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HOLLYWOOD VS. AMERICA

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE WAR
ON TRADITIONAL VALUES

Michael Medved

1992



HarperCollins Publishers

Zondervan

A Sickness in the Soul

Alienating the Audience

America's long-running romance with Hollywood is over.

As a nation, we no longer believe that popular culture enriches our lives. Few of us view the show business capital as a magical source of uplifting entertainment, romantic inspiration, or even harmless fun. Instead, tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children. The dream factory has become the poison factory.

The leaders of the industry refuse to acknowledge this rising tide of alienation and hostility. They dismiss anyone who dares to question the impact of the entertainment they produce as a "right-wing extremist" or a "religious fanatic." They self-righteously assert their own right to unfettered free expression while condemning as "fringe groups" all organizations that plead for some sense of restraint or responsibility. In the process, Hollywood ignores the concerns of the overwhelming majority of the American people who worry over the destructive messages so frequently featured in today's movies, television, and popular music.

Dozens of recent studies demonstrate the public's deep disenchantment. In 1989, for instance, an Associated Press/Media General poll showed that 82 percent of a scientifically selected sample felt that movies contained too much violence; 80 percent found too much profanity; and 72 percent complained of too much nudity. By a ratio of more than three to one, the respondents believed that "overall quality" of movies had been "getting worse" as opposed to "getting better."

In 1990, a *Parents* magazine poll revealed similar attitudes toward television. Seventy-one percent of those surveyed rated today's TV as "fair, poor, or terrible." Seventy-two percent of this sample supported strict prohibitions against "ridiculing or making fun of religion" on the air, while 64 percent backed restrictions on "ridiculing or making fun of traditional values, such as marriage and motherhood." A Gallup Poll in 1991 turned up additional evidence of the public's suspicious and resentful attitude toward televised entertainment. Fifty-eight percent of Americans said that they are "offended frequently or occasionally" by prime-time programming; only three percent believed that TV portrayed "very positive" values.

This widespread concern over the messages of the popular culture stems from an increasingly common conviction that mass entertainment exacerbates our most serious social problems. A *Time/CNN* survey in 1989 showed that 67 percent believe that violent images in movies are "mainly to blame" for the national epidemic of teenage violence; 70 percent endorse "greater restraints on the showing of sex and violence" in feature films. A *Los Angeles Times* survey of the same year reported 63 percent who assert that television "encourages crime," while a 1991 *Newsweek/Gallup* Poll showed 68 percent who hold that today's movies have a "considerable" or "very great" effect in causing real-life violence.

"This Simply Cannot Go On"

The Hollywood establishment chooses to ignore these public attitudes, or else to downplay their significance. Surveying the severe financial problems that currently plague every component of the entertainment industry, the top decision-makers see nothing more than a temporary slump in business. In one typical comment, John Neal,

senior vice president for marketing for United Artists Entertainment, optimistically declared: "All it takes is one big hit movie and suddenly the whole picture changes."

That "one big hit movie," however, will do nothing to end the alienation of an increasingly significant segment of the mainstream audience. The public's growing disillusionment with the content of the popular culture represents a long-term trend that won't suddenly disappear with the end of a recession, or the release of a new batch of lucky box-office blockbusters. The depth and breadth of the current crisis suggests fundamental flaws in the sort of entertainment that Hollywood, in all of its many manifestations, seeks to sell to the American people. That is why ventures as varied as home video and rock 'n' roll radio, feature films and prime-time television, are all suffering similar and simultaneous setbacks.

Consider, for example, the baleful situation with the three major television networks. In the last fifteen years they have lost a third of their nightly audience—some 30 million viewers. As a result, their cumulative profits have sunk from \$800 million in 1984 to \$400 million by 1988, to less than zero in 1991. Business analysts advance many theories for this disastrous falloff, but even television insiders consider that much of the public's disenchantment relates directly to the quality of the programs. "The networks have lost audiences because they've lost touch with the American viewer," according to Gene DeWitt, head of a prestigious New York media consulting firm interviewed by *Time* in November 1990. "They haven't delivered programs that viewers want to watch."

Syndicated columnist Mike Royko spoke for many Americans when he recently declared, "I enjoy TV trash as much as the next slob. But the quality of truly trashy trash has declined." He went on to explain that of the top seventy-one shows in the Nielsen Ratings, "there isn't even one that I now watch regularly." His fellow columnist Cal Thomas announced his resolution at the end of 1990 to give up watching the networks altogether. "They have not only abandoned my values," he wrote, "they now have sunk to the sewer level, dispensing the foulest of smells that resemble the garbage I take to the curb twice a week."

Many of the major networks' lost viewers have fled to the new Fox Network, or to the abundance of alternatives on cable TV, but these additional options have done nothing to increase the public's approval

of what it is watching. A survey commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters found that a growing number of households with TV sets "feel increasing dissatisfaction" and that "the majority of viewers believe television is a negative influence."

One reflection of viewer restlessness is the tendency toward "grazing" in their nightly viewing—using remote controls to switch stations in the middle of a program. According to a major survey for *Channels* magazine in 1988, 48.5 percent of all viewers regularly change programs during a show—and nearly 60 percent of viewers in the crucial eighteen-to-thirty-four age group. "Grazing is by definition a sign of dissatisfaction," explained James Webster, professor of communications at Northwestern University. "Viewers know what is going to happen, and they wonder what they're missing on some other channel." According to the Gallup Poll, in 1974, 46 percent of Americans rated watching television as their favorite way of spending an evening; by 1990, that number had fallen to 24 percent.

This diminished enthusiasm for the popular culture and its products has even infected the huge teenage audience for popular music—an audience never before noted for its finicky taste or searching discernment. Overall sales of records, cassettes, and CDs plummeted a disastrous 11 percent in the first six months of 1991, and signs of restlessness and frustration turned up everywhere in the music business. Bob Krasnow, chairman of Elektra Entertainment, told *Billboard* magazine: "In 1991, the record business finds itself dangerously close to creative stagnation. All the formulas have been played out." Meanwhile, numerous articles asked "Is rock dead?" while all measures of public response suggested that this once robust art form was, at best, on life-support systems.

For instance, rock 'n' roll's share of the music industry's total take slipped from 46.2 percent in 1988 to 37.4 percent in 1990. Just weeks before his death in October 1991, the legendary concert promoter Bill Graham observed that "until now, rock was recession proof . . . but we have just gone through the worst six months ever in the rock concert industry." Attendance at rock concerts across the nation plunged by more than 30 percent compared to the previous year.

At the same time, the "Top 40" radio format continued its long-term slide in the Arbitron radio ratings, abandoned by even those teenagers who have always provided its core of support. In 1991 an

unprecedented 56 percent of the teenage radio audience preferred listening to other formats; as a result, country and western for the first time passed Top 40 in overall popularity. In fact, the steady growth in the audience for country music, with its earthy and unpretentious attempts to connect with the everyday concerns of Middle America, provided one of the few bright spots in the general gloom of the music business. Country star Garth Brooks confounded all expectations by creating 1991's top-selling album, *Ropin' the Wind*, which is expected to reach sales of more than 7 million units. Music industry analyst Bob Lefsetz, publisher of *The Lefsetz Letter*, declares, "Country music, unlike the rest of popular music, is talking about real lives. About real people. These artists are telling you what they feel. They're making honest records, and that's why their music is connecting with the public."

Feature films, by contrast, are connecting with a shrinking percentage of the American people. Sharply increased ticket prices and the controversial content of recent films have combined to make moviegoing a form of entertainment that appeals primarily to an elite audience. According to 1991 figures from the Motion Picture Association of America, 27 percent of those who have attended college describe themselves as "frequent" moviegoers, but only 11 percent of those who failed to complete high school place themselves in that category. More significantly, 45 percent of *all* Americans are identified as "infrequent" moviegoers (less than twice a year), and a full 33 percent declared that they *never* go to the movies. Several other recent studies (Gallup, Gordon Black Corporation, Barna Research Group, Media General) show similar percentages (ranging from 35 up to 45 percent) who stay away from motion pictures altogether.

The absence of these potential patrons has devastated the movie business. At the height of the usually prosperous summer season, ticket sales plunged more than 31 percent in 1991, bringing the feature film business its worst August in twenty-three years. Even video rentals, whose seemingly inexorable rise has played such a significant role in keeping struggling studios afloat, declined 6 percent during the year. Industry analysts reported that poor audience response to the new feature films had begun to rub off on the home video business, producing a new wariness on the part of prospective renters.

An upsurge in ticket sales during the holiday season generated

some reassuring headlines about the movie business, but year-end reckonings offered no real grounds for joy. According to figures from *Variety*, 1991 brought only 960 million motion picture admissions—the lowest total in fifteen years. The first months of 1992 confirmed the disastrous long-term trend: according to Exhibitor Relations Co., a widely used box-office data tracking firm, movie grosses between January 1 and April 15, 1992, fell an additional 9 percent from their already dismal performance of the previous year. This meant reduced income for the major studios of some \$200 million. During the usually busy Presidents' Day weekend, *Variety* reported that movie admissions fell a spectacular 30 percent from 1991.

As a result of the shrinking movie audience, the precarious economic situation of the major studios began attracting headlines of its own. Two of the industry's most important and respected production companies, Orion and MGM, have recently frozen their release and production schedules as they teeter on the verge of financial collapse. Cannon Films and Weintraub Entertainment Group, both of them well-financed and high-flying independents as recently as a few years ago, have now closed down altogether. Even Carolco Pictures, producer of the year's top hit, *Terminator 2*, found itself forced to cut production and to lay off one-fourth of its employees as part of its December 1991 retrenchment plan.

Peter Dekom, the universally respected entertainment lawyer and show business analyst, describes the current condition of the movie industry as "a catastrophe." In a widely circulated September 1991 memo entitled "Chicken Little Was Right," he concludes that "We in the industry are all wondering how we keep our life-styles together, because each and every one of us knows this simply cannot go on."

Sleaze and Self-Indulgence

Even without the pronouncements of experts, ordinary Americans understand that Hollywood is in serious trouble. As a point of reference, ask yourself a simple question: when was the last time that you heard someone that you know say that movies—or TV, or popular music, for that matter—were better than ever? On the other hand, how recently have you listened to complaints about the dismal quality of the

movies at the multiplex, the shows on the tube, or the songs on the radio?

In recent years, not even Jack Valenti, the well-paid cheerleader for the Motion Picture Association, can claim with a straight face that the movie business is scaling new artistic heights. David Puttnam, Oscar-winning producer of *Chariots of Fire* and former chairman of Columbia Pictures, reports, "As you move around Hollywood in any reasonably sophisticated group, you'll find it quite difficult to come across people who are proud of the movies that are being made." In December 1991, industry journalist Grover Lewis went even further when he declared in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*: "The movies, which many of us grew up regarding as the co-literature of the age, have sunk to an abysmal low unimaginable only a few years ago."

In fact, nearly everyone associated with the industry acknowledges the obvious collapse in the caliber of today's films, and at the same time manages to blame someone else for the disastrous situation.

Jeffrey Katzenberg, production chief at the beleaguered Walt Disney Studios, shrugs his shoulders and cites inscrutable Higher Powers. "We're in the hands of the movie gods," he told the *Los Angeles Times*, "who will either shine down and give us good fortune or not. . . . That's part of what keeps people going in this business—the magical and mysterious nature of it."

Producer Gene Kirkwood (*Rocky*) offers a less "magical and mysterious" explanation for Hollywood's troubles, pointing his finger at the writers. "When you look at the writing that's around today, most of which is not very good, it makes you want to go back to the old films," he explains. One of the writers of those old films, Oscar-winner I. A. L. Diamond (*The Apartment*) in turn cites "the lawyers and agents who run the studios, and the subliterate subteenagers who form the bulk of the audience" for creating the present problems. Julia Phillips, the outspoken outcast who produced *The Sting*, specifically accuses Mike Ovitz, head of the Creative Artists Agency, who "first ruined movies, then sold out to the Japanese."

Film critic Michael Sragow manages to identify an even more nefarious and omnipotent culprit, blaming the industry's whole sorry mess on an over-the-hill Warner Brothers star who actually abandoned the movie business more than twenty years ago. Asserting that "American movies are still reaping the harvest of Ronald Reagan's reign of

mediocrity and escapism," Sragow concluded in 1990 that it was actually the former President who "ate Hollywood's brain."

While searching for scapegoats, the entertainment industry ignores the obvious: that Hollywood's crisis is, at its very core, a crisis of values. It's not "mediocrity and escapism" that leave audiences cold, but sleaze and self-indulgence. What troubles people about the popular culture isn't the competence with which it's shaped, but the messages it sends, the view of the world it transmits.

Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values of most American families. On many of the important issues in contemporary life, popular entertainment seems to go out of its way to challenge conventional notions of decency. For example:

- Our fellow citizens cherish the institution of marriage and consider religion an important priority in life; but the entertainment industry promotes every form of sexual adventurism and regularly ridicules religious believers as crooks or crazies.
- In our private lives, most of us deplore violence and feel little sympathy for the criminals who perpetrate it; but movies, TV, and popular music all revel in graphic brutality, glorifying vicious and sadistic characters who treat killing as a joke.
- Americans are passionately patriotic, and consider themselves enormously lucky to live here; but Hollywood conveys a view of the nation's history, future, and major institutions that is dark, cynical, and often nightmarish.
- Nearly all parents want to convey to their children the importance of self-discipline, hard work, and decent manners; but the entertainment media celebrate vulgar behavior, contempt for all authority, and obscene language—which is inserted even in "family fare" where it is least expected.

As a working film critic, I've watched this assault on traditional values for more than a decade. Not only have I endured six or seven movies every week, year after year, but I've also received a steady stream of letters from moviegoers who are upset by one or another of Hollywood's excesses. At times, they blame me for failing to warn them ardently enough about avoiding a particular film; in other cases they are writing to express their pent-up frustration with an industry that

seems increasingly out of control and out of touch. My correspondents frequently use words such as "disgusting" or "pathetic" to describe the sorry state of today's films. In 1989 a young woman from Westport, Connecticut, expressed these sentiments with memorable clarity. "The problem is that whenever I take a chance and go against my better judgment and venture back into a movie theater," she wrote, "I always feel like a worse person when I come out. I'm embarrassed for the people who made this trash, and I'm embarrassed for myself. It's like watching the stuff that I've just watched has made me a smaller human being. Isn't that sad?"

It is terribly sad, especially in view of the technical brilliance that turns up in so many of Hollywood's most recent productions. When people express their disappointment at the generally low level of contemporary films, they seldom indict the camera work, the editing, the set design, or even the acting. In fact, these components of moviemaking have reached a level of consistent competence—even artistry—that would be the envy of Hollywood's vaunted Golden Age. I regularly marvel at gorgeous and glowing visual images, captured on screen in the service of some pointless and heartless waste of celluloid, or sympathize with an ensemble of superbly talented performers, acting their hearts out, and trying to make the most of empty material that is in no way worthy of them. If Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman have failed to inspire the sort of devoted and consistent following once enjoyed by Jimmy Stewart or John Wayne, it is not because they are less capable as actors. What ails today's films has nothing to do with the prowess or professionalism of the filmmakers. The true sickness is in the soul.

"A Performance Piece by Michael Jackson"

This heartbreaking combination of dazzling technique wedded to a puerile and degrading purpose recently shocked the country in one of the most heavily hyped entertainment "events" in history: the world premiere of the music video "Black or White," from Michael Jackson's album *Dangerous*.

On November 14, 1991, Fox Network, MTV, and Black Entertainment Television simultaneously broadcast the first showing of this

eleven-minute extravaganza, which had been created by director John Landis at an unprecedented cost of \$7.2 million. To prepare the public for the momentous occasion of the televised premiere, Epic Records released the song (without the accompanying images) to radio stations just two days in advance. Within twenty-four hours, "Black or White," described by the record company as "a rock 'n' roll dance song about racial harmony," had been added to the playlists of 96 percent of America's 237 Top 40 radio stations. This broke the previous record for a first-day release—94 percent—which had been set by Madonna's "Like a Prayer" in 1989.

On the fateful Thursday night of the televised premiere, an estimated 40 million individuals tuned in—helping Fox Network score the highest ratings of any night in its five-year history. To insure maximum exposure to the children and preteens who make up such an important part of Michael Jackson's core audience, the video featured well-advertised cameo appearances by both TV favorite Bart Simpson and diminutive movie star Macaulay (*Home Alone*) Culkin.

The video begins, in fact, with a tender domestic scene between Culkin and George Wendt (of TV's "Cheers"), playing his irritable dad. Macaulay is upstairs in his room, happily listening to music, when his father orders him to turn it down, threatening the child with a wagging finger. In response, the adorable boy hauls some huge amplifiers and speakers downstairs, tells Dad to "Eat this!" and proceeds to blast the music at such an ear-shattering level that he literally blows his parent through the roof.

The video proceeds to a display of a dizzying succession of more or less random images, including dancing Cossacks in the Kremlin, whooping Native Americans in feathers and paint, and Michael and a partner hoofing their way through hundreds of speeding cars on a busy freeway. The most memorable sequence involves a series of fifteen magical transformations in the course of little more than a minute, using the costly computer-generated special effect called "morphing" and made popular by *Terminator 2*.

The most troublesome transformation comes near the end of this incoherent epic, as the song concludes and the soundtrack falls silent except for a selection of jungle growls, screeches, and roars. A stalking black panther turns miraculously into Michael Jackson as we've never seen him before—attempting a feeble impersonation of a sulky, men-

acing, inner-city tough guy, tap-dancing down a wet, deserted street. As if to prove his manliness, Michael grabs repeatedly at his crotch, with close-ups showing our hero pulling the zipper of his pants suggestively up and down. *Entertainment Weekly* magazine later counted thirteen instances in which the superstar touched his "private parts," and at one point he performs an exaggerated simulation of masturbation. Finally, this inane episode reaches its creepy climax, as Jackson picks up a garbage can to shatter a store window, and uses a crowbar to savagely bust up a parked car, for no apparent reason whatever. As director John Landis helpfully explained in an interview prior to the premiere broadcast: "The epilogue is really a performance piece by Michael Jackson that can stand totally on its own. It's essentially an improvisation of Michael's."

The national television audience failed to appreciate that improvisation. Immediately following the telecast, switchboards at MTV, Fox Network, and all the network affiliates lit up with outraged complaints. One Fox official commented: "In all my years of television, I never saw anything like it. We couldn't believe the volume, and we couldn't believe the intensity. It was like a tidal wave." A spokesman for Jackson's production company confirmed that negative feedback was coming at them "from all directions."

Within twenty-four hours, the chagrined superstar agreed to delete the controversial four-minute epilogue from all future versions of his video and issued an elaborate apology to his fans. "It upsets me to think that 'Black or White' could influence any child or adult to destructive behavior, either sexual or violent," his statement read. "I've always tried to be a good role model and therefore have made these changes to avoid any possibility of affecting any individual's behavior. I deeply regret any pain or hurt that the final segment of 'Black or White' has caused children, their parents, or any other viewers."

Fox Network issued a lame apology of its own, admitting that "based on calls we've received, the strong symbolism used in one sequence overshadowed the film's message about racial harmony. We apologize to anyone who interpreted that sequence as sexually suggestive or violent and was offended."

It is impossible to imagine how anyone could possibly interpret the sequence as anything *other* than "sexually suggestive or violent"—after all, toying with your fly in intense close-up and using a crowbar to shat-

ter a parked car amount to the sort of "symbolism" that is hardly ambiguous.

The unanswerable question about this entire affair is how the experienced executives at the network, the record company, and Jackson's PR agency could seem to be so sincerely surprised by the public's outraged response. Did it never occur to them that people might find it more than a bit distasteful to use Macaulay Culkin and Bart Simpson to promote a video freak show that unequivocally encouraged vandalism and crotch-grabbing as forms of self-expression? With so many tens of millions of dollars riding on the outcome, with Michael's album setting all-time records for both its production and promotional costs, how could they afford to be so blind?

The lessons of this astonishing affair mirror three of the major arguments that I am advancing in this book.

First, the Michael Jackson fiasco shows that some of the most powerful, highly paid, and widely respected titans in Hollywood are hopelessly out of touch with the public they are trying to reach. They don't begin to understand the values of the average American family, or the special concerns of the typical parents who worry about unwholesome influences on their children.

Second, the Jackson affair clearly demonstrates that the American people understand that media images influence real-life behavior. The entertainment industry may deny its own impact, but ordinary citizens know better. They know perfectly well that if tens of millions of kids watch repeatedly as Michael Jackson gleefully smashes a car with a crowbar, then their own car is that much more likely to get smashed someday—and their own kids are that much more likely to try some smashing. The logic of this assumption is so obvious and inescapable that only the most shameless entertainment executives and their hired academic experts would even attempt to argue against it.

Third, the outcome of the "Black or White" controversy proves that an outraged audience can force changes on even the most powerful figures in show business. As a result of the spontaneous public outcry, Michael Jackson and his associates agreed to the uncomfortable and expensive expedient of cutting four questionable minutes from their eleven-minute video. Similar pressure, applied in a sustained and coordinated manner on a range of issues in American entertainment, could alter the entire direction of the popular culture.

Common Interests and Common Attitudes

Unfortunately, the prevailing attitude toward Hollywood recalls Mark Twain's celebrated comment about the weather: everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. In the case of the entertainment industry, most people recognize its powerful influence on their lives, but they assume that there is nothing they can do to change its course or reduce its impact.

That is not true, because the popular culture is hardly a force of nature, or an immutable aspect of the atmosphere around us. It is a man-made product, generated by a surprisingly small community of vulnerable and insecure human beings. That community has reconsidered its values and modified its priorities several times in the past, and future changes are not only possible, they are inevitable.

In that context, it's important to remember that the term "Hollywood" most often describes an industry, not a place. Of the ten major movie production companies, only one of them, Paramount, is actually located within the geographic boundaries of the sadly seedy district of Los Angeles that is officially designated "Hollywood." The rest of them are scattered throughout Southern California, while maintaining important "branch offices" in New York.

Their business is by no means limited to making motion pictures: all of the "majors" are connected to massive entertainment conglomerates that own everything from television networks to theme parks, from book publishers to gigantic record companies. Partially as a result of this concentration of show business resources, the dividing lines that once separated the various entertainment endeavors have never been so easily blurred. Distinguished movie directors regularly devote their talents to creating "music videos"; these productions in turn are featured on a round-the-clock television network devoted to promoting new hit records. In past years, major motion picture stars tried to avoid appearing on television, except for occasional high-profile specials; today, even the most critically acclaimed figures in the movie business will attempt serious and ambitious projects for TV. While some distinctions in emphasis and style still apply to the different branches of the business, it is now more appropriate than ever before to discuss "Hollywood" as one all-encompassing industry, united by common interests and common attitudes.

Feature film production remains the key to understanding those attitudes because it is still the most prestigious expression of the popular culture. Established TV stars and popular singers regularly dream of making the transition to motion pictures not because they can earn more money that way (they usually can't), but because they are far more likely to be taken seriously as creative artists if they develop movie careers. Garry Marshall reached a much larger audience with his television series "Happy Days" than with all his feature films combined, but it is those films (including *Nothing in Common* and *Pretty Woman*) that won him deeper respect from the critics and his peers. By common consent, the movies represent Hollywood's cutting edge, and provide the best perspective for understanding the industry's prospects and problems.

A Traitor to the Industry

In examining those prospects and problems, this book addresses some crucial questions concerning the current crisis in the popular culture:

- What are the values which today's movies, TV, and popular music transmit to America and to the world?
- How are Hollywood's messages affecting our society and our children?
- What are the underlying motivations of the moguls and creative artists who control the media culture?
- What can be done to make the entertainment industry more responsible and responsive to the public it is supposed to serve?

By asking these questions, and providing honest answers to the best of my abilities, this book will undoubtedly outrage a heavy majority of show business professionals. I am painfully aware that one of the consequences of its publication will be my potentially permanent estrangement from some of the thoughtful and well-intentioned people in Hollywood I have been proud to call my friends. In their view, I am a traitor to an industry that has always been good to me, and the criticisms that I raise here are misguided, offensive, even dangerous.

A few months ago, I showed an outline for this book to a close friend who works for one of the major studios. He strongly urged me to drop the project and warned of the outcome if I refused to do so. "I hope you realize," he told me, "that if you insist on going forward with something like this, you're going to become the most hated man in Hollywood."

That is a designation I am willing to accept, if the ensuing controversy will serve to open minds, and to encourage both producers and consumers of popular entertainment to examine its content with fresh eyes.

In any event, I could no longer ignore destructive trends that seemed increasingly obvious to me, or continue to focus exclusively on reviews of individual films while pretending not to notice that Hollywood's "big picture" had grown so much darker and more ominous. No matter how elegant and diverting the passing parade, it's time to step forward to suggest that the Entertainment Emperors are wearing no clothes.

Whatever my doubts about the industry, I continue to cherish occasional new films and to feel a sense of vicarious exultation whenever a filmmaker, in defiance of all odds and expectations, manages to create something of value and beauty. Whenever I go to a screening, I surrender myself to that thrilling and pregnant moment when the lights go down, leading to that on-screen enchantment that novelist Theodore Roszak writes about so well: "I see it as a softly focused square of light, and see myself dazzled and aroused, seated in the embracing darkness, savoring the enticement."

Like all moviegoers, I still savor the enticement, and hope that this appalling but amazing industry will regain its bearings and once again merit the affection of its audience.

A Declaration of War

"Father, Forgive Them"

On the morning of August 11, 1988, more than 25,000 people gathered at Universal City, California, in the largest protest ever mounted against the release of a motion picture.

The huge crowd assembled from every direction, filling all streets and sidewalks surrounding the legendary "Black Tower" that housed the corporate command center of the vast conglomerate, MCA/Universal. For several hours, long lines of cars and vans disgorged their passengers, clogging traffic and forcing police to close freeway off-ramps within a two-mile radius. All observers commented on the remarkable age range of the protesters, with preschoolers in strollers and senior citizens in wheelchairs well-represented, along with every category in between. The demonstrators carried hand-lettered signs proclaiming "Please Show Respect for My God," "The Lie Costs \$6.50; the Truth Is Free," and "Father, Forgive Them."

An acquaintance who worked at Universal at the time recalled the nervousness that prevailed throughout the day inside the company's main office building. "That was one time it was really scary to be in the Black Tower," she said. "There were just so many of them! When you

looked down, fifteen stories down, they were everywhere. The crowd seemed to go on for miles. We felt like we were trapped. A guy down the hall said it was like the Russian Revolution, and we were in the Winter Palace. My boss kept expecting them to charge—to break down the doors and to trash the building. He thought they were going to try and kill people. We had extra security all day because everybody was expecting a fight.”

The huge throng failed to live up to these dramatic expectations; despite the feelings of hurt and rage that many of the demonstrators expressed to members of the press, the police reported no incidents of either violence or vandalism. The protesters assembled in order to show their passionate opposition to the next day’s scheduled release of Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, not to exact vengeance from the studio that produced it. They sang a few hymns, cheered lustily for more than a dozen occasionally emotional speakers, and then peaceably dispersed. By midafternoon the terrified honchos in the Black Tower breathed a collective sigh of relief and returned to their business—without making any serious attempt to come to terms with the significance of what had just occurred outside their windows.

The movie moguls, together with many of their supporters in the news media, persisted in dismissing the demonstrators (and all others opposed to the production and release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*) as representatives of a lunatic fringe of religious fanatics and right-wing extremists. In one typical piece of commentary, columnist Mike Duffy of the *Detroit Free Press* decried those who criticized the film as “sour, fun-loathing people” and “the American ignoramus faction that is perpetually geeked up on self-righteous bile. . . .

“They looked for Reds under every bed with Joe McCarthy.

“They cheered police dogs in Selma. . . .

“And now the know-nothing wacky pack has latched onto Martin Scorsese and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. . . .”

In point of fact, the “know-nothing wacky pack” that protested the movie included such “fringe groups” as the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention (with 14 million members), the Eastern Orthodox Church of America, the Archbishop of Canterbury (head of the worldwide Anglican Church), the archbishop of Paris, twenty members of the U.S. House of Representatives (who cosponsored a bipartisan reso-

lution condemning the film), the Christian Democratic Party of Italy (that nation’s largest political party), and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Nobel Prize-winner who invariably turns up on polls as one of the world’s most admired human beings. Mother Teresa sent a particularly passionate “message to America” that was read to the demonstrators in which she called on all people of good will to use “prayer as the ultimate weapon to fight this ultimate disgrace.”

In fact, all of those who addressed the enormous crowd that gathered at Universal the day before the picture’s release spoke in temperate tones that gave scant indication that they had been “geeked up on self-righteous bile.”

One of Hollywood’s own received an especially warm response—Ken Wales, former vice president at Disney studios and veteran producer of more than twenty feature films. “As a member of this industry I wish that there were hundreds of stars and writers and directors standing here with me,” Wales pleaded. “I suppose they are out protesting toxic waste! Let me tell you, there is toxic waste in other areas besides our rivers. That happens in the pollution of our minds, our souls, and our spirits!”

Another speaker on the program was Rabbi Chaim Asa, a Holocaust survivor and leader of a large Reform temple in Fullerton, California. Speaking slowly and deliberately, but with great intensity, Rabbi Asa explained that he had come to “join in protesting the indignity of this particular attempt to defame your God. . . . Millions across the country are saying, ‘You are touching something very deep, very sensitive in my soul. Please don’t do it, because this is not fair!’ I protest vehemently, as many of my Christian friends did when someone tried to burn our temple in Fullerton. . . . I will try to express to my Christian friends—if their pain is deep now, so is my pain for them.”

Stonewalling

The executives at Universal remained remarkably insensitive to that pain; their public statements contained not the slightest hint of conciliation or apology. Instead, the studio brass incongruously invoked the First Amendment and struck a series of smug, self-serving poses that seemed to suggest that this for-profit corporation felt a solemn and

selfless duty to promote a film that tens of millions of its potential patrons found offensive.

"Though those in power may justify the burning of books at the time, the witness of history teaches the importance of standing up for freedom of conscience . . .," declared a pompous, full-page "open letter" from Universal Pictures published in newspapers around the country. "In the United States, no one sect or coalition has the power to set boundaries around each person's freedom to explore religious and philosophical questions. . . ."

This tendentious civics lesson made no attempt to explain why the conglomerate's principled defense of the Constitution required it to finance, promote, and distribute certain religious and philosophical explorations, but not others. Hadn't the company somehow breached its commitment to "standing up for freedom of conscience" by passing up the opportunity to produce a film version of Salman Rushdie's best-selling novel *The Satanic Verses*—a book that offered a revisionist view of Mohammed in some ways comparable to Scorsese's revisionist portrayal of Christ?

When it came to the prospect of enraging the Islamic faithful, the instinct for self-preservation took precedence over the commitment to controversial religious explorations, but the Universal bosses felt no corresponding compunctions when it came to offending Christians: time and again during the *Last Temptation* battle, the studio seemed to go out of its way to insult the organized religious community. Dr. Richard G. Lee, pastor of the seven-thousand-member Rehoboth Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, managed to collect more than 135,000 signatures on his petition protesting the film's release. When he and his associates repeatedly called Universal to request that a representative of the company make ten minutes available to formally receive the petitions and the attached list of names, the public relations executives refused to cooperate. "We contacted their offices," Pastor Lee recalled, "and in our last conversation they told us, 'We don't care about your petitions. Leave them with the guards, and we'll put them in the dump.' They were saying, 'We don't care about the opinions and the heartbeat of 135,000 Americans.'"

Ultimately, all the major Hollywood studios offered formal support for this callous attitude and endorsed Universal's position on the film. Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America,

issued a statement in which he ringingly declared: "The key issue, the only issue, is whether or not self-appointed groups can prevent a film from being exhibited to the public. . . . The major companies of MPAA support MCA/Universal in its absolute right to offer to the people whatever movie it chooses."

No one ever challenged that "absolute right"; Universal's critics merely questioned the way the studio elected to exercise it. The dispute concerned the movie company's *choices*, not its rights. To assert that a studio has the right to release "whatever movie it chooses" is not to insist that every possible release is equally defensible.

Would Mr. Valenti have spoken out in behalf of a film biography of slain black leader Malcolm X that portrayed him as a paid agent of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI who secretly worked to discredit the civil rights movement? What about a movie version of the life of the assassinated gay hero, San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk, that suggested that he was actually a closet heterosexual (and inveterate womanizer) who only pretended to be gay in order to seek political advantage? Or a revisionist view of Holocaust victim Anne Frank that portrayed her as an out-of-control teenage nymphomaniac who risked capture by the Nazis night after night to satisfy her raging hormones?

It is difficult to imagine the industry's leaders rallying to the support of any such outrageous and patently offensive projects in the way they rallied to the support of *The Last Temptation*. For Hollywood, in other words, some martyrs are more sacrosanct than others.

In 1984, four years prior to the battle over the Martin Scorsese film, organized protests erupted over the release of a sordid little exploitation picture called *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, which portrayed a department store Santa as a blood-soaked psychotic slasher. Many Hollywood leaders actually supported the protesters, and neither Jack Valenti nor anyone else from the motion picture establishment ever spoke up for the producers' "absolute right" to besmirch the image of Kris Kringle. This may reflect the fact that the people behind *Silent Night, Deadly Night* wielded considerably less clout than the people behind *The Last Temptation*; but it also indicates that Santa Claus is more sacred to the entertainment industry than Jesus.

In fact, the industry's stubborn and purportedly principled defense of Universal's right to offend a significant segment of the public with the Martin Scorsese film stands in striking contrast to the deference

displayed to a wide range of "politically correct" special-interest groups, both before and after the *Last Temptation* controversy. For instance:

- In 1990 animal rights activists demanded that Disney studios eliminate what a spokesman for the Humane Society described as "an antiwolf statement" in the film adaptation of Jack London's novella *White Fang*. The producers agreed to remove a dramatic scene in which a wolf attacks a man and even added a disclaimer to the film which stated that "there is no documented case in North America of a healthy wolf or pack of wolves attacking a human."

- In 1991 screenwriter and independent producer Jonathan F. Lawton altered the storyline in his script *Red Sneakers* under pressure from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD). His original concept involved a heroine who leaves her older female lover for a man—a plot that allegedly affronted lesbian sensibilities. In the revised (and, according to GLAAD, "much improved" version), the main character views the older woman more as a mother figure than as a lover, and that older woman is also provided a happy romance with another lesbian.

- In another well-publicized incident, the religious leaders in one Hopi Indian village reviewed the script for Robert Redford's upcoming film *Dark Wind* and reached the conclusion that the screenplay portrayed their ancient rites in a "sacrilegious" manner. Producer Patrick Markey promptly agreed to make changes.

The sensitivity that Hollywood flaunted during these and many similar episodes makes the industry's stonewalling during *The Last Temptation* controversy even more difficult to understand. Leaders of the motion picture business showed more concern with possible sacrilege against the religious traditions of a single Hopi village than with certain offense to the faith of tens of millions of believing Christians; the prospect of being labeled "antiwolf" produced greater worry than the prospect of being labeled "anti-Christ."

In response to this charge, the industry's defenders might insist that the examples of accommodation cited above involved adjustments that were made *during* the production process, while the bitter fight

over *The Last Temptation of Christ* erupted as Universal prepared a finished film for national release. This argument, however, only highlights Universal's surprising unwillingness to receive input from respected Christian theologians or organizations in the scripting of their inevitably sensitive project. Animal rights activists, gay advocacy groups, and ethnic organizations of every description are frequently consulted on questions of content in feature films, but Martin Scorsese and his associates kept their plans for *The Last Temptation* a closely guarded secret from all church leaders.

It is difficult to quarrel with the substance of a press statement released on July 12, 1988, by the broad-based religious coalition opposed to the release of Scorsese's film. At the time, they noted the studio's "presumed unwillingness to release a major film maligning the character and distorting the historical record of any other religious, ethnic, or national hero" and therefore condemned "the highly discriminatory nature of Universal's decision against the Christian community."

Much of the press coverage of the increasingly bitter dispute also seemed highly discriminatory. Television news repeatedly misrepresented the nature of the national movement opposing the movie's release by focusing on one utterly unrepresentative individual as the preeminent symbol of that movement: the Reverend R. L. Hymers, pastor of an obscure church in downtown Los Angeles. With his snarling moon face and explosive temper, his predictions of impending apocalypse (through earthquakes and "killer bees"), his blatantly anti-Semitic ravings against the "Jewish money" behind the movie, and a long history of legal problems stemming from past violent outbursts, Hymers lived up to anyone's worst nightmare of deranged religious fanatic. Naturally, the press couldn't get enough of him.

The mainstream Protestant and Catholic leaders who coordinated the major efforts against *The Last Temptation* not only disowned Hymers, they publicly denounced him. They pointed out that he represented no significant constituency, and spoke only for his own struggling, 250-member Fundamentalist Baptist Tabernacle. Nevertheless, Hymers appeared on literally hundreds of TV interviews and talk shows, as well as gracing the pages of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People*, while respected Christian leaders like Pastor Jack Hayford and the Reverend James Ogilvie (whose congregations each boasted more than

twenty times the membership of Hymers's) were virtually ignored. When Hymers and less than one hundred of his followers staged a "mock crucifixion" on the sidewalk in front of the home of Universal president Lew Wasserman, he received more television coverage than the subsequent demonstration at the Black Tower, which drew a crowd that the police estimated at 25,000.

The media not only misled the public about the leaders of the protest, but also distorted the substance of their objections to Scorsese's film. News stories focused again and again on the "dream sequence" at the end of the movie, emphasizing one brief scene in which Jesus makes love to Mary Magdalene and asserting that this image alone had provoked the furor in the religious community. In fact, Christian leaders identified more than twenty elements in the finished film that offended them deeply, ranging from an early scene in which Jesus crouches by the bed and watches with voyeuristic intensity as Mary Magdalene has sex with ten different men, to a later conversation in which the Apostle Paul confesses that he doesn't really believe in the Resurrection and admits that "I've created truth out of what people needed and believed."

By ignoring the issues raised by all other aspects of the film and concentrating exclusively on the sex scene between Magdalene and Christ, the press helped to make the protesters look like narrow-minded prudes. Dr. Larry Poland, whose "Mastermedia" ministry works to bring Christian ideas to leaders in the entertainment industry, saw an especially flagrant example of this tendency in the coverage on the CBS television station in Los Angeles. In filing a report on the film and the protests, entertainment correspondent Steve Kmetko authoritatively (and fatuously) concluded: "As far as the controversy goes, the movie follows Christian doctrine very closely." Kmetko then joined the two news anchors in some spontaneous banter about the movie and its infamous love scene:

ANCHOR #1: "So you mean, Steve, that all of this protest about the film surrounds the equivalent of one page from a two-hundred-and-fifty-page book?"

ANCHOR #2: "Or really just thirty seconds of a two-hour-and-forty-minute movie?"

KMETKO: "That's it."

This sort of one-sided coverage made it easier for everyone in the industry to ignore the uncomfortable questions raised by the controversy—questions about Hollywood's underlying hostility to religious belief and to religious believers. Instead of confronting the situation honestly, show business leaders issued an endless series of smug pronouncements in defense of Mr. Scorsese's First Amendment rights—inconsistently coupled with condemnation of those who chose to exercise *their* First Amendment rights by protesting the film. In all the bitter weeks of charges and countercharges, Hollywood never seemed to understand the demands of those who opposed the picture. What they wanted from the industry wasn't censorship; it was sensitivity.

Solemn Stupidity

As the controversy intensified in the days immediately prior to the film's release, I tried to focus on my job as a movie critic and to stay away from the increasingly hysterical theological and constitutional debates. I wanted to see *The Last Temptation of Christ* with an open mind and to assess its artistic excellence (or inadequacy) as a motion picture, rather than surveying its importance as a battleground in the ongoing culture war. As a practicing Jew, I could sympathize with the sense of violation and outrage that many of my Christian friends felt as soon as they heard about the film, but I never shared their visceral reaction; nor did I experience the similarly passionate (and similarly instinctive) impulse of some industry insiders who rushed to the defense of the film the moment it was attacked by the religious right.

With these intense emotions very much in the air, I gathered with a dozen other critics to see the picture at a weekday afternoon screening two weeks before its release. We sat together in a small screening room at the Universal lot, chatting as we waited for the lights to go down. I think we all felt the electric atmosphere in that room, connected with our knowledge that we were about to witness a significant moment in cinema and social history. Our anticipation arose in part from the expectations surrounding any film by Martin Scorsese, the most acclaimed director of our time. In one well-publicized national poll, a group of the most prominent critics in the country made Scorsese's movie *Raging Bull* their runaway choice for best American film of the 1980s.

Unfortunately, as *The Last Temptation of Christ* unreeled before our astonished eyes, it became clear almost immediately that he might have retitled this new film *Raging Messiah*. Within its first five minutes the picture offers a sequence in which Jesus (Willem Dafoe) inexplicably assists the Romans in crucifying some innocent Jewish victim. As they nail the poor man's feet to the bottom of the cross, blood spurts out and covers Christ's somber cheek.

Such graphic and shocking gore recurs at regular intervals, providing the only relief to long, arid stretches of appalling boredom, laughable dialogue, and unbearably bad acting. Even those who publicly praised the film confessed that its two-hour-and-forty-four minute running time amounted to something of an ordeal for the audience; I found the entire experience as uplifting and rewarding as two hours and forty-four minutes in the dentist's chair.

After the first half hour of this solemn stupidity I began to feel sorry for the actors. Barbara Hershey played Mary Magdalene and for some odd reason, director Scorsese had decided to cover her lovely body from head to toe with intricate and abstract tattoos. Try as I might, I couldn't avoid recalling the lyrics of the Groucho Marx ditty "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady" whenever Miss Hershey appeared on screen. Most other women in the cast had been similarly decorated—as if Scorsese had made a startling archaeological discovery that indicated that ancient Judea boasted tattoo parlors on every corner catering exclusively to females. In reality, however, Jewish and biblical law strictly prohibited tattoos of any and all kinds, for both men and women, making a mockery of all the boasts in the official press kit about Scorsese's "exhaustive research" on Judean customs at the time of Jesus.

Other members of the cast suffered even more intense embarrassment than Miss Hershey. Following the lead of the Nikos Kazantzakis novel that served as the source for the film, the script tries to make Judas Iscariot the most admirable and devoted of Christ's disciples, but in his performance as Judas, the woefully miscast Harvey Keitel inspires unintended hilarity rather than sympathy. With his thick Brooklyn accent firmly intact, braying out his lines like a minor Mafioso trying to impress his elders with his swaggering, tough-guy panache, Keitel looks for all the world as if he has accidentally wandered onto the desert set from a very different Martin Scorsese film. He is also

required to wear a flaming orange fright wig that gives him an unmistakable resemblance to a biblical bozo.

The picture is crammed with such idiotic touches—from Jesus reaching into his chest and pulling out his bloody pumping heart to display to his impressed apostles, to the resurrected Lazarus answering a question about the contrast between life and death by mumbling, "I was a little surprised. There isn't that much difference." In response to such memorably miscalculated movie moments, some of my generally restrained colleagues, who attended the same critics' screening I did, began snickering, hooting, and laughing aloud midway through the picture's all-but-insufferable length.

When we finally staggered out into the light of day, blinking our eyes and shaking our heads in disbelief, a TV camera crew from a national entertainment show approached a few of the recognizable reviewers in the crowd and asked for our instantaneous responses. I told them, "It is the height of irony that all this controversy should be generated by a film that turns out to be so breathtakingly bad, so unbearably boring. In my opinion, the controversy about this picture is a lot more interesting than the film itself."

That comment may have forever ended my chances of making Martin Scorsese's Christmas card list, since it was widely and repeatedly quoted in the national media as part of the continuing debate on the motion picture and its significance. I stand by the comment today, not only as an expression of my own opinion, but as an accurate summary of the general reaction of those who sat beside me in that screening room and watched the film for the first time that afternoon.

I was therefore amazed and appalled in the days that followed at the generally respectful—even reverential—tone that so many of my colleagues adopted in their reviews. In particular, I found it impossible to understand the one critic who had snorted the loudest and clucked the most derisively at the afternoon screening we both attended, but whose ultimate report to the public featured glowing praise and only the most minor reservations.

When I called him to ask about the contrast between his privately expressed contempt and his on-the-record admiration, he proved surprisingly candid in explaining his inconsistency. "Look, I know the picture's a dog," he said. "We both know that, and probably Scorsese knows it, too. But with all the Christian crazies shooting at him from

every direction, I'm not going to knock him in public. If I slammed the picture too hard, then people would associate me with Falwell—and there's no way I'm ready for that."

I believe that his confidential comments offer the best explanation for the utterly undeserved critical hosannas that the picture provoked in many quarters. Other critics may never acknowledge the antireligious prejudice that helped to produce their positive reviews—and some of them may not even be consciously aware of it. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that many of my colleagues automatically assumed that any film that caused so much upset to the conventional religious community must be brave, significant, and worthy of praise. Critics invariably disagree about the quality of major movies, but the level and intensity of the disagreements on *The Last Temptation* went far beyond expected differences in taste and seemed to suggest ideological agendas at work.

In a sense, the response to the film (including Scorsese's surprise nomination for an Academy Award as Best Director, and official endorsements by the Writers Guild, the Directors Guild, and the Motion Picture Association of America) represented the movie industry's "circle the wagons" mentality at its most hysterical and paranoid. Veteran star Mickey Rooney, one of the few established Hollywood figures to speak up against Scorsese's acclaimed "masterpiece," concluded: "*The Last Temptation of Christ* provides a good example of the film establishment rallying around a bad film to protect its own selfish interest. . . . That film, no matter what its defenders say, was a slap in the face to Christians everywhere, but Hollywood cradled the picture as if it were *Citizen Kane*." When religious figures across the country attacked the picture, the members of the Hollywood community felt called upon to close ranks and to do rhetorical battle with any who dared criticize the industry and its values.

That's why so many of the film's supporters not only praised it as a work of art, but defended it as an act of faith. The noted theologian Joel Siegel of "Good Morning America" insisted it was "deeply felt and ultimately faith-affirming," while Marshall Fine of Gannet News Services called it "a work of immense imagination, one that never betrays its unshakable faith." David Ehrenstein of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* declared, "It is without question one of the most serious, lit-

erate, complex and deeply religious films ever made, brilliantly directed by Martin Scorsese."

The public wisely ignored such glowing notices and the film quickly developed the deadly word-of-mouth it so richly deserved. Despite saturation coverage in the press—exceeding even the epic hoopla connected with the debut of *Gone With the Wind*—the movie promptly bombed at the box office. Its domestic gross of \$7 million scarcely covered the expenses for promotion and distribution, let alone the original cost of the production. The movie's rental and sale on videocassette proved similarly disappointing; Blockbuster Video, the Florida-based corporation that operates the nation's largest chain of video stores, refused to even stock the title for fear of offending its customers. Though precise figures will never be made public, best estimates indicate that Universal's overall loss on the project could hardly have been less than \$10 million—an appalling result for a project that had received the most lavish prerelease publicity in modern motion picture history.