# Why Not a Propaganda Model for Hollywood?

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In the two decades following Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's original proposal of a Propaganda Model (PM) to account for the politics of news media, several theorists have argued that it can be applied more broadly to understand political discourse, particularly intellectual culture (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Herring and Robinson 2003; Phelan 2006; Jensen 2007). Both Herman (2003) and Chomsky[i] (2006) have stated that the PM can be applied across the spectrum. I have proposed a 'Hollywood Propaganda Model' (Alford 2008) based very closely on the original PM, as an explanation for why films do not challenge what Chomsky (1989: 45) calls the 'bounds of the expressible' about the US role in the international system. The model consists of five filters – concentrated ownership, the economic importance of advertising, the centrality of the government as a source of information, the ability of the powerful to issue flak, and a dominant ideology of a superior 'us' in the West versus a backward 'them' overseas – which in Herman and Chomsky's words 'cleanse' information from the real world leaving only the 'residue' which is acceptable to established power systems (Herman and Chomsky 2002: lx).

To test this theory, I examined mainstream American films released between 1991 and 2002 that represented the application of US power overseas. I predicted that mainstream Hollywood products would assume, almost without exemption, that the US is a uniquely 'worthy' and benevolent entity in world affairs. I found that this was the case and, in addition, that there was a significant body of films that actively endorsed the application of US force against official enemies (with the resultant 'unworthy' victims), in stark contrast to the oft-cited characterisation of Hollywood as 'anti-American' and 'anti-military' (Medved 1993; Alford 2008, 2010).

Is the Hollywood Propaganda Model (HPM) an adequate explanation for the conformist nature of Hollywood cinema? If so, then it would indeed be a useful tool in understanding the parameters of the debate about the war on terror declared by President Ronald Reagan in 1985 and given a reboot by the Bush administration in

2001. However, the scholarly community has raised its objections, as we shall see. Let's first consider how the model can be applied by examining the pertinence of each filter before moving on to the criticisms of the original model and, especially, its derivative.

**The Five Filters**

*1) Concentrated Corporate Ownership*

Just six theatrical film studios, known collectively as 'the majors', control the vast majority of the world's movie business. These are: Disney (owned by The Walt Disney company), Sony Pictures Entertainment (Sony), Paramount (Viacom Inc.), 20th Century Fox (NewsCorp), Warner Bros (TimeWarner Inc.) and Universal (Comcast/General Electric). These companies produce, finance and distribute their own films and also pick up projects initiated by independent filmmakers. The studios' parent corporations also have substantial holdings in other industries beyond entertainment and are well integrated into the prevailing order, which tames their output within standard ideological parameters (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2007). Indeed, those parents have even occasionally interfered consciously in the output of their subsidiaries, guided by their broader interests (see Alford, forthcoming).

As Herman and Chomsky (2002: 14) observe with regard to news media, the majors are subject to the 'sharp constraints' of the market and a collective interest in keeping production costs high to exclude weaker, less resource-rich rivals from taking their market share – hence the emphasis on expensive stars and special effects in the world of mainstream motion pictures. In 2007, the last year for which data were released, the average cost of producing and marketing a studio movie had reached $106.6 million (Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. 2007: 7). Smaller production companies have significant distribution capabilities in specialized markets, but not the considerable access to capital necessary to handle such broad theatrical product lines (Vogel 2004: 49—50). There are overseas owners – NewsCorps (Australian), Vivendi (French), Sony (Japanese) – but Washington limits foreign ownership to 25%, provides various state subsidies, and control of studio output remains in California and New York (Miller 2005: 187—9). This has squeezed out competition from

foreign films, which accounted for nearly 10% of the North American market in the 1960s, 7% by the mid 1980s, and just 0.5% by the late 1990s (McChesney 2000: 33; Miller et al. 2001: 4). Of the 1,000 foreign language films which entered the US market since 1980, 70% scored less than $1 million and only 22 more than $10 million. For each successful foreign release there are dozens if not hundreds of failures; most never make it to the country (apart from screenings at some film festivals) nor ever enter distribution (Mueller 2010).

What impact does this concentration of ownership among a very small group of US-based multinationals have on film content? First of all, whilst of course Hollywood is aware of its international markets, it is liable to make films about and for America and Americans, marginalising the importance of foreigners. This is not necessarily 'unfair' or unusual but it does mean that the notion of America as a culturally internationalised, globalised melting pot should not be overstated. Secondly, films will tend to avoid political narratives that are unfamiliar to audiences. '[Filmmakers] don't do the unexpected, they're too scared – the prices are too high', says producer Robert Evans (Rich 2005). Former President of Paramount David Kirkpatrick agrees that the result is that: 'You need a homogenized piece of entertainment...something that is not particularly edgy, particularly sophisticated' (Kirkpatrick 2001).

*2) Advertising*

Although movies are not dependent on advertising revenue (unlike most TV stations and newspapers), product placement and merchandising deals are widespread and attractive to movie-makers because even if the movie fails the manufacturer incurs the loss. Product placement in motion pictures is valued at $1.2 billion annually (Kivijarv 2005), and the majority of Fortune 500 companies are involved in the practice (Segrave 2005: 180). Therefore, for financial security the major producers sell markets (film goers) to buyers (advertisers). As such, the film producers compete for their patronage and – as Herman and Chomsky (2002: 16) describe it with regards to news media – 'develop specialized staff to solicit advertisers and explain how their programs serve advertisers' needs.' Consequently, many films are under pressure to avoid raising 'serious complexities and disturbing controversies' because this would interfere with the 'buying mood' in the media outlet. Instead, they will more likely

‘lightly entertain’ and thus ‘fit in with the spirit of the primary purpose of program purchases – the dissemination of a selling message’ (Herman and Chomsky 2002: 17—18). Egregious examples include the science fiction blockbuster *Fantastic Four* (2005), which was produced with an intimate relationship with Chrysler.[ii]

*3) Sourcing*

As Herman and Chomsky (2002: 19—20) observe, government and corporate bureaucracies such as the Pentagon have vast and well-funded public relations divisions which offer special access to the media. Unlike journalists, Hollywood creatives and producers do not rely on the Pentagon for daily news or the military itself for protection in a war zone. However, for over half a century filmmakers have made use of Pentagon advice and material to save costs and create authentic-looking films, in exchange for carefully constructed script re-workings that ensure good coverage of the military for recruitment and public relations. At least a quarter of major 1991-2002 films depicting the application of US force received full cooperation from the Pentagon, including *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), *Rules of Engagement* (2000) and *Black Hawk Down* (2002). The CIA also appears to have exerted significant influence over films such as *The Recruit* (2003) and *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007) (Alford 2010; Roddy 2007; Jenkins forthcoming), and there were even some unusually direct requests from Washington to Hollywood about how to represent the War on Terror and the War on Drugs (Alford and Graham 2008; Forbes, 2000).

*4) Flak and the Enforcers*

Punishment, or ‘flak’ refers to the ‘negative responses to a media statement or program’, which ‘may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, law suits, speeches, bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action’ (Herman and Chomsky 2002: 26). Whilst flak may be organized locally or consist of ‘entirely independent actions of individuals’, the ability to produce effective flak is related to power (2002: 26—28). The government is a major producer of flak, ‘regularly assailing, threatening, and “correcting” the media, trying to contain any deviations from the established line’ and the business community has

also sponsored the creation of organizations, such as the right-wing Accuracy in Media, whose sole purpose is to produce flak (2002: 27).

On the occasions when radical movies do emerge that challenge US power, reactions from enforcers can be intense. This happened most dramatically with the 'Hollywood Blacklist', which began in 1947 and continued until the end of the 1950s, whereby film-making professionals were denied employment in the field because of their political beliefs or associations with Communism, whether verified or not. More recently, in 2008, Hillary Clinton ended her financial relationship with the Turkish producers of *Valley of the Wolves Iraq* (2006), a film which portrayed the US military as brutal invaders. Numerous filmmakers who have raised their voices about injustice have been on the wrong end of industry isolation, vigilante violence (notably Michael Moore – see Democracy Now 2010), multi-million dollar legal action by government members (notably Costa-Gavras – see Lewis 1987), and even false imprisonment (notably Jane Fonda – see Hershberger 2004). 'All publicity' is not necessarily 'good publicity' when filmmakers knock up against the limits of tolerance in the US political system, just as journalists face risks when they embark on a dissident career path.

*5) Anti-'Other' as Control Mechanism*

Hollywood narratives are frequently based on polarized representations of good and evil, with the audience encouraged to root for the 'good guys'. Throughout the Cold War, Communists provided convenient enemies in countless moving pictures from *The Red Menace* (1949) to *Rambo III* (1988) and beyond. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 29) argue that Communism has always been seen by the powerful as the 'ultimate evil' because it 'threatens the very root of their class position and superior status'. Since the concept of Communism is 'fuzzy', they suggest, it can be used against anyone 'advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodations with Communist states and radicalism'. With Communism presented as the worst imaginable result, the support of repressive regimes abroad is 'justifiable' as a 'lesser evil' (2002: 29).

Herman concedes that the filter perhaps should have been termed 'the dominant ideology' so as to include the merits of private enterprise and one's own government. In the end though, 'anti-Communism' was selected primarily to emphasise the ideological elements that have been most important in terms of disciplining and controlling mechanisms (Wintonick and Achbar 1994: 108). Chomsky stresses 'Otherness' as part of the 'dominant ideology', explaining that:

> [I]t's the idea that grave enemies are about to attack us and we need to huddle together under the protection of domestic power. You need something to frighten people with, to prevent them from paying attention to what's really happening to them. You have to engender fear and hatred, to channel the kind of fear and rage – or even just discontent – that's being aroused by social and economic conditions.
>
> (Chomsky 2003: 41)

Since the end of the Cold War, it has been fashionable to associate the Other with the East, particularly Islam and specifically its 'radical' form. As early as 1992, former National Security Council member Peter Rodman, writing in the *National Review*, explained that 'now the West finds itself challenged from the outside by a militant, atavistic force driven by hatred of all Western political thought, harking back to age-old grievances against Christendom' (Rodman 1992: 28). Harvard professor and founder of the Middle East Forum Daniel Pipes (1995) explains that in radical Islam there are 'no moderates' and that it is 'closer in spirit to other such movements (communism, fascism) than to traditional religion'. Another Harvard professor, Samuel Huntington, popularised the phrase 'Clash of Civilizations', claiming that the West had to face up to this new paradigm for international relations, and that Islam had 'bloody borders' (Huntington 1993). President George W. Bush took on similar rhetoric, initially dubbing the 'war on terror' operation in Afghanistan 'Infinite Justice' and a 'crusade' (BBC 2001).

Edward Said (1979) explained that this kind of 'Orientalist' thought associated history, narrative, speech, complexity, and development with the West, and image, stasis, and myth with the East. For example, where the likes of Rodman (1992) talk

about ‘the politics of rage’ and Islam being driven by ‘resentments’ and ‘material inferiority’, Said (1997: xviii) asks: ‘Does every one of the billion Muslims in the world feel rage and inferiority?’ He concludes that such assertions can be made because the Islamic stereotype ‘stands charged and convicted without the need for supporting arguments or modulating qualifications’ (Said 1997: xviii).

This does not mean that the Other will necessarily be presented as wholly aggressive. Stuart Hall broadly concurs with Said’s assessment but explains that:

> [F]or every threatening image of the black subject as marauding native, menacing savage or rebellious slave, there is the comforting image of the black as domestic servant, amusing clown and happy entertainer – an expression of both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilized, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking beneath the surface; or by an untutored sexuality threatening to ‘break out’.
>
> (Hall 1993: 287)

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) wrote about these binary representations of the Other in the Western movie genre, where different tribes of Indians become classified as ‘good’ (to be patronised and rescued) or ‘bad’ (to be destroyed). Shohat and Stam further argue that such a binarism ‘persists…even in revisionist, “pro-Indian” (or “pro-Arab”) films’ with the result that stories are told from the perspective of the powerful’ (1994: 109).

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the five filters of the Propaganda Model map quite neatly onto the Hollywood film industry. Still, do these help or obfuscate our understanding of the politics of motion pictures?

**Limitations and Debates**

There are limitations to the utility of the PM and debates around this have been well rehearsed (Herring and Robinson 2003). Much discussion revolves around the

question of which is the more significant part of the process: the active 'manufacture of consent' (agency), or the more passive 'filtering out' (structure) of critical discourse. Herman and Chomsky's work emphasises that structure is more important than agency: they accordingly stress that the model is not a conspiracy theory. However, critics seem to have been misled by the one-off but prominent use of the word 'propaganda', which John Corner calls Herman and Chomsky's 'calculated shock effect',[iii] but which prompts unfortunate and inflated charges of functionalism (Edwards 2001a; Edwards 2001b).

Ultimately, perhaps one cannot expect too much of the PM. Corner emphasises that it should engage with other radical thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, Ralph Miliband and Michel Foucault,[iv] but can any model sufficiently digest, process and incorporate such dense and extensive material? Why should Herman and Chomsky – or anyone – be obliged to use specified academic texts, or texts that are European or even old or obscure? In the words of Herman (2003), the PM deals with 'extraordinarily complex sets of events, and only claims to offer a broad framework of analysis, a first approximation, that requires modification depending on local and special factors, and that may be entirely inapplicable in some cases'. Similarly, Chomsky acknowledges that 'there's no algorithm for judging relative importance [of each filter] abstractly. It varies from case to case'.[v]

Such caveats and limitations – and the responses to them – hold true for the Hollywood Propaganda Model too. More important to explore in this chapter is what additional criticisms have been levelled specifically at the HPM. The main objections are as follows: that it is harder to measure; that narrative conventions in entertainment are more salient considerations in the de-radicalisation of products; that Hollywood is only responding to audience demands for standard political orientations; that the model underplays the diversity of screen entertainment; that it is less appropriate to critique entertainment products in political terms; and that there is a powerful liberal community in Hollywood. In what follows I examine each of these in turn.

*Entertainment products are harder to analyse politically*

Robert Kolker (2000: 11) explains that the formal conventions of Hollywood film tend to 'downplay or deny the ways in which it supports, reinforces and even sometimes subverts the major cultural, political and social attitudes that surround and penetrate it.' In contrast, news media convey their messages in more straightforward terms. They are less liable to obfuscate the political points they are making, even whilst they might hide behind claims to 'objectivity', since their remit is to provide clear, digestible information about the real world.

Nevertheless, the comparatively opaque nature of Hollywood fiction that Kolker highlights has little impact on the attempt to apply the PM to the motion picture industry. Herman and Chomsky essentially identify a benevolent meta-narrative of US power which assumes without question that the US deploys military force to further common principles and values based on human rights and consciously or unconsciously classifies victims of political violence as 'worthy' and 'unworthy' depending on their utility. The extent to which media products adhere to these 'exceptionalist' assumptions corresponds to how closely they conform to the predictions of the PM. Such representations are usually not hard to identify in fictionalised entertainment, since we are typically able to agree on what is happening in the story, whether the military or government is presented in a favourable light, and which characters, with which national and institutional affiliations, are heroes, villains and victims. We can identify whether the film presents in any form (through dialogue, imagery, etc.) any ideas that are challenging to real-world power structures. We can also ensure that we focus on those films that are most widely lauded as offering challenges to powerful interests, such as *Three Kings* (1999), *Buffalo Soldiers* (2001) or *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), just as the PM pays closest attention to cases such as the Vietnam war where the news media appeared to adopt an adversarial role.

There are some additional complications in a PM reading of cinema but they can be negotiated. Where individuals in the government or military are rendered villainous, it does not follow that the system itself is necessarily being significantly criticised. In fact, the existence of internal enemies is often the catalyst that is needed to demonstrate the essential decency of US power. As Robert Ray (1985) argues, such 'problem pictures' critique large social issues but ultimately have happy endings that

belie those problems. Even an unusually challenging film such as *Rendition* (2007) provides a happy ending, whereby the Muslim-American wrongly kidnapped by the CIA is returned to his wife and newborn child, providing a certain level of comfort for the viewer. Even in this extreme case, in a blunt way the system eventually provides some relief.

It is important to be careful in HPM readings of fictional films, as even the most reactionary pieces are liable to make nods towards more dissenting views, which can obscure their more central political message. So just because the *Rambo* franchise has its hero sometimes dress like a hippy does not mean that the spirit of the film is all 'flower power'. Films may hold internal ideological contradictions and this is not in opposition to the predictions of the HPM. British film scholar Brian Neve comments that the PM presumes that 'stridently ideological, conservative texts' will result – an assumption which derives, perhaps, from Herman and Chomsky's use of the word 'propaganda' in the title of their model (though they are much more careful in its usage elsewhere). The model actually predicts only that texts will be 'cleansed' of any seriously critical content and could be either conservative or liberal in flavour (Herman and Chomsky 2002: 2). Neve concedes that the influence of the Pentagon on certain productions 'may be problematic, especially at times when a real or imagined threat from outside is central to official thinking', but, he asks 'is it really useful to use the term propaganda in this context? Are we then comparing *Top Gun* [1986] with [the Nazi propaganda film] *Triumph of the Will* [1935]?'[vi] Well, in terms of the film text itself – yes. The HPM itself tells us nothing about the character or intent of the government backers, only the nature of the media message.

*Entertainment products are less well suited than news media to providing information that interrogates established power structures*

With genre as the paramount consideration when making a film, it might be that little room remains for dissent. Generic conventions oblige certain kinds of stories, offering certain kinds of audience pleasures: action adventures must prioritise spectacle, comedies must be funny, and so on. However, genres are not fixed. Given the will and demand Hollywood could in principle exclusively produce socially-responsible documentaries.

Indeed, even if Hollywood was obliged to produce only a certain range of genres, this would not in itself preclude the generation of more challenging, 'dissident' material, since all major genres have produced critical pictures at some stage in the history of screen entertainment: *Dr Strangelove* (comedy), *Syriana* (political drama), *Apocalypse Now* (war film) and *Starship Troopers* (science fiction). Nor is there any inherent need for Hollywood to emphasise American exceptionalism in even the most violent or dumbed-down genre narrative, as has been demonstrated in countless films from *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) to *Kick Ass* (2010).

*Audiences routinely demand mainstream products with standard political orientations*

'If you want to send a message,' says the old Hollywood adage, 'send a telegram'. It is widely believed, quite reasonably, that audiences do not want to feel that they are being encouraged to buy a particular political argument. However, there is also another popular saying in the business: 'Nobody knows anything' (Goldman 1996: 39) and this also has some validity – witness huge surprise hits like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) or *Titanic* (1997) and some political surprise successes such as *Silkwood* (1983).

Additionally, Hollywood's business leaders make crucial decisions that affect the success of these products. It is not possible to know how much better more dissenting films might do at the box office were studios to invest in them as heavily as they do more conventional fare. *The New York Times* reported that test audience reaction to *The Quiet American* was 'OK' when Miramax acquired the film on 10 September 2001 (Thompson 2002: 1). According Miramax co-chairman Harvey Weinstein:

> What freaked me out after the 10th was the 11th. I showed the film to some people and staff, and they said: 'Are you out of your mind? You can't release this now, it's unpatriotic. America has to be cohesive, and band together'. We were concerned that nobody had the stomach for a movie about bad Americans anymore.
>
> (Quoted in Thompson 2002: 1)

Miramax released the film in two cities for two weeks, reportedly because its star, Michael Caine, pressed the studio to recognise that the film could make a lot of money if he won the Oscar for Best Actor (this requires a minimum one-week commercial run in Los Angeles to qualify) (Wiener 2002).

Similarly, although *Variety* claimed that the military farce *Buffalo Soldiers* (2001) was 'the wrong film at the wrong time' because of 'public opinion' (McCarthy 2001: 25), in fact its dreadful box office showing was unavoidable after Miramax released it in just two cities. Meanwhile, despite lamentable reviews, Disney unexpectedly decided in August 2001 to extend *Pearl Harbor*'s nationwide release window from the standard two-to-four months to seven months, meaning that this 'summer' blockbuster continued screening until December. Sometimes, films seem to be shaped at a fundamental level by conscious political decisions – for instance when Twentieth Century Fox released *Australia* (2008) the film was intimately tied into the country's major new tourism campaign (Ferguson 2008). Herman and Chomsky's 'filters' seem to be very much at play, to some degree in opposition to audience desires: demand does not always create supply – supply also promotes demand.

*Hollywood's output is more critical and contradictory than the model assumes*

It is certainly true that a range of political ideas are presented by Hollywood but, just as the PM examines the most mainstream news and pays less attention to smaller and independent media outlets, so the HPM examines the most mainstream Hollywood products. Even the most visible radical productions are poorly distributed as cinematic releases. *War, Inc* (2008) was released in only 33 cinemas nationwide, for example; *Redacted* (2007) in just 15. *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) opened in nine screens in the US but 216 in the UK – an indication that the superpower is less willing to interrogate itself than those who live outside its borders may be.

Furthermore, even amongst the lower budget range, screen entertainment products are surprisingly constricted ideologically. Reactionary fodder like *In the Army Now* (1994), *Stealth Fighter* (1999), *Air Marshal* (2003) and the *Left Behind* (1999-) series is plentiful. Perhaps most disturbingly, more high-brow films may raise issues about US power and take new and challenging political angles, but on closer inspection

these frequently turn out to be more conformist. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), for example, condemns America's unwillingness to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide but it stays within the established political narrative of the genocide, ignoring evidence of more active Western support for the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which contributed to the disaster (Herman and Peterson 2010). *The Kingdom* (2007) gives a leading role to an Arab actor but also lionises gun-toting US authorities as they clean up Saudi Arabia (Shaheen 2008). *Three Kings* (1999) suggests that the problems of Iraq can only be solved by the application of US force, though of the 'right', humanitarian sort. Although *Munich* (2005) was condemned by various Israeli groups as being opposed to Israeli policy, in fact director Steven Spielberg said explicitly that 'Israel had to respond (to the Munich massacre), or it would have been perceived as weak: I agree with Golda Meir's response' (Ebert 2006: 14—15). The most celebrated 'anti-war' scene (Reich 2006) in the film is a two-and-a-half minute exchange between an Arab and an Israeli, which at most points out that Palestinians are motivated by a desire for 'home' but, more saliently, suggests that their struggle is futile and immoral.

Films given 'full cooperation' by the Pentagon are predictably less subtle. *Black Hawk Down* (2001) removes those elements of the book on which it is based that point to soldiers' brutality and unseemly US actions/motivations in Somalia (see further Alford 2010). *Iron Man* (2008) was a 'pacifist' film, according to several reviewers (see, for example, *Chicago Sun Times* 2008), but really only in the sense that the weapons-dealer hero decides that he is no longer comfortable selling arms that kill Americans, instead designing new attack armour allowing him to venture out and kill Afghan villains. *Rules of Engagement* (2000) suggests that US massacres are understandable, even noble, when dealing with foreign populations that are infested with – in fact, in total sympathy with – Al-Qaeda terrorists.

One leading Film Studies scholar contended to me that in times of heightened public cynicism – such as during the latter years of the Bush and Blair governments, when the popularity of political leaders plummeted – there may also be a 'darkening' of mainstream movies, as manifest in films such as *War of the Worlds* (2005), *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). However, such examples have little to do directly with American power (indeed, very few films of any kind even mention

American power directly, so in this sense the HPM is vindicated). The darkening of tone is a double-edged sword politically too: *War of the Worlds* actually envisions a heroic American military response to invasion, complete with 'special thanks' to the Pentagon on the credits to the film; *The Dark Knight* can readily be understood as a parable that is highly favourable to neoconservative ideology – K.D. Killian (2007) makes a convincing case for this in relation to the previous movie in the franchise, *Batman Begins* (2005).

Films which offer some challenge to elite power are important, but as Herman (2003) puts it, why thrust these into the foreground 'except as a means of minimizing the power of the dominant interests, inflating the elements of contestation, and pretending that the marginalized have more strength than they really possess?'

*It is less appropriate to criticise entertainment products*

'It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies,' Chomsky (1967) famously stated. People working in the fields of media, academia and politics are obliged to be honest about the world. Entertainers, however, have a responsibility to entertain. Do they really have the responsibility to speak the truth and expose lies? If a product is entertaining but has conventional politics, is it so worthy of criticism? Should we take the politics of entertainment as seriously as we do that of news providers?

We may say we want films for 'just entertainment' but in reality, few people want or expect our entertainers to be telling lies, supporting falsehoods or mythologizing for the government. There is actually a good case to be made that filmmakers should have comparable responsibility for their output. No one knows the actual effects of film products on audiences but even if they were minimal, that still does not change the fact that cinema warrants a critical approach. Still, let us assume that there is less moral imperative for fictional artists to expose lies or to prioritise telling the truth. Let's assume that they should have no responsibility at all. Does this change our analysis? Surely not – regardless of the moral question, we can still try to determine the extent to which Hollywood is part of a de facto propaganda apparatus which is significantly generated by its involvement in larger commercial and political power

systems. Likewise, just because audiences may be able to differentiate between reality and fiction does not change the fact that this is a model about media performance, not effects.

*Liberal networks are a powerful force in Hollywood*

Hollywood is indeed characterised by liberal ideas. 'Far from being conservative or reactionary forces in the society as many academics insist is the case', argue Stephen Powers et al. (1996: 3), 'elite directors, writers and producers now usually espouse liberal or leftist perspectives.' However, there are crucial qualifiers left unsaid here. Liberal views have frequently been consistent with endorsing the use of US military force, as indicated by the old adage that 'Politics stops at the water's edge', and actualised by President Barack Obama's intervention in Libya. The notion of liberal influence also overplays what liberals are actually prepared to do. Ben Dickenson (20062004: xiv—xvi) argues that 'the fruit of the last twenty five years of activist and ideological battle in the arena of American cinema is the emergence in the twenty first century of a new radical Hollywood left' which has embarked upon a 'tumultuous path' to 'social justice' and whose influence he declares is dependent on 'how far they can understand the recent social, political and economic history'. Yet Marc Cooper (1999) points out that the 'authentic Hollywood left that functions beyond the parameters of narrow electoral politics' was 'virtually unchanged through the eighties and nineties…because it is so small'.

Actually, liberal Hollywood has been remarkably unconcerned by America's actions beyond its borders in the modern era. In the build-up to the 1991 Gulf War, for example, the *Washington Post* reported that Hollywood's 'most visible liberals' were 'maintaining low profiles when it comes to the war' (Hall 1991: D2). The fear, reportedly, was that any protest against US policy could be misunderstood as a criticism of American troops, as had occurred over Vietnam. So, on the eve of the conflict, 100 Hollywood celebrities – including Tommy Lee Jones, James Woods, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Meryl Streep, William Shatner, Michelle Pfeiffer, Kurt Russell and Kevin Costner – recorded a charity record, 'Voices That Care', which praised American troops without explicitly commenting on the legitimacy or otherwise of their presence. When American troops returned home in April 1991,

Hollywood held a 'Welcome Home Desert Storm' parade, which deliberately excluded peace messages collated by a body of social activists (United Press International 1991). Similarly, at the height of NATO's 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia, an extensive interview with leading 'dissenting' Hollywood stars appeared on the pages of *The Nation*, yet none of them even mentioned foreign policy, aside from a brief (though pertinent) comment from actor Tim Robbins, who alluded to the ongoing calamity in Iraq:

> You talk about the Hollywood Left, where the hell are they? The same people who will be absolutely crazy about animals being sacrificed in the name of medical research will not raise a voice about human beings who are killed in the name of oil.
>
> (Biskind 1999: 14)

Even with regard to the exceptionally controversial 2003 Iraq war, Hollywood was split. Lara Bergthold, former executive director of the Hollywood Women's Political Committee, which had been the town's most active opponent of the Reagan administration's intervention in South America during the 1980s, said that there was a behind-the-scenes 'conversation' about the 'antiwar response' but that the debate 'should begin and take place in Washington' (Broder 2002: 22), echoing the organisation's lack of a public stance over Iraq in 1991 (Hall 1991: D2).

Mostly, though, there has been apathy about US power in a political environment dominated by money and narrow self-interest. Even right-wing activist David Horowitz, who despises what he sees as Hollywood's liberal agenda, concurs, saying that '98% of people in Hollywood have no politics to speak of, or their politics are an inch deep. People do what they have to do to get ahead in this town' (Corn 1999: 52). As a consequence, movie texts are produced according to the internal logic of the industry, which naturally strives for profit and is therefore subject to the filters of the Propaganda Model.

Additionally, although the political beliefs of celebrities are frequently discussed, in truth this is something of a side issue rather than providing any decisive insight into

the communications industry. Justin Lewis observes in the documentary *The Myth of the Liberal Media* (Media Education Foundation 1997) that studies examining the political beliefs of writers 'assume that it is the journalists rather the owners, the advertisers, the news-shapers or news-makers that control the manufacture of news. That's a bit like saying… the workers on the factory floor decide what the car industry produces.' Powerful media owners, such as Rupert Murdoch, have considerably different agendas from those further down the ladder. Chomsky explains further that:

> You could find that 99% of journalists are members of the Socialist Workers Party or some Maoist group and that in itself would prove nothing about the media output. The issue is whether the media are free? Are the media by their institutional structure free to allow expression of opinion from whatever source and look at whatever topic and so on and so forth?
>
> (Media Education Foundation 1997)

This is different from claiming that there is censorship of any kind in the media, even self-censorship. When British journalist Andrew Marr asked Chomsky, 'How can you know that I'm self-censoring?' Chomsky replied: 'I don't say you're self-censoring….If you believed something different you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.'[vii]

Overall, Hollywood's opposition to US foreign policy in the contemporary era is all too easily exaggerated. Celebrity apathy towards, and complicity with, the stances of state and private power sets the context for understanding how entertainment conglomerates produce movies that invariably support the idea that the US is a benevolent power in world affairs and frequently endorse the application of US force.

**Conclusions**

Does the Hollywood Propaganda Model help us to understand better the ways in which the war on terror has been represented? As with any theoretical perspective in the social sciences, the HPM cannot account well for nuance and there have always

been limitations to what any configuration of the PM can do. Indeed, it may be more appropriate to call it primarily a 'de-radicalisation model' rather than associating it so much with the more active implications of 'propaganda'. Still, the PM does offer a useful paradigm, namely that it coherently challenges the crucial and well-worn idea that the media typically adopt an adversarial stance towards elites. As demonstrated, the model is equally applicable to mainstream US cinema. Hollywood is a liberal town but, as Jack Valenti (1998) has commented, it sprang 'from the same DNA' as Washington, especially when it comes to foreign policy – and so a cultural framework was laid for the war against terrorism that fitted neatly with the broader objectives and narratives of the US government.

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