely from the mass media, it is likely to be a rather defamatory stereotype.<sup>9</sup> As Walter Lippmann noted, stereotypic thinking "precedes reason," and "as a form of perception [it] imposes a certain character on the data of our senses."<sup>10</sup> When we respond to a real-life situation with the exclamation, "Just like in the movies," we are expressing recognition and even satisfaction that our media-created mental frames find corroboration in the real world.

The media images in our heads influence how we appraise a host of social realities, including our government's domestic and foreign policies. If we have "learned" from motion pictures and television dramas that our nation is forever threatened by hostile alien forces, then we are apt to support increased military spending and CIA interventions. If we have "learned" that inner-city denizens are violent criminals, then we are more apt to support authoritarian police measures and cuts in human services to the inner city. Remarking on the prevalence of media-induced stereotypes of African-Americans, Ellen Holly put it well:

- When I express concern for [the image of Black people] in the media, don't imagine for one moment that anything as shallow as a racial ego posture is involved. The way we are perceived by this society affects the most basic areas of our lives. When you apply for a job the interviewer in personnel reacts to you not only in terms of who you are but also in terms of who he *thinks* you are. There are countless images floating around in his head and many of them are traceable to the media. You may sit in front of him as a neatly dressed, intelligent female who would do an efficient job, but if he has been fed one stereotype too many he may look and see not you but Flip Wilson's "Geraldine" goofing on the job, painting her fingernails and calling up her boyfriend to chat on company time. If so, for all your qualifications, you're not the one who is going to get the job. . . .

Again and again I have seen Black actors turned down for parts because they were told that they did not look the way a Black person should or sound the way a Black person should. What is this business of should? What kind of box are we being put into? I have seen Black writers told that the Black characters they put down on a page were not believable because they were too intelligent.<sup>11</sup>

Audiences usually do some perceptual editing when watching a movie or TV program, projecting their own viewpoint upon the performance. But this editing is itself partly conditioned by the previously internalized images fed to audiences by the same media they are now

## Media Influence Is Sometimes for the Better

Those who doubt that the media can influence actual behavior might want to ponder this report by Diana Maychick, which appeared in the *New York Post* on February 9, 1983. It describes audience behavior during *Gandhi*, a movie that portrayed the courage, sacrifice, and nonviolent collective action of India's patriots under Mohandas Gandhi's leadership.

At the Ziegfeld Theater [in New York City], *Gandhi*, starring Ben Kingsley, is taming the thousand plus crowds who daily fill the 1140 plush red velour seats at 12, 4, and 8 P.M. Once the three-hour epic is half over, the audience remembers the value of courtesy.

"They come here anxious and impatient about seats. Outside, we have to monitor the line. [People wait for approximately 45 minutes to an hour]," said Ziegfeld manager Manual Soto. "But once the movie begins, something happens.

The people calm down. . . . And during intermission, they're like different people from the usual rude New Yorkers," Soto said about the effect of *Gandhi*, which has grossed \$11.6 million nationwide.

At intermission, moviegoers wait patiently on lines for candy, for the telephone, and for the bathrooms.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Nadege Guillame, a concession stand employee. Protocol is evident on popcorn lines; patrons voluntarily speed up the process by forming sublines composed of those who prefer small containers, large ones, and extra butter.

"You don't have to push to get ahead. That's what this movie is all about," said George Vardas on a recent Saturday.

"It's the weirdest thing," says Ziegfeld ticket-taker Lionel Stevens. "We don't have any problems with crowd control. This Gandhi must've been something else."

viewing. In other words, rather than being rationally critical of the images and ideologies of the entertainment media, our minds—after prolonged exposure to earlier programs and films—sometimes become active accomplices in our own indoctrination.

We are probably far more affected by what we see than we realize. Jeffrey Schrank notes that 90 percent of the nation's adult viewers consider themselves to be "personally immune" to the appeals of TV advertisements, yet these viewers account for about 90 percent of all sales of advertised products.<sup>12</sup> While we might think it is always other people (less intelligent than ourselves) who are being manipulated by sales appeals and entertainment shows, the truth might be something else.

Another investigator, Jerry Mander, argues that media images are "irresistible," since our brains absorb them regardless of how we might consciously regard such images. Children believe that what they are seeing in the make-believe media is real. They have no innate capacity to distinguish between real and unreal images. Only as they grow older, after repeated assurances from their elders, do they begin to understand that the stories and characters on the big and little screens do not exist

## Media Influence Is Sometimes for the Worse

The former United States president Ronald Reagan has credited the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* as the one that most affected his life and led to his quest for the nation's highest office.

"I began to realize, through the power of that motion picture, that one man can make a difference," said Mr. Reagan. He made his statements as part of the all-star video gala to celebrate the opening of the Disney-MGM Studio's Theme Park in Florida.

World leaders, including the British prime minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, and the Polish Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa, along with celebrities such as Jimmy Stewart

and Mickey Rooney, will be discussing the films that made deep impressions on them.

Stewart starred in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, playing a man who fought corruption in the Senate. The 1939 film became one of the most beloved of director Frank Capra's optimistic fables.

"When Jimmy Stewart walked the halls of the Capitol building, I walked with him," said Mr. Reagan. "When he stood in awe of that great man at the Lincoln Memorial, I bowed my head, too."

NZPA-AP report in *The Press* (Christchurch, New Zealand), April 6, 1989.

in real life. In other words, their ability to reject media images as unreal has to be learned.<sup>13</sup> The problem does not end there, however. Even as adults, when we *consciously* know that a particular movie or television program is fictional, we still "believe" it to some extent; that is, we still accumulate impressions that lead to beliefs about the real world. When drawing upon the images in our heads, we do not keep our store of media imagery distinct and separate from our store of real-world imagery. "The mind doesn't work that way," Mander concludes.<sup>14</sup>

It has been argued that the claims made about media influence can be unduly alarmist; it is not all a matter of our helpless brains being electronically pickled by the sinister media. Indeed, things can be overstated, but that is no excuse for dismissing the important impact the media do have. Consider some of the more troubling instances such as the "copycat" or "trigger" effects, when media exposure sparks imitative responses from viewers. One sociologist reports that suicides (along with auto fatalities and airplane accidents) increase significantly for a brief period immediately after news reports about suicide.<sup>15</sup> Probably the most dramatic instance of copycat behavior was the rash of self-killings following the news that Marilyn Monroe had taken her life. Other incidents are worth pondering:

- After *The Deer Hunter* began playing in theaters in 1979, at least twenty-five viewers around the country reenacted the movie's Russian roulette scene and blew their brains out.
- NBC showed the film *The Doomsday Flight*, about a man who tries to extract a ransom from an airline after planting a bomb on one of its planes. Within a week, a dozen bomb threats were reported by the major airlines, a dramatic increase over the previous month.
- A woman in Boston's Roxbury district was doused with gasoline and burned to death shortly after the telecasting of the film *Fuzz*, which portrayed a similar act.
- A fourteen-year-old whiz kid in Syracuse committed a series of robberies fashioned after techniques he saw on "Mission Impossible." He was apprehended only after a friend informed the police.
- In Los Angeles, a maid caught a seven-year-old boy sprinkling ground glass into his family's dinner. He said he wanted to see if it would work as it did on television.<sup>16</sup>

For some viewers, it is less a matter of consciously imitating the media and more an inability to distinguish between the real world and

themselves eventually rerun on the small screen or made accessible as video cassettes for home viewing. Many Hollywood films are specifically made for TV and never reach a theater. At the same time, television situation comedies, or "sitcoms," have had their baneful effect on the scenarios and humor found in Hollywood films.

Still, there is a difference in the manner of consumption between the two media. Imagine spending six or seven hours a day at a movie theater when you were a 12-year-old. Your elders would not have permitted it. Yet children half that age spend six or more hours a day watching TV.<sup>24</sup> Seeing a movie still requires an admission fee and a special effort to get to the theater. Television, however, is woven into the domestic scene—almost like a member of the family. In fact, no member of the family is likely to hold our attention for three or four hours at a time the way the tube does. "Television does more than inform and entertain us—its ubiquitous presence helps us regulate our lives. The progression of news-time, prime-time, bedtime . . . is a pattern which defines the evening for vast numbers of Americans."<sup>25</sup> For many people, especially those who live alone or who are lonely, television is a home companion, used for company and background sounds. Such users turn on their sets almost the moment they come home. Even if not constantly monopolizing their time, the television is rarely idle, becoming something of an electronic hearth.

There are more television sets in American homes than bathrooms or telephones. Some 97 percent of all households have a TV, and more than 30 percent have two or more. On any one evening, eighty-five million people are in front of the little screen, with as many as thirty-five million fixed on the same program. In 1969, the average household spent about 41 hours a week viewing television. By the mid-1980s it was about 52 hours a week. In households with three or more people, the television is on 61 hours a week.<sup>26</sup>

Access to cable and to a greater number of regular channels may have contributed to the increase in viewing. Also, with the growing use of remote-control channel changers or "zappers," the empowered viewer spends more time in front of the tube. The philosopher Bertrand Russell once pointed out that, as transportation becomes more accessible and rapid, people spend *more* time traveling, not less. The same might be true about television viewing. Armed with their zappers, viewers have quicker access to the entire range of programs; they can skip effortlessly from channel to channel, fleeing from advertisements, foraging for morsels from ten or more channels simultaneously, and doing this for hours—experiencing more distraction and using less concentration than when they watched one show at a time.

## In England Too, the TV Pied Piper

In the pre-television era, playgrounds, streets and greens were alive with children playing a multitude of games and singing rhymes, sometimes unchanged for centuries, carrying out traditional customs and doing all the activities forming our "children's culture" . . . Seasonal games like conkers or marbles, top spinning, hoops, skipping to rhymes, local customs such as "mischief nights," jingles, hopscotch and countless other activities formed the rich fabric of children's culture. . . . Weeks after Edward VIII's abdication, children all over the country were singing, "Hark the herald angels sing, Mrs. Simpson's pinched our King!" This age-old children's culture is semi-underground, and not for the usual adult.

Nowadays, although children's culture may still thrive on some

school playgrounds in certain areas, one can be in a park or on a street at a time when it would once have been bubbling with children playing; now there are but few children, and even fewer who play the old games. Where have all the children gone on a Saturday morning, a Sunday afternoon or after school? The television, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin drawing all the children into the mountain cave, has taken many of our modern children away from their hobbies, play, games, streets and greens for at least twenty hours a week. Only the few odd ones out who watch little or no television continue to play. . . .

Martin Large, *Who's Bringing Them Up? Television and Child Department* (Gloucester, England: M.H.C. Large, 1980), p. 35.

The most pervasive effect of television—aside from its actual content—may be its very existence, its readily available, commanding, and often addictive presence in everybody's home, its ability to reduce hundreds of millions of citizens to passive spectators for major portions of their lives.<sup>27</sup> Television minimizes personal interactions within families and communities. One writer only half-jokingly claims: "I watched television, mainly as a way of getting to know my husband and children. . . ."<sup>28</sup> An associate of mine, who spent years in western agricultural regions, relates how a farmer once told her: "Folks used to get together a lot. Now with television, we see less of each other."

With the advent of Hollywood—even more with the advent of television—a single information source can transmit images and viewpoints directly into millions of minds, making it difficult for people to separate the real from the unreal, pacifying and immobilizing them,

fragmenting their perceptions, blunting their imaginations and their critical judgments, shortening their attention spans, and diminishing their taste for intelligent public and private discourse.

Americans are not the only targets of this communication universe. One survey found that in Colombia people spend an average of seven hours a day watching TV and only six hours sleeping.<sup>29</sup> In many other countries viewing averages range equally high. The mass media's influence is global, with the lion's share going to U.S. productions. American television programs are watched in just about every country in the world. Likewise, Hollywood films occupy more than half the world's big-screen time. The U.S. motion-picture industry virtually monopolizes international cinema distribution.<sup>30</sup> Much of what is said in the pages ahead, then, applies not only to the United States but to a large part of the world.

Those who produce images for mass consumption exercise enormous power, but they are not omnipotent, for they are not entirely free from public pressure. The viewing audience is something more than just a passive victim. There are times when popular agitation, new developments in democratic consciousness, and changes in public taste have forced the make-believe media to modify or discard images. I will note some of these instances in the pages ahead. But the public is not able to exercise much democratic control over image manipulation unless it is aware of the manipulation. The first step, then, is to develop a critical perspective. When it comes to the media, criticism is a form of self-defense. So let us begin defending ourselves.