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Ernest Giglio: Here's Looking at You. Hollywood, Film and Politics

2001

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2001.1.2604>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Ernest Giglio: Here's Looking at You. Hollywood, Film and Politics. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen / Reviews*, Jg. 18 (2001), Nr. 1, S. 70–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2001.1.2604>.

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Ernest Giglio: Here's Looking at You. Hollywood, Film, and Politics

New York et al.: Peter Lang Publishing 2000, 280 S., ISBN 0-8204-4421-9, DM 48,-

The second chapter in Ernest Giglio's easy to read *Here's Looking at You, Hollywood. Film and Politics* attempts to define the political film, and confronts the same problem as the law's efforts to define obscenity: you know what it is when you see it but ultimately it maybe in the eye of the beholder. However, Giglio uses a broad definition, based on constitutional law scholar Cass Sunstein's definition of political speech, that a political film is both intended and received as a contribution to public deliberation about some issue (*JFK*, 1991; *The Great Dictator*, 1940), although it is empirically very difficult to prove that intent (because of the collaborative nature of film-making – the book's title comes from *Casablanca* (1942), a film which has generated debate as to whether it has an anti-isolationist message) and to gage its reception by the audience (because the mechanisms of reception and audience identification aren't completely understood yet). However, Giglio rejects as naive one of Michael Genovese's criteria for defining a political film, that a film is political if it supports the existing economic, political and social system, because it would be against Hollywood's interests to attack the economical and political status quo which allows it to operate and make money. Giglio accepts that only a film supporting the normal political and socio-economic systems at the expense of disadvantaged and deprived groups could be considered political, for example *Birth of a Nation* (1915). But that doesn't make a film which embraces „The American Dream“ such as *Working Girl* (1988) to be any less political.

It is strange that Giglio doesn't recognise his own naiveté as his first chapter discusses the relationship and the mutual interests between Hollywood and Washington. Apart from the explicit fund-raising activities of stars like Barbara Streisand and Warren Beatty, or the fact that these well-known faces can trade their celebrity for political power by endorsing certain candidates or even running for political office, Hollywood and Washington are complicit in extending foreign

markets for an American export purveying American ideology. It is no coincidence that the industry's attack dog and chief lobbyist since 1966, Jack Valenti, was an ex-aid to Lyndon Johnson, or that he came to public prominence at the GATT world trade talks in 1993 when he attempted (and failed) to negotiate away France's protective practices in order to open up the market to American products. Giglio says, „for the overwhelming majority of Hollywood films, delivering entertainment is the message, profit is the goal. But for that small minority of films, mostly made by auteurs (Oliver Stone, Costa-Gravas), the political message is paramount and takes precedent over commercial success“ (p.32). Giglio refuses to accept that by serving up the status quo with its ingrained American ideology of capitalism, consumerism and free markets, even for the purpose of entertainment, Hollywood is making political movies. You could even argue the „dumbing“ down we have seen in recent years is part of a strategy to make American films comprehensible to consumers in the foreign markets which now account for more than 50 percent of a film's revenue (*Titanic*, 1997, grossed 67 percent overseas, *The Phantom Menace*, 1999, 53 percent).

So within the limitations of his own non-radical arguments, Giglio gives us breadth rather than depth, around a variety of „political“ themes. There is the history of censorship, or rather self-regulation, of American cinema. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (M.P.P.D.A) hired ex-Postmaster General Will Hays in the early 1920's, and later Joseph Breen, to enforce the Production Code, a guideline defining the appropriate content of films, brought in to discourage government interference. The American classification system is based on giving information about the film in its certificate in order for parents to make an informed decision as to whether the film in question is suitable for non-adult viewing. Giglio makes an impassioned plea for a classification system based on age restrictions, as implemented in the U.K by The British Board of Film Classification (B.B.F.C.).

The most interesting chapter is an account of McCarthyism and the blacklist. Although Giglio gives a political context to the „red scare“ - the beginning of the cold war, the police action in Korea, the fact that the Soviets had the bomb - he views Hollywood's mostly enthusiastic embrace of anti-communism as no more than the continuation of its fight against unionisation „[t]he more active leaders in the labour movements [...] appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee and to discover that their names appeared on the industry blacklist.“ (p.79) There is a very good, depressing (or accurate, depending on how cynical you are) overview of Hollywood's depiction of politicians and the political process which could be summarised as: most politicians are scoundrels (*Godfather Part 2*, 1974), presidents used to be the focus of respectful bio-pics (*Young Mr Lincoln*, 1939) but more recently are also depicted as scoundrels (*Absolute Power*, 1996) when they are not being action heroes (*Airforce 1*, 1997) or assassination targets (*Winter Kills*, 1979), but in any case they rarely talk about political issues. In fact,

most Hollywood films do not debate political issues because they are considered poison at the box-office, which the returns of *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Primary Colors* (1998) and *Bulworth* (1998) would tend to support.

Giglio also gives a very readable over-view of the depiction of the American judicial system. Anyone who has ever seen *Suspect* (1987) where defence lawyer Cher is helped out by juror Denis Quaid to reveal that the judge (!) is the murderer, knows how Hollywood utilises „the trial as a paradigm for the confrontation between good and evil“ (p.127) rather than common sense or accuracy. Lawyers are either depicted as saints or sinners, and the practice of law is frequently inaccurate. This is worrying as most Americans form an opinion of the judicial system through films and television. However, Hollywood avoids direct attacks on the system „preferring instead to present the imperfections in a context that blames human weaknesses rather than a flawed legal system“ (p.118). Interestingly, of the two types of justice, distributive or social justice which concerns how honour, prestige and material goods are distributed throughout society, and corrective justice which provides a remedy for those wrongly victimised, Hollywood almost never constructs a plot around the former.

Giglio's chapters on documentaries, nuclear power/weapons, war movies in general and the Vietnam war in particular cover the same ground as countless other books on these subjects bringing nothing new to the table. What is surprising is that he attempts no explanation as to why there have been so few Gulf War films (*Courage Under Fire*, 1996; *Starship Troopers*, 1997; *Three Kings*, 1999) in the last ten years.

His final chapter looks at the future of political films which can be seen as optimistic when contrasted with the very small number of political films Hollywood has made in its history. And most of those films have been made by writer-director auteurs, like Oliver Stone or Norman Jewison, working from within the system but clearly with their own agenda. However, the independent sector in American cinema has seen a resurgence since *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989), and although many of these independent producers-distributors have been bought up by the major studios (Miramax by Disney, New Line by Time Warner) and therefore more interference or at least more self-censorship can be expected, Giglio feels there are opportunities around the edges of Hollywood to make more political films.

Generally, Giglio's prose is easy to read, gives a comprehensive over-view of certain aspects of America's cultural history as well as their depiction by Hollywood, and therefore would fit favourably into an undergraduate syllabus or an afternoon on the beach. For a more in-depth analysis of the topics he covers, you would have to go to other books.