

Media matters

Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy

Matthew Alford

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Robin Ramsay

On the British right there is a widespread view that the BBC is full of lefties and puts out lefty propaganda. Here's Melanie Phillips:

'With a few honourable exceptions, the BBC views every issue through the prism of left-wing, secular, anti-western thinking. It is the Guardian of the air. It has a knee-jerk antipathy to America, the free market, big

business, religion, British institutions, the Conservative party and Israel; it supports the human rights culture, the Palestinians, Irish republicanism, European integration, multiculturalism and a liberal attitude towards drugs and a host of social issues.'

A bit of this is true: the BBC certainly supports the human rights culture and multiculturalism. But how could it not do so? These are the official policies at both national and European level, and are supported by the dominant factions of all three major political parties. Nor are these particularly or intrinsically left-wing. However, as you could listen to/watch the BBC's output for a week and never hear a socialist, republican (let alone Irish republican) anti-business or anti-American voice, the rest of Phillips' paragraph is either a delusion, or a strategy of constantly calling the BBC left-wing to try to make it more right-wing. In Phillips' case it's a bit of both, motivated in part by her shift rightwards but also by her fear that the BBC may one day report what the Israeli state has been doing for the last half century.

In America the right believes or pretends to believe that Hollywood is a nest of pinkos (or Jews, or pinko Jews) undermining America with its liberal propaganda. This belief is the target of this book. Alford does a detailed analysis – genre by genre – of the recent films costing over \$30 million from Hollywood's major studios, and shows that their movies *almost always* express the notion that in its foreign policy, the endless wars in which it engages, America is always right, well intentioned and frequently the victim.

That this fantastic lie is in the films owes something (how much isn't clear) to the Pentagon and CIA liaison operations with the studios. 'Wanna borrow a submarine? Talk to the Navy guy.' If Alford isn't quite describing the corporations and the state running joint psy-ops, it will do until joint psy-ops come along.

On the other hand, how could Hollywood not portray America as a benevolent force in the world? The domestic audience, still the major market, would not pay to see films showing America as the cause of most of the casualties in the world since WW2, supporter of the worst dictators, trainer of torturers and a major feature in the world drug traffic.

There are the occasional exceptions, recently most notably *Avatar* – estimated takings \$237 million – which I read (I haven't seen it) has definite liberal, eco, anti-corporate capitalism themes. Alford wiggles past this: *Avatar* 'is one of those partial exceptions that highlight the rule.' *Partial exceptions?* Surely it either is or isn't. *Highlight the rule?* Is that something weaker than 'proves the rule'?

I wonder how much the ideological content of most movies actually matters to their producers. Maybe the fact that a major studio made *Avatar* simply suggests that the corporations which own Hollywood are chiefly interested in profits and if green-lefty stuff makes them money, their dream factories will make that, too.

Just as there was in the 1970s, in the wake of Watergate and the subsequent revelations of FBI and CIA covert operations, there is a little bit of liberal dissidence in mainstream American movies, mostly at the low budget end, which the author discusses. But 'a little bit' is all.

This is competently done, decently written and, if you've seen a lot of American movies – and I have – it is interesting to have the ideological content articulated. I could do it myself, and I'm sort of subliminally aware of it; but most of the time I'm just watching the movie. So the author's considerable efforts are both useful and entertaining. They are also slightly chastening: he makes me feel that I don't have my ideology detector turned up high enough.