

**Review-Article on
Recent Books on American Film and Politics
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- Ernest Giglio, Here's Looking at You. New York: Peter Lang, 2000, xiii + 280 pages.
Sam R. Gircus, America on Film. Modernism, Documentary, and a Changing America.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xi + 266 pages.
Philip John Davies and Paul Wells, editors. American film and politics from Reagan to
Bush Jr. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. viii +
229 pages.
Melissa Wye Geraci, John F. Kennedy and the Artful Collaboration of Film and Politics.
Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2003. x + 151.

The books under review suggest that there is a broad consensus concerning important connections between film and politics in film studies today, as well as other academic disciplines. Yet there are a variety of views about how to conceptualize and interpret the relations between film and politics and a plethora of ways to explore the linkages. In general, most scholars are aware that image, spectacle, and the media inform contemporary politics, and recognize that films have a political dimension. And yet, as the recent books on film and politics under review here suggest, characterizing the relationships more precisely is extremely difficult and can be approached in many different manners, sometimes conflicting, to produce quite varied results.

The books examined in this review are significantly diverse in focus, scope, orientation, and results, and they exhibit a spectrum of ways that the topic of film and politics can be approached. Ernest Giglio in Here's Looking at You provides a broad historical overview of "Hollywood, Film, and Politics" (his subtitle) that offers students and others generally interested in the topic a useful introduction. Sam R. Gircus' America on Film. Modernism, Documentary, and a Changing America presents a more ambitious and original, albeit flawed, attempt to theorize relations between fiction and non-fiction cinema and politics in the United States during the past decades. Melissa Wye Geraci supplies a study of John F. Kennedy and the Artful Collaboration of Film and Politics that goes into primary sources in the production of JFK campaign films and the crafting of his political image that show how the Kennedy's understood the importance of media and image in contemporary politics and provides analysis of how cinematic production has entered into US presidential campaigns. And moving to the present era, the collection of essays edited by Philip John Davies and Paul Wells on American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr offers essays on specific benchmark American films of the 1980s and 1990s that present insights into the connections between film and politics in the US from the Reagan era to Bush Jr. (a period that can, in retrospect be seen as an intensification of the Reagan era, that is, Reaganism on steroids and to the right).

Ernest Giglio, a professor of Politics and American Studies at Lycoming College, examines the relationship between Hollywood films and politics from the silent era to the present in Here's Looking at You, a clearly written and well-organized collection that

could serve as a useful introduction to the topic to the general reader and a solid text for courses on film and politics.

In his preface, Giglio's documents his love affair with American film, which began in the early stages of his boyhood in New York during the Second World War and continued into his university years and present occupation as a college professor. Giglio's appreciation of film as an art form, as well as an expression of political culture was provoked by the then newly opened Museum of Modern Art's film series, which he attended weekly during his undergraduate years.

Giglio's dissertation from Syracuse University in the 1960s focused on censorship of American film, during the twentieth century and allowed him to combine his two major interests: law and film. This hybrid background informs the often detailed and contextual accounts which are organized into ten chapters that address the relationships of Hollywood and Washington, define political films, investigate non-fiction and independent film, and explore and document the realities and effects of the U.S. government and the film industries' censorship and regulation of film. In the course of his studies Giglio explores the escalation of anti-communist, anti-union, and Cold War politics and the devastating effects of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) on American cinema, the Hollywood industry and creative artists, as well as analyzing depictions of American politicians, lawyers and the law on screen. Giglio also examines the role of war and propaganda, ranging from the so-called "Great" to the "Good" Wars (WWI and II) to the more contradictory Korean War and Vietnam War, while also engaging Hollywood's multiple genres and reactions to the nuclear age and "the bomb," and providing insights into the future of political film in the 21st century.

The nature of film and politics is often ambiguous and difficult to classify, given that the term "political" is such a multidimensional concept. However, Giglio provides us with multiple descriptions of relationships between Hollywood films and politics. As he explains it: "Hollywood makes few films that are political in the sense that their intention is to promote a political idea or cause, disclose government corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, or expose human rights violations. But even the most innocuous Hollywood movie, designed for entertainment is still capable of delivering political messages even while audiences laugh, cry, or shriek with fear" (209). Moreover, he goes on to warn us that these kinds of films, which are often presented as pure entertainment, can be "harmful to the body politic if they reinforce stereotypical images, promote racist and sexist values, lend credibility to selfish or corrupt social and economic institutions, support government policies detrimental to public health and welfare, and champion foreign policy initiatives that result in disastrous consequences (ibid.)

It is in this broader sense, he argues, that most Hollywood films are political "simply because they accept, and therefore promote, the status quo" (ibid.) Yet Giglio's opening chapters engage different analyses of the relation between film and politics and present his own perspectives. Rejecting both the general position that all films are political and the opposing one that they are just entertainment and not political at all, Giglio argues that there is a specific type of political film (20ff) and that there is a history of interesting relationships between film and politics. The genre of specifically political films is defined by intent and effect, embracing both the filmmaker's intention to make a political film and its recognition by the audience, as some critics and audiences recognized D.W. Griffith's political project in Birth of a Nation (1915), or Oliver Stone's

in JFK (1991). Yet such a definition of political film is necessarily loose, as some filmmakers may not recognize specific political intentions found by audiences or critics, editors or studios can alter political scripts, and audiences may or may not grasp the political message intended.

Recognizing the difficulty of specifying the concept of political film, Giglio also presents analyses of film as propaganda, as political history, and as a socializing device (10-17). Chapter Three on “Nonfiction Film” presents analyses of different types of political documentary and nonfiction film. While he provides good overviews of political non-fiction film from World War I to post-World War II, he omits discussion of early nonfiction in works of the Lumiere Brothers and Edison studios, and does not mention the work of the Film and Photo League as political documentary cinema of the 1930s. And while he provides strong detailed accounts of the works of Fredrick Wiseman, Michael Moore, and German propaganda films, he wrongly categorizes John Sayles as a documentary filmmaker (40).

The strongest parts of Giglio’s text involve his political historical analyses of the interactions of Hollywood film and politics from early days of film regulation and the Hays code through the intersection of film and politics in the contemporary era.

Each chapter begins with a striking collection of quotes and a well-informed historical socio-political, economic analysis of the issue under review. These contextual accounts are then situated within descriptions and critiques of American cinema particular to the chapter topic and era. The range with which Giglio cites examples from a multiplicity of decades of U.S. film is often extraordinary and strengthens his arguments. Moreover, his talent for succinctly describing film plots and overt and covert political meanings encompassed in political films provide enough background information for the reader, unfamiliar with these films, to understand his arguments.

For those of us who are familiar with many of these films, his synopses and interpretations allow us to re-visit these films in our minds as well as often instilling a desire to re-watch them. His excellent Filmography, at the end of the book, provides assistance in this quest. Hence, what at first glance appears to be an interesting introduction to politics and film, on closer reading reveals a clearly written, factually rich, contextual illuminating, and critical account of the politics of Hollywood and independent film.

Sam B. Gircus’ America on Film. Modernism, Documentary, and a Changing America is by far the most ambitious book under review, but suffers from major flaws and limitations. A professor of English at Vanderbilt University and author of a series of books on Hollywood film, Gircus opens with some reflections on film and modernism and problems of distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction film. Unfortunately, he does not really flesh out these distinctions and although his book is subtitled “Modernism, Documentary, and a Changing America,” he does not really interrogate documentary films and only discusses one non-fiction film, When We Were Kings (1996), in some detail, a topic we take up below.

Gircus makes the interesting argument that films themselves are historical documents and provide documentary renditions of reality. He notes some difficulties with defining the differences between fiction and non-fiction film, citing documentary theorist Bill Nichols’ position that while it may not be possible to produce a pure documentary and to extol the genre as a “morally superior form of filmmaking,” one can distinguish

between fiction and non-fiction film in terms of the processes of production, the nature and structure of the text, and audience expectations and response. Gircus embraces Nichols' notion of "documentary testing" as a method in which one can test films to explicate their documentary structure, yet he does not make much use of the concept or develop his own position on documentary film and its differences from fiction film.

It is really a shame that Gircus does not interrogate any US documentary/non-fiction films or filmmakers in more detail to see if one could make coherent distinctions between documentary and fiction films. Indeed, by not discussing masters of documentary like Frederick Wiseman, Emile de Antonio, or Errol Morris, Gircus' subtitle "modernism, documentary, and a Changing America" is highly misleading. Emile de Antonio, for instance, blended raw footage and interview commentary to try to develop a rigorous mode of historical and documentary filmmaking influenced by a modernist aesthetic. While de Antonio was a self-professed modernist and had rigorous notions of film construction and editing, he tried to make documentary films that would accurately reproduce the history of his time. And while he was a militant leftist who made no secrets of his politics, he was also concerned to provide documentary truthfulness and eschewed "voice of God" narration that told people what to think and that de Antonio found manipulative.¹

Errol Morris, by contrast, employed reconstruction of events in his documentaries like The Thin Blue Line (1988) or Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999), created sets to interview his subjects, and a camera set-up the Intertron that forced his interviewees to look directly into the camera lens and thus at the viewer. Morris constantly interrogates the line between fiction and non-fiction, exposing the fictive nature of some forms of political reality (like US arguments for the war in Vietnam or rightwing Holocaust denials) and the ways that non-fiction film can reveal personal and historical truth.

Consequently, non-fiction films combine various mixtures of raw unedited footage and construction that organizes and frames the material. The one non-fiction film that Gircus investigates, Leon Gast's documentary When We Were Kings (1996) is, as the author stresses, a highly mythologizing film that makes Mohammad Ali into a quasi-god while downplaying the talents and achievements of boxer George Foreman who Ali is to fight for the world's boxing championship in a highly publicized match in Zaire. Moreover, as Gircus notes, "the film glorifies all things black from America as well as Africa. Singers James Brown and B.B. King, boxing promoter Don King, music that originates in African American culture, and music from Africa become nearly as important as the fighters. Blackness suffuses the film as it covers the origins and surroundings of the boxing match, including the planning and promotional phases in America and the transition to Africa" (104).

Thus When We Were Kings is highly mythmaking and ideological, hardly a good candidate for explicating a non-fiction film. In fact, Gircus does not seem really interested in engaging non-fiction/documentary films and actually focuses more on noting changes in representation in Hollywood film in regard to race, ethnicity, class and ideology in the past few decades. Almost all of the films he interrogates are Hollywood fiction films and many concern race. Parts One, Two, and Chapter 8 discuss changes in representation of race in Hollywood films, while Part Three deals with relations between film and literature and highlights American myths of regeneration and success.

Part Three also takes up the issue of literature and modernism and the process through which novels are transformed into films (pp. 115ff). These concerns are interesting, but produce a somewhat meandering and unfocused text that first discuss thematic relations between the film Bugsy (1991) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. Gircus applies largely methods of literary analysis to his texts and the broader themes of documentary, literature and film, modernism, and changes in US society disappear. Likewise, Chapter 6 on the translation of Saul Bellow's Seize the Day into film (1986) applies Kaja Silverman's psychoanalytic critique to reading of the novel and film and provides interesting discussions of male masochism, but does not really advance the announced themes of the book.

Likewise, the last two chapters under the rubric "documentary and fiction" engage Chaplin's Modern Times (1936) and the collaboration of Spike Lee and Denzel Washington, but do not really pull together and integrate the announced themes of the book, or present any striking conclusions. The Chaplin study briefly touches on the obvious theme of how the Tramp embodies conflicts between the individual and machine and then goes into detail how the documentary figures of Chaplin and Paulette Goddard, with whom he has a romantic relationship and eventually marries, enter into the film and provide a charged sexual dimension and eradicate the distinction between the public and the private. Real life personae of actors from the early days of Hollywood cinema, however, had resonances in their films and highlighting this theme depoliticizes and provides an arguably skewed reading of Modern Times and only minimally engages the theme of documentary. Moreover, although Gircus offers an interesting Marcusean reading of the Chaplin figure as a symbol of individual pleasure and desire, he fails to address the fierce resistance that the Little Tramp often engages in and his feisty opposition to oppression in the status quo. Thus while the Chaplin figure may well embody Marcusean Eros he is better read as a protopolitical exemplar of the great refusal.²

The collapse of Gircus's project, however, is evident in the final chapter. The chapter opens with a discussion of how John dos Passos' USA trilogy provides an exemplary model of the "documentary consciousness" and then reads Spike Lee's Malcolm X (1992) in terms of Dos Passos' narrative techniques. Curiously, Gircus does not interrogate Lee's many documentary films, such as the excellent 4 Little Girls (1997), and by reading Malcolm X as a quasi-documentary fails to grasp the proper aesthetics of the film as a fictional narrative and Spike Lee morality tale.³

While one can grant that there is a documentary dimension to most fictional film, there is also a genre of documentary film with a history, canon, conflicting aesthetics and politics and many internal debates. Gircus uses the term "documentary" too loosely and does not ultimately contribute to better understanding documentary/non-fiction film and how they relate to fiction film. He thus ultimately fails to provide original insight into documentary, the relation between the non-fiction and fiction film, or how films provide documents of political and social change. Although he provides interesting readings of a variety of films, his text lacks thematic focus and does not adequately develop the themes and issues that he announces will be the organizing framework of the book.

Melissa Wye Geraci's monograph John F. Kennedy and the Artful Collaboration of Film and Politics provides an in-depth analysis of JFK's media politics and how he was one of the first to see the importance of the construction of image in contemporary

politics as an important tool in a political campaign. Wye Geraci was trained in political science and had a background in the entertainment industry, and then became a film and television professor in Virginia, New Mexico, and, currently, at Loyola University, New Orleans. She investigates the origins of the 1960 Kennedy campaign film The New Frontier by examining primary documents that reveal how Joseph P. Kennedy, active in film production as well as business, taught his family the importance of the media and bought them a film camera that his children learned to use. Other documents in the Kennedy research library reveal reflections by various of the Kennedy brothers on the use of propaganda and media by German fascism as well as allied democratic forces in World War II, and thus how media could be used for political purposes, positive or negative.

Wye Geraci reveals how throughout his career, John F. Kennedy produced artifacts and spectacle that constructed a positive image and reflected since his student days on the power of media. One of the Kennedy groups' salient insights involves how images used in political campaigns must be connected to specific issues. For instance, the Kennedy team believed that talking about themes like intolerance was not enough, that instead Kennedy should be seen speaking "inside the Mormon tabernacle or traveling with nationally known Jews to New York" (72-73). Or if he was promoting military policy, he should be seen with a figure like General Maxwell Taylor. In Kennedy staff member Fred Dutton's summary: "Actually the scheduling should weave unto it several 'acting-out' situations every week -- appearances and speeches are just not enough. All of this, of course, is part of the larger need to be tangible and understandable with the great majority of people who live their lives without much regard for word communication of abstract ideas, when [sic] in contrast is the great preoccupation of politicians" (73).

Wye Geracci also provides analyses of Lyndon Johnson's 1964 bio-documentary, Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign film, and Bill Clinton's 1992 The Man From Hope, as well as providing a discussion of the use of media in Robert Kennedy's 1968 run for the presidency. She makes the interesting point that the success of the presidential bio-doc helped spawn a new Hollywood fiction genre of the political campaign film, starting with The Candidate (1972) and makes some interesting comments about how Bulworth (1998) draws on its motifs and Warren Beatty's campaigning for the Kennedys. In addition, the bio-doc and what Wye Geracci calls the "info-documentary" can be contrasted with info-art mythology, such as one sees in the many films about the Kennedy family, and with films like Oliver Stone's JFK (1991) that erode distinctions between narrative fiction and documentary.

While Wye Geracci's analysis of campaign-films is ground-breaking, as is her study of the Kennedy's understanding and use of media, she does not discuss in any detail FDR's use of radio, JFK's mastery of television, or how media spectacle became a form of politics from Hitler through JFK and Reagan and to the present. Thus, in a media era, the use of film in politics needs to be studied in conjunction with deployment of other media ranging from the radio to the press and Internet.

The politics of contemporary Hollywood films are taken up in Philip John Davies and Paul Wells' edited collection American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr. The text assembles articles from eleven authors, organized into six parts, which examine a diversity of issues and intersections in American politics and commercial and independent U.S. films of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Philip John

Davies is Professor of American Studies at De Montfort University, while Paul Wells serves as Professor and Head of Media Studies at the University of Teeside, and the articles collected in their text explore and analyze a variety of socio-political, economic, cultural and theoretical dimensions of film and film criticism. The editors describe one of the underlying themes of their text as an examination of the Hollywood/Washington link in American film throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. Within this context, they argue that a central tenet of the text is to investigate the significance of “‘Politics’ big ‘P’ – governmental, strategic, democratic – and ‘politics’ small ‘p’ – personal, localised unstable” in relation to Hollywood film genres of the 80s and 90s (1). As they put it: “it remains a useful exercise to take stock of ‘politics’, ideologically determined and otherwise, as it has underpinned Hollywood movies of the contemporary era” (ibid).

Most of the studies collected are straightforwardly descriptive and interpretive. The first article, however, which with the introduction, comprises Part One of the text, seems at odds with the rest of the essays in this book. Paul Watson’s contribution on “American cinema, political criticism and pragmatism” offers a polemic against Marxism, ideology critique, postmodernism and identity politics in favor of liberalism and pragmatism. Watson opens with a description of the films Fight Club (1999) and Magnolia (1999) and complains that dismissive criticism of especially the former fails to grasp the pain suffered by white men that Fight Club puts on display; consequently, Watson suggests, another, more subtle, mode of criticism is needed to adequately talk about the films. Watson then launches an overheated rhetorical screed against Marxism, feminism, and other modes of political interpretation, concluding: “it is time to stop talking about ‘ideology’ ‘hegemony,’ ‘patriarchy,’ and all those other hangovers from Marxism which dictate the dance we do” (19). Later, in his polemic he will carry out a similar attack against postmodernism and identity politics (33-36) and concludes by defending pragmatism and liberalism (36-40). Like a famous polemic by Richard Rorty, whom he cites throughout, Watson could have labeled his enterprise “Against Theory.”⁴

In fact, Watson has no use for any kinds of ideological analysis, or even, it would appear, for the appraisal of the effects of ideology in everyday life. Watson protests the idea that “ideology still has a useful role to play in social criticism. It seems to me that ideology has become too fuzzy and too equivocal to be profitable and, moreover, that all the useful functions that are performed by [... it] might be achieved equally well, and far more directly, by being content to ask questions such as ‘to what extent is this cultural artifact useful to a liberal description of the world?’” (205, note 47).

Although Watson raises a valid issue in regards to some over-generalized uses of ideology, it seems ludicrous to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater on this account. However, it is unclear as to what Watson proposes as an alternative to the multiplicity of theoretical perspectives he is criticizing, although he does advocate the espousal of pragmatic visions that celebrate liberal democracy (which he describes as the “best gimmick we have ever come up”) (23). As he puts it: “Scholars of film should ... see themselves as involved at one of the softer ends in a long term attempt to modify the self-image of a society in accordance with the ideal of liberal democracy -- not by providing new images themselves but, rather, in drawing attention to cultural practice that is useful in imagining that ideal” (40). Ironically, Watson’s own review of Fight Club

and Magnolia fails to do this and instead seems framed by his attacks on a number of male reviewers analyses of these films, which include ideological critique.

Thus, Watson's own polemic does not exemplify the liberal ideal of tolerance and understanding, but instead harshly attacks reviewers and theorists who he opposes. Against Watson, we would argue that precisely the two films that he rather banally describes with his "liberal" vocabulary put on vivid display the pain and suffering undergone by white males and others under capitalism and patriarchy. Magnolia shows the pain and suffering undergone by a variety of individuals in the San Fernando Valley suburbs of Los Angeles, yet clearly links their troubles to dysfunctional families and an oppressive patriarchy. Moreover, another major motif in the film involves the disappointments of celebrity and the ways that competitive media and capitalist culture can warp and harm individuals.

Fight Club opens by showing how a banal consumerist life style and boring corporate job fails to satisfy one of the film's protagonists and how he joins a brutal masculinist fight culture to find meaning and community. It is ambiguous whether the film provides a diagnostic critique of the pathology of this masculine culture or reproduces it, but ideological contradictions and ambiguity are not part of Watson's self-assured liberalism. Throughout his article, he speaks of "we intellectuals" and "our liberal democracy" as if there were not major differences between intellectuals in contemporary culture and that "our liberal democracy" and life under capitalism are experienced quite differently between people of opposed classes, genders, races, sexualities, and nations. Indeed, "our liberal democracy" is now under attack as we in the US and California suffer under the regimes of George W. Bush and Arnold Schwarzenegger, representing to us (i.e. RH and DK) a crisis of democracy rather than a time to affirm liberalism and reject radical critique as Watson would have it.

Part 2 of American Film and Politics, titled "'Ask not what America can do for you...': Views from the White House," includes two engaging essays that investigate a multiplicity of political themes of a variety of 1980s and 1990s Hollywood cinema. These include the dialectics of the realities and myths of U.S. election processes, candidates and presidencies in the 1980s and 1990s, and the escalating interconnectedness of politics and film. The symbiotic and often indistinguishable nature of the U.S. film and entertainment industries with American politics, as well as the significant role of celebrity status in both Washington and Hollywood, are highlighted in Philip John Davies' interesting account, which begins the second part of the book. Davies' critical readings of '80s and '90s films that refer to politicians, the U.S. political process and the intrigues of the presidency are an appropriate complement to Albert Auster's informed and illuminating explication of the controversies provoked by the two presidential films of Oliver Stone, JFK (1991) and Nixon (1995).

The study by Carol R. Smith on "Gender and family values in the Clinton presidency and 1990s Hollywood film," which comprises Part 3 of the text, reviews the contentious and often shifting political positions on family values as they are reflected in particular 1990s films and, to a lesser degree, television. Her employment of a feminist analysis in discussion of the changing attitudes towards the privileging of patriarchal gender relations and heterosexual bias, in both '90s media and mainstream politics, becomes evident in her critical readings of such '90s films as Thelma and Louise (1991), Pretty Woman (1991) and specifically the three romantic comedies: The Birdcage (1996),

My Best Friend's Wedding (1996) and In and Out (1997). While her arguments concerning the valorization of conventional and unconventional marriage in U.S. political culture and whiteness in many of these genre of '90s films are convincing, it would have been useful to include in this piece how some of these same films have been identified, by both popular and academic critics, as part of an escalating backlash against feminism.⁵

Part 4, of the text, includes two interesting accounts of 1980s and 1990s films that take place primarily in New York and the American South, respectively. Both address the politics of race and class in films of this period, while the second, by Ralph Willett, "Dixie's land: cinema of the American South," documents some of the changing and often oppositional depictions of the American South in U.S. cinema. His often revelatory explications and identification of the contestatory and paradoxical images of the "Old" and "New" South, as well as its' commodification, delineate dimensions of the racial, sexual and class politics which tend to characterize many of the myths and realities of the American South..

Leonard Quart provides a rich textual analysis of the depiction of New York, and to a lesser degree, LA inner-city life in American films, and distinguishes between mainstream and less commercial, alternative and independent filmmakers' representations. He argues, for example that the Hollywood film tends to over-simplify and dramatize the "most compulsive, destructive and self-destructive" dimensions of inner-city politics and culture" (92). Although, most of these films tend to reflect a somewhat decontextualized "inner city of the popular imagination" there are a number of more complex and inclusive (diverse) delineations of this world in some 1990s cinema. The visionary work of Spike Lee is taken up in this regard, as well as three particular films, Nick Gomez's Laws of Gravity (1992), Darnel Martin's I Like it Like That (1994) and Spike Lee's Clockers (1995) which together convey the more multidimensional ethos of New York working-class white, Puerto Rican, and African American life (93ff). Indeed, Quart contends that Hollywood eschews more politically sophisticated films, which "construct a dialectical relationship between the lives of individual characters and the social political context they inhabit" such as those by filmmakers like Ken Loach, John Sayles, Pal Gabor and Frederick Wiseman (104).

Studies in Part 5 address "melting pots and pans" in two different forms of American cinema: Independent films and Disney animations (although it is not clear how the articles included embody this thematic). Brian Neve provides an absorbing explanation of the "significance of 'independent cinema' to the American cultural politics of the last two decades of the twentieth century" (123). Neve's brief historical overview of some of the political, cultural and economic conflicts which characterize U.S. independent filmmaking provides a useful context for understanding his later analyses which include sections on "Independents in the Public Realm," "John Sayles," and "Race, politics and independent voices." Indeed, there is much in this intriguing article which intersects with other pieces in the text, such as those by Philip John Davies and Albert Auster on Politics and film, Leonard Quart on Black filmmakers, Spike Lee and John Sayles, and Mary Ellison on representations of African Americans in Hollywood films.

Paul Wells' article "'I wanna be like you-oo-oo': Disneyfied politics and identity from *Mermaid to Mulan*," like Paul Watson, has an agenda of displacing critical and political readings of Disney, Disney films and particularly Disney animations in favor of

primary focus on the animation process and the nature of audience pleasure in viewing the films. Wells implies that many contemporary analyses of Disney, from perspectives he identifies as “ideological critiques,” “deconstruction,” “postcolonial,” “(post)feminist” and “postmodern,” or Henry Giroux’s critical pedagogy approach, tend to disregard or underemphasize the specificities of the Disney animation process, as well as the manner in which audiences actually read these films.

Wells reduces Disney animation to a highly regulated system of production that follows a series of animation conventions that he delineates. Although Wells claims that animation is rigidly structured, he also claims the system is “open” in allowing audience pleasure and interpretation. He concedes that Disney films have political subtexts, but instead of engaging any specific film he merely lists a series of Disney films along with their political correlatives (148-149). Further, Wells distinguishes between a “primary reading” where audience pleasure and narrative is privileged compared to a “secondary reading” where critics depict ideological and political meanings and engage in interpretation and critique. While no doubt such a distinction can be made analytically, it occludes the important issue of media literacy and the pedagogy of teaching students and citizens how to critically engage and interpret the media. Curiously, although many of the contributors to the volume are British, they all ignore British cultural studies with its emphasis of the politics of representation and developing of methods of critical literacy to engage the highly political forms of media culture.⁶ Indeed, it is confounding as to why Wells neglected to identify British cultural studies approaches to media culture, especially since much cultural studies research involves the multiplicities and complexities of audience research and reception studies. The work of cultural studies scholar Henry Giroux, for example, who Wells cites extensively in this article, includes the very kind of analysis, on “why and how people *enjoy* Disney films” which Wells claims is lacking from so much of the contemporary research on Disney.⁷

The subtitle of section 6 indicates that the underlying themes of these two concluding articles, on representations of African Americans in Hollywood film and war and militarism in American cinema deal with “Contemporary conflict and contradiction,” (although this rather generalized heading would seem to describe any of the articles in this text). However, this section includes two of the most original and interesting writings in the text. Mary Ellison’s engaging explication of “Ambiguity and anger” in “representations of African Americans in Hollywood film” explores the intersections of African American music and U.S film as one of the “essential cultural spaces where the politics of race and class interact and are reconfigured” (157).

Ellison astutely notes how the representation of blackness in the proliferation of white Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s often rationalized racist practices or “appeased troubling liberal sensibilities” without engaging or challenging real systemic racist relations. Yet, the radical increase in support and visibility of counter-hegemonic film by black performers and filmmakers also marks this period. Ellison’s concentration on films which employ and/or are about African-American music such as jazz, blues and rap demonstrates how “ambiguity can be explored as a key to decoding the layered nature of African-American representation in film during the final two decades of the twentieth century” (160). This notion of ambiguity is central to her analysis of how the political economy of Hollywood cinema and the profit-oriented nature of capitalism mediates production and representation. For instance, Ellison addresses the ambiguities that

underlie the cultural politics of subversion and hegemony in “buddy films,” such as Stir Crazy (1980), New Jack City (1991), and others, as well as the 48 Hours, Beverly Hills Cops and Lethal Weapon series.

Like Ellison, Phil Melling presents a multileveled reading of a diversity of films that address the politics of patriotism, war, the fear of war, disease and “alien” invasion as well as militarism in U.S. cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. His exploration of political themes in American films, such as Apollo 13 (1995) and Air Force One (1997), provides Melling with the opportunities to discuss the historical and political contexts which frame and are referenced in these movies. One of the central arguments of his text demonstrates the powerful role of Cold War and post Cold War politics in American film of this period. Expanding upon this loss of the Soviets as enemy, Melling addresses the escalating role of fears of alien invasions, both extra-terrestrial and human, and the racist subtexts often implied by these depictions. Disease, plagues and right-wing morality, infused many of the films of the 1990s, especially those which focused on AIDS and or AIDS-like viruses. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Mellings provides a very different kind of reading of the film Forrest Gump (1994) than that of the title of the introduction to the text, which plays with the famous metaphor employed by Gump, and is entitled “life is not like a box of chocolates” to describe the mix of articles in the book.

While the introduction to American Film and Politics raises some engaging issues concerning the state of American film in relation to “a postmodern mediated age which refuses any notion of consensual reality” (3), unfortunately, few of the articles in the collection make any reference to this concern. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the articles chosen, as well as a somewhat general and not particularly clear section headings, it might have been appropriate for the editors to provide more detailed description of the articles that comprise their text. Otherwise, readers could miss-out on some of the more note-worthy readings and thematics which are found in the various texts, and which we have tried to highlight in our review.

However, there is a subtext of hostility towards other writers in the field that punctuates some of the articles in collection. Rather than evoking a more professional and even-handed dialectical approach towards critics with whom the author disagree, especially in regards to acknowledging the credibility of at least some dimensions of other scholars work who are being polemicized against, or film reviewers they are citing and critiquing, there is a tendency to attack and dismiss them, often without really engaging the works and theories being dismissed. In fact, some of these articles seem to find their basis in antagonisms and seemingly one-dimensionalized criticism of others work and/or approaches, although many of these same authors appear to be employing and translating from the works of those they are dismissing. This kind of mean-spirited and often contemptuous distaste for other academics, or professional film critics, appears to frame some of these texts. Such dismissive polemic is often associated with elitist journal and conference wars and academic debates, to which the general audience is often not privy to and/or has little interest in. This is especially the case in the 27 page lead article in American Film and Politics by Paul Watson. Indeed, it is curious as to why the editors would choose to include this article in the text at all, in that it at odds in both form and content with the editors’ introduction and most of the other chapters in this text. This is especially disconcerting, as it is the first article, which often serves as an indicator of the other readings.

In conclusion, the books we have reviewed show a variety of ways that the relationship between film and politics can be pursued. None provide a new model or classic summation that could be taken as a cutting-edge example of new approaches to the topic, but cumulatively they provide a wealth of material for those of us interested in how politics intersects with film in the contemporary era.

NOTES

¹ On de Antonio's work, see Douglas Kellner and Dan Streible, Film, Art and Politics: An Emile de Antonio Reader. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

² On Marcuse, see Douglas Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism. Berkeley and London: University of California Press (USA) and Macmillan Press (England), 1984.

³ Compare the reading of Spike Lee's films in Douglas Kellner, Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁴ Parenthetically, we might mention that Watson's article includes some very harsh criticisms of the film scholarship of one of the authors of this review. Since Watson also assails Louis Althusser, Slavoj Zizek, Terry Eagleton, Noel Carroll, and Roger Silverstone, to name a few of his targets, for what he regards as a misdirected emphasis on ideology and ideology critique in social theory and film criticism, one need not be embarrassed to be on Watson's blacklist. For a defense of ideology critique in film criticism, see Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988; Turkish translation, 1998; Korean translation 1999.

⁵ See Susan Faludi, Backlash. The Undeclared War Against American Women. New York: Crown Publisher, 1999; bell hooks, Reel to Real. Race, Sex and class at the movies. New York: Routledge, 1996; bell hooks, Cultural Criticism & Transformation Amherst: Media Educational Foundation, 1997. Rhonda Hammer, Antifeminism and Family Terrorist. A Critical Feminist Perspective. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.

⁶ On the importance of developing media literacy, see Peter McLaren, Rhonda Hammer, David Sholle and Susan Reilly, Rethinking Media Literacy: A Critical Pedagogy of Representation. New York: Peter Lang, 1995; Douglas Kellner, "New Technologies/New Literacies: reconstructing education for the new millennium," Teaching Education, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2000): 245-265.

⁷ See, in particular, Henry Giroux, The Mouse That Roared: DISNEY and the End of Innocence. Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.