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Philip John Davies, Paul Wells: American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr 2003

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2003.2.1978>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Philip John Davies, Paul Wells: American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 20 (2003), Nr. 2, S. 173–176. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2003.2.1978>.

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Philip John Davies and Paul Wells: American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr

Manchester: Manchester University Press 2002, 229 S., ISBN 0-7190-5865-1, £ 14.99

Editors Philip John Davies and Paul Wells have compiled a series of essays to explore the specific locus of American cinema in the late 20th century where the „contradictory yearnings to acknowledge the profound effects of late industrial capitalism and technological innovation“ seemingly clash with the „nostalgic desire to celebrate the values and achievements of that which may have been left behind“ (p.3). Even though the days of auteur-led film-making have been replaced by corporate movie-making, the editors feel American cinema „remains remarkably resilient in offering stories in which the personal can be political, and where the ‚Political‘ can still be subject to creative interrogation and critique“ (p.7). Although they worry about the significance of textual readings, whether real messages are being sent and/or received by the audience, „the politics of the most powerful nation in the world cannot be divorced from the most far-reaching entertainment medium in the world“ (p.5). The objectives of the book are to look at the political context in which movies are made, the ways movies tackle overly political themes, the manner in which political figures and institutions are portrayed, and how serious issues have found a populist base.

Does the book succeed? Well, yes and no, depending on which of the 10 chapters you are talking about. Here is an overview of their contents: Paul Watson writes about *Fight Club* (1998) and *Magnolia* (1999) whilst going through some kind of intellectual, or political, mid-life crisis. He makes a number of somewhat incoherent points: masculinity in crisis shouldn't necessarily be equated with the body politic in crisis, white middle-class males have feelings too, Marxist theory has been discredited so how can you use it to analyse film, what is ‚politics‘ anyway? and some prissy reflections about the point of media-studies if it can't be applied to make the real world a better place. When the revolution comes, will he be the first with his back against the wall?

John Davies discusses the convergence of entertainment and the White House. He observes that politics is about getting the candidate in front of the public as a star; that stars raise money for politicians. Politicians such as the Kennedys are stars; stars such as Schwarzenegger, Willis and Beatty express political opinions and have political ambitions. Democratic and Republican conventions have become stage-managed risk-free spectacles; films like *Dave* (1993), *Primary Colors* (1998) or *Absolute Power* (1997) take place in the White House or have the president as protagonist. However, if there is a critique within these films, it is a critique of individuals not institutions. On the other hand, the White House's relationship with Hollywood is also tempered by the knowledge that many of the

electorate blame Hollywood product for corrupting the youth of the nation. At the end of the day the relationship is still relatively cosy.

Albert Auster writes a short chapter on the ‚presidential‘ films of Oliver Stone, *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995). Most of it is descriptive but makes the point that Stone has „created historical myths [...] which attach new meanings to the presidencies“ (p.74). The loss of idealism and the power of the beast: the military-industrial-CIA-Mafia-Wall Street complex, being central to Stone’s interpretation of America’s recent history.

Carol R Smith writes about gender and family values in the Clinton era. She traces the connections between Clinton’s inclusive policies (gays in the military, reforms of Healthcare, education and welfare) and the reinterpretations of the romantic wedding comedy in *The Bird Cage* (1996), *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997) and *In and Out* (1997). „Inclusion within the circle of privilege is no longer dependent on being able to approximate a white, male norm“ (p.104), but she notes it still helps to be married.

Ralph Willet proposes that in the 1930s „nostalgic portrayals of the Old South [...] provided escapism for Depression audiences. Since then, ‚The South‘ has remained image blank and a narrative resource manipulated by Hollywood to answer some of the nation’s psychological needs“ (p.105). We have the ‚Sunny South‘ a projection of pastoral Eden and prosperity, celebrating family life, friendship and racial equality but the reverse side depicts a ‚Visceral South‘ inhabited by rednecks, inbred hillbillies, religious and racist zealots, all with little respect for authority. Media narratives of the South often focus on family feuds and revelations, arising at meals and homecomings. The early 1980’s gave us the cultural phenomenon of ‚Rural Chic‘ which was manifested in a group of films about rural life in the South during times of economic hardship, *The Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), *Sweet Dreams* (1985), *The River* (1984). However, „certain absences handicap them as ‚persuasive Southern cultural documents.““ (p.110). Hollywood also started depicting the lives of African Americans in the country in *Roots* (1977) and *The Color Purple* (1985), which often marginalised the black man. *Mississippi Burning* (1988) was criticised for emphasising the white FBI rather than the black civil rights workers.

Brian Neve gives an overview of the rise of the independent sector. He concludes that the gap between independent and mainstream products narrowed in the 1990s, especially with the advent of major studios buying up smaller production or distribution companies, but the main successes were in black film and in the development of auteurs such as John Sayles and Jim Jarmush.

Paul Wells tackles the reactionary politics of Disney which have become so naturalised within their texts to the point where contradictorily, they are both self-evident and invisible. He argues „there is less ideological coherence in the Disney agenda [...] [because] the very process of creating a Disney text militates against

such coherence“ (p.140). Disney’s production line process for creating animated features is informed at each of its steps by collective suggestion and negotiation among the assigned creative teams. Another aspect of his argument is that Disney’s design strategy lacks cultural sensitivity because it doesn’t speak to contemporary ideological discourses or recognise geopolitical variation because „its claims are for a universality of human qualities“ (p.154). I’m not sure I can agree with him. I feel that anyone working at Disney, with its philosophy of family-friendly entertainment, will at least self-censor themselves creatively, or even be actively removed, if they do not fit the Disney traditions. After all Tim Burton’s short-film *Frankenweenie* (1984) was made while he was at Disney and but never released. And Burton didn’t stay.

An interesting overview on the representations of African Americans in film is given by Mary Ellison. Her first point is that music, and to a lesser extent film, of African-American origin is the unique American contribution to world culture, and the two have „regularly intersected and positively interacted [...] and become the essential cultural spaces where the politics of race and class interact and are reconfigured“ (p.157). The films of young black directors like John Singleton, *Boyz n’ the Hood* (1991), or Spike Lee, *Clockers* (1995), were never simply gang- and drug-obsessed action films but dynamic sites of ideological production. Obviously, Spike Lee has been the most successful black director of the last 20 years and his overtly political films have been shown to diminish racism in white audiences to black people. Having said that many major Hollywood studios are still sensitive to images of miscegenation, in the same way affirmative action has become an ideological battleground between conservatives and liberals. She notes, in reference to comedy-actors like Eddie Murphy and Richard Prior (and more recently Chris Tucker) that „In Hollywood, marginalised black actors came to see their assumed racial inferiority as a performance trope that could subvert hegemonic control from the very margins to which they had been confined“ (p.164). There was also a preponderance of inter-racial ‚buddy movies‘, for example Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series which can be seen as „both projecting and defusing some of the fears of white America“ (p.165). Some films go even further in creating blackness as a site of wisdom, Morgan Freeman usually being the chosen embodiment, *Se7en* (1995), *Deep Impact* (1998).

The final chapter in the book, by Phil Melling, deals with America’s adversarial attitude to the world which can be clearly seen during this latest Iraq crisis. Simply put, America lived with the Cold War for so long, it now needs new enemies. Anybody „who is not with us is against us“. Many films of the 1980s depicted the threat of communism, *Invasion USA* (1985), but once the Berlin Wall collapsed new threats had to be found: old-style communists, *Crimson Tide* (1995), Islamic extremists, *Executive Decision* (1996), aliens/illegal aliens, *Independence Day* (1996), *Men in Black*, (1997), even illnesses *Outbreak* (1995).

Many of the authors give a very useful overview about the types of Hollywood film made in the last 20 years. However, some chapters are better at linking the narratives and representations on screen with the political climate, cultural politics and governmental policies of the day. Even in Smith's discussion of Clinton and family values, which I consider the best, there is a certain lack of depth.

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