

The Deep Politics of Hollywood

In the Parents` Best Interests

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Tom Cruise – “the world’s most powerful celebrity” according to Forbes Magazine – was unceremoniously sacked in 2006. His dismissal was particularly shocking for the fact that it was carried out not by his immediate employer, Paramount Studios, but rather by Paramount’s parent company, Viacom. Viacom’s notoriously irascible CEO Sumner Redstone – who owns a long list of media companies including CBS, Nickelodeon, MTV, and VH1 – said that Cruise had committed “creative suicide” following a spate of manic public activity. It was a sacking worthy of an episode of The Apprentice.[\[i\]](#)

The Cruise case points to the overlooked notion that the internal mechanisms of Hollywood are not determined entirely by audience desires, as one might expect, nor are they geared to respond solely to the decisions of studio creatives, or even those of the studio heads themselves. In 2000, The Hollywood Reporter released a top 100 list of the most powerful figures in the industry over the past 70 years. Rupert Murdoch, chief of News Corporation, which owns Twentieth Century Fox, was the most powerful living figure. With the exception of director Steven Spielberg (no. 3), no artists appeared in the top 10.

Each of the dominant Hollywood studios (“the majors”) is now a subsidiary of a much larger corporation, and therefore is not so much a separate or independent business, but rather just one of a great many sources of revenue in its parent company’s wider financial empire. The majors and their parents are: Twentieth Century Fox (News Corp), Paramount Pictures (Viacom), Universal (General Electric/Vivendi), Disney (The Walt Disney Company), Columbia TriStar (Sony), and Warner Brothers (Time Warner). These parent companies are amongst the largest and most powerful in the world, typically run by lawyers and investment bankers.[\[ii\]](#) Their economic interests are also sometimes closely tied to politicised areas such as the armaments industry, and they are frequently inclined to cozy-up to the government of the day because it decides on financial regulation.

As Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Professor Ben Bagdikian puts it, whereas once the men and women who owned the media could fit in a “modest hotel ballroom,” the same owners (all male) could now fit into a “generous phone booth.” He could have added that, whilst a phone box may not exactly be the chosen venue for the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Sumner Redstone, these individuals do indeed meet at plush venues such as Idaho’s Sun Valley to identify and forge their collective interests.

Of course, the content of a studio’s films is not, as a rule, determined entirely by the political and economic interests of its parent company. Studio CEOs typically have considerable leeway to make the pictures they want to make without direct interference from their ultimate masters. At the very least, however, the content of Hollywood studios broadly reflects their wider corporate interests, and, at times, the parent companies behind

the studios take a conscious and deliberate interest in certain movies. There is a battle between “top down” and “bottom up” forces, but mainstream media and academia have traditionally focused on the latter, rather than the former.

Consider last year’s blockbuster *Australia*, the epic from Baz Luhrmann. Two of the film’s most salient aspects were that, firstly, it glossed-over the history of Aboriginal people, and, secondly, it made Australia look like a fantastic place to go on holiday. This should come as no surprise – Twentieth Century Fox’s parent company (Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp) – worked hand-in-hand with the Australian government throughout the film’s production for mutual interests. The government benefited from Luhrmann’s huge tourist campaign, which included not just the feature film itself but also a series of extravagant tie-in advertisements (all in apparent support of its ham-fisted Aborigine “reconciliation” programme). In turn, the government gave its favourite son tens of millions of dollars in tax rebates. The *West Australian* newspaper even alleged that Murdoch had his “journalistic foot soldiers” ensure that every aspect of his media empire awarded *Australia* glowing reviews, an assessment nicely illustrated by *The Sun*, which enjoyed the “rare piece of good old fashioned entertainment” so much that its reviewer was “tempted to nip down to the travel agent.”

There are historical precedents for such interference. In 1969 Haskell Wexler –cinematographer on *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* – had considerable trouble releasing his classic *Medium Cool*, which riffed on the anti-war protests at the Democrat Convention the previous year. Wexler claims he has Freedom of Information documents revealing that on the eve of the film’s release, Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley and high sources in the Democratic Party let it be known to Gulf and Western (then the parent company of Paramount) that if *Medium Cool* was released, certain tax benefits and other perks in Gulf and Western’s favor wouldn’t happen. “A stiff prick has no conscience,” Wexler told us angrily, referring to Hollywood’s business leaders, “and they have no conscience.”

Wexler explained how this corporate plot was enacted so as to minimize attention: “Paramount called me and said I needed releases from all the [protestors] in the park, which was impossible to provide. They said if people went to see that movie and left the theatre and did a violent act, then the offices of Paramount could be prosecuted.” Although Paramount was obliged to release the film they successfully pushed for an X rating, advertised it feebly, and forbade Wexler from taking it to film festivals. Hardly the way to make a profit on a movie, but certainly an effective way to protect the broader interests of the parent.

Then there’s the more famous case of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the Michael Moore blockbuster which the Walt Disney Company tried to scupper despite it “testing through the roof” with sample audiences. Disney’s subsidiary Miramax insisted that its parent had no right to block it from releasing the film since its budget was well below the level requiring Disney’s approval. Disney representatives retorted that they could veto any Miramax film if it appeared that its distribution would be counterproductive to their interests. Moore’s agent Ari Emanuel alleged that Disney’s boss Michael Eisner had told him he wanted to back out of the deal due to concerns about political fallout from conservative politicians, especially regarding tax breaks given to Disney properties in Florida like Walt Disney World (where the governor was the then US President’s brother, Jeb Bush). Disney also had ties to the Saudi Royal family, which was unfavourably represented in the film: a powerful member of the family, Al-Walid bin Talal, owns a major stake in Eurodisney and had been instrumental in bailing out the financially troubled amusement park. Disney denied any such high political ball game, explaining they were worried about being “dragged into a highly charged

partisan political battle,” which it said would alienate customers.

Disney has consistently spread pro-establishment messages in its films, particularly under subsidiary banners such as Hollywood Pictures and Touchstone Pictures (although Oliver Stone’s 1995 Nixon biopic is a notable exception). Several received generous assistance from the US government: the Pentagon-backed *In the Army Now* (1994), *Crimson Tide* (1995), and *Armageddon* (1998), as well as the CIA-vetted *Bad Company* (2002) and *The Recruit* (2003). In 2006, Disney released the TV movie *The Path to 9/11*, which was heavily skewed to exonerate the Bush administration and blame the Clinton administration for the terrorist attacks, provoking outraged letters of complaint from former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and former Clinton National Security Advisor Sandy Berger.

The nature of Disney’s output makes sense when we consider the interests of the higher echelons of the corporation. Historically, Disney has had close ties with the US defense department, and Walt himself was a virulent anti-communist (though reports about him being a secret FBI informant or even a fascist are rather more speculative). In the 1950s, corporate and government sponsors helped Disney make films promoting President Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” policy as well as the infamous *Duck and Cover* documentary that suggested to schoolchildren that they could survive an atomic attack by hiding under their desks. Even now, a longtime Directors Board member of Disney is John E. Bryson who is also a director of The Boeing Company, one of the world’s largest aerospace and defence contractors. Boeing received \$16.6bn in Pentagon contracts in the aftermath of the US invasion of Afghanistan^[iii]. This would have been no small incentive for Disney to avoid commissioning films critical of Bush’s foreign policy, such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

It is hardly surprising that when Disney released *Pearl Harbor* (2001) – a simplistic mega-budget movie made with full cooperation from the Pentagon, and which celebrated the American nationalist resurgence following that “day of infamy” – it was widely received with cynicism. Yet, despite lamentable reviews, Disney unexpectedly decided in August 2001 to extend the film’s nationwide release window from the standard two-to-four months to a staggering seven months, meaning that this ‘summer’ blockbuster would now be screening until December. In addition, Disney expanded the number of theatres in which the film was showing, from 116 to 1,036. For the corporations due to profit from the aftermath of 9/11, *Pearl Harbor* provided grimly convenient mood music.

But whilst movies like *Australia* and *Pearl Harbor* receive preferential treatment, challenging and incendiary films are frequently cast into the cinematic memory hole. Oliver Stone’s *Salvador* (1986) was a graphic expose of the Salvadorian civil war; its narrative was broadly sympathetic towards the left wing peasant revolutionaries and explicitly critical of U.S. foreign policy, condemning the United States’ support of Salvador’s right wing military and infamous death squads. Stone’s film was turned down by every major Hollywood studio – with one describing it as a “hateful piece of work” – though it received excellent reviews from many critics. The film was eventually financed by British and Mexican investors and achieved limited distribution. More recently controversial documentaries such as *Loose Change* (2006/2007), which argued that 9/11 was an “inside job,” and *Zeitgeist* (2007), which presents a frightening picture of global economics, have been viewed by millions through the Internet when corporate media wouldn’t touch them.^[iv]

Universal studios’ contemporary output has been less rigidly supportive of US power, as films like *Children of Men* (2006), *Jarhead* (2005), and *The Good Shepherd* (2006) indicate.

Still, with movies like *U-571* (2000) and *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), it makes sense that Universal's parent company is General Electric, whose most lucrative interests relate to weapons manufacturing and producing crucial components for high-tech war planes, advanced surveillance technology, and essential hardware for the global oil and gas industries, notably in post Saddam Iraq. GE's board of directors has strong ties to large liberal organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation. Whilst 'liberal' may sound like a positive term after the unpopularity of Bush's brand of conservatism, liberal organizations are cemented firmly in the bedrock of US elites and have frequently been architects of American interventionist foreign policy, including against Vietnam. They are prepared to ally themselves with conservatives over certain issues, particularly national security, so it should come as no shock to find that GE was close to the Bush Administration through both its former and current CEOs. Jack Welch (CEO from 1981-2001) openly declares disdain for "protocol, diplomacy and regulators" and was even accused by California Congressman Henry Waxman of pressuring his NBC network to declare Bush the winner prematurely in the 2000 "stolen election" when he turned up unannounced in the newsroom during the poll count. Welch's successor, the current GE CEO Jeff Immelt, is a neoconservative and was a generous financial contributor to the Bush re-election campaign.

Perhaps GE/Universal's most eyebrow-raising release was *United 93* (2006), billed as the "true account" of how heroic passengers on 9/11 "foiled the terrorist plot" by forcing the plane to crash prematurely in rural Pennsylvania. Although the film made a return on its relatively low investment, it was greeted with a good deal of public apathy and hostility prior to its nation-wide release. At the time, Bush's official 9/11 story was being seriously interrogated by America's independent news media: according to the results of a 2004 Zogby poll, half of New Yorkers believed "US leaders had foreknowledge of impending 9/11 attacks and 'consciously failed' to act," and, just one month prior to the release of *United 93*, 83% of CNN viewers recorded their belief "that the US government covered up the real events of the 9/11 attacks." With the official narrative under heavy fire, the Bush Administration welcomed the release of *United 93* with open arms: the film was a faithful audio-visual translation of the 9/11 Commission Report, with "special thanks" to the Pentagon's Hollywood liaison Phil Strub tucked away discreetly in the end credits. Soon after the film's nationwide release date, in what might be interpreted as a cynical PR move and as gesture of official approval, President Bush sat down with some of the victims' family members for a private screening at the White House. [\[v\]](#)

GE/Universal's *Munich* (2005) – Steven Spielberg's exploration of Israeli vengeance following the Palestinian terrorist attack at the 1972 Olympics – raises similar suspicions. Although the Zionist Organisation of America called for a boycott of the film because they felt it equated Israel with terrorists, such a reading is less than convincing. Indeed, by the time *Munich's* credits begin to roll its overriding messages have been stamped indelibly into the brain by the film's Israeli Special Forces characters: "Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values," "We kill for our future, we kill for peace," and "Don't f*ck with the Jews." Predictably, Israel is one of GE's most loyal customers, buying Hellfire II laser missiles as well as propulsion systems for the F-16 Falcon fighter, the F-4 Phantom fighter, the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, and the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter. In *Munich's* 167 minute running time the voice of the Palestinian cause is restricted to two and a half minutes of simplistic dialogue. Rather than being an "evenhanded cry for peace," as the Los Angeles Times hailed it, General Electric's *Munich* is more easily interpreted as a subtle corporate endorsement of the policies of a loyal customer.

On the most liberal end of the spectrum for movies in recent years has been Warner Bros. – JFK (1991), The Iron Giant (1999), South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut (1999), Good Night and Good Luck (2005), V for Vendetta (2005), A Scanner Darkly (2006), Rendition (2007), and In the Valley of Elah (2007). It is indicative that following complaints about racial stereotyping in Warner Bros.’ Pentagon-sponsored action adventure, Executive Decision (1996), the studio took the unusual step of hiring the services of Jack Shaheen, an on-set adviser on racial politics, resulting in what was critically received as one of the best films of its genre in a generation, Three Kings (1999).^[vi] It may be no coincidence that Warner Brothers’ parent company, Time Warner, is less intimately tied to the arms industry or the neoconservative clique.

But to have an idea of what happens to movies when you remove multinational interests from the industry, consider the independent distributor Lions Gate Films, which is still very much a part of the capitalist system (formed in Canada by an investment banker) but not beholden to a multibillion dollar parent corporation with multifarious interests. Although Lions Gate has generated a good deal of politically vague and blood ‘n’ guts products, it has also been behind some of the most daring and original popular political cinema of the past ten years, criticizing corporatism in American Psycho (2000), US foreign policy in Hotel Rwanda (2004), the arms trade in Lord of War (2005), the U.S. healthcare system in Michael Moore’s Sicko (2007), and the U.S. establishment in general in The U.S. vs. John Lennon (2006).

It hardly needs re-stating that Hollywood is driven by the desire for dollars rather than artistic integrity. As such, cinema is open to product placement in a variety of forms, from toys, to cars, to cigarettes, and even state-of-the art weaponry (hence the “special thanks” to Boeing in the credits of Iron Man (2008)). Less obvious though – and less well investigated – is how the interests of the studios’ parent companies themselves impact on cinema – at both systemic and individual levels. We hope to see critical attention shifted onto the ultimate producers of these films to help explain their deradicalised content, and ultimately to assist audiences in making informed decisions about what they consume. As we peer up from our popcorn it is as well to remember that behind the magic of the movies are the wizards of corporate PR.

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NOTES

^[i] Most memorably, Cruise declared his love for Katie Holmes whilst bouncing up and down on Oprah (the chat show, not the woman).

^[ii] The 2008 Fortune Global 500 list placed General Electric at no. 12 with revenue of \$176bn. Sony was at 75, Time Warner at no. 150, The Walt Disney Company at no. 207, and News Corp at no. 280. By way of comparison, Coca Cola is at no. 403.

^[iii] Interestingly, Disney’s CEO Michael Eisner was personally involved when it pulled Bill Maher’s Politically Incorrect show after the host committed the cardinal sin of saying that the US use of cruise missiles was more cowardly than the 9/11 attacks, with Eisner “summoning Maher into his office for a hiding” according to Mark Crispin Miller in the Nation.

[iv] A less convincing but nevertheless intriguing case can be made for high political/economic influence over the distribution of John Carpenter's satirical sci-fi *They Live* (1988), which depicted the world as being run by an invading force of evil space aliens, allied with the US establishment. The film was well received by critics (with the notable exceptions of the NYT and Washington Post) and opened at number one in the box office. It easily made its \$4m investment back over the weekend, and although by the second weekend it had dropped to fourth place, it still made \$2.7m. The distributing studio, Universal Pictures, published an advertisement during its run that showed a skeletal alien standing behind a podium in suit and tie, with a mop of hair similar to that of Dan Quayle, the new US Vice-President-elect. The Presidential election had been just a few days previous, on November 8th. Co-star Keith David observed: "Not that anybody's being paranoid but... suddenly you couldn't see it [*They Live*] anywhere - it was, like, snatched".

[v] We stated elsewhere that representatives from Universal attended the screening. This was erroneous.

[vi] Shaheen also later assisted on Warner Bros.' *Syriana* (2005).

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