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Illustration by Maurice Vellekoop

Cut

## ARMCHAIR ACCESS

Most Hollywood salons are hosted by A-list players who seek to do good. And they don't mind a bit if you know it

By Gina Piccalo

Los Angeles magazine, January 2010

Deep inside film mogul Peter Guber's cavernous Bel-Air "home office," Deepak Chopra was holding court. Celebrity litigator Gloria Allred sat rapt at the New Age guru's feet, her fuchsia blazer a beacon. Not far away, Rosanna Arquette shared a leather ottoman with a clutch of friends. Guber's yogi wife, Tara, sat on the floor next to them, stroking her dog, as Vidal Sassoon and Marla Maples looked on.

"When you try to understand consciousness, it's your consciousness trying to understand consciousness," the 62-year-old Chopra said, the black and white gems on his glasses glinting in the light. "Now here's something I'd like you all to try: As you're listening to me, I want you to listen to the one who is listening." The room went silent. He waited a beat. "That," he said, a wry smile on his lips, "is your soul."

As Chopra spoke, Guber listened, too, though whether he heard his own soul was not entirely clear. Perched on the arm of his sofa, just inches away from a life-size Batman statue, a giant poster for his 1978 movie, *Midnight Express*, and a trophy case the length of two Escalades, the studio chief turned producer seemed pleased with the turnout. But he blanched at the suggestion that his party was a salon.

"I don't have salons," he said, gesturing above the heads of his white-shirted waitstaff. "I just have friends over."

Salons—variously described as "gatherings," "cafés," "a speaker series," or "lively dinner parties"—are all the rage with Hollywood's glittering class. It's a wonder it's taken so long. Even before Gertrude Stein famously hosted great writers and artists at her Paris apartment, a successful salon always combined two of the entertainment industry's favorite things: performance and self-promotion.

To their credit, some of Hollywood's richest and most powerful use these soirees to try to spark social change. Melting glaciers, the suffering in Darfur, and the illegal diamond trade in Sierra Leone are just a few of the causes célèbres that have incubated in salons hosted by filmmakers and actors. Salons have helped launch best-sellers and have raised phenomenal sums of money (a single evening in Beverly Hills in 2008 funneled \$11 million to the Obama campaign)—all by putting

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what one frequent attendee has called "the pulpit of fame" to good use.

But when it comes to what motivates the hosts, altruism often competes with a baser urge: an unquenchable thirst for validation. Self-consciously overpaid and intellectually insecure, many in Hollywood's most lavish office suites yearn to be taken seriously. Like beautiful women who want it known they have brains, too, these purveyors of pop culture seek to rid themselves of the taint of frivolity that clings to their work. Particularly in this economic climate, when self-sacrifice is de rigueur, everyone wants to be seen as socially conscious.

Which is what makes salons here so much more than high-minded cocktail hours. For many, they seem the most direct route to obtaining something that cannot be measured in box office metrics or Nielsen ratings: gravitas.



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