

CHAPTER 1

THE *WHAT THE BLEEP* PHENOMENON

“Nobody in their right mind would have financed this movie.”

Will Arntz

Financier and Co-Director of *What The Bleep Do We Know?!*

Like it or not, it is nothing short of astounding that this film got made at all. That a novice triumvirate of Hollywood outsiders got it made, got it seen and have made a handy profit without a distribution deal — after getting ripped to shreds by some critics — is a complete miracle. As if depicting the mind-bogglingly complex subjects of quantum physics, neuroscience and spirituality in a low budget feature length film was not enough of a challenge! Yet, within the strictures of its cinematic format, **What The Bleep Do We Know?!** succeeds impressively in presenting many of these ideas.

Not everyone agrees with me. Many reviewers found it easier to be contemptuous and disparaging rather than to take the film’s intriguing ideas into consideration. Ignorant critics trashed the scientists interviewed in the film, apparently having no time to research who and what they were writing about before spewing something nasty in time for their deadlines. For example, Candace Pert, Ph.D., who is a Research Professor of Physiology and Biophysics at Georgetown University Medical School, the author of successful books on these subjects, who triggered a revolution in neuroscience while still in her mid-20s and who may yet be the person who discovers

the cure for AIDS, is identified as “someone’s completely random grandma wearing a tie-dye,” who is “treated on screen as [an expert].”¹

THE CULTURAL DIVIDES

Public reaction to **What The Bleep Do We Know!?** has revealed some interesting divisions in America, of which we may not have been previously aware. Where the second Bush presidency had already fueled the cultural rift between religious and non-religious communities, the reaction to the film has exposed a significant divide within the non-religious sector; namely that between the atheists and the spiritualists. It has also underscored a disconnect between secularist Hollywood and two potentially lucrative markets that are not being served: the religious and the spiritualist. And as we have seen, possible generational issues have been exposed, where Gen X and Generation Y viewers may have been bummed out by flashbacks of their acid casualty elders, in the Ur-Boomer stylings of some of the interviewees.

This was bound to happen in a film that endeavors to scientifically explain spirit and to spiritualize science. The science press, which is mostly atheist, has ravaged the film because it does not welcome the association of science with spirituality (and especially science with Ramtha), this despite the fact that most of the science discussed in the movie is mainstream. Religious people are understandably offended by the film’s potshots at organized religion, in addition to disagreeing with the mysticism the film promotes. However, secular spiritual seekers, who welcome the aid of modern science to help them to understand their inner lives are overjoyed to buy multiple copies of the DVD to give to their friends and family:

[*What The Bleep*] served to bring into relief the need for constructive dialogue about the relationship among religion, philosophy, and science. When these diverse fields intersect today, the debate that follows is often stunted and acrimonious. Those with spiritual concerns claim that science extends beyond its rightful bounds and in effect disenchant the world. For their part, many scientists are reluctant to explore the philosophical implications of their work and content to ignore any metaphysical questions that might arise from it.²

There must be something unusual going on when many people are buying multiple copies of the film at the same time as divergent groups are saying things like the following about it:

Columbia University mathematics professor:

...it was certainly the stupidest thing I can remember seeing in a movie theater, and that's saying quite a lot (I see a lot of movies...). The whole thing is really moronic beyond belief.³

Christian viewer in Minnesota: Our beliefs are called "backwoods" and "ugly." We are made fun of for believing that God could be so personal that He cares whether we sin or not. For, according to them, not only is the "real" god so great that he doesn't care about us piddley mortals, "how can you sin against a god so great as he who creates all this" but there is no such thing as "good" and "bad." Let's not even go that route....

If I can convince at least two Christians NOT to see this movie, I will feel like the sixteen dollars

we gave those people to make fun of our beliefs will cancel itself out. Please let me know by response if you won't see this movie, I feel like I was duped! I wish I had had all this information before I went to see a movie I thought was about SCIENCE.⁴

THE SILENT MAJORITY?

Who are the takers of this film, who are neither the Ivy League university mathematician nor the Middle American Christian, cited above? In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, physicist Fred Alan Wolf, who appears in the film, offered his views:

Wolf: When the film opened in Portland [OR], I was there to answer questions from the audience, and I could tell that these were the type of people who are the true silent majority in this country. America today isn't in the religious Right — even though there are millions of people in that movement. It isn't in the antireligious Left, either. It's in the center, and I think those are the people who caught on to the film...the spiritual experience is really what people hunger for, and I think the film addressed that hunger. People came away from it with that exaltation or excitement that comes when you have a spiritual awakening. Movies can sometimes provide that kind of opening in people, and this one did that.⁵

“The center” can be anybody...

Arntz: Yeah, preaching to the choir is great and everything, but the huge payoff with the film is the people in the mainstream. We used to tell everyone

to tell all their friends they think would be into the film to go see it. And then we stopped saying that. Now we say, Tell everyone because you can never tell who's going to respond.

Interviewer: Any unexpected fans?

Arntz: A friend was in a Gold's Gym in L.A. and he was walking by a couple of really big weightlifter guys there — you know, with muscles on top of muscles. They were talking about the film and how great it was. My friend just kind of stopped and thought, “Holy Moses, I would never have thought these big beef-packers would be interested in this film.” But there's a lot of people my friend calls metaphysical lost souls. People who, once they get exposed to this information, immediately get it. And they go with it. But this stuff's never been presented in a way like we're doing — accessible and kind of fun — and it doesn't have the dogma. It's safe. It's not like attending an encounter group where everyone is going to turn and stare at you and say, “What do you think?” It's a movie.

Co-Director Mark Vicente offers this view:

Vicente: People are so tired of living this old reality they've been fed. They're tired of trying all these things that haven't worked. And when they think about their problems, they feel helpless and don't think they have the power to change. What this film does is say: There is a science and there are ideas that are so wonderful that suggest that we have enormous power locked within us. What we're suggesting is that you have divinity inside

you, that it's leaking out all the time and you have the power to change. People love that idea. It's much more interesting than thinking you're just a mindless speck on the face of the planet that has no say, and that there's a god outside of you keeping score and you have to supplicate yourself in front of that god before you get what you want. That's a stupid idea. This other idea — that maybe you are that god — is far more enticing.⁶

Because Hollywood has striven to avoid boycotts from any religious group, it has tended to shy away from religious or spiritual themes. No major distributor would touch Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, despite his formidable track record at the box office. This has turned out to be much to the distributors' chagrin, since according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, *Passion* "has the potential to wind up as the biggest grossing film in movie history."⁷

Similarly, Will Arntz was unable to find a distributor to finance ***What The Bleep Do We Know?!*** and, like Gibson, he was compelled to dig into his own pockets to produce his movie. But unlike Gibson, Arntz did not already have a well-financed production company like Icon to front the marketing costs of *Passion*. Arntz's team, therefore, devised novel strategies to release their film in theaters:

Arntz: We know that Hollywood is a copycat town. Once they realize there's a vast market for this kind of cinema, it's going to get really interesting. And one of our intents is to basically have what Steven Simon [the producer of *What Dreams May Come*] is always championing: a spiritual cinema. Every week you can go to a movie theater and there are two or three movies that are talking to this audience.⁸

THE GUERRILLA MARKETING

Most independent feature-length motion pictures are never theatrically released but instead, after a possible stop or two at film festivals, go “straight to video,” to generate income in the lucrative home video market (one actor friend of mine likes to point out that many films only go “straight to poster”!). Arntz and his collaborators were not satisfied with the idea of their film only playing on the small screen, so they made agreements with individual owners of movie theaters:

Arntz: We started the film off last February in a little town called Yelm, WA, where a couple of us were living at the time. We pleaded with the local theater, on our knees, and said, “Look, we know enough people in town. We can sell it out for a couple of weeks.” First they said no, no, no — but then they said, “OK, kids, we’ll give you a week, but don’t count on it.” And we ended up having a seven-week run there. Then the Baghdad Theater in Portland, OR, where they’d been saying no to us all along, started saying, Oh, these box-office numbers are kind of interesting. Then they said, “OK, we’ll give you a week, but you have to have 1,600 people show up. Otherwise we’re going to pull it — and don’t hold your breath, kid, we’re probably going to have to pull it.” So instead of getting 1,600 the first week, we got 4,500. And every week it went up 500 until, at its peak, about 7,000 people a week were seeing this film. It ended up playing there for 18 weeks.⁹

Using their grassroots web-based coordination of “Street Teams,” they were able to generate business and then replicate the success they achieved on their home turf

in other spiritualist-friendly regions, such as Sedona, Arizona, certain communities in Northern and Southern California, Hawaii, etc. Below is their strategy, as posted on the *What The Bleep* website. Now that the US theatrical run has ended, “Street Teams” are being drafted for international markets:

1. You sign up to your prospective country below.
2. You will be contacted by a Street Team Coordinator to get the ball rolling.
3. You will help us learn more about the area you live in and share what radio stations, clubs, groups, and organizations you think we should contact.
4. As a Street Team member we will provide you with promotional items from our Street Teams kit.
5. You will stay in touch with our Street Team Coordinator via e-mail or phone on how well it’s going and include the e-mail addresses of anyone interested in street teaming, or in being on our mailing list.
6. You will be greatly blessed, and you will be joyful in the knowledge that you are uplifting the consciousness of the planet!¹⁰

Their tactic of region-based self-marketing for a niche audience proved so successful, that they finally landed a distribution deal with independent, but respectable, theatrical distributors Samuel Goldwyn/Roadside Attractions, who released the film on 60 screens five months after the filmmakers’ original release. Perhaps more significantly, the very mainstream and powerful Fox Home Video, part of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. empire, picked up home video rights and has marketed the DVD very aggressively. The DVD sales pattern so far has been vigorous, if unusual:

A Fox spokeswoman says 11% of the online consumer pre-orders for *Bleep* at Foxstore.com have been for multiple copies. That's far more than the 3% for *The Passion of the Christ*, which was considered unusually high.¹¹

THE QUANTUM CRUISE

In a possible backlash against the growing theocratic trend in American government, a brisk little business is building up around this “little film that could” — this book, included.

The *What The Bleep* website's Calendar page¹² shows that all of the scientists interviewed can be booked for speaking engagements directly through the film's website. They are apparently being kept quite busy, supplementing their teachers' salaries with speaking fees. Fred Alan Wolf and Masaru Emoto currently appear to be the most popular acts, with Amit Goswami, William Tiller and Candace Pert filling up the ranks behind them.

The seven Axiom *What The Bleep Prophet's Conferences* scheduled for 2005 alone should gross at least \$1.3 million by my reckoning, not including merchandise and hotel revenue. This also does not count the many other conferences and speaking engagements and even a couple of Caribbean Cruises that have been lined up, one of which is billed as “The Quantum Cruise.”¹³

Lest there be those who chafe at all of this shameless spiritual profiteering, they might ask themselves how they feel about TV programming that exploits bloodlust — or the \$14 billion US pornography business — or the ultra fat coffers of countless Evangelists, such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, or Tim LaHaye, who does a

bang-up business selling the apocalyptic “Rapture” to his flock — or how they feel about capitalism, itself.

Even if making money is the primary motivation behind the proponents of *What The Bleep*, it is hardly immoral for them to make a living promoting the ideas and people they admire. Is it such a bad thing that lectures on quantum physics and neuroscience are no longer restricted to college students and can now be had aboard a cruise ship? There is evidently a market for such things, albeit a different market from the one that subscribes to “The 700 Club.”

It is a parallel world created by an American system where caste and self-identity are determined by what one consumes, or cannot afford to consume, education and of course, the class into which one is born. Like most things American, it was about money from the get-go.¹⁴