

How “entertaining” is the American entertainment industry?

Charlie’s Angels; Hulk; Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl; Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines

David Walsh

25 August 2003

Charlie’s Angels, directed by McG; *Hulk*, directed by Ang Lee; *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, directed by Gore Verbinski; *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, directed by Jonathan Mostow

The entertainment industry in the US continually reveals itself to be less and less about “entertainment” and more and more about “industry.” In the presence of the weakest films, for example, one senses the combined efforts of a large number of people, organized according to a strict division of labor and along the most modern managerial lines, straining grimly in the service of giant conglomerates to divert their fellow creatures. No project seems less promising as a source of amusement.

Various factors come into play in producing this situation: a general cultural decline, including a drastic drop in the skill level among screenwriters and directors in particular (comic timing has almost entirely disappeared); the great pressure of producing a return on films that cost \$150 million and upward, which propels studios inexorably in the direction of the least common denominator—the film that offends or disturbs no demographic group (i.e., the work that affects no one profoundly); the general rightward lurch by the political and media establishment, including film studio executives, which almost precludes the development of material that might subvert conventional wisdom.

Beyond that, whether its top people recognize this social fact or not, the entertainment industry is engaged in the task of providing amusement for an increasingly restive, frustrated and, above all, socially polarized population. To the extent that the film studios turn out bland, bombastic, falsely “universal” works, with violence and titillation apparently for everyone, they insure a superficial impact. The American population, slowly but surely, is being politicized and radicalized by events. There is an embryonic, semi-conscious hunger within significant layers for material of substance, comic, tragic or otherwise. Offering nothing that might encourage or facilitate a radicalization—indeed avoiding as much as possible the consideration of any *specific or concrete* aspect of contemporary social life—is one of the pressing tasks that the entertainment industry sets itself. In objective terms, it operates by and large against the interests and even the best instincts of the general public it is allegedly assigned to entertain. This circumstance must create its own set of tensions and frictions.

In fact, the present state of affairs comes close to guaranteeing the death of spontaneity, genuine individuality and playfulness, without any of which it is difficult to provide entertainment. Amusing people requires an attentive and serious attitude toward humanity and knowledge of its habits, interests and dreams. Largely lacking either, the film, television and music concerns for the most part provide pallid imitations of

entertainment, based on guesswork that goes on in well-furnished corporate boardrooms. No one in these circles knows “what will succeed with the public,” because no one in these circles knows very much about the public, except what it’s provided by expensive and unreliable market research.

It would be a mistake, however, to write off the possibility of lively or provocative material making an appearance on the grounds that the entertainment corporations have the situation firmly in hand. This would overestimate their strength and minimize the contradictions in American social life, which find all sorts of surprising manifestations.

This kind of “leftism” almost inevitably carries with it echoes of the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School in their glum essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944). For Adorno and Horkheimer, there was no “comes close to.” They wrote unequivocally of “the totality of the culture industry,” a closed system that thoroughly and inescapably dominates the population.

“Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part... Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce.”

The essay contained insights and accurately described many of the *aims* of the modern “culture industry.” For instance, the authors observed, “No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every reaction: not by its natural structure (which collapses under reflection), but by signals. Any logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided. As far as possible, developments must follow from the immediately preceding situation and never from the idea of the whole. For the attentive movie-goer any individual scene will give him the whole thing.”

However, the specific conclusion that Adorno and Horkheimer reached about the culture industry, that it was a seamless “totality” of popular manipulation, flowed from a more general and deeply pessimistic reading of the events of the 20th century. In their view, the working class had been thoroughly integrated into bourgeois society and the possibilities of social revolution had all but vanished.

Thus, they reasoned: “Capitalist production so confines them [‘the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class’], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them. As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously

than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them. The misplaced love of the common people for the wrong which is done them is a greater force than the cunning of the authorities."

Like all "leftist" skeptics they forgot (rejected) one not-so-minor detail: that the conditions for social upheaval are not provided, in the first place, by consciousness or "will," but by the economic-material development of society itself.

The petty bourgeois overwhelmed by events begins in his analysis from the omnipotence of the present order, the ultimate futility of resistance, and works backward from there. Naturally, from such a standpoint no work of popular culture in particular, no matter how prickly or challenging, will ever satisfy. It will perpetually be classified as doing no more than serving "all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system" (Adorno and Horkheimer on Orson Welles). The left academic of this stripe never notices that it is, in fact, he who believes most unwaveringly in the invincibility and hence "the validity of the system."

The revolutionist, on the other hand, who takes as his or her guiding principle not the eternal crisis-free existence of contemporary society, but its inevitable catastrophic breakdown, weighs artistic works from the point of view of their truthfulness and their ability, even sometimes in a quite limited manner, to develop the spectator's critical faculties. Confronted with the cultural state of affairs, he or she "must bring in a little dialectics," and—without engaging in wishful thinking or self-delusion—searches for "points of departure," works or even moments that contribute to the liberation of "the mind from the ideologic yoke of the bourgeoisie" (Trotsky).

This is by way of introduction to a brief comment on four "summer films," which reveal, on the one hand, the present overall dreadfulness of Hollywood's products, and, on the other, the existence of delightful exceptions.

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle, loosely based on the 1970s television series and a sequel to 2000's *Charlie's Angels*, is a terrible film, with few, if any, redeeming features. Ostensibly about three female detectives (Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu) battling a renegade (Demi Moore) from their ranks, the work apparently sets out to prove that a film in the "post-modern" and "post-logocentric" age needs no plot whatsoever, merely large amounts of energy and technological wizardry. Instead, it proves that even the most hackneyed narrative is preferable to none at all.

The film consists of two hours' worth of discrete "bits of business": chase sequences, fights, dance numbers, sight gags, popular culture references, computer-generated images, etc. The presence of the three central performers is often the only link from one loud and vulgar segment to the next. Somehow, the film manages both to be impossible to follow and yet have nothing to follow.

Energy harnessed in this pointless fashion produces its opposite: passivity and quiescence. Every individual moment is a climax and, therefore, none is. With nothing to work out but the significance of this or that "inside joke," the mind wanders. The brash, violent imagery rapidly becomes tedious. Without any overall dynamic or coherence, for all its noisiness and "audacity," *Full Throttle* as a whole adds up to less than any one of its individual parts. Nothing of the film remains with the viewer except the vague distaste it generates.

Director "McG" (Joseph McGinty Nichol), who began in music videos, told an interviewer, "The directors I love and have learned from are the same ones most of the critics admire: Hitchcock, Truffaut, Antonioni, Orson Welles. But I love punk, rock 'n' roll and heavy metal and skateboarding, too. That's my generation. I'm making big studio movies, but I don't want to make assembly-line movies. I think you can put your personal imprint on them... I'm not really into disposable culture, I want

to do work that lasts." The last comment in particular, self-deluded to an almost life-threatening degree, suggests something disoriented and unhealthy about the entire milieu.

With *Hulk*, based on the Marvel comic book, Taiwanese-born filmmaker Ang Lee continues to demonstrate an ability to make dull films in a wide variety of genres. In fact, things are getting worse. *The Wedding Banquet*, about a gay Taiwanese émigré living in New York and trying to fool his family by organizing a marriage, had its amusing moments; Lee showed a relatively light touch at that point. *Sense and Sensibility* was a rather nondescript addition to the film world's infatuation with Jane Austen in the mid-1990s. *The Ice Storm* was an uninspired, quasi-critical look at 1970s middle class suburban life in Connecticut and its emotional frigidity. The real leap into empty self-importance came with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—the martial arts saga—in 2000. Perhaps Lee felt he had a great deal at stake in taking on a genre so popular in East Asia. In any event, the gigantism of the film only brought out into sharper relief the sad fact that the director had little or nothing to say.

Hulk only confirms this. The story of Bruce Banner (Eric Bana), who turns green, muscle-bound and enormous when angered, is recounted in a murky and long-winded manner. For some unknown reason, the scenarists attempt to provide plausible biological and psychological underpinnings for Banner's super-powers. We learn, at considerable length, why and how he inherited a mutating gene from his mad scientist father, which becomes activated when he is exposed to a laboratory accident. No one will be terribly interested or convinced by the exposition, which is followed by a flurry of purely computer-generated action scenes.

A greedy scientist/entrepreneur (Josh Lucas) and a perpetually scowling military man (Sam Elliott) pursue Banner, each for his own reasons. Nick Nolte turns up as the crazed father, who has a bizarre and incomprehensible final confrontation with his son, with whom he would like to rule the world. Jennifer Connelly, a pleasant rather than electrifying performer, is the understanding girl friend.

As in *Crouching Tiger*, Lee's attempt to saturate a popular genre, which has its own inner logic and demands, with self-serious "yuppie" angst is simply disastrous. The result is the collapse of the genre and a flat, unenticing work. The film says nothing meaningful or especially probing about father-son relationships, the dilemmas facing modern science, corporate power or the role of the military.

One image lingers: US army tanks operating in the desert (where they are confronting the bulked-up green monster). It is impossible not to think of the ongoing colonial occupation of Iraq. There is no evidence that Lee meant this to resonate with the spectator, and so the image endures for reasons that apparently have nothing to do with the filmmaker's intent. This, more or less, sums up the experience of *Hulk*.

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines is a stupid, gloomy film, the latest in a series. A young man, John Connor (Nick Stahl), is the target, along with his future wife (Claire Danes), of a machine sent from the future that specializes in assassination. Connor has been singled out because in the not-too-distant future he will lead the human resistance to the rule of murderous machines, a conflict that takes place after the obliteration of the much of the planet by atomic bombs. Another terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) has been dispatched once again to protect him. The only twist this time is that the first killer machine is a female, so to speak—an icy blonde super-model terminatrix—and is more advanced than the Schwarzenegger robot.

The film takes place on the eve of Judgment Day, at which time a sophisticated computer system—acting on behalf of self-aware machines—launches a nuclear war that will kill off several billion human beings. The three central characters spend much of their time attempting to forestall the launching of this conflict. In a particularly unpleasant turn of events, they fail, and the film's final images depict the destruction of major urban centers by a nuclear holocaust. What is one to make of such a

cheap and unserious, but misanthropic and morbid conclusion? A *Terminator 4* is foreseen, and there is most likely no way to forestall that future.

Schwarzenegger is, of course, a leading Republican contender in the California recall balloting. It is difficult to blot that from one's mind, watching his wooden and banal performance. This aging, slightly ridiculous bodybuilder, with dyed hair, has a chance of becoming governor of the country's most populous state. Disgust rises in the throat.

The one bright spot this summer has been *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, directed by Gore Verbinski. For once, some obvious thought and effort has been put into preparing the entertainment. The story-line—about a pirate ship in the 18th century Caribbean cursed by Aztec gold and the trials and tribulations of a young couple in love—is silly, but comprehensible and coherent, with traces of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Chiefly, the film benefits from the presence of Johnny Depp, as pirate captain Jack Sparrow, and Geoffrey Rush, as his arch-rival, Barbossa. The two are delightful and enliven the proceedings enormously. From the first moment we first see Sparrow, in a moment worthy of Buster Keaton, proudly stepping from the rigging of his miserable craft onto a pier just as it sinks beneath the waves, it is clear that a treat is in store. With his gold teeth, eye make-up, scraggly goatee, sun-burnished skin, beat-up hat and silly walk, Depp treats the humor of the situation as it should be treated, with the utmost earnestness.

Confirming the difficulties mentioned above, Depp told interviewer Sean Chavel that his choice of props and mannerisms caused considerable nervousness among the film's producers. "I remember I had two more gold teeth and there were a few that wanted them gone, in fact wanted them all gone. And they wanted the braids in my beard gone and they wanted a lot of the trinkets and things gone." The actor's elementary choices, which contributed greatly to elevating the character out of the ranks of the ordinary and clichéd, were seen as eccentric and potentially dangerous to the film's financial success! Such are the unrelenting pressures at work in the contemporary film industry to eliminate anything unexpected. Depp, who lives much of the time in France and expresses indifference toward Hollywood goings-on, had the integrity and the clout to resist—how many others do not?

The interviewer asked about Jack Sparrow's walk, and Depp's answer goes some way toward explaining the film's—and his performance's—unusual appeal: "The way I walked, well, it was a couple of things. To me, it was like this guy who had spent a very, very long time on the ocean battling the elements. It was a guy who had spent way too much time in the sun, so maybe his brain was literally cooked a bit. And he was way more comfortable on the deck of a ship in terms of the rhythm of the ocean than he was on dry land. And I think he would also be a guy who would understand that, like he could take that and use it to his advantage, as if to hypnotize someone. He'd kind of go back and forth and hypnotize them, kind of like a cobra, moving target. So, that's where it came from. I thought he would hate being on land."

Genuine non-conformism and genuine talent. It should be encouraged.



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