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Author examines films he deems 'politically incorrect'

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"God, Man & Hollywood: Politically Incorrect Cinema From 'The Birth of a Nation' to 'The Passion of the Christ'"
by Mark Royden Winchell
Intercollegiate Studies Institute. 490 pp. $28.

The problem with common sense, Voltaire observed, is that it is not common. A similar complaint could be made about popular entertainment -- that it's not "popular" -- by those who feel that the values it promotes don't reflect those of most Americans. That opinion is lucidly articulated in conservative scholar Mark Royden Winchell's "God, Man & Hollywood: Politically Incorrect Cinema From 'The Birth of a Nation' to 'The Passion of the Christ.'"

Winchell, an English professor at Clemson University (who died shortly before the book's publication), subscribes to the old Winston Churchill adage: History is written by the victors. And in the polarizing "culture war," the victors, in Winchell's scoring, are the liberal intelligentsia who commandeered the Hollywood dream factories during the 1960s and '70s.

However, those expecting an industry-bashing tirade will be disappointed. It is not Winchell's intention to pen "yet another treatise belaboring the sins of Hollywood." Instead, he opts to accentuate the positive by demonstrating that, despite what he terms the "conformist mold of left-wing groupthink," films that buck the prevailing liberal "herd mentality" and espouse conservative values occasionally get made. He labels these ideological anomalies "politically incorrect."

After providing some brief historical context, Winchell gets down to the main task at hand, examining 18 films that he deems "politically incorrect."

Some are obvious choices, for example, "The Passion of the Christ" (2004). But readers may be surprised -- or shocked -- that, despite containing graphic sex and violence, Sam Peckinpah's "Straw Dogs" (1971) and Stanley Kubrick's "Clockwork Orange" (1971) also meet his criteria.

Some films merit inclusion for swimming against the cultural current of their day. A case in point is the hawkish "Patton," released in 1970 at the height of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Others, like "Gone with the Wind" (1939), only later became un-"PC." Its crime? It showed characters "growing up emotionally" -- a mortal sin in "the land of perpetual adolescence."

Winchell is on shakier ground when arguing that, beneath its racially offensive imagery, D.W. Griffith's seminal, but controversial, silent classic "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) -- which includes a heroic depiction of the Ku Klux Klan -- is really about "people being rescued by friends from the clutches of strangers." (At times, he comes off as somewhat dismissive of the perceived racism of some of the films discussed.)

A longtime defender of Southern culture, Winchell devotes several chapters to rigorously challenging what he considers the distortions of Hollywood's take on the Civil War and Reconstruction era. He cites films like "Gettysburg" and "Gods and Generals" as being more nuanced portraits of the historical realities than those presented by the "orthodox" Hollywood version.

Behind such alleged bias, Winchell discerns a subversive Orwellian logic at work: "Those who would control the present must also control the past. This means not only writing the history that students read but creating the images we receive from even our most casual entertainment."

Though measured in his brickbats, Winchell takes the liberal "elite" to task for what he views as their double standard when it comes to censorship: It's wrong, unless they disagree with what is being said.

To his credit, Winchell acknowledges that, throughout history, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme and "right-wingers" have enforced their own brand of political correctness.

The book also contains brief analyses of an additional 100 politically incorrect films. As with the longer reviews, the selections range from the predictable ("A Man for All Seasons"), to the unconventional (the animated Fox TV series "The Family Guy") and the provocative ("Borat").

Heeding G.K. Chesterton's advice that one should "never let a quarrel get in the way of a good argument," Winchell keeps the tone scholarly rather than shrill. You may disagree with him or question his choices, and not all his reasoning is equally persuasive, but he gives you plenty to think about, discuss and debate.
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