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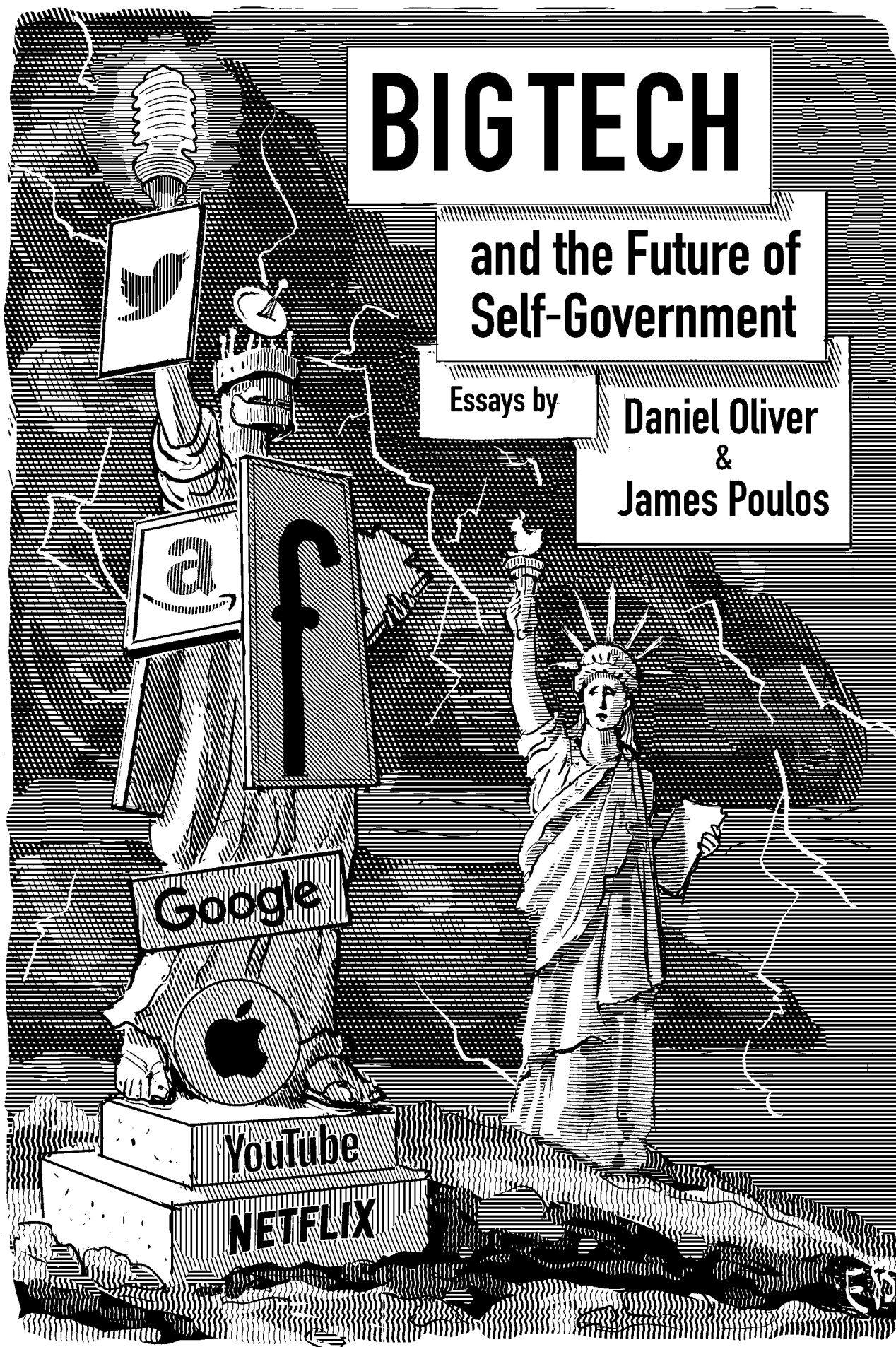
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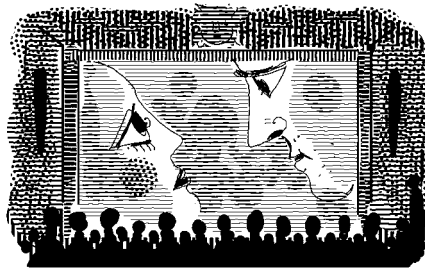
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



They're Not Lovin' It

MCDONALD'S IS THE NUMBER ONE fast-food company in the world, in part because it is skilled at adapting to the tastes of a particular culture or country. Developed in America, this skill has now been honed in 119 countries. For example, in France and Italy, McDonald's serves wine; in Turkey and other Muslim-majority countries, it serves halal meat; and in Israel, customers find dairy-free kosher under the Golden Arches.

When foreign customers say, "We are happy to buy *this*, but don't try to sell us *that*," the smart company listens. There are limits, however. Big Macs and other menu staples, friendly service, and clean kitchens and restrooms are standard in every one of McDonald's 38,000 outlets, because the company's market research shows that every part of that package has universal appeal.

In addition to being universally appealing, service and cleanliness are good for people—*all* people, regardless of location, language, culture, or religion. This is not true of certain other parts of the McDonald's experience, which may be universally appealing but are definitely *not* good for people—the fries, for example, which in addition to being the most frequently ordered item on the menu, are also the least nutritious, loaded as they are with fat, salt, and toxic compounds formed during the super-heated cooking process.

I believe the same logic can, and should, be applied to another highly successful American export: entertainment. Like McDonald's, American entertainment spread rapidly to the rest of the world after the Cold War, taking full advantage of newly opened markets and disruptive technologies like satellite communications. Between 1989 and 2010, foreign sales of U.S. films and televi-

sion shows increased fourfold, from \$3.6 billion to \$14.2 billion. Today, American movies, television programs, popular music, video games, and social media earn as much or more overseas than at home—a clear indication, it seems, that this massive cultural export is universally appealing. But how much of it is good?

The Era of Self-Regulation

CLEAR, EVALUATIVE JUDGMENTS ARE easier to make about friendly smiles, spotless facilities, and trans-fats than about commercial popular culture, which is infinitely more complex and variable, spanning the full range of human expression. But surely that doesn't make popular culture less important. One of the more bizarre aspects of today's political landscape is the blithe assumption that the massive presence of American popular culture around the world is always appealing and good for all people.

That presence is due partly to the pure business savvy of the U.S. entertainment industry. With no direct subvention by the government, this industry has thrived for more than a century, making products that are not really products in the sense of being reliably manufactured and sold but rather unique creations that may or may not resonate with audiences. Not only that, but in this business, flops greatly outnumber hits, and most ventures do not even recoup their sunk costs. Success in such a field is always impressive. But unless we put profit before all other considerations, we cannot regard it as always good.

Another reason for Hollywood's global presence is its extraordinary record of technical innovation and artistic achievement, which developed in tandem with a half-century of struggle to enlarge its own intel-

lectual and creative freedom. That struggle began in 1915, when the Supreme Court defined the new medium of film as "a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit like other spectacles, and not to be regarded as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion." That decision, *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, exposed the products of the fledgling film industry to state and local government censorship. In response, the studios developed the Motion Picture Production Code to self-regulate their product and keep the government at bay.

This being America, the studios also pursued a long-term legal strategy that by mid-century resulted in film being judged a constitutionally protected form of artistic expression. In 1968, this new legal status allowed the studios to drop the Production Code and adopt the ratings system still in place today.

The story of broadcasting is roughly similar. As commercial enterprises, broadcast radio and television have operated under the oversight, and licensing power, of the Federal Communications Commission since 1934. But these enterprises, too, have endeavored to keep the government more or less at bay by establishing internal departments of "standards and practices."

I call these 20th-century practices "self-regulation" to distinguish them from "self-censorship." Both the film studios and the broadcast networks set up these systems in response to the possibility of government interference. But it matters greatly whether that interference came from an authoritarian state that without due process punishes any deviation from officially sanctioned "truth," or from a democratic government that respects the rule of law and the rights of its citizens. The term "self-censorship," with its connota-

tions of silent submission to arbitrary power, belongs more to the former.

Today, of course, America's entire self-regulatory regime has been rendered toothless by a combination of cultural change, legal reform, and technology. It remains to be seen whether an adequate substitute can be found. But there is little hope of finding one if Americans continue to assume that there are no harmful ingredients in our popular culture.

Another Country Heard From

HOLLYWOOD IS JUSTLY PROUD OF its enormous global audience. By one recent estimate, the number of tickets sold per year to Hollywood movies is 2.6 billion. All the more surprising, then, to compare this global audience to the one reached by the Indian film industry, Bollywood. The same source estimates the number of tickets sold per year to Bollywood films to be 3.6 billion!

Please note that this is not an estimate of revenue earned. With regard to profits, the two giants on the planet, America and China, leave India in the dust. But revenue is not the best measure of influence. There are several other film industries in India, serving different regions and language groups. But it is Bollywood, the Mumbai-based, Hindi-with-a-hint-of-English powerhouse, that earns 20-30% of its revenues outside India. Much of this revenue comes from Indians living abroad. But Bollywood also has hundreds of millions of non-Indian fans in the rest of the world.

What does this huge swath of humanity see in Bollywood? When I posed this question to Dev Benegal, an independent filmmaker who believes in preserving what is best about the Bollywood tradition, he replied, "Bollywood knows its audience. The people who love Hindi films, no matter where they are, do not want American-style stories with sex and violence. What they want are the ingredients that once defined classic Hollywood: beautiful stars, lavish costumes and settings, singing and dancing, strong emotions, melodrama and—most important—a very clear and simple moral lesson."

These ingredients are all present in the most popular Bollywood film of the past quarter-century: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave Heart Wins the Bride). *DDLJ*, as it is fondly known, is the story of Raj (Shah Rukh Khan), the playboy son of an Indian millionaire living in London, who falls in love with Simran (Kajol Devgn), the daughter of an immigrant shopkeeper.

Simran was betrothed at birth to the son of her father's best friend back in Punjab, so her

father is firmly opposed to a love match with Raj. When Simran's family travel to Punjab for the wedding, Raj follows, and concealing his identity proceeds to ingratiate himself with every member of Simran's extended family. At one point, Simran's mother decides to spare her daughter the unhappiness she has experienced, and urges the couple to elope. But Raj refuses, declaring himself a true son of India who would never dream of defying the wishes of his elders. A little later Raj expresses the same noble sentiments to Simran's father and the would-be groom's family. But they are not won over, and with great reluctance Raj accepts their decision and announces his departure.

The film climaxes at the railroad station, where, in a typical Bollywood flourish, Simran's father waits until the very last minute to release his grip on Simran's arm. When he finally lets his weeping daughter go, Raj's train is slowly rolling out of the station. The music swells as she runs after it and is hoisted aboard by her "brave heart," Raj.

To young, educated Indians, especially filmmakers, *DDLJ* is a relic of the past. A beloved relic, to be sure, but a relic all the same. Asked why, they will speak of the greater freedom and realism exemplified by Hollywood. Pressed further, they will deplore the restrictions imposed by the Indian Central Board of Film Certification, a government body that basically does what the non-governmental Production Code used to do in America: vet new films and deny theatrical distribution to any that violate its standards.

Here we run into an important distinction. The Indian film board's basic standards are set forth in language taken directly from the Indian constitution. And some of the restrictions sound scary to American ears, because their clear intention is to stifle political dissent. For example, no film can be released "if any part of it is against the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, [or] friendly relations with foreign States." Other standards sound safe, because they echo well-known exceptions to First Amendment protection, such as offenses against "public order [and] decency," "defamation," "contempt of court," and "incitement."

This distinction speaks to America's history of rejecting *political* censorship while imposing *moral* censorship. Despite the restrictions enumerated in their constitution, most Indians still support a free press and free political speech. But they also support moral censorship of media and the arts, because they consider graphic depictions of sex, violence, brutality, and criminality a threat to public morality. If this sounds horribly repressive to

Americans, it is because we have forgotten our own history.

Bollywood Goes Hollywood

LIKE IT OR NOT, WE LIVE IN A WORLD in which there is a strong consensus in favor of moral censorship, even in free and partly free societies. And for many people, Hollywood's unfettered freedom of expression is both appealing and repellant. We see this in India, where the Pew Global Attitudes Survey consistently finds positive views of America coupled with negative views of American popular culture. For example, in 2017, when the nation's image was taking a beating from some of President Trump's statements about other countries, fully 49% of Indians expressed a favorable view, both of America and of its then president.

But the same 2017 survey found only 26% of Indians saying they "liked American music, movies, and TV." Asked whether it was good or bad that "American ideas and customs are spreading here," only 23% said good. No more than a tiny percentage of Indians ever visit the United States, so the question arises: where did these respondents get their impressions of American ideas and customs? The Pew researchers do not explore the connection, but the answer has a lot to do with Bollywood's emulation of Hollywood.

For most of its history, Bollywood was dominated by small, family-owned studios whose main source of capital was organized crime. This changed in 2001, when the government granted official industry status to these companies, making it easier for them to raise capital and do business with foreign investors. Soon forward-looking studios were embarking on joint ventures with American giants like Warner Brothers, Sony (Columbia Tristar), Paramount, Fox Star, and Walt Disney. This has led to improvements not only in business methods but also in technical skills such as cinematography, lighting, sound, and production design. But with these technical improvements has come a loosening of traditional controls over content.

The classic three-hour Bollywood film is a rich tapestry, by turns comic and tragic, of an entire social milieu. But in recent years that tapestry has become threadbare, its empty places filled with what the eminent Mumbai journalist Rauf Ahmed calls "mindless items." "Item" is the Bollywood term of art for a song-and-dance sequence that is free to depart from the time and place where it originates. For years, it was standard Bollywood practice to borrow a story from some other source, including Hollywood, and then ex-

pand it in two ways: first, by adding song-and-dance sequences; and second, by including a large number of characters representing the extended family and often the village of the principals.

This broad canvas of characters was the heart and soul of classic Bollywood. But under Hollywood's influence, all that has changed. According to film scholar Nasreen Munni Kabir, there is now

great emphasis on young people as decision makers, and less presence of older family members as key characters.... The older films relied a lot on subplots and a number of characters carrying the narrative. As these have been more or less eliminated, the story lines are linear and often dance numbers fill in the gaps to the detriment of the story [emphasis added].

For Rauf Ahmed, this detriment consists of an "epidemic of mindless distraction" that, rather than helping audiences "reason through basic questions," immerses them in "a circus of titillation, some emotional, some comic, but with no linear development."

These changes are driving, and being driven by, an increasingly segmented market. Of the several hundred million Indians who go to the movies on a given day, the majority are poor villagers paying less than five U.S. cents to fill the benches in an old-fashioned single-screen theater. But 300 million (and counting) are young, middle-class urbanites paying four or five times that amount to fill the cushioned seats in an upscale multiplex. This new audience is generating a rapidly growing percentage of Bollywood's profits. And the same is true of its overseas audience, where the more affluent segment is also the most lucrative.

This change has left 900 million impoverished and tradition-minded fans of Bollywood somewhat bereft. The same is true of Bollywood's non-Indian fans. To quote one Nigerian viewer,

When I was young, the Indian films we used to see were based on their tradition. But now *Indian films are just like American films*. They go to discos, make gangs, they'll do anything in a hotel and they play rough in romantic scenes

where before you could never see things like that [emphasis added].

Xi Who Must Be Obeyed

AS NOTED ABOVE, BOLLYWOOD'S DOMESTIC box office is not in the same league as the two giants Hollywood and Beijing, which at present are running neck-and-neck, with Beijing poised to pull ahead. But it is important to note that only one of these giants, Hollywood, makes movies that do well overseas. The other giant, China, can boast of making four recent blockbusters—*The Mermaid* (2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *Ne Zha* (2019)—that grossed an impressive \$500 million each. But only 5% of those earnings were outside China. Not a happy picture for a regime intent upon using global cinema to bring the rest of the world into "harmony" with its intentions.

That is why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping has consistently

We live in a world in which there is a strong consensus in favor of moral censorship, even in free societies.

sought to exert as much control as possible over Hollywood. A new report from PEN America puts it this way:

By influencing which stories Hollywood tells, the Chinese government can soften the edges or erase depictions of its human rights abuses; it can dampen movies' call for change or encouragement of resistance in the face of oppression; and it can discourage or silence filmmakers interested in making movies that question or critique the Chinese government.

It took Hollywood 40 years to gain freedom of expression under the First Amendment, and for the 65 years during which American filmmakers have enjoyed that freedom, they have been the envy of the world, especially in countries where expression is

stifled. It is all the more dispiriting, then, to watch Hollywood surrender its hard-won freedom to the CCP's Central Propaganda Department. Although this surrender has occurred in stages, making it hard to discern its severity, that severity is now hard to miss. In 2018, Xi ordered the entire Chinese media system consolidated and placed under his direct control, with particular attention paid to the "special and crucial role" of film in "spreading propaganda." As noted in the PEN report, this means that, instead of dealing with censors "who often had experience with filmmaking," Hollywood must now deal with apparatchiks "trained mostly in Communist Party doctrine—a very different lens."

The CCP likes to describe this process as a form of cultural adaptation, by which foreigners are instructed in the refined subtleties of Chinese civilization. This is rich, given that the party devoted its first 30 years to destroying that civilization in the name of Leninist class struggle. But setting that aside, the process is not even similar to McDonald's adding the "Sichuan Double Chicken Burger" to its Chinese menu. What McDonald's does is listen to the freely expressed preferences of its customers. What Hollywood does is collaborate with a regime intent upon controlling not only the consumer preferences of its citizens but also every other aspect of their lives.

This collaboration has repercussions outside China. By asserting control over the world's most powerful entertainment industry, the CCP seeks to prevent the global audience from learning about its extreme repression of the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities, its crushing of freedoms in Hong Kong, its wielding of "sharp power" against defenseless or unfriendly nations, and its stunting of a billion lives at home. And beyond that, the CCP seeks to fill the world's screens with propaganda made more appealing by talents borrowed from America.

Meanwhile, in partly free countries like India, Hollywood behaves like a gigantic adolescent, treating every local constraint as an attack on its right to purvey entertainment that violates social norms. An individual who cannot handle freedom is called a libertine. I don't know if you can say that about an entire industry. But I do know that, sooner or later, those who abuse their freedom are likely to lose it.

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