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# Why Hollywood Isn't As Liberal As We Think and Why It Matters

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Claremont McKenna College

Why Hollywood Isn't As Liberal As We Think And Why It  
Matters

Submitted to  
Professor Jon Shields

by  
Amanda Daily

for  
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## **Abstract**

Hollywood has long had a reputation as a liberal institution. Especially in 2019, it is viewed as a highly polarized sector of society sometimes hostile to those on the right side of the aisle. But just because the majority of those who work in Hollywood are liberal, that doesn't necessarily mean our entertainment follows suit. I argue in my thesis that entertainment in Hollywood is far less partisan than people think it is and moreover, that our entertainment represents plenty of conservative themes and ideas.

In doing so, I look at a combination of markets and artistic demands that restrain the politics of those in the entertainment industry and even create space for more conservative productions. Although normally art and markets are thought to be in tension with one another, in this case, they conspire to make our entertainment less one-sided politically. From the role that China plays in Hollywood productions to examining the politics of *The Matrix* and other pop culture staples, I work to deconstruct the notion that Hollywood and its entertainment are solely a liberal endeavor. Less polarization in entertainment brings forth a variety of important implications, one such being that Hollywood will continue to act as an institution that provides intellectual diversity and entertainment for all.

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## Introduction

Being a member of Hollywood means entering into one of the most liberal professions in the United States. From 1974 to 2000, twenty public opinion surveys were conducted asking both the general public and elites in various professions to identify as a liberal, conservative or moderate. While only 25 % of the public repeatedly identified themselves as liberal, roughly 70% of elites working in television and film identified themselves as liberal.<sup>1</sup> Those in the industry are also disproportionately active in liberal politics. Individuals and firms within the entertainment industry, for example, were responsible for 84 million dollars in 2016 campaign contributions; of that 84 million, 80% went to Democrats.<sup>2</sup>

These facts have long troubled conservative activists. Ben Shapiro, for example, recently wrote an entire book titled *Primetime Propaganda* that lays out Hollywood's progressive agenda. In it, he refers to television as "an artistic vanguard for liberal social change, rather than a conduit for basic entertainment."<sup>3</sup> His thesis is largely based on a series of interviews he conducted with various liberal Hollywood elites: executive

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<sup>1</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. 2004. *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. Simon and Schuster.

<sup>2</sup> Gross, Neil. 2018. "Opinion | Why Is Hollywood So Liberal?" *The New York Times*, January 28, 2018, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/hollywood-liberal.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Primetime Propaganda: The True Hollywood Story of How the Left Took Over Your TV - Ben Shapiro - Google Books." n.d. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Primetime\\_Propaganda.html?id=ymAWgveoxW8C&printsec=frontcover&source=kp\\_read\\_button#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books/about/Primetime_Propaganda.html?id=ymAWgveoxW8C&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false).

producer Leonard Goldberg said that liberalism in television is “100 percent dominant, and anyone who denies it is kidding, or not telling the truth.” *Friends* co-creator Marta Kauffman said “There was a bit of ‘fuck you’ in it to the right wing” when she cast Newt Gingrich's sister as the minister of a lesbian wedding. *House* creator David Shore said, “there is an assumption in this town that everybody is on the left side of the spectrum, and that the few people on the right side...I’m sure it doesn’t help them.”<sup>4</sup> Shapiro conducted a number of additional interviews that all carry the same sentiment—Hollywood is undoubtedly and unapologetically liberal.

The liberalism of the industry is not lost on regular citizens either. Surveys find that citizens perceive those in the entertainment industry as well to the left of the general public.<sup>5</sup> Some evidence suggests that this partisan divide increasingly alienates more conservative Americans. The 2018 Oscars, for example, which saw a 19.6% loss in overall viewers.<sup>6</sup> One theory, posed by a liberal studio executive, was that the celebrities outspoken liberal politics were alienating a huge portion of the country.<sup>7</sup> In other words, people might not have tuned in to watch the glitz and glamour of the Oscars, because they feared at being preached at from Hollywood’s biggest political pulpit. Such fears are

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<sup>4</sup> “TV Executives Admit in Taped Interviews That Hollywood Pushes a Liberal Agenda (Exclusive Video).” n.d. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tv-executives-admit-taped-interviews-193116>.

<sup>5</sup> “Putting a Number on Hollywood’s Perceived Liberalism.” 2018. *Morning Consult*. March 1, 2018. <https://morningconsult.com/2018/03/01/putting-number-hollywoods-perceived-liberalism/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jr, Peter Bart, Mike Fleming, and Peter Bart Jr Mike Fleming. 2018. “Bart & Fleming: Oscar Ratings & ‘Red Sparrow’ Sunk By Hollywood’s Liberal Trump Bashers?” *Deadline*. March 8, 2018. <https://deadline.com/2018/03/oscar-ratings-political-hollywood-jennifer-lawrence-jimmy-kimmel-commentary-1202316434/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

not unreasonable. The Oscars are chosen by members of the academy, which is entirely comprised of retired or current industry professional; those industry professionals get to nominate and vote on the films that suit their preferences. Voting happens outside of the studio system and outside of the constraints of public opinion. The Oscars, therefore, allow celebrities to express their opinions and espouse their political beliefs. It's why a lesser known film like *Moonlight* beat out the more popular and more traditional *La La Land* for Best Picture at the 2017 Oscars.

But if the Oscars highlight the overarching liberalism of celebrities, the films and TV shows they star in are often far more politically constrained. This is one reason why citizens often protest or boycott award shows, but rarely protest the films and television shows the artists create. Thus, while Hollywood is undeniably a profession dominated by liberals, it is also not a left-wing institution. Unlike award shows, the entertainment itself does not offer a coherent moral or political vision. Why? Because films and television programs are often shaped more by consumer preferences and artistic sensibilities than by the politics of writers, producers and actors. In other words, the demands of the markets and art lead to products that are far from monolithic. This thesis argues that a mix of market pressures and artistic forms have conspired to make films and TV shows far less partisan than their makers. Chapter one shows how the influence of global and domestic markets dampen much of the liberal sentiments that might otherwise exist in big budget productions and even create room for more conservative voices. Chapter two turns our attention to the shift of modern American cinema toward realism, an artistic style that sometimes allows for more conservative depictions of social reality precisely because realism is hostile to more idealistic portraits of human beings. Chapter three shows how a

very different genre—science fiction—is also friendly to conservative sensibilities. This is so because of science fiction's dystopic tendencies, which often depict a human past that is far better than its future. And finally, chapter four will show how yet another genre—comedy—thrives when it can poke fun at all of our fellow citizens, regardless of their politics. Ultimately, this thesis will work to deconstruct the notion that Hollywood, and the entertainment it creates, is an inherently liberal institution.

## Chapter 1: The Power of the Market

### Hollywood's Economic and Global Influence

Hollywood, more than a bastion of creativity or breeding ground of liberal politics, is a business; specifically when referring to the Hollywood studio system. It seeks to make money before it cares to engage in any sort of politics—this is evident when looking at the history of Hollywood, but is also apparent when examining how large an industry Hollywood actually is. The United States, in terms of gross box office revenue, is the largest film market in the world; in 2017 it led all countries with a total of 10.24 billion dollars in gross box office revenue.<sup>8</sup> North America has consistently brought in upwards of 10 billion dollars in revenue since 2012 and is projected to make well over 11 billion by 2021.<sup>9</sup> China comes in second with 8.42 billion dollars in gross box office revenue. The top five highest grossing films of 2018 are all American films, and there are only two films in the top ten that aren't American, both of those films are Chinese. As of November 2018, the twenty highest grossing films of all time are all American films except for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II*.<sup>10</sup>

Hollywood's global dominance and massive profit margins are usually attributed to a few different things. First, Hollywood is often credited as the center of filmmaking

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<sup>8</sup> "Film Industry in the U.S." [www.statista.com](https://www.statista.com). Accessed December 10, 2018.  
<https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and as such, draws an enormous amount of economic resources and top talent.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, the American distribution system works to ensure the success of American films in the international market, while making the U.S. domestic market exclusive for other foreign films.<sup>12</sup> This distribution system is ultimately a facet of the Hollywood studio system, whose films and marketing tactics are one of the ultimate driving forces behind Hollywood's massive profit margins. There are, of course, independently financed films that will be discussed later in this section, but the films that make the most money and that have the widest international release are products of major studios. The highest earning studios of 2017 were Beuna Vista (another name for Walt Disney Studios) with 2,410,400,00 dollars, Warner Bros. with 2,034,900,000 dollars, Universal Studios with 1,528,900,000 dollars, 20th Century Fox with 1,326,000,000 and Sony with 1,059,900,000 dollars.<sup>13</sup> Upwards of 8 billion dollars of profit comes from just five studios, and these studios are obviously producing the most profitable films. Also important to note, is that the United States is not first in terms of producing the highest number of films; Bollywood actually takes that statistic by a long run. Seeing as the United States does bring in the most revenue, the American film industry is bringing in more money on fewer products. The films themselves are valuable quantities and drive the majority of the profit. As with most things, power lies where the money is, and the

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<sup>11</sup> Crane, Diana. "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

<sup>12</sup> Crane, Diana. "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

<sup>13</sup> "Film Industry in the U.S." [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com). Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/>.

aforementioned film studios run the show in Hollywood—the goal of those studios, more than any other agenda they might have, is to continue to increase their already massive profits from year to year. Just as the global film market is dependent on Hollywood, Hollywood is dependent on its global revenue. There's a reason why America is able to export its films more seamlessly and more effectively than any other country, particularly when compared to the other biggest film markets in the world, and that dependency on exports produces its own set of limitations.

### **The Neutralizing Effect of the International Market**

The United States is the third largest film industry in the world when examining the number of tickets sold, behind China and India, respectively.<sup>14</sup> The obvious discrepancy here is that both China and India have populations of over 1 billion people, while the United States only has a population of about 327 million people. The disconnect between the number of tickets sold and the actual revenue could be attributed to higher ticket prices in the United States—in 2017 the average ticket price in North America was 8.97 dollars.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, for the United States to near the number of pure ticket sales based on domestic population alone is an incredible feat; furthermore, as mentioned above, neither China or India come close to the actual revenue the United States brings in from Hollywood. The Chinese and Indian industries are also both largely internal industries, in that their films are a good that's meant for their respective populations, not as an export. Simply put, the United States film industry virtually dwarfs every other film industry in the world in terms of monetary gain and global influence.

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<sup>14</sup> “Film Industry in the U.S.” [www.statista.com](https://www.statista.com). Accessed December 10, 2018.  
<https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

One of the largest reasons the United States is able to maintain its spot as the highest grossing film industry in the world, and by quite a large margin, is because of the massive amounts of exports. In fact, unlike India and China, the majority of film profit in America is made from the international box office. This is not to say that films aren't profitable within the United States, but with rising production costs, looking internationally was a way to generate more profit: "In 2005, 61.3% of Hollywood's box office receipts were derived from foreign markets."<sup>16</sup> One of the more obvious factors that facilitate such an international presence is that American movies are filmed in English, a primary international language. Furthermore, Hollywood makes an effort to establish a network of global distribution centers: "The American market for foreign productions has been described as 'impenetrable and unattainable.'<sup>17</sup>" This extensive distribution network also speaks to the role of different production systems; in Hollywood, this means a production system that's devoted to different things. The first priority is to "the production of very expensive blockbuster films that are marketed globally" and the other part of the system devoted to "the production of relatively low-budget independent films which may or may not be distributed abroad."<sup>18</sup> This awareness of how to target the international market, and what films will actually penetrate foreign markets, really facilitate Hollywood's position as the leading player in the global film market.

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<sup>16</sup> Crane, Diana. "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

However, because Hollywood derives the majority of its profit from the international box office, Hollywood films have to take into consideration how a major blockbuster, funded by a major studio, will translate in various countries. The other countries in the top five film markets —China, Japan, United Kingdom, and India<sup>19</sup>—all produce films that are relatively, locally focused, in a way the United States just can't be. Bollywood, for example, produces a massive number of films, and all of them are very Indian-centric. They aren't created with the intention of being a widely exported product outside of India; consequently, they can heavily explore Indian culture and ideals that might not translate well in other countries. There are no worries about a cultural disconnect for people outside of India because their film is not focused on catering to anyone outside of an Indian demographic. Conversely, the United States absolutely creates blockbuster films with the purpose of being a global export in mind. This is where the mitigating effect of an international market comes into play. A strong argument can be made that, "Hollywood deliberately produces narrative structures that are susceptible to 'plural meanings to suit different viewers,' and furthermore that, "American filmmakers have developed a type of film that crosses national boundaries easily because it has eliminated a great deal of cultural complexity." <sup>20</sup> In other words, Hollywood tries to steer away from films that are too specific to a certain culture or group of people; the goal is always more profit and that means globally accessible work. Some even take the idea a bit further in identifying, "a process of 'deculturation' has taken place in which the

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<sup>19</sup> "Film Industry in the U.S." [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com). Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/>.

<sup>20</sup> Crane, Diana. "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

capacity of American films to communicate something meaningful about American society and culture has disappeared.”<sup>21</sup> Hollywood has surrendered to the power of the market; instead of pushing American culture forward and maintaining complete creative autonomy, Hollywood producers have accepted this process of ‘deculturation’ as a necessary trade-off to make money. This process is sometimes referred to as cultural pushback: “It occurs whenever a foreign market says, ‘We like most of what you are selling, but don’t try to sell us *this*.’ To succeed in such a market, a company must heed the message. It must ask *what* isn’t wanted and *why*.”<sup>22</sup> American producers are relentlessly fascinated with what content will not work in foreign markets; anytime this cultural pushback threatens profit, American producers are quick to remedy the situation. The resulting product is one with incredible mass appeal, but one that is inevitably a muted version of the original product.

This can actually lend itself to incorporating more conservative ideals, or at the very least, negate some of the liberalism that Hollywood is so known for because the culture of Hollywood, when looking at the actual artists and creators, is inherently liberal. In one scenario, liberal creators tend to produce content that will bring in a profit, regardless of a desire to push politics. This also creates the possibility for conservative writers and producers to push forth conservative politics as long as those politics do not damage the marketability of a film. The studios curtail that culture of hyper-liberalism in

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<sup>21</sup> Crane, Diana. “Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Bayles. *Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America’s Image Abroad*, n.d.

an effort to focus on the internationally recognized and transferable American ideals. These are often more conservative ideals, especially when much of the global market that is consuming American films—India, Japan, South Korea, etc.—are, on the whole, substantially more conservative than the United States. And the United States is more conservative than most European countries. Hollywood's intense focus on consumer politics and preference creates a system where, to some extent, the politics of consumers shape a film's content more than the proclivities of various writers and directors. This is inherently different from the top-down system of universities. The research that professors produce, for example, are usually only read and digested by other liberal academics; their findings are not scrutinized by a diverse demographic. Films are scrutinized by a diverse American public, a large portion of which find conservative values favorable.

Furthermore, filmmakers actually make an effort to “incorporate themes and motifs from other countries.”<sup>23</sup> Films with a hyper-liberal political agenda, specific to American societal issues, are not going to disseminate as well overseas when they often aren't even big money makers in America. Movies such as *Moonlight*, about a gay African American man growing up around the drug trade in Florida, or *Dallas Buyers Club*, a film dealing with a variety of issues like AIDS and transgenderism, are hyper-specific. Both of these films, however, were nominated for multiple Oscars and were subject to wide critical acclaim. These types of films are not usually produced by the typical studio system, and do not usually have a wide distribution—internationally or

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<sup>23</sup> Crane, Diana. “Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>

domestically. These films are widely talked about among cinephiles, but not so much among the general public, let alone the international community. Because these films usually are not apart of the studio system, they also usually are not the films representing Hollywood to the international community. There is no financial incentive for major studios to distribute films like that.

What does get exported are films like *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Jurassic World*, *The Avengers*, *Furious 7*, *Black Panther*, etc., all of which are on the list of top ten highest grossing films of all time.<sup>24</sup> The majority of these films are action films, usually male-led, with the exception of *Titanic* as the classic love story on the list. Almost all of the films also highlight a sort of American classic individualism and focus on the bravery of the individual with respect to a larger purpose. None of them could easily be classified as any kind of boundary-breaking, deep character piece. Hollywood knows that these are types of films that succeed in foreign markets, and consequently can only be so liberal. This neutralizing effect might not be so apparent, or something that studios would worry about so much if international profits constituted a smaller portion of the overall profits. Since the start, Hollywood has always been an institution run by studio heads who prefer to make money than to launch a political agenda. This will continue to be true as movie attendance rises in places like China and Latin America—foreign markets—but remains stagnant or decreases in the United

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<sup>24</sup> "The 10 Highest-Grossing Films of All Time." IMDb. Accessed December 01, 2018. <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls026404341/>.

States.<sup>25</sup> In addition to actual revenue, Hollywood sees the most revenue growth from foreign markets; in 2017, foreign markets constituted 73% of the revenue and almost all of the 5% revenue growth. *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* saw 71.4% of its 709 million dollars come from foreign markets and foreign markets made up 70.3 % of *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* 699.2 million dollars in box office revenue.<sup>26</sup> Foreign markets have become the money maker for Hollywood blockbusters. The demand is overwhelmingly being driven by foreign consumers; it's logical then that foreign consumers dictate that content in some way, and that often consists of a lessening of liberal messaging.<sup>27</sup>

The Chinese market, in particular, is able to dictate content in Hollywood in films in a big way. China's film market is expanding at a far larger percentage than the United State's film market. Hollywood also depends on the Chinese market as one of the key overseas audiences, for a variety of reasons. The 2014 film *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, earned 300 million dollars to become the highest grossing film in China, and the marketing only cost around 3 to 5 million dollars—a pretty undeniable profit margin when compared with the 100 million dollars of advertising spent in North America.<sup>28</sup> With Hollywood's domestic revenue plateauing, and sometimes even declining, American film producers have no choice but to target the Chinese market. The Chinese

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<sup>25</sup> “Hollywood Benefits From Growth in Overseas Markets Targeted by Trump,” April 4, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-04/hollywood-benefits-from-growth-in-markets-targeted-by-trump>.

<sup>26</sup> Cieply, Michael. “Hollywood Works to Maintain Its World Dominance.” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, sec. Business. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/business/media/hollywood-works-to-maintain-its-world-dominance.html>.

<sup>27</sup> “Hollywood Benefits From Growth in Overseas Markets Targeted by Trump,” April 4, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-04/hollywood-benefits-from-growth-in-markets-targeted-by-trump>.

<sup>28</sup> “\$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs | Hollywood Reporter.” <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818>.

market, however, has very strict censorship rules, meaning that American producers either comply with those limitations or forfeit the profit of distributing their film in China. The choice of Hollywood has been clear since the first American film was shown in China in 1994: "Hollywood has increasingly chosen to appease Chinese censors when faced with the difficult choice between tailoring its content for China or losing billions of dollars in revenues."<sup>29</sup> This choice to appease Chinese censors affects the content of American films and ultimately the content that Americans are able to see. Films that show positive portrayals of the United States military, or negative portrayals of the Chinese government, often fail to pass Chinese censors. American producers, as a reaction, let this relationship with China dictate political representations and other content that American audiences would never think twice about: "Hollywood has begun to censor itself, anticipating what Chinese regulators will object to and making alterations before production is completed."<sup>30</sup> China then can essentially dictate what will or will not be shown; as mentioned before, China is a substantially more conservative country than the United States. Films that show a more progressive version of sexuality, for example, are not going to pass Chinese censors. There are many rumors pertaining to the removal of content in an effort to appease Chinese censorship. 2016's *Star Trek Beyond* was rumored to have removed a gay kiss for this reason, and the more recent *First Man* chooses not to show the American flag planted in the moon in a film about the first moon landing for this reason. Aside from expressing criticisms about democracy and America in general, there's also simple competitiveness behind the actions of the Chinese censors. When

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<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, Sean, and Nicholas Armstrong. "Directed by Hollywood, Edited by China: How China's Censorship and Influence Affect Films Worldwide," n.d., 17.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

China first started to allow American films to be shown, the regime would intentionally pick poorly produced American films. Not simply films that make America itself look bad from a Chinese perspective, but films with poor production quality. These films were most likely shown with “the purpose of disillusioning the Chinese people about the supposed high quality of Hollywood films.”<sup>31</sup> China is one of America’s biggest economic adversaries and this competitiveness follows through to the film industry; the censors, in addition to taking issue with actual content, serve as a kind of check to the economic powerhouse that is Hollywood.

The ability of China to influence any American film hoping for a wide international release is very real. Because of the previously mentioned global studios and distribution Hollywood has set up, however, there is not much Hollywood can do. The Hollywood studios are “divisions within global conglomerates,” and as such, have “complex and sprawling worldwide business ties, including business in China.”<sup>32</sup> Failing to appease the Chinese censors could mean more than just losing revenue for one project, the fear is that it could ruin other projects or even any sort of relationship established with Chinese distribution centers. In particular, companies whose business deals with more than just entertainment are concerned about a film affecting the entirety of the business.<sup>33</sup> Overall, the reason why this has a moderating effect on the films released in America is because Hollywood often does not release two versions of the film. Instead of an edited

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<sup>31</sup> Martha Bayles. *Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America’s Image Abroad*, n.d.

<sup>32</sup> O’Connor, Sean, and Nicholas Armstrong. “Directed by Hollywood, Edited by China: How China’s Censorship and Influence Affect Films Worldwide,” n.d., 17.

<sup>33</sup> O’Connor, Sean, and Nicholas Armstrong. “Directed by Hollywood, Edited by China: How China’s Censorship and Influence Affect Films Worldwide,” n.d., 17.

China-friendly version, and the original film, the original film is often edited to include these appeasements. That means that American audiences are often watching the same "censored" content that Chinese viewers are watching; not something that lends itself to highly liberal filmmaking, considering how strict Chinese censors are. With the growth of the Chinese film market, this does not appear to be an influence that will lessen as time goes on.

### **The Fight Between Money and Acclaim**

In discussing the international market, it is also important to highlight the various divisions within the domestic market. The main focus so far has been the reach of the studio system and the blockbuster films those studios produce, because those are the films that have the most global distribution. That does not, however, cover the entirety of the film market nor the entirety of the various goals of different films and filmmakers. Hollywood is often seen as a monolith, but the industry has various agendas and various political ideologies that present themselves in different ways. The perceived "liberal" narrative ascribed to Hollywood, really only applies to a certain subset of Hollywood. While it can be more complex, the general model is that there are two types of films produced by two types of Hollywood. A good way to understand the different films that get made is to understand the demographics they serve: "One side of the market is the general movie-going public, which represents the primary source of box office revenues. The other consumer group is the elite, artistic and movie insider."<sup>34</sup>The former is usually

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<sup>34</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. "Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market." *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12180>.

a product of the studio system, while the latter is usually aligned with the independent film crowd; the producers of the former are more focused on money while they producers of the latter are often more focused on acclaim. It creates a kind of two-sided market that ultimately has different purposes.

This is not to say that the films never cross over—independent films have the potential to make money and blockbusters have to potential to receive acclaim—but understanding this dichotomy is helpful to understand the liberal slant Hollywood is often saddled with. The films made for the elite or the artistic, do often have a liberal slant and are lauded as the best films. In fact, the films themselves are often constructed differently because they have a different audience in mind. Films that satisfy the general movie-going consumer often include “broad family appeal, special effects, fast-paced action, strong comedic elements, and related characteristics.”<sup>35</sup> Essentially, this group (the largest source of revenue) often go to the movies with their friends and family, ultimately hoping to be entertained. One can refer back to the list of top grossing films, where films like *Avatar* and *Avengers* dominate the list. Films that have “mass market appeal such as G-rated and PG-rated films,” or simply “family friendly” films, tend to be profitable and the ultimate focus of the studios.<sup>36</sup> The overwhelming majority of the highest grossing films list contains family-friendly, often apolitical narratives. From 1995 to 2018, the most profitable film genre is Adventure with a total of 58.84 billion dollars in box office revenue. The next most profitable genre is Action with 44.15 billion dollars. Drama

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<sup>35</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. “Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market.” *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12180>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

comes in at third with 35.2 billion dollars, while Comedy has brought in 33 billion dollars.<sup>37</sup> Many of these films in the top-grossing genres fall under the family-friendly, entertainment-oriented category. The market demand for these palatable, entertainment-oriented films creates a kind of watered-down political film in and of itself. At the very least, these films tend to avoid controversy and provocation, because that is not what the general public responds to most of the time.

On the other hand, the elite, artistic consumers often “prefer films with more character development, more complex storylines, timely or controversial subject matter or images, nuanced production qualities, and related artistic characteristics.”<sup>38</sup> This is where we stray back into the realm of independent films, and films like *Moonlight* come into play. The difference between independent films and blockbuster films often comes down to how they are financed; independent films are usually independently financed, although they can also be backed by studios to obtain a wider distribution or other such products. But the film itself is not owned, financed and distributed solely by the typical studio. Consequently, these films and their target audiences, do not have to care so much about the profit. Since this isn't really the area of filmmaking in which one makes money, the producers, writers and directors tend to be of the more artistic type. These films are often intensely character focused and are often the ones intended to push boundaries (and to some extent, their own agenda) in order to reach for artistic acclaim. These are the

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<sup>37</sup> “Movie Genres by Box Office Revenue in North America 2018 | Statistic.” Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/188658/movie-genres-in-north-america-by-box-office-revenue-since-1995/>.

<sup>38</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. “Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market.” *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12180>.

films lauded at the Oscars and the Golden Globes; they are also often the preferred projects for "serious" actors. And ultimately, this is where the perceived reputation of liberal Hollywood comes into play. The creators in this realm of the market have more autonomy, and it is well documented that the majority of artists in Hollywood are more liberal than the general public. At the very least, the public perceives Hollywood as more liberal than them: In a survey conducted by *The Morning Consult* in February of 2018, people were asked to gauge the public's political ideology, one being conservative and ten being liberal. The respondents placed the general public's political leanings at a 5.1 but placed the political leanings of the entertainment industry at a 7.<sup>39</sup> It makes sense then that work created and pushed forward by mostly liberal people would tend to have a progressive slant; especially, when there is no nullifying factor of money or market demand.

These films are clearly not insignificant and box office revenue is not the only measure of a film's achievements: Box office revenues are treated as "a close approximation for mass market consumer valuation," whereas critical acclaim is treated as "the salient measure of success on the artistic side of the market."<sup>40</sup> The critical acclaim these films get is an incredibly important aspect of the industry, but the money factor will almost always separate these films from the mainstream and the mass consumer group. These independent films circulate within elitist circles of artists and cinephiles because that is the core audience, but their impact is often limited beyond

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<sup>39</sup> "Putting a Number on Hollywood's Perceived Liberalism." *Morning Consult* (blog), March 1, 2018. <https://morningconsult.com/2018/03/01/putting-number-hollywoods-perceived-liberalism/>.

<sup>40</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. "Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market." *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77.

those circles. A good measure of the impact in the general public is the limited release strategy, where films are released in theaters for a very short time, and in very few theaters, in order to qualify for the Academy Awards. Despite good critical reception, the majority of these films do not pull in large revenue. Oftentimes the marketing is limited as well, so the ability of an independent film to have a significant financial and cultural impact is slim. Of course there are exceptions, like the critical and box office success, *Get Out*, but that is not the norm. Ultimately, this structure creates a dichotomy within the market between the elite and the general public, something of a commonality in America today. It's a similar situation to politics overall, where liberal elites dominate the conversation but the actual political demographic of America is more complex, with a predilection for conservatism or a lessening of extreme liberalism in much of middle America and the general public.

This same general public is one of the best determinants of why films produced in Hollywood might not be as liberal as people think, because, despite the independent film section, it is who the industry ultimately caters to. Simply put the "elite film consumers are the marginal consumers" in comparison to "the mass market consumers—those driving large box office revenues."<sup>41</sup> And high budget, action films are what these consumers tend to respond to. In fact, the budget of a film has one of the biggest correlations to the revenue it eventually brings in: "Higher budget films tend to receive less favorable critical reception, but budget positively correlates with box office performance."<sup>42</sup> This brings everything back again to the division between the mass

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<sup>41</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. "Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market." *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

audience, the elite consumer, and who dominates Hollywood. As of 2006, 100 million dollars was the average cost of a studio film, whereas independent films cost less than 40 million dollars.<sup>43</sup> The disparity in production costs has become much more exaggerated in recent years, with studios no longer keen to finance mid-budget movies. What exists now in terms of film is really the massive blockbuster and an incredibly low-budget independent film.

The high costs of blockbuster films, mostly include above the line talent, referring to a star-studded cast, a highly acclaimed director and the industries most powerful producers. A-list actors can command anywhere between 15 to 20 million dollars a picture, while "mid-tier" stars average between 3 to 5 million dollars.<sup>44</sup> Top directors can also cost upwards of 10 million dollars while top producers receive around a few million.<sup>45</sup> This does not even include the actual production costs of locations, props, special effects, etc. Furthermore, a massive amount of money in Hollywood is devoted to marketing costs. Now a major tent pole can cost 200 million dollars on average when including marketing costs, up from 150 million in 2007.<sup>46</sup> For mid-tier studio movies in 1980, the average cost of the marketing was 4.3 million dollars, which jumped to 36

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<sup>43</sup> Crane, Diana. "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 365–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.832233>.

<sup>44</sup> "2017 Hollywood Salaries Revealed: From Movie Stars to Makeup Artists | Hollywood Reporter." <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/2017-hollywood-salaries-revealed-movie-stars-makeup-artists-1043252>.

<sup>45</sup> "2017 Hollywood Salaries Revealed: From Movie Stars to Makeup Artists | Hollywood Reporter." <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/2017-hollywood-salaries-revealed-movie-stars-makeup-artists-1043252>

<sup>46</sup> "\$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs | Hollywood Reporter." <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818>.

million dollars in 2007.<sup>47</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America stopped keeping statistics on prints and ads, but it is now estimated that the cost of marketing for a mid-level movie would come out to be upwards of 40 million dollars.<sup>48</sup> All of this is to point out that creating a massive box office success in 2018 is a massively expensive endeavor, yet those massively expensive films are the ones that turn in the largest revenue. If a studio knows it will have to invest substantial amounts of money in a film in order to see a substantial return, it's only going to finance the films that have a wide appeal and marketability. It's only going to finance the films it can be as sure as possible will cast the widest net. Even if the majority of Hollywood does ascribe to a more liberal ideology, and even if those liberal people control the large budget films, they will always be beholden to the market and the studio.

### **When Profit and Acclaim Meet**

Just as the market itself is not black and white, however, neither are the films that are produced. Situations present themselves in which studios, and above the line talent, want both critical acclaim and high profit. In these cases, producers try to "strike a balance between making more artistic films and trying to find ways to placate the mass market."<sup>49</sup> This creates a duality of political opinion and thematic elements in the films themselves. More conservative elements become a possibility as a result; the tradeoff sometimes centers around adopting the more artistic models, essentially the complex character studies mentioned before, but focused on a more relatable topic. Films like *Hell*

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<sup>47</sup> "\$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs | Hollywood Reporter." <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Goff, Brian, Dennis Wilson, and David Zimmer. "Movies, Mass Consumers, and Critics: Economics and Politics of a Two-Sided Market." *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 269–77

or *High Water*, which focuses on the ramifications of the 2008 financial crisis in middle America, or *A Quiet Place*, which is a horror movie truly dependent on the traditional family structure, are the kind of hybrid works that fall into the categories of satisfying both sides of the market. They fall into the art piece category yet focus on conservative elements that hold appeal for a wider American audience. In the same way that the international market can have a mitigating effect on the politics of a film, so can this need for films to satisfy two sides of the market. The combination of striving for financial success as well as artistic acclaim pushes films into a kind of grey area—one that cannot be too liberal for fear of isolating viewers and ultimately revenue.

Additionally, it is plausible that a lot of Hollywood works within this grey area because a lot of studios want both money and acclaim. If the big box office tent poles and mid-tier to smaller films are all hoping for some sort of profit and distribution, a good portion of Hollywood films need to shy away from being inherently controversial or politically proactive. These highly political, artistic pieces are a fairly small portion of the films Hollywood produces—they are also the films with the least amount of monetary and cultural impact. This is not to say that these films never have a cultural impact or help to push society forward, but the percentage of films that are actually produced with that intent, and then ultimately achieve that kind of reach, are not as common as one might expect from the liberal Hollywood narrative.

### **Making Room for Conservative Artists**

Although the number of conservatives or even independents in Hollywood is much smaller than their liberal counterparts, the market still carves out a space for their work—provided they can provide the revenue. Clint Eastwood might be the most famous

example of an outspoken conservative who has been able to endure as a Hollywood legend. Eastwood first started making movies in the 1950s, a time in which it is easy to understand how more conservative politics would have played well or passed by without the kind of scrutiny Hollywood conservatives receive today. Eastwood's career has, however, passed the test of time and persevered well into the 2000s. He's both acted and directed in many conservative films—many of which tend to evoke the Western era he was a part of—such as *Gran Torino* and *Million Dollar Baby*. Eastwood has described himself as libertarian although he has supported Republican candidates like Donald Trump and Mitt Romney in the past. He even used to throw his own hat in the political ring. In 2016, he went on an explicit rant about the concept of political correctness. Yet, Eastwood's outspoken nature hasn't really seemed to damage his relationships with other actors, his products or his overall work.

Part of his ability to endure is surely due to the fact that he's an experienced artist who produces interesting work, even if that work has a political slant: "Eastwood's movies provide a vantage on a certain conservative attitude in American life, one that privileges the liberty and dignity of the individual above all else."<sup>50</sup> There might simply be something to the fact his individual-focused libertarian filmmaking is a more accepted version of conservatism in America. But there have been plenty of Eastwood films past 2000 alone, that would have seen other similar projects come under fire. What really allows Clint Eastwood and his filmmaking to endure is the power of the market. He turns

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<sup>50</sup> "Understanding the Art and Politics of Clint Eastwood."  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/understanding-the-art-and-politics-of-clinteastwood/article37767417/>.

a huge profit as an actor and an even bigger profit as a director. The Eastwood-helmed *American Sniper* earned 547 million dollars at the box office.<sup>51</sup> Three of the projects he directed—*Gran Torino*, *Sully* and *Million Dollar Baby*—made upwards of 200 million dollars, and he has nine projects that all broke the 100 million mark by a substantial margin.<sup>52</sup> This is still leaving out a countless number of films that grossed a healthy revenue. With that kind of long-lasting earning power, Eastwood has a space carved out for him in Hollywood for as long as he wants, regardless of the political leanings of Hollywood or of his films. This can be seen with other conservative, actors, directors and projects. It's definitely not the norm, but conservative or independent actors such as Dwayne Johnson, Robert Downey Jr., Gary Sinise, Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, Mark Wahlberg, Tim Allen and many more have enjoyed careers in Hollywood as conservatives without much fanfare. Even those who have been outspoken about being conservative are still able to have a career if they remain bankable stars.

The ability of the market to carve out spaces for writers and producers, people who are behind the scenes, is even more apparent; members of conservative Hollywood have done what they can to ensure a space for them remains. Friends of Abe is a conservative networking group in Hollywood founded by Gary Sinise in 2004; the group itself is well-known but the Hollywood players in the group are kept a secret.<sup>53</sup> It indicates a fear of public vilification for being conservative, but that does not necessarily

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<sup>51</sup> “Rank of Clint Eastwood’s Movies by Box Office Performance.” IMDb.  
<http://www.imdb.com/list/ls063838905/>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Wilford, Lauren. “Shut Up and Sing: Is Hollywood Actually Secretly Conservative?” *Vice*  
[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative).

translate to a fear of producing conservative work. What it does translate to, is conservative actors or projects being marketed in different ways:

“The branding of the Hollywood conservative as a rugged individualist has been used to great advantage by Hollywood’s most famous conservatives...Conservatives see them as Hollywood’s Dirty Harrys—at times literal gun-toting renegades who’ve defected from the liberal Hollywood establishment.”<sup>54</sup> The Hollywood conservative is not framed as a conservative but rather as an individual, a trait central to the American identity and one that translates well across all political spectrums. That quality of rugged individualism, which is often a key feature of conservative work is one that has repeatedly turned a profit in American cinema. There will always be a room for conservative actors, writers, producers, and directors as long as they continue to produce work that offers large returns. This is bolstered by the financial foundations of the Hollywood machine and Hollywood's major players recognize that. Director of *The Big Short* and *Anchorman* Adam McKay said "As far as Hollywood being liberal, that's the funniest thing I've ever heard. Look, who owns the studios? Viacom, Comcast, Disney. They want to make money."<sup>55</sup> While the majority of the talent and the majority of the rhetoric surrounding Hollywood is liberal, the foundational fact that Hollywood is a profit-driven business will always create room for conservative creators that generate money.

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<sup>54</sup> Wilford, Lauren. “Shut Up and Sing: Is Hollywood Actually Secretly Conservative?” *Vice* [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative).

<sup>55</sup> Wilford, Lauren. “Shut Up and Sing: Is Hollywood Actually Secretly Conservative?” *Vice* [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xy7d9j/shut-up-and-sing-is-hollywood-actually-secretly-conservative)

### **Differences within the Television Market**

The market for TV shows is a little more complex, partially because there are so many different TV shows to choose from. And TV, unlike film, can produce a lot more products in a much shorter time, for less money. Modern models of on-demand videos and streaming make a consistent market analysis fairly difficult. Television is also, more often than film, fine with targeting a specific kind of audience rather than trying to obtain the most widespread reach possible. This, of course, varies from show to show; well-known crime procedurals compete with more artistic, niche shows. It's like the television version of the blockbuster and the independent film, except the financing is not quite as separate from one another.

The market for television proves a similar point regarding the neutralizing effect of the international market, albeit in a different way. For one, it's not nearly as dependent on the international market as film is; in some ways, that's responsible for the current disconnect between American television audiences and international ones. There is still a massive international market for American TV series, but there remains a pretty clear distinction between what types of television shows make an impact overseas and which ones do not. The popular style of storytelling in America now is a serial show with complex story arcs and a dramatic structure that departs from the norm; this does not translate well to an international audience who still largely prefers episodic shows such as *NCIS* and *CSI*.<sup>56</sup> *NCIS*, in fact, is one of the most watched shows in the world, drawing

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<sup>56</sup> "America's TV Exports Too Diverse for Overseas?" The Hollywood Reporter.  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/americas-tv-exports-diverse-overseas-879109>.

over 20 million viewers domestically, but well over 50 million viewers worldwide.<sup>57</sup> The show is a fairly generic show about heroism, something that translates well regardless of culture. This is important to note because, much like film, the less controversial, widely relatable stories are what sell internationally.

When analyzing different countries it becomes apparent that different shows are popular in different parts of the world. However, in almost every country, multiple crime procedurals appear on the list and almost all of the most popular shows follow an episodic structure.<sup>58</sup> Shows like *The Mentalist*, *Criminal Minds*, *Person of Interest*, *NCIS* (including its spinoffs) and *CSI* (including its spinoffs) consistently make the list.<sup>59</sup> What does not usually make the list, are shows that feature more diversity and specifically shows that focus on niche issues. Shows that “feature black faces but non-ethnically specific kinds of stories,” for example, actually do really well abroad.<sup>60</sup> This includes shows like *How to Get Away With Murder* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. Popular U.S. television series such as *Empire* and *Blackish*, however, tend to do very poorly outside of the U.S.<sup>61</sup> Most of the storylines in these shows are ethnically-specific and focus on American social issues as it relates to the aforementioned ethnicities. This is all to point out that

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<sup>57</sup> Gonzalez, Sandra. “How ‘NCIS’ Became the World’s Most-Watched Show.” Mashable. <https://mashable.com/2015/09/22/ncis-worldwide-viewers/>.

<sup>58</sup> “The Most Popular U.S. TV Shows in 18 Countries Around the World.” Vulture. <https://www.vulture.com/2015/12/most-popular-us-tv-shows-around-the-world.html>.

<sup>59</sup> “The Most Popular U.S. TV Shows in 18 Countries Around the World.” Vulture. <https://www.vulture.com/2015/12/most-popular-us-tv-shows-around-the-world.html>

<sup>60</sup> “America’s TV Exports Too Diverse for Overseas?” The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/americas-tv-exports-diverse-overseas-879109>.

<sup>61</sup> “America’s TV Exports Too Diverse for Overseas?” The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/americas-tv-exports-diverse-overseas-879109>.

international audiences still have the same reaction in TV that they do in film, but because the television market is not as dependent as the film market it's not as apparent. It still lends itself to the notion that the more neutral, less politicized, less liberally focused shows are the ones that succeed internationally. Shows that do not try to force a political ideology either way tend to do well overseas. *NCIS* is a show about a section of the U.S. military, yet it plays well internationally because its actual focus is on general heroism and people catching bad guys.

There are exceptions to this rule, and to some extent, the international television market is somewhat unpredictable. Shows that might not even be that popular in America sometimes make their way to countries most watched list, and while the *NCIS*-type shows tend to make everyone's top ten, there's usually a different number one show for different countries. South Africa has an affinity for *Modern Family*, whereas South Korea is fond of *Scandal*; Italy's top show is the soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* while Russia unsurprisingly loves *Game of Thrones*.<sup>62</sup> Out of South Africa, Indonesia, South Korea, Australia, Sweden, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, only Canada and Australia share the most popular American television show with *The Big Bang Theory*.<sup>63</sup> That's a massive differentiation on the most popular show from country to country, and there is no clear pattern indicating why the margin is so wide. Italy's fondness for soap operas are well known, and the similar viewing patterns between Canada and Australia aren't too surprising; but on the whole, there's simply too much difference in international show

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<sup>62</sup> "The Most Popular U.S. TV Shows in 18 Countries Around the World." Vulture.  
<https://www.vulture.com/2015/12/most-popular-us-tv-shows-around-the-world.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

popularity for Hollywood to make decoding those differences a priority. So while American TV shows will sell in certain places overseas, the mass marketability and dissemination that film markets strive for can really only be achieved through crime drama procedural shows.

Another reason why American television has found less success in the international market than film is because countries will produce their own TV shows based on American television series: "...most foreign TV programs are adapted from US originals. A lot of this localization is done without the permission of US producers."<sup>64</sup> This allows foreign television producers to cherry pick what they do like about American television and remove what they dislike; the shows are then tailored to the local sensibilities. A more generic American TV show does not stand much of a chance against shows tailor-made for a local audience. That is also why, "in more lucrative markets, co-production with US companies is common."<sup>65</sup> While Hollywood does its best to keep its international reach intact when it comes to television, the market is simply shaped differently than it is for films. This also might have to do with the fact that most markets cannot compete with the scale of Hollywood films, but television productions are easier to reproduce at an acceptable level for in-home viewing.

For the most part, Hollywood knows exactly what will and what will not sell; it also knows *where* its products will sell. And the majority of Hollywood producers do want to cast the widest net. The focus is not going to be on what show will translate well

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<sup>64</sup> Martha Bayles. *Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad*, n.d.

<sup>65</sup> Martha Bayles. *Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad*, n.d.

in Poland versus in Spain. Ultimately this means that a lot of the American public's favorite shows and films are being dictated by what the world wants to some extent. At the very least, the internationality of the market has a clear effect on what kind of product is made. A lot of the biggest markets want something that falls into the mass market consumer category rather than the liberal elite, artistic category. In general, it could be a good rule of thumb to check how much money a film or show costs—if it is a widely popular piece of media chances are it will not be as left-leaning as one might expect.

## **Chapter 2: Inherent Conservatism in Science Fiction**

### **Foundational Elements of Conservative Thought:**

Artistic demands play as much of a role in dictating the politics of entertainment as the market does; moreover, particular genres lend themselves to the incorporation of conservative ideals. When the average viewer thinks about the science fiction genre, conservatism is probably not the first association that comes to mind. However, *Star Trek* aside, many of the overarching messages of the science fiction genre share its foundations with conservatism. In part, this has to do with the dystopian nature of science fiction. In order to elucidate this connection, it's important to first examine what conservatism, as it pertains to this chapter, actually means. Conservatism can be an elusive political ideology both because people assign incorrect meanings to it and also because that is partly the nature of conservatism. Conservatives often defend institutions and ideologies that vary widely from each other, in practice and in intent, because the goal is to conserve the institutions and conventions that guide society.

The core of conservative social and political thought can be boiled down to a couple of ideas. Conservatives often concern themselves with the potential ramifications of progressive reform: "Rather than representing the self-satisfied and complacent acceptance of the institutional status quo, ideological conservatism arises from the anxiety that valuable institutions are endangered by contemporary developments or

proposed reforms.”<sup>66</sup> Preserving institutions from the past is an important element of conservatism because there is a fear that getting rid of those institutions as a result of progressive reform will actually be harmful. Whereas progressives tend to view institutions as obsolete or antiquated, conservatives tend to seek out the continued importance of institutions. Conservatism reasons that the very existence of institutions “creates a presumption that they have served some useful function” and, because those institutions serve some useful function that might not be entirely understood, “eliminating them may lead to harmful, unintended consequences.”<sup>67</sup> Conservatism believes that these institutions are serving some human need and keeping society in order, even if the exact product of these institutions is unknown. Getting rid of these institutions without knowing their full influence and impact on society might lead to unpredictable ramifications that could leave society worse than it was before the proposed reform. Progressive thought centers around the idea that humans have the ability to engineer a better future and create new institutions; in this view, the original institutions are not serving a purpose and should be replaced with something better. Conversely, conservatives are wary of the idea that something better can be created by humans. In part this anxiety comes from a consideration about the limits of human knowledge, and that “society is too complex to lend itself to theoretical simplification.”<sup>68</sup> The worry that people do not respect the limits of social engineering is a central concern of conservatism.

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<sup>66</sup> Jerry Z. Muller. n.d. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, the engineering of new and successful institutions will be virtually impossible because valuable institutions “arise not from natural rights, or from universal human propensities or from explicit contract, but rather are a product of historical development.”<sup>69</sup> The conservative worry is that humans do not have the ability to create a perfectly formed institution right away because all good institutions are a product of time and natural development. The importance and usefulness of institutions develop over time—time is also what establishes a reverence toward these institutions and makes them so complex. This historic development is one of the main reasons conservatives laud institutions as superior because the intricacies developed over time cannot be manufactured or reformed. The varying institutions are also able to serve different needs for different groups of people. Progressives have a tendency to try and create a single solution that replaces institutions and universally serves the needs of humanity. Conservatism argues that liberals “depend upon a systematic, deductivist, universalistic form of reasoning which fails to account for the complexity and peculiarity of the actual institutions they seek to transform.”<sup>70</sup> For conservatives, the new innovation will never supersede the original institutions. Overall, conservative thought does not have confidence in the ability of humans to engineer a better future; it’s more likely that, by shattering the old world, reform will actually make things worse than they are. At the core of conservative thought is the idea that the past is better than the future.

This is where conservatism intersects with science fiction. Science fiction, barring a few exceptions, tends to be an inherently dystopian genre. The genre itself is widely

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<sup>69</sup> Jerry Z. Muller. n.d. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

influenced by the 1931 dystopian novel *A Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and Orwell's classic *1984*, released in 1949. Both novels depict a future in which technological development and human innovation result in an authoritarian state. Technology is used by the government to control and spy on its citizens, people are expected to conform or await punishment, and history is often manipulated to hide the truth of the future's atrocities: "Huxley and Orwell framed the threats through which we proceed. As technology becomes ever-more capable, we must question what futures we desire to create, and why." This is the framework that most science fiction series and films tend to follow. Technology, for one, always plays a role in the descent into dystopia. There's usually a person or group of people fighting against an oppressive authoritarian regime. Very rarely does science fiction portray a future in which human innovation leads to the universal peace and happiness that liberals strive for; in fact, it's rare that the future is depicted as an improvement in any way. All of the conservative anxieties mentioned above play out within the constraints of a dystopian future. People have plans to improve society, usually through technological development; instead of a great triumph however, society almost always devolves into chaos or despair. In that way, science fiction is something of a cautionary tale for those who think they can change the status quo and generate something better. Ultimately, science fiction carries with it an inherent conservatism because it often focuses on dystopian societies—societies where human innovation has created a future far worse than anything that came before.

### **Serenity**

Released in 2005, *Serenity* is the continuation of Joss Whedon's cult-favorite television series *Firefly*. The film is set in 2517 and follows the crew of the *Serenity*

spaceship as they attempt to smuggle and steal for their livelihood. In this version of the future, humans have colonized a new solar system because the Earth was not able to sustain the human population. The inner planets coalesced under the moniker the Alliance and they fought a war against the outer planets known as Independents. The Alliance won the war and everyone who resisted are either ignored or considered fugitives. The captain of *Serenity*, Mal, and his first officer Zoe fought in the war against the Alliance and now spend their time fending for themselves. Part of the dangers of being outside of the Alliance's protection or vicious, cannibalistic creatures known as Reavers, who devastate everything and everyone in their path.

*Serenity* has a similar feel to the typical Western movie. Space is the wild west. There are no real rules or societal protections, people simply have to figure out how to survive on their own. Mal is the John Wayne-like character, acting off his own notions of cowboy justice. Just like Westerns, *Serenity* plays on the notion that people have to get justice for themselves because society will not help you. This environment inspires an individualistic society, rather than a society that focuses on the universal good. Mal may not be the most morally righteous main character to exist—sometimes he even seems downright cruel—but he aims to provide for himself and the people on his ship. There are multiple times throughout the film that Mal is described as the father and protector of the crew, with one person telling him that “a man should keep his house in order.” The morality of this world is such that the only focus is to make sure you and your group survive. The robberies he orchestrates with his crew, for example, are efficient and harsh; they take no qualms with frightening people, and in extreme cases harming them, to get the result they want. After a heist, a man desperately clings to Mal's get-away ship as his

crew tries to escape reavers. Instead of helping the man climb aboard the ship he kicks him off and the only mercy he offers is to shoot the man in the head before the reavers can eat him. Although these actions might be considered immoral, Mal is not needlessly cruel. He refuses to help the man, for example, so his crew has a better chance of escaping. It's all part of a moral code that's born out of survival. He takes matters into his own hands because he cannot rely on the government to do so. Instead of a future in which government institutions have progressed and help people, this future seems more like a regression to a lawless America. The future is run-down, gritty and post-apocalyptic.

This tension with the government is the first sign of conservative anxieties in *Serenity* coming to life. In the progressive point of view, starting over in a new solar system would mean a chance at creating new progressive institutions and a chance to get things right. This desire to create something better is explicitly stated by the main antagonist, The Operative. After murdering Mal's friends on planet Haven, The Operative states that he is willing to be evil because he "believes in a better world without sin" and supports the Alliance as a means to achieve that end. Instead of becoming a bastion for promise and peace, however, this new solar system is worse than earth. All of the historical developments that took place on earth are essentially wiped out and with it a lot of the institutions that make society function. In this new solar system, people no longer have guidelines or constraints for their actions. Progressive reform does not create a better world that people might hope, instead, it creates a bleak depiction of the future. The Alliance tries to force conformity, and those who do not acquiesce are forced to live their lives on the outskirts, surviving through illegal means. The inequality is massive and

spread over different planets. There are no institutions that care to attend to differences or individual needs. Instead of engineering a better future, humankind has engineered a society far more dangerous than earth ever was.

*Serenity* is the ultimate example of a case where a desire for genuine human progress and ingenuity leads to tragic unforeseen consequences—the kinds of unforeseen consequences that conservatism likes to forewarn about. This is evident in the film's most important plot point. The *Serenity* crew lands on the mysterious planet Miranda. The crew discovers that everyone on the planet is dead: the people look like zombies in various stages of decay, some laying on the ground or sitting at their work stations, but all are frozen in time. The reason for the mass deaths on the planet is revealed when a recorded broadcast is found from a member of the Alliance survey team. The hologram tearfully explains to them that the research team was there to observe an experimental chemical that was released into Miranda's atmosphere, and this chemical was meant to temper aggression. The chemical worked too well and, instead of eliminating aggression, it caused people to become so complacent they stopped living. They literally stopped doing anything, including breathing, causing millions of deaths all over the planet. A smaller facet of the population experienced the opposite and became inhuman with madness and violence. In other words, the Alliance created the cannibalistic savages known as reavers and they covered it up. The apocalyptic world was entirely a result of innovation. The woman on the hologram desperately says "We mean it for the best...to make people safer." This is a core concern of conservatism. People genuinely wanted to improve society and pushed forth a solution without properly examining potential consequences. The result was infinitely worse than the initial problem. Instead of curing

aggression, they caused genocide and essentially created a new, vicious species. In the aftermath, the reavers are framed as savages who refuse to conform to the Alliance's message of unity, when in reality the Alliance is responsible for the nightmarish conditions. War was not the true cause of strife—the problems that plague this future are entirely a result of human intervention.

### **The Matrix**

*The Matrix*, released in 1999, is one of the staples of the science fiction genre. Even though the film was designed to be a blockbuster with an initial estimated budget of 63 million dollars,<sup>71</sup> the film exceeded expectations earning over 171 million dollars domestically, and over 463 million dollars at the worldwide box office.<sup>72</sup> The resulting success spawned two more films, and *The Matrix* trilogy is one of the highest grossing media properties of all time generating three billion dollars in revenue.<sup>73</sup> The story follows Neo, a hacker who soon discovers that reality is an illusion. What seems like normal twentieth-century life is actually a program called the matrix designed by artificial intelligence to keep human's complacent as the machines use them for energy sources. The earth as it exists in the real world is a barren wasteland. The real world is in such a bad state that many who have the opportunity to become unplugged choose to remain blissfully unaware of the hell that earth has become. Neo becomes aware of this after meeting a group of people who are "unplugged" from the matrix, including

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<sup>71</sup> *The Matrix*. n.d. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> "The Matrix Movies at the Box Office - Box Office Mojo." n.d. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=matrix.htm>.

Morpheus, and joins the rebellion against the machines. Again we have a movie that presents human innovation and development as the ultimate downfall of society.

The situation is explained by Morpheus through the use of an old school television. He plays scenes of the earth in the twentieth century—a nondescript city with blue skies overhead plays on the screen while a piece of idyllic music plays. "This is the world you know," Morpheus says, as a crowd of people flash on the screen, followed by a rush of cars. The music and images indicate a kind of reverence for this time period when humanity was still flourishing. It's common for science fiction movies to reference the twentieth or twenty-first century as the peak time for humanity and the calm before the storm in which their own innovations destroy them. This is precisely what happens in *The Matrix*.

The tone shifts as Morpheus narrates that, "At some point in the early twenty-first century, all of mankind united in celebration. We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI." Morpheus is, of course, referring to the creation of artificial intelligence. The next scene he plays shows the earth as it is currently: the same city shown previously is now completely obliterated, the buildings are destroyed and crumbling, everything is grey, and the sky is completely dark due to the destruction of the sun. Thunder and lightning add to the apocalyptic depiction. This is the state of the earth, assumed to be long after the twentieth century. This dystopian society is the result of the creation of artificial intelligence. Machines become free-thinking and, instead of serving humans, wage a war in order to gain control of humankind. The machines win the war against humans and enslave them in order to harness their body energy. Instead of creating a technological marvel, humankind created their own prison. The destruction is

so complete that there are only a few people on all of the earth living outside the confines of the matrix, and most of them have to live under the surface of the earth.

Morpheus describes "endless fields where human beings are no longer born...we are grown." Humans have become nothing more than artificial batteries meant to power and serve their own creations. Technology has virtually rendered humankind obsolete. There is no age of prosperity brought on by the technological developments of humankind, only devastation. Again we run into the conservative worry of unforeseen circumstances; no one could have predicted the catastrophe that would result from creating artificial intelligence, but that is precisely the point. Humankind meddled with foundational aspects of society, without understanding the potential ramifications that might take place. There's a belief from liberals that innovation and reform will lead to positive outcomes no matter what; this film and many in the science fiction genre indicate the opposite. The limits of human knowledge have led to the creation of something that cannot be truly understood. It is reminiscent of the conservative idea that "It looks bad, indeed it is bad. But it can get much worse for reasons that you have overlooked, indeed haven't even imagined."<sup>74</sup> The matrix is much worse, so much worse than it might have been absurd for people to imagine such a devastating result. If nothing else, *The Matrix* is a cautionary tale for the propensity of humans to leap into innovation and reform without looking.

Because the future is so bleak, the people that are free find themselves longing for the simplicity of the past, before technological innovation resulted in endless strife. Two

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<sup>74</sup> Jerry Z. Muller. n.d. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present*. Princeton University Press.

of Morpheus' crew, for example, are "real" humans, born outside of the matrix system. When Neo meets Tank he quickly points out that Tank does not have any holes (the ones that allow people to plug into the matrix). Tank is cheerful in his response, "Nope. Me and my brother Dozer, we're both 100 percent pure, old-fashioned, home-grown, born free right here in the real world." They are from the last remaining city, toward the center of the earth. The last place in the world where humans are able to have children the "old-fashioned" way. The world has descended into such an awful state that being born the natural way is something rare to be proud of. Throughout *The Matrix*, there are fond references to inherently human aspects of life, mostly because basic human ways of life have completely disappeared in the face of artificial intelligence. Previously undervalued or mundane things like having a real meal, engaging in a real relationship and even being a real human are treated with reverence. The amazing things people can learn and do courtesy of the matrix, such as the ability to learn Taekwondo in thirty seconds, have no appeal. Old-fashioned things are what people want—old-school clothing, books, showers, and even food. In this twisted dystopia, humans have been stripped of free thought and humanity; they are nothing more than power sources to machines. *The Matrix*, perhaps even more than other movies in the science fiction genre, presents such a desolate future that humankind is compelled to yearn for a past life. Most would rather live in ignorance than have to acknowledge the despair and devastation humankind is responsible for. People no longer want to push forward or hope for innovation, they desperately want to go back to the way life was before humans attempted to change the status quo. In this film, the past is undoubtedly better than the shattered future people are forced to endure.

## **Battlestar Galactica**

*Battlestar Galactica* has seen a number of remakes, but this paper will focus on the 2003 miniseries. The premise of the miniseries, and all of its previous incarnations, is that human civilization lives in a part of the universe known as the twelve colonies. These colonies have been at war with artificial intelligence of their own creation known as cyclones. After forty years of peace the cyclones launch an all-out nuclear attack on the colonies; during this forty year period cyclones have developed to look as though they are human. By entering the colonies in humanoid form, the cyclones virtually decimate the majority of the people in existence. Toward the end of the miniseries, the starship known as the Battlestar Galactica is one of the last lines of defense.

Artificial intelligence is back as the antagonist in this science fiction series, however, *Battlestar Galactica* is explicit in outlining the culpability of the human race. The words plastered across the opening frame of the series states, "then the day came when the Cyclones decided to kill their masters." The initial moments of the series identify technological innovation as the ultimate nemesis. The creator/creation and master/slave analogy is explicitly clear from the start. But where the Cyclones were once inventions of humankind, they have now evolved to become smarter and stronger than humans. The Cyclones spent the past forty years planning an attack on humans, whereas the humans think that the Cyclones have remained stagnant and have been adjusting to peace. They expect that the Cyclones still look like robots when in reality they have developed a human appearance. The theme of unforeseen consequences is at play and so is the idea that humans are woefully unprepared for any kind of consequence or conflict. This is the rare series where humans have some warning before they are completely

destroyed—they have a chance to deal with ramifications of their own invention. Yet even after clear indication of aggression by the artificial intelligence, humans remain confident in their superiority and fail to develop a plan of action. It shows the humans are both unable and unwilling to deal with the problems that they create.

And although the human race is not portrayed as the aggressor in this conflict, that does not absolve them of their culpability. Commander of the Battlestar Galactica, William Adama gives a speech before word of the new attack is in. He speaks of the creation of the cyclones, stating "we decided to play God, and create life." People could not fathom why their creations would turn against them and started to view the Cyclones as purely evil. Over the span of forty years, it feels as though the Cyclones have become a distant or removed problem. However, Commander Adama states that humans cannot forget their role in the conflict: "You cannot play God then wash your hands of the things that you've created." The genesis of artificial intelligence is always humans, and the Cyclones are not exceptions. Although the commander meant it as a moral lesson, the people of the twelve colonies literally cannot be rid of the cyclones—they force the human race to the brink of extinction. The consequences of human development are so severe in *Battlestar Galactica* that, instead of humans living in an authoritarian regime or dystopian world, they are almost wiped out. The remaining survivors are isolated to a single ship and the dystopia element is near-extinction itself. Once again, humans have engineered their own destruction, and none of their technological development can help them.

Consequently, *Battlestar Galactica* puts a heavy emphasis on the value of the past and of past developments. In fact, the reason that Battlestar Galactica is the sole surviving

ship is because it is a relic from the past. The start of the series shows the ship in the final stages of decommissioning. People tour through as if it's a museum, and the launch bay has been turned into a gift shop. As a group of tourists walks through, a guide talks about the antiquated nature of the ship pointing to phones with chords and computers without internet connection. He says, "Galactica is a reminder of a time when we were so frightened by our enemies that we literally looked backward for protection." Although the guide says this sarcastically, the series clearly means to imply that humans should look toward the past. Humans should not forget to be wary of the future. When the initial conflict took place people looked toward the past to make it through. It was not technological innovation that saved the day, but old-fashioned human institutions. For example, in addition to the old school technology of Galactica, reliance on a military institution and their military training is what helps them survive. Galactica survives only because it is a relic of the past both in its operation and in its construction.

This dynamic is brought up again when there are talks of updating the battleship's computer. The Commander is adamant in making sure the systems run offline: "many good men and women lost their lives aboard this ship because someone wanted a faster computer to make life easier." What people want is convenience. They want the newest technology because that is thought of as real progress. It comes with a certain amount of hubris—the best innovations are desired because people want to impress, without consideration or care or the consequences. It's a fatal error that humans make over and over again in the science fiction genre, and it's even more unforgivable in *Battlestar Galactica* because the mistake has already been made. The devastating consequences are already known, yet humans remain hubristic and have misplaced confidence that their

ingenuity will win out. They believe that their new creation will be superior to what comes before it and that a better world will result. It's an error that the humans of *Battlestar Galactica* make twice. The superior technology in the fight against the cyclones is not new and advanced technology. Reliance on old-school technology and old school thought is what actually saves the day.

### **Black Mirror**

The entirety of the *Black Mirror* series is dedicated toward representing anxieties about technological advancement. Each episode is a standalone episode that explores the various ways in which obsession with technological advancement warps society. Although it's not necessarily set in the future, every episode portrays an alternate universe in which some kind of technology creates varying dystopia-like societies. The series is currently running and has been since 2011, to much critical acclaim and commercial success. Not every episode is inherently dark, but there is not a single episode that portrays a universe in which society is positively impacted by human creation. Charlie Brooker, the creator of the show, highlights a kind of cautionary message in his description of the series: "They're all about the way we live now—and the way we might be living in 10 minutes' time if we're clumsy. And if there's one thing we know about mankind, it's this: we're usually clumsy."<sup>75</sup> Apprehension about human 'clumsiness' is the driving force behind this series, and also the driving force behind conservative thought. All of the nightmarish, Orwellian scenarios characters find

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<sup>75</sup> Brooker, Charlie. 2011. "Charlie Brooker: The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction." *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011, sec. Technology. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror>.

themselves in throughout the series are a result of humans clumsily engaging with technology and societal norms they do not understand. *Black Mirror* constantly redefines society in the light of scientific advancement, something that usually looks like an inescapable dystopia.

### *Fifteen Million Merits*

The episode titled “Fifteen Million Merits,” follows a man named Bing, who lives in a small prison-like cell where every wall is a screen. Everything in this world is paid for by “merits” which Bing and everyone else can only earn by cycling on stationary bikes. More importantly, the energy gathered from people exercising is used to power this world. Brooker says this episode portrays what an “Orwellian future that ran on Apple software” would look like.<sup>76</sup> Again we see a portrayal of a world in which humans are enslaved to machines. The characters are even dressed in grey jumpsuits reminiscent of prison uniforms, as they cycle along next to one another but never saying a word. They are all too absorbed in their own digital worlds trying to earn merits. And even though Bing and the others are clearly being controlled by this technological, authoritarian system, they are complacent because another class resides below them (the overweight people who, instead of cycling spend their time cleaning up after the others).

Where “Fifteen Million Merits” differs from other dystopian societies, is that the characters do not truly realize the situation. Individual screens are personalized to distract and entertain in the most effective way possible, and the people are all physically fit—it’s portrayed as a kind of digital utopia. No one understands that they have essentially been

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<sup>76</sup> Brooker, Charlie. 2011. “Charlie Brooker: The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction.” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011, sec. Technology. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror>.

reduced to mindless batteries. Only the lead character starts to understand the pointlessness and isolation of his existence which nearly drives him insane. There are no individual institutions in place and no individualism at all. Everyone's identity and purpose disappear under the guise of technology and health. It's a completely artificial world that was engineered in order to foster a population that is docile and fit, things that were thought of as better than the present. In this case, the unforeseen consequences are literally not seen by the people living in this dystopia. Instead of oppression by a government, it's subconscious oppression by human design. Mankind has sorted itself into a technological prison and no one even knows it.

#### *U.S.S. Callister*

Ironically, this episode parodies *Star Trek*, one of the few science fiction properties that genuinely imagines a better future. This version, however, is much darker than the original. The episode follows a programmer named Robert, who also happens to be the founder of a technology company. His recluse nature leads him to create a simulation that resembles *Star Trek*, where he becomes the captain of the U.S.S Callister and can do whatever he pleases. This simulation utilizes people's DNA to actually place them in the simulation, like a futuristic augmented reality. After feeling underappreciated and ignored by his coworkers, he steals their DNA and forces them into the simulation. For Robert, this simulation contains no rules or restraints and he consequently treats the "crew" with that idea in mind. He forces them to act out deranged Starfleet missions, he sexually harasses the women and alters the reality in whatever way pleases him most. Although the premise of this episode might seem frivolous and the technology somewhat far-fetched, *U.S.S. Callister* hits on some familiar anxieties within the science fiction

genre. People create technology that gives them the freedom to do whatever they want. In this case, Robert engineers himself an entirely new world in order to liberate himself from what he perceives to be an unjust existence. There are no societal institutions, laws or social norms that he must abide by. Much like other science fiction films, this episode creates a lawless future—there are no rules to follow. It creates an implication that individual liberation leads to chaos and abuse; instead of creating a better simulation of the real world he simply creates one that allows him to abuse others. Without an established foundation to ground him, Robert's foray into the future leads to tragedy (he gets stuck in the simulation by himself forever). This episode examines more of a micro level than science fiction usually does, but the concerns and injustices explored in this episode emulate familiar concerns of dystopian societies in other works of science fiction.

### **Snowpiercer**

Even when a science fiction film overtly portrays liberal themes, the nature of the genre promotes an inherent conservatism. *Snowpiercer* is a Korean-English language film that presents the earth like a frozen wasteland. Heightened concerns about global warming lead scientists to develop a technology that alters the earth's climate, with the hopes that it will sufficiently temper global warming and preserve the earth. Scientists launch the technology into the atmosphere in 2014 and the results are catastrophic; instead of slightly lowering earth's temperature, the entire planet freezes over. Almost all living creatures—from people to animals to vegetation—are wiped out by the botched attempt to remedy global warming. The only humans who survive this glacial apocalypse are the few thousand people aboard a technologically advanced train called Snowpiercer.

This only covers the setup to the film. The majority of it takes place in 2031 almost seventeen years after the initial crisis. *Snowpiercer* blurs the political lines within the first five minutes of the film.

Clearly, the movie means to make a progressive statement about the imminent dangers of climate change. The apocalypse-inducing panic is evidence enough of that. Yet when society makes a drastic move in combating climate change (an action that would probably garner strong support from liberals) it only exacerbates the problem. It's a much more extreme version of Brooker's commentary on the clumsiness of humans; clumsiness, in this case, means the end of the world. At the start of the film, climate change is a serious concern, but it is not an immediate concern. Before the event, the earth was slowly dying. Now, due to rash human intervention, the environment is decimated and the human race is nearly extinct. Liberals might argue that trying anything is better than letting climate change continue and, in pursuing that end, would have confidence in humankind's ability to engineer a positive solution. Conservatives might argue against such an extreme response to climate change, especially without a deep understanding of the possible ramifications, because the resulting problems might be much worse than the present. The film definitely seems to side with conservatives in that regard. *Snowpiercer* might have meant to send a message about the imminent dangers of climate change; however, simply by the nature of the film being a dystopian sci-fi, it's forced to take more of a convoluted political position.

This political ambiguity continues throughout the entirety of the film. Most of the movie focuses on the survivors inside the snowpiercer. A representation of inequality, the train is divided into two sections: the front of the train where the elites live, and the back of the

train where everyone else lives. The elite train cars are something to marvel at, with fully functioning nightclubs, an aquarium, a conservatory, classrooms and even a room solely devoted to providing the elites with sushi. The back of the train is reminiscent of a concentration camp, with people so cramped they are piled on top of each other and starvation so severe they resort to eating limbs. Whereas kids in the elite cart get to go to school, children in the back of the train are taken from their parents and forced into child labor in order to keep the train's engine running. At first glance, it seems as though *Snowpiercer* is addressing the woes of capitalism and income inequality. To a certain extent, that's precisely what the movie is doing: the treatment of the different classes, even in a post-apocalyptic world, is plain for anyone to see. One group of people is isolated from tragedy and living in extreme luxury while the other is treated with absurd cruelty.

But the film does not simply portray an abusive upper-class and the innocent lower class. Most of the elites are needlessly cruel, they are simply isolated from the people at the back of the train and what it means to be there. Those that are underprivileged do not take particular issue with the luxuries of the elite once they discover it. It seems as though they are “less interested in changing the system than in changing their position within it.”<sup>77</sup> This dystopia necessitates an individualistic, survival-based mindset. Most people, even those who have experienced great hardship, have no desire to make life better for everyone else. The only thing people want is to improve their own situations—hardly an altruistic mindset. The institutions and

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<sup>77</sup> “Snowpiercer Director Bong Joon-Ho Talks About Heroes, Politics, and End Games.” n.d. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/interviews/a29260/bong-joon-ho-snowpiercer-interview/>.

inequality that existed before the disaster surely had their issues, but those institutions kept society grounded and functional. While imperfect, they tempered nastier tendencies of human nature and created a society that, at the very least, was habitable. Now the people on the train are living in a post-apocalyptic nightmare entirely engineered by human innovation. Climate change might have been bad before but now the earth is unlivable. The inequality that plagued people before was inadequate by now it's barbaric. Any advocacy for institutional upheaval or advancement is stunted by the film's portrayal of a future with careless human intervention. Any liberal message *Snowpiercer* tries to send is convoluted simply by the dystopian setting.

### **Connecting the Dots**

Humanity has a tendency to believe that it can discern the answer to all of its problems. Progressives want to create a better future and believe that new institutions, new innovations and new social norms are the ways to get there. Science fiction, however, rarely depicts a world in which humanity gets it right. Technological developments turn into tools with which people unintentionally orchestrate their own downfall. More often than not, societies that start with a clean slate become symbols of oppression or descend into anarchy rather than evolve into utopia. Time and time again, science fiction portrays futuristic societies that are significantly worse than anything that predates it. At the core of this recurrent societal devolution, is the liberal proclivity to restructure and advance. Oftentimes the thing that saves the day is the conservative mindset of preserving old ideals and institutions. As long as science fiction depicts a world in which the past is better than the future, it will always carry inherently conservative elements.

## Chapter 3: The Conventions of Comedy

### The Nature of Comedy

Unlike science fiction, comedy is not an inherently conservative genre; it does, however, reject certain liberal sensibilities regarding political correctness for a number of reasons. Part of nature of comedy is that it comes in many different forms and styles. There are comedic films, sitcoms, late-night shows, stand-up comedy and many other mediums in which comedy takes place. As Professor of Film Studies Frank Krutnik and Professor of Philosophy Stephen Neale put it, "Comedy is itself a varied phenomenon, both in the range of form it encompasses...and in the range of defining conventions it can involve: from the generation of laughter, to the presence of a happy ending, to the representation of everyday life."<sup>78</sup> In other words, comedy is not as formulaic of a genre as other modes of entertainment and, as such, has the freedom for one work of comedy to be drastically different from another. Much of today's comedy, under the subgenre of satire or parody, is explicitly political. *The Daily Show*, first headed by John Stewart and now Trevor Noah, is a newer left-leaning form of political comedy. It's a form that blends news, politics, and comedy together. All late-night show hosts discuss politics in their opening monologues and beyond. Other stand-up comedians or comedies try to be as

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<sup>78</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

apolitical as possible. There's no real rhyme or reason to the ways in which comedy is expressed—there is no rigid model to conform to.

However, there does seem to be one prominent convention that, despite the variations, unites all of comedy's forms—the nature of comedy is such that it is dependent upon violating social norms. Krutnik and Neale say that: "...comedy necessarily trades upon the surprising, the improper, the unlikely and the transgressive in order to make us laugh; it plays on deviations both from socio-cultural norms, and from the rules that govern other genres and aesthetic regimes."<sup>79</sup> There's the implication that comedy is very different from other forms of entertainment. To a certain extent, comedy has the license to transgress norms and be offensive in ways that other genres tend to avoid. In slapstick comedy, this means that more innocent norms of probability are violated, with the piano dropping from the sky or slipping on a banana. It violates a kind of physical norm—people get hurt in increasingly ridiculous ways but always turn out fine. It becomes more nuanced when people talk about violating actual culture norms, even as basic as decorum. This does not mean that comedy is inherently conservative, but it does mean that comedy inherently conflicts with liberal sensibilities about political correctness. Comedy, by nature, can never be politically correct because comedy has to push boundaries in order to be funny. Whether it's a dark comedy or a romantic comedy or stand-up, comedy depends on shocking people. People are not entertained by the mundane or the normal; this is true of any genre and it holds true for comedy. Comedians need to make cultural observations that others do not see and ultimately make fun of

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<sup>79</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

those observations. Some comedians might be more crass or harsher than other comedians, but they all violate social and cultural norms in whatever way possible. This often includes observations on sex, race, religion and just about anything else. There is no untouchable subject. There are no taboos in comedy because comedy specifically depends on pushing the boundaries and violating those taboos. As a result, comedy will always be a section of entertainment and of Hollywood that can never conform to a completely liberal cultural standard.

There are generally two types of decorum that most modes and genres in entertainment try to respect. This includes “respecting the norms embodied in ‘public opinion,’ and another which consists of respecting the rules of a genre or form.”<sup>80</sup> Comedy chooses to violate both of these norms. Choosing not to respect public opinion is difficult when ultimately trying to sell a commodity because public opinion can make a project lucrative or make it a total bust. Comedy, however, seems to have leeway to offend and make mistakes as it pertains to public opinion. Of course, this does not mean that comedy violates norms without commentary or backlash. The book *Popular Film and Television Comedy* states that “deviations from decorum, whether inside or outside this particular kind of comedy, can result not only in what a particular sector of society might regard as ‘bad taste,’ but in the transgression of more general social taboos.”<sup>81</sup> While comedy might sometimes or even regularly be viewed as something that is in poor taste, it is perhaps the only genre that is allowed to and even expected to be in poor taste.

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<sup>80</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

<sup>81</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

Major exceptions are often made for the acceptability of a joke, especially as it pertains to comedic film, “comedy is a form in which film-makers can get away with grotesque transgression that would not be permitted elsewhere in the mainstream.”<sup>82</sup> Strictly romantic or dramatic films that attempt to transgress cultural norms would likely be vilified by public opinion. On the other hand, comedies that are deemed as widely inoffensive or inappropriate are oftentimes some of the most popular ones; anyone that walks into an R-rated comedy, for example, expects to see something outrageous and offensive. People still go to see this type of content because, for many, offensive is funny. Transgressing norms involves transgressing public opinion, but if comedy succeeds in genuinely being funny than it's granted a significant amount of leeway.

As it pertains to respecting the rules of genre and form, this can really be seen within the diversity of comedy as a genre. Because there are no rules other than breaking the rules, the types of comedy that exist are expansive. “Norms, laws, and taboos of this kind are of course, usually codified in systems of censorship,”<sup>83</sup> but comedy works outside of the normal system of ‘censorship’ prevalent in Hollywood. It does not have to be sanitized in the way that massive blockbuster films are. This is also why comedies generally do not translate well to other countries, because in order for something to be funny it has to violate the norms of that culture. For Hollywood, that means there’s less of a focus on making comedies conform to a formulaic genre or film trope because successfully disseminating a comedy across cultures is virtually impossible. It creates this

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<sup>82</sup> King, Geoff. 2002. *Film Comedy*. Wallflower Press.

<sup>83</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

space within entertainment for comedy to have the freedom to explore the inappropriate and uncouth. Comedies can range all the way from stand-up to adult cartoons and the comedy itself can range from slapstick to dark comedy. A romance, for example, has to follow certain conventions and plotlines in order for it to be considered a romance. No matter how the director spins it, two people have to meet and fall in love. Unless it's a tragic romance, it has to have a happy ending. It's trapped within a specific set of requirements and within a very limited form. Comedy is not bound by anything except making people laugh and thus, comedy has no obligation to respect the rules of genre or form. In fact, if comedy is bound by any obligation it's precisely the obligation to violate the rules of genre and form.

In order to violate norms, comedians have to know what those norms are. As Professor of Film Studies Geoff King puts it, "To find transgressions comic, then, presumes a knowledge of the norm."<sup>84</sup> That means the foundations of comedy are often rooted in stereotypes because in many ways stereotypes are the norms. They are what people expect to be true or irregular, and then it becomes the job of comedy to achieve the irregular. Krutnik and Neale state that, "given the prevalence in any culture of models and stereotypes of people, professions, races, nations, and roles, it is hardly surprising that deviations from type are so frequently a source of comic improbability and, hence, comic surprise."<sup>85</sup> It is what comedians draw upon for inspiration because it is what comedians can see as the standard for society. Their material is only funny if it's based in

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<sup>84</sup> King, Geoff. 2002. *Film Comedy*. Wallflower Press.

<sup>85</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

a kind of tragic relatability, and therefore must depend on some kind of cultural norm.

Often comedians observe sex differences and turn that into humor and even racial or ethnic differences; all of these cases depend on stereotypes that are then used as comedic inspiration.

There's a common expression that comedians are supposed to punch up and never down, but the truth is that comedy punches in all directions. Comedy then becomes a kind of politically mitigating genre. If a comedian does a set on the evils of capitalism but the very next day does a set about the negative side of abortion, there's no real favor toward one ideology. Even political based comedy cannot completely support one specific political ideology; comedy cannot generally be as partisan or even as politicized as other forms of entertainment. It cannot only be considered a leftist institution because leftist values and tendencies are often in the crosshairs of comedians. Comedy is a type of free-for-all where anything is game, an attitude that plays a big role in the depoliticizing nature of the genre. On any given late night show the hosts will mock Donald Trump, but later in the same night they will go after Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, albeit less frequently. Comedians have to be opportunistic in order to stay relevant. Being funny trumps any other loyalties comedians might have, including ideologies or institutions.

While politically-correct backlashes have become more severe and more common, they do not necessarily have a negative effect on comedy. Comedy critic and *New York Times* writer, Jason Zinoman, described how the imposition of political correctness has actually benefited comedy, "the realm of the taboo has appeared to

expand. There are more lines to cross, more things you're not supposed to say."<sup>86</sup> For comedians that simply means there is more material to choose from; there are more norms to transgress, more ways for people to shock and to entertain. If political correctness is the new standard of public opinion, then that is simply the new standard comedians will work to violate. It's recalibration comedians make rather than a full stop because they work entirely based on their own perceptions of what line will or will not be crossed. Oftentimes, as Krutnik and Neale indicate, "works and comic performances establish their own norms, and their own particular balance between the ludicrous, the ridiculous, the grotesque, the monstrous, and the silly."<sup>87</sup> Conforming to a liberal institution would mean that comics have to temper their material when other people take issue with it for being too crude or grotesque or offensive, yet that goes against the comedic tradition. They are much better off remaining firmly apolitical politically balanced in their subject matter—it gives them the ability to be an equal opportunity offender. Public opinion might be harsh online but comedians can see real feedback in their shows. According to Zinoman, "anyone who sees enough stand-up knows the truth: transgression gets laughs,"<sup>88</sup> and comedians covet laughs over all else. For them, laughter is their livelihood and breaking norms is the way to get there. No jokes are off the table and no cultural norms are untouchable, people just have to be willing to receive the

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<sup>86</sup> Zinoman, Jason. 2017. "Political Correctness Isn't Ruining Comedy. It's Helping." *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/arts/television/political-correctness-isnt-ruining-comedy-its-helping.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Krutnik, Frank and Steve Neale. 2006. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131978>.

<sup>88</sup> Zinoman, Jason. 2017. "Political Correctness Isn't Ruining Comedy. It's Helping." *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/arts/television/political-correctness-isnt-ruining-comedy-its-helping.html>.

backlash. Overall, because the nature of comedy depends on violating norms, it will always reject liberal sensibilities regarding political correctness; therefore, it can never conform to the inherent liberalism that is so often attributed to Hollywood as an institution.

### **Transgressing Norms in *Tropic Thunder***

*Tropic Thunder* might be the best example of a film that violates every norm a person could imagine, yet became widely popular and critically acclaimed. For all intents and purposes, it's a film that would have succumbed to political correctness had it not been a comedy, or a funny comedy at that. The film was released in 2008 with an all-star comedy cast of Ben Stiller, Robert Downey Jr., Jack Black, Tom Cruise, Matthew McConaughey, Bill Hader, and many more. The movie follows Tugg Speedman (Ben Stiller), a once popular action star whose career and popularity has long deteriorated. In order to make a comeback, he joins the cast of a Vietnam war film called 'Tropic Thunder.' He's joined by multiple Oscar-winner Kirk Lazarus (Robert Downey Jr.), and a host of other actors who travel to Vietnam to film the movie. The problems come when the actors realize they have actually been dropped in the middle of a real war-zone. The rest of the movie follows the crew as they try to escape Vietnam, continuously making offensive jokes as they navigate their way through danger. If it sounds far-fetched, that's because it is. The film is a parody within a parody—it never takes itself too seriously, every character is ridiculous and everything that happens is outrageous.

Aside from it being an outrageous comedy, there are a few (or many) aspects of the film that theoretically should have been condemned by the liberal institution of Hollywood. *Tropic Thunder* takes any and all social norms and completely throws them

out the window. Perhaps the biggest example is the character of Kirk Lazarus. In the film, he's a white Australian man with bleach blonde hair and blue eyes. He's a dramatized Daniel Day-Lewis, known for his intense method acting but winning five Oscars in the process. Except in *Tropic Thunder*, Kirk Lazarus has undergone skin darkening to convincingly play a black man. In other words, Robert Downey Jr. dons full blackface. His skin is fully darkened, he has traditionally black hair and puts on a stereotypically black voice. Throughout the course of the film the actor plays up different stereotypes, even going as far to mention his love of crawfish and collard greens; despite the constant reminder of these stereotypes, he still manages to avoid becoming a caricature.<sup>89</sup> It's a balancing act where race and racial stereotypes are at the forefront, but the overall message is a commentary on the ridiculousness of the person that tries to employ those methods. Downey said this character is different because "it's entertainment that's set up by people who are high-minded enough to be racist or offensive," and that the role satirizes the idea of actors' narcissism rather than any harmful racial stereotypes.<sup>90</sup>

That seems to be the sentiment among other entertainment news outlets on why this version of blackface seemed to slip by without much complaint. It's more about a white actor who's so prideful that he thinks he can actually convincingly play a black man,<sup>91</sup> and in doing so, avoids making any actual implications about black people. Still, it

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<sup>89</sup> Garrett, Stephen. 2008. "Why Robert Downey Jr. Can Get Away with Blackface." *Esquire*. August 12, 2008. <https://www.esquire.com/features/the-screen/tropic-thunder-0808>.

<sup>90</sup> *Reuters*. 2008. "Robert Downey Jr.'s Risky Role in 'Tropic Thunder,'" August 11, 2008. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-blackface-idUSN1138604020080811>.

<sup>91</sup> "'Tropic Thunder' Rewatched and Reconsidered, 10 Years Later." n.d. EW.Com. Accessed April 7, 2019. <https://ew.com/movies/2018/08/15/tropic-thunder-10th-anniversary/>.

seems as though a Hollywood film released post-2000 that does, regardless of context, have a white actor portray a black one would have been met with a little more backlash. By 2008, this is an issue that liberal Hollywood should have already been wary of promoting so fervently. Rather than rejecting the film or his character, however, Robert Downey Jr. was nominated for a best-supporting actor Oscar; rather than backlash he received accolades. The film survived the wrath of public opinion and was lauded by the traditionally liberal academy. Fellow comedian and friend Jamie Foxx addressed Downey's role in *Tropic Thunder* in 2017 on the *Joe Rogan Show*, saying that, "people have to understand where it comes from... You gotta give us room." He continued, saying Downey was allowed to do that role because there was no harmful intent and even called the role legendary. Considering Downey's now venerated status as an actor, it seems as though the rest of the Hollywood institution agreed with that sentiment. This is an example of a "grotesque transgression" of social norms that would not be acceptable in any other situation. There would be no other circumstance outside of the realm of comedy that would allow such a thing to happen. Yet because it's a comedy, Downey was given the room to blow past any acceptable boundary and create a character that genuinely made people laugh. This film might meet more contention in 2019, but the fact remains that the blackface was allowed to happen only because it was a comedy and a comedy is meant to transgress norms.

This is not the only instance in *Tropic Thunder* in which the actors and the plot abandoned any pretense of respecting cultural expectations or constraints. The main character, Tugg Speedman (Ben Stiller), starts the film as someone whose career is in shambles after being mocked and ridiculed in his one attempt at a "serious" role. This

serious role was a character called "Simple Jack," a severely disabled character. Stiller speaks with what some would consider a stereotypically offensive, heavy speech impediment. He has prominent buck teeth and a bowl haircut complete with straw-like hair. Downey's character later explains to Speedman that "you can never go full retard." The character of Simple Jack becomes important toward the end of the film because it turns out the Vietnamese villagers they have been captured by love and venerate that film. Stiller's character is consequently treated as a hero. Just like Downey's venture in blackface, Stiller's portrayal as a disabled person pulled no punches. There is no attempt to respect any sort of decorum or any sort of rhetoric surrounding disabled people. This aspect of the film actually did draw criticism and significantly more criticism than Robert Downey Jr. received.

Before the film was even released it came under fire from a coalition of twenty-two groups, including the Special Olympics and the National Down Syndrome Congress.<sup>92</sup> The groups made an effort to ban the film, largely because of repeated use of the word retard and because of a seemingly stereotypical portrayal of a disabled person on the part of Stiller.<sup>93</sup> A Special Olympics chairman said the film reinforced the sentiment that "this population remains the defenseless butt of jokes throughout media" and that it was time to end it.<sup>94</sup> Clearly, the backlash is an indication that *Tropic Thunder* successfully transgressed whatever boundary was considered acceptable in regards to the portrayal of disabled people in Hollywood films. Surely, the portrayal went farther in

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<sup>92</sup> "Stiller's 'Thunder' Under Fire From Disability Groups." 2008. ABC News. August 18, 2008. <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=5560702&page=1>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> "Stiller's 'Thunder' Under Fire From Disability Groups." 2008. ABC News. August 18, 2008. <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=5560702&page=1>

emphasizing the disability than any of the more palatable depictions of disability in dramas—films like *Rain Men* or *Forrest Gump*, for example. The backlash, however, did not seem to have much tangible impact on the release of the film or any subsequent acclaim the film received. Similar reasoning to the blackface was given for why Stiller’s turn as a severely disabled character has been largely accepted. The point of the character was supposedly to mock how Hollywood only sees highly functional disabled people as a palatable story. Again the ire was pointed toward the Hollywood institution itself. A disabled writer from Forbes described the portrayal as ‘sly’ and one that acknowledges the rigid definitions of disability in Hollywood.<sup>95</sup> By going all out with the character, Stiller is supposedly revealing that “these movies are conceived with an idea of disability yet never worked on by people with disabilities.”<sup>96</sup> That’s a very academic explanation for why Simple Jack is different from a solely offensive portrayal of a heavily disabled person. That doesn’t negate the fact, however, that Simple Jack is a character that the film portrays and describes as retarded. The point of the Simple Jack character is not to genuinely display the plight of disabled people, it’s to get laughs by portraying a character so blatantly offensive people aren’t sure what to do other than laugh. *Tropic Thunder* knows that the portrayal of Simple Jack is offensive and it utilizes that knowledge to make people laugh. It’s supposed to be shocking and off-putting. It pushes the boundaries

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<sup>95</sup> Lopez, Kristen. n.d. “Ten Years Of Missing The Point of ‘Tropic Thunder’s’ Thoughts On Mental Disability.” Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenlopez/2018/11/02/ten-years-of-missing-the-point-of-tropic-thunders-thoughts-on-mental-disability/>.

<sup>96</sup> Lopez, Kristen. n.d. “Ten Years Of Missing The Point of ‘Tropic Thunder’s’ Thoughts On Mental Disability.” Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenlopez/2018/11/02/ten-years-of-missing-the-point-of-tropic-thunders-thoughts-on-mental-disability/>.

so far past the norm that it makes people uncomfortable. Regardless of the larger commentary surrounding the character, the ultimate purpose is to make people laugh by pushing the boundaries. There's a reason why the dramatic turns of *Rain Man* and *Forrest Gump* have to tone down their portrayal—only comedy can take such liberties and make such transgressions and still be accepted.

Those are perhaps the two most obvious and most offensive ways in which *Tropic Thunder* violates social norms, but it's possible to list a number of other ways that film crosses the so-called socially acceptable line. There's an incredible amount of violence used to mock war injuries and war itself. In one sequence a person's head is completely blown off—Stiller's character, not believing the situation, picks it up and pretends to eat it. It is the definition of employing grotesque comedy. There's the ridicule of drug addiction and there's the ridicule of shallow fame. The Vietnamese villagers are pretty much solely portrayed as selfish drug dealers. The entirety of jokes surrounding Jack Black's character have to do with him being overweight. *Tropic Thunder* truly embraces the mentality that anything is fair game. There are no specific events or characters in the film that express explicitly conservative views, but all of the aforementioned issues do present a film that is in direct conflict with the idea of liberal political correctness. It's a very depoliticized film in that way. More than anything the film attacks and mocks the institution of Hollywood itself, both in its characters and in the plot. There's no political alliance to be found in this film and the supposed liberal institution to which it belongs.

### **Key and Peele**

Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele have made a career out of boundary-pushing comedy and social commentary in their self-titled series *Key & Peele*. The show

itself is an amalgamation of different styles and formats, but it's mainly comprised of pre-taped comedy sketches. And while plenty of their skits make left-leaning social commentary, many cross the bounds of what is usually accepted as politically correct. They play up stereotypes, as comedy often does, to overdramatized and outrageous lengths; stereotypes of black people, of gay people and even of Muslim people are common fodder for jokes (the rest of the time jokes are usually aimed at Caucasian people). Unlike some of the other works mentioned in this chapter, *Key & Peele* was met with very little backlash and plenty of critical acclaim. Fifty-five episodes aired from 2012-2015 on Comedy Central, garnering upwards of 50 award nominations and two Primetime Emmys. Perhaps Key and Peele have escaped harsh backlash because many skits are making social commentary from a leftists perspective, but in a time when celebrities' careers can be torpedoed for the slightest misstep it seems more likely they're granted leeway because of the conventions of comedy.

#### *Auction Block*

One of the more controversial topics *Key & Peele* ever dealt with was in the sketch "Auction Block," which parodies a slave auction. In the sketch, Key and Peele play two disgruntled slaves about to be sold, and both are upset because no one wants to buy them. Egos bruised, they start to critique the other slaves in order to feel better. To them, it's understandable when a larger, athletic looking slave is sold before him and even an older slave, but when the next person up is sold quickly they feel too slighted to remain quiet. "Look at him! What could he pick? A cotton plant is like...this tall!" Ironically, the slave owner takes offense to this stating that, "I will not have my reputation tainted sellin' superficial bigoted slaves." Everyone agrees, and the auction

ends with Key and Peele still espousing why they would be the perfect slaves. In an interview Key called the skit "a treatise on vanity and the framework happens to be slavery."<sup>97</sup> It does play like a commentary on vanity, but one would guess that using slavery as the framework would at least raise some eyebrows. Explicit slavery is very rarely used in a comedic context and if it is used, it's usually a brief one-liner; Key and Peele go all out, from standing shirtless on a literal auction block, to the white man with the whip to jokes about picking cotton. They destroy any sense of decorum and go straight for the taboo. The sketch is not really about race, but creating a comedy skit out of a slave auction is taboo enough. Key and Peele are allowed to play with such a forbidden framework only because they come at it with a comedic lens.

### *Das Negroes*

And if making a sketch about slavery wasn't daring enough, Key and Peele also made a sketch about Nazi Germany. A Nazi shows up hunting for "two negroes that escaped." Key and Peele answer the door in whiteface, posing as Germans. From there the skit devolves into the Nazi employing increasingly ridiculous ways to discern "real negroes." These scientific tactics include measuring the size of their heads, tempting them with beets, which are apparently irresistible to black people, and finally pulling out a cat toy. Key and Peele unsurprisingly resist the ridiculous tactics and the Nazi finally believes that they are white. After the Nazi leaves, however, Peele excitedly exclaims "he left the cat toy" while playing with it on the couch. The skit thrives on absurdity from start to finish. At first, it seems like it's a commentary on the Nazi's warped take on

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<sup>97</sup> "Dissecting 'Key & Peele.'" n.d. EW.Com. <https://ew.com/article/2012/10/26/dissecting-key-peeel/>.

stereotyping and eugenics, but it all gets turned on its head again when the Nazi's bizarre tactics work. There have been comedies and parodies about World War II, but usually those films strive for some sort of serious commentary. *Das Negroes* is simply meant to make people laugh. Key and Peele pick Nazi Germany as the setting for the skit because it's offensive, ludicrous and shocking—the offensive setting is precisely what they rely on to make this skit funny.

*East/West College Bowl and Substitute Teacher*

Both of these skits play with stereotypes regarding African American names. “East/West College Bowl” is a spoof on when football players list their names and schools before a game. The entirety of the skit is simply Key and Peele listing names as they pretend to be different players; the comedic element comes as each name gets progressively more ridiculous. It starts normally with D'Marcus Williams but progresses to bizarre names such as Xmus Jaxon Flaxon-Waxon and Javaris Jamar Javarison-Lamar. The skit ends with the only white player in the lineup who identifies himself as Dan Smith from BYU. If the racial component was not clear by that point the introduction of the sole white players confirms it. Key and Peele are clearly playing off stereotypes about African American names by exaggerating the names to a ridiculous extent. And this isn't the first time Key and Peele's skits have pointed to a cultural and stereotypical difference in names between white and black people in America. The "Substitute Teacher" skit follows an inner-city teacher named Mr. Darby as he substitutes for a class comprised entirely of white kids. Throughout the skit, Mr. Darby is taking roll but is unable to say the kids name correctly and becomes increasingly frustrated as kids fail to respond. His strange pronunciation of supposedly obvious, stereotypically white names becomes the

focus of this skit. He calls the name Jacqueline, for example, but pronounces it Jay Quellin. Again we see Key and Peele poking fun at the general eccentricity of African American names versus seemingly bland Caucasian names. These are, of course, sweeping generalizations as the skits are predicated on exaggerated stereotypes, but the fact remains Key and Peele venture into racially charged territory with both. These two sketches also remain among their most popular, garnering upwards of 50 million and 165 million views on YouTube respectively.

### *Karim and Jahar*

This is a skit that Key and Peele did actually receive some backlash for, although it had little impact on their careers or even on these characters. It centers on two Middle-Eastern men, Karim and Jahar, who spend their time standing on the side of the street ogling and cat-calling women. Armed with stereotypical accents and leers to boot, they spend the skit over sexualizing everything. A woman walks by wearing a niqab (her entire body is covered except for her eyes), but that doesn't stop Karim and Jahar from making it sexual. Karim mentions that he caught a glimpse of her ankles and Jahar responds "You saw ankle ball? You got some ankle cleavage, you dirty devil." To which they make a bunch of excited and lewd gestures toward each other. The woman walks by again, and this time Karim and Jahar comment on the bridge of her nose. This cycle happens one more time, now with the woman entirely covering her face. They pause for a moment until Jahar eventually responds that there's "Not a lot to go on there...good height?" This skit has the potential to offend on multiple layers. First of all, it's a fairly stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern men as lecherous. All they do the entire skit is make crass comments about women. Additionally, there is a clear commentary on

Muslim women covering up their body; the absurdity of Karim and Jahar finding a woman's ankles or height attractive seems to imply that Muslim women covering up their modesty to such a drastic extent is unnecessary. These characters have been met with some criticism for stereotyping Muslim men and women, but for the most part, these characters are simply viewed as another funny skit. Even with criticism, Key and Peele have reprised their Karim and Jahar characters multiple times. It's the ultimate example of how Key and Peele violate the rules of decorum in order to create their content; this time it means playing up stereotypes to an offensive extent and running with it. Both Key and Peele have defended their right to make fun of any culture: "That's when we worry that we're being insensitive—that we're being mean. But ask yourself again what's worse: making fun of people or assuming that they're too weak to take it?"<sup>98</sup> Even though both are outspokenly liberal, Key and Peele embody the spirit of laughing at everyone and every group, without distinction. While they might not directly address it, they clearly do not abide by the liberal model of political correctness or the idea that you can only punch up. If they did then the aforementioned skits would never have been made. This mindset has had little negative impact on them. In 2019, both Key and Peele remain popular, respected and relevant comedians.

### **South Park Takes on Political Correctness**

*South Park* is a massive cultural staple in American television; the show started airing in 1997 and is currently airing its 22nd season. Created by Trey Parker and Matt

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<sup>98</sup> "Key and Peele Encourage 'Making Fun' of All Cultures for a Better Society." n.d. BET.Com. <https://www.bet.com/news/national/2014/03/17/key-peeel-encourage-making-fun-of-all-cultures-for-a-better-society.html?cid=facebook>.

Stone, the animated series follows fourth graders Kenny, Cartman, Stan and Kyle as they get into trouble in their Colorado town. Sometimes the show cares about continuity and sometimes the episodes are complete one-offs, but over the past two decades, the show consistently uses current events as fodder for its jokes and derision. The show is known for being so unapologetically offensive that there are multiple compilations of *South Park's* most offensive moments. The show has mocked everything from white nationalism to school shootings, to child molestation within the Catholic church, to Donald Trump to Caitlyn Jenner. There is truly nothing off limits to the *South Park* creators.

The show has faced its fair share of controversy and backlash over the years but has always survived any negative reception it has received. Rather than avoiding controversy, the show seems to directly seek it out. However multiple publications, including the Washington Post, have lauded the series as one of the most balanced satires on air; its equal opportunity attitude has meant that both liberals and conservatives find themselves satiated by the raunchy humor: As entertainment contributor, Joshua Axelrod puts it, "*South Park* has never wavered in its efforts to be an equal opportunity offender to everyone deserving of criticism. It's the rare piece of political satire that has consistently been able to see the bigger picture skewering both sides of the aisle and everyone in-between."<sup>99</sup> The show goes after liberal figures like Hillary Clinton with as much passion as it satirizes Donald Trump, and that just scratches the surface. The

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<sup>99</sup> Joshua Axelrod 2018. "South Park Is Still Our Most Consistently Fair Political Satire." *FanSided*. August 13, 2018. <https://fansided.com/2018/08/13/south-park-still-our-most-consistently-fair-political-satire/>.

episode “Where My Country Gone?” puts a funny twist on Donald Trump’s campaign against illegal immigrants; a character named Mr. Garrison wants to put a border between the United States and Canada because he believes Canadian immigrants are sneaking across the border and committing crimes. We ultimately find out that Canada beat the U.S. to it, and built a wall to keep Americans out of Canada. Here we see *South Park* identifying the stereotype of illegal immigrants and flipping it on its head. Liberals tend to love episodes like this when the show makes a point of mocking conservative figures and ideas. It’s also a favorite of liberals when the show targets alt-right figures like white nationalists and regular conservative institutions such as Catholicism. Conservatives laud the show because of the intense commitment to free speech (and to offense).

Yet the nineteenth season, which aired in 2015, seemed particularly keen on tearing down the culture of political correctness. At the start of the season, the PC Principal is introduced as a new major character and the school’s new principal after Principal Victoria is hired for using the phrase “Hot Cosby” to talk about rape. As Comedy Central describes it, PC Principal is there to help the boys “confront the damage they’ve done through their history of racism and unconscious bias.”<sup>100</sup> If viewers had expected that to be a serious synopsis from Comedy Central then they got an unpleasant surprise going into the season. The very first episode is called “Stunning and Brave,” and deals with the outrage culture of the politically correct, particularly as it pertains to the transition of Caitlyn Jenner. The PC Principal is pretty militant in how he tries to enforce this new culture of sensitivity—he’s supported by an army of white frat bros who use

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<sup>100</sup> Pedersen, Erik, and Erik Pedersen. 2015. “‘South Park’ Season 19 Premiere Has Caitlyn Jenner Case In Its Sights.” *Deadline* (blog). September 14, 2015. <https://deadline.com/2015/09/south-park-caitlyn-jenner-season-premiere-stunning-and-brave-1201526625/>.

violence and intimidation to get people to be respectful. Together they enforce the idea that Jenner is stunning and brave and anyone who thinks otherwise must be dealt with. Kyle is immediately given detention for saying that Caitlyn Jenner is not a hero, and when his father refers to Caitlyn as Bruce they are both thrown out. From this point on Kyle is continuously harassed by the politically correct mob. The entire episode parodies the idea of PC culture and the mob mentality that tends to follow it. *South Park* does not fly under the radar of the politically correct culture, it attacks it head-on.

This war on political correctness is obvious in one of the main subplots of the season. The episode follows PC Principal and Vice Principal Strong Woman as they try to deal with Strong Woman's pregnancy. It becomes an issue because they are concerned her pregnancy is going to make people assume gender roles; ultimately she gives birth to five PC babies that cry when they get offended.<sup>101</sup> It's perhaps one of the bluntest forms of ridicule that any show on television has thrown at the idea of political correctness. This plotline also reveals a conservative idea about gender roles—the show makes fun of the liberal ideology that it's offensive to assume gender roles. Yet in true comedic form, they dramatize the issue to such an extent that it clearly seems ridiculous. The characters' fervent commitment to political correctness highlights some of the movement's key hypocrisies. *South Park* gets away with the mockery surrounding gender roles and of overall political correctness because it does it in such an absurd way. It deflects some of the ire this commentary would normally create because people find it funny, and perhaps

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<sup>101</sup> Edwards, Chris. 2018. "Post-Outrage TV: How South Park Is Surviving the Era of Controversy." *The Guardian*, November 20, 2018, sec. Television & radio. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/nov/20/post-outrage-tv-how-south-park-is-surviving-the-era-of-controversy>.

even partially because it's animated. Nevertheless, the show's relentless and dirty satirization of any current event or person creates an inherently apolitical show that addresses inherently political issues. It certainly does not spare liberal ideology or institutions.

An episode called "Naughty Ninjas" addresses the anti-police sentiment that has grown in American in recent years. As this is still part of the nineteenth season, the episode's campaign against police is simply seen as the town becoming more progressive. After officer Barbrady responds to a call and mistakenly shoots a Latino kindergartner he is fired from the police force; consequently, the South Park town decides to rid itself of all police. While all of this is happening a preposterous ISIS plot to harm the town is brewing. In one particular scene, officer Barbrady enters a crowded bar. A townspeople immediately tells him that "We don't take kindly to folks who impose their authority on the underprivileged." Barbrady, frustrated and sad responds, "Now look, not all cops are racist, trigger-happy assholes." The man snarks back, "Really? I'll bet you don't even know what farm-to-table means." The rest of the bar cheers as Brady leaves, commenting on how they don't need the police now that they have a Whole Foods. Eventually the townspeople reinstate Barbrady to address they growing ISIS threat but immediately fire him again after it's over. The entire exchange of dialogue is ludicrous. But the show is over-inflating the elitist concerns of the progressive townspeople in order to make a point—just as the show was making a point about the racism of Trump's immigration rhetoric, it's now making a point about the often unfounded or unfair anti-cop rhetoric that police might endure in today's climate. The fleetingly contrite townspeople realize the importance of the police toward the end of the episode (only to forget it again). This

topic has been written about seriously in academia and other modes of entertainment, but it's often meant with claims of racism or a failure to see racist institutions within the legal system. *South Park*, of all things, was able to engage in a serious conversation about the increasingly antagonist climate police face and the potential dangers that holds.

None of these episodes or plots have caused the show to be canceled. None of them have caused the series to lose viewers. On the contrary, the show is one of the longest running series on television and has received acclaim and support from media on both sides of the political aisle. The show has been nominated for a Primetime Emmy almost every year it has been on the air, except for 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2012.<sup>102</sup> Out of the remaining seventeen nominations, it has won five times.<sup>103</sup> Even though the aforementioned episodes directly conflict with much of the socially and politically acceptable rhetoric surrounding Hollywood, the Hollywood institution still give the show acclaim. *South Park* stays true to comedic form by utilizing the unbelievably improper and the transgressive to make people laugh. The show seeks out the most recent social taboo and turns it into its next episode. Whether it be violence, profanity, sex, racism or any other potentially offensive issue, *South Park* addresses it head-on with humor. There's no interest in being regulated by the sensibilities of the left or of anyone. And it's largely given the space to do so, even in today's climate, because of its comedic nature.

### **Bill Maher**

Bill Maher is an important figure to address, as a late night talk show host, comedian, political satirist, and probably as the most controversial example used in this

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<sup>102</sup> *South Park* - IMDb. n.d. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121955/awards>.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

chapter. He is an outspoken member of the Democratic party and often expresses his personal beliefs on his HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*. He's been in the comedy game for four decades and a figure in late-night for around two decades. Over the course of his career, he's stirred up plenty of controversies. Initially, Maher hosted a show called *Politically Incorrect* that ran from 1993-2002; it was canceled when Maher commented on 9/11, a week after the incident. He essentially argued that the terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center were brave, "We have been cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."<sup>104</sup> It might have been one of the few times in which a comedian went too far—the backlash he received in the wake of his comments ultimately led to ABC canceling the show. There might be a few reasons for why this specific instance was not given comedic leeway. Aside from the obvious point of making the comment a week after thousands of Americans had died, this segment of the show, and the comment in particular, was not meant to be funny. Maher made the remark while interviewing a far-right political commentator named Dinesh D'Souza.<sup>105</sup> It was a discussion between two proactive political commentators, rather than an exchange of jokes between two comedians. It did not make people laugh and it did not have the intent to make people laugh. He was not protected by the network either. The show had more of a defense for controversy when it was on Comedy Central, but after it moved to ABC the network had no interest in protecting comedic offense. All of these factors might help to

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<sup>104</sup> Carter, Bill. 2002. "ABC to End 'Politically Incorrect.'" *The New York Times*, May 14, 2002, sec. Business Day. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/14/business/abc-to-end-politically-incorrect.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

explain why Maher, traditionally thought of as a comedian, was not granted the typical comedic leeway that the aforementioned shows received.

Yet even this controversy and subsequent cancellation did not permanently damage his career. Not long after *Politically Incorrect* went off the air, Maher was courted by HBO to host another late-night show deemed *Real Time with Bill Maher*.<sup>106</sup> That show is currently on its seventeenth season and has been renewed through 2020.<sup>107</sup> Maher's new show was a similar format to his previous show, in that he mixed skits and monologues with panel debates or interviews with political figures and commentators. One might think that the longevity of Maher's second late-night show would mean that Maher started to curtail some of his more offensive commentary. On the contrary, Maher has remained committed to free speech, usually by saying whatever he wants; in fact, as the name his first show indicates, Maher has made a career by pushing the boundaries and ignoring the constraints of political correctness. He has not been shy when it comes to making crass sexual jokes. When talking about potential collusion between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin after Russia meddled in the 2016 election, Maher remarked, "Forget collusion, I want to know if there's penetration." Some thought the joke went too far, although most of Maher's liberal audience responded well to it. Maher was met with a less pleasant reaction when mocked Hillary Clinton for crying during the 2008 election, joking that all women cry to win arguments.<sup>108</sup> Many viewed the comment as sexist. The

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<sup>106</sup> *Real Time with Bill Maher*. N.d. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0350448/>.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Hornshaw, Phil, and Provided By. 2017. "11 Times Bill Maher's Politically Incorrect Comments Sparked Outrage (Photos)." SFGate. June 3, 2017. <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/the-wrap/article/11-Times-Bill-Maher-s-Politically-Incorrect-11193673.php>.

list of comments that have sparked outrage on both sides of the aisle goes on and on—much like *South Park*, there are countless articles compiling Maher's most inflammatory comments over the span of his career. Maher has only apologized a small number of times—his comments regarding 9/11 and much more recently when he made a joke using the n-word live on air. The latter instance, although removed from reruns by HBO, had no significant impact on his career. *Real Time* remains a popular weekly staple on the network.

And even though Maher has consistently faced backlash, he's never strayed from his commitment to be politically incorrect. In a 2018 interview with Entertainment Weekly, he said that "the enemy of good comedy and of truth very often, is political correctness." He continued by reaffirming that, "nobody is off limits and everybody has to understand that no jokes are completely fair. If they were completely fair, they wouldn't be jokes."<sup>109</sup> In the same article, he also talks about the importance of calling out people in the Democratic Party, his party, when they are wrong. His willingness and dedication to "good comedy," and what he deems "the truth" make his work more politically fair than one might think. He has somehow remained one of the most outspoken celebrity democrats while consistently rejecting many of the new, more intense, developments of the democratic party. He does differ from his fellow late-night comedians in that respect, or at least Maher thinks so. Maher mentions how the number one priority of other talk shows is to avoid upsetting the audience; Maher condemns that mindset, "That's just not

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<sup>109</sup> "Bill Maher Q&A: HBO Host on Trump, Roseanne, Chris Hardwick, Jordan Peterson, More." n.d. EW.Com. <https://ew.com/tv/2018/06/29/bill-maher-interview/>.

interesting to me...And it doesn't have a hell of a lot of integrity, I don't think, either."<sup>110</sup> Even though he's a liberal, his opinions on comedy have isolated him from his own peers. Despite the ambiguous political camp Maher now occupies, and despite the various objections to his specific brand of provocative humor, he continues to be a successful comedic figure in American entertainment. Whether or not an individual finds Maher's comedy funny or inappropriate is unimportant—he works within the realm of comedy and is granted massive leeway to cross lines, even what might be considered hard cultural lines. The fact that his show is still on the air is proof of that. Celebrities are consistently vindicated for far less offensive commentary than Maher makes on a regular basis. Maher does not care for decorum, nor does he think that any group of people get a pass from his satire. The reason he's been allowed to persist in doing so is because he is protected by the conventions of comedy. In some ways, Maher's offensiveness has become a partisan issue which ultimately makes his comedy, and the people the target of his jokes, apolitical. Maher is important because he's not just violating norms, he's important because political correctness itself is the butt of the joke.

### **Conclusion**

All of the aforementioned examples are connected by the offensive nature of their comedy and, to a certain extent, offensive is the nature of comedy. More importantly, all of the above examples have transgressed cultural norms to the extreme. They blow past the line of cultural acceptance in order to make people laugh. And while all of them have met their fair share of backlash, all of them are either still successfully running or were a

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<sup>110</sup> Bradley, Laura. n.d. "Bill Maher Is Sure He Has the Funniest Show in Late Night." HWD. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/07/bill-maher-comedy-special-hbo-real-time-liberal>.

massive success at the time of release. All of them have persisted through the era of extreme political correctness. *South Park* and *Bill Maher*, in particular, both existed before political correctness truly became a mainstream issue but have remained popular shows without toning down their shock value or inappropriate commentary. Although political correctness might have curtailed some comedy, it has helped other types of comedy flourish. Political correctness simply means that there are now more lines for comedians to transgress than ever before, comedians just have to be willing to receive the backlash that has always come with pushing the boundaries. Comedy is continuously granted permission to offend, precisely because making people uncomfortable and violating cultural norms is the nature of comedy. Consequently, comedy is something of a partisan issue—it is routinely cited as the most popular genre by both Democrats and Republicans,<sup>111</sup> and that's largely because it offends in all directions.

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<sup>111</sup> “Democrats vs. Republicans: Stars They Won’t Pay to See; Movies They Hate and Love (Poll).” n.d. The Hollywood Reporter. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/politics-box-office-democrats-republicans-244741>.

## **Chapter 4: Realism and Artistic Integrity**

### **The Importance Of Style**

Finally, it's important to touch upon the necessity of style and, in particular, the use of realism in modern Hollywood. Realism is a popular style of filmmaking in which artists focus on portraying stories with as much authenticity as possible. Content that follows the realism style is content that artists often make for the sake of art and the hope of critical acclaim. This is so because realism focuses on the lives of real people and realistic stories, conveyed in accurate and believable ways. Actors try to embody their characters with as much sincerity as possible, the cinematography is often such that every visual is naturalistic and recognizable and the stories are those based in real human struggles. In other words, it's an attempt by cinema to represent real life as accurately as possible. This style carries implications for the political messages of its content. Realism necessitates that people pull away from their own ideological abstractions and personal politics in order to tell these stories with integrity; this, in turn, creates space for conservative messages within entertainment because the artists are beholden to the inclinations of their characters and their stories. But before diving into the practical ways conservatism manifests itself in realism, it's important to understand what the shift to realism actually looked like in Hollywood.

## The New Hollywood

Hollywood and its filmmaking style have undergone various changes and iterations since its conception in 1919. One of the most influential changes in American cinematic history was the New Hollywood Era, also known as modernist cinema, which began in 1967 and continued throughout the 1970s.<sup>112</sup> This era pushed modern day cinema toward a much more realistic style than classic Hollywood cinema ever attempted to portray. *Bonnie and Clyde*, released in 1967, is largely considered to be the catalyst for the New Hollywood era. Reviews for the film were mixed—older critics disparaged the film but the younger generation cited the film as a period for change;<sup>113</sup> however, both agreed that *Bonnie and Clyde* marked a change in Hollywood. The film presented a new cinematic style and emphasized a more realistic subject matter than was the norm for Hollywood. It was described as utilizing a "new freedom and widespread experimentation"<sup>114</sup> previously absent from studio-funded films. The New Hollywood Era, although divisive at the time, is now considered to be a golden age for Hollywood, in which innovative young directors changed cinema.<sup>115</sup>

In some ways, The New Hollywood cinema is difficult to pin down. Before 1967 Hollywood cinema was fairly homogeneous in its restraint and thematic intent, but one of the defining characteristics of this new era is that the films were more diverse and,

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<sup>112</sup> Krämer, Peter. 2006. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

consequently, harder to pin down.<sup>116</sup> Other films considered to be New Hollywood cinema include *The Graduate*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Godfather*, and even *Rocky*.<sup>117</sup> Even within the few mentioned there are a number of different genres such as Western, gangster and even a sports film. These films do, however, have some unifying factors: “The presence of several surprise hits is one of the distinctive features of New Hollywood...”<sup>118</sup> The era before was dominated by studios that only funded certified blockbusters; in particular, this meant musicals, epics and adventure films.<sup>119</sup> Anything that did not have mass appeal or top star billing was ignored for something that carried more earning potential. This model became more unsustainable in the face of declining ticket sales and, as a result, studios started to open the door for various types of filmmaking at various price points. New Hollywood cinema meant the absence of epics and musicals and other traditionally bankable films from the highest-earning film's list. People were surprised to see New Hollywood films on blockbuster lists precisely because those films were not created in the same way that blockbusters were created, nor with the same intent to garner the widest possible appeal. Rather than becoming successful by adhering to a specific formula, the films of the '60s and '70s had success unexpectedly and unpredictably attracted massive audiences.

Another uniting factor of New Hollywood cinema is that the majority of films were set in 1960s and 1970s America.<sup>120</sup> Before movies were often set in luxurious settings, many

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<sup>116</sup> Krämer, Peter. 2006. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>117</sup> Krämer, Peter. 2006. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

even staged to look like European countries such as France or other parts of the world. In other words, the movies getting released in the '60s and '70s were movies about present-day America. A lot of realism elements start to come into play simply because of the setting. People started writing and producing films about what they knew and the films inevitably became commentary about America and its various issues. As a result, New Hollywood films consistently and seriously engaged with societal issues in America, such as class and racial differences. Movies in classical Hollywood often focused on the lives of the upper class, but as films started to focus on class and race issues cinema shifted its focus. Films that were given artistic and critical consideration shifted toward realistic elements of American life such as poverty and violence.

Moreover, New Hollywood Cinema flourished just as the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as Hay's code, was lifted in 1968.<sup>121</sup> The code, which was enforced between 1934 and 1968, was established in order to make sure cinema was not “lowering the moral standards of those who see it.”<sup>122</sup> Essentially, it was supposed to serve as a moral guideline for filmmakers to follow. The code explicitly prohibited the portrayal of miscegenation, sexual perversion, explicit violence and even derision toward the law, as well as countless other actions that were deemed immoral or inappropriate.<sup>123</sup> The removal of this code meant filmmakers were able to delve into previously unexplored territory. New Hollywood cinema was able to “get away from the religious

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<sup>121</sup> Pollard, Tom. 2015. *Sex and Violence : The Hollywood Censorship Wars*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315632162>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

morality of the previous era.”<sup>124</sup> The new films had casual sex, sympathy for the bad guys and an abundance of violence, often sending conflicting messages. The films were darker, grittier and dove into what it was like to live the lives of the people being shown on screen. *The Godfather*, aside from a fun mafia movie, was partly about the complexities and dangers that come with running an organization. The memorable training montages in *Rocky* are partly to show what he has to endure and the sheer violence behind the sport. This generation of cinema started to show the behind-the-scenes and the institutional rules that govern the characters;<sup>125</sup> there was an effort to show the reality behind characters lives and actions as much as possible. Violence, sex and crime became a constant in Hollywood cinema just as it became another tool for social commentary. The New Hollywood movement created an era of cinema in which perfect movie magic was no longer the goal; instead, there was a shift toward a style of filmmaking that attempted to show people's lives as they were.

### **Realism in Modern Hollywood**

This shift from classic Hollywood cinema to a grittier type of filmmaking has carried over to present day Hollywood. Much of Hollywood continues to portray more realistic expressions of society and real life issues that affect real people. Certainly the work that lauds itself as more serious work and is often critically acclaimed, tends to focus on real-life situations. These films are sometimes deemed as more artistic or as art-house films; as such, this means they often attract stars that find themselves drawn to

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<sup>124</sup> Krämer, Peter. 2006. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>125</sup> Krämer, Peter. 2006. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Columbia University Press.

artistic projects. These kinds of films and television series are the opposite of the films mentioned in the market chapter. Realism does not manifest itself in massive blockbusters with adventure or fantasy elements—*Star Wars* or *The Avengers*, which serve as escapist content and global phenomena, are not meant to capture reality.

Whereas those films liberal political slants are filtered by the economy, these more artistic films often have conservative elements, simply due to the nature of portraying something with authenticity.

In this way, sometimes the hyper-progressive or liberal ideals that are sometimes portrayed are actually hidden from a lot of the public and are less reliable. Furthermore, sometimes these progressive notions occur less often or less apparently in people's everyday lives. It's another case of the Hollywood elite or liberals on both coasts being attuned to these issues, but not the rest of the country. A lot of realism based films tend to focus on people struggling with poverty or low socioeconomic status and the issues related to that; at the very least, the ones that do focus on people in that socioeconomic status tend to have somewhat conservative slants. Many of the people in these films, for example, are portrayed as having problems as a result of a breakdown of family structure—an inherently conservative idea. There's also a certain aspect of liberalism that is somewhat exclusive and only gives elites the ability or the desire to engage with it; a level of luxury underlies these types of problems and people dealing with more salient issues do not care to address. Oftentimes, people in this demographic refuse to engage with the rhetoric of political correctness, or trigger warnings, or other liberal rhetoric—the characters in these films are presented in that same manner. Of the films and television shows mentioned in this chapter—*Juno*, *Girls*, *The Wire*, and *Hell Or High*

*Water*—almost all of them focus on people dealing with real life situations and struggles that people of lower socioeconomic status have to deal with in ways that elites do not. There are artistic films that focus on the elite, such as *The Big Short* or *The Wolf of Wall Street*, but those films focus more on the excess of greed and extravagance or corruption—another life so foreign to most of the American public that it becomes a fantasy in its own way. The films that really focus on American social and cultural issues are not these films, but the family, relationship-focused films such as the ones previously mentioned.

### **Artistic Integrity Over Political Affiliation**

This focus on realism also lends itself to the notion of artistic integrity. These films that focus on largely blue-collar people have conservative slants to them because realistically the decisions and actions being made by these people probably would be, at least to some extent. Rather than Hollywood trying to change the narrative and give all of these characters decidedly liberal slants, the artistic integrity and the care for the realism of the characters prevents that kind of political manipulation. An argument can be made that the conservative slants to most of these products are not intentional. The writers, directors and actors of the projects certainly aren't conservative or outwardly conservative—it often seems as though the conservative slants of these films are entirely accidental or unconscious on the part of the filmmakers. Because these artists are staying true to the situations their characters \ go through the resulting message can sometimes be conservative without intention. Nevertheless, many of these films carry culturally conservative messages and they are popular, highly regarded works of art. Ironically this would be the place that Hollywood could theoretically espouse their most liberal

beliefs—these films don't focus on turning a profit the way huge blockbusters are meant to. Consequently, these films are not forced to engage with such a strict level of censorship and a need to please everyone. Many of these films, however, still end up juggling conservative elements. It seems as though artistic integrity is one of the only logical reasons for conservative elements to repeatedly show up in Hollywood cinema. Artistic integrity, at least as it's being referred to in this paper, means putting the art and the integrity of the story above individual political agendas. Sometimes the character's beliefs and overall theme of the film might coincide with the creators' politics, and sometimes it means the message of their art is vastly different from their own inclinations. This occurrence of artists leaving their personal politics out of a story, in service of the story, appears to happen in Hollywood films more often than one might think. Genuine artistic creations might be inherently depoliticizing because the truth and honesty an artist might explore to create work tends to, on some level, be depoliticizing. It forces people to pull away from their ideological abstractions.

### **Hell or High Water**

*Hell or High Water* is a film that makes a lot of political commentary without inherently picking a political side; it also represents how these elements of realism and artistic integrity can mesh together to create a work of art that contains some inherently conservative themes and concerns. It might seem counterintuitive to say a film both doesn't have a specific political side, yet also carries inherently conservative themes, but *Hell Or High Water* does not advocate for a specific side. The themes that emerge are themes that come from taking an honest look at what the characters go through. It also falls into the category of independent work, produced outside of the usual studio system

model. The film was released in 2016 and focuses on two brothers whose family was devastated by the 2008 financial crisis; more specifically, the bank is trying to foreclose on their dead mother's property, so the brothers decide to take things into their own hands. They embark on a carefully planned-out bank robbing spree—stealing from the people who are trying to take their mother's property. It's a modern-day Western revolving around the old American concept of outlaw justice; when someone has been wronged, and everyone knows the system is not going to help, people start to take justice into their own hands. This film portrays people at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder who were perhaps the most devastated by the financial crisis and how they dealt with it, instead of the elite, top-down focus featured in films like *The Big Short* and *Inside Job*. As the brothers try to complete their mission with the Sheriff and his partner hot on their tail, the actual morality of the film becomes incredibly convoluted. Perhaps more important than the actual conventions of the film, however, are the themes and ideas that *Hell or High Water* deals with.

Firstly, the film is set in rural Texas and a part of Texas that has been economically devastated by both the 2008 financial crisis and by the progression of society in general. An *Esquire* review describes *Hell or High Water* as a film that “paints a picture of a world most in the so-called coastal liberal elite too often ignore.”<sup>126</sup> It's a stagnant place, one that is stuck in the past with no way out and no one looking to help them. The main characters, brothers Toby and Tanner, are definitely part of the blue-

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<sup>126</sup> Atad, Corey. “How ‘Hell or High Water’ Portrayed a Very Real America That Many Ignored.” *Esquire*, December 12, 2016. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a51457/hell-or-high-water-2016-canon/>.

collar demographic that artistic Hollywood finds so interesting to explore. This film is the epitome of a kind of abandonment of blue-collar American workers in a world which favors elite, educated individuals. It's a film about the people that coastal elite like to make fun of but don't actually understand what the lives of those people look like. Aside from the fact that the characters don't have enough money to prevent the bank from foreclosing on their house, there are various other indicators that these characters are familiar with poverty. They sleep in a cramped trailer, they wear the same tattered clothing for the entirety of the film and they are comfortably covered in sweat and grime.

There are other non-visual cues as well. Their speech, for example, is crass and unpolished—it's obvious that neither of them were able to receive an education above a high school degree. This doesn't necessarily correlate to intelligence—Chris Pine's Toby is the remarkably clever mastermind behind the robberies—but it does absolutely put them in a certain classification of Americans and at a certain disadvantage to pull themselves out of their situation on their own. It's one of the major reasons they see resorting to crime as the only option. All of these factors create characters that don't talk or behave like anyone in the liberal elite would, and the film stays true to that representation. Rather than being isolating, however, the characters backstory and authenticity garners sympathy from everyone. As a *Variety* film review describes it, the characters are forced by their situation which is the result of the "new corporate-driven, triumph-of-finance-culture America."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Gleiberman, Owen, and Owen Gleiberman. "Cannes Film Review: 'Hell or High Water.'" *Variety* (blog), May 16, 2016. <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/cannes-film-review-hell-or-high-water-chris-pine-jeff-bridges-1201775089/>.

Although the aftereffects of the 2008 financial crisis affected different demographics of people across America, the main characters in *Hell or High Water* are still suffering from it. It's part of a larger commentary about a sector of Americans that are getting left behind. And while the perception of an evil corporate, capitalistic American might seem like a liberal criticism, the path that Toby and Tanner take to remedy their situation is rooted in conservatism. Their bank-robbing spree is predicated on the idea that if the government or system abandons you, you need to take justice in your own hands. This is especially clear when realizing that the brothers only hit the banks that took part in scamming their mother. Rather than acting as baseless criminals, Toby and Tanner take justice into their own hands; it's an idea that, regardless of political orientation, makes sense to American audiences, particularly when people are confronted with the reality of their situation.

This idea of justice also takes on a more material form in the film's usage of guns. The film really rejects any sort of liberal condemnation on guns. The gun violence in this film is very realistic, in the sense that the situations in this film could actually happen. Tanner, for example, explicitly shoots a bank security guard in the head. One of the detectives is also brutally shot in the head. Toby spends the last portion of the film trying not to bleed out from a gunshot wound to his abdomen—he sweats profusely while trying to wrap his injury with shaky hands. The guns in *Hell Or High Water* don't have a cushion to them—the consequences are scary and graphic and real. Although the portrayal of gun violence might seem like a condemnation, the attitude toward the guns is positive. There's also a realness to most of these characters; people living in rural West Texas do carry guns. In an early bank robbery, one of the customers inside of the bank is

carrying a gun and starts shooting at Tanner and Toby. It creates this environment in which guns are a part of the culture, something that holds true in West Texas. But the guns are also a symbol of the characters' autonomy and of their freedom: "...the film shows us what the weapons *mean*—that they're signifiers of power, self dignity. *Hell or High Water* is a rare movie that invites even liberals to grasp the spirit of American gun culture from the inside out."<sup>128</sup> The guns are part of the mechanism that allows the characters to deal with justice in their own way—it allows them not to be helpless. The necessity to do that is something that not all Americans have to contend with, and it offers an insight into that world.

Most of the previously mentioned plot points and themes of *Hell or High Water* do not align with a liberal political perspective. It was an independent film made for 12 million dollars; in other words, it's an artistic film that was not created with the intent to maximize its profit the way a blockbuster would. There was no financial pressure on this film to lean in a more neutral direction and art films are usually canvases in which liberal artists can express whatever they want. *Hell or High Water*'s focus on the artistic integrity of its characters and the reality of their situation lends itself to employ inherently more conservative ideas. Whether because or despite its politics, *Hell or High Water* resonated with people and became one of the most successful independent films of 2016 in terms of both financial achievement and critical acclaim. The film was released in the usual art-house theaters on the two coasts, and it also released in cinemas across Texas

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<sup>128</sup> Atad, Corey. "How 'Hell or High Water' Portrayed a Very Real America That Many Ignored." *Esquire*, December 12, 2016. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a51457/hell-or-high-water-2016-canon/>.

and the Southwest due to its subject matter.<sup>129</sup> The film did equally as well in blue states as it did in red states; art-house theaters in Los Angeles in New York received the film just as well theaters across Dallas, Houston, Austin and Phoenix.<sup>130</sup> An executive vice president for distribution from CBS films stated that "The fact that it is working in both art houses and commercial theaters is unheard of, whether you are talking about Los Angeles, San Diego or Las Vegas."<sup>131</sup> Apolitical films such as *The Avengers* blockbuster performs well across much of the U.S. Independent films rarely see that kind of universal attention. *Hell or High Water* also received an avalanche of positive reviews from traditionally liberal outlets like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* to conservative outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*. This conservative, independent film should have theoretically tanked; instead, its realism and integrity impressed the artistic side of Hollywood, and the messages resonated with everyone else.

## **Juno**

*Juno*, even more so than *Hell or High Water*, is an example of a small independent film that resonated with the public. It was released in 2007 with an estimated production budget of 7.5 million dollars.<sup>132</sup> Despite the small budget, *Juno* went on to become a cultural phenomenon that grossed over 143 million dollars domestically and 231, 411, 584 dollars worldwide.<sup>133</sup> The film also amassed critical success, earning four

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<sup>129</sup> "Box-Office Analysis: How 'Hell or High Water' Became an Indie Summer Success." The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-analysis-how-hell-923573>.

<sup>130</sup> "Box-Office Analysis: How 'Hell or High Water' Became an Indie Summer Success." The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-analysis-how-hell-923573>.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> *Juno*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0467406/>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Oscar nominations for Best Original Screenplay, Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role and Best Achievement in Direction, going on to win the Oscar for Best Screenplay.<sup>134</sup> It's another case of a small independent film receiving critical and commercial acclaim; more importantly, it's another film that, due to its focus on realism and realistic subject matter, ends up dealing with some inherently conservative themes.

*Juno* centers around a sixteen-year-old girl who finds out she's pregnant after the first time she has sex. Almost immediately after discovering she's pregnant, *Juno* resolves herself to get an abortion and heads to the clinic. This is where the film seems to take a decidedly conservative turn. On her way to the clinic, she runs into her classmate who's protesting outside the clinic with a "No babies like murdering" sign. Juno brushes past her but her classmate desperately tells her that "Your baby probably has a beating heart ya know...it can feel pain, and it has fingernails!" Juno stops, turns around and with curiosity asks "Fingernails... really?" Despite the brief interaction Juno goes inside the clinic and sits down to fill out some forms. But as she sits there she notices all the other people in the clinic; the camera cuts to each person's fingernails and an incessant, heartbeat-like tapping sound gets increasingly louder throughout the scene. Clearly, the audience is supposed to assume that Juno is thinking about her future baby and it's already developed fingernails with some guilt. Juno starts to panic and rushes out of the clinic in a hurry, ultimately deciding not to get an abortion. After this moment in the film, Juno never goes back to get an abortion, or even considers one, again.

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<sup>134</sup> *Juno*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0467406/>

It's one of the most obvious film scenes regarding abortion, where a woman wants one, goes to get one, and then is swayed not to because she starts to feel as though abortion is wrong and is a type of murder. It's not a scene that's meant to shame those who get abortions, but it is making a decidedly conservative statement about the morality of abortion. Juno "certainly seems to be moved by unremitting grossness of the abortion clinic and more importantly, by the declaration, from a pro-life Asian classmate keeping a lonely vigil outside the clinic, that her child-to-be 'already has fingernails.'"<sup>135</sup> It's handled good-naturedly, so it doesn't seem like too serious or condemning of a message, but the film is "decidedly a brief for not getting an abortion."<sup>136</sup> Most films choose not to delve into abortion at all—*Juno* does delve into it and decides to say that it's the wrong decision. This does not fit the typical Hollywood pro-choice narrative. It does, however, track with what a young girl from a blue-collar family might really decide to do when faced with teen pregnancy. The writer of the film, Diablo Cody, has since clarified her stance on abortion—she's pro-choice and is upset that the film was perceived as pro-life. The argument can be made then that Cody was simply devoted to the integrity of Juno as a character and, without realizing it, she created content that was decidedly pro-life. Cody herself has stated that Juno's choice was not meant to reflect any anti-choice sentiment and that Juno simply did not want an abortion.<sup>137</sup> The fact remains, however, that whether

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<sup>135</sup> Douthat, Ross. "The Politics of Juno." *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2007. <https://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2007/12/the-politics-of-em-juno-em/55166/>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Hutchinson, Kate. "'There's This Idea That Mothers Are Completely Selfless': Diablo Cody on Tully – and the Juno Backlash." *The Guardian*, May 3, 2018, sec. Film. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/03/theres-this-idea-that-mothers-are-completely-selfless-diablo-cody-on-tully-and-the-juno-backlash>.

or not Cody intended to make a political statement about abortion, she did; Juno chooses not to get an abortion because she starts to feel as though it's wrong. The writer of the film is decidedly liberal, but the politics of Juno are decidedly not liberal; the artist's prioritization of the film and the character over personal politics made room for a conservatives statement about abortion.

Conservative elements can be seen in other aspects of the film as well, and they are all a result of the creators of the film focusing on the honest reactions of characters in their situations. The setting of Minnesota, for example, sets the stage for the blue-collar background of Juno and her friends and family; the film emphasizes the parents' cheap tastes, for example, and pokes fun at how they've never heard of Pilates.<sup>138</sup> But instead of poking fun at their simple mid-western values, the film seems to point out the ridiculousness of certain elite tendencies. Juno's family, different though it may be from the coastal elite, is portrayed as lovable and dependable, "but there isn't much sign of the red-America attitudes that either radio talk-show hosts, or snooty liberals, assume go with the pedigree."<sup>139</sup> In other words, instead of portraying the family (mostly meaning Juno and her father) as a Midwestern caricature, the film makes an effort to portray the reality of the situation. In this case, reality means a smart young girl who made a mistake and a clueless but well-intentioned single dad who try to navigate a teen pregnancy with all of its stressors (financial and otherwise).

And all of this, with its inherently conservative messages, resonated with people and exploded at the box office. A seven million dollar independent film raking in over

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<sup>138</sup> Hulbert, Ann. "Juno and the Culture Wars." Slate Magazine, December 18, 2007. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2007/12/juno-and-the-culture-wars.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

200 million dollars is more than rare. A big part of the reason *Juno* attracted so many is that "healthy reality is more entertaining than great drama."<sup>140</sup> The entirety of the film is centered around this idea of a "healthy reality" and of realism in general. Juno's pregnancy isn't the worst thing in the world; she's anxious and she's scared, but she takes responsibility for her pregnancy almost immediately. Her uncomfortable reaction when she's at the abortion clinic is realistic—even the biggest pro-choice advocates don't portray abortion as a good or easy experience. Her reluctance probably resonated with women who backed out of an abortion, and it also probably resonated with women who did go through with an abortion. The reality of abortion is that even women who get an abortion, and don't regret it, find it an incredibly emotionally taxing experience. The film does not send its abortion message with an agenda of shaming women, it frames a healthy reality—that might be why that scene did not enrage as many people as it might have otherwise.

## **Girls**

This focus on realism also permeated the landscape of television. *Girls* is a show whose creator and main star, Lena Dunham, is loudly progressive. She often gets criticized for being too extremist of a liberal—from other liberals. She famously said that she's never had an abortion, but wishes she had, so she could be a part of lessening the stigma surrounding abortion.<sup>141</sup> She was an active Hillary Clinton campaigner. She often tells the story of how she was raised by liberal, elite art fanatics in Soho, and how that

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<sup>140</sup> "Why We Love 'Juno.'" Psychology Today. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy/201002/why-we-love-juno>.

<sup>141</sup> Davis, Allison P. "Lena Dunham Comes to Terms With Herself." The Cut, November 25, 2018. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/11/lena-dunham-comes-to-terms-with-herself.html>.

informed her specific brand of provocative liberalism.<sup>142</sup> In other words, Dunham's political views are about as far from conservative, or even moderate, as a person can be. Yet her television series *Girls* revolves around some particularly conservative themes and ultimately serves as a kind of conservative cautionary tale.

The set up for the series is that the main character, Hannah, has to figure out how to make it in on her own after her parents cut her off. The series focuses on the plights of Hanna and three of her friends Marnie, Jessa and Shoshanna as they try to figure out life in their twenties. Essentially the goal of the show is to present a realistic portrayal of what the lives of four millennial girls would look like living on their own in New York City. The sex is awkward and raunchy, the friendships are tense, relationships are unhealthy, and there are financial problems abound. It's also marketed as a comedy, but there isn't much that's light-hearted about *Girls*; it's not another happy-go-lucky *Sex in the City* with four successful, mostly-happy women. Every single one of the girls is emotionally damaged and struggling to find their way; usually because they either don't have a familial support system or because they refuse to listen to anyone giving them advice. Hannah is incredibly self-centered and selfish, always thinking the world revolves around her; she's also immature and has major authority problems. Marnie is Hannah's right hand and has a wide variety of her own problems—she rivals Hannah in narcissism and most of the show is just a string of her failed relationships. Jessa might be the most constantly damaged over the course of the show; a heroin and cocaine addiction leads her to rehab, she has an extremely short marriage and her self-destructiveness essentially

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<sup>142</sup> Davis, Allison P. "Lena Dunham Comes to Terms With Herself." *The Cut*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/11/lena-dunham-comes-to-terms-with-herself.html>

shatters all her relationships with her friends. Shoshanna is the most emotionally stable of the group and eventually realizes she needs to break off her unhealthy relationships with the other girls. The girls are mostly miserable over the course of the series, and the cause of their misery follows a similar logic to that of cultural conservatives.

One of the biggest topics of the show, for example, is sex and relationships; mainly that none of the girls can seem to figure out how to have a healthy relationship or pleasurable sex. “The characters’ sex lives were not remotely “safe”; they were porn-haunted and self-destructive, a mess of S.T.D. fears and dubiously consensual incidents and sudden marriages and stupid infidelities.”<sup>143</sup> The girls do not enjoy partaking in the freedom of the sexual revolution or sexual liberation that has become a part of feminist rhetoric. They find these interactions either meaningless or simply unsatisfying. More than anything, the explicit sex in *Girls* is essentially a lesson in what not to do—there’s nothing sexy about it. The one time Marnie, for example, actually enjoyed herself was in she was in a relationship with one of the rare men she actually cared about. If the show was taking the more liberal route, it would show a bunch of successful women in their twenties, engaging in casual sex and enjoying it; it would be a sign of freedom instead of the sign of the girls’ underlying emotional issues. It’s a recognition of the conservative idea that men and women are inherently different and that women will not enjoy casual relations the way that men do. The show is almost too obvious in how it presents female promiscuity as something that only leads to dissatisfaction and dysfunction.

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<sup>143</sup> “Opinion | A Requiem for ‘Girls’ - The New York Times.”  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/opinion/a-requiem-for-girls.html>.

Another conservative idea that pervades the entire series is the problem that a lack of mature men presents—both in romantic relationships and in the form of father figures. It's heavily implied that the four lead characters are so maladjusted because their family lives were dysfunctional, and more specifically that most of the girls have absentee fathers. *Girls* even has a season four episode title *Daddy Issues*, wherein Hannah aptly attempts to deal with some emotional baggage courtesy of her father. This absence of any real male role models in the girls' lives renders all of the girls virtually incapable of fostering a relationship with a good man. *Girls* is a show “in which any kind of confident male authority presence was simply *gone*...mostly the male sex seemed adrift, permanently boyish, a bundle of hormonal impulses leagues away from any kind of serious and potent manhood.”<sup>144</sup> It's true that most of the men in this series (who aren't gay) are portrayed as immature or manipulative or downright mean. It's a commentary on the failings of the modern man and that kind of behavior is bad for both men and women alike. And more than superficial squabbles or petty fights, the relationships the girls have with the various immature men deeply hurt them, and even set them back in life. The girls, with their own immaturity, hurt those men back. “*Girls* never lets its women off the hook. If anything, the girls of *Girls* come off looking more venal, dishonorable and duplicitous than the men in their lives...”<sup>145</sup> Rather than focusing on a patriarchal system

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<sup>144</sup> “Opinion | A Requiem for ‘Girls’ - The New York Times.”  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/opinion/a-requiem-for-girls.html>.

<sup>145</sup> “Lena Dunham’s Ultimately Conservative Message.” *National Review* (blog), April 19, 2017.  
<https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/04/lena-dunham-girls-hbo-conservative-bourgeois-manners/>.

that works against them, this show makes its women take responsibility for their own poor choices.

Two of the four characters have gone through a divorce before they turn thirty and by the end of the series, all of them are alone. There's not much in the way of healthy male-female relationships in *Girls*. There's an obvious connection being made between unstable relationships and an unstable life. The show's emphasis on the damaging effect of these kinds of casual or unhealthy relationships might be the single most prominent theme in the show. The girls are a far cry from being successfully independent, and even farther from being genuinely happy. "At its foundation, *Girls* has been a six-year lesson in the cost of flouting bourgeois norms and romantic conventions;"<sup>146</sup> flouting these romantic conventions and norms only leave the girls discontent with themselves and with life.

In general, their unhappiness has a lot to do with their immaturity and the decisions they make because of it. That show has always been oriented around what the girls do wrong and the mistakes they make. The very first poster that was released for *Girls* show the four girls sitting together in a shabby looking apartment; above their heads, it says "Living the Dream. One Mistake At A Time."<sup>147</sup> Other promotional posters have a similar message—season two's tagline says "Almost getting it kind of together," while season four's poster states "Nowhere to grow up but up."<sup>148</sup> In other words, *Girls*

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<sup>146</sup> "Lena Dunham's Ultimately Conservative Message." *National Review* (blog), April 19, 2017. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/04/lena-dunham-girls-hbo-conservative-bourgeois-manners/>

<sup>147</sup> Adalian, Josef. "What 6 Seasons of *Girls* Posters Tell Us About the Show." *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/04/girls-posters-six-seasons-explained.html>.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

has always recognized that its characters are horribly immature and damaged; it's been a theme since the very start that they need to get their lives together. Except by the final season, no real growth has occurred. Shoshanna simply cuts the other girls out of her life and Jessa is left in limbo after dating Hannah's ex-boyfriend. Hannah does finally grow up at the very end of the series when she realizes that she's pregnant, "But the form it took was almost too heavy-handed in its traditionalist definition of a woman's growing-up: an unplanned pregnancy, a baby, the absolute obligations of motherhood trumping the trivialities of freedom."<sup>149</sup> Everything Hannah tried to do over the course of the series to fulfill her own needs left her in the same place of emptiness and narcissism. Ultimately the only thing that pulled Hannah out of her never-ending selfishness was the classically conservative signifier of adulthood for women—having a child. And it's essentially motherhood that also makes Marnie grow up. At the end of the series, Marnie is divorced and as aimless as ever; she decides to live with Hannah and help her raise the baby. It's not a particularly happy ending, but it's fitting to the show's overall theme. Hannah and Marnie's lives are still in disarray, but the two most self-obsessed people in the show finally care for someone other than themselves.

By focusing on the realism of four millennial girls trying to make it on their own—and all of the hardships that come with that—Dunham has created a television series that's completely antithetical to her own politics. To have a person like Dunham speak of how she wishes she had an abortion, but then make becoming a mother the single most important plot point of the show seems pretty diametrically opposed. Those

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<sup>149</sup> "Opinion | A Requiem for 'Girls' - The New York Times."  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/opinion/a-requiem-for-girls.html>.

inconsistencies between her own beliefs and the themes of the show are abundant. The "striking thing about "Girls" is how the mess it portrayed made a mockery of the official narrative of social liberalism, in which prophylactics and graduate degrees and gender equality are supposed to lead smoothly to health, wealth and high-functioning relationships."<sup>150</sup> Whether intentionally or subconsciously, Dunham made her four liberal elitist characters guides for what not do. All of their aimlessness and mistakes were honest—Dunham unflinchingly followed all of her characters through their most unflattering or painful moments, often creating intensely awkward and even dislikable characters and scenes. But Dunham’s commitment to the characters flaws ultimately produced a kind of culturally conservative think piece In *Girls*, the liberal lifestyle is the one that leaves floundering and the conservative lifestyle is the answer that finally takes them out of their cyclical self-destruction.

### **The Wire**

The Wire is more founded in realism than any of the previously mentioned shows or movies. The five-season-long show was released in 2002 and chronicled the relationships of law enforcement to various social institutions and issues throughout the city of Baltimore. Season one focuses on the illegal drug trade and the war on drugs, for example, whereas season four focuses on the institution of schools and education. The creator of the show, David Simon, worked as a Baltimore crime reporter in the '90s, and his co-creator, Ed Burns, worked as a detective in Baltimore’s Homicide and Narcotics

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<sup>150</sup> “Opinion | A Requiem for ‘Girls’ - The New York Times.”  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/opinion/a-requiem-for-girls.html>

divisions.<sup>151</sup> Simon himself said that “the entire theme of the show is how institutions treat individuals.”<sup>152</sup> The show is heavily based on their experiences and knowledge of those Baltimore institutions; this resulted in a truly laborious dive into what makes Baltimore tick. Every institution that's explored throughout the course of the show— police departments, drug cartels, labor unions, schools, the seaport system, media, etc.— has its shortcomings examined with careful scrutiny. The show does not use Hollywood magic, where the problems neat and quickly dealt with. "One of the problems here in the US is that we try to deal with the solution without understanding the why...The Wire explained to you the why. It said we're gonna take it real slow, go deep and show you the whole landscape."<sup>153</sup>

Portraying that landscape with accuracy and integrity meant focusing on the realism of Baltimore and its people. In addition to the story, *The Wire* even wove realism into it's casting. The Baltimore Governor at the time, Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., appears in the show as a security guard.<sup>154</sup> Prominent Baltimore Reverend, Frank M. Reid III, plays an influential minister in season four of the series.<sup>155</sup> Former Baltimore police commissioner and convicted felon Edward Norris gets the pleasure of playing a committed homicide

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<sup>151</sup> Saraiya, Sonia, and Sonia Saraiya. “15 Years Later, 2017 Needs Its Own ‘The Wire.’” *Variety* (blog), June 1, 2017. <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/the-wire-anniversary-15-years-1202450469/>.

<sup>152</sup> ZURAWIK, DAVID. “Local Figures, Riveting Drama Put ‘Wire’ in a Class by Itself.” *baltimoresun.com*. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2006-07-12-0607120099-story.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Lynskey, Dorian. “The Wire, 10 Years on: ‘We Tore the Cover off a City and Showed the American Dream Was Dead.’” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2018, sec. Television & radio. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/06/the-wire-10-years-on-we-tore-the-cover-off-a-city-and-showed-the-american-dream-was-dead>.

<sup>154</sup> ZURAWIK, DAVID. “Local Figures, Riveting Drama Put ‘Wire’ in a Class by Itself.” *baltimoresun.com*. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2006-07-12-0607120099-story.html>.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

detective under his own name.<sup>156</sup> The actors in the show who aren't known Baltimore figures are purposely unknown actors. The most recognizable actors cast were character actors—people who could disappear into their roles without the audience recognizing the person. In other words, it was a conscious decision not to cast any true stars or people who would command attention simply because of their name. Even then, many of the actors were playing characters based on real people that David Simon and Ed Burns knew. The character Omar, who acted as a kind of vigilante by stealing from and thwarting the plans of Baltimore's drug dealers, was based on a real person named Donnie Andrews. Andrews turned himself into Ed Burns back when Burns was a detective and, after serving time in prison, became an anti-gang mentor for Baltimore youth.<sup>157</sup> The show is about the real Baltimore, and its people, not the Hollywood version of it. That intense authenticity pervaded the show throughout its five seasons.

This rare attention to realism, even within the works that aim to be realistic, creates a show that's somehow both apolitical and incredibly political. *The Wire* “offers fodder for liberal, conservative, leftist and libertarian readings - much like reality itself,” and while it is an intensely political work it “rarely devolves into agitprop.”<sup>158</sup> Because the show is so close to real life it has varying shades of political thought to represent the various viewpoints of Baltimore. The show's intense criticism of American political institutions is something that liberal viewers find themselves agreeing with. A defense of

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<sup>156</sup> ZURAWIK, DAVID. “Local Figures, Riveting Drama Put ‘Wire’ in a Class by Itself.” baltimoresun.com. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2006-07-12-0607120099-story.html>

<sup>157</sup> “23 Fascinating Facts About The Wire,” March 9, 2018. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/61919/23-things-you-might-not-know-about-wire>.

<sup>158</sup> Douthat, Ross. “The Wire’s Politics.” *The Atlantic*, December 3, 2008. <https://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2008/12/-em-the-wire-em-s-politics/55825/>.

important American institutions are pretty central to conservative viewpoints, yet the way in which *The Wire* criticizes those doesn't seem to offend conservative sensibilities. The messaging for why those institutions are failing and why the failure of those institutions is bad actually relies on conservative ideas, not culturally liberal ones: "While many of the problems most prominently on display can certainly be traced back to racism, racism itself is not the central issue in *The Wire*...These drug gangs and the poor souls in their orbit, are not trapped by racism so much as by dysfunctional culture."<sup>159</sup>

It's not the idea of an institution that is the issue; the series makes a lot of arguments for why a strong institution would benefit people. Instead, the show talks about the dangers of a broken institution, partially as a result of a dysfunctional culture. The drug trade itself is seen as a kind of institution that Baltimore children are drawn into because other institutions have failed them. The war on drugs is not portrayed favorably (the satisfaction for liberals) but neither is the actual drug trade (the satisfaction for conservatives). The police officers in *The Wire* are sometimes awful, but more than not they're shown as people who do what needs to be done in order to get the job done. On the reverse, there is sympathy shown for people who are caught up in the drug trade, but it's portrayed as one of the most destructive "institutions" in Baltimore. It's a Catch-22 in which the dysfunctional culture has created a trap for all parties—the supposed solution isn't helping, but the issue can't be left unaddressed. It's implied that, although countless characters are let down by institutions that are supposed to help them, everyone still has to take some sort of responsibility and ownership over a culture that has led to these

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<sup>159</sup> "Conservatism and The Wire." *National Review* (blog), December 1, 2008. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/conservatism-and-wire-jonah-goldberg/>.

problems. *The Wire* is not necessarily a strictly conservative show; rather, it's "a realistic show, and its depiction of reality serves as an indictment of a system many conservatives should second."<sup>160</sup>

Ultimately, the show is both pessimistic and nihilistic. The answer in *The Wire* is not just to create shiny new institutions that will fix all the inequalities and issues that pervade Baltimore. That does not even seem like a possibility. The show never truly tries to give an answer to all of the problems it digs up. Any sort of political solution "fails because so much of Baltimore is in the death grip of immediate need, of decades long failure that demands reparation."<sup>161</sup> That decades-long failure is in large part a cultural failure, and any sort of reparation cannot happen as long as the dysfunctional culture stays firmly intact. By presenting Baltimore in this brutally honest way, Simon and Burns have created the rare politically androgynous show; it carries some of the political agenda of its creators, but it mostly carries whatever political messages a person gleans from a tragically real situation.

### **Final Thoughts on Realism**

Almost all of the creators, writers, directors and producers of the aforementioned shows and movies fall into the category of liberal Hollywood. Many of them are outspoken about their liberal beliefs. Yet, in each case, the person's individual politics either stayed out of their work entirely, or their work was representing a political slant

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<sup>160</sup> "Conservatism and The Wire." *National Review* (blog), December 1, 2008.

<https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/conservatism-and-wire-jonah-goldberg/>.

<sup>161</sup> Goodman, Tim. "Yes, HBO's 'Wire' Is Challenging. It's Also a Masterpiece." SFGate, September 6, 2006. <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Yes-HBO-s-Wire-is-challenging-It-s-also-a-2553074.php>.

divergent to their own. None of the aforementioned work was created with the intent to bring in massive revenue. *Hell or High Water* was one of the most expensive, produced for around 12 million dollars (minuscule compared to a normal studio film). *Juno* was made for even less money. *Girls* had a respectable audience but it wasn't marketed with *Game of Thrones* distribution in mind. *The Wire* was almost entirely kept alive by favorable critical perception alone. These various works of art were created without the financial pressure of a studio system demanding something with mass appeal. All of them had the license to imbue as much of their politics as they wanted, and most of them do try to. But every creator had a commitment to create a work of artistic integrity; for each work, the path to that integrity had to do with various degrees of realism. Portraying the world as it is produces much more politically complex work than portraying the world as one thinks it should be, and that political complexity often means that conservatism seeps into these art house projects.

## Conclusion

Hollywood has been liberalizing since the 1930s.<sup>162</sup> Political activism started to flourish after the devastation of the Great Depression, which many saw as a failure of capitalism and conservative economics. A desire for higher wages and union struggles combined with the effects of the Great Depression made Roosevelt's New Deal an attractive option.<sup>163</sup> These factors combined with, "the rise of fascism in Europe, and the perception that socialism was working in the Soviet Union,"<sup>164</sup> started the shift toward a liberal tradition in Hollywood. American patriotism was seen as right wing and was not accepted in the mainstream without weariness until after World War II.<sup>165</sup> A second shift toward liberalism in Hollywood is often attributed to the Vietnam War when many celebrities became very vocal about their opposition.<sup>166</sup> There were, of course, shifts in political alliance throughout Hollywood's history: "Actors' liberal politics would wax and wane over the remainder of the 20th century, growing muted under McCarthyism and amplified later when there was social unrest—the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war. But you can trace a more or less straight line from those early formative events to

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<sup>162</sup> Donald T. Critchlow. n.d. *When Hollywood Was Right, How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls and Big Business Remade American Politics*.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> "Putting a Number on Hollywood's Perceived Liberalism." 2018. *Morning Consult*. March 1, 2018. <https://morningconsult.com/2018/03/01/putting-number-hollywoods-perceived-liberalism/>.

today.”<sup>167</sup> This series of historical and cultural events colored the politics of Hollywood’s actors from its conception up until today, and it’s more than likely that this liberal tradition will continue for years to come.

While these trends are understandably alarming to conservatives, the evidence presented in this thesis suggests that Hollywood is not a liberal institution, nor will it ever become one. According to Professor Donald T. Critchlow, Hollywood is first and foremost, “a town concerned with making movies, making profits and making careers.”<sup>168</sup> This does not mean entertainment is apolitical or avoids engaging with political rhetoric—plenty of art is inherently political; however, it does mean that Hollywood is not exclusively a liberal mouthpiece. Whether it be through market demands or artistic inclinations, Hollywood does and can create politically diverse entertainment. Moreover, modern-day Hollywood creates work that seriously deals with conservative themes and ideas, and this is at a time when political polarization is at an all-time high. Starting from the New Hollywood Era to today, Hollywood follows specific conventions that keep entertainment consistent and ultimately keep Hollywood a place focused on making movies and making money.

Although it might get lost behind interviews and sound bites, artists place more value on their art than on their politics. Actors and actresses, in particular, work to inhabit lives and experiences different from their own. This means portraying a range of different political views and doing so with integrity. The nature of the job alone implies a certain

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<sup>167</sup> Gross, Neil. 2018. “Opinion | Why Is Hollywood So Liberal?” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2018, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/hollywood-liberal.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Donald T. Critchlow. n.d. *When Hollywood Was Right, How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls and Big Business Remade American Politics*.

amount of empathy and desire to explore human nature. Movies and television would be incredibly limited if actors only portrayed what they and their peers believe. Instead, artists and producers choose to expand their content by covering a far wider range of the human experience. This plays out mostly within Hollywood's varied genres and styles, including realism, science fiction and comedy.

Furthermore, the studios that fund all of these ventures prioritize making money over all else. Hollywood executives want to make films that relate to as many people as possible; more importantly, they want films that entice everyone to buy tickets. This ensures that at least one, very lucrative, sector of Hollywood is devoted to making content focused on mass appeal—to let celebrities only focus on the liberal elite and their concerns would mean severely limiting their market reach. Artists, and the studios that fund their work, have a vested interest in making sure that entertainment actually entertains a mass audience.

### **Why does this matter?**

The political left dislikes the other side of the aisle much more intensely than has been the case for the past fifteen years, but the entertainment itself has not followed suit. It seems then, that Hollywood is somewhat sheltered from polarization. This serves an important function in society. Entertainment has pushed forward important social messages and taken political stances. It has increased tolerance toward discriminated groups. It has been used to challenge norms and to make people think. But most importantly, entertainment is meant to entertain. It's meant to provide amusement and enjoyment and act as an escape for people from the stress of everyday life. Hollywood's

resistance to polarization is important for society because it means that entertainment still has the power to provide a refuge from our politics. Perhaps now more than ever people need a reprieve from America's coarsening political life and Hollywood is still the institution that provides that refuge.

When entertainment does provide more political substance to its audience, it does something just as important in this age of polarization: it introduces partisan audiences to bipartisan ways of thinking. Oftentimes people find themselves existing within echo chambers, exposed only to those who share their political opinions; these people rarely make the effort to seek out and explore opposing political opinions. Entertainment then provides a kind of political education for people, one they might be willing to receive precisely because it is not nakedly partisan. Entertainment often has some political substance, but it's far less partisan than television news.

Entertainment should continue to be a place where people can try something new and satisfy their intellectual curiosity. Conservatives should not shy away from the movie theater or new television shows for fear of liberal propaganda, and liberals should continue to allow artists the freedom to deal with various themes and political views. Rather than a source of derision, Hollywood is a uniquely American cultural staple that continues to bring people together. Some work leans more left, some leans more right and some seems more ambiguous, but this political diversity ensures that there is something for everyone. Most if not all of the points mentioned throughout this thesis were true at the start of Hollywood and have persisted to the modern day; they will most likely continue to be pillars of the entertainment industry far into the future. Regardless of what goes on in the world—whether it be changes in the administration or great tragedies or a

new cultural movement—the future of Hollywood will look much like it looks now; namely, an institution that provides authentic art, intellectual diversity and entertainment for all.

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