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Jingo Unchained

By Toby Miller

Martha Bayles's *Through a Screen Darkly* starts with an anecdote about "my interpreter and I" in Indonesia. That sets the tone for what follows: a *tour d'horizon* of how others' comprehension of the United States is disfigured by the gap between reel Americans and real ones, and what to do about it.

*Through a
Screen
Darkly:
Popular
Culture,
Public
Diplomacy,
and
America's
Image
Abroad*
By Martha
Bayles
(Yale
University
Press)

The tour incarnates the gulf between public intellectuals like Bayles and scholars in media, communication, and cultural studies. The latter don't write with the sufficiently sweeping, Olympian generalizations needed by the bourgeois media to qualify for the interview circuit. Both sides are diminished.

Bayles, who teaches humanities at Boston College, begins with a 1950s white-picket-fence account of the U.S. populace undifferentiated by immigration status, class origin, family background, racial identity, sexual and gender orientations, religious belief, or any other factor. She refers to what some would view as middle-class, suburban lifestyles and values but what she appears to view as universally "American." They include positive attitudes toward monogamous sexuality and traditional institutions.

So what does bind "us" together? I ask as a U.S. citizen who does not share the things ascribed to "us" by Bayles. We Americans are, she announces, positive and pragmatic, full of "hope and prudence ... the American ethos." Collectively, we seek

freedom and democracy for the world; military domination and corporate control, it seems, are simply side effects.

When others encounter us directly, that ethos is supposedly what they experience. But the association with us of those practical ideals is undermined in the international imagination by our exported popular culture.

Armed with this foreknowledge, Bayles consults various public-opinion polls to gauge the negative image of the United States overseas. Then she travels through India, China, Indonesia, Europe, and the Arab world (Latin America doesn't rate a visit) with interpreters who enable her to speak with media executives and scholars about this problem and try to comprehend how "authoritarian societies" perversely rely on American entertainment to instill negative attitudes toward us. The remainder of her book is a critique of Hollywood texts and recommendations for cultural policy, from broadcasting to liberal-arts education.

The main question she poses is a good one: What's wrong with Hollywood? Her answer is threefold. Mainstream American cinema, video games, and satellite and cable television embody the 1960s-70s counterculture's legacy of rebelliousness, but shorn of its political animation and suffused exclusively with its desire to shock. Second, new technology makes media regulation of content implausible. And finally, with the erosion of federal support for public diplomacy, America sends out messages that are not about the good things we do—the avant-garde, classical and jazz music, TV talent quests—but focus instead on schlock, violence, sex, and base competitive instincts.

Bayles is especially opposed to the valorization of sexual autonomy and rejection of conventional institutions. This leads to a denunciation of *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Desperate Housewives*. She says *Friends*, for example, kept families "strictly offstage." Try telling that to Christina Pickles, nominated for an Emmy for her role as a mother of two main characters (Monica and Ross), yet strangely absent from this account. Bayles attributes the lack of family-life depictions to the presence of gay writers, whose exclusion from conventional families supposedly alienates them from this profound truth of American life. Uh-huh.

hrough a Screen Darkly emerges from a venerable pop-culture-

Tbashing lineage. Having watched a tragedy, the Athenian lawmaker Solon asked its author, the poet Thespis, whether he was "ashamed to tell such lies in front of so many people."

Leaping forward to the 12th century, John of Salisbury warned of the negative impact of juggling, mime, and acting on "unoccupied minds ... pampered by the solace of some pleasure." When printed books proliferated in the early 18th century, critics feared that real learning would be overwhelmed. Hollywood's impact abroad is just the latest suspect because it has been the entertainment bodega since the second half of the 20th century.

Bayles's method is to adopt two or three old sayings about the American public, claim that these represent abiding verities, explain how they once found cultural expression, complain that they no longer do so, analyze briefly dozens of pop-cultural culprits, then summarize the way they slander and slight the real United States.

The material on cultural policy tendentiously maintains that the culture wars destroyed public diplomacy and fails to engage core debates investigated by dozens of distinguished analysts on high versus popular culture, the creative industries, and important exceptions to Anglo-Hollywood hegemony like the cultural cross-pollination between the United States and Latin America.

A consideration of approaches from cultural theory toward understanding the new international division of cultural labor, ethnographic analyses of reception, developments in the international political economy of the media, ties between Hollywood and empire, how popular culture can point to or distract from the real-life disaster epic of global warming? You won't find any of that here.

Bayles has labored long and hard on her analysis, but it amounts to a fleshing out of the simplistic hypothesis she was clearly wedded to from the start. Until they wrestle with more compelling, nuanced studies by influential scholars including Aida Hozic, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Néstor García Canclini, George Yúdice, and Lary May, Bayles and fellow pundit-scholars are destined to venture through a screen dimly.

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co-author, editor, and co-editor of more than 30 books, including Global Hollywood (British Film Institute, 2001), Blow Up the Humanities (Temple University Press, 2012), and Greening the Media (Oxford University Press, 2012).
