

Reelpolitik: Political Ideologies in '30s and '40s Films. By Beverly Merrill Kelley with John J. Pitney, Jr., Craig R. Smith, & Herbert E. Gooch III. Westport, CT & London: Praeger, 1998. 194 pp. ISBN 0275960196 (pbk.). ISSN 10625623.

Even still, I take up and read with some keenness, but sometimes surreptitiously, any new book glancing my field of specialization, however diverging in theoretical frame or methodological approach, simply for its inherent promise to offer a fresh glimpse of some sort, some intellectual adventure. Kelley's recent anthology *Reelpolitik* definitely caught my attention, perked my expectations, and left my curiosity whetted but deeply unsated; and I shall tell you why.

Kelley, Professor of communication arts at California Lutheran University, contributes six of the ten chapters in the volume, including the introduction and conclusion. Her aim is not, as the first part of the title "Reelpolitik" may intimate, to concern the project with the Weimar period or its cinema or, for that matter, anything in German film history, but rather the illustration of U.S. political ideology, that is, populism/elitism, fascism/anti-fascism, communism/anti-communism, and interventionism/isolationism in particular Hollywood narrative films. It turns out that the word play with "Realpolitik" and "reel" is but a corny pun, at least corny and tired to those of us not-so-fresh to cinema or cultural studies. Her other aim is pedagogical, namely, to provide this as a textbook for an undergraduate course in political history. The book itself is the result of a collaborative, interdisciplinary experiment (involving political science, English, communication arts, and history) during cinema's centennial anniversary observances (1996) at her university that also comprised film screenings.

The criteria for selecting the eight films are remarkably arbitrary. Each film was chosen by one of the participating film-buff professors, none of whom is an expert in film history, with the intent of simply illustrating one of the above political ideologies through its narrative. Moreover, the film would have to be readily available on video for student study, and its length should not endure over two hours, so as to fit into classroom viewing schedules. Kelley also notes that "Movies produced prior to 1930, for the most part ... lack fully developed plot lines, sophisticated production values and ready availability on video" (p. 2), so there was no need to cover the first three decades of the twentieth century. With the films chosen playing such an illustrative role, their arbitrariness is left unexplored and unacknowledged. Should the *de facto* canon matter outside of simply its serving the pedagogical goal of recounting U.S. political history? (Perhaps a filmography of alternatives for each political principle would help this project, but this would require more film historical knowledge and research.) Is there a larger claim being made here? Why should "underdeveloped" plot lines hinder political ideological illustration? No reasons or theories of narrative are offered. Against Kelley's contention that "even D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* often fails to lock in the attention of film majors" (p. 2), the film would doubtless serve as a rich resource for the critical ideological analysis of the dynamics of race in the U.S.

The eight films discussed are: Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* for its populism, *The Magnificent Ambersons* for elitism, *Gabriel over the White House* for fascism, *Citizen Kane* for anti-fascism, *Casablanca* for internationalism, *All Quiet on the Western Front* for its isolationism, Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* for communism, and his *The Fountainhead* for its anti-communism.

After reading through several chapters, I began to wonder why the writers had chosen to centre their writings on film at all. In her conclusion, Kelley cheerily notes, "With cinematic images, we share common ground. At least film provides a new language that we can use to discover, discuss and dream of politics, American-style. Finally, who says academic inquiry has to be arduous and agonizing? Please pass the popcorn" (p. 173). The film qua film is never analyzed, although there is the occasional mention of "mise-en-scène" (*sic*) as

a significant concern. Each chapter with its respective political ideology and movie briefly sketches out some biography on the director, some description of the ideology, some discussion of its interpretation as uncovered in the said narrative (but often as it appears first in its published novel form), and sometimes the response of the audience. The biography of the director or writer appears to matter a lot to the uncovering of ideology, although it is unclear how all of these sections hang together conceptually. I am not at all sure of the theory of film or culture underlying the analyses here. It is not clear why film was chosen, that is, beyond the conceptually lame excuse that the book resulted from the 1996 anniversary. The corresponding novels analyzed, I suppose, for contextual depth could have stood on their own. This eclecticism remains untheorized, unacknowledged.

So, precisely, what is a political film? According to Kelley, it represents some ideological principles through its narrative; and here the films are all Hollywood features. She states: "Even if a movie deals only peripherally with politics, it socializes us to political ideas, values and behavior" (p. 4), which is for her not a claim to be argued but a given. There is no clear intentional theoretical baggage here, just another putative truism. However, I find the question certainly interesting. If we take Kelley's implicit definition to be any narrative feature film that thematically refers to specific ideological principles, then we have something like a political worldview to uncover, perhaps Ian Jarvie's work on identifying the philosophical *weltanschauung* in a film as an interpretive scheme would pertain to some degree. Nevertheless, the history of thought on cultural artifacts, be they artistic, film, television, and so forth, is full of competing theories of the political or social and its significance to the work and to larger social and cultural systems. The political nature of film is in the case of *Reelpolitik* reduced to merely narrative references alone. The contexts of production, exhibition, practice, and so forth are left, again, untheorized, left precariously hanging without a conceptual frame.

Kelley defines political ideology as "the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a governmental policy" (p. 2), so expect no Foucauldian historiography, no Lacan, no Althusser, no deconstruction, no hybridity, no gender, not even any Benjamin, but do expect a very chatty, anecdotal read. From its consistently unironic prose, I was surprised by Kelley's remark in the section on Vidor's film version of *The Fountainhead* that "Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum abandoned her mother country [Soviet Russia] and *rechristened* herself Ayn Rand within months of glimpsing the Statue of Liberty" (p. 138, emphasis added). There are other curious howlers.

I question the shockingly simple goal of the book itself. While the level of *Reelpolitik* is admittedly undergraduate, it glosses many important questions, leaving much noticeably undertheorized and nakedly naïve. All this merely reconfirms my general Nietzschean distrust or suspicion of history writing. The topic is indeed worthy of greater theoretical prowess, attention, and care. Please, pass the popcorn!

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