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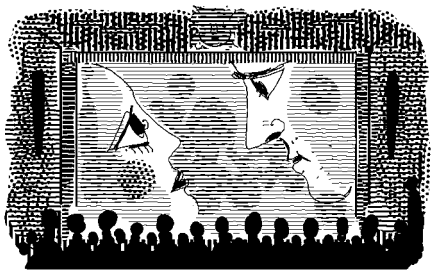
by Martha Bayles



A Tale of Two Markets

What on earth has happened to the movies? Why is it so hard to find a compelling human drama, a genuinely amusing comedy, or even a clever and visually pleasing animated feature in a theater nowadays? When did the big screen get taken over by comic books and video games? Who brainwashed Hollywood into churning out endless wannabe blockbusters about superheroes blasting away at supervillains? Why are the multi-million-dollar special effects in these movies so cheesy that even this non-gamer wishes she had a joystick, gamepad, or light gun just to keep from nodding off?

One obvious culprit is China, the first overseas market in history to shape decisively the priorities of the American film industry. For the past several years, Hollywood has seen China as a glittering Shangri-La where cineplexes sprout like mushrooms and 1.4 billion consumers are insatiably eager to spend heaps of money on mindless blockbusters. Yet gaining access to that pot of gold has been tricky, because movies are not like other products. Each new release is a unique cultural expression, which may or may not appeal to audiences, never mind the censorious guardians of the Chinese box office. Hollywood has long dreamed of inventing a dependable, risk-free widget that will appeal to vast audiences and generate a consistently high return on investment. The pressures exerted by the Chinese market have brought this dream closer than ever. All it takes is an assembly line stamping out loud, vapid movies that have nothing to say except what Beijing allows—or encourages—them to say.

This assembly line has slowed since Xi Jinping came to power. Outwardly confident but inwardly insecure, the Communist Party has been playing rougher than usual with a wide range of independent companies, from Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific Airways to Marriott, Tiffany, the Gap, Versace, Coach, and now the Houston Rockets. But these are newbies compared to Hollywood. Although it doesn't get much attention in the U.S. media, Hollywood has come to realize, just in the past two years, that the People's Republic is not Shangri-La but a 21st-century Brave New World—a digital dystopia where the rulers use entertainment to distract and indoctrinate the masses.

For America, Darkness and Trash

Meanwhile, back in the states, the main alternative to superhero tedium is a cult of "darkness" exemplified by *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, Quentin Tarantino's nostalgic tribute to promiscuity, alcoholism, drug abuse, brutality, and murder in the summer of 1969. Typical of Tarantino, the decadence and violence are accompanied by a soundtrack of upbeat pop music, a gimmick that by creating a cheap and instant feeling of irony impresses a certain type of critic (generally speaking, the type who revels in the film's depiction of a wild party at the Playboy Mansion while praising Tarantino for breaking off his long-term friendship with Harvey Weinstein).

Another recent film, *The Joker*, borrows heavily from the 2008 Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*, but omits the superhero and gives top billing to the supervillain. Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* accurately skewered *The Joker* as "a flagrantly seedy movie, one that constantly evokes the garbage, vermin and social apathy that New York was known for at its worst. Welcome to Gotham City, where the weak are killed and eaten."

Neither *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* nor *The Joker* has been allowed into China, although if the party were a little savvier it would screen movies like these in every theater, on the ground that their ugly, amoral vision makes excellent propaganda supporting the official Chinese view of America as a civilization in decline.

Then there's television. It is too late to ask what happened to the networks. They sold their birthright 30 years ago, when competition from cable and the VCR led them to replace their costly "scripted" programs with cheap "unscripted" talk and reality shows. Unfortunately, these unscripted shows proved easier to clone than the scripted ones, and soon there were hundreds of them competing for eyeballs, not only on the networks but also on cable and in syndication. Some reality shows—*American Idol*, for example—spoke to the aspirations of young people in the United States and around the world. But owing to the cutthroat nature of the competition, the overall trajectory of these shows has been downward, toward crude voyeurism. There can be little doubt that "trash TV" like *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991–2018) and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-present) has contributed to the coarsening and incivility, not just of American television but also of what used to be called American political discourse.

Back in the 1980s, when China was extending its state TV system to every corner of its vast territory, it imported American shows to attract viewers. (When visiting Beijing in the late 2000s, I met several people who fondly recalled *The Brady Bunch* as their first introduction to American culture.) But after crushing the pro-democracy movement in 1989, the regime began encouraging Chinese companies to produce what might be called "U.S. entertainment with Chinese characteristics." This included talk and reality shows and, in 2006, the finale of an *American Idol*-style singing contest called *Super Girl* that at-

tracted the largest audience in Chinese television history. But instead of being pleased, the party objected to the fact that millions of viewers had been encouraged to take the politically forbidden step of *voting for the winner*. High-level meetings were held, and this simulacrum of democracy was condemned as "vulgar" (which it wasn't) and canceled just before the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Last month, during the lead-up to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, the Central Propaganda Department, which now controls every aspect of the media, instructed all TV outlets to refrain from airing "any period or 'idol dramas' that are too entertaining" and instead fill their schedules with shows extolling the "different stages of the Chinese people's road to independence, prosperity, and strength." The stated goal, to provide programming "appropriate for the whole environment during this period," contained a distinct—and, for many Chinese, an alarming—echo of Maoist totalitarianism.

Getting from Point A to Point Z

Based on what I've said so far, this tale of two markets looks bleak. On the one hand, the Chinese market is a place where the cost of doing business includes total submission to the party line. On the other, the American market is in thrall to a pseudo-sophisticated "dark" sensibility that insists on portraying America as a sick society suffering death throes, and dismisses as feel-good pabulum any effort to depict the country in a more positive, or even a balanced, light.

Fortunately, there is more to tell. In 1995, when *New York Times* literary editor Charles McGrath suggested that "TV is actually enjoying a sort of golden age," he was not referring to talk and reality shows. Instead, he had in mind a new TV genre then gaining cultural influence and market share. That genre, best described by the British term "limited series," departed from the traditional practice of having each episode of a TV series tell a standalone story. The purpose of that practice was to produce self-contained units that could be watched in any order, aired as re-runs, and sold to other broadcasters. The limited series does the opposite: it weaves several stories together over two or more episodes, and expects viewers to keep track by watching all the episodes in sequence.

A somewhat similar expectation has long existed for viewers of the humble soap opera, but in that case keeping track is made easier by airing a new half-hour episode each day. The soap, which began in the early years of radio then moved to television, is known for its ability to keep viewers hooked with a steady supply of bizarre plot twists that continue as long as advertisers stay interested. The first such program was created in 1930 by Irna Phillips, a second-generation immigrant who worked at radio station WGN in Chicago—and yes, one of the sponsors was a soap company. In 1937 Phillips went to NBC radio and created the longest-running soap in history, *Guiding Light*, which ran on television until 2009.

That's 40 years longer than CBS's *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which premiered in 1987 and aired its 8,000th episode this past January. But after the first 30 years, who's counting? Ostensibly about the world of high fashion and the class divide between wealthy and middle-class Americans, this convoluted saga's real subject is the sex life of a woman called Brooke Logan, who keeps marrying and divorcing various men, especially members of a family named Forrester who own a successful fashion house in Los Angeles. Last I checked, Brooke had been married three times to the family patriarch, five times to the eldest son, and once to the younger son. As in any long-lived soap, the various stories are not woven together so much as bent, crumpled, and pretzeled to the point of resembling the old novelty song in which a man's family relations get so tangled that he ends up being his own grandfather.

In the 1980s, "prime-time soaps" such as *Dallas*, *Knots Landing*, and *Dynasty* attracted huge and diverse audiences in the networks' lucrative evening time slots. But these shows, too, were engineered for longevity. Taking their cues from the daytime soaps, they resorted to all sorts of contrivances and cliffhangers ("Who shot J.R.?") to keep people tuning in. By the time these began to wear thin, viewers were already discovering the more satisfying alternative of the limited series, which had been around since the 1970s, when PBS began airing popular British series such as such as *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and later *The Duchess of Duke Street* and the original *House of Cards* (much superior to the later Netflix version).

The chief virtue of the limited series is that it does not contort itself to stay on the air forever. Instead, it stays no longer than necessary to tell a particular story. In the words of Vince Gilligan, creator of the acclaimed limited series *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), the secret is not to keep the "characters in a self-imposed stasis" but to move them "from point A…to point Z." This may not be a sufficient condition for great television, but it is a necessary one. This format is roomy enough, but also shapely enough, for a rich development of character and plot while also adhering to the classic structure of beginning, middle, and end. No wonder many of the most esteemed network shows,

from *Roots* in 1977 to *Lonesome Dove* in 1989, were limited series. In the early 2000s the format was taken up by the cable channel HBO, which gained prestige (and subscribers) with such outstanding productions as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and *John Adams* (2008).

How Will the Streaming Wars End?

Today, the limited series is the most prominent feature in an entertainment landscape transformed by drastic changes in technology and viewing habits, most notably among digital natives (i.e., people who text with their thumbs). Most digital natives do not own TV sets, because they watch everything via streaming video on their laptops, tablets, smartphones, and other mobile devices. Whether or not this change constitutes cultural as well as technological progress depends on what is being watched. Streaming video seems the natural home of the limited series, and on a good day I would argue that, because this genre has come to occupy the vital space between popular and elite taste once occupied by the novel, it makes perfect sense that we are accessing it on devices roughly the size of books.

But that is on a good day. On a bad day—for example, a day spent pondering what the trade papers, pundits, and mainstream media are calling "the streaming wars"—I worry about the competition now heating up between the best-known streaming platform, Netflix, and a slew of potential rivals: Amazon's Prime Video, Apple TV+, Disney+, HBO Max, Peacock, YouTube TV, and Facebook's Portal TV.

The effects of that competition can already be felt. For example, Netflix made its name as an "aggregator" of streaming content produced by others. But in the last year or so, would-be rivals such as NBC, Warner Bros., and Disney have been pulling their films and TV shows from Netflix in order to stream them on their own newly created platforms. Netflix is trying to make up for this loss by becoming a producer in its own right. Fortified by the success of the first "Netflix Original Series," a remake of the British show *House of Cards*, the company pumped $12 billion into new content last year and has budgeted $15 billion for 2019. But to judge by the noisy and aggressive promotion of this new content on the Netflix home page, a lot of it is going unwatched.

This is pure speculation, I admit. But Netflix is notorious for not publishing viewer data, except to throw the occasional fat figure to the media, where it gets recycled so often, people begin to believe it. My speculation is somewhat supported by the fact that in July Netflix reported a major decline in the number of subscribers, and one of the main explanations offered was that a fair number of people had been logging on to Netflix not to watch its original content but to access their favorite movies and TV shows from (you guessed it) NBC, Warner Bros., and Disney.

It is worrisome and annoying that the majority of reporters who cover the streaming wars focus narrowly on the question of which U.S. company is going to make the most money in the U.S. market. Amid the welter of informed speculation about pricing schemes, possible acquisitions, projections of consumer behavior, and a zillion other bottom-line-related concerns, it is hard to find more than a passing reference to that other market, China, which is still decisively shaping the landscape. And it is impossible to find any serious reflection on the larger implications of the streaming wars on American culture and liberty.

American producers of content are all desperately eager to sell their wares to their Chinese counterparts.

With regard to culture, the situation does not bode well. Competition may be a good thing, but as we have seen time and again, when media competition is not regulated according to certain standards of quality and probity, it quickly becomes a race to the bottom. Again, Netflix does not publish viewer data. But that is not the point here. We don't need statistics to see that the company's multi-billion-dollar investment in original content seems to be yielding a sorry crop. The two most popular streaming series are a raunchy dark comedy about women in prison (*Orange Is the New Black* on Netflix), and a raunchy dark comedy about women not in prison (*Fleabag* on Prime Video).

The rest of the shows are pretty formulaic. There are the "historical" dramas whose plots consist largely of setting the stage for the moment when hunky heroes rip the bodices off witty, empowered heroines. There are the "noir" detective sagas that follow the descent into madness of chronically depressed sleuths tormented by the hideous crimes they are investigating. There are the small-town mysteries that start with nice, blond, smiling families then plunge them into swirling maelstroms of occult evil. And so forth.

With regard to liberty—specifically America's vexed tradition of free speech and expression—it is necessary to consider that, although none of these American streaming services will ever be allowed to operate in China, as producers of content they are all desperately eager to sell their wares to their Chinese counterparts. And because of the restraints under which they must operate, the Chinese streaming services are just as desperately eager to buy American content, provided it can be brought into alignment with Xi Jinping Thought. With this oxymoron in mind, I will now end my tale with a brief glance at how the *Chinese* streaming wars are playing out.

At first glance, the competition for streaming dominance in China looks similar to the one occurring in America. The Chinese equivalent of Netflix, a streaming service called iQiyi, is facing stiff challenges from an existing rival, Tencent Video, and a newly established one, Youku Tudou. Like their U.S. counterparts, these streaming warriors are owned by large corporations—iQiyi by Baidu (the Chinese equivalent of Google); Tencent Video by Tencent (the Chinese equivalent of Google, Facebook, and Apple combined); and Youku Tudou by Alibaba (the Chinese equivalent of Amazon). But appearances can be deceiving, because none of these companies is in fact the equivalent of Netflix, Google, Facebook, Apple, or Amazon. On the contrary, they are all fully vetted subsidiaries of the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department. And while their competition is real, the outcome will be very different from the outcome in America. The winner will take all, and that winner will not be one of these companies. It will be the regime.