

CONTROVERSY ABOUT EFFECTS AS EFFECTS:
A SHORT-CIRCUITING MODEL*

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As we all know, some mass communications affect some people in some ways some of the time. This result seems rather trite. It disappoints the pre-scientific intuition that the mass media have quite specific effects, some positive, some negative. If we look at the models that lie behind the effects research we see that they operate with media and with messages, with individuals and with groups of individuals. Yet the presumption that social phenomena are aggregates of individual phenomena is not one to be made without supporting argument: the social effects of the mass media probably cannot be captured by individualistic theories. Were we to consult our intuitions a little further, we might be inclined to say what we expect from violent television, for example, is not the triggering of particular acts in particular individuals, but perhaps something more diffused like a rise in the rate of violent incident, coupled perhaps with a decline in the amount of affect violence evokes. Such intuitions, being inherently vague, would be very hard to quantify and test.

These sorts of 'Durkheimian' questions might lead us to study mass media effects in different ways, as acts of participation that could, with comparative statistics on saturation, participation rates, use-environment and so on, be related to degree of industrialization, class structure, social solidarity, collective representations.

A further step would be to study not the social phenomena of media effects, but the social phenomena of the per-

ception of effect and the various reactions of enthusiasm and dismay associated with these perceptions. Many consumers see the mass media in terms of expenditure, use of leisure time and the building of social bonds, much as the producers do. In the same society, public figures may see the mass media in terms of exploitation, manipulation and adverse effect. Again, comparative study might relate such reactions to divisions and tensions in the social structure, to the type of society, its degree of economic development, to the process of secularization, etc. Controversy about media effects is a social phenomenon that is itself deserving of explanation.

So we have research concentrating for the moment on direct and indirect effects models, and what I want to propose is a short-circuiting model.

Direct effect models treat the medium, the message and the effect as unproblematic categories. The viewer, exposed to the television commercial goes right out and buys the product; the adult or child exposed to a violent episode is caused to imitate it, or to discharge their own aggressions in action, or to achieve catharsis. Problems arise because of context and because media texts contain many messages, some hidden. Moreover, most experiments show the effects wearing off fairly rapidly.

Indirect effect models take account of all these problems by taking into account context, repetition, mediation (two-step and multiple-step flow), measurable shifts in behaviour (e.g. rates of violent crime). But here too there is a

focus on the transmitter/receiver nexus, even where context is added, i.e. effects are measured in relation to those who received the communication. What of the possibility that mass media effects are to be found as much among Ss who were not exposed to the transmission at all as among those who were? What about where the communication creates ripples far beyond those who saw it and far more deeply than on them? What about the communication that is only one among an unending series that echoes and resonates in memory and anticipation?

This leads to the short-circuiting model, i.e. the communication having an effect before it is transmitted, well beyond its recipients, and long after it is concluded. A way to highlight this is with mass communications that become themselves the objects of wide social controversy. The oversimplified and sentimental television series 'Roots', for example, cannot be adequately dealt with unless its general context of slavery and emancipation in the United States is understood, along with Reconstruction, segregation, desegregation, white guilt, and so on. 'Roots' made a splash and lots of ripples in that pool in ways that will affect those who never saw it.

In this paper I want to approach effects along these lines. Possibly the most intriguing social phenomena are those not intended by any of the actors involved. Interest in them goes back to Mandeville and Adam Smith, who argued that phenomena such as the market and its constancies come about although no-one intends them to and even although no-one

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possibly could. Thus we can begin by setting aside intentions on the part of media manipulators and media consumers, and we also set aside attitudinal differences in individuals. We stick to the social level.

Each of the mass media that has emerged in our society in the last one hundred years - newspapers, records, movies, radio and television - has provoked storms of controversy about effects. They have all been accused of having various malign effects; and they have all been held up as possible aids to enlightenment. Are such reactions merely manifestations of the consternation consequent on any social change, or is there something special about these media? What I want to show is that the products of these media enter into and affect the society quite directly, without being mediated through modification of the behaviour of the audience. This occurs in the following way: some item or general trend in a medium is singled out as controversial (often by another mass medium, e.g. by the press about movies, pop music or television; by television about the press; but also by public figures, such as politicians, preachers or pundits) and this makes the effects of the medium an issue of social concern. A controversy then ensues in the public arena.

A simple example, which will also dispel any lingering suspicion that the question always turns on bad effects the media are supposed to have, would be education. Much ink has been used to argue that the mass media offer exciting new ways to educate people about foreign lands, about history, about social problems, about the responsibility of citizens. Much

of this discussion took place in the U.S.A., where the commercial possibilities of the media were quickly siezed on while the educational possibilities were rather neglected. The different patterns of organizing and regulating broadcasting in the U.S.A., France and the U.K. are deeply revelatory of the balance of social forces in those different countries, and the complex interplay of politics, business, social class, hierarchy, tradition and ideology.

My own thoughts on the social significance of controversy about effects in general were provoked by the public and media reaction to certain American films shown in the United Kingdom. American films are made by many companies that do not have any deliberate coordination of their Americanism. Such coordination as there is clearly derives from the cultural surroundings in which those companies and their employees dwell. Whatever the explanation, American films were seen as culturally all of a piece by their foreign customers and they aroused general passions, including anti-American passions. They were denounced in England for the baneful accents, mispronunciations and solecisms they displayed; for their distorted values and skewed human relationships; and, especially, for the insult their unconscious chauvinism delivered to the chauvinism of their United Kingdom viewers. Hollywood became synonymous with crass vulgarity, self-glorification, insularity and cupidity (and, ambivalently, with glamour, success, professionalism, romance, freedom, fantasy, power). British actors and actresses who were lured to Hollywood seemed not just to be losing their values

but to be treacherous to what their homeland stood for.

Britain, in common with much of the old world, suffers from strong and ambivalent popular sentiments towards the U.S.A. Well aware that America's ideologues have defined the American identity by opposition to many of the values and traditions that govern social life in Europe, there exists in the popular consciousness both envy of America's wealth and proclaimed liberation from the bonds of tradition, class and hierarchy and a contempt for what is thought of as America's lack of positive social values except for money and chauvinism. In some ways inchoate, these anti-American sentiments are widely diffused around the world, and are evoked strongly by the very mass media products from America that are at the same time eagerly consumed: newspapers and magazines, popular songs, radio programmes, movies and television series.

A particular stimulus to anti-American sentiments were American war films. Many of these were purely commercial and absurdly patriotic and no-one need be surprised that they would feed the fires of anti-Americanism when shown abroad. But when quite earnest and well-intentioned dramatizations of combat projected American notions of courage and valour, American problems in socializing conscripts, or, worst of all, dramatized campaigns into which Hollywood actors were introduced, although the American presence in the campaign may have been at best nugatory, caused widespread resentment that soured Anglo-American relations. Thus Hollywood movies, aiming always at providing entertainment, could become the butts of controversy, political and legal discussion, diplomatic protest and popular resentment.

Although at the methodological level all this may involve individuals, at the theoretical level these effects are to be studied only as social.

These controversies need not involve harm to individuals, but international relations could be harmed, and indeed often were. There is a growing body of literature on the protests made to the United States by various countries, especially South American, against their nationals being stereotyped in Hollywood movies. Some countries have from time to time refused Hollywood filmmakers permission to film because of mistrust stemming from previous films. O.W.I. made strenuous efforts during the second World War to have Hollywood mend its ways, to develop greater sensitivity to foreign susceptibilities, with indifferent success. An industry that so cavalierly stereotyped its own citizens found it hard to rectify the stereotyping of foreigners. Instead, restitution was attempted in the form of movie 'tributes' to different countries, celebrating them in song and dance: for example the spate of films about South America at the height of the Good Neighbor policy efforts after the war, and pro-Russian films after 1941. But we see from the serious diplomatic incident recently created between Britain and Saudi Arabia over a film dramatization of the scandal in the latter country of an adulterous romance between a princess and a commoner how the power of movies to create rather large-scale social ripples is anything but lost.

So, individual movies, or whole series of unrelated movies, or even the attitudes implicit in a country's movies can become the foci of public controversy and I think we can call these

'effects'. They are not often measurable effects. The tools we need to approach them are those of the most venerable of the social sciences: history. In what follows I shall present a case study in two controversies involving single films, where the focus of one is anti-Americanism in Britain; the other is the secularization process in America and Britain. In each case the films fuelled the controversy, but did not bring it into being. Each film can be used as a bench-mark by historians in considering the wider issues. With Objective Burma we can see how, at a crucial period of Anglo-American military cooperation the possibility of the relationship souring was real. The fuss over the film is initiated by an American officer concerned at the damage a slighting American film might cause. Life of Brian shows how far the process of secularization has eroded many of the sanctions, political, legal and informal, that protected religious institutions and susceptibilities.

Objective Burma was a Hollywood war film that provoked such a rumpus, ranging from the popular prints to the House of Lords, that it was withdrawn from distribution in Britain for seven years. By 1952 passions had cooled, and the film's release passed without incident. What sort of a film was it? It was a standard Hollywood war film of 1944, produced by Jerry Wald for Warner Brothers, directed by Raoul Walsh and starring the Americanized Australian actor Errol Flynn. Its intention was to be a sober tribute to paratroopers. It is entirely without home life scenes, without women or romance, and presents itself as a semi-documentary dramatization of the sorts of things that went on in the India-China-Burma theatre. A small batch of para-

troopers is dropped behind enemy lines to blow up Japanese radar in advance of a major invasion. The group is humanised with an aging war correspondent, and certain soldier-types (farmboy, Italian, Jewish, youthful, silent Ghurka, etc.). The mission succeeds but the retrieval of the men fails and they have to conduct a fighting retreat to a rendezvous with the main force.

The production files on the film show no awareness whatsoever of the crucial issue that was to engulf the film in controversy. To put it simply: there was only a very small American presence in the Burma campaign, mainly airmen; the overwhelming majority of ground troops came from Britain, her colonies and dominions. The actual fighting was bitter and costly; conditions in the jungle were atrocious. The British were affronted that one of their major war efforts should be portrayed as derring-do exploits by a group of imaginary Americans led by the star of many swashbuckling movies. Given the record of Warner Brothers it is clear no offense was intended. Warners was the most liberal studio in Hollywood, democratic in politics, noted for films dramatizing serious social themes such as gangsterism, prison reform, juvenile delinquency, lynch-law, the rise of Nazism, and so on. They had cooperated with Roosevelt's suggestion that they make a pro-Russian movie by filming Mission to Moscow in 1943 - a decision they were to have a lot of trouble explaining to a rampaging HUAC in 1947. Military advisers were seconded to the Objective Burma unit, but they were American, and seem not to have had close enough experience of Burma to know that no Southern California locations would at all approximate the Burmese jungle. Jerry Wald, the producer, and the three main

writers - Ranald MacDougall, Lester Cole and Alvah Bessie - all had impeccable liberal credentials, to say the least. Yet the resultant film would be found deeply offensive by America's main ally, would provoke a classic editorial in the London Times, would add fuel to the fire of anti-Americanism, and would make Errol Flynn and his posturing a standing joke in the British parts of the English-speaking world for years to come.

Objective Burma was shot between May and August 1944 and released in January of 1945. The reviews in The New York Times, The New York Herald Tribune and in Time magazine were all favourable, singling out the vigour of the direction by Raoul Walsh and the authenticity of the jungle scenes, photographed by James Wong Howe. The film played in the United States through February and March, was a modest success, and was forgotten.

It was to be released in Great Britain in the autumn. Quite suddenly, an uproar began. Apparently the film was screened to troops in the India-China-Burma theatre, and on May 30th 1945, Reuters carried a story from advanced headquarters, Burma, to the effect that an American glider officer serving in Burma had written to the services newspaper SEAC that the film was a 'travesty of the truth'.

Before chronicling the further history of that controversy, let me say something about Monty Python's Life of Brian. I shall not symmetrically relate this to anti-British sentiment in the United States, of which there is anyway no longer very much. Monty Python's Flying Circus was a highly successful BBC television comedy series produced by a collective of six comedians. It has

been widely shown in the U.S.A., and developed something of a cult following despite, or because of, its irreverent, surrealist and occasionally scatological character. These ambitious young comedians decided it was time to make a frontal assault on religion and religious movies. It was reported that because of the irreverent nature of the material they had some difficulty in financing the project and when one backer, E.M.I., withdrew, the film was completed with money from the popular singer George Harrison. The film was picked up for distribution in America by Warner Brothers which rushed it out in August, ahead of its British opening, and soon after Public Television had shown a documentary about its making. When a storm of controversy arose around it there was little reason to doubt that this was the intent. The popular sentiments aroused had I think much to do with the decline of organized religion and the general process of secularization in the U.S.A. Organized^{religion}/is still a powerful force, a dominant one in some parts of the country, and something to which most public figures find it expedient to pay at least lip-service. Mockery of religion, a flourishing tradition in Europe, is not so common in America. Films, television series, and stand-up comics rarely lampoon religion as such. When religion is attacked it has more to do with fraud and hypocrisy (viz. Elmer Gantry, Wise Blood) than with pomposity, power and reaction. Life of Brian, then, set out to provoke both those who take organized religion seriously and also those who take the Cecil B. DeMille style of Hollywood religious film seriously. It did not fail to do so.

Let me now set out some of the comparative reflections these

films suggest.

First, they suggest a whole area of censorship that has yet to be properly researched, namely, self-censorship brought about by unofficial and quasi-official pressure. In 1945 Warner Brothers felt it necessary to dissociate themselves from Objective Burma by suspending its release in the U.K., whereas in 1979, the same company could defend Life of Brian in similar terms while doing nothing else except perhaps crying all the way to the bank. Legal scholars distinguish between private ordering and public ordering in the matter of censorship. Public ordering is legislation and administration by statutory bodies. Private ordering is all kinds of regulation and certification carried out by privately owned and controlled bodies. These films highlight the gray area between the two. Obscene, seditious or blasphemous materials are prohibited by statute in most jurisdictions, although the tradition of free speech is often so strong that these are rarely invoked. Private ordering is usually undertaken to forestall the intervention of public bodies, and so to protect profitability. In the case of Objective Burma, however, it was the concern of neither public nor private ordering to consider foreign susceptibilities: or, rather, while the issue was a factor in private calculation it was both a low priority and poorly researched. Life of Brian emerged in a totally changed situation: the collapse of legitimacy suffered by most censorship institutions in the U.S.A. greatly encourages an attitude of 'let's see what we can get away with'. It would be naive, I think, to assume that this attitude stems from a deep commitment to freedom of expression. Naive because it is clear that controversy is a form of

publicity, so the art of the thing is to be shocking enough to make waves, but not so shocking that either public or private ordering initiatives are reinvigorated.

Second, if one is interested in the impact of film on society, as well as the perhaps related but not identical problem of the impact of film on people, the question arises: is society the same thing as the people in it? People are part of society, certainly; but society is a lot else besides the people in it. What other dimensions, then, must research be pursued in if we are to study the impact of film on society? Well, there is clearly the impact of the film industry as part of the economy in general, and as one part of the economy of show business, and as one part of the economy of Los Angeles. Again, there is clearly the impact of the fact that in communication across the land people gather themselves together in groups we call 'audiences' to see films. The fact of these collective representations as well as their content needs to be looked at. And, finally, there are the many studies of film content and the conjectures about its relation to society, whether movies are a mirror up to society, a window on society, flickering shadows cast by society, society dreaming itself, a hypodermic stuck into society's buttock, or what not.

But our short-circuiting provokes other problems. A film's content is not a given. For one thing, selective perception is at work and people see what is not there, as well as miss seeing what is. As if this isn't bad enough, there is more. The mechanisms of promotion and publicity make films so 'visible' that people get to know about them and even decide what to think about

them who have never seen them at all. This may seem implausible but it is not. I know many people who dislike John Wayne's film The Green Berets because it is in favour of the Vietnam war; they know this even though they have not seen the film; indeed, it was because they knew this that they did not go to see the film. Protests against both Objective Burma and Life of Brian were entered by people who admitted they had yet to see the film. This is by no means unreasonable. I can quite see how one might be involved in protesting a film and refusing to take the risk of being upset by going to see it, or contributing to its takings by buying a ticket.

Withal, the controversy takes on a life of its own going far beyond those who have seen it, because it is embroiled in wider social issues than movies, yet the interest generated can have its effect on movies, can also raise public consciousness, form images, precipitate further events.

So, in the matters of self-censorship and effects on public policy these two case studies are significant. I suggest that Objective Burma unwittingly displays certain kinds of thoughtlessness and braggadocio in American popular culture that play their part in fostering anti-American sentiments. I suggest that Life of Brian reveals just how far the dismantling and delegitimation of the censoring mentality has proceeded in the United States, and just how little power the forces of organised religion are able to wield in secular matters. Where once the Catholic influence permeated the Production Code and its Administration, where the production files on Objective Burma contain twenty-five letters from Joseph Breen quibbling right down to an issue such as whether the

word 'jerk' can be used, and yet totally missing what was to become the main issue of controversy round the film, not to mention a racial slur on the Japanese: Life of Brian, for its part, has frontal nudity, profanity, salaciousness, swearing and blasphemy and it is merely classified as R. Furthermore, Life of Brian is a British movie with the kind of humour and accents that it was once alleged Americans would find unintelligible. Instead, the anarchic, vulgar, off-colour and disrespectful tradition of British humour is finding an audience in the United States, even on television. This reflects a process I have elsewhere called the decline of American provincialism.

These sorts of processes, anti-Americanism, the power of religion, the secularizing of the state, cultural sophistication take place in a wider public arena than that of movies and moviegoers, and it seems to me that in being foci of controversy movies may be having just as much if not more social impact as in for example perpetuating stereotypes.

The Objective Burma Controversy

Writing in the services newspaper Seac, Lt.-Colonel William H. Taylor, Jr., of the U.S.A.F. said in part:

It is a disturbing thought that this meretricious hodge-podge, which implies that Burma was invaded and liberated by a force of American parachutists, American glider-borne troops, two Gurkha guides and a Chinese officer, will be seen by thousands of men of the 14th Army, who know better.

The thought that it has already been seen by millions of American civilians, whose impression of the Burma campaign must consequently be irreparably and viciously garbled, is enraging.

The thought that it may be seen by the mothers, fathers, friends and relatives of the many Allied troops, British, West African and Burmese, who have lost their lives in the slow and painful struggle to clear Burma of the Jap-

anese invader, is sickening.

Taylor suggests that the film will jeopardize inter-Allied relationships. I have yet to track down who Taylor was, and whether he was writing only for himself. What he said was immediately picked up by British newspapers, and I have clippings from both The Daily Telegraph and the Manchester Guardian showing this. The critic of The Daily Telegraph had already written about what he called the 'long series of affronts to truth and the Empire's fighting men' perpetrated by American war films. It has even become the practice, he suggests, for Hollywood to make two versions of its films, one for Britain, shorn of criticism and embellished with references to British achievements, the other...for America and the rest of the world, in which British achievements are wholly or almost wholly ignored. So the pot of controversy was already boiling in May, four months before Objective Burma was to be released in Britain.

One notes the factors. The film purports to treat of real events; makes use of genuine combat footage; focusses on American personnel (ostensibly for dramatic purposes); mentions real persons like Mountbatten and Stilwell; the British are anyway very touchy about Yankee upstaging, i.e. they suspect the Americans are trying to grab the credit and look for evidence of this. Summing up a strong feeling at the time, the respected critic of The Daily Telegraph, Campbell Dixon, wrote:

This distortion and denigration of the British Empire's efforts, in all theatres of war, is arousing natural resentment. There is a feeling that if Washington will not take action it is time London did. No one would welcome it more than serving Americans who know the facts.

At the time, the director of publicity for Warners in London is quoted as having said: 'The picture is based on one incident in the Burma campaign...It is not intended to present a complete picture of the Burma war.' A prefatory note appears to have been tacked on to the film before it opened in London, that stressed that the incident depicted was typical of many Allied efforts.

When the film opened, the London critics damned it to a man. They found its appropriation, even by suggestion, of a British-dominated theatre of war offensive. They sneered at the use of Errol Flynn. They found the simulated jungle resembled pleasant woodland glades, and the atrocious fighting conditions represented only by the odd slap at an invisible fly. One or two found the action scenes effective. But interest centred around the felt slight to British efforts. So great was the hoo-hah that memory has exaggerated it. In his memoirs, Errol Flynn says that the Lord Chamberlain (the British theatre censor) yanked the film after the first showing. As we shall see, what really happened is that the film played for a week but then was voluntarily withdrawn by Warners and its general release cancelled. Flynn also manages to claim creative credit for some of the touches in the film and cooks up an imaginary technical adviser, a Britisher, Major Watkins. In fact the technical advisers were two American paratroop officers, Majors Galbreath and Taylor. Reminding us that he was himself an Australian whose education was completed in Britain, Flynn writes:

Actually Objective Burma ended with a shot showing a horde of American planes flying triumphantly over

Burma. That might have been good for American morale at the time, but it sure made the English feel bad (p. 253).

Flynn seems to have taken well to his name becoming a standing joke such that whenever there was trouble in the world, people would say, not to worry, send for Errol Flynn.

The critic of the biggest circulation tabloid, The Daily Mirror, suggested that Warners withdraw the film. Stories surfaced that the head of the Associated British cinemas chain was having second thoughts about general release. Critics of other newspapers reported letters arriving from soldiers and ex-soldiers in the India, Burmese and China theatres protesting the film. Some writers pointed to Warner Brothers' excellent record as a reason for forgiving them this film.

One suspects that Associated British decided not to risk a general release, and the easiest way to break the contract was for Warners to withdraw the film, which is what they did. Max Milder, Warners managing director in London, issued a two-page press release that withdrew the film in one sentence and used the remainder of its space to defend the company, the film, entertainment, the purity of intention and the fact that it had

played to bigger audiences than any previous Errol Flynn picture. Probably forty per cent of our patrons have been British soldiers - the largest troop percentage in the theatre's history. Not one word of criticism or protest has been expressed by them. They have enjoyed the film as dramatic entertainment and have disregarded any suggestion of adverse propaganda.

Despite this uncompromising defense, he announced that its release was to be suspended. Thirty four years later in the United States

Warners' representatives would defend Life of Brian in the same terms, but then take no action to withdraw or modify it at all.

As a postscript to the incident, the film was finally released in Britain in 1952 when Errol Flynn was over there shooting The Master of Ballantrae. Seven years after the furor, London's critics, many of them the same ones, could no longer quite see what all the fuss was about back in 1945. By then it could be seen as part of genre film-making: the all-male action film, derivative of the western. They could also see that the genre conventions of the war film were artificial and formulaic, either of the moulding-the-raw-GIs-into-a-fighting-unit formula, or the carrying-out-of-a-dangerous-mission formula. Objective Burma combined both. When these films starred Randolph Scott, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, Robert Taylor or Errol Flynn their intrinsic connection with Hollywood and its conventions was manifestly stronger than their extrinsic connections to the real war in the real world.

Be that as it may, Objective Burma had brought to a head a growing resentment in Britain and its Empire. Objectively, it was a pretty difficult situation to swallow. The British, rulers of an Empire on which the sun never set, had for a second time to rely upon American men and materiel to help them win a world war. When the ally does not live by the values of aristocracy, imperturbability, understatement and modesty, but rather postures in a 'let's go over and clean up that mess in Europe spirit', and adopts as an anthem Irving Berlin's chauvinistic 'Over There', the galling necessity of needing help at all wrangles all the more.

Damn it, the Yanks were coming and the necessity of it was humiliating enough without their rubbing it in. Even Errol Flynn could see in retrospect that the rarefied atmosphere of Hollywood was not a good place from which to think clearly about the sensibilities of the foreigners who were going to see American films that portrayed them, caricatured them, slighted them, and so on.

Anti-Americanism is a world-wide phenomenon, and one that, as recent events in the Middle East make clear, is alive and kicking. What the Objective Burma controversy illustrates is just how naively America cooperates with its enemies and embarrasses its friends. Not just Hollywood, but the most liberal and socially-conscious studio in Hollywood, spends thousands on research, re-takes, elaborate location work, weapons accuracy and such like, yet makes a film that will enrage influential and ordinary people alike in the allied nation closest to America in history and culture. American popular culture of that time has a parochialism, an insularity, as well as a vulgarity and crassness, that is magnified in Hollywood, a community that was itself isolated from the centre of sophisticated and cosmopolitan American culture on the Eastern seaboard. It should not be forgotten, I think, that intellectual interest in American movies is a relatively recent phenomenon. That in the heyday of Hollywood, intellectuals ignored American films because of the sorts of faults I have mentioned. I still laugh when I remember the story that when the British movie mogul J., Arthur Rank visited the U.S.A. in 1945 to initiate an aggressive sales drive for British movies he was answered with the argument that

his movies wouldn't play in Peoria unless they had subtitles. One wonders how all those British actors survived in Hollywood, and how it is that Monty Python, Benny Hill and Dave Allen can now be enjoyed on television. One factor, the decline of American provincialism, I have discussed elsewhere.

News of the whole controversy around Objective Burma crossed back over the Atlantic. The New York Times magazine had an exchange between a British commentator and Bosley Crowther on the alleged artificiality, bad taste and self-congratulation of American war films. Variety even hinted that the clamour about American films might be an orchestrated campaign to give J. Arthur Rank more leverage (Marxists are not the only ones who believe in economism). But apart from Anglo-American relations in general, it was also pointed out in a magisterial editorial in London's Times, and by Campbell Dixon, that Objective Burma fostered ignorance. A Gallup poll apparently revealed that many Americans were under the impression that their country fought alone in the S.W. Pacific, Burma, Tunisia and Italy, making some wonder whether American films might be the sole source of all the contemporary history a great many Americans ever learn. The key to this, of course, is that unless people are disabused of such notions, self-aggrandizement and chauvinism can flourish unchecked.

The Life of Brian Controversy

We shift from an incident lost to memory that has to be reconstructed using the materials of history, to one so recent it has scarcely run its course. Opening in mid-August of 1979, Life of Brian got reviews that compared it with previous Python movies, mentioned the thick British accents, and warned the sensitive that it was

in bad taste and liable to offend them. Variety on August 22 had already reported on the controversy surrounding the film in Britain and that it was being referred to the President of the British Board of Film Censors and to the Director of Public Prosecutions (roughly equivalent to the Attorney-General) to see whether its blasphemy was not too much. In the end the British classified it as AA, which admits anyone over 14, on grounds that it was a lampoon. Without seeing it one knew what to expect: the Pythons, like many British humourists, regard religion as a legitimate target of satire and facetiousness in a way that American comedians do not.

What transpired can only be called a wave of inter-faith protests from Catholics, Protestants and Jews. No doubt Christians were offended by such scenes as a squabble breaking out among listeners to the Sermon on the Mount because they cannot hear what is being said, or the idea that the Biblical story might be a series of idiotic coincidences. Jews could take offence at the stoning arranged because someone had spoken the name of God, which degenerates into a quarrel about what stones to use and who goes first.

The Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting of the Roman Catholic Church sent a formal complaint to the Motion Picture Association of America about the film having been given a seal. Jack Valenti, head of the MPAA, while acknowledging the tastelessness and the offense to religious sensibilities, had to remind the Rev. Sullivan, director of the Office, that the function of the rating system is to rate, not to place value or take a moral position.

True to form, Warner Brothers issued a statement on August 27 that says in part that it regrets that the film gives offense but that 'It was never our intention to offend anyone's beliefs' - it may not have been their intention, but then they distributed, they did not make, the film. They comfort themselves that what they call a whimsical, friendly spoof has received critical acclaim - and lines at the box-office. In its inimitable style Variety reports that the film has racked up a boffo gross of \$706,103 in eighteen days. ¶ A prominent Lutheran broadcaster terms the film blasphemous, crude, profane, grossly offensive.

What is happening in a world where nothing is sacred anymore? Where faith is publicly ridiculed, mocked and scorned for the entertainment dollar?

The dilemma is even to talk about the film in such terms these days may give it more publicity and hence success. Like the Catholics, what the Lutherans are bothered about is a world in which they no longer have power, a world in which an affront like Life of Brian can thrive, and they have no recourse either to public or to private ordering. Prior censorship bodies are no longer in place, public authorities are wary of attempting prosecution under common law as movies now have the protection of speech. It is open to objectors to denounce and even to picket, but they know full well that this may pull down ridicule and resistance, as well as publicity, on their heads.

Rabbi Abraham Hecht, speaking on behalf of one thousand rabbis of the groups Rabbinical Alliance of America, Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada and the Rabbinical Council of Near Eastern Sephardic Communities of America found the film

blasphemous, sacreligious and an incitement to possible violence. 'Blasphemy and sacrilege are not protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution', he added, a little ominously. In the past Jewish groups have rarely made a fuss about films, unlike Christian groups, the last being against Jesus Christ Superstar for anti-semitism. In Life of Brian Rabbi Hecht is particularly exercised by the stoning scene.

The Catholics get back into the act and single out the crucifixion ending: having the nihilistic song 'Always look on the bright side of life'

juxtaposed against the very image of redemption
(the cross) becomes something intolerable.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York condemns it formally as blasphemy for holding the person of Christ up to ridicule. And so it went on. The film was indeed not being shown at various places around the country, especially Georgia, South Carolina and Louisiana, but in large urban centres young people flocked to it and enjoyed it with much laughter and glee.

The outcome has been suggested to be a bad effect on the religious upbringing and attitudes of young people; the realisation that

We are reaching the point in the late twentieth century when the religious community must face the fact, regrettably, that the entertainment industry will not likely prevent the creation of such material;

and that some people will do anything for money as long as it does not land them in jail. These are earth-shaking lessons for the religious community to be learning at this late date. Hollywood once made a film called Nothing Sacred, but that was in 1937; those religious leaders who cited the biblical spectaculars of

Cecil B. DeMille of those based on books by Lloyd C. Douglas as the good old days open themselves to further ridicule. Religion was used when it served Hollywood's commercial purposes, and its hokiness was there because that was what they thought was needed to get away with it.

But Monty Python are not part of the Hollywood establishment; indeed, they even instituted a court case in New York to prevent re-editing of their shows by American television, fearing censorship as well as artistic damage. So when three of them toured the United States in October on behalf of Life of Brian one could predict their attitude. They flatly denied that there was no intention to offend. Affirmed a desire to be outrageous. Affirmed that their target was less religion as such than organized religion, ironically, exactly the sorts of groups that were protesting their film. Probed about their satire on Jews, the director Terry Jones responded with an allusion to a deleted sequence, possibly apocryphal, in which a fascist Jewish group sets up a Jewish state with concentration camps for the Samaritans: In the end, he said, we'd like to put back a scene that would have really offended the Jewish community.

In Mel Brooks' film The Producers, the impoverished theatrical agent Zero Mostel and his accountant henchman Gene Wilder determine to exploit the ultimate tax loss scheme, by putting on a sure-fire flop show. Hence they select the most fatuous, tasteless, offensive and awful script they can lay their hands on, 'Springtime for Hitler'. Of course, the show is a huge success. Brooks' career of making comedy from bad taste was well-launched in the land of Lenny Bruce, another practitioner of the art, and

which now sustains 'Saturday Night Live', a show that strives to give offense to everybody.

Upshot

It is one function of the media to stir up controversy, to focus issues. I use 'function' here in a non-intentional sense: it is what they do, not what they intend. Objective Burma crystallised anti-Americanism and resentment in Britain at the end of a debilitating war and perhaps finally signalled to Hollywood that the British public, indeed much of the world public for American movies, like the hero of Network, was mad as hell and not going to take it any more. Hollywood needed to be sent such signals if it was to flourish in the revived international trade in films after the war. Countries like India, Mexico and the Philippines had banned and protested in vain. States like Britain had to find channels for the resentment they felt at becoming client states of the U.S.A. The effect of such a film had to do with the controversy it entered and fed.

Life of Brian focussed the resentment of once-powerful organised religion in America at its increasing powerlessness. It made clear that where once official and semi-official bodies would collude with organized religion to protect the sensibilities of its adherents they no longer would or could do so. It went a step further along the road towards dismantling of American cultural parochialism in that European attitudes of scorn and ridicule towards religion, common for hundreds of years, were elbowing their way into a major mass medium and finding a warm and lucrative reception.