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Donald T. Critchlow: When Hollywood Was Right: How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls, and Big Business Remade American Politics

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Donald T. Critchlow: When Hollywood Was Right: How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls, and Big Business Remade American Politics

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The interconnectedness between politics and entertainment in the dream factory remains a pertinent topic, even more so in the post-Schwarzenegger age. Moreover, the labels ‚Communist' and ‚Socialist' continue to be used in order to belittle political opponents in the United States, even as Hollywood frequently voices its sympathy for the political left on screen. To give an example: *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) star Bryan Cranston is set to star in a biopic of Dalton Trumbo, the famous blacklisted author of *Spartacus* (1960).

In his study of „the rebuilding of the Republican party in California" (p.2) between 1930 and 1980, Donald T. Critchlow challenges the prevailing view of Hollywood as a hotbed of liberal Democrats. Though the Great Depression pushed the majority of the studio employees to the political left in

the 1930s and they started to organize themselves in unions, many actors and powerful studio heads like Cecil B. DeMille or Walt Disney leaned more towards the right.

Most of the chapters in Critchlow's book trace the making (and un-making) of political careers in California, where the gubernatorial races frequently saw celebrities campaigning for the candidates and where future Presidents like Richard Nixon or former actor Ronald Reagan (initially a Democrat) earned their political spurs. Hollywood Republicans engaged in political rallies usually tended to sail more under the radar than their Democrat opponents, yet the ‚dramatis personae' of prominent Republicans which Critchlow assembles in his book is still impressive: it includes politically up-front directors (John Ford, Sam Wood), writers (Morrie Ryskind, Charles Brackett, Ayn Rand), and actors (John Wayne, James Stewart, Gary Cooper), and the affiliation of the latter group with the Western genre may not be a coincidence. Due to the author's background in political history and his many publications on American conservatism, the major emphasis is on political mechanisms and on election campaigns such as Barry Goldwater's 1964 bid for the White House. Critchlow's account of the 1947 HUAC hearings makes for fascinating reading, as it is meticulously researched and very thorough in the way the author dispenses with popular myths surrounding the ‚Hollywood Ten' and their colleagues. Their allegiances and sympathies were far more differentiated than [it] is often acknowledged.

What Critchlow does not engage with is how the dream factory's political tendencies informed its productions. Aside from a few brief case studies of genuine propaganda films such as *Mission to Moscow* (1943) or the John Wayne-directed, anti-Vietcong flick *The Green Berets* (1968), this is political history for those who are interested in the formation of political alliances and the role of fundraising and ad campaigns. The author presents findings from his thorough archival work, and his detailed knowledge of the various political players is impressive. However, he is on much less firmer ground when he discusses film history, getting various names and facts wrong in the process: he attributes twelve Academy Awards to Elia Kazan's 1954 union drama *On the Waterfront* (the film received eight); confuses Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960) with Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956); and legendary Hollywood Republicans like director Mervyn LeRoy or actor John Gavin find themselves referred to as „Melvin Leroy" (p.171) or „John Galvin" (p.181), respectively.

In addition, the author's own political opinion occasionally clashes with his objectivity as a researcher. By both implicitly and explicitly positioning himself as an opponent of Communism and by taking sides with Hollywood stars who were (unfairly, according to Critchlow) too often ridiculed „as narrow-minded right-wingers" (p.42), the author loses a degree of credibility. Not only does he get carried away in his admiration for those „dedicated men and women" who „remade both their state and their

country" (p.6) and who „fought the good fight, defeating the communist faction in Hollywood" (p.213), he also goes so far as to attribute near-messianic qualities to Ronald Reagan („After wandering in the desert for nearly thirty-five years, conservatives had marched to the Promised Land led by a former actor who had gotten his start fighting communism in Hollywood a generation before" [pp.212]). As a consequence, Critchlow never really engages with the Communist project and its actual ideas, employing it as a rather vague signifier for an unspecified threat, for men and women whose patriotism appears questionable. He effectively denigrates all supporters of the Communist cause in Hollywood as renitent individuals who signed up out of feelings of guilt, confused idealism, boredom, or because they were downright naïve (see pp.58-63).

What makes this a recommended read in spite of the factual errors and the ideological bias is Critchlow's impressive knowledge of the political apparatus. In his compelling account of Ronald Reagan's rise to President of the United States, a key moment in the history of American politics and of Hollywood's involvement in it, the author makes a convincing case that it was, ironically, the triumph of this former actor which marked the end of celebrity Republicans' involvement with political campaigns, as Reagan's team preferred the support of background players (such as executives and agents) to that of singers and cowboy actors.

In spite of its shortcomings, the book contains many valuable findings and should serve as an invitation to investigate further chapters of the shared history of politics and entertainment in the future. As the author only briefly hints at the many ties which existed between individual actors, studio heads, and political candidates (many of which have not yet been investigated), there is plenty of work ahead for scholars working in political science as well as in media studies.

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