

JOHN PODHORETZ

**Hollywood
Searches for
a New Script**

Popular Culture
After September 11

“I WAS TRYING TO KNIT AMERICA
BACK TOGETHER AGAIN”

In early December 2001, the actress Goldie Hawn made an appearance in Washington, D.C. She was there not to promote a movie or to appear at a benefit. Rather, she was delivering a major policy address in a venue designed for such a purpose: a luncheon at the National Press Club. Her topic was not a subject on which Miss Hawn possesses singular expertise—unlike, say, the tribulations of being a movie star in her fifties with a daughter whose career is more successful, the virtues of unmarried cohabitation with Kurt Russell, and the uses of plastic surgery. In all of these matters, Goldie Hawn may be the world’s foremost expert.

Her oration dealt with issues of far greater moment. “On September 11, 2001, the world changed,” she informed an audience no doubt deeply illuminated by this unexpected observation. Miss Hawn found herself “moved by acts of remarkable courage” she witnessed on that day. She “learned that we are all vulnerable.” And, most strikingly, she found that deep within her cleavage, there beat a patriotic heart.

“Even I bought red, white, and blue yarn and knitted an American flag,” Miss Hawn said—a noble sentiment, though it’s more likely one of her assistants actually purchased the wool. “I think, in my own small way, I was trying to knit America back together again,” the actress offered. (This is something else she does know about intimately, having previously united a racially and culturally divided America in common national indifference to films like *Town and Country* and *Housesitter*.)

Now, Goldie Hawn’s expression of patriotic fervor was certainly genuine. It was a perfect reflection of the feeling of wounded righteousness that swept across the United States even as the World Trade Center buildings were coming down. It is sad that it should seem remarkable for a mainstream motion-picture performer to make a public display of her love of country. Such displays should be constant, given the nature of the lives led in the world of show business. The American celebrity class is living out the American meritocratic dream (in a highly exaggerated version, to be sure). Performers have almost always been born in modest circumstances and yet have managed in the space of only a few years to rise to the apex of wealth, fame, and power—due entirely to personal qualities and not to conditions of birth or class.

But the Hollywood affect for three decades or more has been to bask in the glories and wealth of the United States while evincing deep concern about the supposed inequities and injustices suffered by her citizens and others abroad. After

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 107

all, what good is cultural power if it doesn't buy you the right to instruct others less fortunate than you on what to think and how to act?

"In a post-September 11 world, we need to worry less about being clever and more about being wise," Goldie Hawn told the National Press Club audience. "We need to realize that each person has his or her own unique, special soul print. And every soul and every body deserves to be spoken to with care and respect."

Now, more than ever, we must learn to discourse nicely: "We used to pretend that we didn't care when someone said something unkind. We would say, 'sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.' But words do hurt, and painful words have no place in our better normal world."

No one knows this better, in Miss Hawn's view, than an extremely famous and rich person: "Every actor, everyone in public life, has experienced the pain that gossip and untruths can cause." So she has joined with Rabbi Irwin Katzof in a national campaign entitled Words Can Heal to "combat verbal violence and gossip."

Miss Hawn acknowledges that some may be pessimistic about the efficacy of her efforts. "You think Americans can't reduce gossip and verbal abuse? Does it sound impossible? It's not." After all, "there was a time when slavery was considered normal in America."

How exactly does all this relate to September 11? In Miss Hawn's view, "negative words" are weapons of soul destruction. "They can tear us down or terrorize us," she says. "Negative words can hurt us for the rest of our lives—words like 'I hate you,' 'fatty,' 'loser' or even the new word of war, 'infidel.'" Thus has Goldie Hawn achieved a remarkable Hegelian synthesis. The *National Enquirer* and Osama bin Laden emerge

108 JOHN PODHORETZ

from the same dark wellspring. Calling someone “fatty” is comparable to enslaving him.

Now, I acknowledge that I have, in the preceding ten paragraphs, waged what Goldie Hawn and her rabbi might consider a campaign of “verbal violence and gossip” against her. I am sure that if she read these words, her feelings would be bruised. Still, what I have not done is “terrorize” her. There is a vast distinction between subjecting someone to ridicule and invoking in him a deep, mindless, primal fear.

And there is an even greater distinction—a distinction both practical and moral—to be drawn between the pain caused by gossip and the pain caused when three airplanes crash into three occupied buildings and one crashes into a Pennsylvania field. Given the 10,000 American casualties (both dead and injured) from the al-Qaeda attacks, one might think even a Hollywood celebrity might be reticent about using them as a way of giving her own solipsistic concerns a scope and seriousness they do not deserve.

The fact that Goldie Hawn did not show any such reticence is revelatory—not about her own character so much as the nature of present-day American popular culture.

“MAYBE I SHOULD WATCH MY DIET”

Weekly following September 11, some major pop-culture figure stuck his expensively pedicured foot in a mouth filled with expensively capped teeth trying to say something meaningful about the events.

Barbra Streisand told *USA Today*: “I can’t explain it, but I had a feeling something was coming. And then, oh, my God, it’s here, this nightmare, this horror. One day I tell myself, ‘Screw everything, I’m getting a Carl’s Jr. hamburger and eating fried chicken three nights in a row. I don’t care about my

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 109

weight.’ The next day, my optimistic side takes over and I think, ‘Wait a minute, life goes on, people will get wiser, justice will prevail. Maybe I should watch my diet.’”

The very personal solipsism of Hawn and Streisand was matched by the professional solipsism of film director Robert Altman. He could not imagine that Osama bin Laden might have been engaged in other activities—like joining the mujahedin in Afghanistan, plotting against the Saudi royal family, and following an Islamic-fundamentalist faith enjoining graven images of any kind—that might have precluded his regular attendance at the cinema. In an interview with a British newspaper, Altman declared that “the movies set the pattern, and [the terrorists] have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie.”

Richard Gere, who practices Tibetan Buddhism when he isn’t rolling his eyes into his head to express his pain and sorrow on screen, offered his best wishes for the karma of the terrorists. “It’s all of our jobs to keep our minds as expansive as possible,” said the star of such mind-expanding entertainment as *Autumn in New York* and *Mr. Jones*. “If you can see the terrorists as a relative who’s dangerously sick and we have to give them medicine, and the medicine is love and compassion. There’s nothing better.”

These sorts of remarks put one in mind of Wittgenstein’s final proposition in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Just because celebrities are asked their views of the changing world circumstances does not mean they are required to offer those views up for general consumption.

The purpose of celebrity is to garner attention. A news event garners attention; therefore, a celebrity gravitates to it in the hopes of diverting some of that attention his way. Some-

110 JOHN PODHORETZ

times a celebrity will be elevated by a display of genuine self-sacrifice. That was the case for some stars (Jim Carrey, Tom Hanks) in the aftermath of September 11, who quietly donated \$1 million of their own money to relief efforts. But more often, the news event is to the celebrity as a glowing bug zapper is to a fly—alluring, hypnotic, irresistible, and deadly.

MODESTY AND CELEBRITY

It has been nearly impossible for any of us to put into words the cluster of emotions brought up by September 11 or by the sight of Ground Zero. As a result, we resort to default words and phrases: “It’s unbelievable,” or “I wish it were September 10,” or “It’s just so sad.”

These default phrases speak to the essential modesty with which most of us approached this enormous event in the first three months. Even intellectuals and pundits, always ready to express an opinion about the causes of any calamity and a program to address it, were cowed. Were the attacks the result of an intelligence lapse? Inattention on the part of current and previous administrations? Islamic fundamentalism run amok? An outgrowth of the Israeli-Palestinian problem? The answer to all of these questions was, quite simply, *we don’t know yet*.

What’s more, it seemed that rushing to answer them might even be irresponsible. The search for these answers would have required us to turn inward and examine our own failings at a moment when the nation needed to keep its eyes focused on an outside enemy. There would be time enough to point fingers and study the record. It did not have to happen in the first three months.

Modesty in the expression of controversial opinion is not to

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 111

be expected from pundits and intellectuals. Still, with very few exceptions, they rose to the challenge.

But if there can be said to be an elite even less modest than the intellectual elite, it would have to be the show-business elite. Several of the latter elitists found it all too easy to draw large lessons from a little knowledge.

Writer-director Oliver Stone's very name has become shorthand for a worldview in which the American government is responsible for every ill on the planet. He is considered a bit loopy in Hollywood, but he is also the only working filmmaker to have won four Academy Awards, and so it can't be said that his opinions are outside his industry's mainstream. At a panel discussion sponsored by the New York Film Festival just weeks after the attacks, Stone launched into a tirade about how the six conglomerates that own movie studios—which is to say, the six businesses he knows—“have control of the world. They control culture, they control ideas. And I think the revolt of September 11 was about, ‘F*** you! F*** your order.’ The Arabs have a point.”

His fellow panelist Christopher Hitchens reared in disgust at Stone's use of the word “revolt,” and the views Stone expressed would be equally revolting to 90 percent of Americans. But there's little question that a significantly larger number of people in show business probably share Stone's general outlook, though they might have better timing and more self-control than he.

The central aspect of the Oliver Stone worldview is its simplicity. Whatever the world's problems, they all have their origin in a military-industrial-intelligence-corporate complex that killed John Kennedy, involved us in Vietnam, got Richard Nixon elected, created the junk bond, and went to war with

112 JOHN PODHORETZ

Iraq for oil and Saudi Arabia. It's the philosophy of Walt Kelly's comic strip, "Pogo": "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

"IN THE FIFTIES, THERE WAS A BLACKLIST"

Others in Hollywood look at America and say, "We have met the enemy, and he is *them*"—and by them, they don't mean Osama bin Laden. Consider the post-September 11 work and comments of Aaron Sorkin, the most celebrated creative talent working in network television today. Sorkin wrote a special episode of his program, *The West Wing*, in which a group of high school students are delivered an hour-long tutorial on Islam and tolerance by the tolerant White House staff—even as the chief of staff is elsewhere in the building grilling a Muslim staff member who shares the same name with an Arab terrorist. Needless to say, the Muslim staff member is not a member of al-Qaeda. The White House chief of staff tells him to get back to work.

Sorkin's great, publicly expressed fear is not for his nation's safety or the challenge of defeating terrorism, but rather the American reaction to it. Following the public outcry against a snotty remark by television chat-show host Bill Maher (who's still on the air, by the way) and the news that two journalists (out of more than 100,000 people who make their living working for American publications) had been fired for writing material deemed insufficiently supportive of the war or the president, Sorkin appeared on a panel in Los Angeles and spoke against a looming evil. "We've heard this song before, right?" he said. "In the fifties, there was a blacklist, and it ruined lives."

Whereupon Sorkin turned into a Pastor Martin Niemoller of the New Millennium, complete with a "when they came for Bill Maher, I did not speak" trope: "If you're anything like me, when you watch any of the dozens of films that have been made

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 113

about the blacklist, you look at that and think, my God, if I could only transport myself back in time to this period and knock a few heads together and say, are you out of your mind? Well, we're there, right now."

The instinctive reaction among show people is to turn any event into a mirror through which they can continue to pay the most attention to their own reflections. The Emmy awards were twice postponed, in part because television royalty feared they posed too juicy a target for Osama bin Laden. This was true despite that fact that al-Qaeda had indicated on September 11 it was after far bigger game—the world financial system and the American government.

But it was unimaginable to people in Hollywood that they were not next—for don't they produce the very cultural exports that make Osama bin Laden hate the United States? Actually, no. What makes Osama bin Laden hate the United States is democracy, freedom, and Judeo-Christian values. It's mostly leftist academics like Benjamin Barber who are certain the Muslim world has turned against America because of music videos and sexy movies.

The last thing Hollywood can bear to believe about itself is that it is irrelevant—and the last thing its leading lights can bear to believe is that they do not understand what is happening and have little of moment to say about it. Therefore, they converted the events of September 11 into a melodrama with a familiar and comforting villain. For Aaron Sorkin, it was a blacklist melodrama. Oliver Stone saw the attacks as a noble "revolt" against the corporations who have recently failed to offer financing for some of his ruinously expensive motion-picture projects. Goldie Hawn wants a jihad against gossip. Barbra Streisand is waging a titanic struggle against Carl Jr.'s fried chicken.

To be fair, the show-business community in general joined

114 JOHN PODHORETZ

in the national celebration of the sacrifices of the firefighters and policemen in New York and Washington, the heroism of the men of Flight 93 who stormed the cockpit and brought the plane to ground, and the conduct of President Bush. But so unused is Hollywood to the notion of celebrating the generosity and openheartedness of Americans and America that it could not do so without adding a cautionary warning. In the world of popular culture, the initial instinct was—at least in part—to view the September 11 attacks less as a threat to the people of the United States that had to be answered with mighty force than as a threat to the Muslim minority in the United States from non-Muslim Americans. Now here was a threat about which there could be unanimous determination to do something.

“WE’RE GOING TO TRY TO DO SOMETHING”

On September 21, ten days after the attacks, all American broadcast networks canceled their prime-time programming to join in a two-hour telethon called “America: Tribute to Heroes.” George Bush had just spoken before Congress of “our mission and our moment,” turning the aftermath of September 11 into a righteous national cause. This was the moment for popular culture—a moment to speak to and capture a bit of the nation’s fragile spirit as only popular entertainers seem to be able to do in our time.

But there was none of Bush’s spirit on display in the telethon. “We’re going to try to do something,” said Tom Hanks in the first spoken words heard by 150 million people. That “something” was a threefold effort. First, a fund-raising appeal that resulted in donations exceeding \$150 million. Second, a heartfelt memorial to those who died in the attacks. And last

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 115

but certainly not least, a heartfelt appeal to Americans not to hurt Muslims.

The telethon had barely begun when the audience was treated to a lengthy film clip of Muslim children saying they were sorry for what had happened, and the tragically impaired Muhammad Ali muttering a condemnation of the attack and speaking in praise of Islam. Later, Julia Roberts insisted: “Please, please, let’s love one another. Reach out to each other. Be kind to each other.”

The notion that the shell-shocked people of the United States were intending to rise up and slaughter the Muslims in their midst had been belied by the national mood in the previous ten days. In a nation of 281 million people, there were 53 reports of “bias” incidents involving Muslims, with a single fatality involving a turbaned Sikh in Arizona. At the time of the telethon, it was still believed that as many as 10,000 people had died at the World Trade Center. And yet the telethon offered a near equivalence between the dead and the nonexistent danger to the Muslims living in the United States.

That nonexistent danger was so serious, in the eyes of Paramount Pictures CEO Sherry Lansing, that she told *Time* magazine she would refuse to make a movie with a Muslim bad guy—which would seem an odd decision to make only weeks after Muslim bad guys in real life had staged the worst attack on United States soil in 187 years. “You [hear about] these Afghan or Arab children who are getting picked on,” she said. “You don’t want this to be a country where we do this to innocent people.”

To be sure, Hollywood was not alone in its obsession with this notion. It was following along a favored subplot of the American news media. But still, the idea of combating prejudice and hate—as opposed to, say, joining in the muscular anger and resolve offered up by George W. Bush—must have been

116 JOHN PODHORETZ

reassuring in Hollywood. Such an approach represented a reassuring point of continuity between the new national understanding of the world forced upon Americans by Osama bin Laden and Hollywood's pre-attack understanding of America, its place in the world and what it means to be an American.

The problem is that the two cannot so easily be reconciled, if they can be reconciled at all.

BAD DAVID, GOOD GOLIATH

Since Vietnam cleaved the nation in two, the popular culture has presented a schizophrenic image of the United States. When its movies and television programs are not offering any particular message about American life, they portray a people living in casual luxury who happily take for granted the ease and comfort of their lives.

But when these pop-culture works do attempt to speak directly to the issues undergirding American life, they usually portray a nation whose institutions are at war with its people. Corporations, businesses, politicians, the military, and government officials are unfeeling at best and murderous at worst. They are monolithic and totalitarian.

This image of American life is not simply, as many conservatives would have it, a hangover from the anti-war movement in the 1960s. Hollywood's America is a more ideologically complex place—an amalgam of libertarian sentiment, right-wing anti-bureaucratic theory, and leftist anti-capitalism. These wildly contradictory perspectives do have a single common element: They claim to speak for every ordinary American against those who would oppress him in the pursuit of power.

Hollywood's present-day populism has an added kick to it. It's not simply good guys squaring off against bad guys. The bad guys must also be far more powerful than the good guys—

Hollywood Searches for a New Script 117

richer, more numerous and more impersonal. Good may eventually triumph over evil, but it's more exciting if the victory comes against all odds. This perspective animates not only the action movies that are Hollywood's mainstay but the mostly ill-informed political views of the pooh-bahs of the popular culture.

What happened on September 11 radically up-ended the Hollywood worldview. The worst crime ever committed against this nation was the result of an entirely different dynamic. By any reckoning, the United States is Goliath and Osama bin Laden is David. America is the giant, bin Laden the speck. And what America and Hollywood have learned is that David can be evil incarnate while Goliath can be innocent and good.

In the wake of the attacks, Hollywood toyed with various theories about the way it would have to change to fit the new national mood. No more violent films, some said; until it turned out that violent films were flying off the shelves at video-rental stores. No war movies, it was said; until a modest effort called *Behind Enemy Lines* made \$19 million in its first weekend in November.

Some of the ways in which Hollywood will be changing in the years to come are already evident. It will, for example, be many years before a man in any type of uniform is cast as a villain. A movie called *The Last Castle* saw to that. Set at a military prison with an evil warden holding the rank of colonel against whom a wonderful and wrongly imprisoned general stages a mutiny/riot, *The Last Castle* opened in October to box-office receipts of only \$17 million against production and marketing costs above \$70 million.

Dreamworks, the studio that made the picture, tried to sell *The Last Castle* as a deeply patriotic work—even though in the ads designed before September 11 the chief image was of the

118 JOHN PODHORETZ

American flag hanging upside down. It didn't work, to put it mildly. This effort at retrofitting was an act of desperation, but Hollywood's studios had no choice. With billions of dollars in expenditures and lost revenues on the line, they had and have to try and shoehorn the projects that were in the pipeline into the new national consensus.

It is impossible to say what will emerge anew from our popular culture after September 11—which is to say, the sorts of movies and television shows that will be produced for consumption in late 2002 and throughout 2003 and beyond. But I believe the stark reality of a nation attacked has shaken the popular culture to its foundations. American institutions were the object of the September 11 attacks, and Hollywood is sensing that it can no longer comfortably use them to serve as a standard-issue villain.

The popular culture needs a new plot line.