

# chapter 1

## Hearts, Minds, and Hollywood

The conflicts of the future are going to be as much about the abundant cultural flows of the global information economy as about the scarcity of resources. This is because contending values have been crowded into a common public square created by freer trade, the spread of technology, and the planetary reach of the media.

Only in such a world could a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in an obscure Danish daily newspaper inflame the pious and mobilize the militant across the vast and distant stretches of the Islamic world. Only in such a world would bloodied Tibetan monks be censored out of Chinese TV news reports just to show up on YouTube, or would a CNN pundit in New York be sued by a Beijing school teacher for calling Chinese “thugs” and their exports “junk.” Only in such a world would the Vatican launch an all out assault on the *Da Vinci Code* movie to convince audiences that popular fiction is not the same as eternal truth.

This global public square is the new space of power where images compete and ideas are contested; it is where hearts and minds are won or lost and legitimacy is established. It is a space both of friction and fusion where the cosmopolitan commons of the twenty-first century is being forged.

Though facing intense challenges, the core of the global information economy today remains America's media-industrial complex, including Hollywood entertainment. If culture is on the front line of world affairs in the times to come, then Hollywood, as much as Silicon Valley, the Pentagon, or the US State Department, has a starring role.

In this book, Hollywood – broadly defined as the commercial and professional production of American popular culture for mass distribution, but focusing on the film industry – is our main prism. The reasons for Hollywood's power over the last 100 years are clear. Long before celluloid or pixels were invented, Plato understood that those who tell the stories also rule. And if music sets the mood for the multitudes, the warblings of Sinatra, Madonna, and Metallica have certainly been the muzak of the American-led world order.

Above all, as philosophers have told us, images – the currency of Hollywood – rule dreams and dreams rule actions. That is because most people construct the worldview which informs what they do more on an emotional than a rational basis. They buy into a narrative not so much through the considered weighing of ideas as on what image they want to be a part of or associated with. What people identify with, or don't, depends on the dignity, recognition, and status those images – “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” in the famous words of the poet Ezra Pound – confer in their culture<sup>1</sup>. In short, a person's vision of “the good life” is largely determined by what works for them metaphorically.

It is why Saddam regularly played the Sinatra tune “My Way” at his birthday party and it is why we associate a moment of carefree, dancing joy with “Singin' In the Rain.” It is why a middle-aged man buys a Porsche and why a teenager desperately desires a pair of Pumas. Sometimes, the symbol can be more generic, as when blue jeans spread worldwide

after the 1960s as a ready-to-wear statement about non-conformity and informal lifestyle. Biographers and fashion editors to this day regularly dredge up Jackie Kennedy, Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, or Elizabeth Taylor when they want to evoke the glamour of a bygone era in an age of Wal Mart aesthetics. When Carla Bruni, a.k.a. Mrs. Sarkozy, showed up for a state visit on the staid shores of Britain, her gray cashmere coatdress and pill box hat immediately evoked Jackie O mixed with the lost glamour of Princess Di in the London press. By far, this impression outweighed in the public eye President Sarkozy's hints about France rejoining NATO.

Tomorrow's style nostalgia may include Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, or Julia Roberts, who stand in the place taken by Katherine Hepburn, Marlon Brando or Paul Newman for an earlier generation.

Apprehending the world by what works metaphorically is why the Camorra gang from Sicily mimics Hollywood films in its actual lifestyle, with women bodyguards wearing yellow tracksuits like Uma Thurman in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. It is why the villa of one of its top bosses was modeled down to the last detail on the mansion of Tony Montana in Brian De Palma's *Scarface*.<sup>2</sup>

More profoundly, adopting a worldview by what works metaphorically is also why humiliated youths in Gaza, feeling righteous and empowered, cheered Al Qaeda taking down the Twin Towers on 9/11. Its why Mexico's demographic experts credit the daytime soaps with helping reduce the population explosion in that thoroughly Catholic nation.

In international affairs, public opinion doesn't pick apart policies analytically but forms its sensibilities based on images. Where the Statue of Liberty once symbolized America, to many that symbol became the hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib during the Bush tenure (though the very fact of Barack Obama's election as president did more than all the years of

Bush's public diplomacy to restore some shimmer to America's image). In Japan's case, where once there was Tojo now there is Toyota. In the early post-Cold War days, Gorbachev taking his granddaughter to a McDonald's said one thing. A muscular, bare-chested Putin hunting boar in the Russian bush says something entirely more menacing, closer to a Ramboesque KGB assertion of raw power than the image of glasnost or Swan Lake with which the West felt comfortable.

Lacking direct experience in the reality of others, such images are known largely through the media. The biggest projector of images in human history, of course, has been Hollywood. By and large, what Americans know about the world, and what the world knows about America, they know from the screen. Of the 20 percent of Americans who own passports, less than 10 percent travel abroad in any given year,<sup>3</sup> a situation bound to get worse with the falling dollar. And, in 2008, American film exports were 10 times larger than film imports, a balance of trade more favorable than any other industry but aerospace.<sup>4</sup>

Often what foreign audiences learn is incidental – the well-appointed kitchen in the *Leave it to Beaver* TV show, the two cars in the driveway or kids with their own bedroom in such thrillers as *When a Stranger Calls* (an unimaginable amount of private space in most places in the world), the expectation of fair treatment under the law and the sincerity of weighing fairness and justice in *Twelve Angry Men*, the casual relationship between boys and girls as the backdrop to shows like *Friends*, or even the most innocent Disney Channel shows like *Hannah Montana*. Sometimes films and television shows mislead outsiders about American life, for example by the near total absence of religious expression in mainstream entertainment, leaving impressions, like the shadows in Plato's cave, far from the truth. This "second order" communication is often as powerful in the perception of the viewer as the first-order dramatic plot.

Osama bin Laden has never been the United States; he only watched it on TV when he was growing up in Saudi Arabia. Most of the nouveau riche Chinese who buy up the California-style tract houses in suburban Beijing have never been to the Orange County their development replicates; they've only watched *The O.C.* on pirated videos or satellite TV. Conversely, and just as significantly, what all too many Americans think they know about the rest of the world comes from movies like *Around the World in 80 Days*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, the *Deer Hunter*, *Mission Impossible III*, the James Bond series, or *The Bourne Identity*.

If there is a genius to Osama bin Laden's madness in this context, it is that he understands that insular Americans, who don't look back and don't look around, also don't think much about the rest of the world unless it intrudes upon their pursuit of happiness in a sensational way. In this vein, Al Qaeda has taken a page from the Hollywood handbook. Its real expertise is not military damage, but media manipulation through sensational acts of special-effects terror that rivet attention – both in the West and across the Muslim *ummah* (community) – in a world crowded with other messages. Also grasping that America is a post-textual society that obtains information mainly from movies, television, or the Net, Osama bin Laden knows it is images, not concepts, that break through. Thus, blockbuster acts of terror are the forte of this virtual caliph.

Unfortunately for the rest of the Muslim *ummah*, such powerful images work the other way as well. For most post-textual Americans, the “people of the Book” – Muslims – are now known mostly through sensational images of terror staged by Al Qaeda and its allies, including the attacks in Mumbai in 2008. The same terrifying images that inspire defiance in the young kid in Gaza also sow the seeds of fear and loathing among westerners.

In the global battle for hearts and minds, America once had the metaphorical upper hand because we dominated the flow of images, icons, and information, not to speak of English being the lingua franca thanks not only to American hegemony but that of the British Empire before it. The democratization of media through technology is making that less true every day.

Where CNN, MGM, and the BBC once ruled, now there are 75 million Chinese blogs,<sup>5</sup> CCTV, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and the Dubai Film Festival, as well as 200 satellite channels across the Arab world. A proliferation of jihadist websites, which have joined benign telemuslims like Egypt's Amr Khaled in competing for the Arab soul, are every bit as influential as YouTube or Facebook in their own demographic. Without doubt, the Internet is the single most empowering tool for recruitment and networking of jihadists. Where once American soap operas like *Days of Our Lives* filled boob tubes globally, now Brazilian, Mexican, or Korean daytime TV have as great or even greater appeal. Though for the moment Hollywood may still command the shock and awe blockbuster, national cinemas, as has long been the case in India, are gaining traction even as Hollywood itself is showing signs, if so far meager, of taking on a more cosmopolitan cast.

In the midst of this technological and cultural democratization, America's once lustrous image has become tarnished by the misadventure in Iraq, Guantanamo and the Bush White House defense of torture, not to speak of the globally broadcast scenes of the Katrina catastrophe, the Britney breakdown, Wall St. corruption and the mortgage crash brought on by too much consumption and too little financial regulation (generating not a little schadenfreude among those we scolded in the Asian crisis a little more than a decade ago). It also doesn't help that while the US has 5 percent of the world's population, it has 25 percent of the world's incarcerated.<sup>6</sup>

Despite America's considerable technological and higher-educational prowess, we can, therefore, no longer assume, as we did in the triumphant days after the end of the Cold War, that global public opinion will buy into the American narrative. We can no longer assume that the world out there so readily identifies with our idea of "the good life" as universally appealing.

In what amounts to a global glasshouse of instantaneous information with planetary reach, we must contend for hearts and minds just like everyone else. The images of those bloodied Tibetan monks, censored within China, competed for sympathy in global public opinion with those of the Paralympics torchbearer, Jin Jing, who struggled from her wheelchair to protect the Olympic torch from the rough assault by a Tibetan protestor in Paris. Indeed, the Chinese government skillfully sought to recast its image through leveraging the world media's coverage of the 2008 Olympics. Before he dropped out in protest over Chinese inaction on genocide in Darfur, the authorities had recruited Steven Spielberg for this purpose. In the end another director, Zhang Yimou, masterfully orchestrated the Olympic ceremonies. That is indicative of what is to come with the rise of the rest in what Fareed Zakaria has called "the Post-American World."

This book is about grappling with this challenge, so to speak, of *American Idol* after Iraq. It is about understanding the power of the image, the rise of that power manifested by the global dominance of American entertainment culture and the reaction to it. It is about the increasing dispersion of that power due to globalization. And it is about grabbing hold of the power of the image as a tool of cultural diplomacy in America's quest to restore its lost luster.

## Notes

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