Here's Looking at You

Hollywood, Film, and Politics

ERNEST GIGLIO

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PETER LANG
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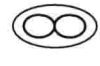

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Here's Looking at You

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David A. Schultz, *General Editor*

Vol. 3

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Boston • Bern
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To my wife Karin, and to
Christopher, David, and Elisabeth,
who had to endure many bad movies in
order to catch the occasional gem

Preface

This book began a long time ago in the fertile imagination of a small boy whose childhood was entwined with the movies. In the early stages of childhood the boy and his sister would be taken by their mother after school each Friday afternoon to the local movie theater while their father worked the night shift at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The world of work and the travails of war were remote events to youngsters compared to the fun and games in the schoolyard.

The trip to the movies became a weekly ritual—a double feature at the theater followed by a stop at Fisher's Jewish bakery on the way home to pick up danish pastries and a loaf of rye. Of course, I must confess that often I failed to understand much of what I saw on the big screen, but I still found it fascinating, often funny, occasionally sad, and sometimes boring. The westerns were exciting, and I laughed heartily at the cartoons and the slapstick comedies. Sometimes my mother had to nudge me when I dozed off during the love scenes. But at my age, what did I know of such things!

When I reached twelve I was permitted to go to the movies with my friends. Now the weekly picture show involved Saturdays rather than Friday afternoons. I have no sense of what Saturday matinees were like elsewhere, but a kid in New York City during World War II could spend six hours in a dark movie theater and never see the same film twice. I remember the routine well: all the boys (girls were not part of the gang) would pack a lunch, hide it inside our knickers, enter the theater around 9:00 in the morning, and emerge sometime after 3:00 in the afternoon with eyes that had to adjust to the light. Once several of us were caught with our lunch and had to eat it standing up in the theater lobby shortly after having had breakfast. But that was a small price to pay for more than six hours of entertainment.

During those hours in the theater we would get to see a double feature (the first film was usually a major Hollywood production and the second, a shorter feature known as the B-film), the weekly serial and newsreel, cartoons, several short subjects, and even play one or two give-away contests. Going to the movies was a social experience in those days. I even saw Babe Ruth once when the local theater was showing

Pride of the Yankees. But mostly those Saturday matinees featured war movies in which actors like John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, and Errol Flynn single-handedly took on the Nazis and the Japanese. For a youngster, they were larger-than-life heroes; reel characters who invaded our dreams and assured us that we would be victorious against the forces of fascism. For a change of pace, the theater would show an animated film from Walt Disney, a Lassie adventure story, a musical, or a Bing Crosby/Bob Hope road movie as those at home waited out the war.

But as a typical teenager, going to the movies was a way to escape from homework for a few hours or a diversion from a game of stickball in the schoolyard. Movies were not to be taken seriously, an attitude, I later learned, that I shared with the Justices on the United States Supreme Court, who considered movies to be purely entertainment, much like us kids. It was not until the 1950s that the Court would reverse itself and bring movies under the protection of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Similarly, I did not come to appreciate film as an art form or as a politicizing agent until, as an undergraduate student at Queens College (CUNY), I religiously took the subway into Manhattan every Wednesday afternoon to attend the newly opened Museum of Modern Art's film series. Now the weekly ritual took on substance as I became familiar with the great directors of the silent screen—D. W. Griffith, Fritz Lang, Erich von Stroheim—and with the films of Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Gish, John Barrymore, John Gilbert, and Rudolph Valentino. These weekly visits provided an opportunity to see some of the truly great film classics of the silent cinema, such as *Birth of a Nation, Intolerance,* and *Modern Times*, and to develop an interest in film as an expression of the political culture. Going to the movies was no longer a social diversion; it became serious business.

I was so smitten by the movies that as a graduate student at Syracuse University in the 1960s, I found it possible to combine my interest in constitutional law with my love affair with the movies. After completion of the academic coursework, I had to decide on a topic for my doctoral dissertation. Hence, my interest in law and my fascination with film provided a perfect opportunity for a marriage of convenience. Doing the dissertation proved to be more exciting than any film script. Imagine the excitement when your research discovers that in the second half of the twentieth-century, movies were subject to censorship by state agencies and local censor boards in addition to the internal rules and regulations of the industry's Production Code Administration. The history of film censorship also proved to be indicative of the revolution in social mores that had occurred during the century. For example, the earliest known

instance of film censorship occurred in 1896 on the boardwalk in Atlantic City where the peep show, *Dolorita's Passion Dance*, was apparently too risque for the local police, who proceeded to shut it down. If Dolorita's shaking and shimmering was too provocative for a Victorian public that covered itself in head-to-toe swimwear, it would strike contemporary audiences, comprised of individuals whose swimwear is just enough to cover the essential "private parts," to be downright silly. With virtually two-thirds of contemporary Hollywood films R-rated, it is a rare film indeed where the major characters keep their clothes on. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, motion pictures serve to document the changes that have occurred in social mores, gender and racial attitudes, and sexual values and practices.

As a college professor, the young boy who watched the movies grow up with him now had an opportunity to fuse his love for movies with his professional interests in an undergraduate course on *The Political Film*. To provide material for the course, I put together a custom made in-house reader, which subsequently provided the impetus for this book. It has proven to be a long, but rewarding journey.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a labor of love, but even efforts of affection are enriched by external stimulation and assistance. Without a doubt, this project has benefited greatly from numerous contributors, many of whom remain unaware of the extent of their support and encouragement. However, there are colleagues, libraries, and organizations that have provided the kind of valuable assistance that demands recognition.

I am particularly indebted to Lycoming College for providing part of the research funding for this project and for allowing me to take a sabbatical leave at an opportune time in order to complete the manuscript. I also want to thank the librarians and staff at the University of Wisconsin Film & Television Archives, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the British Film Institute in London, and especially the reference librarians at Lycoming College—Janet Hurlbert, Tasha Cooper, Margaret Murray, and Lisette Ormsbee—who provided the kind of services that researchers desperately require at a moment's notice. Additional support came from several colleagues: Alan and Meryl Aldridge at the University of Nottingham (UK) offered valuable suggestions during the early stages of the manuscript, Professor Christa Slaton of Auburn University made several helpful suggestions regarding the first two chapters, and Professor John Williams of Principia College read a good deal of the first draft and tested the manuscript in his political film course. His students' comments were immensely valuable during the subsequent rewrite. Also of importance was the information collected during the documentary film program at the 1998 Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, particularly in writing chapter three. I would be remiss if I failed to mention the importance of the feedback received from the students in my Political Film course as well as the comments obtained from several Elderhostel groups. A number of student assistants helped with the library research, but Emily Hautala and Stephanie Wilkie deserve mention for putting the filmography together. Special recognition has to be given to Elisabeth Giglio whose editorial skills and insightful comments improved the quality of the writing and provided the text with structure and clarity. Without her invaluable suggestions, this book might have remained on computer disk rather than the printed page. Finally, Heidi Burns, senior

editor at Peter Lang, read through the entire first draft with a keen eye for detail and a razor-sharp pencil to detect the mistakes. Hollywood, of course, has been a silent collaborator, providing the films that serve as the primary textual material. While many film studios were helpful, a few were uncooperative, refusing permission to use photo stills from their films.

Naturally I accept responsibility for any errors or omissions in the manuscript. As is usually the case in writing a book, the buck always stops at the author's desk.

Williamsport, Pa.
April 1999

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Hollywood and Washington: The Marriage of Film and Politics

"If you want to send a message, use Western Union!"
—Producer Samuel Goldwyn

Imagine the following scene taking place in a Hollywood studio where two writers are brainstorming a script involving the American president:

First Screenwriter: "Let's see. We'll start with a popular president who is also a notorious womanizer. One day he gets caught, sort of with his pants down and the media have a field day publicizing the discovery. Unfortunately for the president, the timing is lousy since election day is imminent. Not to worry, though. The White House staff recruits a noted spin doctor to do damage control."

Second Screenwriter: "Mm, continue."

First Screenwriter: "After these initial scenes, the film shifts to salvaging the president's political career. The consultant decides to wage a phony war to divert attention away from the president's indiscretions. He hires an egotistical Hollywood producer to stage this fake war against Albania in a TV studio. The TV war achieves the desired effect of rallying the country round the flag. The scheme works and the president is reelected. How does that sound to you? I don't believe this storyline has been done before. Do you?"

Second Screenwriter: "Pretty far-fetched plot. Who's going to believe it? Besides, will it sell?"

First Screenwriter: "Well, the plot has everything for a successful film—sex, political intrigue, war, a happy ending, and it even takes a swipe at television."

Second Screenwriter: "I have a better idea. We change the central character from an incumbent president to a married wannabe Southern governor, 'a good old boy-type' who has a weakness for donuts and a fondness for women. Despite his paunch and his womanizing, the governor plunges into the presidential race. He puts together a loyal and competent campaign staff to gain the Democratic Party nomination. But to discredit his rival and force him out of the race, the governor confronts his opponent with harmful personal information compiled by his staff, justifying his action as being in the public interest because the governor's social and economic policies will be better for the country. How does that grab you?"

First Screenwriter: "It has possibilities. Let's see, we retain the sex but we add some serious moral and political decisions faced by politicians seeking public office. So, the film appeals to the intellect as well as the libido. I like it. Let's sketch out the scenario and take it to the studio."

How likely is it that the above scene unfolded as described? Farfetched? Maybe. But the idea of an American president besieged by charges of improper sexual behavior appears in two recent Hollywood films, *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *Primary Colors* (1998). Both movies were in release during the time when President Clinton faced charges of sexual misbehavior with Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky. The reel president in *Wag the Dog* wages a phony war against Albania as a diversion while President Clinton initiated a campaign of saber-rattling against Saddam Hussein which moved the Jones and Lewinsky accusations temporarily off the front page. Four days after Clinton admitted to the American people that he had an "inappropriate relationship" with Lewinsky, he ordered cruise missile strikes against terrorist camps in Sudan and Afghanistan.

And then several months later, during the congressional impeachment hearings, the president ordered more air strikes against Iraq. Coincidence? Fortuitous timing? Or another effort by the president's spin doctors to divert attention away from the impeachment hearings at home? Meanwhile, John Travolta's portrayal of the Southern governor in *Primary Colors*, who is mounting a campaign for the presidency, is an undisguised imitation of the real Bill Clinton, right down to the Krispy Kreme donuts. Accidental? Hardly. The film was a fictionalized account of Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign by political writer Joe Klein.

These two films provide contemporary evidence that seriously questions the accuracy of Goldwyn's quotation. Hollywood is in the entertainment business all right, but the industry also delivers political

messages in selected films. For example, the cynical message of *Wag the Dog* seems to be that the American people are easily manipulated by political spin doctors and readily fooled by second-rate media talent. The film wants the audience to believe that the American public is so gullible that its decisions rest on emotion rather than reasoning; a concept usually associated with fascism rather than democratic government. Moreover, the wicked satire in *Wag the Dog* distorts the line between truth and virtual reality when it enables an egotistical Hollywood director to successfully create a studio war to save the president's political career, an act that ultimately costs the filmmaker his life.

Primary Colors, meanwhile, plays like an apology for sleazy and ruthless politicians, asking audiences to accept human imperfections as a trade-off for popular public policies. In essence, the movie asks audiences to forgive the flaws of the Clintonesque character because, if elected, he will make a good president. These may not be the kind of civics lessons American parents want their children to learn, but *Wag the Dog* and *Primary Colors* serve to remind us that Goldwyn's remark reflected neither the Hollywood of the past nor the Hollywood of the present. Instead his statement serves to perpetuate the myth that all Hollywood provides is entertainment without acknowledgment that it is a powerful and influential industry. Of course Hollywood is a business operated for profit. It is undisputed that the vast majority of Hollywood films are designed to capture audiences through appeal to our senses rather than our intellect. Yet recognition of the profit motive in Hollywood does not alter the history of the American film industry, which includes the deliverance of political messages, some intentional, others inadvertent, since the beginning of the century.

As early as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a biased presentation of slavery, Reconstruction policies, and the Ku Klux Klan, selected filmmakers have viewed the medium as an instrument to communicate stories that express their personal opinions and beliefs about love, life, and politics. Had the film industry produced commercial entertainment exclusively, the history of Hollywood (and America too) would have to be rewritten. Given that task, revisionists writing today would have no choice but to ignore the historical record, excluding from their accounts all of the following: efforts by governments to censor and regulate motion pictures; the film industry's anti-union hostility, which erupted occasionally into violent conflict between workers and the studios; the government's utilization of the film industry for propaganda purposes during both World Wars; and the sanctioned compliance by the film industry with the questionable aims and methods of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) and their imposition of the

dreaded blacklist. This revisionist task would challenge even the best efforts of Orwell's Big Brother.

The Relationship Between Film and Politics

Despite Hollywood's protestations and disavowals, the film-politics association is traceable through an examination of their relationship in two distinct, but related contexts. The most obvious setting occurs on the movie screen where Hollywood releases some 400 films annually. While the vast majority are purely commercial ventures, there exists a small minority of films, five to ten percent, that present explicit, and often latent, political messages.

The other context is set in the arena of practical politics, which requires that its practitioners raise substantial sums of money. Candidates for public office seek financial support for their increasingly expensive political campaigns. Without financial resources, a campaign will be stillborn. Only those candidates with money or with the ability to attract sufficient funding have an opportunity to compete for political power. This is where the Hollywood-Washington connection plays an important role; first in providing the funding for outsiders to run and second, in encouraging those within the entertainment industry to seek public office. There is nothing intrinsically evil about Hollywood fulfilling these functions because it is not a crime for film personalities to run for elective office. Nor is it illegal for Hollywood to protect its economic self-interest by recruiting its leadership elite from the White House staff. Neither is there a law against Hollywood soliciting political assistance from its Washington friends. But what is truly alarming, however, is that Hollywood money gains the industry an unequal amount of access and an inordinate amount of influence while it blurs the line between public office and celebrity status. The development and acceptance of a "culture of celebrity" has led one critic to observe that popular entertainment has replaced ideology in American politics, that political candidates emulate movie stars, that primary campaigns resemble casting calls, that political campaigns are closer to auditions than to the articulation of substantive policy agendas, and finally, that the electorate today behaves as if it were a film audience passively surveying the political performance.[1]

The Hollywood-Washington Connection

The relationship between film and politics dates back at least to the pre-World War I period when Hollywood was dominated by movie moguls like Sam Goldwyn, Louis Mayer, and Jack and Harry Warner;