

Politics and Film

The Political Culture of Film in the United States

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Film Criticism: What Is a Bad Movie?

Most people go to the movies for one specific reason—to be entertained. But beyond that, the moviegoing experience is a personal one. Most professional film critics evaluate movies according to a rather specific set of criteria—the qualities of filmmaking as a craft. Production qualities, plot development, and acting are the primary standards by which most film critics measure the quality of a film. But those form only one set of standards for evaluating a film, which is certainly the case when considering the fact that some of the greatest box office successes have been critical failures—and the other way around. The whole *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) series comes to mind. Apparently, there is a large audience for these films even when film critics warn viewers that they are going to the theater to see bad movies. Nevertheless, audiences are entertained.

And entertainment value seems to be an important standard by which to measure the quality of a movie. Apparently, there is something entertaining about a car-chase formula that hasn't escaped Hollywood executives. And even though critics find most car chases after the defining car chases in *Bullitt* (1968) and *The French Connection* (1971) to be hackneyed and boring, the public can't seem to get enough. Audience members find it entertaining, and, the truth be told, it is.

When there is a car wreck on the freeway during rush hour, traffic can be backed up for miles. Before the wreck is cleared and the bodies are carted off, drivers can't help but slow down just to take a look. Rubbernecking is a human trait. A morbid curiosity is not an indication that we are monsters or moral degenerates just because we take an interest in the macabre, the gruesome, or the antisocial. Even social moralists probably slow down and take a look at an accident scene. In fact, as suggested in previous chapters, much of the criticism of the modern media's parading themselves as being concerned for the moral and cultural sensibilities of the masses is, in reality, a thinly veiled contempt for the tastes of the average movie patron. Much of the junk science that purports to prove that media messages lead to society-wide misbehavior is simply part of a larger political agenda of one group or another.

Mobster films, horror films, and slasher films have been the commercial staple of Hollywood since the beginning. By the standard of simple entertainment, these types of films are like roller-coaster rides: they take us out of our everyday humdrum existence and give us a window into something that we never witness in person—a mob hit, a face melt, a barroom brawl, or a car chase (in which no one gets hurt). And the popularity of those genres probably means little more than that—a little metaphorical rubbernecking.

Professional film critics are possibly rubbernecks of a sort as well. But when they go to the movies, car wrecks or natural disasters do not entertain them. They are looking for something different and are thus measuring a film by a different standard. What they are looking for is something they haven't seen before—and what a tough audience they must be. After watching five or six films a week for years, professional film critics must have seen just about everything at least once. Therefore, what probably thrills professional critics is originality. They are quick to praise the small independent production, the foreign import, or the directorial efforts of a promising newcomer (witness the critics' over-the-top reaction to Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*). This is not to say that these films are not noteworthy—for the film scholar, they are probably the *raison d'être*—but the critic's seal of approval isn't always a ticket to enjoyment.

By contrast, what a “bad” film is to a professional critic is the sequel, the remake, the big-budget production that must recoup its investment by appealing to the lowest common denominator, and the niche film designed to appeal to a specific segment of the public—car-racing buffs, for example.

It now becomes clear that there are several standards by which to measure the quality of a film.¹ First is the artistic/aesthetic standard. As noted, commercial films are mostly product, not art. Nevertheless, some filmmakers, whether because of their skills or their clout, are able to make films that are more art than product. But this is probably the exception to the rule. Film scholars make a distinction between two types of directors: technicians and auteurs. For the technician, scripts are a kind of architectural plan for a film; the film is constructed from the script. And while the films of the technician may be competently constructed or even elegantly crafted, they hardly represent an independent vision that reflects the aesthetics of the director. Auteurs, on the other hand, create a distinct vision; they have a distinct style regardless of the script. That the auteur allows his or her personal vision to dominate the film, irrespective of the demands of the market, makes the film of the auteur an art form.² It is hard to know how many auteurs fail in the market—probably more than we would think—simply because their films never achieve enough commercial success to be widely screened. But in some exceptional circumstances, the public takes a shine to the work of an auteur and gets to experience creative magic in the local cineplex. Some of the noted auteurs of the American film industry are Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Sam Fuller, Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang, John Ford, Stanley Kubrick, and Woody Allen. Each one of these directors produced a film that has a notable style, a feel, and even signature conventions, such as Hitchcock's habit of appearing once on-screen in all his films.

As dominant as the American film industry has been, there have probably been as many or more foreign filmmakers who could be considered auteurs, including Sergei Eisenstein (Soviet Russian), Jean-Luc Godard (French), Werner Herzog (German), Federico Fellini (Italian), Pedro Almodovar (Spanish), and Ingmar Bergman (Swedish), just to name a few. Perhaps the reason that so many foreign directors are auteurs is that they are often relatively free from the demands of the market. Many, if not most, of these foreign filmmakers were subsidized in one way or another by their respective governments.

So it seems that by taking the market, if even partially, out of the filmmaking equation, there may be a greater likelihood that the films produced are more likely to be art than product. Even fascist totalitarian regimes, which have utterly and completely controlled their film industries, have nurtured brilliant filmmaking, such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) or Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925). By the same token, during Hollywood's golden age of cinema, or what is termed in previous chapters the “second monopoly” of American cinema, many fine films were produced simply because the moguls wanted them produced as a kind of homage to their vanity. But even so, auteur filmmakers such as Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles were either harassed or driven out of the industry by the Hollywood power structure of the golden era.

Today in the rough-and-tumble market of filmmaking corporatization, film auteurs still exist, but their films are produced for relatively limited release. Modern American film auteurs include the Coen brothers (Joel and Ethan), Woody Allen, David Mamet, and Robert Altman, among others. Any film they make is worth a look—if you can find it. Most art films in the modern era don't make it out of the larger markets, and, even when they do, they are generally shown on a limited number of screens for a limited period. Most of the films may also become available on DVD or VHS—again if you can find them and if it's worth the trouble to view a film on the vastly inferior appliances available to most of us at home as opposed to the vastly preferable in-theater screening.

Another standard by which to measure the quality of a film is by its technical merit—how well have the moviemakers employed their craft? This category of criticism encompasses everything from acting to direction, special effects, and script continuity. Script continuity is the degree to which a film maintains its internal consistency. It may not make sense in the real world for dinosaurs to be wandering an island off the coast of Costa Rica, as they do in *Jurassic Park* (1993), but within the context of that film, it makes perfect sense. But even the finest films often lack the detail of plot continuity.

For example, there are some serious problems with the script of the recently released and critically acclaimed *Mystic River* (2003). This film is wonderfully acted and meticulously shot, but the story line is full of holes that could better be described as plotline *cul-de-sac*. Case in point, a story thread that runs through the movie is the troubled relationship between the character played by Kevin Bacon and the character's wife. Perfectly good scenes in the film are derailed by a series of strange phone calls

between these two characters, which in the end lead to nowhere. In another scene, toward the end of the film, Sean Penn's character and his character's wife, played by Laura Linney, have an encounter in which Linney plays Lady Macbeth to Penn's King Macbeth. Apparently, she is the one pulling the strings behind the scenes. But since this exchange comes at the end of the film, out of context and out of nowhere, it explains exactly nothing and motivates no more a reaction among the film's audience than a scratching of the head.

The fact is that in terms of craft American films produced for general release are probably the most technically proficient films in the world. Even the worst American commercial film rarely falls below the threshold of at least being technically competent. And when it's really done well, modern filmmaking is a marvel.

What is less likely to be competent is the thought that is put into a film. This is probably the case for five reasons. First, while filmmakers are well trained in the craft of making movies, they may have neglected the obligatory liberal arts education, courses in philosophy, literature, and politics that would help their films make better sense.

Second, because of the trend toward outsourcing the production of a film, there is no single intelligence guiding its production. Financiers may want the film to do and say one thing; writers something else; directors another thing; and editors may envision yet another message entirely. The outsourcing of film production has led to the release of many a commercial film that is a visually stunning, magnificently acted, unmitigated mess. One of the more prominent recent examples is Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002). This film is incomprehensible from beginning to end. It is more like a series of tableaux held together by a variety of grunting, thumping, and grinding noises. The acting is as good as it can be, given that there is no plot. But one thing that can't be faulted about this film is that it is visually stunning. The script, however, appears to have been passed around like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Third is the problem of plagiarism, which includes copies, remakes, and sequels. For example, *La Femme Nikita* (1991), an excellent French action film, was remade in the United States as *Point of No Return* (1993). There is nothing wrong with rehashing an old idea. After all, there is always a terrible shortage of really good plotlines. Besides, great literature usually revolves around some of the enduring questions of life—love, hate, sacrifice, and so on—which need to be rehashed. However, the American version of *La Femme Nikita* was an exact copy of the French movie, but in English. Why not just dub the film in English? There was nothing original about this film.

Fourth is the problem of script gimmicks. In that respect, the recently released *The Jackal* (1997) is one of the worst films ever made. Start with the fact that this film is a remake of one of the best thrillers ever produced, *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), and it is all downhill from there. The film doesn't make sense from beginning to end. But besides the fact that the film suffers in comparison to its predecessor, *The Jackal* harbors a little gimmick that deserves special note. At some point in the plot—and that is to use the term loosely—Bruce Willis, a macho actor playing a macho role, assumes the cover of a homosexual to accomplish some amorphous goal. We are treated to a pickup scene in a gay bar, the entire purpose of which is to have Bruce Willis kiss

another man on the lips. I watched this film in Greenwich Village, so nobody really reacted. This sort of thing happens there all the time. I can only imagine the gasp that arose in the average suburban multiplex. I guess the filmmakers accomplished their goal—another original way to shock the audience and without expensive special effects (an added bonus). This little incident, however, had nothing to do with the plot. It is little more than having a microphone boom slip into the top of the frame. It is unprofessional, crass commercialism of the worst kind. At best, it is simply a distraction, and at worst it is an insult to the viewer's intelligence.

Finally, there is the siren song of special effects. Many a film has been dashed against the shoal of special effects. What technicians can do these days on film is remarkable. All one needs to do is to take a look at Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and compare it to *Blade Runner* (1982) and then to *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) to see how far we have come in the production of special effects. But these special effects do not come without a price.

Special effects cost money, to be sure, but at some point they cost the story as well. Despite several justifications, special effects—although downright distracting—cost so much that they can't be cut from the film. Imagine if in the final edit of a film, the director were to suggest that a million-dollar special effect be deleted. What would be the producer's reaction? A million-dollar investment is just too valuable to sacrifice for a mere story line. The result is a film such as *X2* (reviewed at the end of chapter 2); *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* (2002); or the Bruce Willis vehicle *The Fifth Element* (1997), which is visually stunning, technologically advanced, and pretty much impossible to understand. At least when David Lynch makes an incomprehensible film, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) for example, he probably does so intentionally. But these are really technical problems with a script. Since most of us don't live in the film world and are not professional film buffs, the standards listed here are of some value but aren't particularly useful to the average filmgoer. Most of us go for the story. Assuming that most commercial filmmaking is at least technically competent, the success or failure of a film with a general audience lies in the script. The primary consideration in this regard is the entertainment value of a film. A lot of mediocre films are financial successes because they give the public something that it wants—thrills, awesome special effects, car chases, steamy love scenes, the right stars, and so on. Entertainment is certainly important, and we shouldn't give that standard short shrift, but whether films are entertaining or not is really not the subject of this book. Furthermore, it may be that in providing entertainment the industry may be subtly degrading society. That is certainly the argument made by ideologues on both ends of the political spectrum. Even if the audience does not realize it, films contain plotlines and messages that may be historically inaccurate, morally questionable, or downright subversive. Since, as we have seen, many people get their information about the world from the entertainment media (talk radio, for instance), the hidden meanings of films may be reinforcing ideas or behaviors that do have a public policy impact. Certainly, Arnold Schwarzenegger's election to the governorship of California is related in some way to the fantasy persona that he cultivated in his film roles.

Take, for instance, the film *Batman* (and to a lesser extent the sequels). The modern remake of *Batman* is in many ways a work of art. The world created by director Tim Burton, a master of this sort of aesthetic sensitivity, is meticulously designed to connote Gotham City's ominous sense of malevolence. The cast is great—any film with Jack Nicholson is worth taking a look at—and the story is fine. This is all true except for the fact that the *Batman* story has a somewhat questionable provenance.³

When the *Batman* comic strip was first introduced in the 1930s (at about the same time as the aptly named *Superman* strip), the United States was in a depression. The world was dominated by totalitarian regimes. It was not entirely clear that democracy would, or should, survive. After all, if the Great Depression demonstrated anything, it demonstrated that democratic governments appeared powerless to take care of their citizens. In the time before the war, fascism began to gain a limited appeal in the United States and other industrialized democracies. Some of this flirtation with fascism manifested itself in the popular culture of the day. For example, in 1933 publisher William Randolph Hearst financed and cowrote a modestly successful film titled *Gabriel over the White House*. The plot of the film, which involves the replacement of a democratically elected president with a more "suitable" leader, is unmistakably fascist.⁴

The *Batman* comic strip is born of the same ilk. In the *Batman* story, the democratically elected government of Gotham City is supine. The government is unable to exert control and is corrupt to the core in any event. Consequently, the city is being taken over by criminals. The citizens of Gotham are no longer able to move about independently for fear of falling victim to crime. Indeed, the wealthy orphan Bruce Wayne lost his parents to just this kind of street violence. He decides to avenge himself against the criminals (i.e., their class), who have taken his parents and his city. So he dons strange body armor and a mask, develops all sorts of technical crime-fighting aids, and adopts the symbol of the bat. He then goes to town in his spare time and arrests and often punishes "bad" people. Fortunately, he never makes a mistake and never punishes the wrong guy—hence no need for constitutional rights nor the niceties of law. Once he cleans the city of its bad people, he returns to his mansion. Of course, the city can always call on him again in its time of need (which is apparently pretty often) by projecting the symbol of the bat onto the clouds.

This is a flat-out fascist solution for the problems that ail democratic society. It is probably not the case, however, that by screening this film we are going to turn out a generation of Hitler youth. After all, at least in the West, fascism is an ideological museum piece. Democracy is now ascendant. And so whatever messages of the *Batman* series that may have resonated in the psyche of the 1930s are merely entertainment today. But that doesn't mean that we don't have our own present demons that need to be exorcised through popular entertainment.

Let's take, for instance, the *Dirty Harry* (1971) series. In the 1970s there was a substantial rise in the crime rate. Public concern over that increase was reflected in the entertainment media of the time, through higher body counts and rates of victimization in dramatic television series and the movies. The *Dirty Harry* movies

were enormously popular in their day because they provided a kind of cathartic release for moviegoers who had a fear of crime but also believed that the government's response was inadequate. The problem is that the *Dirty Harry* solution for crime, while satisfying to the audience, is hardly the way to run a society governed by the rule of law.

In the film, Clint Eastwood playing Harry Callahan is judge, jury, and executioner. It is not to besmirch the fine career of Eastwood to say that his portrayal of Inspector Callahan is subversive—subversive in the sense that his portrayal may undermine support for the rule of law. It is not his fault. When he had an opportunity to make his own film, *The Unforgiven*, Eastwood depicted violence, the consequences thereof, and the role of the law marvelously—well deserving of the Academy Award that film and director received. But as *Dirty Harry*, Clint Eastwood plays fast and loose with the U.S. Constitution, which makes this in some sense a bad film. In *Dirty Harry*, Callahan makes no secret of his contempt for the law and for the bureaucrats and the courts that enforce it. At least he is up front about his beliefs.

A much more dangerous and subtle play to the darker side of the public's appetite for vengeance occurs in the enormously popular film *The Untouchables* (1987). In what is otherwise a gripping and exciting film occurs one of the oddest and most contradictory moments in American film history. Kevin Costner, playing the prototypical G-man and straight shooter Eliot Ness, murders a suspect in custody. It is an act that is so out of character, such a cheap sop to the visceral emotions of the audience, such an easy way out for the filmmakers that it virtually ruins the film. The suspect who is killed, Frank Nitti, is no doubt a bad guy and deserves what he gets, but that is not the point. If the point of the film is the age-old struggle between good and evil, law and lawlessness, the murder of a suspect already subdued, no matter what he is accused of doing, muddies the waters. Eliot Ness is no longer as straight as he seems. While he is better than the man he kills, he is not much better. He's just a hit man for the government. Who will stand up for justice if not Eliot Ness?⁵

In the 1980s the women's liberation movement became a prominent part of America's social scene. In trying to cash in on this political movement, filmmakers attempted to create film plots and roles more sensitive to the plight of women. One such film was *Working Girl* (1988), starring Melanie Griffith, Sigourney Weaver, and Harrison Ford. It is sometimes the case that filmmakers try to do the right thing but get it wrong. *Working Girl* is such a film.

In it, a secretary from a working-class neighborhood on Staten Island (played by the always radiant Griffith) tries to break into the ranks of the junior executive in her Wall Street brokerage house. However, her way is blocked by sexist men and by a particularly predatory female boss (played by Weaver). The film is supposed to be about how, through hard work and pluck, this woman manages to gain the first rung on the ladder to her ascent to the top. This is a modern Horatio Alger tale with a twist. In this story, the protagonist is a woman, giving the film the veneer of a contemporary story about a woman's liberation.

Why is this a bad film? The production values and acting are first class, but the problems start with the main plot and encompass the entire outline of the film. While

hard work and pluck are supposed to be rewarded in our capitalist system, in this film they are nothing of the sort. In the beginning of the story we find that no matter how hard she tries, how many night school classes she attends, Griffith, viewed by her coworkers as merely a voluptuous secretary, is never taken seriously. Her multiple attempts to move to the level of management trainee are constantly rebuffed by the personnel office. Finally, in desperation, while her boss is out of town, she assumes the role of her supervisor and manages through this subterfuge to work out a big deal and bed a handsome dealmaker from another firm (played by Ford). The problem with all this is that it has nothing to do with capitalism or with women's liberation. The main character, Tess (Griffith), gets ahead through cheating the system and the judicious use of her lovely body. If anything, this film is an advertisement for socialism because, stripped to its core, the message of the film is that the only way for Tess to get ahead is to cheat and sleep her way to the top.

And what a "top" it is. In the last scene of the movie, Tess succeeds in getting her own office as a management trainee. This accomplishment seems dubious. One gets the sense that being a junior executive in this firm is just like being a glorified secretary. As if to reinforce that point, as the credits role and the music swells (a lovely inspirational tune sung by Carly Simon), the camera pulls back from the building in which Tess's office, put in perspective, resembles a cell in a beehive. This last scene delivers a punch like a knockout blow. This is what she fought for, so that she could have her own secretary and have someone else get the coffee? In a magnanimous gesture, Tess makes it clear to her new secretary that she'll get her own coffee. This probably means that Tess will be a "good" boss—sort of like a good slave master. Nevertheless, the reality is that the secretary is still in the "pool." But, then again, so is Tess herself.

If there were a sequel to this movie, my guess would be that Tess, after having spent the best years of her life slaving away for the company, will be laid off in a cost-saving measure before her pension vests. After all, her supervisors will reason, she was promoted because she slept with and married the character played by Ford, which brings us to the ludicrous and insulting way in which women (and working-class people, in general) are treated in this film.

When the evil witch (Weaver) is vanquished, in a parting shot she is told to get her "bony-ass" out of the building, as if the character played by Weaver really cares what some CEO thinks of her ass. Can't women just be evil in their own right? Do they have to be demeaned as well? Look at it from another perspective: Would John Wayne shoot someone and then comment on the size of his victim's penis?

As for the working people, the way this film treats them is an abomination. Joan Cusack and Alec Baldwin, cast in roles as Tess's best friend and boyfriend, play their roles as drunken louts from Staten Island, incapable of expressing or even having an intelligent thought. I suppose this is a plot device necessary to convince the denser of us that what Tess is doing to achieve a higher level of dronedom is worth it. The alternative to a luxury apartment on the Upper East Side is a life of drinking, whoring, and wearing bad clothing. This in fact may be the way that producers see the world,

but it is patently untrue and insulting to working men and women, most of whom have a life worth living.

Far from being a paean to women's liberation and capitalistic justice, this film would resonate well in the former Soviet Union. *Working Girl* could be interpreted to mean that if the only way that working people can get ahead in a capitalist system is to cheat, steal, and lie (in more ways than one) their way to the top, then maybe the capitalist system should be overthrown once and for all. Other films of this "liberationist" ilk include *Pretty Woman* (1990), where the protagonist solves her problems by marrying money; *Thelma and Louise* (1991), where the heroes of this female buddy flick solve their problems by killing themselves; and *Striptease* (1996), the only film in history inspired by a cosmetic surgical procedure, Demi Moore's breast enhancement.

In the 1990s the whole role of government came under attack. The Republicans won control of Congress in 1994 for the first time in forty years, largely by running against the corruption of the Democratically controlled Congress and, in general, against the corruption of an overly intrusive and corrupt government. Popular entertainment, too, fed these claims. In supplying stories and protagonists who highlighted the sinister side of government, some films reinforced these beliefs. For example, two enormously popular films of the 1990s were *The Firm* (1993) and *The Client* (1994), both based on novels by best-selling author John Grisham.

For those who haven't seen the movie *The Firm*, it is about a supposedly brilliant young Harvard-trained lawyer (Tom Cruise) who gets a job with a Memphis law firm and whose job it is to help its clients avoid and evade paying taxes (tax avoidance is legal; tax evasion is illegal). Unbeknownst to our hero, the firm's main client is really the Chicago mob, and the firm is really responsible for helping it launder its ill-gotten gains through the Cayman Islands. Our hero soon discovers this fact. He also finds that anyone in the firm who objects to this practice is murdered. At the same time, our hero is approached by the FBI, which is also aware of what is really going on, and he is asked to serve in an undercover role as an FBI informant. This is where the film takes a strange turn.

Instead of leaping at the opportunity to serve the cause of justice and fight the Mafia (and, in the process, to clear his name), our hero rebuffs the FBI. Why? Because of some completely fallacious and self-centered reasoning about his future as a lawyer. Somehow, he reasons, if he turns state's evidence, he will violate his sacred client-lawyer relationship (with the mob?) and have his license to practice revoked. Even if there were a risk that his license would be revoked (no matter how remote) or that he would be cooperating at some personal risk, it seems probable that he has the obligation as an officer of the court, and as all citizens do, to cooperate with the authorities in their investigation of capital crimes. How would he (the "hero") feel if someone else refused to testify or cooperate with the police in the investigation of a crime of which he was the victim? Instead, he keeps his salary, his fancy house, and his car and decides to investigate the firm on his own for some purpose that is not entirely clear. At the very least, he should resign immediately upon learning what sort of things the firm is up to.

The rest of the film is devoted to the story of his narrow escape and personal triumph. In the course of this adventure, he manages to blackmail the government (that is "us" if you believe that we live in a democracy) into releasing from prison his brother, a convicted murderer (one wonders how the victim's relatives feel about that), and extorting \$750,000 of our taxpayer money from the FBI. This is not to mention that he betrays his wife, betrays his firm, and manages to protect the Mafia all at the same time. And this guy is a hero? Only in the 1990s could such behavior be considered heroic. In contrast to the protagonist in *The Firm*, consider the role of Jimmy Stewart as an FBI agent in *The FBI Story* (1959). In that movie the FBI is portrayed as an elite crime-fighting unit with dedicated heroic agents—not as it is in *The Firm* as some sort of hybrid between the Keystone Cops and the gestapo. Clearly, attitudes concerning governmental institutions have changed. Why most other people didn't have the same general reaction as I did to *The Firm* can only be attributable to some broad general components of our American political ideology that some politicians so skillfully managed to exploit in the politics of the 1990s.⁶

In fairness to Grisham, he did not write the scripts for *The Firm* and *The Client*. Furthermore, in a later movie based on a Grisham novel, *The Rainmaker* (1997), the gist of the story is that the institutions of society prevail in delivering justice. However, it should be noted that *The Rainmaker* was much less a commercial success than was *The Firm* or *The Client*, which may tell us something about the public's appetite for stories about the success of governmental institutions. Although filmgoers may be more socially liberal, it is not clear that they are more politically liberal.

In the discussion of judging a film, we can apply another standard by which to measure the quality of a film aside from its entertainment value or technical quality. The films examined in this chapter are viewed from the sociopolitical perspective. Up to now, we have outlined the standards used by professional film critics to measure the quality of a film, but it is also the case that film reviewers and the public can view a film from an ideological perspective. To capture the spectrum of opinions on the quality of films from the ideological perspective, it is essential that we understand the broad outlines of American political thought.

AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND AMERICAN FILM

It may come as a surprise to some that American political ideology is generally regarded as being relatively homogeneous.⁷ In comparison to the range of political thought in other countries—such as France, Germany, Italy, or practically any other Western democracy—the range of American political thought is relatively narrow. In the United States, we have no large-scale fascist or socialist movements. There are no political groups in support of a return to monarchy or dictatorial control. In the United States, most of us share two core beliefs: a belief in political democracy and one in free market economics.

Given the spirited and sometimes nasty tone of American politics, it is hard to believe that there is less political difference between John Kerry and George W. Bush than among the party leaders on the ends of the political spectrum in almost any other country. However, when Bush and Kerry debate industrial regulation, tax cuts, or health care reform, they discuss "how much and for whom" rather than what fundamental changes need to be made in the political process or how we should construct our economic system.⁸ This is not to say that one side can't charge the other with being socialist or authoritarian; after all, it is the job of politicians to highlight their differences with their opponents but in an unfavorable light for the latter. But beneath the veneer of spirited political competition in the United States, there is a core of consensus. Again, this is not to discredit the substantial differences between the parties and candidates in the United States. However, these differences for the most part take place within a common consensus.⁹

In what is to follow, I identify six ideological types that exist within the American consensus. Then, for the purposes of comparative contrast, I outline two ideological perspectives that are outside the American consensus. A description of the socialist and the fascist views will give us some idea of reactions to American film abroad.¹⁰ Finally, I choose a current controversial film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and display critiques of it from each of the American ideological perspectives. As the reader, identify your own point of view, or portions of your point of view, from the list.

First, we need to discuss the American consensus in a little more detail. It is quite remarkable that as culturally diverse as our population is, we are so politically homogeneous. The reason is that most Americans have in their family background the shared experience of flight, or as I described it in chapter 1, the immigrant experience. This experience has at the same time both a leveling effect and the effect of producing a nation of individualists. Save for Native Americans, no American has any more of a claim to being an American than anyone else. Furthermore, the immigrant experience has the effect of inculcating us with a healthy fear of government. After all, most immigrants have fled oppressive governments or social regimes. Thus, Americans are basically egalitarians and largely individualists, and most would therefore agree that the government that governs best governs least.

There are times, however, when we need a government. In times of war, for example, a government organizes an army for defense. Most of us would also agree that the court system, the police, and other basic functions of government, such as the building of roads and other infrastructure improvements, are essential. But the devil is in the details. How much should government do and how should we pay for it? What are the legitimate rights of individuals and what kinds of behaviors should be restrained? These are the baselines of debate in American politics. To settle these issues, we rely on a representative democracy. Democratic rule makes the most sense for our individualist state because through democracy the restrictions that the government imposes are basically restrictions that we place on ourselves. Consequently, there is a consensual agreement in the United States concerning the legitimacy of democratic

governance. Furthermore, because we are individualists or life entrepreneurs, we tend to believe in free market economics, where each individual can make or break him- or herself in the rough-and-tumble of the market. Thus, an outline of the American consensus. But as I have said, the devil is in the details. The following are some of the more prominent divisions of American politics.

Six Ideological Types within the American Consensus

Libertarian. Libertarians believe that the government that governs best governs least—period. Libertarians promote the minimal state with the only absolute guiding principle being the absolute respect for property rights. Libertarians define property rights rather broadly to include not just a person's right to obtain and possess property but also the property rights that one has in one's own body. Thus, libertarians oppose the expropriation of property in all forms, including taxation, theft, and assault. To the extent that government exists, it does so to protect the property rights of the individual. In terms of public policy, libertarians oppose most forms of taxation, zoning restrictions, firearm bans, drug laws, and government activities beyond the police function and national defense.¹¹ While most Americans are libertarians to some extent, they reject in one way or another the absolutism of the libertarian. Thus, while most Americans believe that the government that governs best governs least, they do so with a few provisos.

Welfare liberals. Welfare liberals also believe that the government that governs best governs least. However, it is often the case that individuals find themselves in circumstances in which the government should help them out.¹² Children, the disabled, the sick, the aged, and the infirm are generally at a disadvantage through no fault of their own. Children, for instance, can't choose their parents. Sickness and the ill effects of aging are unavoidable. Consequently, welfare liberals support government programs to provide for public schools, public hospitals, aid to the indigent, public health, and other components of a social safety net. These liberals are generally tolerant of social differences, behaviors, and other religious practices. However, they do not tolerate unfair discrimination, defined as that made on the basis of race, gender, or political conviction.

Of course, the problem with welfare liberalism is in deciding who is genuinely at a disadvantage. Is the smoker to blame for his heart disease, the overeater for her diabetes? At what point should children be responsible for themselves? These are questions that dog the welfare liberal ideology and are often raised by those in our society called *conservatives*.¹³

Secular conservatives. Secular conservatives, as well, believe that the government that governs best governs least. However, there are times that government ought to intervene in order to facilitate the market or preserve the existing order of society. The government can often help the market be more efficient by providing an adequate infrastructure. Consequently, conservatives, along with liberals, support public education, public health, road building, some forms of trade regulation, and a strong

national defense. Where they disagree with liberals is on the issues of why and how much. Conservatives support social programs as an investment and therefore hold those programs to an investment standard. When policies such as public education begin to show a diminished return, conservatives tend to lose interest and begin to promote their privatization. Because conservatives hold these programs to an efficiency standard rather than a rights standard, as liberals do, conservatives are less willing to be expansive in public spending to cover all possible needs. Therefore, secular conservatives disagree with welfare liberals on the size and scope of the welfare state.

Unlike libertarians, however, conservatives do not believe that anything goes in terms of behavior. Certain standards and traditions need to be upheld if only to protect the smooth, working order of society. For example, conservatives support harsh antidrug penalties because, from their position, drug abuse leads to crime and wasted lives. Conservatives generally oppose gay marriage and civil unions because of the perceived threat that such relationships pose to traditional notions of child rearing, the nuclear family, and the allocation of public benefits.

The problem with the secular conservative position is that if social programs are held to an efficiency standard, many individuals in need fall through the cracks. School vouchers may help a middle-class child move into a private school, but as school vouchers are generally proposed, they won't be enough to get a poor child into a private school. Thus, the efficiency standard tends to be class biased. A decline in funding for facilities such as public housing, transportation, hospitals, and schools tends to weigh most heavily on the poor. The question liberals then pose is, Are housing, health, nutrition, and basic education a right or a privilege?

Religious conservatives. Like the others, religious conservatives believe that the government that governs best governs least. However, if the government acts in a way that contradicts religious doctrine or if the government doesn't act at all when the moral order of society is threatened, they want the government to intervene. Religious conservatives agree in many ways with both liberals and conservatives. They agree with conservatives on most social and economic issues, and, in a general sense, they agree with liberals on the importance of social programs to provide for children, the sick, and the indigent. However, the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah guide their beliefs in the promotion of government action.¹⁴ Because these books, in the opinion of religious conservatives, are literally the word of God, they cannot compromise on issues where the secular government and the religious texts contradict. Consequently, religious conservatives reject the notion that there should be in government a separation of church and state. Furthermore, they believe that government should subsidize religious organizations as being the primary suppliers of social benefits. Therefore, religious conservatives don't disagree with liberals on the need for alms for the poor; they disagree on how those services should be supplied.

While religious conservatives generally support a free market economy, they would do so with some provisos. The problem for religious conservatives is that the market is neither moral nor immoral—it is amoral. So, when there is a market for abortion

on-demand pornography, liquor, and gambling, religious conservatives support government intervention to close these markets. Religious conservatives do not measure programs by an efficiency standard, as do secular conservatives; they do not measure programs by a rights standard, as do liberals; they measure programs by a Biblical standard. Programs that do not meet that standard are by definition a violation of the word of God and must be opposed.

Of course, secular conservatives object to the religious conservatives' rejection of the efficiency standard. Furthermore, secular conservatives may have a problem with religious conservatives who oppose teaching science in school or who impose arcane restrictions on gambling and alcohol. Liberals, for their part, don't believe that religious organizations have the resources to adequately supply social services on their own. Furthermore, liberals believe that religious organizations are discriminatory and thus not the way that government funds should be distributed in a democracy.

It should be noted that not all religious people are conservatives. A significant segment of the religious community is liberal. Its members believe in the secularization of politics and that the holy books can be read to mean that a much more activist government is in order.

Religious liberals. Religious liberals are more likely to support the separation of church and state, as they are more tolerant of diverse lifestyles and practices. They tend to side with welfare liberals when it comes to providing for the welfare state. They believe as do welfare liberals that health care, schooling, food, and housing are rights, not privileges. They arrive at this conclusion in their reading of the Bible.

Green Party. Finally, there is a relatively new phenomenon in American politics: the Green Party. The Green Party was born of the environmental movement. Greens borrow much of their ideology from the ancient religions that saw the human race as simply being part of a whole. It is then the responsibility of the human race to live in harmony with nature. If that means doing without personal automobiles, nuclear power, or the globalization of trade, then so be it. In many ways, the Green Party is both the most unusual and the most traditional political movement in the United States. Greens do not necessarily believe that the government that governs best governs least. They can see that in many cases collective action, sometimes through government and sometimes through private organization, is a better way than the market to achieve society's goals. In this sense, they share something in common with the socialists. On the other hand, the Green Party is the most traditional of American political movements, as they draw much of their inspiration from the Native American religions that predate Western settlement of North America.¹⁵

The problem with the Green movement from both the liberal and the conservative political perspective is its rejection of free market capitalism. From the religious perspective, the Green movement is troublesome in the sense that Greens seem to reject traditional notions of religion. Thus, the Green movement is really, for now, outside the mainstream of American politics. But there is a chance that in the future Greens will widen their agenda and appeal enough to become a major player in American politics.

Two Ideological Perspectives Outside the American Consensus

Socialism. One of the most common smears in American political discourse is to label an opponent a socialist (that to label someone a socialist in our country is a smear is remarkable in and of itself). Yet there are few true socialists in the United States and no real socialist movement. Socialist movements, however, are strong and alive abroad. Therefore, we should consider their reaction to American culture, if only to understand the attitudes of many abroad toward the United States.

True, socialists also believe that the government that governs best governs least. The ultimate goal for the socialist is the withering away of the state. In that socialist utopia, there would be no need for government because states would have no need to go to war against one another, and for individuals it would be "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." In the meantime, however, socialists believe that the source of many of the world's problems is a function of the capitalist system. Capitalism, according to the socialist, is inherently exploitative. To maintain this exploitative system—that is, workers being exploited by the owners of the means of production—states are forced to subdue other states and subdue their own workers. Capitalists do so in a number of ways. Because they own the media, they use propaganda to maintain their control and cover up their crimes. By and large socialists reject religion as "the opiate of the masses." Capitalists use religion to pacify exploited workers. And finally, if worse comes to worst, capitalists use force.¹⁶

This is not part of the American debate. No leading candidate for political office in the United States proposes state ownership of the means of production (although there have been some calls for nationalized health care in the style of the Canadian system, although Canada is hardly a socialist state). The problem with socialism is that it may be wildly inefficient. Capitalists cannot see how centralized planners can outperform the market in the distribution of goods. Furthermore, individualists cannot see why they should sacrifice their own ambitions for the good of society or for the good of people at large. Thus, socialism has not found and is unlikely to find much of a following in the United States.

Socialist, however, is not the only smear used in the rhetoric of politics. Another label bandied about in the United States is *fascist*.

Fascism. Fascism did not die with Adolph Hitler. It is alive and well all over the world, but it hasn't had much of a presence in the United States since before World War II. Fascists believe that there is a natural hierarchy in society, that in society there are the strong and there are the weak. According to the fascist, it is the role and indeed the obligation of the strong to rule the weak. Of course, the problem with this prescriptive order is determining who is the strong and who is the weak. The fascist invariably self-identifies as the strong and identifies the "other" as the weak.¹⁷ Liberals and conservatives reject fascism, among other reasons, because fascism rejects democracy; religious conservatives and liberals reject fascism, among other reasons, because of its total and complete rejection of traditional religion. There are no significant fascist

political movements in the United States, nor are there likely to be because of the United States' core political belief in essential egalitarianism.

Each of these ideologies and their variants looks at the world through a unique set of lenses. In the following section, I take as an example a recent controversial film, and I examine how the film is seen from each of the political perspectives discussed here, save for that of the Green Party and including that of the Jewish and the black perspective.

IDEOLOGY AND *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

It is clear by now that *The Passion of the Christ*, an enormously controversial film produced by actor Mel Gibson, is a huge financial success. The film was produced for the rather paltry sum of \$30 million and has to date (2005) grossed more than \$600 million,¹⁸ a huge success by any standard. The film has provoked a tremendous amount of controversy due to its interpretation of the Bible, its violent content, and its medieval approach to the Christian religion. It has also become a metaphor for the spectrum of American political debate.

Before we examine this film from the perspectives of the aforementioned ideologies, let's first consider the standard movie review. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* writes,

Is the film "good" or "great?" I imagine each person's reaction (visceral, theological, artistic) will differ. I was moved by the depth of feeling, by the skill of the actors and technicians, by their desire to see this project through no matter what. To discuss individual performances, such as James Caviezel's heroic depiction of the ordeal, is almost beside the point. This isn't a movie about performances, although it has powerful ones, or about technique, although it is awesome, or about cinematography (although Caleb Deschanel paints with an artist's eye), or music (although John Debney supports the content without distracting from it).¹⁹

Ebert applauds the artistry and the passion of the filmmakers without passing judgment on its content. This is one standard of evaluation to be sure, but it can also be used as a standard to praise *The Triumph of the Will* (1934), Leni Riefenstahl's celebration of the Nazi Party. Do film reviewers owe us more? Do we want them getting out of their expertise, the film business, to comment on something that they probably know little more about than we do?

Typical of a critique from the far Left is J. Hoberman's review in the *Village Voice*:

Sitting through the film's garishly staged suffering, one might well ponder the millions of people—victims of crusades, inquisitions, colonial conquests, the slave trade, political terror, and genocide—who have been tortured and killed in Christ's name.²⁰

Hoberman focuses not on the artistry of the film but on the destructive consequences of religious passion. His standard for criticizing this film is the effect that *The Passion* may have on those who watch it.

A typical, mainstream welfare liberal response to this film is from David Ansen, writing for *Newsweek* magazine:

It's the sadism, not the alleged anti-Semitism, that is most striking. (For the record, I don't think Gibson is anti-Semitic; but those inclined toward bigotry could easily find fuel for their fire here.) There's always been a pronounced streak of sadomasochism and martyrdom running through Gibson's movies, both as an actor and as a filmmaker. The Oscar-winning "Braveheart" reveled in decapitations and disembowelments, not to mention the spectacle of Gibson himself, as the Scottish warrior hero, impaled on a cross. In "Mad Max," the "Lethal Weapon" movies, "Ransom" and "Signs" (where he's a cleric who's lost his faith), the Gibson hero is pummeled and persecuted, driven to suicidal extremes. From these pop-passion-plays to the Passion itself is a logical progression; it gives rise to the suspicion that on some unconscious level "The Passion of the Christ" is, for Gibson, autobiography.²¹

Ansen is clearly concerned about this film's potential to produce a bigoted response. But rather than critique Gibson as a member of a group (radical religious conservatives), Ansen focuses on Gibson's individual responsibility. Ansen suggests that the passion in this film is Gibson's passion and that, more than anything else, this film may reflect the fact that Gibson is more than a little crazy. This review is fine as far as it goes, but it begs the obvious. Millions of people have bought into Gibson's passion. What may be a personal statement apparently resonates with millions of people. The ideas expressed in *The Passion* are more generally shared than what Ansen is willing to admit. In some sense, then, Ansen is in denial.

From the secular conservative perspective, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks's comments are illustrative:

The flap over Gibson's movie reminds us that religion can be a dangerous thing. It can be coarsened into gore and bloodshed and used to foment hatred. But we're not living in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Our general problem is not that we're too dogmatic. Our more common problems come from the other end of the continuum. Americans in the 21st century are more likely to be divorced from any sense of a creedal order, ignorant of the moral traditions that have come down to us through the ages and detached from the sense that we all owe obligations to a higher authority.

Sure, let's get angry at Mel Gibson if he deserves it. But let's not forget that the really corrosive cultural forces come in the form of the easygoing narcissism that surrounds us every day.²²

Brooks's comments are from what could be called the "kids these days don't believe in anything" school of thought. Brooks is clearly uncomfortable with the religiosity of Gibson's film, but he can't resist getting in a dig at liberals, who, in his opinion, have contributed to the moral degradation of modern society. Secular conservatives are concerned about the breakdown of the traditional social order. However, they are also concerned that replacing our civil society with a religious society, one may go too far in the other direction. We have seen what the imposition of fundamentalist

religious beliefs has done (or hasn't done) for the economic and social development of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

A good example of a conservative religious reaction to *The Passion* comes in a column written by Robert Novak:

At the heart of the dispute over "The Passion" is freedom of expression. Liberals who defended the right to exhibit Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ," which deeply offended orthodox Christians, now demand censorship of "The Passion of Christ." As a result, Abe Foxman [head of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League] and his allies have risked stirring religious tensions over a work of art.²³

Novak sees criticism as censorship. However, to criticize is not to censor. Pundits on both ends of the political spectrum often use this riff, equating criticism to censorship, to intimidate their opponents. However, Novak goes one step further. There is an implicit threat in his suggestion that criticism of the film may stir up "religious tensions." Religious conservatives are more sensitive to criticism than are other groups because they believe that they are acting according to the will of God. Therefore, to criticize the activities of religious conservatives is to criticize God.

Religious liberals, however, have a totally different reaction to this film. Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete is a Catholic theologian, author, lecturer, and former president of the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico. Writing in the *New Republic*, he suggests,

I found Gibson's film to be, at some level, powerful. But his reduction of the passion and death of Jesus to an emotionally wrenching story is problematic. What is one supposed to do about this story? Cry? Be inspired to make sure things like that don't happen again? Why not seek revenge (as anti-Semites throughout the ages have done)? None of these is the intended purpose of this narrative. To separate the facts of the passion from their proper context is to open the door to unchecked religious emotionalism. This is what worries me about Gibson's film.²⁴

Albacete is clearly concerned about the ramifications of the release of a religious film that incites so much passion without so much direction. Over the years, passion plays have often incited Christians to riot, committing atrocities against local Jewish communities. While only 8 percent of Americans believe that Jews are responsible for the death of Christ, that belief is more widely held in the rest of the world and could grow larger as the result of this film.²⁵

Many Jews do feel threatened by a film that can be interpreted by some to blame the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. After all, Jews have been persecuted for centuries by Christians who accuse them of deicide. Leon Wieseltier, writing for the *New Republic*, voices these concerns when he writes,

The Passion of The Christ is an unwitting incitement to secularism, because it leaves you desperate to escape its standpoint, to find another way of regarding the horror that you have just observed. This is unfair to, well, Christianity, since Christianity is not a cult

of Gibsonesque gore. But there is a religion toward which Gibson's movie is even more unfair than it is to its own. In its representation of its Jewish characters, *The Passion of the Christ* is without any doubt an anti-Semitic movie, and anybody who says otherwise knows nothing, or chooses to know nothing, about the visual history of anti-Semitism, in art and in film. What is so shocking about Gibson's Jews is how unreconstructed they are in their stereotypical appearances and actions. These are not merely anti-Semitic images; these are classically anti-Semitic images. In this regard, Gibson is most certainly a traditionalist.²⁶

One wonders how Christians would react were their ministers and religion depicted in the same way that Gibson portrayed Jews and Judaism in *The Passion*. Wieseltier is pointing out that in his decision on how to portray the Jews and emphasize some parts of the New Testament over others, Gibson depicts Judaism in a negative light and reinforces negative stereotypes of Jews. Whether Gibson is anti-Semitic or not is beside the point. He has the right to his opinion. But if the film he makes is anti-Semitic, that's a different matter. Gibson may not be anti-Semitic, but his insensitivity to the roots of bigotry is manifest.

And it's not just Jews who complain about Gibson's depiction of Jesus. James Hill, writing for *Black Entertainment Television*, writes,

It is troubling that even in 2004, a director would go so far as to use solely Aramaic and Latin languages in order to ensure a historically accurate film, and yet still hire mostly White actors to play people who were anything but what scholarship suggests. Despite Gibson's efforts to hide lead actor Caviezel's European heritage behind a prosthetic nose and digitally darkened eyes, Jesus and the majority of the cast comes off looking like all the other theatrical productions of Jesus' life—Whitewashed.²⁷

African Americans have often criticized the film industry for whitewashing its productions. There is some controversial scholarship to the effect that Jesus was black. Whether that is true or not, it is certainly the case that African Americans have been historically underrepresented in the production and casting of Hollywood films.

Hill sees this film from a perspective based on his ethnicity, which brings me back to my original point. The conversation about film is often the conversation about politics. In this section, we see how almost every major political perspective in the United States has weighed in on the quality of this film. Is *The Passion of the Christ* a bad film? Well, as they say in politics, "Where you sit is where you stand."

Feature Film: *Working Girl* (1988)

As we have seen, even films that are on the surface devoid of political content can promote, ignore, or distort certain political beliefs. In a bit of a departure from the standard movie review, I have chosen to analyze one particular film, *Working Girl*, from several different ideological perspectives.



Working Girl. Courtesy of M.P. & T.V. Photo Archive.

To reprise, Tess McGill, played by Melanie Griffith, is a secretary for a Wall Street financial firm who tries to get ahead in her job by working hard and by not just a little deception. As we have already discussed the plot of this film extensively, let's now examine it from various political perspectives.

Libertarian

This is a movie about reality, not what we would like reality to be. Tess is at a disadvantage because she is discriminated against. Get over it. Discrimination is a fact in our society and is simply one of the natural barriers that one needs to overcome in order to get ahead. Outlawing discrimination is like outlawing gravity. To get ahead, Tess breaks the rules. But who is hurt by her deception? No one and that is the standard we should use in evaluating the morality of her actions. In fact, we are all better off for the increased efficiency in our economy brought about by free, unfettered economic transactions, such as that demonstrated in the plot through the purchase of radio stations by Trask Enterprises. In the end, because of her hard work and pluck, Tess succeeds. Isn't that the way it ought to be?

Welfare liberal

Tess is confronted by unfair discrimination. There is no reason that just because she is a woman and she comes from humble beginnings, she can't perform the same job at the same level of efficiency as the men do in her office (and the one woman at the corporate management level, portrayed by Sigourney Weaver). That is what I mean by *unfair* discrimination. Fortunately, there are laws against

discrimination on the basis of gender. Rather than take matters into her own hands (and thereby delegitimize her behavior), she should hire a good litigation attorney and sue the company for illegal discrimination on the basis of gender. In doing so, not only will she help herself, but she will help her fellow workers, who are beset by a pervasive atmosphere of sex discrimination.

Secular conservative

In some sense, Tess should be applauded for her efforts to get ahead. We have provided for her a good education and an infrastructure in support of business that is second to none. Clearly, she and her company have benefited from the limited assistance that government provides to promote business. Tess, however, thinks the world owes her a living. When the company she works for refuses to grant her a promotion, rather than look for work somewhere else or display the patience necessary to get a reward for work well done, she decides to cheat and scheme her way to the top. I have got to wonder why she hasn't yet been promoted. Could it be that an employee who uses the company's keyboard to disrupt the stock ticker in the middle of a trading session is not seen by the company as management material? In other words, isn't she at fault for the fix she's in? Clearly, she looks in a mirror and sees that she dresses like a clown and talks like longshoreman. Should the company be expected to promote her before she cleans up her own act?

Religious conservative

Tess is on a dead-end path. Her ignorance of God and his word makes her life meaningless. In the end, when she faces the judgment of the Lord, she will have nothing to show for her life but a legacy of sin and money. The pursuit of money of and for itself is a sin. The fact that she cheats, lies, steals, and has immoral sexual intercourse compounds that sin. In the end, were she to find the Lord, she would receive all of the sustenance that she needs. She would lead a good and generous life and would be rewarded in the end in the kingdom of heaven. This film sets a terrible example for our youth. At the very least, the film should be marketed with a warning label interpreting and highlighting the degeneracy of this film as being promoted by a bunch of Hollywood liberals.

African American

Where are all the black faces in this and all the movies we have seen? The fact that Hollywood hires blacks neither in front of nor behind the camera breeds racism. Audiences for this and other movies never see blacks in positions of responsibility, nor are they told of the discrimination that is still rampant in our society. Therefore, the racial problems of this country become invisible to the European majority, and racism persists.

Fascist

Tess has the will to power. She is obviously born to rule. Liberal society's rules exist to protect the position of the degenerate upper classes. The fact that Tess breaks the rules to get ahead is simply nature taking its course. If people like Katherine (Tess's boss), who achieve their position of responsibility by virtue of birth, are allowed to continue to rule, the state will eventually perish. Therefore, what Tess does in this film is not only essential; it is right.

Socialist

Tess is on the path to oblivion. As a worker, she expends all her energy to "get ahead," which, in the end, means moving from a desk out in the open to a closet that passes as an office. Her reward is to be able to lord it over her secretary. But is this petty exploitation a true reward? Does she realize her true potential? Does her climbing over the backs of other workers make anyone better off (except the bourgeoisie)? No. Tess must recognize that the corruption she sees in her office is endemic to the capitalistic system. To know that and to still participate in it is to be part of the problem, not the solution. What she needs to do is to organize and educate other workers to rise up against the oppression of the capitalist state. Then she will be truly free.

Don't agree? What do you think?

EXERCISE

Interpret a current top-grossing film from five different American political perspectives: libertarian, welfare liberal, secular conservative, religious conservative, and religious liberal. See if you can identify your own personal political philosophy in the way that you analyze film.

NOTES

1. For a good discussion of film criticism, see Warren Buckland, *Film Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), particularly chap. 6.
2. See Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (New York: Viking, 1974), 121–24, for a discussion of the director as auteur.
3. For an excellent discussion of the sociological meaning of the comics, see Arthur Asa Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York: Walker, 1973); on Batman in particular, see 160–71.
4. John E. O'Connor and Phillip C. Rollins, eds., *The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003).
5. For an examination of vigilantism in comparative perspective, see H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter C. Sederberg, "Vigilantism: An Analysis of Establishment Violence," *Comparative Politics* 6, no. 4 (July 1974): 541–70.

6. For a full-length review of these films, see Daniel P. Franklin, "A Day at the Movies: 'The Client' Breeds Anarchy," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 4, 1994, A15.

7. The classic exposition of this point is made by Samuel Huntington in *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1981), 230–31; or Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1955). For a further discussion and partial refutation of this point, see Rogers M. Smith, "The 'American Creed' and American Identity: The Limits of Liberal Citizenship in the United States," *Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1988): 225–51.

8. For a more complete rendition of this argument, see Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1979).

9. For more on this, see Russell Hardin, *Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999).

10. For a book-length discussion of these ideologies, see Terrance Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2003).

11. For a good exposition of the libertarian ethic, see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974), especially chap. 7.

12. For a prominent justification of the welfare liberal state, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

13. See Clarence Y. H. Lo, "Countermovements and Conservative Movements in the Contemporary U.S.," *Annual Review of Sociology* 8 (1982): 107–34.

14. Geoffrey C. Layman and Edward G. Carmines, "Cultural Conflict in American Politics: Religious Traditionalism, Postmaterialism, and U.S. Political Behavior," *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 3 (August 1997): 751–77; Geoffrey C. Layman, "Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Affiliations, and Commitment from 1980 to 1994," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 288–316; Kirk W. Elifson and C. Kirk Hadaway, "Prayer in Public Schools: When Church and State Collide," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 317–29.

15. From the Green Party platform, "Green politics is an ecological approach to politics that links social and ecological problems. Ecology studies the relationships among organisms and their environment. Political ecology brings human institutions and ideologies into this holistic perspective. We find that the same institutions and ideas that cause the exploitation and oppression of humans also cause the degradation and destruction of the environment. Both are rooted in a hierarchical, exploitative, and alienated social system that systematically produces human oppression and ecological destruction. For the Greens, therefore, the fights against racism, sexism, class exploitation, bureaucratic domination, war, and all other forms of social domination and violence are central to the movement for an ecologically sustainable society. In order to harmonize society with nature, we must harmonize human with human" (www.greenparty.org/Platform.html; accessed December 23, 2004).

16. There are many versions of socialist thought; the description here is drawn mainly from Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978): 469–500.

17. For more on this, see Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

18. Box Office Mojo, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm (accessed December 23, 2004).

19. Roger Ebert, "Current Reviews: *The Passion of the Christ*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 24, 2004, www.suntimes.com/output/ebert1/cst-fr-passion24.html

20. J. Hoberman, "Flogged to Death," *Village Voice*, February 25–March 2, 2004, www.villagevoice.com/film/0408.hoberman.51305.20.html (accessed August 4, 2005).
21. David Ansen, "So What's the Good News? The Debate over 'The Passion' May Be Less Harsh Than the Film," *Newsweek*, March 2004, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4338528/ (accessed August 4, 2005).
22. David Brooks, "Hooked on Heaven Lite," *New York Times*, March 9, 2004, A25, www.nytimes.com/2004/03/09/opinion/09BROO.html?n=Top%2fOpinion%2fEditorials%20and%20Op%2dEd%2fOp%2dEd%2fColumnists%2fDavid%20Brooks (accessed August 4, 2005).
23. Robert Novak, "The Passion of Christ," November 3, 2003, www.townhall.com/columnists/robertnovak/rn20031103.shtml (accessed August 4, 2005).
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