

"Hollywood's Poison Factory: Making It the Dream Factory Again"

by Michael Medved Co-Host, "Sneak Previews"

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The Golden Turkey Awards (with Harry Medved, Putnam Perigee Books, 1980), and *Hospital: The Hidden Lives of a Medical Center Staff* (Simon and Schuster, 1983). Mr. Medved has been a frequent guest on "The Tonight Show," "Oprah Winfrey," "David Letterman," "ABC Nightline," "Today," "Good Morning America," and other programs.



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Preview: *One of Hillsdale's most popular speakers ever, PBS film critic Michael Medved addressed an audience of over 400 students, faculty and outside guests on campus last March at the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Culture Wars." In this edited version of his remarks, he notes that in recent decades Hollywood has lost touch with its own audience, and that it has openly attacked the family, religion, traditional values, and genuine heroes. Medved argues persuasively that, goaded by disastrous box office receipts, the industry can be changed, but that we must all get actively involved*

America's long-running romance with Hollywood is over. For millions of people, the entertainment industry no longer represents a source of enchantment, of magical fantasy, of uplift, or even of harmless diversion. Popular culture is viewed now as an implacable enemy, a threat to their basic values and a menace to the raising of their children. The Hollywood dream factory has become the poison factory.

This disenchantment is reflected in poll after poll. An Associated Press Media General poll released in 1990 showed that 80 percent of Americans objected to the amount of foul language in motion pictures; 82 percent objected to the amount of violence, 72 percent objected to the amount of explicit sexuality, and by a ratio of 3 to 1 they felt that movies today are worse than ever.

In reality, you don't need polls or surveys to understand what is going on. When was the last among other things, the fact that in the past the movie business has always proven to be recession proof. Economic downturns generally saw the movie business profit as people sought escape.

In recent articles, a few critical col-leagues believe they have discovered the culprit—blaming all of Hollywood's woes on one "over-the-hill" ex-Warner Brothers actor who hasn't worked in movies for some thirty years. His name is Ronald Reagan. Somehow, this former President was sup-posed to have singlehandedly destroyed the quality of American film.

time you heard someone say, "You know, by golly, movies today are better than ever!" Only Jack Valenti, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, can make such statements with a straight face. There is a general recognition even among those Americans who still like to go to movies that their quality has declined. And this has begun to register in disastrous box office receipts.

Hollywood's Dirty Little Secret

There is a dirty little secret in Hollywood. For movie attendance, 1991 was the worst year in fifteen years. The summer season was the worst in twenty-three years. Forty percent of Americans report that they don't see a single film in the course of a year—a higher percentage than ever before. What Hollywood publicizes, of course, is total box office gross receipts, which look respectable, but which are misleading. Why? Because the ticket prices have been raised so much! If you actually count the number of warm bodies sitting in theater seats, movie attendance has disastrously declined.

Major studios like MGM and Orion are teetering on the verge of collapse. Carolco, which produced *Terminator II*, the year's biggest hit, has since scaled back all operations and fired one-third of its employees. This is clearly an industry in trouble.

Rather than searching for solutions, Hollywood looks for scapegoats. The most common line is: "It's the recession," but this ignores,

What Hollywood insiders refuse to recognize is that the crisis of popular culture is at its very core a crisis of values. The problem isn't that the camera is out of focus, or that the editing is sloppy, or that the acting is bad. The problem is with the kind of stories Hollywood is telling and the kind of messages that it is sending in film after film. The industry is bursting with professionalism and prowess. But it suffers from a sickness of the soul.

Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values that most Americans

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cherish.

Take a look, for example, at the most recent Oscars. Five very fine actors were nominated for best actor of the year. Three of them portrayed murderous psychos: Robert DeNiro in *Cape Fear*, Warren Beatty in *Bugsy*, and Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* (this last a delightful family film about two serial killers—one eats and the other skins his victims). A fourth actor, Robin Williams, was nominated for playing a delusional homeless psycho in *The Fisher King*. The most wholesome character was Nick Nolte's, a good old fashioned manic-depressive-suicidal neurotic in *The Prince of Tides*.

These are all good actors, delivering splendid performances, compelling and technically accomplished. But isn't it sad when all this artistry is lavished on films that are so empty, so barren, so unfulfilling? Isn't it sad when at the Academy Awards—the annual event that celebrates the highest achievement of which the film industry is capable—the best we can come up with is movies that are so floridly, strangely whacked out?

I repeat: The fundamental problem with Hollywood has nothing at all to do with the

brilliance of the performers, or the camera work, or the editing. In many ways, these things are better than ever before. Modern films are technically brilliant, but they are morally and spiritually empty.

The Messages

What are the messages in today's films? For a number of years I have been writing about Hollywood's anti-religious bias, but I must point out that this hostility has never been quite as intense as in the last few years. The 1991 season boasted one religion-bash-

ing movie after another in which Hollywood was able to demonstrate that it was an equal-opportunity offender.

For Protestants there was *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, a lavish \$35 million rainforest spectacle about natives and their wholesome primitive ways and the sick, disgusting missionaries who try to ruin their lives. And then for Catholics there was *The Pope Must Die*, which was re-released as *The Pope Must Diet*. It didn't work either way. It features scenes of the Holy Father flirting with harlot nuns and hiding in a closet pigging out on communion wafers. For Jews there was *Naked Tango*, written and directed by the brother of the screen-writer for *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This particular epic featured religious Jews operating a brutal bordello right next door to a synagogue and forcing women into white slavery.

And then most amazingly there was *Cape Fear*, which was nominated for a number of the most prestigious Academy Awards. It wasn't an original concept. *Cape Fear* was a remake of a 1962 movie in which Robert Mitchum plays a released convict intent on revenge who tracks down his old defense attorney. Gregory Peck portrays the defense attorney, a strong, stalwart and upright man who defends his family against this crazed killer. In the remake, by *Last Temptation* director Martin Scorsese, there is a new twist: the released convict is not just an ordinary maniac, but a "Killer Christian from Hell." To prevent anyone from missing the point,

his muscular back has a gigantic cross tattooed on it, and he has Biblical verses tattooed on both arms.

When he is about to rape the attorney's wife, played by Jessica Lange, he says, "Are you ready to be born again? After just one hour with me, you'll be talking in tongues." He carries a Bible with him in scenes in which he is persecuting his family, and he tells people that he is a member of a Pentecostal church.

The most surprising aspect of this utterly insulting characterization is that it drew so little protest. Imagine that DeNiro's character had been portrayed as a gay rights activist. Homosexual groups would have howled in protest, condemning this caricature as an example of bigotry. But we are so accustomed to Hollywood's insulting stereotypes of religious believers that no one even seems to notice the hatred behind them.

The entertainment industry further demonstrates its hostility to organized religion by eliminating faith and ritual as a factor in the lives of nearly all the characters it creates. Forty to fifty percent of all Americans go to church or synagogue every week. When was the last time you saw anybody in a motion picture going to church, unless that person was some kind of crook, or a mental case, or a flagrant hypocrite?

Hollywood even removes religious elements from situations in which they clearly belong. The summer of 1991 offered a spate of medical melodramas like *Regarding Henry*, *Dying Young*, and *The Doctor*. Did you notice that all these characters go into the operating room without once invoking the name of God, or whispering one little prayer, or asking for clergy? I wrote a non-fiction book about hospital life once, and I guarantee that just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there are no atheists in operating rooms—only in Hollywood.

Religion isn't Hollywood's only target; the traditional family has also received surprisingly harsh treatment from today's movie moguls. Look again at *Cape Fear*. The remake didn't only change the killer; it also changed the hero, and this brings me to the second message that Hollywood regularly broadcasts. As I mentioned, the original character Gregory Peck plays is a decent and honorable man. In the remake, Nick Nolte's character is, not to put too fine a point on it,

a sleazeball. He is repeatedly unfaithful to his wife; when his wife dares to question that practice, he hits her. He tries to beat up his daughter on one occasion because she is smoking marijuana. He is not a likeable person. That a happily married, family-defending hero—the kind of person that people can identify with—is transformed into a sadistic, cheating, bitter man, says volumes about the direction of American movies.

Did you ever notice how few movies there are about happily married people? There are very few movies about married people at all, but those that are made tend to portray marriage as a disaster, as a dangerous situation, as a battleground—with a long series of murderous marriage movies.

There was *Sleeping with the Enemy*, in which Patrick Bergin beats up Julia Roberts so mercilessly that she has to run away. When he comes after her, she eventually kills him. There was also *Mortal Thoughts* in which Bruce Willis beats up *his* wife and he is killed by his wife's best friend. In *Thelma and Louise*, there is another horrible, brutal and insensitive husband to run away from. In *A Kiss Before Dying*, Matt Dillon persuades twin sisters to marry him. He kills the first one and then tries to kill the second, but she gets to him first.

In *She-Devil*, Rosanne Barr torments her cheating husband Ed Begley, Jr., and in *Total Recall*, Sharon Stone pretends to be married to Arnold Schwarzenegger and tries to kill him. When he gets the upper hand, she objects, "But you can't hurt me! I'm your wife." Arnold shoots her through the forehead and says, "Consider that a divorce." And then there was a more recent film, *Deceived*, starring Goldie Hawn. The advertisement for the movie says, "She thought her life was perfect," and, of course, her model husband turns out to be a murderous monster. *Deceived* is an appropriate title, because we all have been deceived by Hollywood's portrayal of marriage. It even applies to television. *The New York Times* reports that in the past TV season there were seven different pregnancies. What did six of the seven pregnancies have in common? They were out of wedlock. The message is that marriage is outmoded, it is dangerous, oppressive, unhealthy.

But is it true? Recently, I made an interesting discovery. The conventional wisdom is that the divorce rate in America stands at 50 percent. This figure is used repeatedly in the media. But the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau has a category listing the number of people who have ever been married and who have ever been divorced. Less than twenty percent have

been divorced! The evidence is overwhelming that the idea of a 50 percent divorce rate is more than a slight over-statement; it is a destructive and misleading myth.

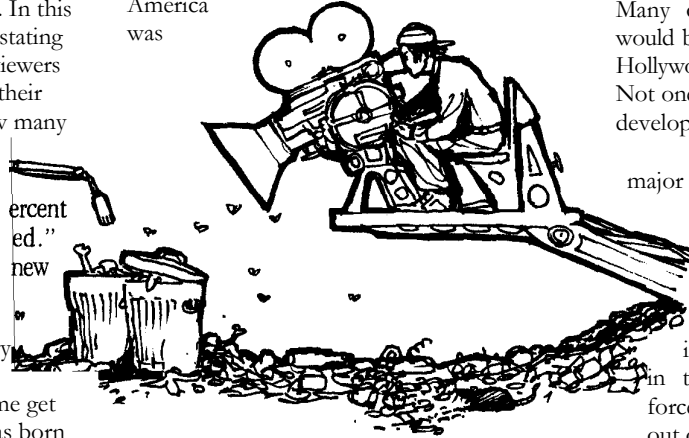
Yet for years Hollywood has been selling divorce. Remember *The Last Married Couple in America*, starring the late Natalie Wood? That may be a Hollywood prophecy, but it is not the reality of the American heartland. In this matter, as in so many others, by overstating the negative, the film industry leads viewers to feel terrified and/or insecure, and their behavior is adversely affected. I know many people who say, "I'm reluctant to get married because I know there's a 50 percent chance I'm going to get divorced." Wouldn't it make a difference if they there was an 80 percent chance of staying together?

Another negative message is America-bashing. This is a very patriotic country, one of the most patriotic countries in the world. Let me get personal for a minute: My mother was born in Germany. She was lucky enough to get out with her family in 1935. There were other family members who were not fortunate enough to get out, and most who stayed behind died in Hitler's holocaust. In any event, my mother had a first cousin, Hans, who also got out of Germany, and within a year of arriving in the United States, speaking only broken, heavily-accented English, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He became a tail gunner and flew 25 bombing missions. On the last, when he was 21 years old, he was shot down and killed over Romani. His parents, for whom he was the only child had a little shrine in their home ever afterwards, with an American flag and a picture of Hans in his airman's uniform. They often used to say, "We're proud that he died for this wonderful country."

I relate this story not because it is exceptional but because it is typical. Don't all have personal stories that show our love our pride, our gratitude for being born in this amazingly fortunate situation in which we find ourselves? The luckiest people on earth—that's how most Americans feel. But what do they see on their movie and television screens? What is the dream of America that is portrayed? It is a dream of a nightmarish land, where nothing is going right, where evil powers dominate. Consider for example that full-color, breathless guided tour of the fetid fever swamps of Oliver Stone's paranoid imagination—the movie *JFK*, a tale in which Stone suggests a conspiracy so grand, so enormous, so corrupt

that it involves absolutely every conceivable American institution and organization except the CampFire Girls.

Oliver Stone's nightmare has increasingly become Hollywood's dream of America. Once upon a time, one of the ways that my immigrant mother, and my immigrant grandparents on my father's side, learned about America was



through movies. Movies glorified the American past, and some of them were very good, like *Drums Along the Mohawk* or *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Today, if Hollywood made a movie about young Mr. Lincoln he would be an abused child and grow up to be corrupt and power-lusting.

The American past, according to Hollywood, is mainly about the rise of evil businessmen and the "exploitative" capitalist system, or, alternately, about the supposedly glorious 1960s. There are a plethora of phony Sixties nostalgia movies clearly made by people who are determined to glorify all those who protested against the Vietnam War and to insult all those who actually fought it. Is there a more insulted and abused group of people than Vietnam vets? You always see them with twitches, right? They're always weird guys. If a screenwriter needs to come up with an explanation for why a character is a crazed killer, there is always: "Oh, he was in 'Nam." But three million Americans fought in Vietnam and they are not all crazed killers.

The other era that the movies tend to focus on obsessively is the 1930s, with those wonderful dramatic elements of negativity, the Depression and gangsters. The glories of our history? Forget it.

In 1985, there was an attempt to make a movie about the American Revolution that cost \$35 million and showcased Al Pacino, his Brooklyn accent firmly intact, as a soldier in the Continental Army. But this movie made the Americans the bad guys! Did it take a genius to tell Warner Brothers that if

you make a movie about the Revolution that runs two and a half hours and makes the Americans the bad guys, no one will want to see it?

Recently, we went through an amazing national experience when America rallied with a unanimity that has not been seen in my lifetime behind Operation Desert Storm. Many commentators predicted that there would be a glut of movies about it. Wouldn't Hollywood be eager to exploit the Gulf War? Not one is currently in production or even in development.

By contrast, there are currently *five* major studio projects in development about the Black Panther Party—that tiny, briefly fashionable gang of thugs who murdered many of their own members. An industry that thinks that the American people are more interested in the Black Panthers than in the genuine heroes of our armed forces is an industry that is profoundly out of touch.

The Motivation

What is the motivation behind the messages Hollywood is sending? Some people say, "Well, you know, the movie business is perfect capitalism; it's merely giving the people what they want."

But a simple analysis of the controversial content of recent films and their corresponding box office performance shows that this is not the case. Over 60 percent of all the feature films are now rated "R"—despite the fact that they consistently earn less money than those rated "G" or "PG." In 1991, PG-rated films drew a median box office gross *three times larger* than R-rated films—but Hollywood persists in keeping the majority of its releases as gore-and-sex drenched R-rated shockers. Is this an example of responding to the public?

Hollywood expresses its underlying values most clearly with those projects which it considers serious "art" films—films that make some philosophical or political statement. Consider the 1990 bomb, *Guilty by Suspicion*, a dark, tragic tale of an idealistic, blacklisted left-wing director in the 1950s. How could Warner Brothers possibly assume it would make money on this very expensive Robert DeNiro project—especially when more than a half-dozen previous films about the horrors of the McCarthy era had all failed miserably at the box office?

Or take a look at the three gigantically expensive film biographies that are coming

out in 1992. You know what they're about? They're about three terrific American heroes. One of them is Jimmy Hoffa, played by Jack Nicholson. The second is about Malcolm X, directed by Spike Lee. The third is about Charlie Chaplin, specifically about his struggles with McCarthyism during the 1950s and about how he eventually had to flee to a self-imposed exile because of his left-wing politics.

If we can assume that the primary purpose of these movies, each of which will cost tens of millions of dollars, is not to make money, then what is it? Why does Hollywood persist in making films that so constantly revel in the dark side, in gloom and despair, destruction and horror? I'll try to offer a brief explanation, but it's a complicated psychological problem. Someone versed in clinical psychology might be better able to diagnose the situation.

People in the movie business are motivated by a tremendous desire to be taken seriously. They don't want to be thought of as just entertainers. They want to be respected—as "artists." And the view today is that in order to be a serious artist to make a statement—you have to be removed from the mainstream in your own country.

This view ignores all of Western history. Was William Shakespeare alienated from the Tudor monarchy? He wrote play after play glorifying Elizabeth's antecedents and became a court favorite. He was part of the establishment and proud of it. When Johann Sebastian Bach wrote the imperishable glories for which he is known, he wrote for Prince Leopold, for the elector of Brandenburg, and for the Church of St. Thomas in

Leipzig. He composed more than 600 sacred cantatas and chorales, devotedly serving the religious hierarchy of his time.

In the past, most great artists served and respected the society they lived in. To be sure, they were not content with all its aspects, but they weren't off on the sidelines wearing black turtlenecks saying that life is meaningless and bleak or immersing crucifixes in their own urine. Today the "serious artist alienated from society" syndrome has mined the visual arts, poetry, and classical music. It has even begun to destroy popular culture, which heretofore has been more in tune with ordinary people.

Today to win the highest critical praise, or to receive leading Oscar consideration, you have to make a movie that says life is short and bitter, and it stinks. Mel Brooks recently made the least successful movie of his career. Do you know what it was called? *Life Stinks*. Pretend for a moment that you are the head of MGM, and Mel comes to you and says, "Hey, I have an idea for a fun comedy called *Life Stinks*. Think that's gonna sell?" No, but it will help Mel get taken seriously as an "artist."

These are not bad people. They are very well intentioned. There isn't a single AIDS benefit that they will miss. If there is any kind of dinner to save the rainforests, they are there. They want to be loved. But they earnestly believe that the only way they will receive respect from those who "count"—the critics, the industry heavyweights, the media, the intellectual elites—is to make brutal, bitter, America-bashing, family-bashing, religion-bashing movies.

What Do We Do?

What do we do about it? At a recent conference on popular culture and values, I was on a panel that included Jack Valenti, William Bennett and Robert Bork. The question of regulating the content of movies came up. Interestingly enough, judge Bork was generally in favor of government intervention, i.e., censorship. He pointed out that all law is based upon moral judgments. Law exists to influence the moral behavior of its citizens.

This is certainly a convincing argument, but I don't think censorship is a good idea for one very simple reason: the government makes a mess of everything it does, and it would make a huge mess of determining what goes into movies! It always surprises me that conservatives, who understand that the government is remarkably inept, even at running the postal system, believe that state power can somehow suddenly be counted upon to raise the moral tone of our popular culture. It can't—forget it, it is only wishful thinking.

This does not mean that we can't talk about values in movies. I have drawn a good deal of criticism over the years because as a professional critic I try to consider the values and the message in movies—not just their technical excellence—and I speak out about this in the national press and on television. It is vital that those considerations should play a more prominent role in our public

discussions of contemporary cinema. That is alternative number one to censorship. No movie is morally neutral, no movie fails to send a message, no movie doesn't change you to some extent when you see it. Movies have a cumulative, potent and lasting impact.

Another alternative to censorship is *corporate responsibility*. The great business conglomerates that are making entertainment have to exercise a more mature sense of social and corporate accountability. We are living in an age when increasingly we are asking corporations to be responsible for their pollution of the air and the water; why shouldn't they be responsible for the pollution of the cultural environment around us? In the same way that other activists use boycotts and stockholders meetings and every sort of public pressure, popular culture activists must develop a new sense of determination and resourcefulness. The impact of popular culture on our children and our future is too important an issue to leave in the hands of a few isolated movie moguls in Hollywood—or to self-important politicians in Washington.

There are many indications that the entertainment industry may be eager to reconnect with the grass roots—and to entertain an expanded notion of its obligations to the public. The industry, in some areas, behaved responsibly. In the past five years it changed its message about drugs. No longer is it making movies in which marijuana, cocaine and other drugs

are glamorized. Hollywood made a decision. Was it self-censorship? You bet. Was it responsible? Yes.

We can challenge the industry to adapt a more wholesome outlook, to send more constructive messages. We can clamor for movies that don't portray marriage as a living hell, that recognize the spiritual side of man's nature, that glorify the blessings in life we enjoy as Americans and the people who make sacrifices to ensure that others will be able to enjoy them.

The box office crisis put Hollywood in a receptive mood. Already two film corporations have committed to a schedule of family movies for a very simple reason: they are wildly successful. Only two percent of movies released in 1991 were G-rated—just 14 titles—but at least 8 of these 14 proved to be unequivocally profitable. (By comparison, of more than 600 other titles, at most 20 percent earned back their investment.) Look at *Beauty and the Beast*, my choice for Best Movie of 1991. It was a stunning financial success. We need many more pictures like this, and not just animated features geared for younger audiences. Shouldn't it be possible to create movies with adult themes but without foul language, graphic sex or cinematic brutality? During Hollywood's golden age, industry leaders understood that there

was nothing inherently *mature* about these unsettling elements.

Rekindling Our Love Affair with Hollywood

People tell me sometimes, "Boy, the way you talk, it sounds as though you really hate movies." The fact is that I don't. I'm a film critic because I *love* movies. And I want to tell you something: All of the people who are trying to make a difference in this business love movies and they love the industry, despite all its faults. They love what it has done in the past, and they love its potential for the future. They believe that Hollywood can be the dream factory again.

When I go to a screening, sit in a theater seat, and the lights go down, there's a little something inside me that hopes against all rational expectation that what I'm going to see on the screen is going to delight me, enchant me, and entice me, like the best movies do. I began by declaring that America's long-running romance with Hollywood is over. It is a romance, however, that can be rekindled, if this appalling, amazing industry can once again create movies that are worthy of love and that merit the ardent affection of its audience. 8

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