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“CONSERVATIVES AT THE MOVIES: CONSERVATIVE FILM CRITICS AND POPULAR  
CULTURE”

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## Chapter 1: Conservatism and the Culture

Once believed to be the enclave of a relatively small minority of paranoid radicals or a sect defined by their backlash to racial progress, conservatives have come to be better understood as a diverse set of people with ideas driven by a unique set of principles, i.e., anticommunism, natural law, a strong religious and moral foundation, individualism, and an aversion to statism. While the traits above provided a template for a cohesive philosophy that united conservatives under one large banner, those conservatives living through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century waged a war for intellectual and philosophical purity regularly arguing more amongst themselves than against their common rival, liberalism. There were debates, arguments, and broken friendships along the road of evolving conservative thought. This relatively new insight into the historiography of conservatism, the variations in conservative thought, has offered historians a new way of studying the movement.

Those writing on the diversity within 20<sup>th</sup> century American conservatism have found three major intellectual strains which vied for dominance within the movement. These were traditionalists/paleoconservatives, libertarians, and neoconservatives. The paleoconservative movement was closely equated to the conservatism in America before 1945. They tended to favor localism, were largely from the geographic American South or had an affinity for the cultural heritage therein, focused on preserving Western civilization as understood through a Christian tradition, and found natural law to be the binding material of our society. Libertarians were also an older brand of conservatism finding their roots in an abhorrence to the New Deal and government centralization. They were more focused on natural rights, the importance of the individual, and the centrality of laissez-faire economics. The newest brand of conservatism came from the neoconservatives. This group, predominantly made up of ex-liberals and ex-Trotskyist

from the Northeast, were naturally more radical in their mindset, and while believing in the importance of laissez-faire capitalism, they were most fervent in their anti-communism. These three groups came to make up the intellectual makeup of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century conservative movement and are central to this study. Each group had its distinctive intellectual and political leaders along with its own magazines, journals, and even public policy think tanks promoting its own philosophy and agenda. This study utilizes the recent scholarship which has focused on the differences among the varying groups to accentuate some distinctions but also brings to light some larger overarching commonalities in an area on conservative scholarship that has largely been overlooked by historians.

Indeed, while the historiography of conservatism is rich with diversity and an exorbitant amount of content, it has some gaping holes that need to be filled. Historians and political scientists have written and debated over the exact intellectual and even geographic nature of the origins of conservatism, others have described the rise of the religious right, the convergence of political and cultural conservatism, as well as transatlantic, economic, and social histories of the movement. What is missing is a study that examines the diverging conservative faction's interactions with popular culture and the arts. Contemporary journalistic and opinion pieces written about conservatism and popular culture or the arts view conservatism through older, out-of-date paradigms. Many commonly used caricatures of the religious right to portray conservatism as antithetical to popular culture or have oversimplified conservatism to pigeonhole a diverse community of thought into a small reactionary force. It is true that conservatives, in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were largely dismayed by many of the contemporary degradations they believed to be occurring within the culture and arts, exemplified in current literature, music, television, and most apt to this study, the cinema. However, taking into account the latest

scholarship and utilizing a quantitative study on film reviews in conservative literature could remedy the oversimplifications and under analysis in this area.

In order to best accomplish this, the study views conservatism, not through the narrow lens of politics but a more sweeping all-encompassing understanding which takes politics into consideration but does not view it as the end-all and be-all of conservative ideology. It should be understood as philosopher Roger Scruton or historian Patrick Allitt put it as an “attitude” or “disposition” not a rigid set of dogmatic practices or ideological beliefs to which one must adhere.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, when judging works of popular entertainment or art, politics undoubtedly played a role for many if not most critics, but to get to the core of the matter and better grasp what, if anything, united the wide spectrum of conservative thought when it came how they judged the art of cinema, one must go beyond politics and discover what deeper more aesthetically-linked traits unified conservatives.

If one were to pick up one of the major conservative magazines (*Human Events*, *National Review*, *Chronicles*, *Commentary*, or *The American Spectator*) from February 1987 up to March 1988, it is plausible they may come across a film review of a movie that won four Academy Awards, including the one for Best Picture for 1986. *Platoon*, written and directed by Oliver Stone, depicted life for American soldiers during the Vietnam War, and was widely celebrated by critics as “possibly the best work of any kind about the Vietnam War...,” “*Platoon* the phenomenon,” and the Vietnam War “as it really was.”<sup>2</sup> As would be expected of a movie perceived to be highly critical of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and overtly violent,

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Houndsmills: PALGRAVE, 2001), 1-4, and Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas & Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Canby, “Film: The Vietnam War in Stone’s ‘Platoon’,” *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 1986. and Richard Corliss, “Platoon: Vietnam, The Way it Really Was, on Film,” *Time*, January 26, 1987.

bordering on the sadistic, many conservatives found it to fall short of the approbation it was garnering. However, a closer examination of film reviews demonstrates both the similarities and differences in conservative's shared intellectual heritage. Rather than a bland monolithic denunciation all around, each reviewer is unique in their criticism and more surprisingly in their praise.

*Human Events* fixated solely on the anti-Americanism of film depicting it as a piece of pro-communist propaganda, while the paleoconservative *Chronicles* was more focused on pushing back against the tide of praise coming from the cultural elite and believed Stone's use of violence was nothing short of exploitation.<sup>3</sup> *The American Spectator* published an overall negative review but was not hesitant to point out the cinematic positives and the immediate effect it had on its audience. However, similar to *Chronicles*, the reviewer was most irked by the adulation heaped upon the film by those in attendance.<sup>4</sup> John Simon from the *National Review* found the film filled with cliches, "tie-died prose," and believed it all boiled down to an effective "anti-recruiting poster". In fact, the only thing Simon believed to be "amazing" about the film was that someone who actually spent fifteen months fighting in Vietnam could make the same film as the "hacks who never got closer to the VC than their VCRs."<sup>5</sup> Then there was *Commentary* which asserted that Stone was not attempting to depict an explicitly pro-communist or an imperialist vision of American policy but one which put the individual soldier at the forefront of the story. The soldier in *Platoon*, according to the reviewer was neither a hero or villain, but a victim to be pitied and understood.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cliff Kincaid, "Media, Reds Embrace Message of 'Platoon,'" Focus on the Media, *Human Events*, February 7, 1987; Allan C. Brownfeld, "Did 'Platoon' Really Deserve the Academy Award?" *Human Events*, April 25, 1987; and Katherine Dalton, "The Long War," Vital Signs, *Chronicles*, June, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, Bawer, "Poltroon," The Talkies, *The American Spectator*, March 1987, 33-35. Bawer saw the film in pre-screening with Oliver Stone in attendance and the audience was allowed to ask questions afterward.

<sup>5</sup> John Simon, "Found in the Mud," Film, *National Review*, March 13, 1987, 54-57.

<sup>6</sup> George Szamuely, "Hollywood Goes to Vietnam," *Commentary*, Vol. 85, Iss. 1, Jan 1988, 48-53.

What does all this say about conservatism? One, conservatives were well acquainted with the popular culture they were commenting on. They were not ignorant naysayers or just blindly reacting to cultural changes. Many reviewers, although negative, were witty and jocular in prose, and the vast majority were looking for something beyond mere entertainment. Two, while they all found *Platoon* to fall short of the acclamation heaped upon it, not all saw it as a complete disaster or simply a piece of left-wing propaganda. This exposes the rifts and intellectual divergences within conservatism, i.e., some focused on communism, some critiqued those who praised the film more than the film itself (this fits well into the majoritarianism within conservatism arising during this time, which viewed a small handful of elites as corrupting the culture and values of America), and still others attempted to parse the bad from the good viewing the film from a more aesthetic, art-centered perspective. Three, the lack of common cause among the reviewers, besides that they all found the film lacking, indicates that a quantitative study utilizing a large cross-section of reviews is what is required to find overarching cohesion when it came to how conservatives viewed the artistic and entertainment value of film. While this is only a partial incursion and nowhere near a complete examination, the author hopes that this short foray has whet the readers' appetite for the more in-depth version coming in the following pages.

This study has examined and analyzed hundreds, if not thousands of published film reviews written in conservative publications from 1976 to 2000, deemed the age of conservative ascendancy.<sup>7</sup> This will allow for an in-depth intellectual, cinematic, and cultural study of how differing camps of conservatism interacted with popular culture through the medium of film and what united them in their criteria for judging the merits of film while bringing a deeper

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<sup>7</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008), 1.

understanding of conservatism. The following are the foundational publications that fit the authors' methodological criteria: *National Review*, *Human Events*, *Reason*, *Chronicles*, *American Spectator*, *The Weekly Standard*, *Christianity Today*, *New Oxford Review*, *Crises*, *Libertarian Review*, *The Libertarian Forum*, and *Commentary*. The criteria are as follows. The publication had to either be widely considered a conservative publication or be a self-proclaimed conservative publication, continually running for at least five years. Lastly, each publication needed to have a regularly published film review section at one time during the time under examination.<sup>8</sup> Since “regularly” is subjective, the author has deemed twelve reviews a year as the minimum for weeklies and biweeklies, six reviews a year for monthlies, and twice a year for quarterlies. Doing this accomplishes two major tasks. It allows the author to see continuity or change within the magazine and movement they represent, and it shows that the publication took film criticism seriously enough to write about it systematically. Outside of these central publications others which can add the breadth and depth of this study but do not necessarily meet all the criteria are *First Things* and *The National Interest*.

The analysis is largely comparative in nature pulling all the film reviews on major films within a genre into a single chapter and working chronologically through the films, but not all analyses will develop in this mold. Certainly, key films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Star Wars*, *Rambo*, *Aliens*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Malcolm X*, a whole host of Disney movies, and many others are examined. However, what is also a distinct feature of this study is that it spotlights lesser-known films reviewed by some but not all magazines under review, especially those deemed to be particularly admirable or repugnant by the reviewers. This sheds light on

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<sup>8</sup> Many times one or more publication would discontinue their film review section and then have sporadic reviews for months or years, or they would stop for a period of time and pick it back up later with a different critic or column. With the exception of *National Review* all other publications had some time frame where film reviews became irregular.



what cinematic features and cultural values the differing periodicals prized. Also, since each chapter focuses on a specific topic or genre in film there are unique and supplemental themes apparent within each chapter (i.e., conservatism's interaction with Disney in the animation chapter and the supposed Rightward shift in cinema in the Vietnam chapter, etc.) that are of secondary importance to the larger overarching objective, i.e., to outline the large all-encompassing commonalities between the variety of critics which point to a shared conservative culture when it came to cinematic art. This shared set of traits comes into focus as each chapter progresses. Lastly, while all reviewers mentioned have some background information, there is an emphasis placed on certain individual reviewers who are recurrent across this study to better understand how their individual philosophies might have impacted their opinions.

So, why is this study important or even necessary? To start, its distinctiveness alone makes it a worthy endeavor. To the author's knowledge, there has not been a study that employs film reviews in order to better understand the political and cultural ideology. Second, there has never been a serious examination of conservative film critics before. This is the first study of its kind that catalogs the major conservative film critics of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while exploring their own personal history as well as their contributions to conservatism. Many of the critics who are expounded on in chapter two have contributed to the development of conservatism in ways that have thus far gone unheralded and underappreciated. Third, the fact that this work includes such a wide-ranging array of conservative periodicals (over a dozen ranging from the conservative Catholic to the objectivist to the fusionist), including many that are oftentimes overlooked (*Chronicles*, *Reason*, *Libertarian Review*, *New Oxford Review*, etc.) in such an exhaustive way (over twenty-five years) separates it from many other works focused on conservative history. Furthermore, it delves into areas of conservative history overlooked and

underacknowledged by historians, specifically the intersection of conservative thought with art and popular culture. Nevertheless, this is an apt time to delve into the background and historiographical debates surrounding conservatism over the past half a century.

Indeed, the historiography of modern American conservatism is as diverse as the subject. The academic scholarship began in the 1950s and continued into the 1960s under the hostile presumptions of consensus historians who believed conservatism was a kind of psychological disorder. Influenced deeply by the belief that liberalism was the binding material of American life and “the sole intellectual tradition,” those studying the subject saw conservatism as an anomaly driven by paranoia, conspiratorial thinking, and radicalism.<sup>9</sup> Historian Richard Hofstadter and sociologist Daniel Bell are the two most renowned proponents of this philosophy. Hofstadter’s “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt” (1955) and “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964) along with Bell’s *The New American Right* (1955) which was rereleased in 1963 under its more well-known name *The Radical Right*, remain the major works on this topic, and it is difficult to understate the influence on the historiography.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that others, more well acquainted with conservatism and its’ precepts were not writing on the subject during the 50s and 60s. In fact, it was during this same time that one of the founders of the “new conservatism” Russel Kirk published *The Conservative Mind*

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<sup>9</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1950). For more on the prevalence of Liberalism in post-World War II America see: Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955), and Arthur Schlesinger Jr, *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1962). To better understand how conservatives viewed the rise of liberalism and differentiated themselves from it see: Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York, 1953); Henry Regnery, “The Age of Liberalism,” *Modern Age XIX*, Spring 1975: 114-126.; and Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis, Ind: Liberty Fund, 1996, 33-40, 149-151).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” *American Scholar*, 24 (Winter 1954-1955): 11-17.; Ibid., “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964.; Daniel Bell ed., *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion, 1955).; Ibid., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963).

and started the conservative scholarly quarterly *Modern Age*.<sup>11</sup> In 1960 Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater released his *Conscience of a Conservative* urging a new generation of conservatives to “apply the wisdom and experience and the revealed truths of the past,” in order make sure they “preserve and extend freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Add to this list William F. Buckley’s *National Review*, established in 1955, it quickly became the most important journal on the Right where a diverse assortment of conservative writers, thinkers, and politicians debated on the nature of conservatism. It was during the late 50s and early 60s that conservative intellectual thought began to solidify into a coherent and cohesive intellectual and political ideology.

However, conservatism went *largely* unnoticed in academic circles as Hofstadter’s and Bell’s theory remained prominent into 1980. The word *largely* is stressed because there were certainly pockets of scholarship during the 1960s and 1970s focusing on conservatism. Historian Leo P. Ribuffo does an exceptional job of demonstrating this in “Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?” (1994).<sup>13</sup> Ribuffo elucidated on research conducted by a myriad of historians that should have been of interest to those studying any aspect of 20<sup>th</sup> century America.<sup>14</sup> The most notable example was George Nash’s *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976) which remains a foundational source for understanding the conservative movement in America.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Ribuffo asks why many historians are unfamiliar with the work done during

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<sup>11</sup> Russel Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Co., 1953). The subtitle in proceeding editions became *From Burke to Elliot*.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdville, KY: Victor Publishing Company, 1960), xxiv, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Leo P. Ribuffo, "Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 438-49.

<sup>14</sup> For a list of these authors and their works see: Ribuffo, “Why is There so Much Conservatism...,” 438-440.

<sup>15</sup> George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1975). Nash aimed to rebuff the idea that conservatives had little to no intellectual history. He shows how

this time. He believed the fault lay with historians in academia. The problem, he explains, “is not the absence of good scholarship but the profession’s failure (in the current locution) to ‘mainstream’ the copious good scholarship that already exists.”<sup>16</sup> Ribuffo’s explanation is only partially satisfying. Other historians seeking answers have come to more nuanced answers.<sup>17</sup> Alan Brinkley came up with the most cogent response in an article published in the same issue of Ribuffo’s entitled “The Problems of American Conservatism.”<sup>18</sup> He argued that many of the academics writing during the 1960s and 1970s conflated liberalism with conservatism.<sup>19</sup> This was a disservice to conservatism which did not allow for it to be studied on its own merits apart from a melding with Liberalism. To a lesser extent, he points to those on the New Left who came into positions in academia and were more focused on “discrediting liberalism” than the “less formidable foe,” conservatism.<sup>20</sup> It was also during this period that new studies focusing on race, sexuality, and environmentalism arose pushing a movement with little involvement in any of these areas to the backburner.

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there was indeed a meshing of varying intellectual thought between traditionalist, libertarian, and anticommunist thinkers which formed the modern conservative movement in the United States. Ibid., 118.

<sup>16</sup> Ribuffo, “Why is There so Much Conservatism...,” 441.

<sup>17</sup> What follows is a list of articles dedicated to fleshing out the historiography of modern American conservatism. Within some of these accounts, especially McGirr, Kazin, and Phillips-Fein there is at least some acknowledgment of this issue with some explanation. Nearly all though follow the logic laid out by Alan Brinkley below as to gap in the historiography from the 1960s to the 1990s. Michael Kazin, “The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century,” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (1992): 136-55.; Julian E. Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (2010): 367-92.; Lisa McGirr, “A History of the Conservative Movement from the Bottom Up,” *Journal of Policy History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 331-39.; and arguably the best historiography up until 2011, Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011): 723-43.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Brinkley “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 415-29.

<sup>19</sup> Most notable are Gabriel Kolko, *the Triumph of Conservatism: 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963); William Appleman Williams, *American in a Changing World: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1978); Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, NY: Knopf: 1962); and Peter Viereck, “The Philosophical ‘New Conservatism,’” in Bell, *The Radical Right*, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” 413, 415. There is also mention of the newness of conservative thought and philosophy in American political life as being a possible cause, but Brinkley believes this was an “inadequate explanation,” and restates his belief that the confusion between liberalism and conservatism to be the major cause.

New breath entered into the historiography with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Many conservatives in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century began to write triumphalist narratives and firsthand accounts about their rise to power. Notable are *National Review* publisher William A. Rusher's *The Rise of the Right* (1984), Co-founder of Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and academic Lee Edwards's *The Conservative Revolution* (1999), and founder of the neoconservative movement Irving Kristol's *Neoconservatism* (1995).<sup>21</sup> All these works told the inside story of how different facets of conservatism became mainstream.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, academics scrambled to analyze the popularity of conservatism i.e., Reagan, among white middle-class voters. This occurred during the maturation of “new” political historians who aimed to analyze history from the bottom up through the lens of ethnocultural studies using the social sciences.<sup>23</sup> Ronald P. Formisano's *Boston Against Busing* is a germane example that depicted whites in Boston as guarding against integration to hold to some semblance of racial privilege due to fears of economic decline.<sup>24</sup> An offshoot of this idea in the historiography is that conservatism is best understood as a reactionary movement defined by backlash.<sup>25</sup> Advocates of this theory usually depict conservatism in a highly negative light when

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<sup>21</sup> William A. Rusher, *The Rise of the Right* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984); Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: An Autobiography of an Idea* (Chicago: The Free Press, 1995); and Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement that Remade America* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999). For more on the historiography of neoconservatism see: Brandon High, “The Recent Historiography of American Neoconservatism,” *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009): 475–91

<sup>22</sup> For a polemical view from within the conservative movement see: Paul Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Lee Benson was one of the earliest to incorporate the new social sciences, and this idea was built upon by Ronald McCormick and Ronald P. Formisano. See: Lee Benson *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); Ronald P. McCormick *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Ronald P. Formisano *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan: 1827-1861* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

<sup>24</sup> Ronald R. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1991). For a more modern example see Timothy J. Lomardo, *Blue Collar Conservatism: Frank Rizzo's Philadelphia and Populist Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Byrne and Mary D. Esdall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Right, and Taxes on American Politics* (1991); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crises: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (New Jersey:

it comes to social progress in the realms of sexuality, gender, and especially race. Some examples of the latter which attest to the continuity of thought across disciplines and over time are Dan Carter's *Politics of Rage* (1995) which depicts race-baiter, George Wallace, as the harbinger of the modern conservative movement, Nancy Maclean's "Guardians of Privilege" in *Debating The American Conservative Movement* (2009) that argued conservative "leaders have systematically exploited fear and prejudice in order to acquire power," Corey Robinson's *The Reactionary Mind* (2011 and 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2018) contended that racism and violence are "constitutive elements of conservatism, dating back to origins...", and Alan I. Abramowitz's *The Great Alignment* (2018) which asserted that feelings over racial anxiety among whites were what historically brought together all those on the Right side of the political spectrum.<sup>26</sup>

While the backlash thesis continued to shape the historiographic debate, the next major trend was already developing. Built on the work started by the new political historians, these historians continued to look at the movement from the bottom up by focusing on grassroots movements.

Sociologists Sara Diamond and historian Jonathan M. Schoenwald both wrote on the holistic rise of

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Princeton University Press, 1996),; and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and Struggle for Post War Oakland* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> The first two sources were written by historians and second two are written by political scientists. Critchlow, Donald T., and Nancy MacLean. *Debating the American Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009),vii; Dan Carter, *Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1995),; Corey Robinson, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), xi,; and Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). Professor of History at the University of South Carolina Dan Carter specifically built on the analysis that the roots of modern conservatism could be found in the South's reaction to Civil Rights and opposition to integration. This analysis had become more nuanced over time leading some scholars to posit that this race-based opposition often led many into the conservative fold by introducing them to more traditional conservative values like individualism, low taxes, anti-statism, and property rights. For more on the southern roots of conservatism see: Glenn Feldman, *The Great Melding: War, the Dixiecrat Rebellion, and the Southern Model for America's New Conservatism* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2015), ; Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009),; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counter Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007),; and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

conservatism activism in their respective works *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (1995) and *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (2001).<sup>27</sup> Others zeroed in on the 1960s as the pivotal era politically and culturally for conservatism. Historians John A. Andrew III in *The Other Side of the Sixties* (1997) and Gregory L. Schneider in *Cadres for Conservatism* (1999) wrote on the rise and influence of Young Americans for Freedom.<sup>28</sup> Sociologist Rebecca Klatch laid out the cultural and grassroots organizational rise of the New Left and the New Right by utilizing archival research and conducting interviews with dozens of ex-members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), while historians Mary C. Brennan and Rick Perlstein concentrated on the politics of the 1960s in *Turning Right in the Sixties* (1995) and *Before the Storm* (2001).<sup>29</sup> However, it was Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* (2001) that most modeled these new historiographic inclinations. Building on some of the recent works from the late 1990s she put forth a pioneering investigation that argued conservatives were not the paranoid radicals portrayed by the consensus historian nor were they the reactionaries focused on preserving white privilege. Rather, in southern California at least, the conservative activists McGirr studied were largely respectable, highly skilled white-collar men and women who promulgated anticommunism, "celebrated laissez-faire capitalism, evoked staunch nationalism, and supported the use of the state to uphold law and order."<sup>30</sup> This new analysis shifted

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<sup>27</sup> Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), and Jonathan M. Schoenwald *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Gregory L. Schneider *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), and John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), and Rick Perlstein *Before the Storm: Barry Gold Water and Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8,11.

the geographic area of study to the West and the Sunbelt.<sup>31</sup> It also changed the way academics viewed the conservative movement and those involved in it.

As McGirr and others were pushing the conversation forward, historians began to look closer at the politics during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and came to the conclusion conservatism had been the dominant force during this time. Donald T. Critchlow's *The Conservative Ascendancy* (2007) was one of the first to argue this point, while Sean Wilentz dubbed 1974-2008 the "era of conservatism," in his *The Age of Reagan* (2008).<sup>32</sup> In the wake of this observation, there was an explosion of new studies looking into all aspects of American culture, politics, religion, etc., and their intersectionality with conservatism. Lacking the space to expound on all the ins and outs of the recent scholarship, what follows is an abbreviated mention of some of the major and most unique works during this time. In *Invisible Hands*, Kim Phillips-Fein believed that the roots of modern conservatism could be found in the economic backlash to New Deal-era policies.<sup>33</sup> She expounds on conservative intellectual economic foundations laid out by Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises and shows how these libertarian ideas became, in her view, the central point to conservative ideology. There have also been excellent studies on the nature of transatlantic conservatism as of late. Most notable has been the collection put together by Anna Von Der Goltz and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson *Inventing the Silent*

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<sup>31</sup> For more on suburban studies and those in the West and the Sunbelt see: Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). For a study that combines suburban politics with religion see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion: Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein. *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009). For some recent assessments on the economic role of modern conservatism going back to the 1930s see: Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2015) and Richard Rauchway, *Winter War: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the First Clash Over the New Deal* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018).



*Majority in Western Europe and the United States*, (2017) but not to be overlooked is intellectual historian Reba Soffer's *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America* (2009).<sup>34</sup>

One of the most diverse and growing portions in recent historiography has been the study of Religious Right. Historians Mark Knoll and George Marsden have written widely on the influence of religion in America *God and Race in America*, *Religion in American Politics*, and *Fundamentalism in American Culture*.<sup>35</sup> Others have focused on more specific aspect's interaction with conservatism like evangelicalism, the Moral Majority, Christian Nationalism, along with central figures like Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham.<sup>36</sup>

Then, there has been a plethora of works surveying new and interesting ways of looking at conservatism like historian Jonathan Stahl's *Right Moves* (2016) examining the impact of

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<sup>34</sup> Anna Von Der Goltz and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson *Inventing the Silent Majority in Western Europe and the United States: Conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and Reba Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Mark A. Knoll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); *Ibid.*, and Luke E. Harlow, *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007); and George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006). For more works examining religion and politics see: Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Allen D. Hertzke, et al, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices*, Sixth Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019); Gaston Espinosa ed., *Religion, Race, and the American Presidency: With a New Chapter on the 2008 Election* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008); J. Matthew Wilson, *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in American Religious Mosaic* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), and David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> For a broad survey on the rise of Religious Right see: Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008); or Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a small selection on how Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham helped to shape the religious Right see: Matthew A. Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: St. Martin's Press, 2012); Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009);, and Michael Sean Winter, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Christian Right* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012). For some recent scholarship on the rise of Christian Nationalism refer to: Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).; Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).; Andrew L. Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American* (New, York, NY: Sterling Publishing, 2019).; Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

conservative think tanks on American politics and culture, University of Virginia's Nicole Hemmer and her book *Messengers of the Right* (2016) tracking the development of the conservative media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and historian Patrick Andelic's *Donkey Work* (2019) answers how a half-century dominated by conservative politics was undermined and sometimes placated by the dominance of congressional democrats.<sup>37</sup> For a detailed analysis of any of the themes mentioned up to 2011 see Kim Phillips-Fein's "Conservatism: A State of the Field," (2011) or Julian E. Zelizer's "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism." (2011)<sup>38</sup>

The last and most germane strand within the historiography to this study is the intellectual history of the varying and competing components that made up modern conservatism. Foundational to this research once again is George Nash's *Intellectual History of the Conservative Movement*. Besides Nash and up until quite recently the only ones to write on this matter extensively were those from within the conservative movement. One of the older writings on this topic was completed by philosopher Thomas Fleming and paleoconservative historian and author Paul Gottfried in *The Conservative Movement* (1988).<sup>39</sup> Gottfried has continued to write a considerable amount on this topic up to the present day.<sup>40</sup> Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute and political scientist Peter Berkowitz

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Patrick Andelic, *Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1994* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2019). For more on conservative media and its impact on foreign policy see: Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton eds., *The Conservative Press in Twentieth Century America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999); and Laurence Jurdem R., *Paving the Way for Reagan: The Influence of Conservative Media on US Foreign Policy* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism," 732-734 and 737-739; and Julian E. Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism."

<sup>39</sup> Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> These works tend to view the neoconservative movement in a harsh light, but they are comprehensive works. Paul Gottfried, *Conservatism in America*, 2007); Ibid., *The Great Purge: The Deformation of the Conservative Movement* (Augusta, GA: Washington Summit Publishers, 2015); and Ibid., ed., *The Vanishing Tradition: Perspectives on American Conservatism* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2020). For works examining the difference between conservative and libertarian viewpoints from within the movement see: George Carey ed., *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies

compiled several essays in his 2004 *Varieties of Conservatism in America* which much like Nash delineates between traditionalism, libertarianism, and neoconservatism to see where these three elements of conservatism differ and where they align.<sup>41</sup>

One of the first academics, outside the conservative movement, besides Nash, to flesh out these differences in an exhaustive way was political scientist George Hawley. His *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (2016) offered a long-ranging history of conservatism with a focus on the issues and events that created fissures in conservative thinking. He specifically focuses on the way the conservative movement “purges” itself of those who “strayed too far from established conservative dogma,” and attempts to narrow down the nebulous meaning of contemporary conservatism in America.<sup>42</sup> British journalist Edmund Fawcett wrote an intellectual and political history of conservatism from a transatlantic perspective (United States, France, Germany, and Britain) dating back to Burke and working his way up through the present time.<sup>43</sup> Breaking his work into four time periods or parts, in each one he expounds explicitly on the “Party and Politicians” who were leaders of conservatism in their respective countries and then in a similar fashion delves into the “Ideas and Thinkers” who gave the logical underpinnings for conservatism. Two of the most recent pieces of scholarship are both headed up by historian Marcus M. Witcher. His *Getting Right with Reagan* (2019) has demonstrated tensions between Reagan and his conservative critics while the president and his editorial work on *Conversations on Conservatism* (2021) brings to life the major debates and

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Institute, 2004),; and Nathan W. Schlueter and Nikolai G. Wenzel, *Selfish Libertarians and Socialist Conservatives? The Foundations of the Libertarian-Conservative Debate* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Peter Berkowitz, ed. *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute), 2004.

<sup>42</sup> George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 2. Those purged were often those on the Right of the mainstream conservatism, i.e., paleoconservatives. Gottfried offers his own insights in *The Great Purge* and his Afterword in *The Vanishing Tradition*.

<sup>43</sup> Edmund Fawcett, *Conservatism: The Fight for Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

speeches that occurred within the halls of the Philadelphia Society during the crucible years of conservatism 1965-1982.<sup>44</sup>

However, a glaring omission from this fairly new historiographical trend and conservatism as a whole is a study that investigates the intersectionality of popular culture and conservatism. Rather than viewing conservatism through a narrow lens, scholars can now attempt to parse out the differences within conservative thought through various mediums, while also using divergent conservative publications to nail down some unifying themes. Truly, there has been little attention paid to the way conservatives have interacted with popular culture or the arts, i.e., movies, music, and literature in order to better understand conservatism as a movement. There are some exceptions but nothing that takes into account the latest scholarship on the variation within conservatism.<sup>45</sup> A non-scholarly work that broaches the subject was written in the early 1990s. Michael Medved's polemic *Hollywood vs. America* (1992) lambasts Hollywood elites for their outright hostility to American values in chapters like "The Attack on Religion," "The Infatuation with Foul Language," "Bashing America," and "The Addiction to Violence."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, there is little in the way of analysis, and it provides a major oversimplification in the way he depicts nearly all movies as being antithetical to traditional values. Still, other studies have been written about the political machinations of Hollywood

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<sup>44</sup> Marcus M. Witcher, *Getting Right With Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020); and Ibid. Blake Ball, and Kevin Hughes eds., *Conversations on Conservatism: The Philadelphia Society Talks, 1965-1982* (Massachusetts: American Institute for Economic Research, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Some of these exceptions are James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: NY: Basic Books, 1991). To his credit Hunter has a chapter on media and the arts, but only two pages dedicate do film with the vast majority of it looking at evangelical reaction to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. A more comprehensive look at film and the political Left and Right is Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997). However, once again conservative reaction film is equated with the religious right. A work that attempts to look at "popular conservative" reaction to rock music is Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Ger Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Post-Modern Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992). However, there is no coherent definition of what conservatism is throughout his work.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).

and movie making, but nothing can shed further light on conservatism and the popular arts.<sup>47</sup> This is why a study of various conservative literature's film review sections from 1976-2000 not only provides a nuanced way of studying conservative thought and what many saw as worthy and unworthy in the culture and arts but will also provide a better understanding of the changing relationship between conservatism and film through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The analysis in the coming chapters will delve into a whole host of issues, themes, and questions relating to cinematic concepts, conservative film critics, and how conservatives viewed the culture of the entertainment and art worlds. The variation within conservative film criticism and how they viewed cinema as either art or entertainment is absolutely fundamental to understanding their own assessment of film. More so than where one fell on the conservative political spectrum, it was the way in which each critic or reviewer understood film as either purely for entertainment or to be judged aesthetically due to its inherent worth as a piece of art that was the marker of true delineation between critics. Certain themes persist across the quarter-century while others ebb and flow with the political and social tides. Specific cinematic traits that many conservatives agreed were vital to nearly all movies either bolstered a film to greatness or dragged it down to the depths of third-rate rubbish. The ideological and political issues that united and divided some conservative film critics and culture writers in the wide-ranging publications will come to the forefront of each chapter and may even surprise a few readers. Whether it was the style, the quantity of reviews, or the ideological emphasis of

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<sup>47</sup> For works on the broader intersection politics, culture, and movies see: Christensen, Terry. *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987),; Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988),; Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992),; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (UK: Vintage, 1994),; Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002),; Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011),; and Steven J. Ross ed. *Movies and American Society* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). On how specific movies have inspired conservatives see: Joe Street, *Dirty Harry's America: Clint Eastwood, Harry Callahan, and the Conservative Backlash* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016).

the writer, from 1976 to 2000, film reviews changed as the face of conservatism changed. The reviews in these publications reflected both the shared aspirations and hopes along with the fears and frustrations over film, culture, and art.

What follows is a simple outline of how the rest of this study will unfold. Chapter 2 will accomplish a few tasks. It will explain in short order why film was the central medium for expressing popular entertainment and art on a mass scale during the era. It will also briefly acquaint the reader with the world of film criticism and the job of the film critic. But for the most part, it will expound on the principal critics and the major publications associated with this study. A short history of the critic, their career, accomplishments, and the publication is given, as well, when possible, the critics' philosophy about art. This allows for a baseline to be established for better understanding the who's who in the majority of reviews and provide foundational information for the rest of the research.

Each chapter after Chapter 2 follows a thematic approach. A genre or type of movie is explored in each chapter. The author has subjectively chosen which genres to include and has, unfortunately, had to leave out entire categories like Westerns, comedies, and political thrillers due to space. As noted above, each chapter will have certain distinctive themes which separate it from the rest, however, the overall focus remains on using quantitative analysis to discover the predominantly shared precepts of the critics throughout time and across the conservative spectrum. To achieve this, a comparative analysis of the film reviews from the differing publications will be a significant portion of each chapter. While the focus will be on more popular films, lesser-known films reviewed by various conservative publications will be utilized to discover any further overarching themes and differences between them. The final portion of

each chapter will be to recap the major findings and provide the author's analysis in a clear and concise way before moving to the next chapter.

Chapter 3 begins the thematic exposition with Vietnam War movies. The Vietnam War serves as a useful inflection point for both film and culture. Movies based on the historically centered and culturally polarizing war should allow for useful insights. Also, how conservative film critics approached Hollywood is briefly explored, especially in the context of depicting America and its then antithesis communism. There is also the opportunity to explore some films which were deemed to be part of a rightward shift in the culture during the Age of Reagan. What conservatives did or did not have to say about these films is fascinating. The explosion of Vietnam War movies in the 1980s with critically acclaimed films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Apocalypse Now* ground this chapter in films that were contemporaneously and socially significant.

Chapter 4 examines the rise of animation and Disney movies. As a genre, animation had historically been associated with entertainment made for children. However, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, animation made inroads across the age range but especially among young adults and older teenagers. Thus, a deeper look into how conservatives viewed this genre brings a better understanding of where they saw the culture heading. The ideas both implicit and explicit in several Disney films were judged to be averse to many traditional values that some conservatives hoped this genre and Hollywood studios would promote. Also, in no other chapter is the rise of the religious right and fall of libertarianism so clearly exemplified and explored.

Chapter 5 focuses on horror and Sci-Fi movies. Both are unique film genres that invoke people's collective imagination and worst fears. This chapter unlike the rest is one in which the genre itself was indicative of inventiveness and not based on reality. How did conservatives react

to this and what shared ideas possibly came up as a reaction? Chapter 5 also illustrates how one genre was ideologically tied to a specific strain within conservatism while the other was considered to be conservative by its very nature. Chapter four and certain aspects of it pour over into chapter five and this is explored in greater detail as well.

The last chapter attempts to deal with the issue of race in cinema. Some scholars and historians have argued that the very origins of modern American conservatism have an intrinsic link to racism. Chapter six aims to investigate this thesis by analyzing how conservatives critiqued films that dealt explicitly and implicitly with race, racism, and black urban culture. The evidence found will either refute or bolster this argument. At the end of this chapter, there is a shortened epilogue with the goal of laying out the principal evidence from chapters two through six. It will succinctly encapsulate the shared traits and ideas that many if not all the conservative critics looked for in film.

When taken together these chapters should illuminate sides of conservative history never studied before, the conservative film critic, what criteria made a movie art or just entertainment, and what criteria unified conservatives focused on finding art in a culture polluted by the mundane. The critics insight into film and culture can no longer be overlooked and considered only important for cinephiles or film historians (who have sadly neglected this group for the most part). Rather, their ideas about film translate into deeper philosophies covering art, culture, and the nature of conservatism itself. By better understanding them, a clearer and deepening knowledge of conservatism and what unified this diverse group comes into focus, one that up until now has largely been ignored.



## Chapter 2: Conservative Film Critics and Their Publications

This initial body chapter will acquaint the reader with the array of critics and publications relied upon throughout the entirety of this work. All the central publications will be discussed, some in more detail than others, with the hope of pointing out ideological and historical differences between the lot. All the *major* critics will be introduced with their opinions on film, criticism, and/or art openly explored. One cannot write about every critic who may have penned an article for one of these magazines or the chapter would go on ad Infinitum. So, this chapter will focus on those critics who were central to their publication's film review section (having served as the main critic for at least two years or having worked for a multitude of conservative publications as a film critic over a multi-year period). However, before diving headfirst into the who's who and what's what, a closer look at cinema's role as the central medium distilling art and culture to a mass audience as well as a short foray into film criticism seems pertinent.

"There...is something magical about the movies," film critic John Podhoretz wrote in *The American Spectator*, "something ineffable which draws to them people who might just as easily stay away and watch television"<sup>48</sup> John Simon, the film critic for *National Review* expounded on the impact film can have on a person, "[i]n two hours or so they make you live a lifetime, laugh yourself silly, scare yourself to death, fall in love with someone unbelievably yet (as it were) palpably beautiful, understand something about the world or yourself that you didn't even know needed understanding, and think you are a better person for having seen them."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, anyone who has watched a film in a theatre has collectively experienced the ability of the medium to enthrall and entertain. But its power went beyond mere entertainment. By the latter

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<sup>48</sup> John Podhoretz, "Aristides Goes to the Movies," *The American Spectator*. 1981: Vol 14 Iss 7, 25.

<sup>49</sup> John Simon, "Movie Musing, 1990," *National Review* 42, no. 21, November 5, 1990, 137, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12480522&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

half of the twentieth century, it had overtaken all other mediums as the prevalent distiller of entertainment and art.

The written word, which had been *the* medium of choice for most of civilized history, had by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century become secondary to visual stimuli. The theatre (plays, operas, ballet, etc.), while visually stimulating never had a broad reach and was often too expensive and high-brow for the run-of-the-mill American consumer, and television was too low-brow and incapable to convey deep meaning in thirty-minute snippets interrupted by insistent commercial breaks. Movies were then the last refuge of those hoping to find art and entertainment rolled into one and available for mass consumption.

The idea of film as art resonated with a large number of cultural critics across the conservative spectrum. Critic and English Professor at St. John's Rev. E. Lauder noted in the conservative Catholic publication *Crises* how “[c]inema, when it depicts and dramatizes the human mystery, has a special power to touch people profoundly, to invite them to self-reflection, to spur them to serious social criticism, and to call them to a deeper level of hope and love,” it was “*the* art form of the twentieth century, enveloping within itself all other art forms.”<sup>50</sup> The ex-libertarian presidential candidate and film critic for *Reason* John Hospers labeled it “the most powerful and pervasive of art media.”<sup>51</sup> While George McCartney, from paleoconservative *Chronicles* magazine gave his thoughts on the unique nature of film as an art:

Our most technically based, scientifically demanding art, film nevertheless registers on its audience with a far greater visceral impact than any other medium. It's not like reading a book or looking at a painting. There's no time to reflect on film as we experience it. It sweeps over us with a visual and aural immediacy that all too easily drowns intellectual distinctions.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Rev. Robert E. Lauder, “Vatican’s Favorite Films,” *Crises*, Vol. 14 No. 07, July 1, 1996, Crises Magazine Archives, [Vatican's Favorite Films \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://crisismagazine.com).

<sup>51</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, September, 1982, 51.

<sup>52</sup> George McCartney, “Of Apes and Yahoos,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 09, 1999, 42-44.

In the eyes of many conservative critics then, movies were the premier and most unique form of entertainment and art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The judgment of what made a film a piece of art, or rather a piece of good art fell within the purview of the critic. The critic, the fulcrum on which the rest of the study rests, thus needs to be clearly defined, an arduous task. Quoting the *Los Angeles Time* film critic Kenneth Turan, the author, film critic, poet, and professor at Columbia University, Phillip Lopate reiterated that the critic had “the overall mandate...to point out the existence and importance of other criteria for judgment besides popularity.”<sup>53</sup> Professor of History and American Studies, Raymond J. Haberski Jr., believed critics “helped make sense of the intersection between art and life,” while author Jerry Roberts claimed they “put up the signposts for us to understand as much as we do about the aesthetic visions, storytelling sensibilities, and emotional intent inherent in movies....”<sup>54</sup> In short, a critic needed to intimately know the topic he or she is critiquing, engage the reader by “translat[ing] visual representations into crispy vivid descriptions,” and “show an interest in something besides movies; a well stock mind,” Lopate insisted, “remains the mark of a true essayist.”<sup>55</sup>

Two critics, Simon and Podhoretz provide a further framework for better comprehending the world of the critic and the nuances ensconced within their world. Simon penned a polemic piece in 1990 for *National Review* where he explained what he found to be the major divergence between the art-centered critics and entertainment driven reviewers.

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<sup>53</sup> Phillip Lopate, *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From Silents Until Now* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2006), XXII.

<sup>54</sup> Raymond J. Haberski Jr., *It's Only a Movie!: Films and Critics in American Culture* (Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 2660-2661; and Jerry Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism* (Santa Monica Press: Kindle Edition), 12.

<sup>55</sup> Lopate, *American Movie Critics*, XX, XXIV.

“The problem with film critics however, is that most of them aren't really critics, merely movie buffs who managed to preserve their childhood enthusiasms intact. They like movie movies, as they call them, much more than art films, as they call genres they don't care for. Can you imagine a literary critic preferring book books? Or detective stories to literature? On the other hand, can you imagine a book critic obliged to review most of what lands on his desk, the way movie reviewers are expected--indeed want; to--see everything? Granted, a movie takes much less time and effort, but is that an excuse for critical omnivorousness [sic], particularly if it results in your reading in the papers that such-and-such a film must be seen, only to have you feel, as you come out of it, the victim of highway robbery?<sup>56</sup>

“Film criticism,” he said, “should be protected from our so-called critics.”<sup>57</sup> True critics according to Simon were not just movie fans who could give a thumbs up or thumbs down. Rather, they needed to meet certain conditions similar to what Lopate laid out earlier. Simon believed they had to be “well versed in all the arts, who, preferably, are also professional writers of something: plays, essays, poetry, fiction.”<sup>58</sup> This type of critic, the elite or highbrow critic in conservative circles was personified by Simon, but could also be said to describe the large majority of conservative critics who will follow (Bowman, Bawer, Teachout, Grenier, Shapearo, Slavitt, McCartney, Lauder, Alleva, etc.).

Podhoretz, on the other hand, believed critics should be divided into three distinct groups. First, there was the “‘consumer guide’” critics who used stars and were “granted 90 seconds on the nightly news” to offer their “monosyllabic judgment.”<sup>59</sup> These would be the “reviewers” under Simon’s model. The second was the ‘academic critic’ who wrote in scholarly journals like *Film Comment* and *Films in Review* which the larger public is largely ignorant of. Finally, there was the “sociological critic,” following in the footsteps, he claimed, of Robert Warshaw and Manny Farber. “What mainly interests the sociological critic,” which he considered himself

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<sup>56</sup> Simon, “Movie Musing, 138.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> John Podhoretz, “Confessions of a Critic,” *American Spectator*, Vol 17 Iss 09, 1984, 33.

among, “is the failure or success of a given film with its audience.” Therefore, he wrote, he was “not really interested in the movies as art.”<sup>60</sup> The idea of cinema being an art seemed silly even pyrrhic to him. “If the movies are to be considered high art,” he wrote, “then they have failed massively,” instead he chose to view himself as an everyman who was “unremitting lowbrow...,” meaning he thought of himself as “pretty close to the mass audience as a whole [in taste], which overwhelmingly prefers the low to the high in the movies.”<sup>61</sup> His justification and the central divergence between himself (along with a few others who could be considered along these lines like David Brudnoy who sometimes veered into the world of art criticism, Murray Rothbard and all *Human Events* reviewers) and the majority of his peers was that he believed, Americans “are all experts in the movies; we’ve all grown up with them, we have sampled film history on television, we know more about movies than about any other art.”<sup>62</sup> Consequently, he and a few others wrote, “about movies as a cultural, not an artistic, phenomenon.”<sup>63</sup>

Above offers a glimpse into the critics’ trade and how some saw themselves. However, their criteria for judgment as Professor Lopate also noted, “tend to be devised on the run by each critic.”<sup>64</sup> This was true, even for those film critics in conservative publications and their predilections will be discussed in more depth below. However, an incongruity arises complicating what this study is attempting to achieve. How can one better understand the culture of conservatism and the various sects within, if each critic had their own subjective understanding of what made a movie a good, or even more complicated, what categorized it as a work of art? The answer comes clear only when taking a birds-eye view of the entire research.

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<sup>60</sup> Podhoretz, “Confessions of a Critic,” 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Lopate, *American Movie Critics*, XXII.

Because this is not a philosophical study in nature, cyphering which individual critics were adherents of Leo Strauss, the fusionism of Frank Meyer, the Burkean traditionalism of Russell Kirk, or the objectivism of Ayn Rand is not under examination. Variations in conservative orthodoxy are obviously noted and part and parcel of the study, but not necessarily the sole purpose. Rather as a historical study, the primary source material when taken together begins to illuminate patterns of thought, partialities, and preferences that when molded together begin to shape the ideas inherent in a larger conservative culture. No doubt, differences emerge which are teased out in each chapter (libertarians and the religious right are among those who most clearly delineate themselves from the rest), however, the importance seems to lay in the fact that there were some glaring overarching commonalities among nearly all critics pointing towards a shared conservative understanding of film, art, and culture.

There were certain critics and publications which were central to this study. They either had a consistent film review section spanning decades if not the entire length of this study or the critic him or herself had an extensive run spanning a similar timespan and across various publications. It seems appropriate to start with arguably the most influential magazine and critic, at least among those who considered movies an art, John Simon and *National Review*. *National Review*, according to its founder William F. Buckley Jr. had the goal “to *change* the nation’s political climate.”<sup>65</sup> It aimed to give conservatism a voice when it had none. But it was not as historian George Nash put it, “a single ‘voice of conservatism’ but a coalition of often competing intellectuals.”<sup>66</sup> In the early years, *National Review* attempted to reconcile the various strains of conservatism giving nearly all a voice. But over time those voices which were deemed too far

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<sup>65</sup> Gregory L. Schneider, *Conservatism in America Since 1930* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 195.

<sup>66</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 141.

outside the mainstream were frequently purged from the pages. By the late 1970s and into the 1980s and 1990s *National Review* still catered to a whole host of conservative viewpoints continuing its fusionist beginnings but by then had begun to lean more into the neoconservative camp as the paleoconservative and neoconservative infighting intensified. Undoubtedly, *National Review* was one of the premier conservative outlets for conservatives and their ideas in the postwar World War II era.

John Ivan Simon was by far the most well respected of all conservative critics as well as the only one who wrote reviews throughout the entirety of this study. He was also the only one mentioned alongside other prestigious film critics of the era including Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Vincent Canby. Born in May 1925 in Yugoslavia, Simon came to the United States in 1941 and served in U.S. Air Force in 1944 and 1945.<sup>67</sup> He was a professor at Harvard and MIT, the theatre critic for *New York* magazine from 1967 to 2005, and had been reviewing films since 1963 in magazines like *The New Leader*, *New York*, and *Esquire* until he took over the spot in *National Review* from the previous film critic Harvey E. Phillips on November 25, 1977.<sup>68</sup> Simon first and foremost believed film should be viewed as art and therefore judged as such. He disapproved of the more “childish aspects of American culture,” and believed “film must do more than merely please the eye.”<sup>69</sup> Although he was sometimes described as “cruel” for his emphasis on personal appearances of actors and actresses, or the “only critic without a passion

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<sup>67</sup> Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, 214.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 213; and John Simon, “Berlin on \$50,000 a Day,” *National Review* 29, no. 46, November 25, 1977, 1375-1377, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6058320&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. There was a short period where M.J. Sobran reviewed a selection of films between Phillips and Simon.

<sup>69</sup> Lopate, *American Movie Critic*, 467.

for the movies,” “no one has ever questioned the superiority of Simon’s prose style, which is elegant, poised, and trenchant.”<sup>70</sup>

A quarter-century of film reviews invites one to better understand the man behind the critic. Simon hated rap and rock but enjoyed jazz, had a “love for [Ingar] Berman,” a fondness for Sandra Bullock, thought no great work of literature could be made into a decent movie, and believed *Shall We Dance?* to be the one the “greatest films of all time,” while *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* restored his “loss of faith” in modern cinema.<sup>71</sup> He also had a disdain for anything infantile or childish, with the movies *Big* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* being the exceptions. There is no doubt Simon was highbrow and elitist in his tastes and disposition. The critic according to Simon had to “contribute to the making of better movies” by “clearing[ing] the ground of rubble” and “ferreting out the rare delicacies.”<sup>72</sup> If this task was left to the American public or “the great unwashed,” as he dubbed them, cinema would be in a much worse state.<sup>73</sup>

Over his tenure, Simon offered glimpses into what he believed to be essential in film and art. “What makes the film art?” he asked in a review on *Schindler’s List*, “[f]irst, its ability to

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<sup>70</sup> Lopate, *American Movie Critic*, 467; and Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, 217.

<sup>71</sup> John Simon, “UP FROM DOWN UNDER,” *National Review* 32, no. 21, October 17, 1980, 1276–78, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6071976&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; John Simon, “La Tradita,” *National Review* 35, no. 17, September 2, 1983, 1089, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6058876&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; and John Simon, “The Dance of Life,” *National Review* 49, no. 15, August 11, 1997, 55–56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9708040317&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>72</sup> John Simon, “Whistling in the Dark,” *National Review* 29, no. 50, December 23, 1977, 1500–1504,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6056821&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>73</sup> John Simon, “Bizet’s Carmen, Shaffer’s Amadeus,” *National Review* 36, no. 20, October 19, 1984, 55, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=13879366&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; John Simon, “Death and Soul-Death,” *National Review* 40, no. 1, January 22, 1988, 64–67, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12563048&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. John Simon, “Droopy Loves Drippy,” *National Review* 42, no. 19, October 1990, 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12486014&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; and John Simon, “Clear and Muddled Danger,” *National Review* 46, no. 18, September 26, 1994, 71, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lgs&AN=9409307542&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.



treat catastrophe with complete understatement and an objectivity that, though by no means feelingless, does not parade its feelings.”<sup>74</sup> This is a pushback on sentimentalism in film, while affirming the need for seriousness and a light touch in filmmaking. This light touch point is seconded in a review on *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in which he argued for the thrills to be cut back: “What would a game of chess be like in which every move threatened checkmate? What would lovemaking be like if every second yielded orgasm? What about a long joke made up entirely of punchlines? Unspeakable horror.”<sup>75</sup> In another piece, he gave an additional clue as to what makes film an artform, “[o]ne thing that distinguishes a work of art from mere entertainment is that you can give away its ending without doing damage.”<sup>76</sup> Art for Simon is not predicated solely on the story or plot. While important they are not central to the creation of art. He explained this in his March 1993 review:

What is it that makes American movies, on the whole, less interesting than their European or Asian counterparts? That, however much they try to disguise it (although most of them don't even bother), they are plot-driven. They dream up some really crazy, wild, funny, scary, adorable, tear-jerking characters, then forget about them as evolving or floundering, rational or rationalizing beings, and merely move them around like counters, counterclockwise or clockwise, to fit the exigencies of a baroque, Byzantine, or brainless plot.<sup>77</sup>

For Simon and numerous other critics, the characters were of central importance. It was their development and human struggle that the audience could connect with. He also provided some other necessary traits like “coherence, warmth, humanity...in less evolved times, we would have

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<sup>74</sup> John Simon, “From the Jaws of Death,” *National Review* 46, no. 1, January 24, 1994, 70–71, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lgs&AN=9401177716&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>75</sup> John Simon, “OVERTHRILL,” *National Review* 36, no. 13, July 13, 1984, 51–52, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12220916&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>76</sup> John Simon, “And Justice for None,” *National Review* 41, no. 23, December 8, 1989, 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=8912250413&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>77</sup> John Simon, “Resurrection,” *National Review* 45, no. 5, March 15, 1993, 61, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lgs&AN=9303040243&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

dared call morality,” that once dispensed with by “pretentious and unskilled hands” could be disastrous for the film and filmmaker.<sup>78</sup>

Simon stands alone among his peers as not exactly fitting into any preconceived ideological mold in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American conservatism. He was among a dying breed, more suited to a European aristocracy or Tory-style conservatism no longer en vogue in America by the 1870s never mind the 1970s. He was an anti-populist, a champion of civilized society, an articulate proponent of intelligent and meaningful ideas, and an advocate for the need to take both art and criticism seriously. While he was the most enduring critic, he was not alone.

Another major publications which spanned the length of this study and brought with it a number of prominent film critics was *The American Spectator*. First called *The Alternative* it was a campus paper at Indiana State University meant to oppose the New Left. About a decade later it changed to *The Alternative: An American Spectator* before *The Alternative* was dropped from the title in 1977 leaving just *The American Spectator*. Founded in 1967 and edited by R. Emmett Tyrell Jr., it attracted a younger college-age conservative readership utilizing “mockery, [by] making fun of the left's seriousness and appropriating its methods to create a sort of right-wing absurdist, radical-style agitprop.”<sup>79</sup> By 1975 it had a national circulation of 25,000 and was one of the two most important “under-30 periodicals in the country.”<sup>80</sup>

As it grew in the 1970s from a local college paper to a national college monthly, and finally into a national magazine it attracted young neoconservative-leaning talents like William Kristol, John Podhoretz, and George F. Will to its pages. Yet, it stagnated throughout the Reagan

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<sup>78</sup> John Simon, “\$3 Bill, Pound2 Note,” *National Review* 35, no. 21, October 28, 1983, 1351, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6069263&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. Simon noted too “I am not saying that true works of art have not been achieved without some of those ingredients,” but that when inexperienced filmmakers do not use them their chances of success were limited.

<sup>79</sup> Byron York, “The Life and Death of ‘The American Spectator’,” *The Atlantic*, November 2001, [The Life and Death of The American Spectator - The Atlantic](#).

<sup>80</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 313.

and Bush years with growth slowing to a trickle, culminating in a circulation of around 30,000 in 1992. However, later that same year the contentious confirmation hearing of Clarence Thomas for Supreme Court Justice propelled *The American Spectator* to the forefront of the new conservative media. Their “The Real Anita Hill” article, read on air by the then titular head of media conservatives Rush Limbaugh propelled subscriptions from 30,000 to over 114,000 in a matter of months.<sup>81</sup> The election of William J. Clinton was a secondary boon for the publication making it “the most widely read conservative opinion journal in the nation,” reaching a subscription number of over 300,000.<sup>82</sup> Although these numbers would dwindle as the 1990s progressed (down to below 75,000 by the end of the decade), they nonetheless remained a central feature of the conservative media conglomerate.<sup>83</sup>

*The American Spectator* was not known for its domestic or foreign policy nor was it truly scholarly in nature. Its acclaim came for taking shots at the Left in an acerbic and biting way, often including ad hominin attacks on those deemed worthy, and was most of all the “anti-Clinton” periodical on the Right.<sup>84</sup> The film critics, while quick with a barb, were more culturally astute through the 1970s and 1980s and it was not until James Bowman began his tenure in the 1990s that *The American Spectator* seemed to find its caustic style echoed in the film section. From 1976 to 1979 there were several film critics, all of whom went on to prestigious careers. In 1976 the neoconservative Robert Asahina was the main film critic. He wrote in a highbrow fashion much like Simon, and like him was also a theatre critic, but for *The Hudson Review*, an

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<sup>81</sup> York, “The Life and Death of ‘The American Spectator’,” *The Atlantic*.

<sup>82</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 333. It was specifically the “Troopergate” scandal published first by *The American Spectator* which acted the further catalyst for increased subscriptions. Troopergate was the alleged sordid tale of then, Arkansas Governor Clinton, using state troopers to facilitate extra-material affairs with an array of women.

<sup>83</sup> York, “The Life and Death of ‘The American Spectator’,” *The Atlantic*.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Tyrell wrote a several books on both Bill and Hillary Clinton including *Boy Clinton* (1996), *The Clinton Crack-Up* (2007), and *Madame Hillary* (2004).

art and literature journal in New York. He left in late 1976 and would go on to become an author, and editor at a wide array of publishers and magazines including *The Public Interest*, film critic for *The New Leader*, and Visiting Scholar of Asian/Pacific/ American Studies at New York University.<sup>85</sup>

David Brudnoy, a critic whose ideas and writings appeared in a litany of conservative publications including *National Review*, *Modern Age*, *Libertarian Review*, *Reason*, and *Human Events*, had a section in *The American Spectator* called “David Brudnoy’s Film Index.” It was a list of anywhere from nine to seventeen movies with short (2-5 sentence) blurbs about each film. Brudnoy left *The American Spectator* at the end of 1976 when the magazine “began to make sneering references, obviously, to gay people.”<sup>86</sup> This was significant only because Brudnoy at the time was a closeted homosexual. In fact, he would not be the last gay film critic at *The American Spectator* to leave due to how the magazines dealt with homosexuality, but more on that will come later. Brudnoy was indeed an interesting character; “libertarian in [his] conservatism,” Frank Meyer the fusionist at *National Review* was his mentor, he did not consider himself “religious in any formal sense,” and owed his conversion to conservatism to Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* which he picked up at an airport book stand.<sup>87</sup> And when *Modern Age* printed their selection of seventy-eight seminal essays from their first twenty-five years “that distinguish the genus of scholarship arising from conservative sensibilities,” and offered a “manifold conservative outlook that goes beyond place and time,” Brudnoy’s name and work

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Asahina, “About,” Robertasahina.com, accessed July 22, 2022, [Robert Asahina » About](#).

<sup>86</sup> David Brudnoy, *Life is Not a Rehearsal: A Memoir* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1998), 163.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 116, 143, 145.

were there among such conservative stalwarts as of Ludwig Von Mises, George Nash, M.E. Bradford, Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, Eric Voegelin, and Richard M. Weaver.<sup>88</sup>

Brudnoy will be touched on again when libertarian publications come up, but there were still other critics for *The American Spectator* in the 1970s. Philip Terzian, a formal speech writer for the Democratic National Committee took over from Asahina from 1976 to mid-1978, until he went on to become a speechwriter for Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, later becoming the Senior Editor of *The Weekly Standard*.<sup>89</sup> After Terzian, there was Ben Yagoda a freelance writer from New York who reviewed films for one year, until John Podhoretz took the reins while still a student at the University of Chicago in September 1979.<sup>90</sup> John Podhoretz, the son of Norman Podhoretz, editor-in-chief of the Jewish-conservative *Commentary* for most of the latter half of the twentieth century, already had some of his ideas about movies, art, and critics clarified above.<sup>91</sup>

He reviewed films at *The American Spectator* from 1979 to February of 1982 until there “was not a film being made that truly inspired me to sit down at the typewriter and bat out the thousand words necessary to fill this space.”<sup>92</sup> He returned in 1984 and stuck it out until the fall of 1985. He would not review any films in any other of the publications analyzed until October of 1995 when he began reviewing movies in the pages of *The Weekly Standard*. Podhoretz was a through and through neoconservative who viewed film as entertainment and its importance lying in the impact it had on the audience. He served as a speechwriter for both the Reagan and George

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<sup>88</sup> George A. Panichas ed., *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years, A Selection* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1988), xvii; and David Brudnoy, “‘Liberty by Taste’: Tocqueville’s Search for Freedom,” in *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years, A Selection*: 154-167.

<sup>89</sup> “Philip Terzian,” Philipterzian.com, accessed July 22, 2022, [Biography | Philip Terzian](#).

<sup>90</sup> John Podhoretz, “The Talkies: Movie Gangs,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 9, September 1979, 24-25.

<sup>91</sup> For more on Podhoretz and his take on film see: John Podhoretz, “A Valediction,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 12, 2018, [John Podhoretz’s 40 Years Reviewing Movies | Washington Examiner](#).

<sup>92</sup> Podhoretz, “Confessions of a Critic,” 30.

H.W. Bush administrations, was the co-founder of the *Weekly Standard* in 1995, and became the editor of *Commentary* in 2009. He was undoubtedly one of the most influential of the second-generation neoconservatives.

During his hiatus from 1982 to 1984 the novelist, Martha Bayles took over writing the reviews published every other month (sometimes longer), she offered a culturally conservative view of film extolling religion and oftentimes focused on negative feminist aspects of the films she reviewed.<sup>93</sup> In 1986 the cultural critic Bruce Bawer who by that time had already been a literary critic and writer for *The New Criterion*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Times*, among others took over.<sup>94</sup> Bawer served as a film critic from 1986 to 1990 and offered the most culturally literate critiques dating back to Asahina. He described himself as a poet and “conservative” who was usually “lumped in with certain neoconservative intellectuals,” “a literary critic,” “a monogamous, churchgoing Christian,” and a homosexual.<sup>95</sup> This last point would once again find him at odds with *The American Spectator*.

He described his stint there and what happened in two of his many books. In 1986 he was invited by managing editor Wladyslaw Pleszczynski of *The American Spectator* to be a film reviewer and given “great leeway” with the only instructions being to keep the reviews below 2000 words and not to write about too many “esoteric or foreign films.”<sup>96</sup> Never made to feel he needed to write from a political perspective he was allowed to discuss “vapid militarism” and his

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<sup>93</sup> See: Martha Bayles, “Big Man on Campus,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 15 Iss 10, 1982, 20-22; Martha Bayles, “Hoffman Bouffant,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 16 Iss 03, 1983, 28-30; and Martha Bayles, “The Right Fluff,” *American Spectator*, Vol 17 Iss 01, 1984, 34-35.

<sup>94</sup> Bruce Bawer, “Shooting Blanks,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 19, Iss 08, 1986, 28-29.

<sup>95</sup> Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York, NY: Touchstone Book, 1993), 25, 44.

<sup>96</sup> Bruce Bawer, *The Screenplay's the Thing: Movie Criticism, 1986-1990* (Archon Books, 1997), 1.

“praise of the gay love story” in *My Beautiful Launderette*.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, Bawer frequently found himself at odds with *The American Spectator* and believed *The New Criterion* came closest in culture and ideology to his convictions.<sup>98</sup> It was a review from August 1990 that acted as the catalyst to sever the ties between the two, well actually a paragraph. The editor asked Bawer to cut out a paragraph in which AIDS and homosexuality were mentioned in passing without condemnation. Bawer refused and they parted ways.

Bawer’s view on film was similar to that of Simon’s when using Podhoretz’s paradigm in that it was highbrow and elitist but also clearer in his conservative stance. He valued film as art but still felt movies ought to also portray a sense of decency, seriousness, and literateness. “The artistic aridity of most American films,” he wrote, “too often goes hand in hand with an ethical vacuity, a saturation in what one might call Universal City Values...a combination of vulgar materialism and modish liberalism.”<sup>99</sup> Movies display a “distressing lack of regard for manners and morals, for life’s richness and complexity, and for human dignity.”<sup>100</sup> Writing wryly in 1989 he outlined the deficiencies he found in American films, harping on the idea of infantilism that became central to Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as to this study in various chapters:

...what’s important is (a) that a film have a hot star in the lead, (b) that it tell a story which can be related in one sentence, and which is similar to the story of at least one recently successful movie, and (c) that it not be above the heads of anybody. Not above the heads of the youngest children, or the most braindead and rock-obsessed teenagers, or the slowest of the ‘mentally challenged.’ In such a marketplace, obviously, the screenwriter with an original idea and a talent for literate dialogue is actually at a disadvantage, and the unlettered amateur with a thoroughly derivative story idea and the mentality, vocabulary, and emotional maturity of a 12-year-old has pretty much everything he needs in order to achieve fame and fortune.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bawer, *The Screenplay’s the Thing*, 1. In a review on the film *Maurice* the publisher had told him that his “boss” wanted him to condemn the characters homosexuality to which Bawer said he went on a tirade about homophobia and the ended-up apologizing for suggesting it. See Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, 75.

<sup>98</sup> Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Bawer, *The Screenplay’s the Thing*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Bruce Bawer, “The Screenplay’s The Thing,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 22, Iss 02, 1989, 34.

What is missing from current films he insisted was “not the ‘spirit of adventure’ of the seventies but the relative sophistication and dramatic craftsmanship that routinely characterized the better American movies of two or three generations ago.”<sup>102</sup> Bawer would eventually move to Europe but continued contributing to *Hudson Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Criterion*, *National Review*, and even *The American Spectator* once again while publishing a whole host of books, with some focused on the dangers of radical Islam.<sup>103</sup>

The final critic for *The American Spectator* arrived a month after Bawer left and has not left since. Born in Pennsylvania in 1948, James Bowman was an English teacher before becoming the film critic at *The American Spectator* (1990-present), the media critic for *The New Criterion* (1993-present), the American editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* of London (1991 to 2002), and currently a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.<sup>104</sup> He has not written a memoir as Bawer and Brudnoy did nor is his name mentioned in any popular works on film criticism like Simon. Yet, he is integral to this study. His time at *The American Spectator* coincided with the magazine's precipitous rise and his consistency as the sole film critic spanning the 1990s brought a much-needed sense of continuity to the study. Bowman contributed an article on the film in nearly every edition of the monthly *The American Spectator* that came out in the 1990s, giving him well over one hundred reviews alone in the 1990s.

Art and entertainment, according to Bowman were inexplicably intertwined not to be separated. “All art,” he wrote in 1992, “should be entertaining and all entertainment is to some extent artful. From the critic’s point of view, the two categories are more or less co-extensive.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Bawer, “The Screenplay’s The Thing,” 33.

<sup>103</sup> “Bruce Bawer,” [Bucebawer.com](http://Bucebawer.com), accessed July 22, 2022, [Bio | Bruce Bawer](#).

<sup>104</sup> “James Bowman,” *The New Criterion*, accessed July 22, 2022, [James Bowman | The New Criterion](#).

<sup>105</sup> James Bowman, “Fashion Plays,” *The American Spectator* Vol 25, Iss 07, 1992, 52-53.



In 1996 he elucidated the dichotomy between the two. “I know that the apartheid between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’” is one of the legacies of modernism, but I have always thought it entirely wrong-headed. All art should be entertaining, or what’s the point of it? But so, too, should all entertainment be artful, or how can it truly entertain?”<sup>106</sup> This placed him among the likes of Simon, Bawer, and the other highbrows. And, akin to many of his peers, he found it necessary for the plot and characters, and to be grounded in reality. This is a point that becomes vital, especially in horror, thriller, and even sci-fi films. “One of the simplest ways to judge a film,” Bowman contended, “is on the basis of its truth to life.”<sup>107</sup> Building upon this he believed that if “there is almost nothing from ordinary experience to cling to...in art as in life that is a nightmare, not a rational experience.”<sup>108</sup> Bowman also provided his reader with a better understanding of his thinking on the way critics judge film and one of his biggest pet peeves: “The critic...more often thinks of a ‘good’ movie, like a good high diver, in terms of the degree of difficulty of what it attempts in relation to the success of its execution...even if the movie meets all the required standards...[it] nevertheless deserves to be disqualified for setting out to do something inconsistent with the ends of art--namely, to propagandize.”<sup>109</sup> His worst movie list of the past quarter-century, which will be explored in a coming chapter, was derived directly from the fact all the films tried to convince the audience in a rather heavy-handed way of some “political, psychological, or sentimental claptrap.”<sup>110</sup>

He was also more prone than nearly all others, besides Simon, to recommend and review foreign films. His “Movie of the Month” designation more often than not was a foreign film.

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<sup>106</sup> James Bowman, “Let Me Entertain You,” *American Spectator*, Vol 30, Iss 09, 1996, 68-69.

<sup>107</sup> James Bowman, “Alive and Dead,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 26, Iss 03, 1994, 54.

<sup>108</sup> James Bowman, “Lost and Profound,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 28, Iss 02, 1994, 84-85.

<sup>109</sup> James Bowman, “Dreadful Martyrdom,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 28, Iss 03, 1994, 64-65. Also see: James Bowman, “Message Parlor,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 29, Iss 05, 1995, 62-63; and James Bowman, “Patriot Games,” *American Spectator*, Vol 34, Iss 07, 2000, 64-65.

<sup>110</sup> James Bowman, “Hit List,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 26, Iss 01, 1993, 77.

While it could be a fool's errand to guess why the answer seems pretty straightforward.

American movies by the 1990s were in a state of disarray with infantilism and postmodern films running rampant. Bowman articulated it this way in 1998:

Hollywood films are, as they say, state of the art. Even the worst that Tinseltown produces will make money by worldwide sales to foreigners eager for any glimpse, however inane, of the famous Hollywood dream factory at work. The movies themselves, however, are often puerile in the extreme, morally and spiritually dead at their center. They produce an endless series of more or less impressive images to no serious purpose whatsoever. As I have occasionally remarked before, much of the reason for this sad state of affairs is the demographics of the domestic movie audience. As a disproportionate number of film-goers are teenage boys, so the movies are filled with explosions, special effects, and other gaudy and meretricious trash designed to appeal to teenage boys.<sup>111</sup>

A lack of serious-minded adult films was at the center of some of Bowman's ire. This will become self-evident when he begins to review Disney films during their meteoric rise in the 1990s.

The last major publication which offered a continuousness in film reviews from the 1970s to 2000, was described by Patrick Buchanan as the "toughest, best-written, and most insightful journal in America offered," i.e., the paleoconservative *Chronicles*.<sup>112</sup> Described by historian George Nash as the home to "militant traditionalists" it was founded by the Rockford Institute in 1977 "as a protest against the perversion of the American culture by something we [*Chronicles*] call the Liberal Culture."<sup>113</sup> In its first issue, the magazine laid out its goals, saying it aimed to "provide viewpoints that are usually eliminated from the literary marketplace, or silenced by the Liberal Establishment that runs the media," namely what they call "a value-

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<sup>111</sup> James Bowman, "There's No Growing Up," *American Spectator*, Vol 32, Iss 02, 1998, 76-77.

<sup>112</sup> *Chronicles* was originally called *Chronicles of Culture* but changed its name in 1985 to *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*. It will throughout just study, for the sake of simpleness be called *Chronicles*.

<sup>113</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 332; and Leopold Tyrmand, "Editor's Comment," *Chronicles of Culture*, September, 1982, 4-5.

oriented criticism...banned...by the liberal bigotry, orthodoxy, and fashion.”<sup>114</sup> What separated *Chronicles* from its peers was that it never quite made it into the mainstream of conservative thought as either a journal of policy or opinion. Their circulation numbers never came close to the numbers of *National Review* or *The American Spectator* (they were not alone in this, as a number of libertarian and other smaller conservative Catholic magazines also shared this trait). Nevertheless, they offered a paleo-conservative perspective not common in the pages of many of the more neoconservative, religious right, or libertarian magazines which dominated the scene, especially from the late 1980s onward.

Paul Gottfried, the current editor-in-chief of *Chronicles* and professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College described the nature of paleoconservatism as following one of two types: “Southerners like M.E. Bradford and his followers, who made no apologies for the Confederacy and expressed misgivings about the civil-rights revolution; and critics of the aggressive liberal internationalism foreign policy that was associated with the neoconservatives.”<sup>115</sup> He expounded on some philosophical principles of paleoconservatives writing in 2019 that it was in essence a “political stance” whose “representatives resisted neoconservatism,” “drew on older conservative thought, going back into the inter war period,” “incorporated both European and American traditions of thought,” did not believe in “equality” as a conservative principle, were uncomfortable with the term “human rights,” believed that the United States “was founded as a ‘constitutional republic’ not as a ‘liberal democracy,” “insist[ed] rights are historic and attached to particular societies within their own histories,” and “stress[ed] the line of continuity extended from the civil rights and immigration legislation of the 1960s to the cultural and political

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<sup>114</sup> Leopold Tyrmand, “About the Chronicles of Culture,” *Chronicles of Culture*, September 1977, 14.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Gottfried, “The Logic of Conservative Purges,” in *The Great Purge: The Deformation of the Conservative Movement*, ed. Paul Gottfried and Richard B. Spencer (Arlington, VA: Washington Summit Publishers, 2015), 13.

transformation of our country now.”<sup>116</sup> Still, some on the Right and in the wider political community viewed *Chronicles* and those associated with it as espousing “neoisolationist nativism tinged with antisemitism,” or worse, outright racist viewpoints.<sup>117</sup>

The film section did not reveal any insights about the latter points, but during the early years the “Liberal Culture” described in the first issue was derided in one review after another.<sup>118</sup> Eric Shapearo wrote the first film review for *Chronicles* in January of 1978. Simply described as someone who “spent his life with motion pictures as a fan,” Shapearo wrote just under twenty reviews for *Chronicles* from 1978 to 1982.<sup>119</sup> His first positive review did not come until a year and a half after he started with the film *Deer Hunter* (1979). Nonetheless, he set a foundation for those *Chronicles* film critics who came after him. Reviewing the movie *Pretty Baby* (1978) he wrote how it “embodies what’s most repulsive and base in today’s Liberal Culture—the cold, heartless and ultimately fatuous fascination with the alleged supra-humanness of the abominable...[i]t reveals nothing about human perspectives.”<sup>120</sup> The importance of character and individualization remained vital to those at *Chronicles* and the wider conservative critic world. He also laid out guidelines for understanding film as art; “In a work of art,” he wrote in 1982, “any sin can be defended and any inhumanness forgiven, but only when the painstaking

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<sup>116</sup> Paul Gottfried, “What’s Paleo and What’s Not,” *Chronicles*, Dec. 2019, <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/2019/December/43/12/magazine/article/10847261/>. The term first comes into use from Gottfried in 1986. For more on paleoconservatism see George Hawley’s *Rightwing Critics of American Conservatism*, 178-206.

<sup>117</sup> See: David Frum, “Unpatriotic Conservatives,” *National Review*, March 25, 2003, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2003/03/unpatriotic-conservatives-david-frum/>; Norman Podhoretz, “Buchanan and the Conservative Crackup,” *Commentary*, May 1992, [Buchanan and the Conservative Crackup - Norman Podhoretz, Commentary Magazine](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/1992/05/buchanan-and-the-conservative-crackup/).

<sup>118</sup> See: Eric Shapearo, “Stylization, Charmlessness and Kitsch,” *Chronicles of Culture*, September, 1978, 23-25; and Eric Shapearo, “Let’s Hope for More Indiana Joneses,” *Chronicles of Culture*, September/October, 1981, 35.

<sup>119</sup> Eric Shapearo, “Simon’s Revenge and Spielberg’s Fast-paced Bubble,” *Chronicles of Culture*, January, 1978, 21-22.

<sup>120</sup> Eric Shapearo, “Subtle Filth and Salvation through Platitude,” *Chronicles of Culture*, July, 1978, 24.

observance of truthfulness opens new vistas to any kind of human experience and circumstances...[w]ithout the magic of moral truth, art becomes only entertainment and literature mere writing.”<sup>121</sup>

By the fall of 1982 *Chronicles* became a monthly magazine and it was in the winter of that year that Shapearo left, replaced full-time by Stephen Macaulay who was “a frequent contributor” to *Chronicles* and acted as their film critic until 1985.<sup>122</sup> In one issue Macaulay pointed out a separating tenet of paleoconservatism, the opposition to materialism. He believed the “disease” warping Hollywood and film was its “emphasis on things” where “material goods” were the “be-all and end-all of existence.”<sup>123</sup> Unlike their neoconservative or libertarian allies, paleoconservatives viewed economics as extraneous to culture. The editor Thomas Fleming put it like this, “...economics...is subject to the delusion that human experiences can be quantified and treated in the abstract. This in turn led classical liberals in the wrong direction, thinking economic thought is independent of ethics and politics.”<sup>124</sup>

Macaulay left *Chronicles* in the summer of 1985 for places unknown and in his wake, the spot of a film critic was filled sporadically and randomly until 1990 with contributors like Herbert London, Sam Karnick, Paul Gottfried, Christian Kopff, and Kate Dalton. There is little consistency with film reviews during these years as well as throughout the rest of the 1990s. In the summer of 1990 however the awarded poet, would-be author of over one hundred literary works, educator at Yale and Columbia Universities, and ex-film critic from *Newsweek*, David R.

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<sup>121</sup> Adrian Speracino and Eric Shapearo, “O, What a Lovely Revolution! or Springtime for Lenin,” *Chronicles of Culture*, March/April, 1982, 40-44.

<sup>122</sup> Stephen Macaulay, “Best-Selling Poetry & Salable Refuse,” *Chronicles of Culture*, September, 1982, 46-47.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Macaulay, “Life Out of the Fast Lane, Elementary my Dear Viewer, and Damsel in Distress,” *Chronicles of Culture*, October, 1983, 41-42.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Fleming, Email to author, July 25, 2020.

Slavitt filled the role for just over four years.<sup>125</sup> By April of 1993, he had become a corresponding editor whose name appeared on the masthead of the magazine until April 1994. Slavitt was a poet first and foremost. A brief once-over of his works on the John Hopkins University Press website or his biography page on the Poetry Foundation makes this abundantly clear.<sup>126</sup> He was much like Bawer in his prose, with a focus on the art of film, yet it is difficult to distill Slavitt's four years of work down to its essence. Because he viewed movies as "popular art" which mostly "appeal to mass taste" he seemed to have a more lighthearted take on certain films than others.<sup>127</sup> This is not to say he did not judge some films harshly or that he was less technical in his assessment, only that he seemed to enjoy many of the movies he was reviewing.

After Slavitt and until 1999 there was once again an array of reviewers, including editor Thomas Fleming, historian Clyde Wilson, and free-lance writer Marian Kester Coombs in which the reviews themselves became sparser. That is until Professor of English at St. John's University, George McCartney filled the role to become the sole film critic in the summer of 1999.<sup>128</sup> He is still their critic presently. Being an English professor, it might not be surprising to know that he agreed with Simon that "[l]iterary works of any sophistication rarely translate to the screen successfully. As a rule, the better the book, the poorer the film."<sup>129</sup> However, he did have a point of contention in that when it came to "[l]esser novels" he reasoned, they "often improve in cinematic translation."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> David R. Slavitt, "Crimes and Punishments," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 09 September 1990, 53-54; and "David R. Slavitt," *Poets.org*, accessed July 22, 2022, [About David R. Slavitt | Academy of American Poets](#).

<sup>126</sup> "Meet David R. Slavitt," John Hopkins University Press, JHU.edu, accessed July 22, 2022, [David R. Slavitt | Hopkins Press \(jhu.edu\)](#); and "David R. Slavitt," Poetry Foundation, accessed July 22, 2022, [David R. Slavitt | Poetry Foundation](#).

<sup>127</sup> David R. Slavitt, "Sinners into Saints," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 18, No.06, June 1994, 48.

<sup>128</sup> George McCartney, "Under, Over, and Worlds Apart," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 06, 1999, 44-45.

<sup>129</sup> George McCartney, "Presence, Real and Ersatz," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No.05, 2000, 47.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, McCartney had high hopes and respect for film. “You're always longing for the medium to realize its potential,” he wrote in his first review, “knowing in advance it won't more times than it will.”<sup>131</sup> Like his forerunner Shakespeare, he seemed to think film depended on both aesthetic and moral vision, in order to forgive films of their deficiencies.<sup>132</sup> When done well as with *Girl on the Bridge* where “courtship [is] distilled to its essentials: step by step, feminine permission transfigures masculine desire, which is skillfully disciplined by respect and affection. By today's standards, such traditionalism is positively daring,” or *Gladiator* with the portrayal of “a religious family' man who submits with enormous courage and stoic understanding to the duties and limitations life imposes upon us.”<sup>133</sup> In both these films the shortcomings were discarded in lieu of the moral truths inherent in each movie. He also found one of the biggest issues to be a common one among his fellow critics, namely simple-mindedness:

No wonder directors lean toward the sensational. It's the medium's distinctive difference. Then there's the question of audience. To justify its huge expense, even a modest film must lure tens of millions into the theaters. It's not likely that they will all be intellectually curious. Filmmakers know their audience, and they know it pays to flatter it. That's why most movies strongly suggest that life is easy to understand and success doesn't require that you ace your physics exam. Simple is better. The problem, obviously, is that such bias stifles the development of more thoughtful works.<sup>134</sup>

Other publications bridged the length covered in this analysis, yet it is their inconsistent film section that places them in the secondary category. The most important of this group is the Jewish neoconservative *Commentary*. *Commentary* was launched in 1945 by the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the oldest and most conservative Jewish defense organization in the United States. In sponsoring *Commentary*, the AJC aimed “to meet the need for a journal of

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<sup>131</sup> McCartney, “Presence, Real and Ersatz,” 47.

<sup>132</sup> George McCartney, “Of Guns and Roses,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No.01, 2000, 47.

<sup>133</sup> George McCartney, “Making Choices, Taking Chances,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No.11, 2000, 47; and George McCartney, “We, Who Are Always About to Die,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No. 08, 2000, 47.

<sup>134</sup> McCartney, “Of Apes and Yahoos,” 44.

significant thought and opinion on Jewish affairs and contemporary issues.”<sup>135</sup> Norman Podhoretz, father of John Podhoretz, became the editor in 1960 not long after the death of the founder Elliot Cohen and remained so until 1994.<sup>136</sup> At first, Podhoretz “resolved to make *Commentary* less Jewish, less academic, and more leftist.”<sup>137</sup> However, this changed over the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s with the rise of the New Left. By 1971 *National Review* saw *Commentary* as an ally “in the anti-New Left campaign,” a stance that “would have been unthinkable in the pages of *Commentary* even a few years ago.”<sup>138</sup> By the 1980s *Commentary* “became an ardent exponent of capitalism,” and was already “militantly anticommunist and supportive of aggressive resistance to the Soviet empire.”<sup>139</sup> In the 1990s “Podhoretz’s opposition to cultural anti-Americanism magnified. He refused to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable criticisms of America,” and became more closely aligned with the Religious Right.<sup>140</sup> *Commentary* not only became the mainstay of Jewish neoconservatism but according to historian George Nash “made conservatism a respectable and unignorable presence in the Jewish community.”<sup>141</sup>

The film reviews in *Commentary* seemed to mirror some of the shifts which occurred in the magazine. Movie reviews seemed to begin in earnest in 1970 picking up in quantity as the decade rolled on. William Pechter was the critic and continued in this role until 1977. He was an academic critic contributing commonly to the scholarly film journal *Film Quarterly* as well as

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<sup>135</sup> Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 3.

<sup>136</sup> Norman and John Podhoretz, “Editing Commentary: A Conversation,” *Commentary*, November 2020, [Editing Commentary: A Conversation - Norman Podhoretz, Commentary Magazine](#).

<sup>137</sup> David J. Hoeveler, Jr. *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison, WI, 1991), 10.

<sup>138</sup> Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine*, 102.

<sup>139</sup> George H. Nash, “Joining the Ranks,” in *Commentary in American Life*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 161.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 167; and Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine*, 189.

<sup>141</sup> Nash, “Joining the Ranks,” 172,



*The Kenyon Review*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Commonweal* throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>142</sup>

Pechter was also the only critic mentioned by historians of film criticism besides Simon. In fact, he and Simon were seemingly pinned together since the early 1970s in their distaste for critics who focused more on the minutia of the film and its technical details rather than what greater themes tied the film together as a piece of art.<sup>143</sup> Unlike Simon though Pechter could not detach himself on an emotional level from the films he reviewed. In his book *Movies Plus One* he wrote about his “archetypal moviegoing experience” as having the “feeling of tears well in my eyes at some film’s maudlin finale at the same time that I’m saying to myself, ‘What crap!’, or the experience of watching a pornographic movie and finding myself *both* aroused and bored.”<sup>144</sup>

Pechter’s last review came in May of 1977. Afterward, a new section called “Fiction” by Pearl K. Bell took the spot of film reviews but music, theatre, and literary criticism continued. It was not until 1979 that a new contributor, Richard Grenier, who seemed to embody much of *Commentary*’s shift toward a more openly culturally conservative stance, took the helm. Unlike Pechter, Grenier had a certain format of writing that, while not completely unchanging seemed to stay with him throughout his time at *Commentary*. First, he would offer his initial thoughts and write about any applicable comparisons to movies, literature, or theatre. Then there was a short (usually 1 page) summation, and finally, his analysis where he judged the merits of the film, its impact within the film genre, and sometimes its influence within larger popular culture was given. Grenier served as the film critic consistently until 1986 and would return sporadically until he wrote his last film review for *Commentary* in September of 1994.<sup>145</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>142</sup> Lopate, *American Movie Critics*, 413.

<sup>143</sup> Leo Braudy, “The Vices and Virtues of Simon and Pechter,” *New York Times*, March, 1971, Section BR, 31.

<sup>144</sup> William S. Pechter, *Movies Plus One: Seven Years of Film Reviewing* (New York, NY: Horizon Press, 1982), 9.

<sup>145</sup> Richard Grenier, “Flop at the OK Corral,” *Commentary*, September, 1994, [Flop at the OK Corral - Richard Grenier, Commentary Magazine](#).

1980s and 1990s, he contributed articles and reviews to *First Things*, *The National Interest*, *National Review*, and *The American Spectator*, while also working for *The Washington Times*. He gained some renown for his review of the film *Gandhi* (1982), which evolved into his second book *The Gandhi Nobody Knows*.<sup>146</sup> Neoconservative at heart, he would appropriately go on to dedicate the book to Norman Podhoretz and his wife Midge.

Grenier epitomized a synergy of critic who while concerned with the sociocultural impact or political messaging of the film could neither forgo its artistic credentials. Part of this stems from the fact that he believed film had become “a highly ideologized medium,” and consequently needed to be judged through that lens.<sup>147</sup> “[M]ovies are rife with political polemic,” he wrote in 1983 and it “is becoming more obvious every day” with subjects like “feminism, crime, foreign policy, gay rights, nuclear power, the press, the law, the environment, the military, [and] ‘big business,’” at the center of many movies.<sup>148</sup> Because of this, he was quicker than most of his highbrow peers to laud films for their patriotism and lambast those movies openly hostile to neoconservative values. He loathed those who rose to the top of their field only to condemn the very society and culture which allowed them to do so. In 1991 he delved into this idea more in his book *Capturing the Culture: Film, Art, and Politics*. His focus was on the “spiritual quest” and “estrangement” of the artistic class “from the traditional values of its own society, which it finds unworthy.”<sup>149</sup> Grenier's thesis was that the decline of religious faith in the West, or as he

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<sup>146</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: The Gandhi Nobody Knows," *Commentary* 75, no. 3, Mar 01, 1983, 59-72, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-gandhi-nobody-knows%2Fdocview%2F1290151559%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Richard Grenier, *The Gandhi Nobody Knows* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1983).

<sup>147</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: All Turkish, no Delight," *Commentary* 75, no. , 1983, 59, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-all-turkish-no-delight%2Fdocview%2F1290080590%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>149</sup> Richard Grenier, *Capturing the Culture: Film, Art, and Politics* (Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center), XX.

put it “the loss of absolute and sublime values” especially among those who were in this artist class left them searching for meaning within the realm of politics by “capturing the culture.”<sup>150</sup> The seeming disdain that “the artistic class” held for their country is without a doubt a common overture that Grenier returned to throughout his time as a film critic.

When Grenier left in March of 1986, he was still writing columns for *The Washington Times* and had become the senior editor at *The American Spectator*. Unfortunately, the departure of Grenier did not bode well for the film review section in *Commentary* as it became virtually non-existent. There were random reviews patched in throughout the years by Jonah Goldberg, Midge Decter (Norman Podhoretz's wife), a critic Terry Teachout who will be discussed a bit further down, and Grenier who wrote a few more here and there, but the magazines decade and half of thoughtful film reviews came to end with Grenier leaving.<sup>151</sup> Yet Grenier’s film criticism career did not end with *Commentary*.

As noted earlier he wrote reviews for a number of other publications including the neoconservative journal founded in 1985 by Irving Kristol *The National Interest*. According to its inaugural issue, it was a “magazine about American foreign policy” which was self-described

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<sup>150</sup> Grenier, *Capturing the Culture*, XXII, XLV.

<sup>151</sup> Richard Grenier, "Indian Love Call," *Commentary* 91, no. 3, Mar 01, 1991, 46-50, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Findian-love-call%2Fdocview%2F1290135893%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Jonah Goldberg, "Grownups and "Kids," *Commentary* 100, no. 6, Dec 01, 1995, 55-57, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fgrownups-kids%2Fdocview%2F1290123634%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Jonah Goldberg, "Politics & Pugilists," *Commentary*, Jun 01, 1997, 51-55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fpolitics-pugilists%2Fdocview%2F1290132619%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Midge Decter, "The Witches of Arthur Miller," *Commentary*, Mar 01, 1997, 54-56, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fwitches-arthur-miller%2Fdocview%2F1290167919%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Midge Decter, "The Kubrick Mystique," *Commentary*, Sep 01, 1999, 52-55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fkubrick-mystique%2Fdocview%2F1290144640%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Terry Teachout, "'Cradle' of Lies," *Commentary*, Feb 01, 2000, 51-55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fcradle-lies%2Fdocview%2F1290144977%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

as “conservative” in nature.<sup>152</sup> It stated three presuppositions: that the primary goal of the U.S. was to advance its national interest, “international politics remains essentially power politics,” and the Soviet Union “constitutes the single greatest threat to America’s interest.”<sup>153</sup> It seems unusual for a film review to have been in a foreign policy magazine, yet Grenier tailored his reviews and picked films to fit in with their approach. He penned articles about “Hollywood Foreign Policy,” John Wayne as “The Cowboy Patriot,” and discussed American expansionism when he reviewed *Dances With Wolves* and *The Last of the Mohicans*.<sup>154</sup> There was certainly not a review in each copy, in fact, there were only six articles on film from its founding to 2000, with Grenier writing five of them.

One last staunchly neoconservative publication that had a film review section was *The Weekly Standard*. Founded by Bill Kristol, John Podhoretz, and Fred Barnes, it became “the most influential, and often the most interesting, [weekly] publication of the American right.”<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, the new publication was a testament to the outgrowth and popularity of the neoconservative movement. The first movie review came from Lynne V. Cheney, the wife of the future Vice President Dick Cheney under George W. Bush. It would be her first and last. Founder John Podhoretz swooped in that October in 1995 and would more or less remain the film critic throughout the time under analysis. There is no need to dive further into Podhoretz’s view on film or politics, only that he had by this time come completely into his own as a leader

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<sup>152</sup> “A Note on ‘The National Interest,’” *The National Interest*, no. 1, 1985, 3–5.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894370>.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Grenier, “Hollywood’s Foreign Policy: Utopianism Tempered by Greed,” *The National Interest*, no. 24, 1991, 67–77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894748>; Richard Grenier, “The Cowboy Patriot,” *The National Interest*, no. 45, 1996, 84–88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42895117>; and Richard Grenier, “Hawkeye as a Moral Hermaphrodite: From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to ‘Last of the Mohicans,’” *The National Interest*, no. 30, 1992, 67–74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42896829>.

<sup>155</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Who Killed *The Weekly Standard*?” *The New Yorker*, Jan 3, 2019, [Who Killed The Weekly Standard? | The New Yorker](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/criticism/who-killed-the-weekly-standard).

in the neoconservative movement. A few others provided reviews and articles on film supplementing Podhoretz or filling in for him when he did or could not write his usual review including James Bowman who wrote a piece on Disney that is central in the animation chapter.

The next major publication was an older one with roots back reaching back to the World War II era. Felix Morely and Frank Hanighen with the help of John Chamberlain started *Human Events* in 1944 as a newsletter based on “libertarian Americanism, rooted...in the Declaration of Independence,” along with the “wholesale opposition to both communism and imperialism.”<sup>156</sup> By 1950 Morely resigned when his then partners Hanighen and Henry Regenry rejected his proposition to take full control of the editorial board to push back on the interventionist Cold War policy he was suspicious of.<sup>157</sup> From then on, *Human Events* presaged the New Right and the need to defeat communism through interventionist policy rather than the Old Right’s preference for isolationism or neutrality.

By the time Ronald Reagan was in the White House, *Human Events* had become a major conservative publication with twenty-four copies being sent to the White House each week, and it became known as “the President’s favorite newspaper.”<sup>158</sup> During the 1970s up through the 1980s *Human Events* was predominantly concerned with communism and this was evident when films were reviewed. During the 1990s there seemed to be a melding with the religious right when it came to their focus on acceptable content, but that will be explored more in a later chapter. To be clear there was not a film review section per se until 1990. There was a “Media Notes” section that sometimes had short pieces on movies or television, but nothing one could call a film review section. Yet, there were articles dedicated to film criticism. John Chamberlain

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<sup>156</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 31.

<sup>157</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 112.

<sup>158</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 252.

and Irvine Reed (the chairman of Accuracy in Media) hashed out positives and negatives of *Reds*, Brudnoy and Grenier reviewed the odd film here and there, and Patrick Buchanan was never stranger to offering his own take on films that drew his ire.<sup>159</sup> Throughout the years, *Human Events*, more so than any other publication, was the one conservative outlet where politics or the sociocultural message of the film always outweighed every other aspect of film criticism.

But there were some outliers even in *Human Events*. Starting in the 1990s the libertarian-leaning Brudnoy, formerly of *The American Spectator*, began his “The Right Movies,” column. Not unlike his “Brudnoy’s Film Index,” he had for *The American Spectator*, it was a half-page section that offered stars as a reference guide for films. Five stars indicated “a superlative film” to one star “An atrocious film” in between were good (4), average (3), and poor (2) and there were ½ stars. Brudnoy took note of the language, violence, and sexual content of many (but not all) of the films he reviewed. Many times the movies were repeated for weeks or even months if they were popular enough. The explicit remarking on language and violence was unusual for most critics, but as will be seen, it seems to have been prodded forth by a push from the religious right for more culturally and morally sensitive material. This lasted until 1993. From 1993 to

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<sup>159</sup> Reed Irvine, "Absence of Malice Worth Seeing," *Human Events*, Jan 02, 1982, 10, 17, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fabsence-malice-worth-seeing%2Fdocview%2F1310016327%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; John Chamberlain, “It’s Actually an Anti-Communist Film...,” *Human Events*, Jan 02, 1982, 10; David Brudnoy, "Hollywood Tampers with the Truth," *Human Events*, Nov 05, 1977, 8, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fhollywood-tampers-with-truth%2Fdocview%2F1310023984%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; David Brudnoy, "Red Dawn: Finally, an Anti-Communist Movie," *Human Events*, Sep 01, 1984, 16, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fred-dawn-finally-anti-communist-movie%2Fdocview%2F1310024276%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Richard Grenier, "Aliens: Scary Role Model for Women," *Human Events*, Sep 06, 1986, 15, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Faliens-scary-role-model-women%2Fdocview%2F1310021133%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Patrick J. Buchanan, "Mississippi Burning: Smear of the South," *Human Events*, Feb 11, 1989, 15, 19, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fmississippi-burning-smear-south%2Fdocview%2F1310029275%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

1998 there was a hodgepodge of reviews much like pre-1990. The founder of the Media Research Center Brent Bozell III became a repeat commentator during this time. Then, in 1998 *Human Events* fully adopted what was known as the “Movie Guide Ratings” system, designed by Ted Baehr. Baehr aimed to find movies that were suitable for those who held a Christian worldview. His reviews intended to guide the reader not towards artistry or cultural commentary but to act as a guidepost for those concerned with the film's content. Baehr’s Movie Guide rating system continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Movieguide* and Baehr are fleshed out in greater detail in Chapter 4: Conservatives Watch Cartoons.

Baehr provides a perfect segue into another auxiliary magazine *Christianity Today*. Founded by evangelist Billy Graham with the backing of oilman J. Howard Pew in 1956, Graham described it in three words “conservative, evangelical, and anti-Communist.”<sup>160</sup> *Time* magazine described it as preaching “a kind of literate, highbrow fundamentalism. Strongly conservative in its economic and political views, [and] strongly Biblical in its theology....”<sup>161</sup> It attempted to combine together a conservative theological position with a conservative economic and sociology position which the founders believed were indelibly linked together.<sup>162</sup> By the early 1960s, it had a circulation of around 150,000 which was above that of *National Review* and *Human Events*.<sup>163</sup> It continued to serve as one of the central publications for conservative protestants during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When it came to cinema, *Christianity Today* (CT) did not usually comment on the movies unless they did one of three things; either provoked the fury of the religious community like *The*

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<sup>160</sup> Alan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), 215.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

*Last Temptation of Christ* or *Priest*, were overtly spiritual, or had a Christian theme *Chariots of Fire* and *The Prince of Egypt*, or a cultural phenomenon *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, etc., In 1982 *CT* changed gears and increased their output on film reviewing films like *Bladerunner*, *Reds*, and even the counter-cultural *Altered States* and by the summer of that year they had a semi-regular cinema section with reviewers Harry M. Cheney and Lloyd Billingsley.<sup>164</sup> While not much is known contemporaneously about either of the main reviewers they are both still working today. Cheney went on to work in Hollywood as a sound editor and is currently a professor of media and film at Chapman University whereas Billingsley continues to write for *Daily Caller* and *Frontpage.mag*, while also working as a Policy Fellow at the Independent Institute. *CT* reviewers, even before and after Billingsley and Cheney, nearly always commented on some moral aspect of the film. Whether it was a lack thereof or the extolling of it for its spiritual message, the moral message of the film was never left out.<sup>165</sup> However, the cinema section was short-lived and died out in March of 1985. Afterward, there was a reversion to a pre-1982 format where films were commented on a sporadic basis by arbitrary groupings of individuals through

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<sup>164</sup> Hiawatha Bray, "Blade Runner," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Sep 03, 1982, 97, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fblade-runner%2Fdocview%2F200686668%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Lloyd Billingsley, "Reds," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), May 07, 1982, 55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Freds%2Fdocview%2F200592618%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Harry M. Cheney, "Altered States would Alter History as Well," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Apr 10, 1981, 84, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Faltered-states-would-alter-history-as-well%2Fdocview%2F200636669%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>165</sup> For some examples see: Harry M. Cheney, "Sophie's Choice," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Mar 04, 1983, 110, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fsophies-choice%2Fdocview%2F200600936%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Lloyd Billingsley, "The Grey Fox," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Oct 21, 1983, 47, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fgrey-fox%2Fdocview%2F200659739%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Harry M. Cheney, "Three Summer Movies," *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Aug 10, 1984, 36, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fthree-summer-movies%2Fdocview%2F200584004%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.



the rest of the 1980s and 1990s. There were a few repeating names like Roy Anker and Stefan Ulstein in the late 1980s and early 1990s but nothing substantive enough to comment on.

*Christianity Today* is not the only conservative religious publication under review. *First Things*, published originally in 1989 by neoconservative Catholic priest Richard J. Neuhaus was another conservative-leaning periodical similar to *Christianity Today*, but with more scholarly and academic prose.<sup>166</sup> It aimed to stem the tide of secularism in the culture and promote Western values. Neuhaus had at one time worked for the Rockford Institute alongside the editor of *Chronicles* Thomas Fleming, but after he was fired, there was a falling out between the two and Neuhaus aired his hostilities towards Fleming in *National Review*, calling him antisemitic and racist.<sup>167</sup> Now there was not truly any film “reviews” in *First Things* but they did sometimes publish articles on “film” or movies in general. There was a total of ten such articles that are germane to this study dating from 1993 to 2000.

Then there were the conservative Catholic publications. *New Oxford Review* was a “Christian, Catholic, and ecumenical,” publication founded in 1977 as an Anglo-Catholic magazine by David Vree.<sup>168</sup> Vree had one of the more fascinating tales of how he came to his unique political philosophy. He was a Berkeley College radical of the 1960s who absconded to East Berlin when his leftist peers did not seem committed enough to the socialist cause. Disillusioned by witnessing the “same selfishness and materialistic banality against which he had revolted in the United States,” it was only the Christians living in East Germany whose “faith entailed real costs” and who ended up being the catalyst for his eventual conversion to

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<sup>166</sup> Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics*, 192-193.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> “About Us,” *The New Oxford Review*,” accessed July 22, 2022, [About Us | New Oxford Review](#).

Christianity.<sup>169</sup> He returned to the United States and found himself changed but still at odds with capitalist consumerism and the anticommunism on the right, but at the same time in opposition to the cultural secularism and selfish hedonism pushed by the Left. Thus his magazine *New Oxford Review* attempted to walk the line between conservatism and liberalism but always veer towards traditional conservatism.<sup>170</sup> According to historian Patrick Allitt, *New Oxford Review* welcomed “the insights and opinions of all conservative Christians,” publishing works by Orthodox, evangelical, and Anglican, writers and even believed themselves to be following in the “honorable anticapitalist [sic] conservative tradition in America” laid out by the southern agrarians as well as Russell Kirk.<sup>171</sup>

In December of 1984, they introduced their column on film called “A Cinematic View,” which they anticipated to be in every issue. The film critic was Rev. Robert E. Lauder, author and professor of Philosophy at Cathedral College in Douglaston, New York. Presently, Rev. Lauder is a Diocesan priest in Brooklyn and a professor of Philosophy at St. John’s University, a position he has held since 1985.<sup>172</sup> As with *Christianity Today*, the film column was short-lived, ending in October 1986. Nevertheless, in that short period, Lauder wrote just under twenty articles on film and offered a take on cinema that combined the *New Oxford Review*’s primacy of the eternal over the temporal with a lesser emphasis on nationalistic and morality issues that seemed to preside over other critics on the religious right.<sup>173</sup> After Lauder’s departure, there were about seven other reviews between October 1986 and December 2000 all by different reviewers.

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<sup>169</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 298–300. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvv4135j.13>.

<sup>170</sup> Dale Vree, “The Vision & Future of the New Oxford Review,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LII, November, 1985, [The Vision & Future of the NEW OXFORD REVIEW | New Oxford Review](#).

<sup>171</sup> Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985*, 298–300.

<sup>172</sup> Robert E. Lauder, “Jean-Luc Godard: Low-Altitude Narcissism,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LI, December 1984, [Jean-Luc Godard: Low-Altitude Narcissism | New Oxford Review](#).

<sup>173</sup> For a few examples see: Robert E. Lauder, “From Chance Encounter to Friendship,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LII, October, 1985, [From Chance Encounter to Friendship | New Oxford Review](#); Robert E. Lauder,

Lauder ended up making his way over to another conservative Catholic publication in the mid-1990s called *Crises*. *Crises* was founded in 1982 by Ralph McInerney and Michael Novak in response to the leftward shift occurring within the Catholic Church.<sup>174</sup> Unlike *New Oxford Review*, *Crises* was anti-communist in nature and more nationalistic, fitting better into the post-war conservative mold. In their initial edition, the editors described the disappearance of the “liberal Catholic tradition,” as those “who used to be liberals have moved decisively to the left.”<sup>175</sup> Disenchanted by the leftward shift, “a new voice” was needed for a “new Catholic spirit” in order to push back against the “leftward...temporal assertion” being placed on the church.<sup>176</sup> It was in these pages that Lauder provided a deeper understanding of how he and other conservative Catholic critics viewed film and film criticism.

In making judgments about film, aesthetic criticism should be united with moral criticism. While we should be concerned about explicit sex and horrific violence on the screen, we should also be concerned about the enormous amount of artistic junk being sold to audiences. The artistic deterioration of film may ultimately be as harmful as the cinematic exploitation of sex and violence. Cinema at its best can signify the presence of the divine mystery and invite us to open ourselves to that mystery. Catholics cannot afford not to take films seriously.<sup>177</sup>

He added to this by remarking on the power of cinema for all Christians, which to some may seem hyperbolic but nonetheless sincere; “Cinema at its best is an extension of the Incarnation, a continuation of the enfleshment of God in time and place. The risen Christ is everywhere, inviting people to open up in love and to say ‘Yes’ to the Father’s self-gift.”<sup>178</sup>

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“Clerical Complicity,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LIII, January-February, 1986, [Clerical Complicity | New Oxford Review](#); and Robert E. Lauder, “Trivialized Sex, Cheap Film,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LIII, July-August, 1986, [Trivialized Sex, Cheap Film | New Oxford Review](#).

<sup>174</sup> Tito Edwards, “The Return of Crises Magazine,” *The American Catholic*, May 9, 2011, [The Return of Crisis Magazine – The American Catholic \(the-american-catholic.com\)](#).

<sup>175</sup> “The Present Crisis,” *Crises Magazine*, November 1, 1982, Magazine Archive, [The Present Crisis \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Rev. Robert E. Lauder, “Vatican’s Favorite Films,” *Crises*, Vol. 14 No. 07, July 1, 1996, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [Vatican's Favorite Films \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

Yet Lauder was not the sole critic at *Crises*. Indeed, he only served as the main critic from February 1995 until January 1997. The first critic for *Crises* was Richard Alleva. Alleva was a stage actor traveling the United States and Europe as well as a screenwriter and playwright before coming to *Crises* in 1985.<sup>179</sup> He stayed until 1990 writing just under forty film reviews, before he left to become the film critic at the more leftward-leaning Catholic *Commonweal*. Alleva was less focused on the spiritual than Lauder and a hearken back to neoconservative critics like Bowman or even Grenier who were quick to point out the leftist cultural leanings in any film and were highly critical of anything reeking of anti-Americanism.<sup>180</sup> When Alleva left in December of 1990, there was a substantial gap in film reviews from then until Lauder took over in 1995. Michael Medved, who will be discussed in an upcoming chapter, authored a couple of reviews, but there was no continuity from 1991 to February 1995. Then when Lauder departed in 1997, Rob Dreher, the current senior editor at *The American Conservative* and future author of *Crunchy Cons* (2006) and *The Benedict Option* (2017) penned a handful of reviews from April 1997 until the end of that year.<sup>181</sup>

This leads to the last reviewer at *Crises*, Terry Teachout. Teachout was well known in conservative intellectual circles being the drama critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, a culture critic at *Commentary*, and frequent literature and culture critic at *National Review*.<sup>182</sup> In January of 2022, he was dubbed “the Last of the Conservative Critics,” by *The Nation* magazine after his

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<sup>179</sup> “Richard Alleva,” Image Journal, Artists, accessed July 22, 2022, [Richard Alleva - Image Journal](#).

<sup>180</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Bone Crunching for Liberals,” *Crises*, Vol. 7 No. 03, March 1, 1989, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Bone Crunching for Liberals \(crisismagazine.com\)](#); Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Roxanne” *Crises*, Vol. 5 No. 10, October 1, 1987, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Roxanne \(crisismagazine.com\)](#); and Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Killing Romero Twice,” *Crises*, Vol. 7 No. 11, November 1, 1989, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Killing Romero Twice \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>181</sup> Rob Dreher, “Movie Review: Evil at the Oscars,” *Crises*, Vol. 15 No. 04, April 1, 1997, Crises Magazine Archives, [Movie Review: Evil at the Oscars \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>182</sup> Terry Teachout, “Film: Single Combat,” *Crises*, Vol. 16 No. 04, April 1, 1998, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Single Combat \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

death that month.<sup>183</sup> Teachout, like many other conservative critics, was quick with a pointed jab toward Hollywood calling it “incapable of honesty,” “hostile to religion,” or just a producer of “liberal agitprop.”<sup>184</sup> But he also gave some amazingly succinct and insightful takes on what made a good film and art truly art. Both descriptions cut to the heart of how many highbrow and Catholic conservative critics viewed cinema and some of its problems. First his thinking on art:

All good art is truthful: even at its most fantastic, it must appeal to our inner sense of verisimilitude. Alas, most people don’t go to movies to see the truth. They want to be reassured, not challenged. This isn’t to say that reassuring films cannot be artful—to be a Christian is to believe in happy endings—but nothing is easy in the modern world, a sorrowful fact that serious art, being true, cannot help but reflect.<sup>185</sup>

Then his take on film:

I have a special liking for films that convey something of the complexity of modern life without losing sight of the polestar of truth. In particular, I like films about gravely flawed human beings who, faced with a set of similarly imperfect alternatives, suddenly find their moral imaginations regenerated by grace, make the best possible choice available to them, and accept the consequences, good or bad.<sup>186</sup>

Much like Shakespeare or McCartney in *Chronicles* or Bowman at *The American Spectator* both statements emphasized the importance of Truth and a need to make some kind of statement on the human condition. These themes are touched on one way or another in the coming chapters.

The last set of publications were integral to the first quarter of this study. All libertarian in nature, they presented a wide array of voices, ideas, and fell along different parts of the

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<sup>183</sup> Jeet Heer, “Terry Teachout and the Last of the Conservative Critics,” *The Nation*, January, 20, 2022, [Terry Teachout and the Last of the Conservative Critics | The Nation](#).

<sup>184</sup> Terry Teachout, “Film: Easeful Death,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 01, January 1999, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Easeful Death \(crisismagazine.com\)](#); Terry Teachout, “Film: A Family That Prays Together,” *Crises*, Vol. 18 No. 05, May 2000, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: A Family That Prays Together \(crisismagazine.com\)](#); and Terry Teachout, “Film: Until the Real Thing Comes Along,” *Crises*, Vol. 18 No. 06, June 2000, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Until the Real Thing Comes Along \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>185</sup> Teachout, “Film: Until the Real Thing Comes Along,” *Crises*.

<sup>186</sup> Terry Teachout, “Room For Doubt,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 12, December 1999, Crises Magazine Archives, [Room for Doubt \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

libertarian/conservative spectrum. To go in chronological order *Reason* magazine was the first one published. *Reason* first came out in 1968 and throughout that year offered a one-to-four-page typewriter-made newsletter with single topic issues like: “Student Brutality,” “Student Power,” or “Violence in the U.S.” In May of 1968, there was the first “Editor’s Note” which laid out their belief that “Objectivism present[s] the only consistent opposition to the underlying premises of the New Left,” who they considered their main opposition.<sup>187</sup> Objectivism is the philosophy first established by author and philosopher Ayn Rand. It stated that an individual’s own happiness was “the highest moral purpose,” religion and collectivism were oppositional to the individuals’ pursuits for self, and that “egoism, energy, rationality, self-respect, [and] ‘the virtue of selfishness,’” were all high ideals of objectivism.<sup>188</sup>

In 1970 the magazine expanded and began to look and feel more professional and by August of 1972 it started to run movie reviews by Charles F. Barr. Barr, originally a computer programmer, who held tightly to the Objectivism of Ayn Rand, with her book *Atlas Shrugged* being what converted him over to libertarianism.<sup>189</sup> Barr would usually review two to three movies in the “movies” section. While not as short as “Brudnoy’s Film Index” they were usually brief compared to his more critical peers. Not trained as a literary or culture critic Barr’s style was much less dense and compared best to Podhoretz minus Barr’s overt libertarian takes on the movies he reviewed. He left in 1977 to focus on screenwriting leaving the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California and former Libertarian presidential candidate from 1972, John Hospers to take charge. Hospers was another more academically minded critic but was not as caustic as Simon, Grenier, or Bowman. Although he did not focus

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<sup>187</sup> “Editor’s Notes,” *Reason*, May 1968, 5

<sup>188</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 143.

<sup>189</sup> Reason Staff, *Reason Profile: Charles Barr*,” *Reason*, October 1973, [REASON Profile: Charles Barr](#).

so much on the artful perspective of a film he took note of the technical aspects quite often and as could be expected his libertarian leanings were apparent in the reviews.<sup>190</sup>

By 1983 the new managing editor Robert W. Poole noted how *Reason* was “the nation’s fastest growing magazine of ideas during,” outpacing *Human Events*, *Commentary*, *National Review*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Progressive* in growth.<sup>191</sup> Yet, just the following year Poole announced he was ending the “long tradition of monthly movie reviews” for a new section “Life & Liberty” that would cover the “cultural terrain.”<sup>192</sup> Unfortunately, movies were essentially overlooked as there were only a handful of reviews moving forward into the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

Beginning just a year after *Reason*, *The Libertarian* later known as the *Libertarian Forum* was the brainchild of Murray Rothbard. It was a twice-monthly newsletter that began in March of 1969. Its aim was to “act as a nucleus and communications center for libertarians across the country” and arm its readers with a workable “libertarian world-view.”<sup>193</sup> Rothbard himself, an economist and philosopher, is said to have been one of “the most influential anarchists on the Right in US history.”<sup>194</sup> His goal throughout his life was the singular pursuit to create a cohesive, coherent, and fully independent Libertarian movement.<sup>195</sup> He attempted to ally with those on the Right in the 1950s only to find himself cast aside because of his less militant foreign policy stance than those at *National Review*, then he tried to work with those on the New Left in the 1960s, but nothing ever coalesced. In the 1980s he found common cause with many

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<sup>190</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, April, 1981, 57-58; and John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, June, 1981, 88-89; John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, May, 1984, 53-54.

<sup>191</sup> Robert W. Poole Jr., “Notes,” *Reason*, May, 1984, 4.

<sup>192</sup> Robert W. Poole Jr., “Notes,” *Reason*, June/July, 1984, 4.

<sup>193</sup> “Why The Libertarian?” *The Libertarian Forum*, March 1, 1969, in *The Complete Libertarian Forum 1969-1984: Volume 1: 1969-1975*, ed. Murray N Rothbard, Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006.

<sup>194</sup> Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, 159. Rothbard was a proponent of anachro-capitalism which is basically the complete elimination of the centralized state in favor of a free market.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

traditionalists and paleoconservatives who were also purged from the mainstream by ever more prevalent neoconservative movement but never had the level of success he knew necessary to make libertarians a viable political movement.<sup>196</sup>

Under the moniker “Mr. First Nighter” Rothbard penned movie reviews in the *Libertarian Forum* rather frequently. Like Podhoretz, Rothbard viewed film from an entertainment perspective, not as an art form. The one aspect that defined Rothbard as a movie critic was his defense of what he called “the Old Culture.” He used this term twenty-eight times during his movie reviewing career at the *Libertarian Forum*. The Old Culture refers to the culture within cinema itself, or what he sometimes calls “movie-movies” namely, movies where there are no “avant-garde gimmicks and camera trickery,” where the “quintessence of the Old Culture” centers around a “marvelous plot, exciting action, manly hero vs. villain (instead of antiheroes), spy plots, crisp dialogue,...the frank enjoyment of bourgeois luxury..., and at the ‘heart of Old Culture,’” according to Rothbard, was romanticism.<sup>197</sup> Rothbard was a fan of the old-time movies from the 1930s and 1940s and often commented about this golden age of cinema. There was “[o]ne thing above all,” he noted which “separates old-time movies from the contemporary cinema: in the old days there was dialogue, and plenty of it: crisp, often witty, delineating characters. Now, the dialogue is sparse and very sappy...[and] any kind of meaningful talk is missing...”<sup>198</sup> *The Libertarian Forum* would come to end at the end of 1984, just a few months after the movie review section at *Reason* ended, basically eliminating all libertarian periodicals, but not every libertarian voice from the study.

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<sup>196</sup> Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics*, 161-166.

<sup>197</sup> First Nighter, Vol. IV, NO 6-7, June/July, 1972, pg 7; Mr. First Nighter, Vol. V, No. 7, July, 1973, 7; Mr. First Nighter, Vol. VI, No. 4, April, 1974, 7; and Mr. First Nighter, “S Wonderful, ‘S Marvelous,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol. XII, No. 3, May-June, 1979, 5.

<sup>198</sup> Mr. First Nighter, “Arts and Movies” *The Libertarian Forum*, Vol. XI, No. 4, August 1981-January, 1982, 10-11, Page 994-995 in vol. II.



*The Libertarian Review* (LR), a bimonthly Libertarian magazine first published in 1972 was founded by Roy A Childs, had Rothbard as a contributing editor, and David Brudnoy as their sole film critic. It had a “deep and abiding commitment to individual Liberty,” thus it “begins with the principle of inviolable individualism.”<sup>199</sup> The final issue in 1981 laid out in greater detail what LR stood for. Childs wrote that the magazine began by “defending the free market... defending gay rights and feminism, and announcing our support for a noninterventionist foreign policy that neither Republicans nor Democrats cared to entertain.”<sup>200</sup> Their “one consistent mission” was:

...to oppose the mythology of Left and Right, of Liberalism and Conservatism, twin branches of the political establishment which have found the maintenance of intellectual package deals so very convenient in blocking the consideration of political alternatives. Today, we face the alleged choice between a triumphant conservatism in power, which offers insignificant cuts in domestic spending and cosmetic deregulation, combined with an enforced social conservatism and increasingly belligerent foreign policy on the one hand, and a cosmetically resurrected liberalism, defeated and decaying, on the other.<sup>201</sup>

Brudnoy started reviewing films for *LR* in 1976 in the “Cinema in Review” section of the magazine.<sup>202</sup> Reviews were not all that common from 1976 to 1978, with only one or two a year, but from 1979 to when it closed down in 1981, they ran closer to nine a year. Brudnoy has already been discussed earlier but deserves a second look here. Before leaving the *American Spectator* at the tail end of 1976 he had already started at *LR*. In 1977 he penned an explanation as to why he left *The American Spectator* and it is reminiscent of Bawer’s tale earlier in the chapter. During his time there Brudnoy found himself “mortified by articles” that demonized homosexuality but attempted to “nudge [the editor] Tyrrell” into taking a different more cordial

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<sup>199</sup> Editorial Section, “Credo,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol. VI, No. 3, 4-5.

<sup>200</sup> Roy A. Childs, Jr., “A Farewell to our Readers,” *Libertarian Review*, December 1981, 6-7.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> David Brudnoy, “Woman’s Fate,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol. V, No. 2 March/April, 8,15. Hoppers was a music reviewer for *Libertarian Review* during this time.

editorial stance.<sup>203</sup> However, Brudnoy decided to leave in January of 1977 after a piece was written by Stephen R. Maloney the previous December called “The Lavender Menace” which was the “final straw” supposedly in a long line of “undiluted attacks on homosexuals.”<sup>204</sup> He wrote to Tyrrell asking if he would reconsider the magazine's stance on “so-called homosexual rights issue,” but received a letter on Jan 7<sup>th</sup> explaining Tyrrell’s opinion. Quoting from the letter Tyrrell wrote to David Brudnoy, stating that he could “allow homosexuals their fantasies” when they are discreet but when they “make their childishness a matter of civil rights” they become “pernicious to liberty.”<sup>205</sup> The gay movement in Tyrrell’s opinion had become “even more preposterous than the women’s movement.”<sup>206</sup>

All this notwithstanding, Brudnoy was a talented film critic who had a flair for writing and an enjoyable down-to-earth style. What separated him from his conservative colleagues was that he was not a fan of the religious right and it often came out in numerous reviews like when he called them a group defined by the “rigidified bigotries of Moral Majoritarian fanatics.”<sup>207</sup> Or as it did in April 1979:

A standard feature of the reflexive conservative press, in fact, is an increasingly hysterical alarmism about the state of the popular media. While almost any bit of sanctimonious drivel will pass muster in such organs, so long as it is ‘wholesome’, the presence of a bared buttock or pubic hair, or, for that matter, the common language of the street, is enough to send the purveyors of Middle American mythology into fits.<sup>208</sup>

So, it was not a lack of morality that bothered Brudnoy nor was it the inability of movies to reach the level of art. Brudnoy never really went deeply into either. He was a mix between an

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<sup>203</sup> David Brudnoy, “The Alternative: An American Spectacle,” *The Libertarian Review*, Vol, VI, No. 8, November, 1977, 29.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> David Brudnoy, “Triumph of the Will,” *The Libertarian Review*, March, 1981, 44.

<sup>208</sup> David Brudnoy, “Hard Core, Soft Core,” *The Libertarian Review*, April 1979, 47.

academic critic and the sociocultural critic like Podhoretz. However, his libertarianism seemed to shape his view that the individual must be at the heart of film. One example was the disappearance of the hero or more aptly put, Nietzsche's Ubermenche in modern film that bothered him. Films, he wrote, "touch us at precisely the points of our greatest cultural vulnerability: our remorse that we have no real heroes...Gone, totally, is the sense we once had that mere mortals could in our own time stride the earth like giants; gone, too, our once common expectation that what other generations knew we could know: achievers without feet of clay."<sup>209</sup> The individual hero and his capacity to overcome great odds are undoubtedly libertarian ideas, even objectivist at heart.

As stated earlier *LR* would come to end at the end of 1981. Brudnoy continued to write for a whole host of other publications and by the 1990s would reveal to the country not only that he was gay but that he had contracted the AIDS virus. He lived to 2004 continuing to contribute to the cultural discussions of the day during the 1990s. During his life, he was a talk radio show host in Boston, a deputy sheriff, TV commentator, author, essayist, and a professor of journalism at Boston University.<sup>210</sup> With Brudnoy, the inquiry into critics and periodicals ends.

The next four chapters go on to delve into specific genres and movies these various critics wrote and debated over. All the critics mentioned here had their own opinions on what made film entertaining and what qualified it, if it does at all, art. Many if not most (Simon, Pechter, Bawer, Teachout, Bowman, Grenier, Slavitt, Shapaero, Lauder), etc..) believed the medium to be one that could convey an artful meaning when done correctly. The minority (Podhoretz, Rothbard, Baehr, Barr) viewed it as entertainment, only to be judged by either its

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<sup>209</sup> David Brudnoy, "Giants in the Earth," *The Libertarian Review*, September, 1981, 44-46.

<sup>210</sup> David Brudnoy, "Giants in the Earth," *The Libertarian Review*, September, 1981, 44-46; and Brudnoy, *Life is not a Rehearsal*, Back Cover.

cultural, moral, ideological, or enjoyment values. Most critics wrote film reviews in publications spanning the conservative spectrum and were not limited to only writing on film. They were culture, art, theatre, music, and literary critics trained in the classics, philosophy, language (many familiar with more than a few), and rhetoric. They went on to teach at prestigious universities, become managing editors for publishers and fellows or researchers at public policy institutes and think tanks, advise politicians, write screenplays, novels, and poems, and start their own conservative publications. This diverse group of conservative thinkers and writers contributed a significant portion of their lives to better understanding the culture they wrote about and, in the process, helped to shape a more complete understanding of conservatism in their wake.

### Chapter 3: Conservatives Revisit Vietnam: From *The Deer Hunter* to *Full Metal*

#### *Jacket*

When conjuring up images of Vietnam war movies, one of the following likely comes to mind: The tense Russian roulette scene from *Deer Hunter*, Sylvester Stallone demolishing a small Washington town in *First Blood*, Robert Duvall basking in the glow of napalm in *Apocalypse Now*, R. Lee Ermey dressing down of Private Pyle in *Full Metal Jacket*, or maybe even William Defoe's dramatic death scene in *Platoon*. These films and many others left an indelible mark on popular culture and are the central focus of analysis in this chapter. Besides being commercial successes, they elicited intense emotions among an array of conservative film critics providing insights into central aspects of conservative film criticism and the wider world of conservatism itself.

Yet, the Vietnam War was more than just fodder for directors and screenwriters.<sup>211</sup> During Vietnam, the war acted as a canary in the coalmine for those worried about America's waning geopolitical influence coupled with the outgrowth of communism into the third world. By the time America became heavily involved in Vietnam, conservatives had already coalesced around a more interventionist and hawkish foreign policy stance to stave off any communistic encroachment around the globe. The dual ideas of military supremacy and complete victory over communism were central to conservative public policy.<sup>212</sup> Similar policy prescriptions were echoed in contemporary conservative publications. *Paving the Way for Reagan* by Laurence Jurdem documented how *National Review*, *Human Events*, and to a lesser degree *Commentary* were warning against "limited war" and arguing for a more robust approach than détente and

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<sup>211</sup> See the following for a perspective of how differing intellectual movements combined in reaction to Vietnam: Samuel Francis, "Beautiful Losers: Why Conservatism Failed," in *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, Ed., Gregory L. Schneider (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 420-421.

<sup>212</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 254-255.

containment throughout the 1960s and early 70s.<sup>213</sup> By the time the war had ended many conservatives felt betrayed by America's concession to Communism in Southeast Asia. The feelings of duplicity and abandonment among conservatives influenced the way many conservative critics understood films dealing with the war. Indeed, as movies on Vietnam proliferated during the early 1980s, they became the central medium for understanding both the conflict in Vietnam and its wider socio-cultural impact on American society. Thus, the following films and the conservative reaction to them shed light on the conservative movement, popular culture in film, and the interaction between the two.

This chapter explores a variety of ideas, including what conservative critics thought about the film industry itself, but also unique to this chapter is whether cinema followed politics and shifted to the Right during the Age of Reagan as some academics have posited. One can pick up any academic or popular book on the study of film during the 1980s and it is nearly impossible not to run across the idea that movies, following the public lead, began to lean rightward during the Reagan era. Robert Sklar, in what many consider the go-to book on film and American culture *Movie-Made America*, wrote how “it was inevitable that the 1980s would be remembered, in movies as in politics, as the Age of Reagan.”<sup>214</sup> He said, “[i]ts roots lie in a reaction to the present...society characterized by divisiveness, selfishness, and hedonism.” The ideal society and culture then became the post-World War II one, in which “unity, clarity, and heroic self-sacrifice” were idealized, but at the same time, Sklar spoke of, other traits like “racism..., a belief in [the] efficacy of imperialism, and demeaning attitudes towards women,” all characteristics which were and still are too often conflated with conservatism.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Jurdem, *Paving the Way for Reagan*, 44.

<sup>214</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 339.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 341-343.

Sklar was not alone in this thinking, especially when it came to films about the Vietnam war. *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, a collection of essays stated that “by the mid-1980s, Hollywood films are promoting the Reagan era’s reinterpretation of Vietnam” and categorized some films (*Rambo*, *Missing in Action*, *Uncommon Valor*) as “right-wing revisionism” of the Vietnam War.<sup>216</sup> Following Sklar’s ideas on the transposition of racist and imperialist characteristics onto conservatism, *Deer Hunter* was described as “pervaded with racists and Cold War stereotypes,” *Rambo* “appears to embrace the militaristic ideology of the radical right,” *Platoon* “cannot escape the paradigm of the colonialist warrior narrative,” and even *Full Metal Jacket* was said to share “the historical amnesia of other Reagan era Hollywood productions that are set in Vietnam.”<sup>217</sup> Renowned academics and critics have continued down a similar path and concluded that politics and film melded together during this time, at least for a certain period, if not the whole era.<sup>218</sup>

This thesis bears revisiting in light of more recent scholarly work as well as the sources utilized in this study which have for the most part been ignored. Also, another point that is absent from this larger analysis of film and culture and the variety of ideas about Reagan or Right-wing films is what conservative critics believed about this thesis. This was sorely missing as conservative film critics were contemporaneously ignored by their peers (John Simon might be the exception as he was also printed in the *New Yorker*) and academics writing about the era basically overlooked their contributions (again Simon gets recognized, but more politically oriented critics are often left out of the conversation). Through the examination of reviews from

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<sup>216</sup> Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 5, 104.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 105, 173, 34.

<sup>218</sup> See Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana University Press, 1988).

an assortment of conservative sources, the thoughts of those pontificating on film and culture will become evident. If there was indeed a culture shift, those whose job it was to keep abreast of cultural changes in film would have undoubtedly took notice.<sup>219</sup>

While examining the reliability of a rightward shift is indeed important, it is not the only or the most important component of this chapter. This chapter will begin to elucidate a variety of prominent themes throughout the entire study. The first and foremost seeks to begin to understand, what, if anything, unified the ideological consort of critics together? There do seem to be some clear themes that begin to take shape throughout this chapter, albeit not fully, and will be noted as the chapter progresses. Whereas, when it came to the very specific context of Vietnam movies, two qualities did clearly unite the broad spectrum: an aversion to communism or anti-Americanism (especially in the context of the war) and upholding the character of American servicemen. Another seemingly contradictory point to the one just made was the diversity of thought among conservative film critics. This becomes apparent sooner rather than later and is not exclusive to this chapter. As is the case with music, paintings, and nearly all forms of art several individuals of a similar mindset can take in some art form and walk away with completely antagonist viewpoints. Why should film be any different? The third point, building off the last and one that differentiated the critics in the sharpest way was the definite divide between those critics who believed movies should first and foremost mirror art with politics counting for less and less and those more concerned with the cultural impact and political messaging of the film. There were of course times when varying critics did not exactly fit the described mold and others who hardly fit any mold at all. Nevertheless, all of these points are fleshed out in the following chapter and all the ones to follow.

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<sup>219</sup> A concluding analysis on this is completed at the conclusion of the chapter.



Before diving headfirst into the literature, it is prudent to better understand how conservatives felt about Hollywood as they aimed to dissect its output concerning a contentious issue like the Vietnam War or really any genre. Indeed, in order to fully comprehend how conservatives understood and interpreted Vietnam War films one must first know how they felt about the film industry itself especially when it came to depicting the United States and its arch adversary communism. It is not an understatement to say that for most of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Right was distrustful of Hollywood's tendency to villainize the United States, its military, and the societal norms which underpinned the culture. Film historians have noted that well into the 1960s and the 1970s films seemed to have veered to the Left creeping towards an anti-American bias.<sup>220</sup> Pontificating how the entertainment industry had depicted the issue of communism in past, *The Weekly Standard* published an article in late 2000, "Celluloid Soviets: A History of Hollywood's Take on Communism."<sup>221</sup> In it, Spencer Warren, a co-host during Turner Classic Movies Conservative Movie Month, wrote about Hollywood's "checkered record in its portrayal of communism." The idea that Hollywood held some secret or even overt adoration for communism and hostility toward American nationalism was a theme repeated across the conservative spectrum and throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This undercurrent of acrimony was evident in the 1970s and early 1980s. *Human Events* ran an article articulating this sentiment entitled, "Latest Hollywood Attack on Vietnam War" where the overall consensus coming out of Hollywood seemed to be that America was "a pretty rotten country."<sup>222</sup> Joseph Sobran, a columnist at the time for *National Review*, writing in *The*

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<sup>220</sup> Christensen and Haas, "Projecting Politics," 194.

<sup>221</sup> Spencer Warren, "Celluloid Soviets: A History of Hollywood's Take on Communism," *The Weekly Standard*, October 9, 2000, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:41D1-TNJ0-00CY-N21K-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:41D1-TNJ0-00CY-N21K-00000-00&context=1516831).

<sup>222</sup> Jones, "Latest Hollywood Attack on Vietnam," 9.

*American Spectator* summed up the overall feeling in a bit of a dramatic fashion, “Hollywood hates America,” he claimed, just “as liberalism hates America....”<sup>223</sup> Others, less acerbically but no less forcefully, echoed Sobran’s view of Hollywood including Richard Grenier in *Commentary* noting how some in the entertainment industry have an “avowed sympathy for Marxist-totalitarian regimes.”<sup>224</sup> John Podhoretz in *The American Spectator* insisted “the American Left and Hollywood have always been intertwined” but the difference between Old Hollywood and the present industry is that Old Hollywood “knew making a pro-Communist political movie was bad business” because its “audience was opposed to the idea of Communism,” whereas “New Hollywood...is plying its wares on people who appear quite willing to buy a leftist, even quasi-Marxist, philosophy.”<sup>225</sup> Libertarians were not ones to stay quiet on the topic. In *Reason* John Hospers wrote how “Hollywood has a soft spot in its heart for any ‘people’s republic’” and its “Rule No.1” was to “never criticize communism.”<sup>226</sup> Podhoretz and Hospers were united on this last point with Sobran who wrote in the *National Review* that “Hollywood wouldn’t dream of having a Communist villain.”<sup>227</sup> The cynical eye towards Hollywood was nothing out of the ordinary as many conservatives were naturally distrustful of centralized power structures whether in government or the cultural centers around the country.

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<sup>223</sup> Joseph Sobran, “Hollywood: In a Word, Communistic,” *American Spectator*, Vol 18, Iss. 02, March 1985, 29. Sobran is not a ‘film critic’ but was an important conservative cultural critic. Although he did review films in *National Review* from March to September of 1977 between when Harvey Phillips left as film critic and John Simon began.

<sup>224</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Summertime Visions,” *Commentary*, 74, no. 2 Aug 01, 1982, 66, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-summertime-visions%2Fdocview%2F1290146207%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>225</sup> John Podhoretz, “The Talkies: Notes on the Hollywood Left,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 13, No. 2, February 1980, 26.

<sup>226</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, September, 1982, 51; and John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, April, 1979, 44.

<sup>227</sup> M.J. Sobran Jr., “Good Guys,” *National Review* 29, no. 16, April 29, 1977, 50, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6072061&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

But it does set the stage for better grappling with the tide of suspicion towards films dealing with the Vietnam War.

During the war and in its immediate aftermath, there was a conspicuous absence of any Vietnam war movies, except for John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968).<sup>228</sup> However, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s there was an explosion of motion pictures on the topic. The films that garnered the most critical acclaim or the most fervent disdain were mentioned at the start of this chapter. This does not imply that they were the *only* films that came under serious scrutiny by conservative publications, but they were the most debated and offered the widest array of articles.<sup>229</sup> Before jumping into the fray of the most prevalent Vietnam movies, it is prudent to first take a short detour into some of the films that came before and were on the periphery of popular culture but still recognized in the pages of conservative intellectual publications.

The earliest movie to come under thoughtful examination was Aldrich's *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977) about a protagonist American general (Burt Lancaster) who escapes prison, breaks into a missile silo, and threatens to launch missiles unless the *truth* behind the invasion into Vietnam is made public to the American people. This film was typical of the 1970s exceedingly popular paranoia genre, especially after *All the President's Men*.<sup>230</sup> There were three short reviews and they all found the film, for various reasons, less than stellar. *Human Events* called it a "hard-sell propaganda effort to convince young Americans of their country's guilt in

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<sup>228</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 335; and Christiansen and Haas, *Reel Politics*, 149.

<sup>229</sup> Some films reviewed by a single reviewer or only touched on in a peripheral way are not included in this study. Some of these films include: *Go Tell the Spartans* (no reviews), *Rolling Thunder* (one review by Hosper in Dec. 1977 in *Reason*), *Boys of C Company* (One review by Hosper in Aug. 1978), *Hamburger Hill*, *Missing in Action*, *Uncommon Valor* (all have no dedicated reviews).

<sup>230</sup> Christiansen and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 175-180.

Vietnam.”<sup>231</sup> This is not surprising as *Human Events* was well known for being a staunchly anti-communist, nationalistic publication. Whereas the derision the film received from libertarian quarters shed some light on their mixed feelings about the war. Murray Rothbard reviewed the film, as was usual under the moniker Mr. First Nighter, in the *Libertarian Forum*. As a self-described “old-time adventure movie buff” he had high hopes for the film but found it to just be a “bad movie,” in which the “dreaded secret document [the general held the missile silo hostage over]...is hardly hot stuff compared with the real McCoy (e.g. the Pentagon Papers).” He ended with the comment, “as dedicated as I am to the cause of Vietnam Revisionism it is scarcely worth threatening to blow up the world to advance the revisionist cause.”<sup>232</sup> Charles F. Barr, the movie reviewer from *Reason* from 1976 to 1977, took a different approach. He described it as the “most simple-minded movie of its type since Executive Action,” filled with “dramatized paranoia,” and “plot holes” big enough to “swallow up a whole missile base.”<sup>233</sup>

A year later there was *Coming Home* (1978), in which a wife (Jane Fonda) of a Marine serving in Vietnam falls in love with a war-weary, wheelchair-bound veteran (Jon Voight). The husband returned from Vietnam a shell of a man, and his wife has to choose between the two. Like *Twilight*, *Coming Home* was a disappointment to conservative critics. There were only two dedicated film reviews, but other conservatives mentioned this picture as an example of the anti-war sentiments in Hollywood during the 1970s. Some illustrations make this point clear: David Brudnoy in *The Libertarian Review* thought it was “marred by a ham-fisted anti-war mentality,”

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<sup>231</sup> Jenkin Lloyd Jones, "Latest Hollywood Attack on Vietnam War," *Human Events*, Apr 09, 1979, 9, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Flatest-hollywood-attack-on-vietnam-war%2Fdocview%2F1310022149%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>232</sup> Mr. First Nighter, “Arts and Movies,” *Libertarian Forum*, Vol. X, No. 4 April, 1977, 8, Page 756 in vol. II.

<sup>233</sup> Charles F. Barr, “Movies,” *Reason*, May, 1977, 45. According to *Reason*’s profile page on him, Barr founded the *Libertarian Alternative* in 1971, and was most closely aligned with the Ayn Rand’s Libertarian philosophy. He left *Reason* to focus on Screen writing.

London Herbert of *Human Events* saw it as implying that all American “wars were immoral,” and John Podhoretz in *The American Spectator* said it was among a group of films “which espouse left-wing views of American life.”<sup>234</sup> Richard Grenier of *Commentary* gave his own thoughts, contending that the film was indicative of how the Left viewed American veterans. Jon Voight in *Coming Home*, according to Grenier, was the Peace movement’s “distillation of the truly representative Vietnam veteran.”<sup>235</sup> Now the actual reviews themselves, one by John Simon of *National Review* and the other by John Hospers of *Reason*, veered toward the negative but were neutral in their overall assessments. Simon had mixed thoughts observing that Jane Fonda (known by this time as Hanoi Jane in some conservative circles) and Jon Voight gave a “perfectly splendid performance,” but the script was filled with “tendentious banality.”<sup>236</sup> Hospers, on the other hand, could not identify with a single character and believed “the year’s most ambitious American film so far” was “made from an ideologically stacked deck,” making it both an “aesthetic and an ideological failure at the same time.”<sup>237</sup> Hosper’s two points, the importance of relatable and realistic characters along with a disregard for films that prioritized ideology or political messaging over everything else, should be remembered moving forward.

This early foray into Vietnam reviews also exemplified a larger dichotomy between libertarians and the majority of conservatives. These two groups had some of the sharpest distinctions when it came to film and popular culture, and undoubtedly, the Vietnam War

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<sup>234</sup> Herbert London, “Liberal Critics Horrified by Patriotic Rambo,” *Human Events*, Jul 06, 1985, 16, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fliberal-critics-horrified-patriotic-rambo%2Fdocview%2F1310024590%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; David Brudnoy, “Hell in a Familiar Place,” *The Libertarian Review*, March 1979, 48; and John Podhoretz, “The Talkies: Notes on the Hollywood Left,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 13, No. 2, February 1980, 26.

<sup>235</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Updating James Bond,” *Commentary*, 71, no. 6, Jun 01, 1981, 67-71, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-updating-james-bond%2Fdocview%2F1290079561%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>236</sup> John Simon, “Truth--For Beginners,” *National Review* 30, no. 15, April 14, 1978, 480, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6046741&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>237</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, June, 1978, 63.

exacerbated the ideological schism between many mainstream conservatives who unabashedly supported the war effort and libertarians who were much more tenuous in their support. Nevertheless, by the time of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, most libertarian movie reviewers rebuffed movies that depicted the United States military in a villainous or malicious role even when it came to a war many of them disagreed with.<sup>238</sup> Another broader, but still present theme was the diversity of conservative thought and the nuance with which many were willing to engage with cinema. Although conservatives had a negative view of both films, each movie was not immediately discarded for having an ardent liberal like Jane Fonda playing a major role nor were the films deridingly panned as Left-wing hogwash by every critic. In fact, Simon and Brudnoy both extolled Fonda for her acting, and Hospers and Murray both wanted to like or at least had higher expectations for both films.<sup>239</sup> This offers a glimpse into the subtlety in which many critics approached film, even those dealing with polarizing topics like Vietnam.

After the extended silence from Hollywood during the war and the initial release of a select few Vietnam movies that nearly all conservatives found not only underwhelming but also offensive to their sensibilities, the idea that Hollywood would create anything akin to conservative tastes seemed like a far-off wish. Therefore, to some, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) seemed like a seismic shift. It is the story of three friends from a small blue-collar town in Pennsylvania who go off to fight in Vietnam. It displayed in vivid detail the aftereffects of their military tour in dramatic and tragic fashion.

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<sup>238</sup> Another example of this before the central films come into focus was John Hospers review of *The Boys of C Company*. "Throughout the film," he began, "the villains are Americans, especially the officers," making it "one long continuous cliché." John Hospers, "Movies," *Reason*, August, 1978, 44; For more on the libertarian and conservative divide during the Vietnam War see: Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 211.

<sup>239</sup> Simon, "Truth for Beginners," 480; and Brudnoy, "Hell in a Familiar Place," 48.

Many on the Right lauded the movie for its cinematic distinction as well as the turn in ideology it apparently embodied. Eric Shapearo from *Chronicles* wrote that it was “the first serious art in two decades to emerge from...Hollywood.”<sup>240</sup> Two years later in an article discussing film as an artform, he added that *The Deer Hunter* was “the best American movie of the last twenty years, precisely because of its magnificent attempt to capture the authenticity of truth of an historical moment, with all possible probing into the American man of that moment.”<sup>241</sup> Brudnoy in *The Libertarian Review* appeared awestruck calling it, “a movie of such brilliance, such power,...and shimmering just below its surface, of such, of such savage perceptiveness about the weakness in our national experience, that it should prove unbearable to anybody who still delights in the fantasy that the American government and the American people are one and the same.”<sup>242</sup> Grenier in *Commentary* argued that there was a “monumental, Eisensteinian quality to it, a grandeur of shooting and montage,” and they it exhibited a “ardent patriotism...rather out of fashion today.”<sup>243</sup> In lieu of this adulation, Ben Yagoda’s meager praise in the *American Spectator* labeling *only* the first half of the movie the most “impressive display of cinematic narrative I have seen in some time,” may seem underwhelming.<sup>244</sup> *The American Spectator* did come around two decades later, declaring *Deer Hunter* one of the top-ten best movies released since the inception of the magazine in 1968.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Eric Shapearo, “Serious Art,” *Chronicles of Culture*, July, 1979. 27.

<sup>241</sup> Eric Shapearo, “The Profundity of Crossness and Pretentiousness as Art,” *Chronicles of Culture*, May/June, 1981, 41.

<sup>242</sup> Brudnoy, “Hell in a Familiar Place, 47.

<sup>243</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: A New Patriotism?” *Commentary* 67, no. 4, Apr 01, 1979, 78,79, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-new-patriotism%2Fdocview%2F1290122586%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>244</sup> Ben Yagoda, “The Talkies: The Deer Hunter,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 3, March, 1979, 26, 28.

<sup>245</sup> James Bowman, “Hit List,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 26, Iss 01, 1993, 76-77.

*The Deer Hunter* went on to win the 1978 best picture Academy Award and Oscars for editing, sound, direction, and supporting actor, but not all reviews were celebratory.<sup>246</sup> In *Reason*, John Hospers said the film was too long and described the main theme as “[h]ow the war transformed, crippled, and destroyed the lives of Americans, soldiers and civilians alike.”<sup>247</sup> Unlike Grenier, Yagoda believed it avoided political messages to its benefit, but still fell short because it did not allow for deeper insights into how the characters felt towards Vietnam or as he put it, “You just can’t send a man to the Heart of Darkness and bring him back with a No Comment.”<sup>248</sup> John Simon was the harshest with his critique, writing that while *The Deer Hunter* may be “on its way to becoming the most controversial movie of both 1978...and 1979” Cimino “falsifies just about everything touches” leaving “not a shred of credibility.” Simon’s distaste for the film stems from a systemic issue he had with the vast multitude of films he reviewed, the suspension of reality within a plotline. He pointed to the use of Russian roulette as torture, the placement of the Vietcong encampment, that there are no guards where the suicidal game is being played, and the entire escape to show that, “the preposterousness of all this outweighs its technical brilliance.”<sup>249</sup> Simon doubled down on this in his review for Cimino’s *Year of the Dragon* (1985) when he wrote that “Cimino may well be the epitome of whatever is wrong with Hollywood” and that this new movie like *Deer Hunter* is “an abomination.”<sup>250</sup>

Eric Shapearo from the paleoconservative *Chronicles* articulated both the ideological and artistic perspective in his review of *Deer Hunter*, “Serious Art.” In fact, to him the two become intertwined. The movie conveyed the message that the war “should have been won by us” but

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<sup>246</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 337.

<sup>247</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, March, 1979, 46.

<sup>248</sup> Yagoda, “The Deer Hunter,” 29.

<sup>249</sup> John Simon, “Lame Deer,” *National Review* 31, no. 7, February 16, 1979, 247-248, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19178486&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>250</sup> John Simon, “The Tong Wars--Chapter Two,” *National Review* 37, no. 18, September 20, 1985, 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12221554&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.



those who “opposed this war, and never came to doubt their own righteousness, will only feel reinforced in their beliefs as they leave the theatre. These,” he says, “are the risks of true art.”<sup>251</sup>

He then went on to analyze both Robert DeNiro and his character Michael which is worth quoting at length for both a deeper understanding of the qualities hoped for by conservative critics and a richer context to *Chronicles* ideology:

...[DeNiro] transforms a simplistic, but coherent, vision of existence into a code of honor and a sense of value; he's pedestrian, but rich in the endless shades of man's sensibility. We rarely write in these pages about contemporary film actors, for whom we feel an utter contempt...DeNiro is an exception, he still tries to construct the immanence of a person, to portray a person's authenticity not at the expense of his autonomy...*The New Yorker* went so far as to ask us not to identify ourselves with DeNiro's Michael. Why? Because he is loyal and sane, and does not lose his fundamental wholeness in the face of the worst crucible?' DeNiro plows through Michael's low-brow ego with all the inevitable grunts and platitudes of an actor's effort to structure a realistic character, and winds up with a rendition of a superb man.<sup>252</sup>

A few concepts start to take shape as the analysis on *Deer Hunter* is unpacked. One, praise or derision was not necessarily correlated with where the film falls on the political spectrum, (just see Simon's, Hospers's, or Yagoda's review), but neither should ideology be discounted as negligible (look back at Grenier's “A New Patriotism”).<sup>253</sup> It was certainly true that many critics panned *Coming Home* and *Twilight* for their apparent anti-Americanism while *Deer Hunter* was praised in part for not depicting a harsh picture of American soldiers or the war effort. But just because a film was not negative in its assessment of America or that fact that it may have even extolled ideals and values some conservatives held, it did not equate to a ubiquitous congratulatory reception. Nevertheless, other more poignant ideas began to pop up in the reviews. Simon's need for logic and for details not to derail the reality of the film was what

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<sup>251</sup> Shapearo, “Serious Art,” 27.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>253</sup> Simon, “Lame Deer,” 248.

grounded his critique of *Deer Hunter*. The need for a sustained sense of reality throughout the film will continue to prove central not only to Simon but to other critics as this study progresses.

Furthermore, and possibly the most telling of all the reviews were the words of Shapero in *Chronicles*. His praise of DeNiro's portrayal of a "realistic character" who was "rich in the endless shades of man's sensibility," as well as DeNiro's ability to "construct the immanence of a person, to portray a person's authenticity not at the expense of his autonomy," are all excellent examples of how conservatives valued the importance of the individual character in films.<sup>254</sup>

This too will be fleshed out as the chapter and entire study progress, but the example at this early stage only bolsters a primary point throughout the study. That multifaceted characters, exhibiting a full range of human emotions were one of the central principles film critics valued.

Supplemental and building off this point was also Shapero's description of DeNiro's character as "a superb man" who never lost his "fundamental wholeness."<sup>255</sup> These two phrases signify the vital importance of having characters who were not only complex depictions of humans but had ideals that grounded them as individuals in something greater than themselves., i.e. duty, loyalty, or selflessness.

This concise incursion of what many conservatives found attractive during a time when the anti-hero was the protagonist in nearly all of Hollywood should be kept in mind throughout the remainder of the study. Most conservatives were not looking for an all-good Clark Kent figure, a whatever means necessary Dirty Harry, or the flag-waving communist stomping Rambo, but rather a character who spoke to the human condition in all its weakness and strengths, who despite the obstacles placed in front of them, and due of some higher ideal (whatever that may be, fidelity to a nation, loyalty to a friend, or a combination) can struggle

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<sup>254</sup> Shapero, "Serious Art," 28.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

through, succeed or not, in face of tremendous impediments.<sup>256</sup> Reading this, one may wonder why would the author would offer such a heavy-handed analysis based on one major film. The answer is simple, and one hopes not a spoiler. But this is the only film among the titles listed at the start of the chapter in which the positive outweighed the negative. Nearly all other film reviews are polemical diatribes. Nonetheless, even in the overtly negative there are glimmers of nuance one can gleam.

Shortly after *Deer Hunter*, the highly anticipated *Apocalypse Now* (1979) hit theaters. Inspired by Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, it was described as "more surrealistic than realistic" or as film historian and critic J Hoberman put it, an "auteur psychodrama."<sup>257</sup> The movie follows a mission to take out a rogue American military officer Kurtz (Marlon Brando). It was one of the more convoluted Vietnam War flicks to come out and caused a wide array of differing opinions on what the actual message was behind the film (if there even was one). Even Coppola seemed torn on this point as he made two different endings, one dovish, the other hawkish.<sup>258</sup> There were no conservative critics who viewed *Apocalypse Now* as a defense of America's foreign policy in Vietnam. Rather, they debated over how the film portrayed the issue of war itself, and this issue for many of them led them to either approve or disapprove of the film. Nevertheless, most conservative critics largely agreed that the film had some cinematic accolades, mainly the cinematographic acumen, but the overall film was muddled by the director's hubris and posturing.

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<sup>256</sup> Some articles not mentioned in the text that also support this evaluation are: Richard Alleva, "Return of the Native," *Crises*, Vol. 3 No. 9, September 1, 1985, Crises Magazine Archives, [Return of the Native \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com); and Teachout, "Room For Doubt," *Crises*; and Clyde Wilson, "Making War," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No. 04, 2000, 48. Alleva looking back at *The Deer Hunter* noted how the movie had "bite, a feel for landscape and people, and a sense of horror," while Wilson praised it for the characters having "some resemblance to actual Americans."

<sup>257</sup> Christianson and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 188; and J. Hoberman, *Make My Day: Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2019), 89.

<sup>258</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 90.

Simon was the first to review the film in September 1979. His article “\$30 Million in Search of an Author,” called it a “depressing film” and described Coppola as “immature” and “pretentious.”<sup>259</sup> The derision of Coppola was seconded and expanded on by Grenier who said he was “one of the most self-absorbed, self-dramatizing artists since the high tide of the Romantic movement.”<sup>260</sup> By the end of Grenier’s seven-page review in *Commentary*, he took Coppola to task again placing the blame for the film’s problems squarely on his shoulders; “*Apocalypse Now* is a film that went colossally wrong, from the egotism of its director, his juvenile megalomania, the callowness of his ideas, and the weakness of his intellectual equipment.”<sup>261</sup> Shapearo wrote that it “sponges on artistic impulses, intuitions, and intentions without bringing them into direct shape,” or as Hospers more simply put it, “the film is a disappointment, chiefly because of its pretentiousness. It tries for deep meanings and profound significance, which it lacks.”<sup>262</sup> A quick side note to point out; Coppola is one of a few directors who, because of their reputation, are judged in a harsher light than their lesser-known peers. The same can be said for Oliver Stone, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Spike Lee; all of whom received their fair share of derision for their own pretentiousness and self-aggrandization in later chapters.

John Podhoretz, the son of the neoconservative founder of *Commentary* Norman Podhoretz and student at the University of Chicago (writing only his second film review for *The American Spectator* in October), and Brudnoy in *The Libertarian Review* wrote the only two positive reviews. Podhoretz and Brudnoy were taken back by the visual boldness describing it as

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<sup>259</sup> John Simon, “\$30 Million in Search of an Author,” *National Review* 31, no. 39, September 28, 1979, 1246. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=8856857&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>260</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Coppola’s Folly,” *Commentary* 68, no. 4, Oct 01, 1979, 68, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-coppolas-folly%2Fdocview%2F1290137918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>262</sup> Eric Shapearo, “A Big Bang and Small Change,” *Chronicles of Culture*, January, 1980, 33; and John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, November, 1979, 42.

“a film of breathtaking excellence” with “stunning images,” “wonderful sounds,” and displaying “an intelligence and subtlety that go beyond anything one has ever seen in the movies.”<sup>263</sup> Brudnoy went so far as to say that, “[t]he film contains what may well be the most haunting scenes of war imaginable in cinema,...[which] will likely remain in any viewer's mind for an uncomfortably long time.” Hospers, Grenier, and Simon who all disliked the film mentioned how the movie “is tremendously impressive visually and auditorily; the photography is so studiedly beautiful that it is often like a series of paintings,” “sumptuously shot and photographed,” and that Coppola is “very good at capturing the grandiose dementia of war.”<sup>264</sup> However, Coppola’s hair-raising ability to capture the “grandiose dementia of war” left Simon with a nagging question that he never answers, “what is an allegedly antiwar filmmaker doing mucking around in the tainted ecstasy of war depicted in the film?”<sup>265</sup> Historian and frequent contributor to *Chronicles* Clyde Wilson writing an article in 2000 reiterated the idea that there needed to be some deeper or larger message about the meaning of war outside of the fact that it is bad and ugly. Mentioning both *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, he observed that “these films appear hysterical creations of the alienated. They tell us little about war and nothing about the American experience.”<sup>266</sup>

Podhoretz took a different approach. Not seeing the film as one that exalts American virtue, neither did he view it as one imbued with irredeemable qualities. One may have thought, Podhoretz declared, that Coppola’s film was going to tow “the anti-war party line: imperialist

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<sup>263</sup> David Brudnoy, “To the Heart of Darkness,” *The Libertarian Review*, volume 8, no. 9, November 1979. 38-39; and John Podhoretz, “The Talkies: Apocalypse Now,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 10, October 1979. 22.

<sup>264</sup> Hospers, “Movies,” 42; Simon, “\$30 Million in Search of an Author,” 1246; and Grenier, “Movies: Coppola's Folly,” 40.

<sup>265</sup> Simon, “\$30 Million in Search of an Author,” 1246.

<sup>266</sup> Clyde Wilson, “Making War,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No. 04, 2000, 48.

America fighting a criminal war...[h]appily, this is not the case.” Rather, the war was more of an “enigma” than a crime.<sup>267</sup> Podhoretz was happy to enjoy the beautiful imagery of the film as long as there was no explicit anti-Americanism or anti-war sentiment. In the end, he hailed it as the “masterpiece” it believed itself to be.<sup>268</sup> As should be known by now, Podhoretz was more concerned with the sociocultural messaging of the films and the entertainment value.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, the libertarian-leaning Brudnoy believed the “strangely psychedelic story” was an overall good one and like Podhoretz was happy to sing its praises.<sup>270</sup> Indeed, his approval of the films’ “war is hell” message or even the idea that everyone has blood on their hands was parroted by him, “[the] true horror...[of Vietnam],” he began, “[is] obvious, by now, to anyone who knows what *we* did, what *they* did, what was done by and done to almost everybody who set foot in Indochina for a decade or more.”<sup>271</sup>

Grenier on the other hand, exemplified a critic who valued the aesthetic value of the film but could not overlook certain elements he found incompatible with his conservative ideals like his staunch anticommunism. So, while his take on the film was impacted by the fact that he believed *Apocalypse Now* placed “itself in the camp of those who opposed the American role in Vietnam but who had—and have—no comment to make about the Communist side,” the overarching subject of his analysis remained the “horrors of war.”<sup>272</sup> Shapearo, echoed the “war is hell” theme in *Chronicles* comparing it to *The Deer Hunter* and explaining his problem with it:

“[*The Deer Hunter*] tells something honorable and important (regardless of its accuracy) about man and history. Honorableness and importance are missing from Coppola's work; a detectable pursuit of them turns into artificiality and contrivance. *Apocalypse* tells us that war is blood, mess, and plenty of undeserved

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<sup>267</sup> Podhoretz, “Apocalypse Now,” 22.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>269</sup> For more on how John Podhoretz viewed film criticism and critics see: John Podhoretz, “Confessions of a Critic,” *American Spectator*, Vol 17 Iss 09, 1984, 33-34.

<sup>270</sup> Brudnoy, “To the Heart of Darkness,” 41.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> Grenier, “Movies: Coppola's Folly,” 70.

suffering—certainly a correct observation. But war has another dimension; it must have, or it would have been eradicated from the universal human experience millennia ago.”<sup>273</sup>

From the hindsight of the 1990s, *The American Spectator* declared the film one of the top ten worst films of the last twenty-five years. Describing the reason for this movie critic James Bowman penned, “they [all the movies selected] convinced a lot of people that they were deeply meaningful, even great films. But they all had something to sell, and what they were selling was completely bogus.”<sup>274</sup> This was reminiscent of Hospers critique of *Coming Home* where he contended that the film failed because it tried too hard to send a political message to its audience. And, it was Hospers who succinctly summed up the feeling among many conservative critics when he wrote, “*Deerhunter* achieves what it [*Apocalypse Now*] does without a trace of claptrap, cant, or mysticism. It is much more rewarding to see *Deerhunter* a second time than to see *Apocalypse* the first.”<sup>275</sup>

One point to bring up before moving forward was the split between art-led critics and sociocultural or entertainment-led critics in the reviews just explored. Those highbrow critics, namely Simon, Shapearo, Hospers, and Grenier who believed the artfulness of the film needed to be a part, if not the most central aspect of the film, found the film lacking. They all observed the cinematic merits of the film but found it deficient in other areas, namely what it aimed to be and say and the reality of what it was. Whereas Podhoretz and Brudnoy (these two critics are often paired together throughout other chapters as well) were approving of the film likely due to the fact that it did not seem to make overtly negative statements about America’s role in Vietnam or

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<sup>273</sup> Eric Shapearo, “A Big Bang and Small Change,” *Chronicles of Culture*, January, 1980, 33. This idea is echoed by a future *Chronicles* writer E. Christian Kopff. In his 1985 article “Still in Saigon in My Mind,” Kopff wrote that the film only “concentrated on the...craziness of war.”

<sup>274</sup> Bowman, “Hit List,” 77.

<sup>275</sup> Hospers, “Movies,” 42.

disdainfully depict American servicemen. If this would not have been the case, they, and likely Grenier as well, most likely would have forgone their praise of the film. However, while the split may seem clear-cut here, it was not, especially in this chapter but this will be explained in greater depth at the end of the chapter.

The next film was deemed by many as laying the groundwork for what is known today as the age of “Reaganite movies.”<sup>276</sup> When *First Blood* (1982) came out it was the surprise hit of 1982, surpassing the sci-fi spectacular *E.T.* as the number one film all through the latter half of October and November.<sup>277</sup> *First Blood* told the story of a returning Vietnam veteran chased out of town by an authoritarian police chief who arrests him for vagrancy. One slight after another along with the mistreatment at the hands of the authorities eventually leads to John Rambo (Stallone) wreaking havoc on the small Washington town. Succinctly put, it was the dramatic and cinematic retelling of the ridicule and hardships returning veterans faced when they came home. In hindsight, one would think that conservative film critics would have jumped at the chance to review this film, but this was not the case. For whatever reason, Hospers and Grenier were the only two to review the film and they both came away with differing opinions.

Right off the bat, Hospers saw “several flaws” or inconsistencies within the picture like the highly unlikely torture of Rambo by police for the petty crime of vagrancy or the out-of-nowhere arrival of Stallone’s handler with little to no explanation.<sup>278</sup> However, another interesting point he made was that the film itself, originally from a 1972 book, was outdated. “Vietnam veterans are being reinstated in public opinion,” he opined, “and to hear them condemned as torturers and child-killers seems now, 10 years later, almost quaint.”<sup>279</sup> With that

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<sup>276</sup> Christenson, “Projecting Politics,” 195.

<sup>277</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 159.

<sup>278</sup> Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, January, 1983, 50.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*



said, he believed the film to be “a celebration of the lone individual pitted against the collective armed might of the state,” which for all libertarians is high praise.<sup>280</sup> Hospers, like Simon earlier, alluded to the logical fallacies he noticed, tainting his view of the film. The repeated need for realism or logic in cinema appeared to be a growing concern for some critics. Hospers also believed the film to have exemplified libertarian values, which needed to be recognized. Libertarians, more than most other conservative critics besides the religious right, were quick to point out ideas in the films they reviewed that spoke to libertarian principles.

Grenier on the other hand, believed *First Blood* to be “the easiest movie to figure out that I’ve ever seen in my life.” After writing about its meteoric rise to becoming the number one film in the country, he noted how it was “the most astounding example of political content” in a film that he had seen in which everyone seems to get except the major critics. The message, presented in “remarkable clarity,” was that it was “civilians who draw ‘first blood.’” But it was not the “ordinary Americans in small towns” portrayed in the film, no, this was the one “grievous historical distortion.” Rather it was the “university students, the children of the privileged, who avoided the war thanks to educational deferments.” Unlike Hospers, Grenier thought the film to be exceedingly timely, in light of the fact that “that black mortuary monument” the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. was unveiled at the same time as the movie’s release. Grenier strong sense of betrayal and disdain for those civilians he saw as drawing “first blood” during the Vietnam War seeped heavily into his writing. The war, he stated, “is over now...[c]ollege students with educational deferments have stopped spitting on working-class youths serving their country Suburban hearts no longer leap high at the sight of the Vietcong flag brandished fearlessly in Scarsdale.” He ended his article by tying

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<sup>280</sup> Hospers, “Movies,” 50.

the clear message of the film and the Vietnam Memorial together. “It is a severe understatement of the burden of this film to say that an inscription might at least read: *They died for their country*. But this inscription is not there, and the names are engraved on a black, tomblike wall, for such was the decision of the panel of judges, who are artistic professionals of course, and, like movie critics, have no politics.”<sup>281</sup>

If Grenier thought the first *Rambo* had a clear message, he should have waited until the *First Blood II* (1985) came out, with the famous tag line, “Sir, do we get to win this time?” In the sequel, Stallone is tasked with a special-operations mission to find and document 2,500 MIAs somewhere in Vietnam. He is eventually double-crossed, ends up taking out the Commie Russians (who were the real bad guys this time), and gets revenge on the government bureaucrat (the ones blamed in the film for losing the war) who betrayed him during his mission. The film became almost immediately associated with the Right and President Ronald Reagan. After seeing *Rambo II*, Reagan said, “I know what to do next time,” referring to a hostage situation just having taken place in Beirut, Lebanon.<sup>282</sup> There was also the “Ronbo” image that became popular which had Reagan’s head cropped onto Stallone’s body. Thus, it may surprise readers to know that the film received little attention, and the reviews it did garner were not all positive.

One bright spot was found in the pages of *Human Events*, written by Herbert London.<sup>283</sup> The praise was solely in reference to the message of the film. He described how the “dissatisfaction with American institutions” became commonplace in film during much of the 1970s and even the 1980s. Therefore, he was shocked to see a “throwback to the virtues of

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<sup>281</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: All Turkish, no Delight,” *Commentary* 75, no. 1, 1983, 61-62, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-all-turkish-no-delight%2Fdocview%2F1290080590%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>282</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 345.

<sup>283</sup> London was the founding dean of the Gallatin School for Individualized Study at New York University. He later went on to run for mayor of New York in 1989, the governor of New York in 1990 under the Conservative Party banner, and eventually became the president of the Hudson Institute.

unalloyed patriotism and heroism.” In the end, there were a few “trifling” flaws but mainly it was “a film made to exalt the role of our soldiers in Vietnam and to provide an explanation for our defeat,” (i.e. bureaucrats unwilling to unleash the full force of American military power).<sup>284</sup> The other review, a few months after the fact, was published in *Chronicles*. It was a compilation piece comparing and contrasting an array of Vietnam movies (*Green Berets*, *Rolling Thunder*, *Missing in Action*, *Deer Hunter*, etc.). *Rambo* was deemed a “good-hearted movie,” but the central thesis was:

In *Rambo*, Stallone has taken the hard-hitting motifs of earlier Vietnam movies and made them palatable for a mass audience. The American people are not to blame. Bureaucrats did us in. Given a chance, our men can stand up to torture and beat Charlie and his Russian master. For all its violence and movement, *Rambo* is ultimately a consoling film.<sup>285</sup>

Richard Alleva, the movie critic for *Crises* from 1985-1990, did not seek to tear the film down but neither was he too admiring. “*Rambo*,” he believed, “with its Fu Manchu villainy, James Bond gadgetry, and rock-video editing, turns out to be a breeze: lightweight summertime entertainment.” Much like Hospers, he saw *Deer Hunter* as a more serious and overall better film, stating that *Deer Hunter* had “bite, a feel for landscape and people, and a sense of horror. *Rambo* is just good, clean all-American violence.”<sup>286</sup> Podhoretz took a different approach, seeing it as “a hilariously lamebrained and preposterous Sylvester Stallone vehicle that improves on most other Stallone vehicles by keeping Sylvester’s mouth almost entirely shut and his pectorals almost constantly flexing.” He compared *Rambo II* to other films about the same topic, *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action I* and *II*, which among the group he found *Uncommon*

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<sup>284</sup> Herbert London, “Liberal Critics Horrified by Patriotic *Rambo*,” *Human Events*, Jul 06, 1985, 16, <http://proxy01.lits.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fliberal-critics-horrified-patriotic-rambo%2Fdocview%2F1310024590%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>285</sup> E. Christian Kopff, “Film: Still in Saigon in My Mind,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 09, No. 12, December 1985, 23.

<sup>286</sup> Richard Alleva, “Return of the Native,” *Crises*, Vol. 3 No. 9, September 1, 1985, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [Return of the Native \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

*Valor* (a film not reviewed at all by any of the conservative publications) infinitely better. Like Hospers, he believed the film to be a bit outdated, as is evident by his title, “Twenty Years Too Late.” But he did mention how:

The ruling is now in [evidenced by box office numbers and videocassette sales]...we should have fought to win. And the tragedy is that had they made movies like this during the Johnson Administration (John Wayne’s silly Green Berets doesn’t count), perhaps those responsible for selling the war to the American people would have had enough confidence to make the case that was eventually made by the deaths of three million Indochinese.<sup>287</sup>

An interesting point of analysis from *First Blood I, II*, and even *III*, which was released in 1988, is not the reviews themselves but the lack thereof. For a movie/series that many considered to be conservatism or Reaganism incarnate, the lack of verbosity from those tasked by conservative publications with reviewing films speaks volumes. This not only goes for the *Rambo* films for which there were six dedicated reviews for three films (if Kopff’s is included and the fact that there were zero reviews for *Rambo III* is taken into account) but also the movies mentioned by Podhoretz just above. *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Uncommon Valor* (1983) are not reviewed by any of the major publications, except a small one on *Uncommon Valor* by *Human Events*.<sup>288</sup> It is precisely these films, along with a few broader anti-communist films, the crudest version of what Christensen described as “Reaganite cinema,” that received little to no attention in conservative publications. The writers of *From Hanoi to Hollywood* include *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987) in this grouping, to which there is one contemporary review-like article, again in *Human*

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<sup>287</sup> John Podhoretz, “Twenty Years Too Late,” *American Spectator*, Vol 18 Iss 08, 1985, 27.

<sup>288</sup> J. A. Frazer, “Uncommon Valor: An Uncommon Movie,” *Human Events*, Jan 28, 1984, 16, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2FUncommon-valor-movie%2Fdocview%2F1310017954%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

*Events*, where nearly all reviews were for the most part just blurbs focused only on the sociocultural impact.<sup>289</sup>

There is some justification for the lack of reviews, but it falls short of a complete explanation. Grenier left *Commentary* in early 1985 and didn't come back until early March 1986 not permitting him to review *Rambo II*, *Reason* stopped publishing film reviews in June/July 1985, and *Libertarian Review* stopped running issues at the end of 1981. However, *National Review*, *Chronicles*, *Christianity Today*, *The American Spectator* (besides Podhoretz review), and *New Oxford Review* all ignored these movies in favor of others. This noticeable absence seems to indicate popular cultures and academia's misunderstanding of how important conservatives thought these films to be or how much they believed their readers would benefit from seeing these films. Too often, certain qualities and cultural values have been imputed onto conservatism that did not adhere to the movement's larger ideas about itself. While it is doubtless that everyday Americans and many conservatives did indeed enjoy these films, the majority of critics in conservative publications did not perceive them as important cultural events, nor did it seem they believed they were indicative of the conservative culture at the time.

Before *Rambo II* and released four days before the 1984 presidential election *The Killing Fields* (1984) was released nationwide. While not a typical Vietnam War movie, having more to

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<sup>289</sup> Reed Irvine, "Times Reporter Rescues 'the Hanoi Hilton'," *Human Events*, Jul 11, 1987, 6-7, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ftimes-reporter-rescues-hanoi-hilton%2Fdocview%2F1310021946%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; There were also a few articles where *Hanoi Hilton* was compared to other Vietnam films in retrospect or mentioned when referencing a broader topic, by *Human Events*, *Chronicles*, and *Commentary*. George Szamuely, "Hollywood Goes to Vietnam," *Commentary* 85, no. 1, 1988, 48-55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fhollywood-goes-vietnam%2Fdocview%2F1290194440%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Arthur M. Eckstein, Film: Caution: Historical Revisionism at Work," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 04 April 1989, 56-57; and Don Feder and Neil McCaffrey, "Conservatives Honor Other Great Communicators of the 1980s," *Human Events*, Jan 13, 1990, 10,12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fconservatives-honor-other-great-communicators%2Fdocview%2F1310027715%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

do with Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge than the American military, it added a layer of depth to this study while not diverging too far from the subject. It split conservatives down the middle with half arguing for its integrity as a powerful film and the other half contending it was pure mythmaking on a grand scale. The movie follows two journalists chronicling the civil war in Cambodia during the 1970s and the genocide undertaken by the communist Khmer Rouge regime. While not exactly clear cut, the divergence of thought on this film, was split between those who saw film through a film-as-art lens, while the other side was more concerned with the sociocultural message it sent.

Herbert London wrote articles in both *Human Events* and *Chronicles* deriding the film for various reasons. In the latter, he described it as “a figment of Sydney Schanberg’s [the journalist the film is based on] well-developed imagination” and a “deft manipulation of the facts.”<sup>290</sup> His biggest gripe was the lionization of the real-life Schanberg and ““new journalism”” which he personified. “By distorting events,” London wrote, Schhanberg and others like him “managed to create a popular antiwar, anti-Johnson, and anti-Nixon movement” which specialized in “tailoring the news” rather than reporting it.<sup>291</sup> His *Human Events* article dovetailed nicely with Patrick J. Buchanan’s published a month after his. Both argued that the film attempted to show how America was at fault for all that went wrong in Cambodia. Buchanan, in his last article before joining the White House as Reagan’s Communications Director, labeled it “propaganda” and contended that the main message of the film was taken from the book *Sideshow* in that it was the American bombings of Cambodia that ultimately led to the violence under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>292</sup> Podhoretz seconded this notion in *American Spectator* writing, “[t]he movie buys lock,

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<sup>290</sup> Herbert London, “Screen: Inventing the News,” *Chronicles of Culture*, March, 1985, 32.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Herbert London, “The Killing Fields: Fiction, Not Journalism,” *Human Events*, Jan 12, 1985, 13-14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fkilling-fields->

stock, and barrel the theory proposed by William Shawcross in his book *Sideshow* that the United States was responsible for the coming to power of the Khmer Rouge. For the viewer who does know the truth, the movie is calculatedly dishonest.”<sup>293</sup> In the pages of *Christianity Today* Lloyd Billingsley stayed away from any ideas about motives or *Sideshow* but mentioned how “Nixon bashing...abounds, [and] one hears the grinding of a well-worn ax.”<sup>294</sup> Still, others thought Buchanan, London, and Billingsley missed the point of the film entirely with one critic calling the two of them out by name.

Five months after London and Buchanan’s article, Brudnoy took London and Buchanan to task for incorrectly labeling *The Killing Fields* as “an anti-American film.” Brudnoy interviewed Dith Pran, Schanberg’s translator who was in the Khmer Rouge for four years, and both men insisted that too many conservatives fasten onto the early part of the film where it shows American bombings causing innocent deaths, but overlook the major theme of the movie, which is the evil of the Khmer Rouge.”<sup>295</sup> Like with *Apocalypse Now* Brudnoy could praise a film as long as it was not, in his view, overtly anti-American. However, his criteria for judgment differed greatly from those critics who put the artfulness of a film before other more ideological considerations.

Two critics viewed the film through this lens. Robert Lauder of the *New Oxford Review*, who was similar in form and style to John Simon, said it was “about as far from light escapist

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[fiction-not-journalism%2Fdocview%2F1310022435%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678](http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fkilling-fields-umasked-face-communism%2Fdocview%2F1310022435%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678); and Patrick J. Buchanan, "Killing Fields: Unmasked Face of Communism," *Human Events*, Feb 23, 1985, 16, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fkilling-fields-umasked-face-communism%2Fdocview%2F1310025609%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>293</sup> John Podhoretz, “Shawcross on Screen,” *American Spectator*, Vol 18, Iss 03, 1985, 33.

<sup>294</sup> Lloyd Billingsley, "The Killing Fields," *Christianity Today (Pre-1986)*, Jan 18, 1985, 65,

<http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fkilling-fields%2Fdocview%2F200677852%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>295</sup> David Brudnoy, "Conservatives Missed the Point of the Killing Fields," *Human Events*, Jun 22, 1985, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fconservatives-missed-point-killing-fields%2Fdocview%2F1310026447%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

entertainment as a movie can be,” and it restored “our faith in the potential of film to deal with contemporary issues.”<sup>296</sup> The point about the film being anything but light entertainment is yet another intriguing point that will be circled back to in other chapters. Simon found that despite “all its flaws, *The Killing Fields* is an important, indeed necessary, film.”<sup>297</sup> He even offered the uncommon laudatory remarks writing, “*The Killing Fields* rises to those heights where our tears flow even as our blood is chilled. Seldom has man's inhumanity to man been shown with such scrupulously understated harrowingness.”<sup>298</sup>

*The Killing Fields* shines a light on a major theme that should be clear by now. Even when it came to contentious films conservatives were not a monolith. Those who were judging the esoteric quality of what they saw as art could watch the same movie as a fellow conservative critic and walk away from it with entirely different points of view as is evident from the various reviews in this chapter. The reason that Brudnoy, Simon, and Lauder approved of *The Killing Fields* which London, Buchanan, Podhoretz, and Billingsley saw as propaganda was twofold. Simon and Lauder viewed all the films they reviewed first and foremost as art where politics were secondary to more aesthetic concerns. Therefore, the movie and its serious nature that went beyond entertainment and did not languish in sentimentalism, even if not overly positive in its depiction of American foreign policy, was to be judged according to its value as art. Brudnoy, who especially when writing in *Human Events* was more focused on the ideological message behind films, believed that *The Killing Fields* did not sugarcoat the horrors of the communist Khmer Rouge. And, even if one was to take the premise that America was to blame for what

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<sup>296</sup> Robert E. Lauder, “The Panoramic & the Personal,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LII, June, 1985, [The Panoramic & the Personal | New Oxford Review](#).

<sup>297</sup> John Simon, “AUTOMATA,” *National Review* 36, no. 25, December 28, 1984, 47, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12485715&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid*, 48.



followed, the evil of what took place by the communist regime was never lessened and therefore the complexity of life, history, and good and evil, shine through in all their complexity making it an acceptable film for Brudnoy along with his highbrow peers.

The next two films, both released in 1987, are seminal Vietnam films. Directed by the controversial director Oliver Stone, *Platoon* had the unique privilege of being loathed by nearly every conservative critic who reviewed it, while *Full Metal Jacket*, praised for its visual beauty and entertaining first half, was ridiculed for its weak storyline which completely unraveled in the second half of the film. *Platoon* tells the story of a new recruit sent to Vietnam who finds himself torn between two commanding Sergeants, both acting as symbols for the dichotomy of man as either philosopher or beast. It went on to win multiple Oscars including one for Best Picture. *Full Metal Jacket* follows newly recruited soldiers through their basic training and into the jungles of Vietnam. Not as critically acclaimed as *Platoon*, nevertheless, it made its mark on popular culture and among many cultural commentators.

“Vietnam as it truly was...,” the line made famous by a *Time* magazine review symbolized the ethos surrounding *Platoon* and to a large degree, what conservatives found troubling about it. *Human Events* ran an article, not a review, “A Vietnam Vet’s Dissenting View of *Platoon*,” which argued that the film’s portrayal was offensive in its dishonest claims of what life was like in Vietnam. The veteran who penned the article stated that the film was a “step backwards in the slow process of national reconciliation,” which he saw as happening across the country with the Vietnam memorial, parades, and a better understanding coming to the forefront.<sup>299</sup> Other *Human Events* writers found it to be blatantly “anti-patriotic”, especially

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<sup>299</sup> William L. Buchanan, "A Vietnam Vet's Dissenting View of Platoon," *Human Events*, Feb 21, 1987, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fvietnam-vets-dissenting-view-platoon%2Fdocview%2F1310032342%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

when compared with *The Hanoi Hilton* also released in 1987.<sup>300</sup> In the same tone Katherine Dalton, the sporadic movie reviewer from *Chronicles* during this time, called *Platoon* “cultural dissemination on the scale of an epidemic...[with] every moldy cliché from the past 40 years’ worth of war movies...[and really] an exploitation — of his [Oliver Stone’s] moviegoer’s emotions, and especially of the Vets he presumes to portray.”<sup>301</sup> Even Simon wrote in the *National Review*, “though *Platoon* may enlighten those who still harbor delusions about Vietnam, and serve the very young as an effective anti-recruiting poster, it is poster art. Even its most belabored point, that our defeat was caused by dissension, is not made compellingly enough.” But what truly shocked him was that “the writer-director, who spent 15 months fighting in Vietnam, managed to make a film scarcely different from the soap operas written by hacks who never got closer to the VC than their VCRs.”<sup>302</sup>

Richard Alleva of *Crises* offered the most optimistic review, calling it a “superb combat movie, but morally ambiguous as the Vietnam war itself.” Alleva also pointed to the visceral realness in the portrayal of the characters and their “horror and fatigue.”<sup>303</sup> This was the one trait extolled by several critics and was also pointed to by Bruce Bawer in *The American Spectator*. He remarked how the film was “a genuine triumph of atmosphere” and that Stone did a “magnificent job of re-creating the experience of the typical foot soldier in the Vietnam bush.”<sup>304</sup> However, Bawer was more closely aligned with the earlier critics than Alleva and the center-right Catholic *Crises*. “The ultimate message,” he understood, “in both films is that America’s

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<sup>300</sup> Irvine, “Times Reporter Rescues ‘The Hanoi Hilton,’” 6-7, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ftimes-reporter-rescues-hanoi-hilton%2Fdocview%2F1310021946%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>301</sup> Katherine Dalton, “Screen: The Long War,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 06 June 1987, 45.

<sup>302</sup> John Simon, “Found in the Mud,” *National Review* 39, no. 4, March 13, 1987, 54, 57, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12292967&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>303</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: *Platoon*,” *Crises*, Vol. 5 No. 04, April 1, 1987, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [On Screen: \*Platoon\* \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://OnScreen:Platoon(crisismagazine.com)).

<sup>304</sup> Bruce Bawer, “Poltroon,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 20, Iss 03, 1987, 34.

military presence in places like Vietnam and Central America serves only to make the lives of the local peasantry more miserable and tragic—it's the powerful rich destroying the lives of the helpless poor.”<sup>305</sup> Taking a step back and viewing the film within the current geopolitical climate he said, “*Platoon* is meant in part as an argument against American involvement in Vietnam—and, by extension, an argument against our involvement in Central America.” The hypocrisy of the film was, therefore “breathtaking”, but what especially rubbed Bawer was the audience’s reaction. He attended a viewing at a UCLA film class’s screening in Los Angeles where Oliver Stone was in attendance to take questions afterward. This part appalled him more than the film itself as he described those in attendance as being “possessed of an irresponsible, self-congratulatory variety of pacifism that was barely distinguishable from...a dozen other self-indulgent, quasi-religious, feel-good-about-yourself California movements.”<sup>306</sup>

*Full Metal Jacket* was reviewed by the same four critics, but the reception was more refined. These reviews once more lead the reader to take notice of the common theme for these critics, individualism and relatable characters. Simon praised the director Kubrick as a “master technician,” but immediately said he was “at a loss when it comes to people.” The main two characters in the first half of the film (Sgt. Hatman and Pvt. Pyle) were simple “caricatures,” and the ending, he saw as a belated attempt to “cram some specious humanity into a film that...misfires.” He puts it more bluntly toward the end when he noted that neither he nor the audience felt the story related to them or could recognize themselves in any of the characters.<sup>307</sup> Similarly, Alleva wrote how Kubrick “perhaps no longer knows how to chart the spiritual shifts within individuals,” and Bawer while mentioning how it was “visually striking and at times quite

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<sup>305</sup> Bawer, “Poltroon,” 33.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>307</sup> John Simon, “Twice-Bitten Bullet,” *National Review* 39, no. 15, August 14, 1987, 52–53.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12561847&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

gripping” also made the point how in the end it was “little more than an assortment of memorable images and forgettable platitudes.”<sup>308</sup> Finally, Dalton in *Chronicles* offered up how many of the critics seemed to feel about both its faults and strengths, “[i]t is all horrible and beautifully done. Kubrick descends slowly from the funny into the frightening, and from the frightening into hell.”<sup>309</sup> But, it always came back to the fact there was little to no humanity about the characters in the film, “Kubrick seems fascinated not by characters but by the lack, the butt-end, the eradication of personality.”<sup>310</sup> Once again, the focus on the person and their development to many conservatives, whether they knew it or not, was central to how they viewed and understood film.

*Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* arguably marked the zenith of the Vietnam War movie in popular culture.<sup>311</sup> It was not that they were considered the best or most critically acclaimed, but after them, only a handful garnered any reviews at all. The last two films in this chapter were released a couple of years later and signified the end of the era of Vietnam war movies. They were most likely reviewed, at least by Simon and Alleva, not for the content they depicted, which had become old news by this time, but because of the popularity and significance of their two directors, De Palma and Stone.

During the summer of 1989, Brian De Palma released his controversial *Casualties of War* (1989). In it, Private Eriksson (Michael J. Fox) struggles with his superior officer Sgt. Tony Meserve (Sean Penn) when the latter orders his troops to abduct a Vietnamese girl Oanh to be

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<sup>308</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Full Metal Jacket,” *Crises*, Vol. 5 No. 09, September 1, 1987, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Full Metal Jacket \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://crisismagazine.com); and Bruce Bawer, “Kubrick Goes To War,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 20, Iss. 10, 1987, 41.

<sup>309</sup> Katerine Dalton, “Screen: Full Force,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 10, October, 1987, 46.

<sup>310</sup> Dalton, “Full Force,” 47.

<sup>311</sup> *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987) and *Hamburger Hill* (1987) released the same year in 1987 were overshadowed by *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, leaving little time for critics to dedicate much ink to so many Vietnam war movies.

used as a sex slave. Less known for its cinematic acuity and more for its acting and some intense scenes of American servicemen raping a Vietnam prisoner, it induced contrasting opinions. Don Feder in *Human Events* was the first to put anything in print describing it as a continuation of the “America-the-Monster” tradition.<sup>312</sup> He sardonically wrote how it “makes *Platoon* seem patriotic by comparison” with all G.I.’s beside the “token good American” being “uniformly vicious or contemptible.”<sup>313</sup> The point, he wrote, was no longer to prove that Hollywood is biased. This thesis “has been proved beyond a shadow of a doubt” but rather Hollywood “mirrors liberalism’s obsession with the Vietnam War,” and “to prove they were right about the war and that the American effort was evil/idiotic.”<sup>314</sup>

John Simon offered up a more contradictory perspective. Depicted as “an ugly and important story,” nonetheless he did “admire De Palma for telling it” even if he “flubs it” in the end.<sup>315</sup> One of the flaws was that “De Palma will follow up something believable and powerful with something contrived and crassly manipulative,” a common critique of Simon.<sup>316</sup> While he compared it to *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* and labeled it “superior” his focus was not on the politics of the film but the horrors that humanity unleashes on itself. “The gang rape itself is horrible though comparatively downplayed; the main horror” Simon believed, “is in the condition of Oanh, physical and psychological, after being ravaged for two days.”<sup>317</sup> Meanwhile,

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<sup>312</sup> Don Feder, “Truth is the Casualty in ‘Casualties of War,’” *Human Events*, Sep 23, 1989, 13, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ftruth-is-casualty-casualties-war%2Fdocview%2F1310041739%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>315</sup> John Simon, “The Enemy Was Us,” *National Review* 41, no. 18, September 29, 1989, 63, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=18954553&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Alleva in *Crises* found the film lacking as well, but for differing reasons. The characters were “as thin as cardboard” and in the end, it was just a “cheap melodrama of war.”<sup>318</sup>

A few months later and only one month after the collapse of the Berlin Wall Oliver Stone revisited the war once again in *Born on the Fourth July* (1989). This time he was selling the “horror of war” theme but not from the jungles of Vietnam as in *Platoon* but from the home front. Winner of Best Director and nominated for Best Picture along with five other categories at the Oscars, it was based on a true story about Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) who is “transformed from an all-American boy...to a pathetically crippled soldier...to an angry opponent of the war.”<sup>319</sup> Richard Alleva reviewed the film in *Crises*. He took note of Kovic’s book which was a “blunt account of the breaking of a body by war and the terrible damage done to the spirit within that broken body,” in contrast, the movie was “a heated-up, politicized melodrama.”<sup>320</sup> Alluding to the opening sequence where young boys were pretending to be soldiers in an idyllic Long Island neighborhood he wrote, “[t]he implication is clear: even in their childish play, America’s youths are being trained for something awful. America is an incubator of killers....”, put plainly the idea that Stone was trying to convey according to Alleva was, “America itself is the corruption.” He continued, “in *Born on the Fourth of July*, evil (militaristic violence) is always out in the open, it is approved of, it is our way of life...yet no sequence, except one, is altogether free of manipulateness and ham-handed dramatics.”<sup>321</sup> Bowman from *The American Spectator* agreed

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<sup>318</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Casualties of War,” *Crises*, Vol. 7 No. 10, October 1, 1989, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Whiz Kid Goes Straight \(crisismagazine.com\)](https://www.crisismagazine.com/On-Screen-Whiz-Kid-Goes-Straight).

<sup>319</sup> Christensen and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 224; and “Born on the Fourth of July,” Awards, *IMDB*, accessed July 22, 2022, [Born on the Fourth of July - Awards - IMDb](https://www.imdb.com/award-nominations/born-on-the-fourth-of-july/).

<sup>320</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Patronizing Patriots,” *Crises*, Vol. 8 No. 03, March 1, 1990, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Patronizing Patriots \(crisismagazine.com\)](https://www.crisismagazine.com/On-Screen-Patronizing-Patriots).

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

with Alleva labeling it “malicious, mendacious propaganda” and putting it on his ten worst films list of the past quarter-century alongside *Apocalypse Now*.<sup>322</sup>

Nonetheless, not all conservative focused on these aspects of the film; Simon was again an outlier. First making sure to point out how he has “been anything but a fan of this director,” he then revealed how Stone’s “new film...is a gripping, unrelenting but extremely powerful work, whose shortcomings evaporate from the memory, but whose strengths are indelible.”<sup>323</sup> Simon described the Vietnam scenes as “more frightening than anything in *Platoon*,” and wrote that he “can't think of another American movie in which gaping family rifts are portrayed with such unblinking, gritty honesty.”<sup>324</sup> “Love or hate it,” he ended his review, “this is a film you cannot afford to pass by.”<sup>325</sup> Again, Simon brought attention not to the politics of film which were blatantly pacifist in nature, but to the personal human relational interactions which once more emphasize complex individuals and the human condition.

The fact that Simon seemed to prefer *The Killing Fields* and *Born on the Fourth of July* to any of the other Vietnam movies is a curious takeaway. At first glance it may seem like this would weaken the unifying theme of conservative critics spurning films that derided American servicemen or the country as evil. However, those familiar with either film could arguably recognize, as it appears Simon did, that the stories were not first and foremost about Vietnam. Rather they focused on an individual coming to terms with his past, altered present, and an uncertain future, all the while struggling internally and externally. Vietnam was the fulcrum on which the story hinged, not the point of the story. This was what many elite conservative critics

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<sup>322</sup> Bowman, “Hit List,” 77.

<sup>323</sup> John Simon, “Wild Life,” *National Review* 42, no. 2, February 5, 1990, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12140442&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

like Simon longed to see, a truly human story. However, even if this point is ignored, Simon exemplified another fact, namely that those elite critics, Grenier excluded, were less concerned with the ideological message of the film *if* the cinematic and artistic quality could overcome the antagonistic traits which bothered many of the sociocultural critics.

When *Casualties of War* and *Born on the Fourth of July* came out Hollywood had resoundingly made up for the aforementioned silence that occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s with the complete bombardment of Vietnam War movies that appeared during the 1980s. And it was not only Hollywood making up for the lost time. In 1989, a *Newsweek* article “Cashing in on the Vietnam War,” observed how the Vietnam War had become a “highly profitable nostalgic franchise” where everything from ashtrays and condoms to shotguns and neckties was being sold having to do with the Vietnam War.<sup>326</sup> It seemed Vietnam for many Americans had lost its unsavory tinge and had become mainstream, and it did not stop in the 1980s. From the start of the first Bush presidency to the beginning of the next there were additional movies released like *In Country* (1989), *Welcome Home* (1989), and *Heaven and Earth* (1993), *Tigerland* (2000) just to name a few, but they had little to no reviews on them.<sup>327</sup> Thus, 1989 truly marked the end of Vietnam War film reviews in conservative publications. The 1990s may have ushered in the first president shaped more by the 1960s and Vietnam than World War II, but by then there was not much left to say about the war that had not already been said in the previous decade.

Several points need to be reiterated fully at this point. First, the centrality of the well-developed fully individualized character where some aspect of people’s shared humanity was brought to light has been shown to be a fundamental aspect of conservative film criticism. When

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<sup>326</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 290.

<sup>327</sup> The single review of these movies is here for those interested: For *Heaven and Earth* see James Bowman, “Lost and Profound,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 28, Iss 02, 1994, 84-85.



this was done well the artists/filmmaker was able to provoke both deep thought and feelings. *Deer Hunter* is the best example of this, as was *The Killing Fields*. When not done poorly nearly all conservative critics were quick to point out this fact as a reason for their distaste (*Full Metal Jacket* and *Coming Home*). However, for the elite critics, this factor could outweigh a litany of other ideological or political issues they may have had with films (*Killing Fields*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Casualties of War*). While this point was not embedded in every review or even with every film its continuing reemergence augurs its recognition. To a lesser extent, but also one which came up in this chapter was the necessity for films to be reasonably grounded in reality, not breaking with logic. This will not be stressed here, as it will become more apparent in another chapter.

Another theme that hopefully started to become clear in this chapter was the dichotomy between those critics who valued the film chiefly through an artistic lens and those who placed more importance on the ideological messaging in the film. Now, this chapter proved to be one in which many critics found it exceedingly difficult to overlook some of the political messaging implicitly and explicitly woven into many of the films on the Vietnam War. Because these films were released while the Cold War was still being waged and anti-communism was one of the principal pieces of glue that held all diverging strains of conservatism together, their hesitancy to push back on films that were seen as disparaging to the American war effort in Vietnam or American serviceman was something that unified most but not all critics. Thus, the divergence between art-lead critics and ideologically-lead critics is more convoluted in this chapter than in the others, but still present.

Continuing on this point, every single film in this study besides *Deer Hunter*, *Rambo*, and *Rambo II* received a fair amount of ridicule for either being anti-American, anti-military, or

depicting American troops in a hostile light. The three films listed received their own fair share of criticism, but from either cinematic or aesthetic areas. All the others had at least some mention of how the films in one way or another were antagonistic in their treatment of those who served in Vietnam, to the belief that the war was a just cause, or to the more basic idea that the war needed to be fought at all. The “war is hell” theme became a common refrain, as did the “war turns men into beasts” mythos. Either and sometimes both concepts played out in multiple films. In popular culture, these ideas when shown and anthropomorphized on film, were indeed powerful as noted by varying reviewers. Nevertheless, those critics who were more concerned with the political meaning of the film than with its artfulness found these ideas not only subversive but also lacking in integrity.

The last point is one that has not been touched on throughout the chapter but returns to one of the first questions asked; the examination of the so-called rightward shift in film during the Age of Reagan. Did conservatives actually see this unfolding, and should this title define the era? Yes and no. Only taking into account the evidence shown above, one could easily conclude that this was a falsehood. However, further evidence points toward the idea that, at least when it came to Vietnam movies during a very short period of time, critics may have seen some aberration in Left-leaning B-level films during the late 1970s and early 1980s but was not apparent in the major blockbuster films of the era. It should be mentioned again that the vast majority of films cited as evidence for this shift were not even reviewed in the pages of any of the publications analyzed here. Richard Grenier of *Commentary* was the strongest proponent of witnessing a shift in real-time. In a 1981 review of *Nighthawk*, he wrote that he saw “a linear progression of movies about Vietnam soldiers. Going from silence in the antiwar era of the 1960s and early 70s (except *Coming Home*) but becoming more patriotic with *Deerhunter* and

*The Stunt Man* and culminating in the “triumphant” *Nighthawk*.”<sup>328</sup> A few months later he described how the “current attitude of the American people toward their own country” had been leaning away from counterculture movies and more towards a “patriotism pays” perspective.<sup>329</sup> Two years later he defined this supposed progression a bit more; a “neonationalist wave...swept the country following the Teheran hostage crises, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and even the revisionism of Vietnam” and these movies were not only “patriotic but ardently pro-military.”<sup>330</sup>

Kopff in *Chronicles* believed he was witnessing something similar when it came to Vietnam films:

If the films that appeal to the popular imagination are evidence, the war is not over for many Americans. More, they are willing to see abusive portrayals of the leadership that lost the war and brought on so many of the fruits of the 60's. This you will not learn reading "important" magazines or public speeches. The American people have discovered in the darkness of the movie theater and the privacy of their homes what they want to applaud. The security of the voting booth has begun to proclaim the same message. The liberal Bourbons, who have learned nothing and forgotten nothing, are beginning to stir uncomfortably in their couches. The cries for equality and compassion that blare from the loudspeakers are being drowned out by a mob crying for excellence and victory, both personal and national. As yet, only popular art reflects this resurgence, but a satiated and sleeping elite may awaken one morning to discover that their cynical Vietnam misadventure was the harbinger of the great popular revolutions of our time.<sup>331</sup>

The last article by Grenier relating to Vietnam war films was a 1991 article in *The National Interest*, “Hollywood’s Foreign Policy: Utopianism Tempered by Greed.” In the ten-page article

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<sup>328</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: Updating James Bond," *Commentary* 71, no. 6, Jun 01, 1981, 70-71, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-updating-james-bond%2Fdocview%2F1290079561%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>329</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: Arms and the Movies," *Commentary*, 72, no. 4, Oct 01, 1981, 71, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-arms%2Fdocview%2F1290113842%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>330</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: The Politicized Oscar,” *Commentary* 75, no. 6, Jun 01, 1983, 68, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-politicized-oscar%2Fdocview%2F1290183602%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>331</sup> Kopff, “Film: Still in Saigon in My Mind,” 24.

Grenier chronicled how films could be viewed through a foreign policy lens. Bringing his basis for a start in a rightward shift forward a bit from his previous article, he wrote that in 1982 there “abruptly, came an eruption of pro-military patriotism” that seemed to be encouraged by the moviegoing public.<sup>332</sup> “On balance it would be fair to say that the American moviegoing public...has with very few exceptions shown a decided preference for Vietnam War films that are at least perceived as patriotic and anticommunist, while usually staying away in droves from films it perceives as categorically anti-American.”<sup>333</sup> This was not only true of the American public but also most conservative critics.

At the very least, this signified that some critics did see a shift occurring. However, one must delve deeper. The premise that a minuscule cross-section of Vietnam films (not the critically acclaimed ones) portended the changing of the cultural guard was far too Pollyannaish. The rightward shift may have occurred, but not in a fashion described by some as increasing throughout the 1980s. Rather it ended in a swift fashion. Grenier himself noted how the tide had already turned back favoring the Left by January of 1984. The “nationalist revival of the latter part of the Carter administration and the first two years of the Reagan administration gave us a whole string of patriotic, pro-military, anti-Soviet movies,” but the nation was now amid a “barrage films from the Left.”<sup>334</sup> Sobran writing in 1985 lamented the “huge market out there for right-wing movies” based on the financial success he witnessed, but this was more of a complaint that these films were the exception to the rule, not a celebration of a shift in the

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<sup>332</sup> Richard Grenier, “Hollywood’s Foreign Policy: Utopianism Tempered by Greed,” *The National Interest*, no. 24, 1991, 73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894748>.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Summertime Visions,” *Commentary* 74, no. 2, Aug 01, 1982, 65-70, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-summertime-visions%2Fdocview%2F1290146207%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Richard Grenier, “Movies: The Hard Left and the Soft,” *Commentary* 77, no. 1, 1984, 57, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-hard-left-soft%2Fdocview%2F1290152492%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

culture.<sup>335</sup> After 1984, except for Kopff's "Film: Still in Saigon in My Mind," there was no talk of a rightward or conservative shift in film as a whole in any conservative publication. From many conservatives' perspectives, the opposite was true. In fact, a closer reading of Grenier's *National Interest* piece bears out some of the more somber analyses. In the early 1990s, he wrote, "Hollywood's foreign policy bears a strong resemblance to that of the United Nations in its most anti-American years, when the Arab- African alliance, with Soviet backing, called most of the shots."<sup>336</sup>

Taking a step back, the label "Reagan era movies," itself needed to be redefined from the way Sklar and others have defined it. Film critic J. Hoberman in *Make My Day: Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan* came close to the truth when he described Reagan-era films directly in contrast with the films of the 1960s and 1970s, the era of disillusionment. Therefore, Reagan-era movies were "a process of reillusionment [sic]" or an attempt to "restore America's...innocence."<sup>337</sup> Hoberman believed the puerile films like *E.T.*, *Indiana Jones*, *Star Wars*, and other movies that were in some way a reversion back to simpler stories where the good guys were really good and they always win out in the end, were the true incarnations of Reagan-era films. And while these films may have represented the hope and simple-minded positivity that then-President Reagan was attempting to instill in the culture and country, they were just the kind of films that conservatives detested; simple-minded, infantile, with unrelatable and cardboard cut-outs as characters who were used more as props in a special effect-oriented bonanza. Jon Lewis, in his textbook *American Film: A History* also argued that the 1980s and 1990s represented a "return to the old Hollywood formula of big films targeted at the widest

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<sup>335</sup> Sobran, "Hollywood: In a Word, Communistic," 27.

<sup>336</sup> Grenier, "Hollywood's Foreign Policy: Utopianism Tempered by Greed," 71.

<sup>337</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 17.

possible audience.”<sup>338</sup> Lewis’s point should not be overlooked. If a Rightward shift was present, then this is the best way in which to view not only Vietnam war films, but all films included in such a paradigm shift. The films described as Reaganesque were not an aberration in the linear progression of film, rather they were a return to more traditional films after the disillusioned, anti-hero-centered, and paranoia-filled films of the 1970s. But many of these films deemed to be the symbol of Reaganite cinema, as will be seen in the following chapters, were some of most panned films by conservative critics.

In the end, it is imperative to remember that while the 1980s, in the words of *Human Events*, “produced some exceptional [conservative] films” the overall consensus of films, as judged by many on the Right by the end of the 1980s, was that “Hollywood is a moral cesspool,” where movies are either “anti-capitalist, anti-religious, pacifist, anarchistic, or promote a thoroughgoing moral relativism.”<sup>339</sup> These feelings about Hollywood did not fade from conservative thought. Inevitably, by the 1990s some conservatives began to try to appeal to Hollywood to make films that appealed to more general audiences and depicted traditional values. They made the argument that movies depicting traditional or conservative values were more profitable and should be made more readily than what was becoming common in theatres across the country. It was essentially the religious right that was at the vanguard of this fight and Disney studios were their principal opponent. This is the topic of the next chapter “Conservatives Watch Cartoons: From *Beauty and the Beast* to *South Park*.”

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<sup>338</sup> Jon Lewis, *American Film: A History* (New York, NY: Norton & Company Press, 2008), 359.

<sup>339</sup> Feder and McCaffrey, "Conservatives Honor Other Great Communicators of the 1980s," 10,12,

## Chapter 4: Conservatives Watch Cartoons: From *Beauty and the Beast* to *South Park*

There is a genre of film that is central to the development of cinema itself, has captivated and amazed audiences of all ages, and provoked some of the harshest criticism and most laudatory praise from reviewers. This genre is cartoons of course, or more precisely known as animation. Whether it was Disney's *Steamboat Willy* (1928) pioneering music techniques, Warner Brothers' creation of Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, and Daffy Duck all central to American shared culture, or even Bart Simpson's designation as one of *Time*'s "100 most important people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," it is plain to see how cartoons have impacted American society.<sup>340</sup> But, the purpose here is not to show how integral cartoons were and are to the American ethos. Rather, it is to better understand how conservatives viewed this genre and animations' impact on film and the larger culture.

Animation by its very nature caused issues for conservative reviewers. By the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the unique appeal of the genre had long faded from the American adult populace, and many believed cartoons were best suited for children. Disney embodied the "animation for children" spirit releasing classics like *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Fantasia*, *Bambi*, and *Pinocchio* among many others. However, by the 1980s and especially into the 1990s animators and creators began tailoring cartoons for older teens and young adults. This became apparent with television series like *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butthead*, *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, and by the turn of the millennia *Family Guy*. The content became increasingly explicit, cruder, and more provocative in nature. Movies on the other hand were both ahead and behind the times. Ahead only because movies were laxer with their content regulations, especially in art-

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<sup>340</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 197-199; and Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 108.

house theatres, where edgier animators (Robert Crumb) made films like *Fritz the Cat* (1972) or *Heavy Metal* (1981) and could be played for those willing to pay.<sup>341</sup> Some became cult classics, but they never received the critical acclaim that non-animated films achieved. As a result, they were truly behind television when it came to animating content for older viewers, thus conservative critics viewed still fewer animated movies during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

One of the select few early animated films reviewed was *Wizards* (1977) written by Ralph Bakshi who also worked on the more popular *Fritz the Cat* and other similar animated features. *Wizards* was about two brothers, one personifying magic and the other technology, in a battle for post-apocalyptic earth. The cartoon was clearly made for adults. It included scantily-clad female figures with their nipples showing, sexual innuendo, and spliced images of Nazi atrocities. This last bit was done because one of the brothers found old Nazi film reels and utilized them along with Nazi symbols in his attempt to conquer the world. It was reviewed in two libertarian magazines *Reason* and *Libertarian Review*. David Brudnoy in *Libertarian Review* noted that the animator was “truly talented” but Brudnoy was more focused on why Nazism rather than communism was the “sole source of suffering in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” when the “hammer and sickle” is just as worthy.<sup>342</sup> As described in a previous chapter, the centrality of communism was an ever-present theme during the late 1970s and 1980s and was evident even in reviews of animated pictures. John Hospers in *Reason*, like Brudnoy, enjoyed the visual effects, yet called it a “dismal failure” which tried too hard to play on the “war is hell theme.”<sup>343</sup> Libertarians, it seemed, were more open to reviewing material others may have deemed scandalous or undeserving of serious analysis.

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<sup>341</sup> Films like *Fritz the Cat* were animated independent films which oftentimes featured sex, drug use, foul language, and graphic violence.

<sup>342</sup> David Brudnoy, “Nazi Chic,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol, VI, No. 2, March-April, 16.

<sup>343</sup> John J. Pierce and John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, August, 1977, 46-47.



After *Wizards* there was a prolonged silence on animation from nearly all quarters of conservatism until the late 1980s. The lack of analysis of animated movies appeared to occur for a multitude of reasons including the genre being better suited for children and thus not worthy of serious critique, or the films strayed too far from the mainstream due to their vulgarity and crudeness. However, the lack in supply of worthwhile animation to wider audiences from the late 1970s to the late 1980s seemed to stem from issues that arose in the Disney corporation during this period. Some difficulties came about after the reorganization of their animation studio in the wake of losing much of their staff in the late 1970s as well as the new focus in the mid-1980s on creating more mature content tailored for young adults under the Touchstone Picture label.<sup>344</sup> The number of animated films continued to stagnate during the 1980s only releasing a handful of animated films throughout the entire decade.<sup>345</sup> As Disney was basically the sole provider of family-friendly animated material, their lack of production had an obvious wide-ranging impact on the dearth of reviews until the early 1990s. However, this was only a slight hiccup in the larger narrative of Disney's meteoric rise as a company and especially within the realm of animation.

Indeed, the 1990s would go on, as CEO Michael Eisner aptly put it, to be the “Decade of Disney” with the most animated releases ever at sixty-seven, more than doubling the amount from the previous decade.<sup>346</sup> Yet even when Disney movies looked to be making a comeback with their release of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), not one conservative publication reviewed it. It was not until the end of 1991 with the release of *Beauty and Beast* that critics once again took

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<sup>344</sup> Pamela G. Hollie, “Animators’ Loss Shakes Disney,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1979, D1, D14; “History,” Walt Disney Studios, accessed July 22, 2022, [The Walt Disney Studios | History](#); and Aljean Harmetz, “After the Lean Years, a Triumph,” *The New York Times*, December, 11, 1989, C13.

<sup>345</sup> Aaron Kyle, “All Disney Animated Films (Order of Release),” *IMDB*, July 12, 2019, [All Disney Animated Films \(Order of release\) - IMDb](#).

<sup>346</sup> Aaron H. Goldberg, *The Disney Story: Chronicling the Man, The Mouse, and the Parks* (Pennsylvania: Quaker Scribe Press, 2016), 158.

notice of animated features. But in the meantime, Disney had two underwhelming releases *DuckTales the Movie* (1990) and *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990). The latter was only reviewed in passing by Brudnoy in *Human Events* which will be touched on shortly. In fact, the libertarian-leaning Brudnoy was the sole critic who reviewed animated features with any consistency from 1991-1993.

Brudnoy's reviews ran in the pages of *Human Events* under the title "The Right Movies" which began in November of 1990. Some animated films reviewed by Brudnoy and found nowhere else were *The Rescuers Down Under* which he believed had "[e]xcellent humor", the re-release of *101 Dalmatians*, the "pretty drawings [and] pretty leftie ideology" of *Fern Gully*, the "vulgar sort" of animation of *Cool World*, another Disney re-release this time of *Pinocchio*, *Little Nemo*, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* which he thought would "entrance and children and not bore adults... [l]ike none other before it."<sup>347</sup> Brudnoy's column ended in late 1993, however, he continued to write the occasional article or review.

This type of short and content-focused review in *Human Events* was indicative of the shift occurring within conservatism at the time. The emphasis on language, violence, and

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<sup>347</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Mar 02, 1991, 14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310024104%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Ibid., "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Sep 28, 1991, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310029390%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Apr 25, 1992, 14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310031256%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Aug 15, 1992, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310029043%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Sep 26, 1992, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310028409%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Nov 27, 1993, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310035124%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>;

sexual matter was a tip of the hat to the increasing influence of the religious right on conservative culture and thought. The religious right was a fundamental part of local and national conservative politics during the 1980s and by the 1990s was firmly embedded in the conservative movement.<sup>348</sup> Professor of History at American University Allan J. Lichtman went so far as to state that the religious right and other Christian groups “did not just back the Republican Party...it *became* the Republican Party.”<sup>349</sup> This move within conservatism did not translate into larger policy successes for the religious right. Most scholars are very clear on the failure of the religious right to achieve most, if any of their most important policy goals during the 1980s, i.e. the overturn of abortion, reinstatement of prayer in schools, and stemming the tide of gay and feminist ideology.<sup>350</sup> Nevertheless, where they did indeed succeed, and what was evidenced by the changing form and focus of film reviews from the early 1990s onward was their impact on how nearly all strains of conservatism interacted with the culture, especially film.

Nowhere was this more palpable than in the pages of Ted Baehr’s *Movieguide: A Biblical Guide to Movies and Entertainment*. *Movieguide* was a daily two-minute radio feature and a monthly newspaper column which by 1989 became a daily newspaper/magazine column and bi-monthly newsletter. It was also made into multi-volume books. Ted Baehr, the son of stage and television actors, was on the board of directors of the National Religious Broadcasters--- when he published his first *Movieguide* book *The Movie & Video Guide for Christian*

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<sup>348</sup> Julian Zelizer and Kevin M. Kruse, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, NY: Norton & Co. 2019), 93-95.

<sup>349</sup> Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2009), 399. This is not to say that the Republican Party and conservatism are synonymous, but this political party was indeed the home of the broad array of conservatives.

<sup>350</sup> John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) 173; and Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation*, 387.

*Families*.<sup>351</sup> He was also a producer and host of PBS's *Perspectives* and later became chairman of Good News Communications in the late 1980s before publishing the second volume. The goal of these reviews was in no way to judge the artistic merits of the movie. Rather, it was to give a "detailed review of each movie, both good and bad, so you can discern which ones to see and which to avoid," while also giving "a Biblical perspective toward each movie so you can develop your Biblical worldview and discernment."<sup>352</sup>

The format of these reviews was different than what was typical in the pages of *Commentary*, *National Review*, or any of the other conservative magazines where critical aesthetic analysis was central to the review. *Movieguide* reviews were never usually more than a short thirty-second read. More telling was the easy-to-read list of headings at the top of each review with the title, a star rating system from four to one, recommendation (evil, bad, extreme caution, caution, acceptable), rating, release date, starring, director, genre, content (might have something like obscenities, violent, nudity, etc., or nothing objectionable), intended audience, and who reviewed the film. There could also be a second heading for movies deemed to be either "Classic" or "Masterpiece." This made Baehr's review system a quick and easy reference for parents concerned about what movies their children were watching. Baehr became a mainstay of culture critics on the Right and was often referenced in the pages of *Christianity Today* wherever the social impact of the film was a topic.<sup>353</sup> By January of 1998, Ted Baehr and *Movieguide*

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<sup>351</sup> Ted Baehr, *The Movie & video Guide for Christian Families* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987); and "About Dr. Ted Baehr," *Movieguide*, accessed July 22, 2022, [About Dr. Baehr | Movieguide | Movie Reviews for Christians](#).

<sup>352</sup> Ted Baehr, *The Christian Family Guide to Movies & Video* (Brentwood, TN: Woglemuth & Hyatt Publishers Inc., 1989), 27.

<sup>353</sup> For a few examples see: "Dead Man Walking Wins Movie Prize," *Christianity Today*, Apr 08, 1996, 93, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fdead-man-walking-wins-movie-prize%2Fdocview%2F211945745%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; "Groups Protest R-Rated Priest," *Christianity Today*, May 15, 1995, 52, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fgroups-protest-r-rated-priest%2Fdocview%2F212024319%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; "New Film Code Sought," *Christianity Today*, Apr 05, 1993, 74, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fnew-film-code>

became the official movie reviewers of *Human Events* marking a cultural shift from *Human Events* from the older anticommunist focus to a more domestic cultural focus when it came to movies. The format for *Human Events* would be a little more detailed and nuanced but this will be fleshed out later.

After the prolonged silence following *Wizards* and before the floodgates open with *Beauty and the Beast*, the first animated movie to garner serious attention from critics on Right was not an animated movie in the true sense of the term. Nevertheless, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* was another case of animation making history in the realm of film. It imagined a world where animated characters and real people lived side-by-side in 1947 Los Angeles and Toontown respectively. One toon, Roger Rabbit, is accused of the murder of the owner of Toontown Marvin Acme, and he becomes reliant on a toon-hating detective Eddie Valiant to prove his innocence. Needless to say, wackiness, comedy, and action ensue during this pioneering film. Ted Baehr provided a review in the second volume of his *Movieguide* book and at first glance, it did not seem overly negative. It received three stars for artistic skill and under “content” listed “rough language and bawdy humor” as the only offenses.<sup>354</sup> However, despite the initial “funny opening” and being a “technically brilliant” film, it was ruined, according to Baehr, by the “premise that humor overcomes evil.”<sup>355</sup>

Unlike Baehr, Bruce Bawer of *The American Spectator* who saw the film four times in just two weeks found it to be “the closest thing I’ve ever seen to a perfect piece of film

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<sup>354</sup> Baehr, *The Christian Family Guide to Movies & Video*, 380.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

entertainment.”<sup>356</sup> He called it “breathtaking,” “an exhilarating, magical experience,” and unlike Baehr, Bawer thought the film beneficial for both adults and children.<sup>357</sup> This was the only review by Bawer in this chapter. He left the *American Spectator* in July of 1990 with the more caustic animation and Disney-hating James Bowman taking over just two months later.<sup>358</sup> Bowman is at the center of many reviews throughout the chapter as he was one of the few to review nearly all the animated films discussed below. Then there was John Simon. “Chances are,” he says, “you’ll get your share of laughs and dazzlement” from the film just as he did.<sup>359</sup> In the end, though, he found the film lacking any sense of realism and straining plausibility.

[H]owever brilliantly these three-dimensional cartoon figures that cast actual shadows interact with human beings (the technical difficulties that had to be overcome by animators and actors are awesome to contemplate) the human world and the Toon world have not been made to mesh properly...It seems to me that you cannot switch dispensations in a plot: all sorts of things can be mixed together, but finally it has to be a Toon world or a human world, or two separate worlds (e.g., Kansas and Oz), each with its own discrete dispensation...Dogs playing water polo is funny; dogs playing water polo against human beings even funnier. But the water polo must remain water polo; it cannot change its rules in mid game without forfeiting much of the fun.<sup>360</sup>

Simon expounds on the importance of consistency within a film. Rules need to be followed, the universe of the movie had to be ordered not chaotic, and this would allow not only for the audience to be able to predict what may occur next, right or wrong, but identify themselves with the characters of the universe even if it was entirely fantasy.

*Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, while not considered among the Disney classics and not immediately recognized as a Disney film as it was released by Touchstone Pictures, nonetheless

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<sup>356</sup> Bruce Bawer, “Rabbit Run,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 21, Iss 09, 1988, 35. Bawer first joined *The American Spectator* in August of 1986, where beforehand he wrote for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Times*.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> For more on why Bawer left, see Chapter 2: Conservative Film Critics and Their Publications.

<sup>359</sup> John Simon, “Turn On, Toon In, Drop Out,” *National Review* 40, no. 16. August 19, 1988, 49, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12293334&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

marked the precipitous beginning of Disney's take over the culture. For nearly a decade every single animated feature discussed in the pages of conservative publications was almost always a product of Disney's animation studios. And it all started with a reimagined version of an old French tale about a precocious girl named Belle.

Like many other Disney creations, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) was adapted from an older story and remade or "Disneyfied" to placate a younger American audience. The most likely origins come from a French fairy tale *La Belle et La Bete* dating back to the 1740s and written by Madame de Villeneuve.<sup>361</sup> It is the story/musical of a cursed prince transformed into a Beast who needs someone to fall in love with him before time runs out thus having to remain in his cursed form forever. Enter the heroine Belle, who through an assorted bargain becomes the Beast's prisoner, where they ultimately fall in love breaking the curse. There were only two contemporary reviews of the film but *Beauty and the Beast's* critical acclaim (winning Best Music for Original Score and Original Song along with being the first animated ever nominated for Best Picture) and Disney's continued success in animation throughout the decade, forced many conservatives to look back at this groundbreaking work and opine.<sup>362</sup>

In his "The Right Movies" section, Brudnoy's short blurb awarded the film four stars and succinctly labeled it "[g]orgeously drawn, funny, [and] wonderfully vocalized."<sup>363</sup> The only other review was written by Bowman of *The American Spectator*. He had a very different take on the film and animation as a whole which was clear from the very start of his review, "[e]ven if

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<sup>361</sup> Amelia Carruthers, *Beauty and the Beast: And other Tales of Love in Unexpected Places* (Warwickshire: Pook Press, 2015), 33-34. Carruthers and others also note how the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche could also have served as the original inspiration for this story.

<sup>362</sup> Goldberg, *The Disney Story*, 163-164.

<sup>363</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Dec 21, 1991, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310026887%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

you discount the fact that I consider any feature-length animation project as being at best an accomplishment on the order of that of the Indian gentleman who has, I believe, transcribed the entire New Testament onto a grain of rice, this film is tripe.”<sup>364</sup> He continued and explained his reasoning:

I know that it is supposed to be for the kiddies, but I cannot forbear to protest against it on behalf of mature taste—partly because it is selling an adult product... Fairy tales are meant to be scary in the way that life is scary to children... It would take a child already on the verge of a nervous breakdown to be afraid of anything in this movie. Adults have sanitized [it]... The cuddly beast looks like an American bison except that he defies evolutionary logic by having the teeth of a carnivore rather than a ruminant... Belle (as Beauty is called in this Frenchified version) shows no fear of him at all, presumably because it would compromise her as the true feminist heroine that adult sensibilities have made her. In fact, there is a whole invented subplot, too ridiculous for words, involving a male chauvinist hunter called Gaston, which is designed precisely to establish her feminist credentials.<sup>365</sup>

He ended his review by noting, “I guess the little girls, at least, will get something out of it if they learn to stick with the guy who owns the castle instead of the handsome ne’er-dowell who spends all his time in the woods, hunting.”<sup>366</sup> There is quite a bit to unpack in Bowman’s comments. First, his initial disregard for animation as a genre should be kept in mind moving forward in the chapter as it does not dissipate. Then, two important points developed over time. One was the sanitization or Disneyfication of significant stories. The twisting or molding of older fairy tales to fit modern tastes, especially for the young, left a sour taste in many conservative critics’ mouths’ not just Bowman. In another piece, he explained why this is. “Disney,” he wrote, “wishes to tell children that they live in a world where the only dangers are imaginary, where perfect strangers should love each other, where they should reject nothing but religious instruction and parental guidance, where they should seek wisdom in their own

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<sup>364</sup> James Bowman, “Everything Old is New Again,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 25, Iss 02, 1992, 51.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



imaginations. In the world of the New Disney, imagination itself has become a dangerous thing.”<sup>367</sup> The problem Bowman found was twofold; a complete rejection of traditional and societal norms where adults were respected and listened to and directly correlated with that was the idea of the child as the bearer of all that is good, wise, and respectable. While in 1992 Disney was still considered by many on the Right as the last bastion of family-friendly films, Disney would find itself in the crosshairs of many conservative writers. This continued through the 1990s and only got worse as many conservatives began to see Disney as a growing antagonist in the burgeoning culture wars.

The last point had to do with the ideology of feminism that seemed to be woven into Belle’s character and the evil impugned on Gaston’s masculinity. Bowman called *Beauty and the Beast* a simple “feminist parable.”<sup>368</sup> Feminism in film was a central concern that *nearly* all conservative critics took issue with at one time or another, and with the rise of Disney and child-oriented cinema, this theme came to the forefront. Four years later, in *The Weekly Standard*, he penned how the “real theme comes with its rejection of a macho hunter named Gaston in favor of the gentle if grouchy Beast because the latter is more respectful of Beauty's feminine autonomy.”<sup>369</sup> Bowman was not alone in his consternation. *Chronicles* ran an article in 1996 where the major review was on Disney’s new film *The Hunchbacked of Notre Dame* (1996) which will be explored in greater detail later and also ruminated on *Beauty and Beast*. The reviewer Marian Coombs took issue with the depiction of Gaston who was not in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century version and was only “added to rub in Belle's rejection of a natural match and to be the

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<sup>367</sup> James Bowman, "DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION," *The Weekly Standard*, July 1, 1996, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S3V-25B0-00CY-N2P8-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>368</sup> James Bowman, “To Die in Bed,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 25, Iss 06, 1992, 47-49.

<sup>369</sup> Bowman, "DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION."

‘dumb and dumber’ butt of her sarcastic feminism.”<sup>370</sup> *Beauty and the Beast* was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to the issue of feminism and cinema.

Yet, as demonstrated by Brudnoy earlier, not all reviewers were negative in their assessment of the film. In *Chronicles*, the authors Leon J. and Mary Elizabeth Podles wrote a satirical and somewhat academic review “The Dangers of PICS—Politically Incorrect Cartoons” in which they discussed the history of *Beauty and the Beast* as literature, its exploration of “truths about males and females in relationships,” the study of the French chateau imbedded in the artistry, as well as the “transforming powers of love on the rough male character.”<sup>371</sup> Then, there was Joe Maxwell of *Christianity Today* who called it “a legitimate contender for top honors” in the Best Picture category going up against *Silence of the Lambs*.<sup>372</sup> Only the article was not a review per se, but a broader piece cataloging all the things wrong with Hollywood. Ted Baehr was quoted at length throughout, once again exemplifying his growing influence, especially on the religious right. The article's main point taken straight from Baehr was that “the threads of moral fiber are unraveling in Hollywood.”<sup>373</sup> Building on this thesis, talk Radio show host, movie critic, and author Michael Medved was interviewed due to the release of *Hollywood Vs. America* which caused a stir across both conservatism and film critic circles. From this

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<sup>370</sup> Marian Kester Coombs, “Mondo Quasimodo,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 20, No.11, November 1996, 46.

<sup>371</sup> Mary Elizabeth Podles and Leon J. Podles, “The Dangers of PICS—Politically Incorrect Cartoons,” *Chronicles*, Vol. 17 NO. 03 March 1993, 20-24. Leon Podles would only come up one more time in a review in *Crises* for the non-animated film *The Rocketeer*. He is the author of *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* and *Sacrilege* and is a self described as “dedicated to advancing Christian culture.” For his review on *Rocketeer* or more on him see the following: Leon J. Podles, “On Screen: Return of the B Movie,” *Crises*, Vol. 9 No. 12, September 1, 1991. Crises Magazine Archives. [On Screen: Return of the B Movie \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com); [Author Leon J. Podles :: Author of Sacrilege, The Church Impotent, The Feminization of Christianity, and groundbreaking and in-depth case studies of clergy sexual abuse.](http://www.crisismagazine.com)

<sup>372</sup> Joe Maxwell, “The New Hollywood Watchdogs,” *Christianity Today*, Apr 27, 1992, 38, <http://proxy01.lits.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fnew-hollywood-watchdogs%2Fdocview%2F212001938%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

point forward, like Baehr, Medved became a key figure when it came to understanding how cultural conservatives understood and interacted with film.

Medved's importance cannot truly be overstated. Even before his catapult to wider fame with *Hollywood Vs. America*, he wrote articles in *Human Events* and *Crises* with his opinion sometimes offered in *Christianity Today*.<sup>374</sup> However, with *Hollywood Vs. America* he became a pillar of conservative sociocultural criticism. The main point of the book was to "explore the malign propaganda that has come to dominate Hollywood's product in recent years and...its devastating impact on society as large."<sup>375</sup> He argued that traditional themes like family, religion, and patriotism were under attack and dedicated chapters explaining the precipitous rise of "The Addiction to Violence," "The Infatuation with Foul Language," and the "Urge to Offend" along with many others. The number of conservative publications which leaned on Medved's thesis or gave voice to his concerns was staggering. This is not to say that his ideas were distinctive or groundbreaking. Many cultural critics had voiced their concerns about the growing trend of violence, foul language, overt sexual themes, and a direct antagonism towards traditional Western values.<sup>376</sup> What was unique to Medved was the use of statistics and polling data to show how many of the most offensive films were flops at the box office while family films were frequently the biggest financial hits.

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<sup>374</sup> Michael Medved, "Hollywood Establishment's War Against Religion," *Human Events*, Mar 24, 1990, 10-11, 20, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fhollywood-establishments-war-against-religion%2Fdocview%2F1310030157%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Chris Willman, "Rapture's Serious Faith Plays to Mixed Reviews," *Christianity Today*, Nov 25, 1991, 49-50, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fraptures-serious-faith-plays-mixed-reviews%2Fdocview%2F211878935%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Michael Medved, "Politics of Hollywood: What Sort of Moral Universe Do Film Producers Inhabit?," *Crises*, Vol. 9 No. 04, April 1, 1991, Crises Magazine Archives, [Politics of Hollywood: What Sort of Moral Universe Do Film Producers Inhabit? \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>375</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood Vs. America* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>376</sup> Baehr, Grenier, Podhoretz, Bowman, Terry Teachout, and anyone writing for *Chronicles* had basically been voicing these concerns since the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

His influence among conservatives became ubiquitous during the 1990s. When writing about Hollywood or the culture of movies one was almost certain to see Medved's name somewhere. Richard Neuhaus, one of the most prominent voices of Catholic conservatism, in *First Things* cited Medved when discussing the motives behind Hollywood making offensive movies, *Human Events* not only reviewed his book but followed his career very closely throughout the 1990s, *Commentary's* Podhoretz reviewed his book and lauded his insights, similarly *Christianity Today* celebrated his work in a second longer interview a month after Maxwell's original, *Crises* published a piece by Medved summarizing his main thesis, and *Chronicles* and *The American Spectator* both ran reviews with William Baer in *Chronicles* describing his work as an "excellent and courageous new book" and Bowman wrote, "I know of no one else who has shown so conclusively that obscenity, indecency, and anti-family, anti-military, anti-religious messages are persisted in despite the fact that they are bad [for the] box office... ." <sup>377</sup> Podhoretz, writing in 1997 in *The Weekly Standard* went so far as to call it "the

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<sup>377</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, "Fighting the New York-Hollywood Axis, *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, no. 56, October 1995, 75-79, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=17750832&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; "A Discussion of Hollywood's Fall from Grace," *Human Events*, Jan 30, 1993, 9-12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fdiscussion-hollywoods-fall-grace%2Fdocview%2F1310035690%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Cliff Kincaid, "Disney Releases Anti-Catholic Film," *Human Events*, April 14, 1995, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9504251728&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; Michael J. Catanzaro, "Michael Medved," *Human Events*, February 20, 1998, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=263245&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; John Podhoretz, "Hollywood Vs. America, by Michael Medved (Book Review)," *Commentary*, Nov 01, 1992, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fhollywood-vs-america-michael-medved-book-review%2Fdocview%2F1290160263%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Michael G. Maudlin, "Hollywood Vs. America," *Christianity Today*, Mar 08, 1993, 22-25, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fhollywood-vs-america%2Fdocview%2F211900474%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Michael Medved, "Hollywood's Dirty Little Secrets: Losing Money on Films America Hates," *Crises*, Vol. 11 No. 03, March 1, 1993, Crises Magazine Archives, [Holly Wood's Dirty Little Secrets: Losing Money on Films America Hates \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com); William Baer, "What Is to Be Done?," *Chronicles* Vol. 17 NO. 02 February 1993, 34; and James Bowman, "Heroes of Our Time," *The American Spectator*, Vol 25, Iss 12, 1992, 61.

decade's most unjustly maligned work of cultural criticism."<sup>378</sup> Even those on the Right who disliked it were impacted by it. The only negative reception it received, and it was telling of the growing rift between libertarians and the religious right was from *Reason's* contributing editor Charles Oliver who berated him in three articles from February 1993 to January 1994.<sup>379</sup> Oliver found it disturbing that many conservatives "have been quick to agree with Medved" and his thinking especially because "it sounds like the standard leftist rant against business. Hollywood is conspiring to warp Americans' minds. Moviemakers are foisting bad products on consumers, and although they have been doing this for more than 20 years, the market has failed to punish them. This is an interesting hypothesis, especially coming from conservatives."<sup>380</sup> Needless to say, Medved's idea about a culture war with Hollywood on one side and the larger American populace on the other, became a rallying cry many conservatives would come back to throughout the decade and onward.

Three weeks after William J. Clinton was elected president and as Medved's book was making its rounds in conservative circles another animated Disney feature was released, in November, *Aladdin* (1992). The story, this time taken from an older Arabian tale is about a commoner (Aladdin) who finds a magic lamp containing a genie and his attempt to woo Princess Jasmine while avoiding the evil schemes of her father's Royal Vizier Jafar. Brudnoy, who had written kindly of nearly every Disney movie thus far found *Aladdin* to be a "terrific...old story with fabulous drawing, decent songs, and a genie (Robin Williams) that is astoundingly

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<sup>378</sup> John Podhoretz, "CASH CARRY; Enjoying Midler, Annoying Cusack," *The Weekly Standard*, April 21, 1997, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S3V-2430-00CY-N1B7-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>379</sup> Charles Oliver, "It's Not a Wonderful Book," *Reason*, February 1993, 46-49; Charles Oliver, "That's Life," *Reason*, April 1993, 56-57; and Charles Oliver, "Child's Play, Too," *Reason*, January 1994, 56-57

<sup>380</sup> Charles Oliver, "It's Not a Wonderful Book," *Reason*, February 1993, 46.

delightful.”<sup>381</sup> Bowman, on the other hand, called it “rubbish” and “Disney’s latest homogenized and pasteurized fairy tale” with the character of Aladdin being “too good to be true.”<sup>382</sup> Bowman believed *Aladdin* “celebrates the ingenuous good intentions of children, which are rendered magically powerful, and perversely associates the worldly wisdom of their parents with moral impotence.”<sup>383</sup> The adulation of the child over the adults became a widely recognized theme in Disney animated movies, with the “irrelevance of parents,” seeping into a plethora of Disney films.<sup>384</sup>

The most surprising review, not for content, but for the mere fact he reviewed a fully animated movie was John Simon’s. For someone not particularly fond of movies aimed at children, his review is a testament to the growing power of Disney films and the cinematic achievement of *Beauty and the Beast* the previous year. Interestingly, Simon wrote how “animation...no longer thrills me.”<sup>385</sup> It was more of a shock to the author that animation at one time *did* thrill him, rather than not doing so anymore. Besides *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, Simon did not, at least in the pages of *National Review*, review any other animated movies, so one is dumbstruck as to what other films he may be referring to. Still, he found *Aladdin* acceptable for “children looking for more wholesome fare,” although overall, the songs were “unremarkable,” and the overall film lacked in quality.<sup>386</sup>

By the summer of 1994 and heading into the midterm elections, *The Lion King* (1994) hit theatres. It was a coming-of-age tale of a young lion Simba who shrinks from his responsibility

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<sup>381</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Jan 09, 1993, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310033292%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>382</sup> James Bowman, “Can You Believe It?,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 26, Iss 02, 1993, 55, 65.

<sup>383</sup> Bowman, "DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION."

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> John Simon, “Not for Enlightened Buddhists,” *National Review* 44, no. 24, December 14, 1992, 53, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9212142266&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

as heir to the throne and eventually has to return to reclaim his rightful place as king. *The Lion King* may be the most well-received Disney film of the 1990s. Podhoretz, writing for *The Weekly Standard* as *The Lion King* play was opening on Broadway in 1997, considered *The Lion King* to be “[b]y far the greatest Disney movie of recent years...[it] is hilarious, interesting, exciting, and really quite overwhelmingly powerful -- unambiguously a masterpiece of storytelling.”<sup>387</sup> However, there was only one contemporary review by Bowman whose “hatred of the Disney animation people [was] one of the constants in [his] life.”<sup>388</sup> Bowman’s disgust with Disney notwithstanding, his ire in this review is less focused on the film itself and more on articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that described the film as “too violent, too scary or too loud for their young children” and could “psychologically traumatize children by playing on their most primal fear-the loss of a parent.” He then launched into a tirade lamenting the cultural loss of Brothers Grimm or the tales of Charles Perrault “which [had] far more gruesome ends than anything to be found in *The Lion King*.” He also observed how he was “disappointed not to have hated *The Lion King* more than I did...not so completely false and silly as *Beauty and the Beast* or *Aladdin*, and it actually had some funny moments.” He even enjoyed “the filial piety encouraged by Simba’s developing sense that his father lives in him” and ended by stating, “it is less depressing than the kiddie fantasies that Hollywood cranks out by the multiplex-load in the summertime.”<sup>389</sup> However, two years later he did circle back to *The Lion King* and mention both its “animist bias” and its view of nature “which it sanctifies and makes an

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<sup>387</sup> John Podhoretz, "HOW THE LION LOST HIS STORY; Staging Disney's Spectacular *Lion King*," *The Weekly Standard*, December 1, 1997, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3RGY-S2C0-00CY-N00W-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3RGY-S2C0-00CY-N00W-00000-00&context=1516831).

<sup>388</sup> James Bowman, “Fantasies for All Ages,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 28, Iss 09, 1994, 57.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

object of worship.”<sup>390</sup> This last point dovetailed perfectly with 1995’s release of *Pocahontas* as the animism mentioned in *The Lion King* was “at the center of *Pocahontas*.”<sup>391</sup>

*Pocahontas* (1995) the reworking of the first interactions between English settlers in Virginia and the Native American peoples irked several conservative critics. Bowman as expected did not hold back in his scorn. His most tepid criticism came in the form of calling the character of Pocahontas a prototype of Cher from the movie *Clueless*, i.e., “indistinguishable from a late twentieth century American teenager.”<sup>392</sup> One point which seemed to irritate him was “the film’s contempt for historical authenticity.”<sup>393</sup> But most of all it was the bitter “stereotypes of the good guys as well-intentioned and harmless nature-worshippers and the whites as greedy and violent Christians” which rankled the most feathers.<sup>394</sup> He pointed to the fact that in “all the confrontations with the Indians, naturally, the whites are the more sinister party, and shoot first,” and that the sole hope for “racial harmony” stemmed from her teaching Captain John Smith how to abandon his European ways and become one with nature.<sup>395</sup> These critiques, the focus on historical manipulation and the blanket characterization of entire races, while unique in this

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<sup>390</sup> Bowman, "DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION."

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> James Bowman, “Clueless Kids at the Apollo,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 29, Iss 09, 1995, 61; and James Bowman, “The New Vulgarly,” *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 12, 1999, 82.

<sup>393</sup> Bowman, “Clueless Kids at the Apollo,” 61.

<sup>394</sup> Bowman, "DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION."

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. The blanket characterization is nothing new when it came to Native Americans and white interactions in 1990s cinema. Critically acclaimed *Dances with Wolves* invoked a similar response with Brudnoy calling it “imbued with the spirit of the moment: anti-white,” Grenier called it a “Romantic idealization of Indians,” while *Christianity Today* published a piece which stated how *Dances with Wolves* strongly suggests that “Judeo-Christian civilization is the real enemy.” These are several other examples and the author hopes to expound on them in another chapter. For more see: David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Dec 08, 1990, 12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ffright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310023797%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Richard Grenier, "Indian Love Call," *Commentary* 91, no. 3, Mar 01, 1991, 46-50, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Findian-love-call%2Fdocview%2F1290135893%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and Charles Colson, "Dances with Wolves in Sheep's Clothing," *Christianity Today*, Apr 27, 1992, 72, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fdances-with-wolves-sheeps-clothing%2Fdocview%2F211924581%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.



chapter, will come back around in be expounded upon in the last chapter: “Projecting Race Relations on the Silver Screen: From Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy to Spike Lee.”

This racial enmity was also pointed out in *Human Events* in their satirical article “America Sorely Needs an Anglo-Saxon Anti-Defamation League,” which comically poked fun at “Pocahontas, which defames, stigmatizes, libels, ridicules, maligns and generally disses honest, hardworking Englishmen.”<sup>396</sup> “‘Politicallycorrectahontas’ [a quote taken from *National Review*] -- treats the English settlers of Jamestown as rogues and ruffians.”<sup>397</sup> Both Bowman’s and *Human Events*’ opinions were echoed in Peter and Rochelle Schweizer’s 1998 book *Disney, The Mouse Betrayed: Greed, Corruption, and Children at Risk*. The Schweizers aimed to pull the veil back on the changes occurring at Disney which they found both offensive and, in some cases, illegal. While animated films were not at the heart of the book, they did have a chapter on “The PC Princess” AKA *Pocahontas*. They spoke with animators and other Disney employees and came to the same conclusions already given: there were “deeply animist” characteristics in the art, “Native Americans and Englishmen are classified by race—into good and evil,” and “the historical Pocahontas...was transformed into a cover girl for Native American philosophies and present-ecological concerns.”<sup>398</sup>

Schweizer’s book brought up an important point. By the latter half of the 1990s, many conservatives were wary not only of Disney animation but of Disney as a corporation. Many felt that the Disney “that once prodigiously guarded the *mores* of Mickey and friends no longer exists.”<sup>399</sup> By 1996 the Southern Baptists Convention voted to censure the Disney Corporation

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<sup>396</sup> William Murchison, “America Sorely Needs an Anglo-Saxon Anti-Defamation League,” *Human Events*, July 28, 1995, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9508081486&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> Peter and Rochelle Schweizer, *Disney, The Mouse Betrayed: Greed, Corruption, and Children at Risk* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1998), 152, 158,

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 140; and Bowman, “DISNEY’S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION.”

“for its ‘promotion of homosexuality’ and the other ‘anti-family’ values,” while *Chronicles* observed how “[c]onservative, traditionalist, and pro-family critics have looked on in dismay as the old playful, good-hearted Disney anarcho-cosmic subversion—Four Legs Good/Two Legs Bad (Bambi), Underdog Good/Overman Bad (Dumbo), Red Man Good/White Man Bad (Tonka), Children Good/Stepparents Bad (Cinderella, Snow White, The Sleeping Beauty)—has marched further and further astray, rewriting classic literature as it goes.”<sup>400</sup> *Human Events* also addressed “[t]he increasingly anti-Christian and antifamily attitudes of the Walt Disney Co.”<sup>401</sup> Then, in 1995 stalwart conservative Brent Bozell III and founder of the Media Research Center and President of the Parents Television Council labeled Disney the “new title holder for Most Irresponsible Entertainment Corporation,” and in 1996 Disney was given the biggest “loser” award for “[k]owtowing to gays...the political left, [and] [g]enuflecting to anti-Christian bigots.”<sup>402</sup> By 1997 Llewellyn H. Rockwell, the founder of the Mises Institute and paleolibertarian, wrote in *Chronicles* that Disney’s “movies have not-so-secret subtexts that are politically correct at best and deeply malevolent at worst. Even more disturbing are the movies backed by Disney's subsidiaries, which include graphic sex, attacks on Christianity, and the basest possible celebrations of perversity. It is an appalling transformation.”<sup>403</sup>

Across much of the conservative spectrum, Disney was under fire. Again, all the ire was not directed solely at the animated features even if they contributed to the overall animosity.

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<sup>400</sup> Marian Kester Coombs, “Mondo Quasimodo,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 20, No.11, November 1996, 46.

<sup>401</sup> Joseph A. D’Agostino, “Pro-Family Group Says, ‘no,’ to Disney’s House of Yes,” *Human Events*, February 7, 1997, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9702115139&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>402</sup> L. Brent Bozell III, “Fox Is Bad, but Disney Is Worse,” *Human Events*, November 15, 1996, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9612173547&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; and “Hollywood’s Winners and Losers in 1996” *Human Events*, January 24, 1997, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9702020475&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>403</sup> Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr., “How the Market Stamps Out Evil,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 21 No. 12, December 1997, 21.

Also, not all critics believed Disney to be promoting values and ideals oppositional to conservatism. As acknowledged earlier, Brudnoy seemed to enjoy every Disney animated feature he reviewed. Once more he is joined by Podhoretz who found *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin* to be “great works of popular art.”<sup>404</sup> He was also the only critic to review 1995’s *Toy Story* which he found to be “a brilliant piece of popular art not because it uses new-fangled computer animation (though it looks breathtaking) but because it is a fully conceived and executed comedy about vanity and anxiety -- in particular, the anxiety of Woody the cowboy and the vanity of Buzz Lightyear the space ranger.”<sup>405</sup> The animated film was above all able to convey “an example of cinematic storytelling of a sort we never get to see these days, because it is about the failings -- moral and spiritual -- of its characters.”<sup>406</sup> In fact, according to him, “[f]or the past five years, Disney's animated movies have been consistently the best studio product made in Hollywood.”<sup>407</sup>

However, Brudnoy and Podhoretz were the anomalies, and the next film was one that even Podhoretz found to be “a stinker.”<sup>408</sup> *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) originally based on a Victor Hugo novel from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the tale of Quasi’s (Quasimodo in the original) attempt to be accepted into mainstream society despite his deformities. He meets a gypsy girl Esmeralda and they both have to escape the conniving of his surrogate guardian/Justice of the Peace, Frollo. John Simon made a comeback to Disney animated films writing about the “happily ending Disney perversion” of Hugo’s original nonetheless he offered

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<sup>404</sup> Podhoretz, "HOW THE LION LOST HIS STORY; Staging Disney's Spectacular Lion King."

<sup>405</sup> John Podhoretz, "NO STARS. FOUR STARS!" *The Weekly Standard*, December 4, 1995, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S3V-2680-00CY-N3P4-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>408</sup> Podhoretz, "HOW THE LION LOST HIS STORY; Staging Disney's Spectacular Lion King."

little else in the way of analysis except to call Quasi “not so much unsightly as a cutesy cartoon version of Nathan Lane, America's most beloved butterball since he starred in *The Birdcage*.”<sup>409</sup>

Marian K. Coombs made a return to *Chronicles* to write a review. She began by remarking on the Southern Baptist Convention vote to boycott Disney, setting up the rest of the article and quickly working her way into the analysis agreeing with Simon that “Hugo’[s] novel has been snatched, and not merely revised, but replaced.”<sup>410</sup> Like Bowman and the Schweizer’s, she had no love loss for Disney. “Disney,” she said, “affects to want a society dedicated to the Gypsy Prinzip, but Gypsies do not build societies, they parasitize them, at best colorfully and entertainingly.”<sup>411</sup> However, in the end, the “principal subversion...[was] the stylized hatred of straight, mainstream, adult society. Back when actual adults were in charge, this vision of kids in control, of the inmates taking over the asylum, was a harmless distraction. But now look who's president.”<sup>412</sup>

The lionization of children and demonization of adults has become a common refrain with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* only being the latest example. Bowman, who tackled this topic with *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*, also pointed this out in *The Little Mermaid*. Discussing the final lessons learned in the film he wrote, “[i]n the end he [Ariel’s father] must learn the lesson taught by the West Indian crab Sebastian: that children have to be free to live their own lives...[and]...[i]f you think that is a trifle premature in its application to a 16-year-old girl, it is about as harmless a message as you are likely to get from the New Disney, for whom

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<sup>409</sup> John Simon, “Midsummer Musings,” *National Review* 48, no. 15, August 12, 1996, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lgs&AN=9608087506&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>410</sup> Coombs, “Mondo Quasimodo,” 46-47.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

parents, when they are not tyrannical, are simply irrelevant.”<sup>413</sup> The conservative Catholic *Crises* also mentioned how *Little Mermaid’s*,

...whole ‘Disneyfied’ storyline of the film — including its new, romantic ending — depends upon the Little Mermaid’s disobeying her father’s prohibition against going up to the ‘world of men.’ And so the noble story of selfless love is transformed into a coming-of-age story designed to please modern audiences — but which is the ‘moral reverse’ of the original story. You can always get what you want, even if — indeed, perhaps only if — you are disobedient.”<sup>414</sup>

The Schweizer’s synopsis of this theme in *The Mouse Betrayed* remarking how this fed into “the feminist twist” occurring in “new Disney films.”<sup>415</sup> Whether it was Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Pocahontas, or Jasmine in *Aladdin* all three had to “cope with patriarchal fathers who are narrow-minded and get in the way.”<sup>416</sup> The male adults in their life are the ones causing the problems and it is they, not the teenage girls who must learn the tough life lessons. In the end, Bowman summarized Disney’s message, “which is that over-indulged children and sentimentalists are good and moralistic adults are bad.”<sup>417</sup>

Bowman began his review of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with a sensible question, “[w]hat is there to say about Disney’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* that I have not already said about *Pocahontas* or *Aladdin* or *Beauty and the Beast*?” Indeed, this was an astute observation because nothing groundbreakingly new came from this review that the reader has not already heard. “Everything,” he began, “is reduced to the bland and the banal. Hugo’s romantic and tragic novel becomes an easy morality tale about not being prejudiced against people because of the way they look... .”<sup>418</sup> However, he did bring a new perspective with “Disney’s Mickey-

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<sup>413</sup> Bowman, “Disney’s Mickey-Mouse Religion.”

<sup>414</sup> Mark T. Lickona, “The Cartoon Saga of Unholy Moses,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LXVI, September, 1999.

<sup>415</sup> Schweizer, *Disney*, 146.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Bowman, “Disney’s Mickey-Mouse Religion.”

<sup>418</sup> James Bowman, “Up on the Roof,” *American Spectator*, Vol 30, Iss 08, 1996, 65.

Mouse Religion,” first published in *The Weekly Standard* and already quoted at length throughout the chapter. Like Rockwell in *Chronicles* who called *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* “cheap, antireligious fare” Bowman concentrated on this characteristic of the film in his commentary.<sup>419</sup> “The anti-Christian tendency of Disney is more obvious in this film [*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*] than ever before,” with the “only prominently believing Christian in the cartoon” being the beyond evil Frolo.<sup>420</sup> It was, therefore “fitting,” he said, “that Disney, our most efficient mass marketer of universally venerable icons, should encourage an idolatrous, if not blasphemous, view of religion.” The next comments taken in their totality offered an answer to why this anti-religious or more specifically anti-Christian bias was occurring at all.<sup>421</sup>

Thus the religious theme neatly elides into the more political one that it is wrong to be prejudiced -- against the ugly, against gypsies, against gargoyles, or against anybody, really, except Christians.... The sensibility of the New Disney is anti-religious and especially anti-Christian for the same reason the rest of Hollywood is: fashion. But Disney's reputation as a purveyor of wholesome children's entertainment gives it a special ability to do harm. Christianity will very likely survive the Disney version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, but the damage done to children by linking the anti-religious tendency to a more general attempt to discredit adult and especially parental authority may be more long-lasting.<sup>422</sup>

As should be expected by now, the sentiment was not unanimous. *The Weekly Standard* published a short response to Bowman's piece pushing back on some of his ideas. “Far from being an attack on Christian values,” the writer penned, “we found *Hunchback* to be an uplifting, funny, and deeply spiritual support for some of the values that we most associate with Christianity.”<sup>423</sup> She went on to remark how Bowman had such a “twisted take...that it's hard to

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<sup>419</sup> Rockwell Jr., “How the Market Stamps Out Evil,” 21.

<sup>420</sup> Bowman, “DISNEY'S MICKEY-MOUSE RELIGION.”

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Karen Davis Hope, “MUSIC AND VALUES IN THE HUNCHBACK,” *The Weekly Standard*, July 22, 1996, 6, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S3V-2570-00CY-N2KT-00000-00&context=1516831>.

know where to start.”<sup>424</sup> In *Crises* the writer and would-be senior editor of *The American Conservative* Rob Dreher discussed his initial trepidation “expecting the worst,” yet “was astonished to find it not only a pro-Christian film, but one embodying (surely unintentionally) basic Catholic principles of sacramental theology.”<sup>425</sup> He explained further stating that the film showed how the Holy Spirit “works through the bent and broken,” that “law without mercy can make a monster of even the most godly men,” and even offered “an implicitly Catholic vision of the divine in its emphasis on God’s presence in the physical beauty of Notre Dame cathedral.”<sup>426</sup> He ended by reminding his readers that “nobody should go to a Walt Disney animated film expecting unsullied and well-developed religious truth, and for all I know, the studio *did* mean *Hunchback* to be a swipe at religious conservatives...,[but] [w]hatever its intention, Catholic parents can find much useful catechetical material in this popular film.”<sup>427</sup>

*THBND* brought some familiar as well as some new themes to light. As for the former, the last paragraph adds to the evidence that conservative thought was not a monolith and breaks fell less along ideological lines and more in line with how the critic viewed the critic’s job. Both the conservative catholic *Crises* and the neoconservative *The Weekly Standard* argued for a more nuanced and less hostile view of the film. If the libertarian Brudnoy would have reviewed it and given his track record, one could hazard a guess to say he would have agreed with their takeaways. All these critics, Podhoretz, Brudnoy, and Dreher were more likely than others to focus less on the artistry of the film. On the other hand, the highbrow Simon and the rare reviewer Coombs found the film offensive in its twisting of classics to fit modern pre-teen tastes,

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<sup>424</sup> Hope, "MUSIC AND VALUES IN THE HUNCHBACK," 6.

<sup>425</sup> Rob Dreher, “Film: Half-Empty Beresford, Half-Full Disney,” *Crises*, Vol. 15 No. 06, June 1, 1997, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [Film: Half-Empty Beresford, Half-Full Disney \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

hence the film could not be considered serious art. With Bowman, the enemy of everything and anything Disney, his scorn was not surprising nevertheless neither should his insights be overlooked. Furthermore, the anti-Christian, anti-adult, and oversimplification of a classic tale are permeating themes that conservative critics pointed out in Disney movies during the 1990s. *THBND* brought them all to the forefront in an expeditious fashion and also seemed to mark the end of Disney films receiving a wide array of reviews. Disney still garnered their fair share, but the pervasive influence and growing success and popularity of animation as a movie genre would lead other production companies to try their hand at the craft.

Before that could happen and after *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the next major releases for Disney animation were *Hercules* and *Mulan* in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Neither reaped a respectable number of reviews in the pages of any publication. James Bowman reviewed both and the results were as could be expected. *Hercules* (1997) was the reimagining of the Greek myth and his cohorts. As Bowman put it, those in *Hercules* were seen as a “particularly mindless bunch of late-twentieth-century American pop-culture addicts,” while *Mulan* continued “Disney’s dismal exercise in feminist propaganda” that started with *The Little Mermaid*, developed in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pocahontas*, and culminated in *Mulan*.<sup>428</sup> *Human Events*, using Baehr’s format, reviewed *Mulan* giving it four stars in cinematic quality and a minus one in content. The concerns were “element of occultism”, “pro-homosexual subtext”, and a “pro-feminist subtext of women in combat.”<sup>429</sup> The following is an example of the usual a short synopsis given in *Human Events* reviews since they adopted Baehr’s model:

Mulan upholds the importance of family, courage, self-sacrifice, honor, freedom and country. Regrettably, it includes scenes of ancestor worship and spirits of

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<sup>428</sup> James Bowman, “Loonie Tunes,” *American Spectator*, Vol 31, Iss 09, 1997, 64-65; and James Bowman, “Who’s the Enemy,” *American Spectator*, Vol 32, Iss 08, 1998, 62-63.

<sup>429</sup> “Mulan,” *Human Events*, 54, no. 24, June 26, 1998, 16,  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=772972&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.



dead people coming alive, and a disturbing homosexual subtext. That subtext contains two lines that mock those who are concerned about modern society's acceptance of homosexual cross-dressing and similar perversions.<sup>430</sup>

While there was not considerable analysis on *Hercules* or *Mulan* the brief analysis echoes much of what has already been said about the increasing focus on the cultural context of the films, the growing impact of the religious Right on conservatism, as well as the ever-present concern for feminist ideology in animated films.

The year *Mulan* came out a new entertainment company DreamWorks Pictures, formed by Steven Spielberg, ex-Disney executive producer Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen released their first two animated features *Antz* and *The Prince of Egypt*.<sup>431</sup> *Antz* received little attention in conservative circles. Terry Teachout writing for *Crises* called it “a talky exercise in watered-down Marxism,” while Baehr in *Human Events* believed it had an “anti-communist theme, with positive implications for Trinitarian theology and moral philosophy.”<sup>432</sup> Needless to say, they both had very differing opinions on the same film, but the analysis of the film ends there. *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) on the other hand offered a wide array of similar reviews.

Released in December of 1998, *The Prince of Egypt* was the animated retelling of Moses and the Jewish exodus from Egypt. It was contemporaneously discussed and reviewed by more publications than any single Disney movie. The consensus at the start was that the film was a smashing success and one worthy of the plaudits it was receiving. *Human Events* led the way with Baehr as one of the first to review the movie before it was released. *The Prince of Egypt*, he

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<sup>430</sup> “Mulan,” *Human Events*, 16.

<sup>431</sup> Chris Holmlund ed., *American Cinema of the 1990s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 161, Kindle. By the end of the 1990s Dreamworks competed with MGM/UA for seventh biggest Hollywood studio. Disney was the largest of the “Big Six” studios according to Hulmund.

<sup>432</sup> Terry Teachout, “Animation—Not for Children Only,” *Crises*, Vol. 16 No. 12, December 1998, *Crises Magazine Archives*. [Animation—Not for Children Only \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com); and Ted Baehr, “Antz,” *Human Events* 54, no. 38, October 9, 1998, 20, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1223458&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

said, “takes animated movies to a new level” and was “one of the most entertaining moral masterpieces of all time.”<sup>433</sup> This was indeed high praise although not entirely unexpected from Baehr. A few months later, Brent L. Bozell III who had dubbed Disney the biggest loser back in 1996 now awarded Dreamworks SKG a Hollywood “Winner” of 1998 for the “breathtaking” movie, and made his sentiments clear remarking, “[m]ove over, Disney, because DreamWorks is now the king of animated movies.”<sup>434</sup>

Baehr and Bozell were joined in *Human Events* by Catherine Edwards who compiled how others felt about the film along with a short behind-the-scenes look at the creation process. To no surprise, Medved was cited, “[a]ny film” he said, “that teaches the Bible and the meaning of freedom should get four stars.”<sup>435</sup> But other more prominent figures on the religious right, less acquainted with film culture were also quoted including Dr. Jerry Falwell and the executive director of the Christian Coalition Randy Tate. Tate told *Human Events* that “[r]eligious conservatives should applaud DreamWorks,” and Falwell noted, “I’ve never recommended a movie to anyone in 40 years. However, Hollywood got this one right.”<sup>436</sup>

There was also a focus on how the movie was made and the editing process of putting the film together. *Human Events*, *Christianity Today*, and *Crises* took note of this process, stating how some “550 clergy, Bible scholars, teachers, archaeologists, educators and Egyptologists critiqued the film,” including those on the religious right like Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and Ralph Reed.<sup>437</sup> This was not just lip service. “Dozens and dozens of changes were made” to the

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<sup>433</sup> “The Prince of Egypt,” *Human Events* 54, no. 44, November 20, 1998, 24, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1327979&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>434</sup> Bozell III, L. Brent, “Hollywood’s 1998 Winners and Losers,” *Human Events*, January 29, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1508223&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>435</sup> Catherine Edwards, “The Prince of Egypt,” *Human Events* 54, no. 49, December 25, 1998, 16, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1417068&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*; Michael G. Maudlin, “Hollywood on Holy Ground,” *Christianity Today* 42, no. 14, December 7, 1998, 66. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1360593&site=ehost-live&scope=site>;

film including the plan for Moses to kill his sister Miriam to a more accurate version and the lyrics of their big musical number changing from “*You can work miracles when you believe*” to “*There can be miracles when you believe.*”<sup>438</sup> The changes, while not monumental, signaled to the religious community that their concerns were taken seriously and the film was rewarded with praise from varying quarters for it.

Now one might expect comments like “the parting-of-the-waters scene would cause Cecil B. DeMille to faint,” from the pages of *Christianity Today*.<sup>439</sup> But when the *National Review* ran a supplemental review to go along with Simon’s, who for whatever reasons decided not to review the film, one should take notice.<sup>440</sup> The senior editor David Klinghoffer wrote the two-page article with acclamatory praise abounding: “gives you chills about every 15 minutes,” “gorgeous to look at,” “songs are lusty and memorable, the characters artfully portrayed and voiced,” and “[c]ertain thrilling moments haunt you after you leave the theater.”<sup>441</sup> All this notwithstanding, after the initial excitement over a film that depicted a Biblical story and did not poke fun or demean it, some of the other critiques began to poke holes of their own. Terry Teachout, who began writing for *Crises* regularly as a film critic in 1998, served as an apt transitional reviewer. He did not expect to like the film with it being “endorsed by everyone from Pat Robertson to Cardinal O’Connor,” yet found “[i]t wasn’t bad at all.”<sup>442</sup> The review flowed from this initial comment and was lukewarm throughout. His ending comments summed up his

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and Terry Teachout, “Film: Liberation Theology,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 03, March 1999. Crises Magazine Archives. [Film: Liberation Theology \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>438</sup> Maudlin, “Hollywood on Holy Ground,” 66; and Edwards, “The Prince of Egypt,” 16.

<sup>439</sup> Maudlin, “Hollywood on Holy Ground,” 66.

<sup>440</sup> Simon reviewed *A Thin Red Line* and *Shakespeare in Love*. John Simon, “Of Blood and a Poet,” *National Review* 51, no. 1, January 25, 1999, 54–56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1437283&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>441</sup> David Klinghoffer, “Moses Unplugged,” *National Review* 51, no. 1, January 25, 1999, 52–53, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1437282&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>442</sup> Terry Teachout, “Film: Liberation Theology,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 03, March 1999, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Liberation Theology \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

ideas well. “That a major film studio should have produced a movie that takes religion seriously is, I suppose, enough of a miracle that one ought to play down the quibbles.”<sup>443</sup> Teachout’s tepidity crossed over into the next three reviews but their consensus became more scathing by the end.

All three, *The Weekly Standard*, *New Oxford Review*, and *The American Spectator* had a kind word or two about the film before diving into the more biting criticism. Matthew Berke in the former said it “includes some of the best artwork ever put on screen,” Mark Lickona in *New Oxford Review* commented how it “delivers one eye-popping and breathtaking portrayal of divine power after another,” and even Bowman thought it was “not nearly so bad as might have been expected.”<sup>444</sup> All three commented on similar issues. Lickona described it as a “typical coming-of-age story” where Moses “will deliver his people from political oppression — in other words, a human, secular drama.”<sup>445</sup> Berke in *The Weekly Standard* seemed to agree with Lickona writing, “the real narrative problem with *The Prince of Egypt*: Moses is merely a liberator, not a lawgiver. The film has no interest in law, let alone in all its detailed, nettlesome rules.”<sup>446</sup> He also touched on the repeated theme of feminist characters in animation, noting the wife of Moses Zipporah was made into “the stereotypical feminist heroine of Disney” and then reverting once again to the political liberation theology writing that in this version “God doesn’t interfere in people’s lives, except to make sure they’re free.”<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Teachout, “Film: Liberation Theology.”

<sup>444</sup> Matthew Berke, “Lights, Camera, God I; Moses at the Movies,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 24-May 1, 2000, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4040-R2T0-00CY-NIBF-00000-00&context=1516831>; Mark T. Lickona, “The Cartoon Saga of Unholy Moses,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LXVI, September, 1999; and James Bowman, “Our Blissful Ignorance,” *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 02, 1999, 64.

<sup>445</sup> Mark T. Lickona, “The Cartoon Saga of Unholy Moses,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LXVI, September, 1999.

<sup>446</sup> Berke, “Lights, Camera, God I; Moses at the Movies.”

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

No stranger to belittling animated films, Bowman continued the focus on the liberation theme. He and Lickona both offered insightful analytical takes which cut to the heart of the concerns they found within the film. Bowman first:

Maybe Dreamworks got to dreaming again and failed to notice that it had advanced the debut of this admirable, abolitionist sentiment by about 3,100 years. Or perhaps they thought that, in a nation of historical illiterates, who would notice? Either way, it is safe to say that it would have been pretty much taken for granted around the factory that the company's commercial interests would be identified with the portrayal of a Moses whose thought processes were as close as possible to those of an American undergraduate of the 1990's.<sup>448</sup>

Hitting on both the anachronism and the seemingly explicit head nod to political correctness Lickona also pointed to this but from a more bible centric viewpoint:

They change the story of Exodus into a story in which the liberation of Israel not only has an entirely political purpose, but is ultimately the work of Moses himself — which means that, in ‘essence,’ *The Prince of Egypt* bears no resemblance to the biblical story. But the most striking political reduction of Moses' mission and the Hebrews' liberation is found in the answer Moses gives Pharaoh when Pharaoh asks him why Egypt must suffer the plagues. To this question Moses does not respond with something like, ‘Because you are preventing God's people from sacrificing to Him’ (see Exodus 8:8-10, 25-32; 9:27-35; etc.) but instead responds with a purely political platitude: ‘Because no kingdom should be built on the backs of slaves.’<sup>449</sup>

Bowman went on to elucidate his frustration and what he believed to be the larger problems in contemporary culture. Not only did it shed light on his thought process on this and other films, but it also explained his perspective on the average American movie-goer in the 1990s.

We are the victims of a combination of a debased popular culture, a vast educational wasteland and the riches which protect us from the worst consequences of both. Like an indulgent papa who buys Junior a BMW for his 16th birthday only to see him smash it up the next day, Uncle Sam decided some years ago to present the nation's children with the gift of leisure in which to enjoy themselves untroubled by serious intellectual, pecuniary, or moral disciplines at least until they were 21. The result has been a crop of admittedly mostly amiable ignoramuses who, you find when you invite them to listen to the story of the Israelites, have themselves become paradoxical but incorrigible Philistines. What

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<sup>448</sup> Bowman, “Our Blissful Ignorance,” 64.

<sup>449</sup> Lickona, “The Cartoon Saga of Unholy Moses.”

else do we expect of a childhood and youth devoted to TV, video games, dating, and athletics?<sup>450</sup>

Bowman's disgust with the culture was unmistakable. He and Lickona viewed the film as evidence of a deteriorating culture that aimed to placate modern audiences through cinematic anachronism and political obsequiousness concerning slavery. However, some saw the potential benefit of a film that espoused biblical truths (even if imperfect) and depicted God as actively working in people's lives as a net positive in the secular and relativist culture of the 1990s. The contrasting views illuminate a continuing divergence in conservative circles among those looking for films that were family-friendly or at least not offensive in their content and those more focused on the artistic ingenuity and quality of the film. The latter were less likely to be accepting of a film even if it checked all the family-friendly boxes and were more willing to point out subtle flaws. The former group was a testament to the lasting impact of the religious right on conservative film reviewers and publications in general.

The following year three animated films were released producing a variety of reviews and unlike most of the chapter, all were from separate animation studios. There was of course the usual suspect Disney which created the poorly reviewed *Tarzan*. Warner Brothers Studio, (famous for their 1996 animation and live-action combination *Space Jam*) which had become part of TimeWarner in 1993 and acquired Turner Broadcasting and New Line in 1996, released *The Iron Giant*. Lastly, there was Paramount which gave Trey Parker and Matt Stone \$60 million for their first feature-length film *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*.<sup>451</sup> *Iron Giant* and *Tarzan* both received only a couple of reviews each but the contrast between the two illustrates

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<sup>450</sup> Bowman, "Our Blissful Ignorance," 64.

<sup>451</sup> Holmlund, *American Cinema of the 1990s*, Kindle.

the continued antagonism felt towards Disney among conservatives. Meanwhile, *South Park* evoked a mix of hostility and at the same time hesitant intrigue.

For conservatives, *Tarzan* (1999) picked up where *Pocahontas* and *Lion King* left off. *Human Events* offered the only pure review. Originated from a story by Edgar Rice Burroughs *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) about a child left to be raised by apes and when he finds he is indeed human and not an ape he must then decide where he belongs.<sup>452</sup> This original piece was then expanded by Burroughs into a compilation of works about Tarzan. As was usually the case, Disney kept the basic outline of the original while Disnifying other areas. Baehr mentioned the focus on “self-sacrifice and family” but also how the villain “proves to be another greedy white man wishing to exploit the jungle” while some of the protagonists forsake Western civilization leading to “a going-native conclusion.”<sup>453</sup> The only other outlet to remark on the film was *Chronicles*. George McCartney, a professor of English at St. John University, only brought up *Tarzan* as part of a larger analysis on *Star Wars* Episode I and *Instinct*. He called it Disney’s “cartoon version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' pulp version of Rousseau's noble savage.” Just like Baehr, McCartney believed Disney was urging the audience “to flee our machine-ridden civilization and return to the primal life,” and to live like “the virtuous primitive” who was without a doubt the ideal version of humanity before the corrupting influences of technology, industrialization, and modernization.<sup>454</sup> Editor of *Chronicles*, Thomas Fleming in an editorial considered *Tarzan* to be “only the latest Disney film to encourage animal worship” and to erase any of the “distinctions between Western and non-Western, human and subhuman.”<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> David Lemmo, *Tarzan, Jungle King of Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2017), 1,9.

<sup>453</sup> “Movie Guide Ratings.” *Human Events*, June 18, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1950446&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>454</sup> George McCartney, “Of Apes and Yahoos,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 09, 1999, 42.

<sup>455</sup> Thomas Fleming, “X2K: aut Christus aut nihil,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 12, 1999, 10-12.

A short time later *Iron Giant* (1999) hit theatres and critics viewed it through three very different filters. Based on a 1968 Ted Hughes poem, it was about a giant robot from space who befriends a small child Hogarth and has to escape a government agency attempting to capture the giant. “If you've not done so already,” George McCarthy began in *Chronicles*, “have your children take you to see *The Iron Giant*. If there are no little ones around, take yourself to this un-Disney cartoon feature...[t]he story has a predictable arc, but everything is done so lovingly that you won't mind.”<sup>456</sup> Baehr in *Human Events* offered a more mixed review. He described it as “one of the most exciting animated movies ever made” yet also tampered down his excitement because of the “strange mixture of Christian, New Age, politically correct, environmental, and other worldviews” along with “politically correct concepts and unnecessary profanities.”<sup>457</sup> Then there was Bowman writing once again in *American Spectator*. He called the *Iron Giant* character “a progressive, pop-cultural messiah with a beatnik John the Baptist, come from the stars to teach pacifism to the simple but violent folk of benighted, Communist-hating, 1950's America.”<sup>458</sup> McCartney also recongnized the “anti-Cold war reasoning” in the film, however, he found the story to have “too much charm to hold its fuzzy politics against it.”<sup>459</sup> So once again three reviews, with three very different ideas about the same film. Even if one was to discount Bowman due to his distaste of seemingly anything animated Baehr and McCarthy offer up diverging lenses through which critics were viewing the culture.

The last film interestingly enough was both reminiscent of *Wizards* and *Fritz the Cat* and also a harbinger of the future with the increasing emphasis on an animation made for adults and

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<sup>456</sup> George McCartney, “In the Toyshop of the Heart,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 11, 1999, 48.

<sup>457</sup> “Movie Guide Ratings,” *Human Events*, August 6, 1999,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2121895&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>458</sup> James Bowman, “A Future That Can't Work,” *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 09, 1999, 60.

<sup>459</sup> McCartney, “In the Toyshop of the Heart,” 48.



older teens rather than children. *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* (1999) was the brainchild of Trey Parker and Matt Stone. It was based on the animated television series *South Park* which used 2-D handmade cut-outs to create stop-motion animation. Holmlund, a professor of Film at the University of Tennessee, described it as “a tale of four mischievous tots who save the world while swearing like marines.”<sup>460</sup> It is about four grade school boys who sneak into an R-rated Canadian movie and start repeating curses they heard from the film. The parents and U.S. government blame Canada and war breaks out between the United States and Canada. At the same time, Satan and his gay lover the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein are plotting to take over the world and need the filmmakers’ blood to spill on Canadian soil for this to happen. The boys are trying to stop all this from happening. It was replete with musical numbers, cursing and lots of it, jokes about sex, and children being killed.

Ted Baehr, *Human Events*, and *Christianity Today* which through the 1990s have amalgamated into one united voice when it came to film all found the film disgusting, if not evil. *Human Events* published a warning piece in March of 1999 cautioning its’ readers of its summer release describing the animated series as “featuring grade-school children who curse like sailors, a piece of human feces as a character, and a small child who is killed as a joke in every episode.” There was also a restating of Medved’s thesis from years earlier which is plain to see from the title “Hollywood Makes ‘R’ Movies, While ‘G’ Movies Make Money.”<sup>461</sup> When the movie was released Baehr in *Human Events* labeled the genre as “Animated Pornography” and called it “intentionally vile, with the most abhorrent content in the history of mainstream moviemaking.” He then went on to list some of the specific issues he had with the film stating that it included

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<sup>460</sup> Holmlund, *American Cinema of the 1990s*, Kindle.

<sup>461</sup> Joseph A. D’Agostino, “Hollywood Makes ‘R’ Movies, While ‘G’ Movies Make Money,” *Human Events*, March 19, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1682935&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

“hundreds of obscenities, sodomy, pedophilia, and extreme violence...with 340 counted obscenities (there may be more that are muddled), 14 profanities and many disgusting bodily functions,” all the while being “[a]nti-Christian, anti-God, anti-morality, and intentionally immoral.”<sup>462</sup> *Christianity Today* continued on this theme. The author noted how even though reviews “covered its disturbing content” he did not feel prepared “for its consistent ugliness.” “If *South Park* opened the door for all that latent hostility against faith to be ventilated in popular entertainment,” he wrote, “Christians should brace themselves for a rough time ahead.”<sup>463</sup> Separate from the publications just mentioned but not to be left out was Bowman. Reviewing *South Park* in the same review as *The Iron Giant*, he called it “appalling rubbish.”<sup>464</sup> He explained why shortly into his review.

...my impression of its critical reception has been that almost no one has mentioned the moral poverty of its point of view. Instead, the film is praised for its cleverness and the alleged uproariousness of its comedy while its offensiveness is either conceded as a qualifying defect or cited as a further recommendation.<sup>465</sup>

There was of course dissension among the ranks. *Human Events* published a “Conservative Spotlight” piece about David Horowitz, the head of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture at the time. Horowitz in the article defended *South Park* as “a conservative movie” that was “pro-personal responsibility and pro-business.”<sup>466</sup> Then there was Podhoretz in *The Weekly Standard*. Podhoretz who saw himself as the everyman of movie critics had a much more nuanced take. He started in a similar way to his colleagues calling it the “most appalling and outrageous of the new gross-out comedies” whose “gags and images cannot even be described

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<sup>462</sup> “Movie Guide Ratings,” *Human Events*, July 9, 1999,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2098639&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>463</sup> Frederica Mathewes-Green, “The Thrill of Naughtiness,” *Christianity Today* 43, no. 10, September 6, 1999, 101, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2288490&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>464</sup> Bowman, “A Future That Can’t Work,” 60.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> Joseph A. D’Agostino, “David Horowitz,” *Human Events*, November 12, 1999, 11, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2468880&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

without going beyond the bounds of civilized discourse.”<sup>467</sup> He also wrote how it was “sexually explicit, blasphemous, and even has traces of anti-Semitism.” However, just a few lines down there seemed to be a change of heart:

Yet, honesty compels me to admit that *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* is uproarious. And that may be the most appalling fact of all. Parker and Stone are possessors of a genuine comic imagination...Parker and Stone are like brilliantly funny four-year-olds. They can make you laugh effortlessly with their clowning.<sup>468</sup>

That *South Park* ends the analysis is quite apt in that it brought the study full circle back to the 1970s. Only by the late 1990s were cartoons no longer just for children or for those willing to go to art-house theatres. There were full-length animated features that received critical acclaim, were financially lucrative, and increasingly seen as being an acceptable genre for all ages. Just two years later in 2001, the Academy Awards began awarding “Best Animated Feature Film” awards, an award that is still given out. The animated films described in this chapter were foundational in pushing the genre towards the mainstream. However, this is not the central argument of the study, but an important point, nonetheless.

There are four central themes about animated movies and conservatism. The first three have already been touched however briefly throughout the chapter, while the fourth will be addressed shortly. One was the increasing influence of the religious right on the culture of

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<sup>467</sup> John Podhoretz, "HORROR SHOWS; The New Gross-Out Movie Comedies," *The Weekly Standard*, July 26, 1999, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3X1P-1040-00CY-N070-0000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3X1P-1040-00CY-N070-0000-00&context=1516831).

<sup>468</sup> Ibid. Podhoretz was more open to animation as a genre than many others, and he was the only one to enjoy the cruder and more adult-themed cartoons like *South Park*. He also had kind words to say about *Beavis and Butthead Do America* (1996) calling it a “very funny” movie and the “true faces of the politically incorrect” which was quite the compliment and within the context of the review, placed *Beavis and Butthead* on the conservative side of spectrum. See: John Podhoretz, "DIARY OF A MOVIEGOER; Eight Films, Five Days, and Only Two Stinkers!," *The Weekly Standard*, January 20, 1997, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S3V-24G0-00CY-N1T0-0000-00&context=1516831>.

conservatism especially when it came to the media. Second, the integral role Disney played as the sole proprietor of animated films through most of the 1990s and thus the rise of the antagonistic relationship between conservatism and Disney. Building off of this last point is the third which is that many conservatives found very specific ideas in Disney or more broadly all animated films to be disquieting. These included feminism seeping into the lead female characters, the depiction of Europeans and adults as evil and native peoples and children as good, and the warping of old stories to anachronistically fit the taste of modern audiences. The last point has to do with the central thesis of this study. What overarching traits can be gleaned that tie this chapter to its predecessors and those that follow? This last point will be handled first.

In the previous chapter, it was clear to see the importance of individual character development and to a lesser extent the need for a continuum in realism/logic as important features that many critics focused on when judging the film's artistic merits. In this chapter, these themes, were seemingly absent, and in their place, more culturally related themes appeared (feminism, the reverence of children, and the derision of adults). Why is this, and in lieu of this chapter should the importance of character and logic be reconsidered? The answer is absolutely not. Rather, these animated films bring to light an extremely important point moving forward, the concept of infantile films as pure entertainment, not art.

The films in the previous chapter were judged through a lens that took for granted that the movies they were viewing were more than mere entertainment. Even if the movie was deemed a failure, the aesthetic value was still front and center because that is how many critics believed serious films were to be judged. However, in this chapter, the lack of reverence for animation as a genre was ubiquitous and slow-growing for conservatives, thus these "simple-minded" and infantile animated films seem to lack the foundational benchmarks to be judged by higher

standards that were often applied to other more adult films. Rather the entire point and premise of the infantile film was to make the viewer ‘feel good,’ to walk out of the theatre with a smile on their face and possibly a song in their head. This was not the goal of art in the conservative mind, only entertainment. There were of course some exceptions like Simon taking note of the logic in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* but these anomalies were few and far between.

Indeed, those who praised the films did not mention the artistry of the film or the relatability of characters in *Tarzan*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Aladdin*, or *Mulan* because they knew those would be ridiculous statements. Brudnoy and Podhoretz, the two most consistent positive reviewers not focused solely on the religious value or family-friendly aspects, usually commented on how the films were enjoyable, comical, or a delight with little insight into much more. The sole exception was Podhoretz’s comment on *Toy Story* where he noted how it was a great story because it was more “about the failings -- moral and spiritual -- of its characters,” than anything else.<sup>469</sup> Nevertheless, there was hardly ever any deeper meaning to be found in many of the films, no serious adult intellectual or moral contemplation was prompted by watching the films (granted, the literature many were based on is a different story altogether). Their deeper messages were puerile: Don’t judge a book by its cover, Be kind to those who look or seem different, and Treat everyone fairly. All important lessons for children, but juvenile to say the least. While animation certainly became a more acceptable genre appealing to wider audiences, it nonetheless, still remained in the eyes of many film critics as pure entertainment. Thus, the centrality of the opposition to infantilism came crashing to the forefront in this chapter, auguring to be the basis from which serious criticism can move forward.

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<sup>469</sup> John Podhoretz, "NO STARS. FOUR STARS!"

Now it needs to be noted that infantilism does not only refer to films in which the main audience was intended to be the preteens and younger. It was also used to mean films aimed at the primary filmgoing audience during much of the 1980s and 1990s the teenager. Infantilism then also referred to any film in which simplemindedness or the base urges of humans were privileged over all other criteria. For instance, there could be infantile sex in a film, which would be a sex scene that added nothing to the plot or character development, or infantile violence like an over-the-top gunfight scene with characters jumping off buildings and running through glass panes, with both only inserted in order to incite the audiences' most base emotions. The infantile was above all simple-minded, cliché, and intended to please not provoke thought. One cannot blame studios for wanting a return on their product, but one can also not blame critics who found the infantile film, well...infantile.

Another theme was the fusion between the religious right and cultural criticism from conservative movie critics which took off in the mid-1990s. This occurred for a few reasons. Baehr's *Movieguide* got the ball rolling in the late 1980s by focusing solely on the acceptability of the content within the film rather than the aesthetic value. The influence was most obvious in the pages of *Human Events*. While always a staunchly anti-communist publication, with the fall of the Soviet Union, *Human Events* began to focus on more domestic social and cultural issues, aligning itself closely, at least in their film sections with the religious right adopting his format of reviewing content even before Baehr took over reviews from Brudnoy. Baehr was bolstered by Medved's *Hollywood vs. America* which had an indelible impact on the way many conservatives viewed Hollywood throughout the decade and onward. The only place Medved received any push back was from the sole Libertarian magazine left in the 1990s, *Reason*. This augurs a

deeper look into an interconnected point that has not been touched on yet; the fall of libertarian publications and the rise of magazines and journals associated with the religious right.

When Murray Rothbard shut down *The Libertarian Forum* in 1984 he wrote a *Mortis causa* of the movement. Without getting too much in-depth he noted how “[l]ibertarian institutions have either collapsed, greatly contracted, or abandoned principle in a generally unsuccessful attempt to corral more support and more funding.”<sup>470</sup> He then listed the various libertarian periodicals and newsletters which collapsed in 1983 and 1984, including his own, leaving only *Reason* which “has gotten so soft-core, and so outreach [sic] (to say nothing of even more boring), that it is now scarcely discernible as being libertarian at all.”<sup>471</sup> Add to this that *Reason* stopped their “long tradition of monthly movie reviews” in the summer of 1984 and it becomes plain to see how there was a void to fill on the Right for those interested in film and the larger culture.<sup>472</sup> Brudnoy reflected on the collapse of libertarianism and the rise of the religious-right writing for a symposium “The 80’s Will be Remembered...” for *Reason* in 1988. He assumed the 1980s would be remembered for “the near-complete breakdown of...the libertarian impulse within the conservative movement.”<sup>473</sup> “What had once been a genteel and thoughtful amalgam of traditionalist and libertarian elements” Brudnoy began, “became-in the hands of the manipulators surrounding the president and in the rhetoric and pamphleteering of the operators who took for granted their benediction from what they imagine is their God-a bitter and vicious thing.”<sup>474</sup> Thus filling the space left by libertarians were publications associated more with the

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<sup>470</sup> “The State of the Movement: The Implosion,” *The Libertarian Forum*, Vol. XVIII, No. 8-12, September-December, 1984, 3, Pages 1191-1199 in vol. II.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.* Here is a list of some of the publications: *Inquiry*, *frontlines* [sic], *Free Texas*, *Caliber*, *Competition*, *Libertarian Vanguard*, *The Voluntaryist*, *Libertarian Review*, *Update*, *Literature of Liberty*, and now *Libertarian Forum*.

<sup>472</sup> Robert W. Poole Jr., “Notes,” *Reason*, June/July, 1984, 4.

<sup>473</sup> David Brudnoy, “The ‘80s Will be Remembered...,” *Reason*, May 1988, 51.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

religious right: *Christianity Today* began regular movie reviews in 1983 and although it had a brief hiatus from March 1985 to March 1988 it continued sporadically afterward, *First Things* did not offer a regular review but did opine occasionally on film, the rightward leaning Catholic-oriented *Crises* and *New Oxford Review* ran their review sections starting in 1985 and December of 1984 respectively, and as already mentioned there was *Human Events* and *Movieguide*, which by the late 1990s were indistinguishable in their film criticism. As Libertarian magazines disappeared so did their influence just as the opposite was true for the Religious Right.

The third and fourth points can be taken together here. Disney's abrupt rise during the 1990s brought a more vigilant focus from those within conservatism who saw the corporation as an opponent in the culture war. What seemed to bother those most perturbed by Disney was that it was expanding its empire into areas not historically or traditionally associated with the Disney of the past. This includes the buying of Miramax in 1993 (made *Pulp Fiction*, *Kids*, *Priest*), ABC television and radio in 1996, and the creation of Hyperion Books in 1990. Much of the material created and distributed under these subsidiaries did not mesh well with what was once known to be Disney family-friendly material. As Joseph D'Agostino put it in *Human Events* in 1997 "[t]oday's Disney is a far cry from the company that Walt Disney, a man renowned for his conservatism in both habit and politics."<sup>475</sup> In *Chronicles* L. Rockwell Jr. went so far as to call Eisner "evil" and a "bad man" for the changes he implemented.<sup>476</sup> This underlying hostility toward the Disney world may have set the tone for some to see their animation through hostile eyes, but it was in actuality the animated films themselves that drew the most intense fire. Or as Bowman put it:

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<sup>475</sup> D'Agostino, "Pro-Family Group Says, 'no,' to Disney's House of Yes," 7.

<sup>476</sup> Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr., "How the Market Stamps Out Evil," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 21 No. 12, December 1997, 21.



For it is not Disney's policy on gay employees, nor even the distribution by its subsidiaries of such trashy and anti-Christian films as *Kids* or *Priest*, that constitutes a threat to the "family values" Disney still claims to uphold. On the contrary, the very films touted as the most "wholesome" and "family-oriented" movies made in the world today tend to undermine not only civil and religious but also parental authority.<sup>477</sup>

There were repeated and specific concerns that popped up throughout the 1990s. The editor of *Chronicles* Thomas Fleming touched on one of these concerns in an editorial he wrote in late 1999:

... Disney heroes were almost always "outsiders" and minority figures who challenge the assumptions of mainstream culture. While older Disney films focused on opening up America to outsiders, the concept of an American mainstream has disappeared in the age of Eisner, and along with it the distinctions between Western and non-Western, human and subhuman.

The final line was quoted earlier in *Tarzan* and merits revisiting in full here. The issue in nearly all the Disney films was that the main power structure, usually run by white, European men, was in some way inherently misguided if not evil. This was shown quite clearly in *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Tarzan*. Civilized society in all these films was inherently flawed, bigoted, or filled with greed or lust. Not only did many conservatives see this as an attack on their shared cultural heritage but also, those concerned with character development saw this to be, just as in the Vietnam chapter, a severe oversimplification.<sup>478</sup> Then, there was the Disneyfication or anachronism that was included to placate younger and more modern audiences. This mostly bothered those elite critics with steadfast respect for literature and the arts and believed the dumbing down or Disneyfication of many of the stories was an affront not only to the original authors but also to those familiar with their work.

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<sup>477</sup> Bowman, "Disney's Micky-Mouse Religion."

<sup>478</sup> The concept of generalization of people groups and its connection to character development will be developed further in a later chapter.

However, another prominent issue in this chapter and the next, but not pervasive throughout the entire study, was the heralding of children as the saviors of humanity and the deriding of adults as idiots, evil, or useless. The problem with this for conservatives was that it undermined the basic social structure of society, the family hierarchy. While the western tradition of a specific family structure and roles can be dated back to Jewish law in the Torah, the apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament, and Aristotle, it was Robert Nisbet in the 20th century who eloquently made the case based on political order in his *The Quest for Community* where, much like Tocqueville centuries earlier, contended that society, is to be built from the ground up, the family being the foundation. In the family, there were specific duties and obligations, put in its simplest form, adults were to be revered, respected, and listened to, while children were to be protected and reared up responsibly. When this was undermined on film, it struck at the heart of a working society and culture.

The last subject weaved its way into nearly all parts of this chapter thus far and that was feminism. It is not necessarily a surprise that many were quick to point out what they saw as the indoctrination of feminist ideology in movies largely aimed at children. This was true for nearly all aspects of the conservative spectrum except for libertarianism. Editor of the *Libertarian Review* explained the reason why there was not a fiercer push back from many libertarians, at least in the *Libertarian Review* which David Brudnoy was a reviewer. The publication, it claimed, was dedicated to “defending gay rights and feminism” along with its more prominent goal of defending the free market and an “a noninterventionist foreign policy that neither

Republicans nor Democrats cared to entertain.”<sup>479</sup> Nevertheless, feminism was and continued to be, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, a central cultural issue for film critics.

So, in the end how did conservatives feel about animation and Disney? There was begrudging respect for animation as entertainment when done in an aesthetically pleasing fashion, like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Lion King*, or even *The Prince of Egypt* from nearly all quarters. However, for many of those critics focused more on the sociological aspects of the film this mattered less than the underlying messages. Broken down by subsection of critic it is easier to understand. For those on the religious right and only concerned with the acceptability of the content (*Human Events*, *Movieguide*, *Christianity Today*) Disney and animation offered them the greatest possibilities of family-friendly fare, but also the greatest letdown. For the more populist reviewers who saw themselves as reviewing movies for the everyday American (Podhoretz and Brudnoy), Disney and animation were fantastic examples of American ingenuity and should be judged on the entertainment value with less focus on the cultural content. Finally, there were those among the elite of conservative critics (Grenier, Bowman, Simon), who besides Bowman rarely if at all even reviewed animated films. Somehow Grenier reviewed zero animated films writing for *Human Events*, *Commentary*, and *The National Interest* during the 1980s and most of the 1990s while Simon only reviewed three animated movies (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Aladdin*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*). The lack of critical analysis for animation exemplified the lack of respect (alluded to above) many of the elite critics felt for the genre and became even more prescient while reading Bowman’s reviews. This is understandable but also unfortunate as animation became more interwoven into American culture, especially in the

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<sup>479</sup> Childs, Jr., “A Farewell to our Readers,” 6-7. Rothbard in the *Libertarian Forum* was not as staunchly pro-feminist as Childs largely because he was a proponent of the “Old Culture” with clearly defined masculine and feminine roles, at least when it came to film.

1990s. Yet, for these elite critics' animation was not the only film genre where many of these traits were pervasive. The child-centric ideology of infantilism touched on in this chapter will be analyzed in-depth in the next chapter: "Conservatives in Space: A Study of Science Fiction and Horror from *Star Wars* to *The Sixth Sense*."

**Conservatives in Space: A Study of Science Fiction and Horror from *Star Wars* to  
*The Sixth Sense***

Chapter five explores two semi-related genres, Science-Fiction (Sci-Fi) and Horror. These two categories of movies have etched an enduring mark on American popular culture. Is there another genre where the score from a film alone has become synonymous with the genre, like that of *Jaws*? In what other genre can a simple mask become indistinguishable from the horror it spawned: *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*. Is there another combination of sound and vision that lives indefinitely in the minds of film aficionados and pop culture historians than the shower scene in *Psycho*, or the opening sequence of *Star Wars*? The distinctive ability of these genres to engrain themselves into the culture makes them a fascinating study by that alone. Yet, they also serve as inflection points to better understand how conservatives viewed popular culture and the ideas many film critics were attempting to uphold. First, some definitions for clarity are in order.

Science fiction, according to the lecturer of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia Keith Johnston, dealt with a “potential future development within science or the natural world, caused by human or unknown force, which has to be understood, tamed or destroyed. Technology is key to many of these definitions, a suggestion that science fiction is as reliant on the ‘science’ element as the ‘fiction.’”<sup>480</sup> Whereas, the horror genre also called “science fiction’s ‘evil twin’” denoting their shared characteristics has several definitions.<sup>481</sup> Jon Lewis aptly characterized horror films as “defined by their effect” mainly to “exploit our gravest fears” and showcase our shared “[h]uman frailty.”<sup>482</sup> Author and film critic Brad Weismann took

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<sup>480</sup> Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomsbury Publishing, Kindle Edition), 1.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>482</sup> Lewis, *American Film*, 128.

a more philosophical approach. He wrote in *Lost in the Dark: A World History of Horror Film* that “it’s anything that deals with our darker impulses—whether fear, hate, dread, despair, bloodlust, or evil.”<sup>483</sup> He explained:

The horror genre, despite limitations and clichés, allows us to say things about life we think or believe that we rarely articulate: that innocence is doomed, that retribution is sure, that death is nigh. Sometimes we need to inundate ourselves with the abnormal in order to reconceive what constitutes normality. Through horror, we can safely ponder chaos and dissolution. Through it, we integrate our darkensses into ourselves. We need the catharsis.<sup>484</sup>

These definitions aptly describe the wide range of horror and sci-fi films throughout the chapter.<sup>485</sup>

Both genres have a rich cultural history. Science fiction is most commonly dated to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the writings of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Hugo Gernsback.<sup>486</sup> Some have argued it could be dated back as early as Lucian’s *A True History* in the second century AD, or even viewed as an offshoot of the Protestant Reformation, but neither is widely accepted in academic circles.<sup>487</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century radio and comic books became mediums for those drawn to the genre but it was the advent of the motion picture that became a boon for the genre with films like *Metropolis* (1933), *Flash Gordon* (1936), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1966). By the 1970s Sci-Fi paid its dues and was considered a mainstream genre.<sup>488</sup> In fact, by the end of the 1980s science fiction was in a type of

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<sup>483</sup> Brad Weismann, *Lost in the Dark* (University Press of Mississippi. Kindle Edition), xii.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>485</sup> Any film not included in this chapter is because there were insufficient reviews (usually only a single one or not even that). A film in the time frame which had at least three reviews was included in the analysis.

<sup>486</sup> Jim Clarke, *Science Fiction and Catholicism: The Rise of the Robot Papacy* (Great Britain: Gylphi Limited, 2019), 30. Also see Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction: A Literary History* (UK: British Library Publishing, 2018).

<sup>487</sup> Clarke, *Science Fiction and Catholicism*, 30; Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), V.

<sup>488</sup> Johnston, *Science Fiction Film*, 91.

renaissance or “second golden age,” comparable to that of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>489</sup> On the big screen, sci-fi took its audience captive in ways not seen before. Films were bigger, louder, and more technically savvy than ever before. The combination of special effects and technical expertise created an exciting new form of entertainment out of a comic book genre. This was due in large part to the minds of two men George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. These two created such culture-altering films as the *Star Wars* franchise, *E.T.*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, all reviewed by several conservative publications.

Horror on the other hand is “as old as death and the unknown.”<sup>490</sup> No matter the civilization or society, belief in the macabre and the fear of ghosts, monsters, and the otherworldly has permeated every culture.<sup>491</sup> In literature, one could turn to *Beowulf*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, or Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for examples of man having to face the horror of beasts, gods, and even eternal damnation. In the more modern Western tradition of horror, there is no less a rich heritage. Indeed, the Professor of English at St. John’s and the film critic at *Chronicles* from 1999 to this day George McCartney believed horror had “an honorable tradition,” with “[w]riters as diverse as Shakespeare, Poe, Hawthorne, and Henry James [who] have rung changes on its conventions.”<sup>492</sup> Many acknowledge Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as one the first of horror novels, with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) coming a generation later and being the forerunner to the modern genre.<sup>493</sup> The genre continued to expand within the medium of film with classics like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *The Creature From the Black Lagoon*

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<sup>489</sup> Johnston, *Science Fiction Film*, 102.

<sup>490</sup> Weismann, *Lost in the Dark*, 3.

<sup>491</sup> For a wonderful assortment of examples see Professor of Philosophy at Columbia College Stephen T. Asma, *Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>492</sup> George McCartney, “Intimations of Morality,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 12, 1999, 47.

<sup>493</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 2.

(1954), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Exorcist* (1973). But the last quarter-century witnessed the revival and arguably restructuring of the horror picture. Between 1975 and 2000 almost four dozen horror franchises were created including *Halloween*, *Alien*, *Predator*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play*, and many more, creating a bonafide horror palooza.<sup>494</sup> In 1987 alone nearly one hundred horror films were released in America.<sup>495</sup> By the early 1990s when *The Silence of the Lambs* became the first horror film ever to win the Best Picture award, horror was once more acknowledged as a legitimate artistic genre.<sup>496</sup>

What made these genres especially germane to this study is the fact that each one seemed to embody certain qualities that would arguably place them within the conservative-libertarian paradigm. Take science fiction. At face value, one may not think this futuristic genre is indicative of any political ideology. Yet, “Libertarian ideas,” according to professor Ilya Somin at George Mason University, “are far more common in science fiction than any other literary genre.”<sup>497</sup> Sci-fi and libertarians “stand...firm against the collectivist notions of both progressives and ‘common good’ conservatives,” and have “an instinctive rejection of stale convention and custom.”<sup>498</sup> The Mises Institute, named after famous free-market proponent and Austrian economist Ludwig Von Mises, published an article reiterating these thoughts. Noting that nearly “[a]ll the best known libertarian novels are science fiction novels,” *Atlas Shrugged, Nineteen Eighty-four, We, The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, it went on to claim that sci-fi had a

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<sup>494</sup> Weismann, *Lost in the Dark*, 154.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> *Jaws* and *The Exorcist* were both nominated for Best Picture but lost in 1973 and 1975. A similar fate befell *The Sixth Sense* in 2000.

<sup>497</sup> Ilya Somin, “The Politics of Science Fiction,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2014, [The politics of science fiction - The Washington Post](#).

<sup>498</sup> Jordan Alexander Hill, “The Libertarian History of Science Fiction,” *Quillette*, June 12, 2020, [The Libertarian History of Science Fiction \(quillette.com\)](#).



“natural literary expression of political individualism—libertarianism.”<sup>499</sup> Quoting from the author of “A Political History of Science Fiction,” the article went on to further explain the ties that bind the two:

[t]he power to suppress free inquiry, to limit the choices and thwart the disruptive creativity of individuals, is the power to strangle the bright transcendent futures of optimistic SF [sci fi]. Tyrants, static societies, and power elites fear change above all else — their natural tendency is to suppress science, or seek to distort it for ideological ends (as, for example, Stalin did with Lysenkoism). In the narratives at the center of SF, political power is the natural enemy of the future.<sup>500</sup>

With horror, the connection was even more apparent. Stephen King, the world-renown author of horror seemed to think so when he said as much in *Danse Macabre* his non-fiction work about the genre. He called horror “innately conservative,” and a couple of hundred pages later explicitly expounded on this theme, “I’ve tried to suggest throughout this book that the horror story, beneath its fangs and fright wig, is really as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece pinstriped suit; that its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands. Within the framework of most horror tales, we find a moral code so strong it would make a Puritan smile.<sup>501</sup> While King may not have had a refined sense of conservatism and all its nuances, his take on the connection between it and horror must not be overlooked. One of the forefathers of conservatism, Russell Kirk, was an admirer of the supernatural tale who “lamented” the “decayed art” of ghost stories so much that he became an author of various paranormal stories.<sup>502</sup> Kirk’s horror style “[i]nsinuates a chain of being that connects the living and the dead, reminding us of our duty and

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<sup>499</sup> Jeff Rigggenbach, “Libertarianism and Science Fiction: What’s the Connection?” Mises Daily Articles, MisesInstitute, February 11, 2011, [Libertarianism and Science Fiction: What's the Connection? | Mises Institute](#).

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York, NY: Gallery Books, 2010), 185, 421. Robert R. Reilly explores the idea of a broken moral code and horror further in his 200 article for *Crises*. See: Robert R. Reilly, “Film: The Horror,” *Crises*, Vol. 18 No. 10, October 2000. Crises Magazine Archives. [Film: The Horror \(crisismagazine.com\)](#).

<sup>502</sup> James Panero, “The Ghosts of Russell Kirk,” *The New Criterion*, January 2019, [The ghosts of Russell Kirk | The New Criterion](#).

obligations to the past ...[and] is at its heart an imaginative exploration of morality.<sup>503</sup> The larger horror genre, author and professor at Ohio Northern University College Bruce Frohnen wrote, “is not about gore,” bloodshed, or the shock value too often synonymous with the genre but “about the human soul; its capacity for depraved conduct, but also its capacity to recognize the natural order of our existence and to work to re-establish that order at great sacrifice and in the face of evils born of hubris, self-divinization, and even tragic error.”<sup>504</sup> These definitions of horror and sci-fi are extremely significant as the chapter goes on. Many of the critics in the following pages viewed these two genres through the perspectives just described.

One last word on this chapter’s format as it is a bit different than what has come before. For the sake of clarity, the chapter is broken up into two sections, one dealing with horror and the other with science fiction films. Ping-ponging back and forth between the two muddles both the analysis and the flow. The horror section will come second and be strictly chronological. The sci-fi portion will be split between a section solely on the *Star Wars* trilogy and its prequel and then will revert back to a chronological narrative. The hope is that this delineation between the two genres will also make their ideological moorings and cinematic differences more distinct.

It was May 1977; Jimmy Carter had been president for four months, *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* were the top two television shows, and *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) just hit theatres.<sup>505</sup> Little did people know at the time that this would become a global phenomenon. “[N]ot since Chaplinitis swept America in 1915,” film critic J. Hoberman wrote, “had cinema-inspired so heady a craze,” like *Star Wars*.<sup>506</sup> *A New Hope* was in many ways a classic saga. The

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<sup>503</sup> Scott Beauchamp, “Horror and Eternity: Russell Kirk’s Ghostly Tales,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, October 25, 2018, [Horror and Eternity: Russell Kirk’s Ghostly Tales ~ The Imaginative Conservative](#).

<sup>504</sup> Bruce Frohnen, “Horror and the Sacred,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, November 12, 2015, [Horror and the Sacred ~ The Imaginative Conservative](#).

<sup>505</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 14, 68.

<sup>506</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 69. The reference to Chaplinitis is a reference to Charlie Chaplin and America’s love affair with the silent film actor.

protagonist Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) set out on a quest to rescue a princess from a galactic evildoer. Along the way, he learned about the mysteries of “the force” from an older father-like figure, made friends with a ragtag group of ruffians (Henry Ford), and was forced into the center of a galactic struggle for the future of the galaxy.<sup>507</sup> *A New Hope*, the first in a nine-part series, not only set a new box-office record but launched “a retreat to the past” in cinema being both “proudly retro and profoundly nostalgic.”<sup>508</sup>

Conservatives essentially found this first installment enjoyable and entertaining. William Neubauer, a freelance writer from Chicago, penned a review for *The American Spectator* in the last issue in which “The Alternative” was used in its title. He began with a grandiose claim. The film was “arguably the most extraordinary economic, artistic, and sociological phenomenon in the history of cinema.”<sup>509</sup> Neubauer saw value in the fact that rather than using sex, pandering to specific audiences, using “scatological jokes,” or explicit violence to shock, *Star Wars* “displayed an innocence of vision and purity of spirit” not commonly found in an era of film marked by paranoia and despair. He believed that it hearkened back not only to the comic book *Flash Gordon* to which it largely owed its lineage, but also to *The Wizard of Oz*, *Paradise Lost*, *Planet of the Apes*, and even some John Ford Westerns.<sup>510</sup>

Neubauer was not alone in his praise. *National Review* in 1977 ran a sporadic film review section within the larger “Books, Art’s, Manners” section called “On the Screen.” Their regular critic Harvey Phillips entered his last article on November 12, 1976.<sup>511</sup> During the reorganization

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<sup>507</sup> Luke very much follows the path laid out by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* which chronicles the hero’s journey in various mythological literature. For more see: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, 1949).

<sup>508</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 328; and Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 72.

<sup>509</sup> William Neubauer, “The Talkies: The *Star Wars* Phenomenon,” *The Alternative: An American Spectator*, Vol 10 Iss 11, 1977, 25.

<sup>510</sup> Neubauer, “The Talkies: The *Star Wars* Phenomenon,” 25-26.

<sup>511</sup> Harvey E. Phillips, “Futures Past,” *National Review* 28, no. 43, November 12, 1976, 1238–39, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6078561&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

period, before John Simon became the new film critic, the libertarian-leaning David Brudnoy found his way to providing his only film review for *National Review* when he wrote one on *Star Wars*. He began by touching on a falsehood to which he wanted to call attention. “[T]he myth,” he started, “that there is an immense demand for ‘family’ picture is almost always exploded at the box office...[the] movie audience is now composed mainly of people from their teens to their forties” and movies reflect their “tastes and values.”<sup>512</sup> It is interesting to note that it is about fifteen years before Medved’s book will hit bookshelves and the editor at *Reason* would make the same argument.<sup>513</sup> Nevertheless, the hallmarks of Brudnoy’s distaste for those who aimed to “clean up” cinema in favor of more family-friendly fare were present in the late 1970s. However, he did remark that there did seem to be a “lost genre” one that has a simple story of good winning over evil leaving one feeling joy rather than insightful self-analysis as they exit the theater. *Star Wars*, which he described as “unashamedly fantasy” fills this void, and “America appears sated with reality and wants some magic again.”<sup>514</sup>

Keeping his analysis rather broad, Brudnoy thought it was “for absolutely everyone,” the “most enjoyable film in a very long time,” and a “continual visual splendor” with “ongoing comic relief.”<sup>515</sup> One of his last lines encapsulated his opinion well, *Star Wars* is “as old fashioned and uplifting as Faith and Love, as familiar as Superman, and as bright and new as next spring.”<sup>516</sup> Then, there was John J. Pierce of *Reason*. He was a one-off reviewer standing in between the switch from critic Charles Barr to John Hospers. Pierce, much like the ostentatious opening from Neubauer one-uped him by paraphrasing the Gospel of Luke about the heralding of

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<sup>512</sup> David Brudnoy, “The Perfect Movie,” *National Review* 29, no. 28, July 22, 1977, 839, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6056597&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>513</sup> See Chapter 3 page, 15.

<sup>514</sup> Brudnoy, “The Perfect Movie,” 839-840.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 840.

the Birth of Jesus. “Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy,” but instead of the baby Christ, it was the “[e]xtravagant space opera,” *Star Wars*.<sup>517</sup> Once again there was a focus on how it was “for everyone” and he hailed the “spectacular special effects,” characters, storyline, basically every aspect of it, including that it “breathes the essential spirit of science fiction.”<sup>518</sup>

About seven months later John Hospers authored a review in *Reason for Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in which he also gave his thoughts on *Star Wars*. “[T]he trouble with *Star Wars*,” he wrote, “was not lack of action (far from it) but meaningless action. There is no battle of wits between the film and the viewer since no one can know what the probabilities are: there’s no telling what kind of new-fangled weapon is going to be pulled out unexpectedly and by whom-as far as the audience is concerned, it’s a matter of sheer chance.”<sup>519</sup> There had to be some inclination of what can be expected from the film and a certain orderliness where anarchy or chaos did not run rampant.

Another critic who was not amused was Murray Rothbard at the *Libertarian Forum*. Ever a proponent of the Old Culture, Rothbard found it odd that his “fellow-critics” were exulting a movie that epitomized the very “Old Culture truths” that they have “spent the greater part of their lives deriding.”<sup>520</sup> However, Rothbard argued that the critics were only able to do this because “*Star Wars* is such kiddie hokum” that they could enjoy the film and the dazzling special effects without “having their aesthetic values threatened.” Besides the values, Rothbard did not find the film pleasing. He thought the Luke character was too “wooden and callow,” Carrie Fischer who played Princess Leia was “ugly and abrasive” and the “quintessence of the anti-princess,” and

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<sup>517</sup> John J. Pierce and John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, August, 1977, 46.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>519</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, March, 1978, 45.

<sup>520</sup> Mr. First Nightery, “Arts and Movies,” *Libertarian Forum*, Vol. X, No. 6, June, 1977, 5, Page 769 in vol. II.

the big duel scene between Darth Vader and Obi-one was “pointless and leads nowhere,” which made it an “oversold Turkey.”<sup>521</sup>

A few comments on this initial analysis. One, there was a larger than usual amount of libertarian voices commenting on this film (all but *The American Spectator*). This does not devalue their takeaways, but it should be noted. It alludes to the fact, as noted at the end of the last chapter, that libertarians in the late 1970s and early 1980s had a plethora of outlets to work within making their voices one of the loudest. Also, it may point to the fact that libertarians were indeed drawn to the genre of science fiction more than others. Two, those who favored the film were unquestionably drawn to the classical nature of the storyline i.e., good and evil were clearly demarcated, the protagonist had to take a journey into the unknown, and there was even a transcendent aspect (the force) present.

Nonetheless, three crucial issues persist throughout the rest of the chapter. First, was the idea that *Star Wars* was, as Rothbard put it, “kiddie hokum,” or infantile.<sup>522</sup> In retrospection, and as will become evident, sci-fi offered a rich environment for infantilism to flourish, and *Star Wars* may not have signified the start of infantilism in film, but it was no doubt the bedrock on which it grew. Yet, interconnected to this was the praise of a “simple” or “classic” comic book story that was “for everyone” and arguable puerile. Why the praise here and derision for animated that exuded the same traits? This will be dealt with after analyzing the rest of the series but should be kept in mind. The second point may have gone unnoticed if not for the issue repeating itself throughout the chapter. Rothbard made a telling comment when he called Leia the “the anti-princess.”<sup>523</sup> As traditional as many critics believed *Star Wars* to be, the timeless

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<sup>521</sup> Mr. First Nightery, “Arts and Movies,” 5.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

damsel in distress was not portrayed in Carrie Fischer's character, particularly as the trilogy progressed. She foreshadowed the way women would be portrayed (strong, in command, self-reliant, the ultimate defeater of evil) in horror and sci-fi during the next two decades.<sup>524</sup> The last point only slightly alluded to by Hospers, already mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, and will become a lynchpin of criticism over the next few films is that if either a sci-fi or horror film was lacking in believability/logic or reason then it was quickly called out by numerous critics which augured its downfall.

Three years later, in the midst of the Republican presidential primaries and just weeks after the failed Operation Eagle Claw, an attempt to rescue the American hostages being held in Iran, the second *Star Wars* installment came out. As one might imagine, *Star Wars: The Empire Strike Back* (1980) was released to American audiences with much fanfare. Continuing the saga that began in the first movie, Luke, Han Solo, Leia, and the rebel alliance are all on the defensive after destroying the Death Star. Luke undergoes training with the Jedi master Yoda while Han Solo and Leia have to evade bounty hunters and the Empire. It all came to a climactic conclusion when Luke was required to make a life and galaxy-altering decision about which side of the Force he should side with. It is a surprising fact that there were not more reviews on this film considering the success of the original. There are only three, but all are quite in-depth and provide unique takeaways. Grenier in *Commentary*, Simon in *National Review*, and Brudnoy in *The Libertarian Review* all put forward their judgments.

Simon was, as usual, the first to have his review in print and was not a fan. The original he believed was “no worse than harmless junk” but the sequel was “malodorous offal...[and]

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<sup>524</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail when the author gets to Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*, Linda Hamilton in *Terminator I* and *II*, Jodi Foster in *Silence of the Lambs*, and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*. The last film was not widely reviewed.

repulsively commercial.”<sup>525</sup> *Empire* was “without innocence,” a position seconded by Grenier further down. Once again, the need for realism came into play as he labeled some of the “plot devices” like Luke destroying the snow-walkers with steel wire and the millennium falcon escaping into the asteroid field as “preposterous, or imbecile.”<sup>526</sup> “Even science fiction,” he lectured “can use a little credibility and originality.”<sup>527</sup>

He was also perturbed by the “regression of adults” and rise of “infantilism” exemplified by the tepid romance between Hans Solo and Leia culminating in a “chaste kiss.”<sup>528</sup> Redolent of Rothbard’s “kiddie-hokum” comment, Simon and others continued to call out this trend as damaging to cinema as an art form. However, these were not the only flaws. He also attacked the three main actors as an “interstellar drug store cowboy,” a “talentless Tom Sawyer of outer-space,” and “worst of all...a cosmic Shirley Temple...without the slightest acting ability or vestige of prettiness.”<sup>529</sup> These descriptions are telling in that they all suggest that Simon was perturbed by the one-dimensionality of the characters, more often found in comic books than in movie theatres. But, the “[m]ost painful,” part he insisted was “the dime store mysticism.”<sup>530</sup> Again, another point made by Grenier in his *Commentary* article “Celebrating Defeat.”

Grenier was a fan of the first film which he described as “basically the story...of two red-blooded American boys, pure-hearted, valiant, sure of their values and justice of their cause, who trounce the villain.”<sup>531</sup> Essentially the traditional or classic story that some conservatives were

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<sup>525</sup> John Simon, “Mythopoeic Madness,” *National Review* 32, no. 12, June 13, 1980, 742, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6079983&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Celebrating Defeat,” *Commentary* 70, no. 2, Aug 01, 1980, 58, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-celebrating-defeat%2Fdocview%2F1290179965%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.



drawn to. However, he found *Empire Strikes Back* to be the antithesis of the original containing “an extensive series of defeats, disasters, humiliations, almost as if our heroes were being punished for their sin of pride (or culture arrogance) they displayed in *Star Wars*.”<sup>532</sup>

Also, like Rothbard back in 1977, he was not a fan of Princess Leia’s character. He thought her “dialogue seem[ed] to have been vetted by the National Organization of Women” and whose “obstreperousness” was used “to mollify the women’s movement specifically or Lucas’s own wife.”<sup>533</sup> He clarified what he thought caused the change between the two films. Between the first and second movie, according to Grenier, Lucas became “intellectually more ambitious” and “more ‘relevant’ offering profound comment on the times in which we live.”<sup>534</sup>

Similar to Simon, he was also dismissive of the “idiot’s version of an Oriental mystic discipline” Luke was learning from Yoda, in lieu of “his corpus of traditional (western) belief” from *A New Hope*.<sup>535</sup> Grenier largely blamed the director. He called Lucas who he seemed to personally dislike, a “card-carrying member of the occultist subculture.”<sup>536</sup> “Lucas,” Grenier penned, “...is the counterculture in a nutshell,” he epitomized the group which took “for granted all the affluence and freedoms which came its way so effortlessly” and “wanted moral superiority, admiration, power.”<sup>537</sup> This was evocative of the way Grenier spoke when he was referring to the student protestors in the Vietnam chapter and the artistic class he described in *Capture the Culture* years later.<sup>538</sup>

Finally, there was the outlier Brudnoy. As in the animation chapter, when he was one of the only ones who enjoyed any animated picture he reviewed, here he is the sole critic defending

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<sup>532</sup> Grenier, "Movies: Celebrating Defeat," 60.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>538</sup> See Chapter 2.

the space opera. It was, in Brudnoy's words, "a sequel worthy of its original," which "became the most phenomenally successful movie ever made."<sup>539</sup> However, what made Brudnoy's article unique was not his cinematic opinions but his comparison of it to Ayn Rand's Magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged*. He began by stating even though "[w]e may never see *Atlas Shrugged* translated to the screen...we may be privileged to experience the completion of a project [*Empire Strike Back*] of comparable interest and kindred spirit."<sup>540</sup> He considered Rand and Lucas as proponents of "rational individualism" or the "saving power in a corrupted world."<sup>541</sup> Brudnoy supposed both (Lucas and Rand included) were "at odds with the kind of 'ethical relativism' that considers every political system essentially the same political system, every arena of human endeavor similarly limited, and every majority inevitably tyrannical, and so wonders why we should bother to struggle against the givens."<sup>542</sup> In the end, "the joy of Lucas's well-wrought movies is enhanced, not diminished, by grasping the sober lessons they teach."<sup>543</sup> Brudnoy's analysis further supports the idea that many libertarians not only enjoyed sci-fi movies but were irrevocably drawn to it as an ideological kindred genre.

Another three years on and *Star Wars* fans were greeted with the capstone of the trilogy *Return of the Jedi* (1983). The third film follows the heroes' attempt to rescue Han Solo (Harrison Ford) from the clutches of his alien capturer Jabba the Hut, the rebel's attempt to destroy the second Death Star, and Luke's (Mark Hamill) battle to win over Darth Vader (James Earl Jones) from the dark side of the force while also defeating the evil emperor of the Sith. *Return of the Jedi* appeared to invoke many of the traits of the original which most critics took as

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<sup>539</sup> David Brudnoy, "Heroes," *The Libertarian Review*, August, 1980, 41-42. Brudnoy is speaking of the original when he called it "the most phenomenally successful movie ever made."

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

a positive. That is, all but Simon who believed it to be a “nine part junk epic.”<sup>544</sup> He described a light saber battle as “a duel of demented traffic lights,” called the acting “rudimentary,” and the sound effects were “aimlessly noisily,” but did note sardonically how “childish adults, of whom there seems to be no shortage...should, like most of my critical colleagues,” enjoy the film.<sup>545</sup> Simon epitomized the critic who absolutely needed the film to be serious-minded. The comic-book narrative and characters for Simon discounted it from being judged on any higher plane. However, he was the outlier when it came to *Star Wars*, as many conservative critics were able to look past many of the traits they could not when it came to Disney’s simplemindedness.

Stephen Macaulay of *Chronicles* and Bayles of the *Spectator* viewed the story’s simpleness through a positive lens. The former believed Lucas had “proven himself to be a talented filmmaker,” and stayed true to form in an era where it would be easy to be “artistic.”<sup>546</sup> Bayles gave a bit more detail. “It is true,” she wrote, “Lucas was raised on Flash Gordon, the Masked Marvel, Disneyland, and comic books—and the Star Wars opus is solidly in this vein,” and therefore “[t]he plot of all three Star Wars movies is the same as any Saturday-morning cartoon.”<sup>547</sup> However, she took issue with this carrying a negative connotation and believed its unexact nature did not equate to a poor movie. What she did find troubling was the overt occultism and shunning of western values. She targeted those who were so “starved for religion, but so disdainful of Western civilization, that they succumb to any high-sounding palaver, provided it issues from the lips of a non-Westerner, or better still, a nonhuman extra-terrestrial.”<sup>548</sup> When in fact, according to her, the “spiritual message resembles the down-home

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<sup>544</sup> John Simon, “NEVER SAY JEDI,” *National Review* 35, no. 12, June 24, 1983, 763–65, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6056413&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>545</sup> Simon, “NEVER SAY JEDI,” 763-765.

<sup>546</sup> Stephen Macaulay, “Paying Dues and Eating Free Lunch,” *Chronicles of Culture*, September, 1983, 37.

<sup>547</sup> Martha Bayles, “A Cartoon Odyssey,” *American Spectator*, Vol 16 Iss 08, 1983, 28.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Methodism which Lucas's grandparents brought with them when they moved to California from Arkansas.” She pointed to “the clear... distinction between good and evil; the availability of salvation to all types and conditions of people; the continual struggle to accept grace and become worthy of it; the pressure to strive toward perfection.”<sup>549</sup> Harry M. Cheney, one of the two reviewers for *Christianity Today* with Lloyd Billingsley, from 1983 to March 1985 when the cinema section ended, had the most laudatory review. He labeled it “a giddy, fully satisfying summation” and the entire series a “cathedral of dreams.”<sup>550</sup> He then went on to discuss the secret behind *Star Wars*’ success. “Jedi and its companion works,” he remarked, “seem to have met a real need in the human heart for heroic ideals, for strong moral delineation, and for naïve, unaffected entertainment.”<sup>551</sup>

A little less than two decades later *The Phantom Menace* (1999) sent movie-goers to the theatres once again in droves. This time, the prequel to the original series has Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) as the main heroes as they set out to protect Princess Padme (Natalie Portman). But the true arc of the story followed Anakin Skywalker, a boy with a natural affinity for using the force who is taken in and trained by Obi-Wan as the evil Sith plot to take over the galaxy. Those who were willing to see the film as pure entertainment found it to be enjoyable while those with a more sophisticated palate were less pleased. However, some familiar themes arose once again, which will be discussed at the end of this synopsis.

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<sup>549</sup> Bayles, “A Cartoon Odyssey,” 29.

<sup>550</sup> Harry Cheney, “Tender Mercies and Return of the Jedi,” *Christianity Today* (Pre-1986), Jul 15, 1983, 54, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ftender-mercies%2Fdocview%2F200695847%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

The “Movie Guide Ratings” in *Human Events* were almost exclusively fixated on the “New Age pagan worldview” and “occult elements” in the film. While “comfortably PG,” the review still warned, “New Age philosophy...creep into this movie all too frequently.”<sup>552</sup> Analogous was George McCartney who took issue with a differing aspect of the same matter. Writing in *Chronicles* he believed the movie evoked a “nostalgia for primal balance” much like *Tarzan* in the animated chapter, where it was only “the simple who are pure of heart,” like the Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi* and this time the Gungans and Jar-Jar Binks.<sup>553</sup> While not explicitly tied to the occult or eastern mysticism, the animism or primal urge present in *Phantom* was reminiscent of the anti-Western tradition recorded by other critics. Nevertheless, when he took off his “critic’s cap” he found himself “bedazzled into submission.”<sup>554</sup> Podhoretz in *The Weekly Standard* was the most laudatory calling it “a very good movie, lovely to look at, with an interesting and complicated storyline.”<sup>555</sup> He thought the film would succeed with audiences because it so closely mirrored the ideas found in the original, “Lucas shows he still believes in good guys and bad guys, in right and wrong, in the Force and the Dark Side -- and if that's even more unfashionable today than in 1977, so be it; it still makes for a surprising and refreshing evening at the movies.”<sup>556</sup>

Bowman and Simon saw things a bit differently from the Podhoretz and others. Bowman in his customary acerbic fashion offered his devastating take on the film. If someone other than Lucas “had made a movie so obviously derivative of the original *Star Wars*, Lucas would have

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<sup>552</sup> “Movie Guide Ratings,” *Human Events*, May 21, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1866820&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>553</sup> George McCartney, “Of Apes and Yahoos,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 09, 1999, 43.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>555</sup> John Podhoretz, “Star Wars and Its Critics; The Phantom Menace Makes It to the Screen,” *The Weekly Standard*, May 24, 1999, <https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3WJD-RWF0-00CY-N1M7-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

had good grounds to sue.”<sup>557</sup> Filled with “wooden acting, ...boring and predictable battles with an even more boring and predictable enemy, its by now over-familiar comic grotesques who talk like Teletubbies, and its portentous nonsense disguised as Jedi wisdom,” Bowman had no time for a film he found “obviously inferior.”<sup>558</sup> For Simon, who had “never been a sci-fi reader, except for the Martian novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs,” which “taught [him] as a 15-year-old much of [his] English,” there was “not much human feeling” nor “much story either.”<sup>559</sup> Quoting one of the lines from the film he ended his review, “‘Feel, don't think,’ Qui-Gon counsels, and I can report that the second part of the advice was scrupulously heeded by the filmmakers.”<sup>560</sup>

There are quite a few points that can be readily made. First, the *seeming* acceptance of the simple-mindedness in *Star Wars* and the rejection of it by many in the animation chapter must be addressed. The word seeming is italicized above because when a step back is taken the adulation placed upon the series is not as strong as one may be led to believe. The biggest proponents are once more the entertainment-centered critics Brudnoy and to a lesser extent Podhoretz. Simon, Bowman, and Hospers were all dismissive if not contemptuous in their reviews. Still, other critics like Grenier enjoyed the first “pure-hearted” film, while Bayles and Shapearo praised the film directly commenting on its comic-book-like simpleness of “good and evil” being clearly delineated as positives.<sup>561</sup> However, the demarcating difference between *Star Wars* and many animated features was that *Star Wars* was honest in its comic-book narrative and abided by many traits of the classic hero story, while Disney films seemed to manipulate their stories to make their characters and stories more modern and more politically correct in order to make some

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<sup>557</sup> James Bowman, “Twice-Told Tales,” *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 07, 1999, 68.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

<sup>559</sup> John Simon, “Not Far Enough Away,” *National Review* 51, no. 11, June 14, 1999, 54–55, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1894901&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>561</sup> Grenier, “Movies: Celebrating Defeat,” 58; Bayles, “A Cartoon Odyssey,” 29.

larger point within the film, i.e., masculine aggression was bad (*Beauty and the Beast*), Native Americans were good and Europeans were rotten (*Pocahontas*), there are no differences in men and women (*Mulan*).

Second, feminism was only a minor issue in this series touched on briefly in *New Hope* and then more generously by Grenier in *Empire*, but still, it drew indignation and will continue to do so in this chapter. Third, the rejection of Western religion or philosophy for the “pretentious nonsense” disguised as Jedi wisdom, or the “dime-store mysticism” as described by Simon, Bowman, Grenier, MovieGuide, Bayles, and others was a large unifying position. It boded once again for the rising influence of the religious right and that nearly all conservatives saw value in some semblance of a Judeo-Christian philosophical tradition. If the latter seems too far a stretch then it could at least be said that they found the New-Age vernacular and spiritualism in *Star Wars* sorely lacking.

The fourth and final point was one continually harped by the high-minded Simon; mainly that the entire series was imbued with infantilism. The issue of child-centered films should not be laid at the feet of *Star Wars* alone. In 1981, a year after *Empire* he remarked how there seemed to be an “all-consuming...tidal wave of infantilism” and in 1986, three years after *Return of the Jedi*, he declared how nice it would be if “decent adult movies, relevant to mature lives, [would be made] rather than the omnipresent horror, sci-fi, high school, escapist fantasy, or sex and violence trash that infests our screens.”<sup>562</sup>The problem for Simon was that in an age in cinema that would largely be defined by “a return to innocence” and child-centric films, American

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<sup>562</sup> John Simon, “Something Adult,” *National Review* 33, no. 14, July 24, 1981, 853, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6079429&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; and John Simon, “Thinking Small,” *National Review*, vol. 38, no. 10, June 1986, 59, *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12562241&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12562241&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

movies did not “...cope with serious, contemporary, middle-class, adult problems.”<sup>563</sup> Simon longed for “serious filmmaking about the urban bourgeoisie and its ordinary problems of existence and co-existence....”<sup>564</sup> The points raised by the critics throughout the *Star Wars* films were not necessarily unique to the franchise, but they do set the stage for understanding the interaction between sci-fi and conservative critics throughout the rest of the study.

Just a few months after *A New Hope* was out, Steven Spielberg released his quasi-religious *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).<sup>565</sup> About an Indiana blue-collar worker (Richard Dreyfuss) who has a “close encounter” with a UFO and becomes obsessed with finding answers. It foreshadowed the problem of coherence within the sci-fi genre that many critics pointed to. John Simon in his third review for *National Review* was one of the first to call out this feature of the film. According to him, the “one salient feature of Spielberg’s script is that it makes no sense whatever.”<sup>566</sup> He then listed inconsistency after inconsistency in the plot, from the aliens who have mastered space travel yet are unable to master a language and being more pranksters than prophets, to the lack of common sense in the familial relationship of the protagonist, and simple contradictions like a car being destroyed in one scene and then driving off in another.<sup>567</sup> After listing this myriad of contradictions that fly in the face of common sense Simon decided that Spielberg must either have the “memory of a four-year-old”, consider logic outdated, or is simply “incapable of elementary ratiocination.”<sup>568</sup> Simon offered the most acerbic criticism, but he was not far off the mark from his fellow critics.

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<sup>563</sup> Terry Teachout, “Film: Leave the Kids at Home,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 07, July 1999, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Leave the Kids at Home \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com). Teachout quoted a 1974 article by Simon.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>565</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 73-74.

<sup>566</sup> John Simon, “Whistling in the Dark,” *National Review* 29, no. 50, December 23, 1977, 1500, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6056821&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 1500-1501.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 1501.



David Everitt, a writer living in New York City, wrote four reviews for *The American Spectator*'s "The Talkies" column from the summer of 1977 to March of 1978. The one on *Close Encounters* was his last before Ben Yagoda and then John Podhoretz took over. While noting its "technical brilliance" he remarked how the "dramatic high point...[was] a combination of tedium and silliness."<sup>569</sup> Unlike *Star Wars* which used special effects as "instruments in achieving a larger goal," *Close Encounters* failed in this respect and became "disappointing."<sup>570</sup> *Close Encounters* was also the first film officially reviewed in the pages of *Chronicles*. Their readers were introduced to Eric Shapearo, a lifelong fan of movies who would go on to serve as their sole film critic through 1981 and contribute in 1982 alongside others. Like Everitt, Shapearo in *Chronicles* found it to be "strong in the visual," but otherwise continued the theme started by Simon when he labeled it "utterly feeble in reason."<sup>571</sup> Spielberg, he wrote, may be a "moviemaker but not an artist."<sup>572</sup> The last review was also the kindest to the film, albeit in a lackadaisical fashion. John Hospers in *Reason* said it was in some ways "more 'realistic'" than *Star Wars* even though certain aspects of the film were "like a jig-saw puzzle whose pieces never quite fit together."<sup>573</sup> *Close Encounters* was not the only sci-fi or horror film lambasted for its farfetched plot and narrative.

Staying on the ever-popular themes of space, Spielberg, who Simon termed "the eternal adolescent," came once more to the forefront with his highly successful summer blockbuster *E.T.*

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<sup>569</sup> David Everitt, "The Talkies: Close Encounters and High Anxiety," *The American Spectator*, Vol. 11, No. 5, March, 1978, 28.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>571</sup> Eric Shapearo, "Simon's Revenge and Spielberg's Fast-paced Bubble," *Chronicles of Culture*, January, 1978, 22.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>573</sup> John Hospers, "Movies," *Reason*, March, 1978, 45.

(1982).<sup>574</sup> A space creature finds itself stranded on earth where he is ultimately befriended and aided in his quest to get “home” by a group of suburban school children. *E.T.* received some of the more positive reviews when compared to its sci-fi predecessors. Tom Mulder, an intern pastor in British Columbia, reviewed the film for *Christianity Today*, one of the few film reviews before they became more regular in 1983. Here is another earlier signifier of the coming of Ted Baehr and *MovieGuide*. According to Mulder, “[s]piritual metaphors abound,” throughout the entirety of the film.<sup>575</sup> “One can’t help but see messianic significance in E.T.,” the creature heals, brings flowers back, and he himself seems to come back to life.<sup>576</sup> However, there were causes for concern. The “most disturbing message” according to the author was “the “justification of sin” through the normalization of profanity by children in the family and E.T. getting drunk; “It shows a continuing trend in our contemporary culture to debase our heroes,” as well as the continuing trend in conservative literature to focus on the moral issues in films.<sup>577</sup>

Simon in *National Review* saw the movie from his usual high-brow critic vantage point, as did the novelist Martha Bayles, who took over from Podhoretz in March of 1982 and would go on to be the critic in *The American Spectator* until May of 1984. Both critics placed *E.T.* within the literature and film context of the classic child and wild animal story, with Bayles arguing it fit better within the “tales of animals caught between the wilderness and the human world.”<sup>578</sup> As usual in his sci-fi reviews, Simon pointed to numerous inconsistencies asking: how can E.T. escape humans, why does he sicken so quickly and heal just as quickly, why can he fly

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<sup>574</sup> John Simon, “E.T. Etc.,” *National Review* 34, no. 14, July 23, 1982, 908, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6095546&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>575</sup> Tom Mulder, “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,” *Christianity Today (Pre-1986)*, Jul 16, 1982, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fe-t-extra-terrestrial%2Fdocview%2F200641077%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>. cinema

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Simon, “E.T. Etc.,” 909; and Martha Bayles, “The Wimp From Outer Space,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 15 Iss 09, 1982, 26-27.

sometimes and not others he cannot, etc. Yet, he found room for praise finding “delightful compensations” with the child acting and the fact there was “more story, more characterization, more human interest.”<sup>579</sup>

Bayles also found merits in the film calling it “charming” and explaining its popularity in writing that it “speaks to the audience's understandably human need to withdraw from all the weird, frightening special effects that pass for fantasy in movies lately.”<sup>580</sup> Here too though, the growing problem of infantilism is evident to Bayles. “Spielberg,” she argued, “deserves to be criticized for worshipping not innocence but ignorance, and inviting the public to share his cult of the child, and of himself as perpetual child.”<sup>581</sup> And while not a contemporary review Richard Hobby, a common contributor to film in the *Boston Globe* and Maine Public Radio, wrote a piece in *Chronicles* called “The Vanishing Adult” that will be examined more thoroughly later. Pertaining to *E.T.* he argued that the traditional family structure was turned upside down with children at the head.

The suburban family [in *E.T.*] has been abandoned by the father. Men in general are ominous. The mother is nice but ineffectual; she is not an adult. The ugly creature from outer space confirms the message that older people are the enemies of children, that all virtue, resourcefulness, and sensitivity reside with children. It is a flight from adulthood that is both sentimental and cynical.<sup>582</sup>

The problem with infantilism began to stretch past cinema into a discussion over the societal repercussions of its premise played out in reality. The lifting up of the child and denigration of the adult seemed to many conservatives to signify a continuing breakdown of familial roles and norms within society.

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<sup>579</sup> Simon, “E.T. Etc,” 910.

<sup>580</sup> Bayles, “The Wimp From Outer Space,” 26-27.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>582</sup> Richard Hobby, Screen: The Vanishing Adult,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 07 July 1988, 43.

Two weeks after *E.T.* hit theatres a darker sci-fi flick was released to the public. Based on the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *Blade Runner* (1982) starring Harrison Ford as cop Rick Deckard set in the dystopian Los Angeles in 2019 was about Deckard's attempt to capture "illegal replicas" or bio-engineered humanoids who escaped their space colony and were now on earth. In *Reason*, Hospers was not impressed. He recalled how it "goes on its own lethargic way with very little excuse for a plot," and generally was "[b]oring, confusing, and totally humorless, and burdened with an atrocious script, this film is a waste of time."<sup>583</sup> If one was only to read Hospers, then *Blade Runner* would have received very little support from the Right.

The other two reviewers had a different take than Hospers. Richard Grenier labeled it the "best and most interesting" movie of the summer.<sup>584</sup> *Bladerunner* is a "nightmare vision" of what society would be like if "it were overrun by what we call the Third World."<sup>585</sup> However, the film is "not primarily political at all," rather, "it is a film about the human condition, about morality, and ends with a startling burst of Christian symbolism."<sup>586</sup> Bray Hiawatha, a freelance writer from Chicago, writing in *Christianity Today's* "Cinema" section called it a "chilling allegory about man's relationship to God."<sup>587</sup> "This isn't a family film, and it's not for the squeamish," but he went on to explain how "of all the summer releases, only Blade Runner is truly adult in its thoughtfulness and complexity."<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> John Hospers, "Movies," *Reason*, November, 1982, 51.

<sup>584</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: Summertime Visions," *Commentary* 74, no. 2, Aug 01, 1982, 68, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-summertime-visions%2Fdocview%2F1290146207%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>587</sup> Hiawatha Bray, "Blade Runner," *Christianity Today (Pre-1986)*, Sep 03, 1982, 97, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fblade-runner%2Fdocview%2F200686668%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*

There could not be a larger contrast between the two films. *E.T.* “resurrected Jesus Christ in the form of alien” and was “set in an idyllic all-white suburb,” while *Blade Runner* “invented a horrific multicultural inner city,” and “featured robot ‘replicants’ more soulful in their mortality than the Home sapiens...who hunted them.”<sup>589</sup> *E.T.* was panned by conservative critics, understandably so, for its infantilism and glorification of children, while *Bladerunner*, taken to task by mainstream critics like Kael and Denby was mostly praised by conservatives for commenting on morality and what truly made one “human.”<sup>590</sup> The serious nature of the latter and inquiry into deeper moral questions afforded *Blade Runner* praise *E.T.* was unable to ascertain. Two years later another android-based film would raise a different set of questions. This time the focus would be on one specific half of the human species, women and their role in their society.

The original *Terminator* (1984) is a time-traveling sci-fi story based on the premise that machines become self-aware sometime in the future, destroy humanity, and a small resistance is created by a man called John Conner. But the first installment is just about a man sent back in time to protect Sarah Conner (Linda Hamilton) and her unborn son, John Conner, the eventual leader and last hope of humanity. At the same time, the machines sent back their own weapon, a “terminator” (Arnold Schwarzenegger) to kill Sarah and her unborn son. It was an action-packed film, which helped propel Arnold Schwarzenegger to greater stardom. However, it was his mother, Linda Hamilton’s character, who received the only attention.

The sole review throughout the conservative publications was in *Chronicles* by a professor of Classics at the University of Colorado and editor of *Classic Journal* E. Christian Kopff. The review provided a backdrop for how one can understand the second film as well.

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<sup>589</sup> Hoberman, *Make My Day*, 153-154.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

*Terminator* was “perfectly constructed to excite, frighten, dazzle” yet it also “conveys clearly—and not without subtlety—some important points of popular morality.”<sup>591</sup> The main idea dwelt on by Kopff was what it meant “to become a woman.”<sup>592</sup> In films of the 1980s he wrote, “the women learn to survive and triumph in a man's world of violence and power by mastering men's violent skills and attitudes.”<sup>593</sup> Within the horror and sci-fi genres, this was evident in *Alien*, *Halloween*, and *Star Wars* but also in other genres like *Private Benjamin* and even some *Dirty Harry* films. Grenier alluded to this fact as well seeing that “throughout the 1980’s women warriors, women soldiers, women policemen, [etc.,]...became Hollywood fixtures,” while “[t]he wave of manly females [was] continuing with even greater strength in the 1990s.”<sup>594</sup> He documented the case of Maid Marian in *Robin Hood* with her “unrecognized virility,” the women in *Sleeping with the Enemy* and *Mortal Thoughts* who were part of the “woman as victim [motif], [and] often compelled to murder her male tormentor,” and finally “the most ambitious, self-important, and doctrinaire of the new feminist movies” *Thelma and Louise* in which “men are depicted as a uniform class... ‘violent’ ‘insulting’ ‘surly’ charming but treacherous, [and] ‘obnoxious.’”<sup>595</sup>

But in *The Terminator*, “Sarah Connor learned how to be a woman by making real love to a real man, by bearing his child and bringing that child up to be a survivor and a leader.”<sup>596</sup> The fundamental concept was that “Linda Hamilton triumphs over the nonhuman and in the process learns what it means to be a woman, with a woman's duties and capacities and a woman's

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<sup>591</sup> E. Christian Kopff, “Screen: Macho Machines and Female Role Models: The Terminator,” *Chronicles of Culture*, March, 1985, 30.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> Richard Grenier, “Killer Bimbos,” *Commentary* 92, no. 3, Sep 01, 1991, 50,

<http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fkiller-bimbos%2Fdocview%2F1290129715%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-53.

<sup>596</sup> Kopff, “Macho Machines and Female Role Models: The Terminator,” 30.

role,” and ended by observing how “*Terminator* is one of the most explicitly reactionary films of the past decade.<sup>597</sup> Yet, just seven years later Linda Hamilton’s character would become in words of Grenier “the most aggressive, foul-mouthed human being in the film,” embodying all he believed to be wrong with how gender roles were being distorted in cinema.<sup>598</sup>

*Terminator II: Judgement Day* (1991) directed by James Cameron moved the storyline forward a bit. Since the machines failed to kill Sarah Conner while she was pregnant, they try for a second time to kill John Conner (Edward Furlong) as a child with a new and improved Terminator, while the humans use a reprogrammed older one (Arnold Schwarzenegger) to protect him. Bowman in *The American Spectator* built on Grenier’s thinking, pronouncing how the director Cameron “adds...to the tough-woman myth by making Linda Hamilton, a mere mother in the first terminator, into a macha machine, a killerette who has nothing to learn even from Schwarzenegger, who really is supposed to be a machine, about blowing people away.”<sup>599</sup> He compiled his thoughts into a short but cohesive statement on the state of cinema and the culture; “the child as teacher goes together with the mother as father, the woman as man, and the man as machine.”<sup>600</sup> Meanwhile, Slavitt, the poet, novelist, and author became the movie critic in *Chronicles* from late 1990 until 1994 echoed both Grenier and Bowman calling it “utter piffle” where “[t]he good guys are the innocent kids and the women, and to keep anyone from missing that nuance, Sarah Connor proclaims to some poor male, ‘You can’t create a life. All you create is death.’”<sup>601</sup> Once again, as evidenced by Slavitt and Bowman the restructuring of family

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<sup>597</sup> Kopff, “Macho Machines and Female Role Models: The Terminator,” 30.

<sup>598</sup> Grenier, “Killer Bimbos,” 50.

<sup>599</sup> James Bowman, “The Child is Father to the Man,” *The American Spectator*, 1991: Vol 24, Iss 09, 33.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid.

<sup>601</sup> David R. Slavitt, “Creations Great and Small,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 15, No.10, October 1991, 50.

dynamics comes to the forefront, but this time when discussing the role of women, not infantilism. Others would continue to comment and expand on these ideas as time wound on.

In *Chronicles* Richard Hobby laboriously evaluated the changing relationship between men and women in film as well as some of the problems stemming from it. “The old movies,” he began, “lent credence to the old-fashioned idea that, whatever their similarities, men are men and women are women, that there are such things as masculinity and femininity. Feminine and masculine traits complemented and strengthened each other.”<sup>602</sup> But, “[i]n contemporary films, women do not feel safe and protected; and men do not provide authority and protection. As men have become weaker, women have become harder, colder.”<sup>603</sup> This was a part of the problem because men and women never truly became men and women, they stayed in a child-like state, never fully capable of taking on the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood. Thus, he stated, “the past 50 years have witnessed an increase in male/female confrontation [due to confusion over the roles each had] and the fading of the adult world,” i.e. the rise in popularity of movies depicting both females in male roles and children as the moral and ethical role models. “These would seem to be symptoms of a deep spiritual malaise,” he wrote, and while “[t]he feminists would like to blame men for all the ills of the world. The evidence from the movies is against this view. Men and women have found it equally difficult to grow up.”<sup>604</sup> It should go without saying here, but the changing role women played in film seemed to disturb conservative film and cultural critics, not because women were taking on new male-oriented positions, but because of what they presaged for the family structure. If adults were all bad, women less so than men, both

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<sup>602</sup> Hobby, “Screen: The Vanishing Adult,” 43.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



still nonetheless childlike, but children all good, then the idea of the family, which is at the heart of a functioning society in nearly all conservative doctrine begins to unravel.

Nevertheless, gender roles were not the only issues at the forefront of conservative critics' minds. *Contact* (1997), a film based on the 1985 Carl Sagan novel of the same name, follows the agnostic/atheistic Dr. Eleanor Arroway (Jodi Foster) as she searches for alien life. Contact is made from the Vega star system with instructions to create a transportation device and from then on, the plot thickens with twists and turns as well as a mixture of religious and scientific innuendo. In *Commentary* the one-off reviewer Daniel J. Silver explained how *Contact* "appears to take the religious perspective seriously," by supposedly staging "a head-on confrontation over one of the big issues of our time: the conflict between secularism and religion."<sup>605</sup> However, Silver immediately pushed back on this assumption. On the contrary, what came across in the film was in place of the "life-saving potential of science, religion's solace, we are made to see, is a cheap and impotent thing."<sup>606</sup> "With the various religious figures in *Contact* trashed for their dishonesty, hypocrisy, bad faith, and fanaticism," he continued, "it is no wonder that religion itself should emerge in hopeless caricature, and that we glean no hint either of its sources of truth or of its power."<sup>607</sup> Silver is not without cause in his deduction. The antagonist minister Ralph Rank (Rob Lowe) in stark opposition to the mission was "described in the movie's press kit as 'the right-wing leader of a conservative religious coalition,'" who is based on the former leader of the Christian Coalition Ralph Reed.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Daniel J. Silver, "God and Carl Sagan in Hollywood," *Commentary*, Sep 01, 1997, 52, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fgod-carl-sagan-hollywood%2Fdocview%2F1290095366%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*

The next reviewer touched on the religious perspective but also brought attention to the intellectual malaise in the country. Television and film critic Rob Dreher reflected on these in the conservative Catholic *Crises*. He began by noting how contemporary movie audiences were “so unaccustomed to having their minds engaged by movies nowadays that it’s easy to watch *Contact* and think you’ve really seen something brainy.”<sup>609</sup> “*Contact*,” he asserted, “...flatters the lazy, comfortably secular audience by giving them just enough of the fuzzy God stuff to send them forth feeling vaguely “spiritual,” without demanding that they do much more than entertain the kind of notions most of us toy with in freshman-dorm bull sessions. It’s full of cheap grace and empty calories... .”<sup>610</sup>

Bowman in *American Spectator* spent less time on religion and more on America’s intellectual downfall and infantilism. He summarized his position rather aptly maintaining that “Cartoon Science and Cartoon Religion and Cartoon Politics are all neatly packaged together with a New Age sensibility into the kind of commercial product that absolutely depends on the combination of innocence and imbecility for which American cinema audiences are becoming world-renowned.”<sup>611</sup> The problem is one he introduced a bit further down in his review. It focused on the contemporary idea of post-modernism in film which became en vogue in the 1990s but also the disappointment in what he believed to be the lack of adult cinema in the country.

Either Hollywood has abandoned any attempt to appeal to a mature audience or (a terrifying but increasingly inescapable thought) there is no longer a mature audience of any commercial significance in America. That must be why I am so often driven to dig up some obscure foreign film as the only movie in a given month which is watchable by grownups, or else to adopt the post-modern spirit

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<sup>609</sup> Rob Dreher, “Film: Stallone Stages a Comeback,” *Crises*, Vol. 15 No. 10, October 1, 1997, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [Film: Stallone Stages a Comeback \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> James Bowman, “Loonie Tunes,” *American Spectator*, Vol 31, Iss 09, 1997, 65.

and recommend some particularly clever piece of trash from off the commercial shelf, with which it is at least possible to laugh along.<sup>612</sup>

Bowman seemed to echo much of what Simon said about the state of cinema above. But here, Simon disagreed with his peers and was the sole outlier among the conservative critics. Calling *Contact's* "technology and space-tripping...awesomely designed and shot," he could not have walked away from the film with a more contrasting opinion when it came to the depiction of faith.<sup>613</sup> Simon insisted that "[w]hat happens in the latter parts of the movie requires that, in each viewer's bosom, faith win out, as, I'm happy to report, it does in the script."<sup>614</sup> This seems to be a reference to Foster's speech at the end of the movie when she is questioned by a panel and asked to provide physical evidence of her expedition to Vega, but cannot. The resolutely atheist scientist went on to clarify how even though from a scientific perspective there is zero physical evidence, she had an experiential phenomenon that left an indelible impact on her and how she now interacts with reality.

*Contact* was the last sci-fi film reviewed. While the remaining films are all considered horror, many could also fall under the sci-fi category as well. But before moving on a few crucial ideas need to be repeated. In *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and even *Contact* infantilism was a central problem for conservative critics. The lack of adult-themed films dealing with serious issues caused many conservative critics to mourn the state of cinema in the 1980s. Similarly, the issues with believability or having a basis in some reality in which a viewer could follow the plot, and not get caught up on some details which distract from the overarching narrative were important points when critics reviewed these films. Furthermore, and from a more culturally oriented

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<sup>612</sup> Bowman, "Loonie Tunes," 65.

<sup>613</sup> John Simon, "Flying High, and Higher," *National Review* 49, no. 16, September 1, 1997, 52, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9708172328&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

stance, the changing of gender roles in sci-fi films came to the forefront once more. When taken together with some conclusions from the previous chapter (reversal of parent and child roles) they help to further illuminate some of the larger societal issues conservative cultural critics seemed preoccupied with.

One other aspect inherent in many of the films in the sci-fi portion of this chapter was the centrality of religion or spirituality. This was evident at the start of the chapter in the *Star Wars* analysis with Bayles and Cheney's comments on the "spiritual message" and "strong moral delineation" in *Jedi*, the disparagement of the strain of "New Age philosophy" or oriental mysticism throughout the series, along with similar comments about the "messianic significance" of *E.T.*, the "burst of Christian symbolism," in *Blade Runner*, and the plethora of comments just made about *Contact* by nearly every critic exemplify the importance of faith or religiosity when it came to film.<sup>615</sup> Many, if not all of these concepts will remerge in the horror section. The first film is one that truly serves as a transition film from sci-fi to horror as it could have fallen in either category.

Two years after *A New Hope* and *Close Encounters* a remake of the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1979) came out. Another story having to do with outer space and the creatures who inhabit it, but unlike in *E.T.*, these were not of the friendly M&M loving variety. It followed a government food inspector (Donald Sutherland) as he slowly began to discover that aliens were turning people into "pods" in a horrifying fashion. The criticism picked up where many left off with *Close Encounter*. Hosper in *Reason* called it so extremely implausible as to make people

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<sup>615</sup> Martha Bayles, "A Cartoon Odyssey," 29; Harry Cheney, "Tender Mercies and Return of the Jedi," 55; "Movie Guide Ratings," *Human Events*; Mulder, "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial," 53; Grenier, "Movies: Summertime Visions," 68, Silver, "God and Carl Sagan in Hollywood," *Commentary*, 52; Dreher, "Film: Stallone Stages a Comeback,"; and Simon, "Flying High, and Higher," 52.

who are located in the real world dismiss the film as “two hours of damn fool nonsense.”<sup>616</sup> Shapearo in *Chronicles* meanwhile made two salient points. One continued Hospers, that the logic in the film and the reality of life are too far separated. He pointed to the fact that sometimes the pods can talk and other times all they can do is howl and that “San Francisco is totally devoid of the premier power of American reality—the ubiquitous media—...,” which would have undoubtedly noticed this seemingly odd occurrence.<sup>617</sup> The second was the idea that “what’s repugnant is not necessarily scary, and there’s a distinction between nausea and horror which seems to elude the artists who created this one.”<sup>618</sup> Shapearo’s last point was reiterated by Simon when he wrote how some of the special effects turned “horror in to mere nausea,” a growing theme in the 1970s and 1980s with the explosion of slasher and gross-out films.<sup>619</sup>

Simon also touched on the fact that the “remake is far surpassed by the original” which he considered “scary in the profoundest sense: morally.”<sup>620</sup> This was due to the fact that a “decent young man” had to deal with never knowing who was human and who was not and even had his girlfriend lure “him into abjuring his soul.”<sup>621</sup> It was the protagonist’s own psychological inner struggle aspect of the original that Simon was so drawn to, not the storyline or anything genre-related, a common theme for Simon. Oddly enough Simon never broached the logic or believability aspect and neither did Ben Yagoda in *The American Spectator*. Unlike his colleagues, he found it “wittier, more sophisticated, and more entertaining,” than “the sentimental *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.” He also enjoyed how the movie takes

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<sup>616</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, April, 1979, 44.

<sup>617</sup> Eric Shapearo, “Hydrolyzed Horror,” *Chronicles of Culture*, March, 1979, 24.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>619</sup> John Simon, “Idle Hands & Slight,” *National Review* 31, no. 11, March 16, 1979, 370, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6062714&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*

“potshots at psychobabble, cultism, and self-help...theme[s] [which] mesh with the late 1970s culture of feeling.”<sup>622</sup> Even though the film “falls short...things are definitely getting better in the big-budget sci-fi wars.”<sup>623</sup>

His categorization of the movie as sci-fi while others clearly believed it to be in the horror showed the interconnectedness of the two genres. Nonetheless, the assertion by Yagoda that things were “getting better” in the sci-fi/ horror genre is a curious idea to explore and one that was seconded by a number of critics. The summer of 1979 saw a plethora of sci-fi and horror films released with Simon going so far as to say, “[t]his summer may go down in cinema as the summer of the horror movies,” and he was not alone.<sup>624</sup> Hospers called late 1979 and early 1980 “the season for terror, horror, monsters, blood, gore, and interplanetary aliens.”<sup>625</sup> Only Brudnoy in *The Libertarian Review* believed “[w]e’ve fallen on lean times in the horror flick category of late,” and that “[t]hey just aren’t making them like they used to.”<sup>626</sup>

The reason for most of this adulation is that 1979 witnessed the release of *Dawn of the Dead*, *Halloween*, and *Alien*. *Dawn of the Dead*, about a zombie apocalypse, was only reviewed by Hospers and Brudnoy with the former calling it an “exercise in the macabre...[which] never quite takes off,” while Brudnoy labeled it as “sleaze and it is imaginably successful at making sleaze work.”<sup>627</sup> Meanwhile, *Halloween*, the horror classic about a masked and seemingly supernatural serial killer on the loose on Halloween night was also reviewed by the same two critics. This time Hospers called it “more than usually scary” and although “no *Psycho*...it is the

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<sup>622</sup> Ben Yagoda, “The Talkies: Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 2, February, 1979, 22.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>624</sup> John Simon, “The Soil and the Soiled,” *National Review* 31, no. 31, August 3, 1979, 980–83, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6087972&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>625</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, January, 1980, 42,47; Also see John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, October, 1979, 41; Here he calls “Mysteries, thrillers, and tales of the supernatural...the best films around... .”

<sup>626</sup> David Brudnoy, “Things That Go Bump,” *The Libertarian Review*, July 1979, 94.

<sup>627</sup> Hospers, “Movies,” 41; and Brudnoy, “Things That Go Bump,” 96.

nearest approach to it that has appeared in recent years.”<sup>628</sup> Brudnoy saw this film as evidence that “super horror flicks are still being made in the grand tradition.”<sup>629</sup> But it was another outer space film that would fill up the pages on many conservative film critics’ pads, *Alien* (1979).

*Alien*, the original in a myriad of sequels and spin-offs, was about a space crew who when investigating a distress signal, found themselves in horrific danger when an alien species snuck aboard their ship by parasitically hiding within one of the crew members. The crew, led by Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) must survive while also uncovering the sinister truth behind their mission. *Alien* received both positive and negative reactions. Yagoda called it a “likeable movie” with “commendable performances” even if the “effects are rather more disgusting than necessary” and the slow and tedious killing off crew members “soon wears thin.”<sup>630</sup> Yagoda, as with the vast majority of his reviews offered his readers a very balanced approach touching on the good, the bad, and leaving the reader unsure of exactly where he stood in the end. Brudnoy also offered a mixed response. Unlike the “shlock horror like Halloween, or trash horror like Dawn of the Dead,” Brudnoy argued that *Alien* was “a very contemporary, very hip version of the old monster-behind-the closet-door thriller of blessed memory;” a “neo-gothic horror tale” that plays into both “our paranoia” and “our legitimate fears.”<sup>631</sup> However, in horror, as so often with sci-fi the film’s ultimate acceptance always came back to logic and believability. Dubbing it “unforgiveably [sic] sloppy,” Brudnoy declared, “[i]t plays by no rules...[and] makes its characters do absurd things like take solo expeditions through dangerous territory on board the ship when it is manifest that the buddy system is essential to survival.”<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, March, 1979, 48.

<sup>629</sup> Brudnoy, “Things That Go Bump,” 94.

<sup>630</sup> Ben Yagoda, “The Talkies: Alien and Winter Kills,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 7, July, 1979, 30.

<sup>631</sup> Brudnoy, “Things That Go Bump,” 96-97.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Brudnoy found a kindred spirit in Simon whose opinion of *Alien* and the entire genres of horror and sci-fi became crystal clear in his article, “Our Aliens and Theirs.” Unlike the libertarian Brudnoy who seemed to enjoy horror and sci-fi, he did not count himself one of the “fanciers of horror,” with the reasons becoming apparent rather quickly.<sup>633</sup> *Alien*, he observed, contained “the usual number of inconsistencies, improbabilities, and outright absurdities characteristic of the sci-fi and horror genres,” but is “commendable” for those “free from hypocrisy and finicky stomachs.”<sup>634</sup> Hospers too found it to be a “dreadful bore” and verbatim to Brudnoy a “game without rules.”<sup>635</sup> He expounded on his and his fellow critics' displeasure below:

There have been fine science fiction thrillers...in which the viewer knew what the odds were and was kept abreast of every development, pro and con. Armed with this knowledge, the question was whether he could make a plausible prediction or an educated guess and in some way outsmart the plot-twisters. In *Alien* there isn't much point in trying to outguess them, since what one faces here is simply an Unknown. One can wonder what form the unknown kind of life will assume next, thanks to the special-effects department; but in a game without rules, there isn't much a viewer can do that could be called playing. One can guess with some probability the human reaction of the characters to whatever happens, since this is something within our ken, something we can deal with and empathize with (though the characterizations in this film are of the most superficial and noninvolving sort). But to try to anticipate what The Incomprehensible is going to do is a hopeless task.<sup>636</sup>

This is a reiteration back to Hospers review of the first *Star Wars* in which he made a very similar argument. It seemed Hospers, although a libertarian, did not enjoy the sci-fi or horror genre as much as many of his libertarian peers. Rather he seemed to fall more in line with critics like Simon, who explained why he lashed in on the importance of logic in the films he reviewed

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<sup>633</sup> John Simon, “Our Aliens and Theirs,” *National Review* 31, no. 27, July 6, 1979, 870, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6070130&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, 870-871.

<sup>635</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, September, 1979, 44.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*



in a September 1979 issue writing, “absurdism on the screen...always fails because it clashes with the basic realism of the medium, the naturalistic scenery and objects.”<sup>637</sup> For Simon at least, it may not have been the genre itself, but the fact that in his opinion with the medium of film, a sense of reality needed to be continually kept so as not to betray its strengths.

Before moving forward *Alien* did spur on a number of sequels (6) and prequels along with two spin-offs. Podhoretz reviewed *Alien Resurrection* (1997) in *The Weekly Standard* which he called “the most violent movie” he had ever seen but the article was more about the desensitizing of himself and the American populace to gore and violence than about the movie.<sup>638</sup> Then, *Aliens* (1986) the second in the franchise was reviewed by Grenier in *Human Events*. Entitled “Aliens: Scary Role Model for Women,” it actually was not as much a review as it was an opinion piece about the changing role of women in society. Still, it once again brought the centrality of female roles in society into the spotlight.

In his article, Grenier looked back at the first *Alien* and believed it to be “far superior” with “no agitprop, neither female supremacist nor anti-capitalist.”<sup>639</sup> The second he observed continually demonstrated the opposite. It was not only that it “demonstrates, again and again, the evils of capitalism” but also the inherent goodness and strength (both moral and physical) of women over men.<sup>640</sup> And it is this second point that earned the most attention from Grenier. He asked how Weaver’s character who threw men up against walls like the masculine characters of

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<sup>637</sup> John Simon, “From Pigskin to Pigsty,” *National Review* 31, no. 37, September 14, 1979, 1166, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6070529&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>638</sup> John Podhoretz, “The Moviegoer's Diary Chronicles Aliens, Zombies, and Lawyers,” THE HORROR, THE HORROR,” *The Weekly Standard*. December 22, 1997, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3RJW-GTD0-00CY-N037-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3RJW-GTD0-00CY-N037-00000-00&context=1516831).

<sup>639</sup> Richard Grenier, “Aliens: Scary Role Model for Women,” *Human Events*, Sep 06, 1986, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Faliens-scary-role-model-women%2Fdocview%2F1310021133%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>640</sup> Grenier, “Aliens: Scary Role Model for Women,” 15.

Stallone, Eastwood, and Wayne was any kind of role model for women. To offer context he wrote polemically how women in the mid-1980s were recently granted “combat roles” in the New York fire and police departments, and as a result how the “size and strength requirements have been drastically lowered all along the line.”<sup>641</sup> The erasing of biological differences between men and women and the ignoring of specific gender roles seemed to him both dangerous and illogical. If Hollywood “must give women inspiring role models” he facetiously insisted they should look to history and “Alexandra the Great or Julia Caesar” or even remake *Gunfight at the OK Corral* with Goldie Hawn and Barbra Streisand.<sup>642</sup> Grenier often resorted to sarcasm, but in this particular instance, his condescending tone seemed to have been building due to what he believed to be a reworking of reality to fit Hollywood politics which he found objectionable.

In the midst of the horrorfest fest of 1979 and 1980 Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), which was “financially successful but not...[a] blockbuster,” came out in the summer of 1980.<sup>643</sup> Originally a Stephen King novel from 1977, Kubrick took it and put Jack Nicholson and Shelley Duvall in as the two main characters. It is the story of a family who moves to a haunted hotel over the winter to act as caretakers. In the process the husband is slowly driven insane by the ghosts in the hotel, leaving his supernaturally gifted son and his wife to fight for their own survival from him and the spirits in the hotel. Hospers provided one of his few positive reviews for a horror film calling it “a masterly work of cinematic imagination and technical expertise [that] could not be seriously denied.”<sup>644</sup> It was, he reasoned, “the psychological and not the

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<sup>641</sup> Ibid.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>643</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 326.

<sup>644</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, October, 1980, 45.

supernatural that provides the real terror.”<sup>645</sup> This was indicative of Simon’s thinking concerning the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where the fear in the film derived from the inner struggle of an individual character and not the special effects or sudden camera movements.

By August of 1980, John Podhoretz had become a member of the editorial staff of the *American Spectator* writing seven film reviews in just under a year. Podhoretz compared the novel which he enjoyed, to the film which he ultimately found “neither very frightening nor very interesting.”<sup>646</sup> The novel he contended portrayed a “devoted husband and an adoring father” who tragically turned against his family. But even early on in the movie “there is still something hateful about him,” taking “very little to turn him into a homicidal maniac.” In the same vein, the wife “is a dull, stupid woman” so much so that Podhoretz “cannot help feeling a little sympathetic toward Jack when he takes off after her with an axe.” This criticism is a familiar one for Kubrick who was habitually criticized for his inability to depict people in any realistic or sympathetic fashion. Podhoretz emphasized this aspect when he wrote, “[n]ever before has Kubrick so effectively demonstrated his hatred of all things human than in *The Shining*.”<sup>647</sup>

Simon went once more into the breach of the horror genre explaining his disregard for what seemed to him a genre that lacked any semblance of rationality. *The Shining*, he wrote, is “bad in many different ways,” but most of all “its horror abides by no rules.”<sup>648</sup> Like his review of *Close Encounters*, Simon listed a cross-section of inherent logic flaws within the film. He found the fact the hotel would shut down rather than turn into a ski resort is “as preposterous as anything that follows,” pointed out that the ghost helped him with one locked door but not

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> John Podhoretz, “The Talkies: Kubrick’s Family,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 13, No. 8, August 1980, 23.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> John Simon, “Horribile Visu,” *National Review* 32, no. 13, June 27, 1980, 795, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6074351&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

others, that the two dead girls who appeared to Danny were “the wrong ages” and spoke with British accents, and finally the wives’ lack of action when she read hundreds of pages of her husband’s descent into insanity, was the final straw.<sup>649</sup> The importance of consistency in horror and tethering to reality has been repeated consistently by conservative critics throughout this chapter. Simon once more explained the need for logic at the start of his review. “Except for mystery, no genre requires more rigorous logic than the horror movie,” where there is a need for “rigorous consistency” which provides the films with a “modicum of credibility.”<sup>650</sup> Shapearo seconded Simon with his own thoughts on the topic.

A good scare as art and entertainment...has always been induced by its relation to realities...The departures from realities into fantasy, cruelty or dramatic suspense must never lose their link to factualities by flouting logic—which is a part of reality—lest shoddiness overcomes the supernatural, and a horror tale simply becomes idiotic. When it happens. Yiddish slang has an expression for it; it can be translated into something like ‘stupid old woman's stories’.<sup>651</sup>

In the horror genre thus far infantilism has been replaced by the need for logic and consistency. With every film mentioned, this theme has reverberated. Secondly, the continued idea of gender roles reappeared if only in *Aliens*, and the preeminence of multifaceted, in-depth characters and their internal struggles over other more superficial traits has been pointed out by Simon in *Body Snatchers* (the original) and Podhoretz and Hospers in *The Shining*.

Between *The Shining* and the next film widely evaluated over a decade passed with hardly any reviews. This might be due to the downfall of libertarian magazines which were some of the most reliable reviews when it came to reviewing horror. Or, it could be that those high-brow critics in *National Review* and *Commentary* were sick and tired of reviewing a genre they found tiresome. Or, maybe it was because magazines on the religious right mostly steered clear

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<sup>649</sup> Simon, “Horribile Visu,” 795-797.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid. 795.

<sup>651</sup> Shapearo, “Hydrolyzed Horror,” 23.

of horror as it became more violent, grotesque, explicit, and detached from its literary forebearers. For whatever reason, it was not until the early 1990s and the rise of Hannibal Lecter that conservatives would once again write prodigiously on horror.

Winner of 1992 Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, Best Writing, and Best Actress awards *Silence of the Lambs* recounts the attempt by a young FBI agent Clarice (Jodi Foster) to find a serial killer, by enlisting the help of an imprisoned serial killer Hannibal (Anthony Hopkins). Two points stand out in the criticism, the praise for the acting and the variety of ideas about what critics found displeasing. In *Human Events* "The Right Movies" section Brudnoy awarded it four stars and called it a "terrific fright flick," which was "not for the faint of heart."<sup>652</sup> David Slavitt, still writing for *Chronicles*, described the film as a "silly but successful horror," but what stood out to him was "Hopkins's performance — so suave, polished, and sophisticated as to be endearing. And that's what is supposed to strike terror into the hearts of the audience and impress them as evil."<sup>653</sup> Comparably, Simon found Foster's character "a persuasive Clarice, balancing strength and vulnerability, and producing a superb West Virginia accent."<sup>654</sup> He even stated how "unless, like me, you are among the impervious few -- it can scare the bejeezus out of you."<sup>655</sup> Nevertheless, he could, of course, find fault. Discussing the scene when Lecter escaped from prison he pronounced, "one has to be as gullible as a five-year-old or one of my fellow critics if one is not to laugh the horror out of its efficacy."<sup>656</sup> The last

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<sup>652</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Mar 02, 1991, 14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310024104%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>653</sup> David R. Slavitt, "Intimations of Morality," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 15, No.8, August 1991, 47.

<sup>654</sup> John Simon, "Horror, Domestic and Imported," *National Review* 43, no. 7, April 29, 1991, 57, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9105061824&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>656</sup> Simon, "Horror, Domestic and Imported," 56.

point he made in the article was one that was uncommon for him. He commented on the morality of the film and the audience:

More disturbing to me than the violence and horror -- which, for such a film, are handled with relative restraint -- is the amorality of *Lambs*, the effect it has on the audience. I don't mind Lecter's getting away -- such things happen in real life, alas. But that he should be presented as the wittiest and most ingenious character in the film, and that the further murder he plans should actually be cheered by the audience is morally wrong. In an age in which mayhem thrives, a mass medium should not be savoring one of the perpetrators quite so gleefully.<sup>657</sup>

Not known for his cultural takes, this glimmer into his thoughts about society as a whole gives a deeper understanding of Simon as a critic and conservative.

The avid Disney-hating James Bowman also reviewed *Silence of the Lambs* and it did not take long to discover where he stood. "If you find that being frightened, horrified, scandalized by the most appalling sort of human bestiality is an aesthetic experience, you should like this film. I don't and I didn't."<sup>658</sup> Bowman, like Simon, had a distinctive take on what he found objectionable. He plunged into his reasoning, a large portion of his distaste was strongly predicated on the implicit idea in the film of masculinity being an inherent threat. The following is a hodgepodge of his thinking:

...I...object when the fright merchants, often for political or ideological reasons, dress up their melodramas as serious art on the specious grounds that life is like this. If you look closely at the critical praise that *Silence of the Lambs* has received, you will see that it is based on the assumption that the picture gives us not escapist fantasy but real life...it is male sex-violence which provides the ideological content [of the film] and hence the contact with real life...The mass murderer [Hannibal]...[is] only [an] extreme form of maleness, and it is the psychiatrist cannibal who calls attention to the more ordinary forms of that sickness which afflicts half the human race. 'Don't you feel men's eyes moving over your body?' he says [to Clarice], and it is creepy, because he is in effect claiming that kinship to the rest of mankind that our experience would deny him-a kinship, nevertheless, that we are only too ready to grant. A series of memorable images of the pretty and nubile FBI trainee in the midst of crowds of men presses home the point that benign masculinity (if there is such a thing) is as psychically

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>658</sup> James Bowman, "Someday Her Prints Will Come," *The American Spectator*, Vol 24, Iss 04, 1991, 34.

as the other kind is physically threatening. Our heroine must fight against it in order to solve the crimes by brilliant detective work and so establish an independent existence.<sup>659</sup>

Hence Bowman seemed to be arguing that if one could deconstruct the film to its most fundamental message, it is masculinity that was the true terror and it was *that* which Hannibal exemplified. The male and female tensions that Bowman indicated here, or the belief that men or maleness was a problem and women were the innate “good guys” have been echoed throughout the study. Rothbard faintly alluded to it concerning Leia in *Star Wars*, Grenier focused on it in *Aliens* and *Empire Strikes Back*, and Bowman, Slavitt, and Hobby all commented on it when they wrote about *Terminator II*. This will be brought up once more at the end of this chapter.

In the late summer of 1999, two very different movies hit theatres *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). At the tail end of July, a low-budget film set film critics scrambling. *The Blair Witch Project* (TBWP) was a project made for a mere \$30,000 and raked in over \$240 million.<sup>660</sup> Staging the film as a “true story” it was about a group of twenty-somethings who went into the Maryland woods with handheld cameras to investigate the disappearance of some locals. Shot from a first-person perspective it tracked the group as they slowly stumble upon the supernatural. Interestingly, Bowman advanced one of his few positive reviews of American movies found in these chapters. He seemed attracted to the distinctiveness of the cinematography and less so the plot. *TBWP*, “not only looks realer than any you will see this year but that also, because of its authentic look, comes tantalizingly close to making witchcraft look real too.”<sup>661</sup> In fact, the “illusion,” he wrote, “works rather well, and unprepared audiences might almost believe that this is, as it claims to be, the film they shot while lost in the

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<sup>659</sup> Bowman, “Someday Her Prints Will Come,” 34.

<sup>660</sup> Troy, *The Age of Clinton*, 256.

<sup>661</sup> James Bowman, “Reality Bites,” *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 08, 1999, 64-65.

woods, looking for evidence of witches, since its drama seems to be more or less incidental and unintended.”<sup>662</sup> Yet, he was the sole voice of respect.

Rather than adulation, for Simon, the film once more stirred him to focus on the credibility of the premise and storyline. He puzzlingly asked, “[w]hy are people so benighted as to think *The Blair Witch Project* a terrific movie?”<sup>663</sup> In order for this to be true, *The Blair Witch Project* “would have to be, on some level, plausible; have characters that are, in some way, appealing;” he found neither to be the case.<sup>664</sup> “The very first absurdity,” he noted, was that “as the two young men and one young woman each had a video camera, the film would really have to be three films. Edited into one, it predicated the work of editors, undercutting its documentary authenticity.” He went on to list several other issues including the throwing away of their only map, the “imbecile” infighting amongst them, not following a stream to civilization, and the continued use of their “cumbersome equipment” instead of just leaving it behind to escape.<sup>665</sup>

McCartney in *Chronicles* went to the movie with high expectations. He was “looking forward to a horror film that employed suggestion and wit, rather than slime and explosions, to engage its audience,” but found himself “shaken...with laughter,” not fear.<sup>666</sup> He struggled to see what was scary about the film but hoped that the popularity among the youth demographic portended a shift away from the gory, limb-losing, horror they had grown accustomed to, to a more character-centric horror genre. Meanwhile, Terry Teachout in *Crises* touched on two important features that impacted nearly every genre in the 1990s. First, the film was “a near-

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<sup>662</sup> Bowman, “Reality Bites,” 65.

<sup>663</sup> John Simon, “Of Witches and Muses,” *National Review* 51, no. 17, September 13, 1999, 69, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2218765&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

<sup>666</sup> George McCartney, “In the Toyshop of the Heart,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 11, 1999, 48.



perfect exercise in post-modernism, a horror film whose subject is film itself.”<sup>667</sup> Post-modernism up to this point has not been examined in any significant way but it undoubtedly impacted how critics viewed film during the 1990s.

Bowman was the critic most vocal in his acknowledgement of this trend but nowhere near the sole critic to do so.<sup>668</sup> In early 1992 he described the change he had witnessed, “[f]or at some point during those years [between the *Deer Hunter* in 1978 and *Batman* in 1989], Hollywood discovered postmodernism-that self-conscious, self-referential, ironic style which now seems to have entrenched itself in the American film industry forever.”<sup>669</sup> Applied directly to the horror genre he explained Post-Modernisms impact and the decaying effect it had.

Somewhere between *Werewolf of London* (1935) and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), it became impossible to play horror straight anymore. That’s what postmodernism has done. Like the miasma of evil from an old-fashioned horror film, it has consumed in turn each of the old genres-Western, gangster movie, family melodrama, and so forth-and turned them into jokes... The result is a crop of cinematic pod people: more or less clever comedies but bland, anodyne, and self-referential, endlessly sending up the conventions of the half-remembered genre to which they now bear only the most superficial resemblance... The only question for the critic to ask in this brave new, postmodern world is this: Is it any good as a joke?<sup>670</sup>

While this was only a short foray into post-modernism, it is not indicative of how pervasive its presence was in the 1990s. A larger study would undoubtedly delve deeper into this idea.

Postmodernism aside, Teachout seemed to accede to the fact that it was indeed “hugely entertaining” but “not especially scary.”<sup>671</sup> His explanation for the latter was tied into his second

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<sup>667</sup> Terry Teachout, “Film: Beast and Superbeasts,” *Crises*, Vol. 17 No. 10, October 1999, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Beasts and Superbeasts \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>668</sup> For a few examples from Bowman see: James Bowman, “Proxysms,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 28, Iss 06, , 1994, 59-60; James Bowman, “Too Much of a Good Thing,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 30, Iss 04, 1996, 62-63; James Bowman, “The Powers That Be,” *American Spectator*, Vol 31, Iss 07, 1997, 62-63; and James Bowman, “Presidentolotry,” *American Spectator*, Vol 34, Iss 02, 2000, 58-59.

<sup>669</sup> Bowman, “Hit List,” 76.

<sup>670</sup> James Bowman, “Not Up to Speed,” *The American Spectator*, 1994: Vol 28, Iss 08, 63-64.

<sup>671</sup> Teachout, “Film: Beast and Superbeasts,” *Crises*.

point and referred to one of the foundational ideas concerning horror; namely, that horror was reliant on the belief of evil and not just evil in the temporal everyday sense, but the kind of ever-present ethereal evil. Therefore, the belief in good and evil as naturally opposed forces by those involved in the writing and directing portion of filmmaking should be sincere enough to come out in the narrative. If it did not, the film then could seem disingenuous. Teachout put it this way, “because...[*TBWP*] was all too clearly made by people who do not believe in the demons whose presence they have so cunningly implied,” the film does not work on the same level as those classic gothic horror tales.<sup>672</sup> Good horror regardless of medium needed to take its subject matter seriously enough to present the audience with a reality they could recognize and an evil based on such an existence.

Now, it is fitting to close with a film that was the only one in this chapter that received no negative reviews. In fact, conservative culture critic and current Head of Publications at The Heartland Institute, S.T. Karnick when comparing the Oscar nominees in 2000 recalled how only one of them, had “a reasonably logical story line, believable characters, and appropriate direction...[t]he rest just have Importance.”<sup>673</sup> He was referring to *The Sixth Sense* (1999) starring Bruce Willis as Dr. Malcolm Crowe a child psychologist and Haley Joel Osment as Cole, a child hiding an eerie and torturous secret. Cole, a young boy haunted by ghosts from his past as well as in the literal sense confides in Malcolm and seeks to find a remedy. In *The Weekly Standard* Podhoretz dubbed it, “a masterpiece -- original, spooky, funny, literate, thought-

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<sup>672</sup> Teachout, “Film: Beast and Superbeasts,” *Crises*.

<sup>673</sup> S. T. Karnick, “Oscar Night; The glamour, the glitter, and the inferiority complex of Hollywood,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 27, 2000, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3YWX-DY80-00CY-N16S-00000-00&context=1516831>.

provoking, and profoundly moving.”<sup>674</sup> Delving a bit deeper into the analytical than usual, he believed that even though the film did “deal with the supernatural, it could be the story of any extraordinary child emotionally ill-equipped to deal with the insight and knowledge of the world his giant intellect remorselessly provides, and whose flashes of freaky genius make him a mystery to his peers and an inscrutable burden to his elders.”<sup>675</sup>

Comparably, McCartney was also drawn to the human struggle within the film more than the horror itself writing that “[t]he Sixth Sense has been marketed as a horror story. But...it uses its hocus-pocus to mesmerize us in order to suggest more than we would expect from a thriller. Once under its spell, we discover a story as old as the Odyssey: a boy in search of a father, and a man trying to be that father, both struggling to come to terms with the losses natural to the mortal condition.”<sup>676</sup> Even Simon who was “by temper disinclined to sympathize with movies of a mystical bent” seemed struck, if not by the story, which he found derivative from Robert Enrico’s 1961 *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, but at least by the acting of the Osment who was “spookily good, scarily adult for his age, with a face that can seamlessly go from being three years younger to being as old and tragic as time itself.”<sup>677</sup> Podhoretz went so far as to call Osment’s acting “the greatest performance by a child actor ever captured on celluloid.”<sup>678</sup>

Teachout writing his last article for *Crises* said there were only twelve movies over his two years of reviewing movies for *Crises* that he believed worthy enough to see more than once.

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<sup>674</sup> John Podhoretz, "Good in Every Sense; The surprising excellence of *The Sixth Sense*," *The Weekly Standard*. September 13, 1999, 39, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3XD4-7NV0-00CY-N0D3-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> George McCartney, "Intimations of Morality," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 23 No. 12, 1999, 48,

<sup>677</sup> John Simon, "From Crown to Crowe," *National Review* 51, no. 16, August 30, 1999, 54, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2215473&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>678</sup> Podhoretz, "GOOD IN EVERY SENSE," 39

*The Sixth Sense* was one of them.<sup>679</sup> He defended his support in a previous article when he reviewed the film.

If you're not floored by the last couple of twists in Shyamalan's script, you ought to consider taking up script-writing yourself. But *The Sixth Sense*, while it contains more than a few moments scary enough to make you grab a stranger's arm, is no ordinary horror movie, but the work of a greatly gifted director who has the power to make reality itself seem hallucinatory....Yet the film's impact arises in even larger part from the fact that unlike...every other horror movie made in the past quarter-century it takes its own subject matter seriously....My guess is that a goodly percentage of its viewers, whether they know it or not, are reveling in the rare opportunity to see a movie that accords with their own convictions; most Americans, after all, believe in God, heaven, and hell.<sup>680</sup>

What drew nearly all differing varieties of conservatives to this film was no doubt the acting, but more so the film's ability to explore the deepest part of the human condition, our mortality while having with it a sense of sincerity and morality. McCartney shared as much in his introduction when writing about *The Sixth Sense*. "At its best, the genre cuts to the mortal chase and confronts us with life's ultimate issues, tamed for the moment within the precincts of fiction...And if the writer has done his or her work, we may even find ourselves facing the next day with greater wisdom and strengthened moral courage."<sup>681</sup> The critic from *Chronicles* not only justified the attraction to *The Sixth Sense* but led the reader closer to understanding what conservatives were looking for in the horror genre.

Brudnoy, more concentrated on the entertainment value over the cultural value asked his readers in the *Libertarian Review*, "[w]hat makes a good horror film?" His response was telling in that it was less aesthetically or critically based than his peers may have defined it: "[w]e ought to recognize on screen some plausible villain whose evil could touch us tomorrow; or we ought

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<sup>679</sup> Terry Teachout, "Film: Until the Real Thing Comes Along," *Crises*, Vol. 18 No. 06, June 2000, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Until the Real Thing Comes Along \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>680</sup> Teachout, "Film: Beast and Superbeasts," *Crises*.

<sup>681</sup> McCartney, "Intimations of Morality," 48.

to see something, or some things, so hideous that we ask our companion to sleep over (and not for kicks); or we ought to be yanked into the unknown where our worst suspicions about tomorrow are confirmed.” In *Human Events* the key rested more in the moralistic essence of the film and hits on one of the major themes awash within the chapter.

In the world of postmodern film, evil's on the loose and good is running for its life...In contrast, the classic Gothic horror tale, such as Brain Stoker's *Dracula*, contained certain themes that gave a framework to books, plays and, later, horror films: a timeless Good exists, the universe displays order, and destroying that order brings disaster. Evil exists and is clearly distinguishable from Good and unalterably opposed to it; evil is cosmic rebellion that disintegrates lives and communities, but Good is clearly superior. Truth is absolute, dependable, and has power to overcome evil, and life involves the call to energetic, concerted and courageous work against evil and its destructive effects. All of these elements are present to an extent in classic Gothic horror films...Evil is certainly real and powerful, but also defeatable by a Power more powerful.<sup>682</sup>

Stephen Macaulay in *Chronicles* and Bowman in *American Spectator* seemed to agree. The former claimed, “[e]vil is seductive; it is not chic. Evil is to be opposed, not embraced,” while Bowman contemplating the diminishment of horror’s capacity to scare wrote, “I think what has robbed the Prince of Darkness of his power to scare us is also a general decline in our capacity for belief in good and evil and you’ve got to believe in one to believe in the other.”<sup>683</sup> All these men explain clearly how essential the recognition of the spiritual, including evil was to horror, that it must be dealt with seriously, and also to understand the ever-present struggle and ability to overcome it must be present.

Terry Teachout seconded these themes but on a more rudimentary level.

...there is a difference between the stories that scared our great-grandparents and the ones that scare us. Nineteenth-century horror stories operated on the assumption, shared by reader and writer alike, that while ghosts and vampires might or might not exist in real life, there could be no doubting the existence

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<sup>682</sup> Jarvis, “End of Days,” *Human Events*, December 10, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2591213&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>683</sup> Stephen Macaulay, “Less Than Zero and Preterminal Filmmaking,” *Chronicles of Culture*, August, 1983, 43; and James Bowman, “Exorcising Good and Evil,” *American Spectator*, Vol 34, Iss 10, 2000, 60.

of *some* sort of supernatural realm, meaning that devils might well walk among us... With the ebbing of the sea of faith, ambiguity crept into the ghost story, sometimes to striking effect.<sup>684</sup>

Here was the crux of the matter. For horror to be truly horrifying, from a conservative perspective it rested on the premise that there is something beyond this mortal existence. A faith that an afterlife existed, that there were powers beyond our control, and that individuals had the capacity to decide what side of the battle they were going to be on. Without as much evil was only a philosophy to be understood or debated and as easily dismissible as any other intellectual theory, not a ubiquitous presence to be fended off at each and every chance. Without the belief in absolutes and the presence of good and evil, horror was merely smoke and mirrors. This was certainly one aspect of what made the literary gothic horror genre so appealing to conservatives and it continued to impact it as the genre moved into the medium of cinema.

But if true for horror, was spirituality a necessary precursor for conservative critics across the genre spectrum? While not clear-cut, it seems the answer is probably not. Now, undoubtedly a healthy respect for religion, especially of the Judeo-Christian variety was always appreciated (except by Brudnoy), but not required for a film to be considered artful.<sup>685</sup> On the other hand, the blatant disrespect of religion or spirituality was usually more than enough to derail a film from being considered under more aesthetical criteria.<sup>686</sup> Yet this was not always the case as was evident in mixed reviews on *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the anti-Catholic *Dogma*.<sup>687</sup> But

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<sup>684</sup> Teachout, "Film: Beast and Superbeasts," *Crises*.

<sup>685</sup> See reviews on *Shall We Dance*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Reservoir Dogs* below for examples of films not having any religion or spirituality embedded in them but deemed to be worthy of praise as art. Simon, John. "The Dance of Life." *National Review* 49, no. 15 (August 11, 1997): 55–56. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9708040317&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; James Bowman, "Sweat Dreams," *The American Spectator*, 1994: Vol 28, Iss 12, 74-75; and David R. Slavitt, "Saintly Thugs," *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 17, No.06, June 1993, 49-50.

<sup>686</sup> For an example see: James Bowman, "The New Vulgarity," *American Spectator*, Vol 33, Iss 12, 1999, 82-83 on *Dogma* by Kevin Smith.

<sup>687</sup> Douglas LeBlanc, "Dogmatically Anti-Dogma," *Christianity Today*, 44, no. 1, January 10, 2000, 80, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2668053&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; Terry

what this trait was indicative of was the seriousness with which conservative film critics expected the filmmakers to approach their craft. By taking the subject matter seriously, films avoided veering too far into the fantastical and breaking their tether to reality, while also displaying a sense of significance devoid of sentimentalism, needless provocativeness, and self-indulgence.

Yet this was not the only issue in this chapter. The need for logic within film became another central tenet of conservative film criticism. Simon, the bulwark against illogic in cinema made his plea in 1990 for a revival of “believableness” [sic] in film.

There is one quality that more than any other could help revitalize the cinema: believableness. Characters in films must re-establish contact with social, economic, and political realities even where film style is non- or antirealistic. We should not have to ask questions such as: How come she has that much tree time? Where does he get his money from? Why would they have been so purblind as not to see that coming? And so on. It may sound like rather simplistic advice, but, if heeded, it could make for major improvements.<sup>688</sup>

This may have been Simon’s pet peeve but when it came to sci-fi and horror it was as permeating as any other trait in this chapter and along with seriousness, would continue to be a key criterion for judging the merits of any film.

Then, there was the continuation of infantilism in film. These films were often castigated for their inability to convey any deeper ideas about human nature or society. Rather, their sole

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Teachout, “Film: Missing in Action,” *Crises*, Vol. 18 No. 01, January 2000, Crises Magazine Archives, [Film: Missing in Action \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com); Carol Iannone, “The Last Temptation Reconsidered,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, no. 60, February 1996, 50–54, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=17753203&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; Roy M. Anker, “Lights, Camera, Jesus,” *Christianity Today* 44, no. 6, May 22, 2000, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3211070&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; Richard Alleva, “On Screen: The Last Temptation of Christ” *Crises*, Vol. 6 No. 10, October 1, 1988, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: The Last Temptation of Christ \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com), and John Simon, “Pale Galilean,” *National Review* 40, no. 18, September 16, 1988, 54–55, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12561795&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>688</sup> John Simon, “Movie Musing, 1990,” *National Review* 42, no. 21, November 5, 1990, 138, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12480522&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

goal seemed to be to entertain their audience by creating a narrative where the end goal was to make sure the good guys won and the bad guys lost, leaving everyone in the theatre with a sense of satisfaction. Imbued in the infantile were two of its principal precepts, the adulation of children and the spurning of adults. One of the best examples of how this trend came to define the era is in a review by Podhoretz, who was usually tepid if not approving of many of the films deemed as infantile by his peers. He concentrated on one of the main perpetrators and purveyors of infantilism, Steven Spielberg. All of Spielberg's movies, he wrote, follow the same plot. All of the adults in his films,

...have lost the capacity for wonder, or the expectation that something extraordinary will happen to save them from their lives of quiet desperation. They take the cards they have been dealt, and for this Spielberg will not respect them. His heroes therefore tend to be children, and here Spielberg scores his most telling points with his audience. In the Spielberg universe, children are the last defense against cynicism and despair, an eternally optimistic group of people who wait for miracles to save them...his idea-that children are morally and spiritually superior to adults-is a peculiarly American madness; and it is the key to Spielberg's great success...It is, of course, profoundly wrongheaded.<sup>689</sup>

This of course was not only true for Spielberg, but for a whole host of films reviewed in these pages, including many of the Disney films from the last chapter. Infantilism in film did not only mean it praised children and their "innocence," but that the film was geared toward children, was simpleminded in its ideas, meant to be entertaining, not thought-provoking, and lacked a sense of seriousness that many conservative critics longed for in cinema.

Having already touched on what made a good horror, and with the knowledge of what made a bad sci-fi movie, a logical question is what made a good one. A few points become clear from the analysis. It must steer clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of

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<sup>689</sup> John Podhoretz, "KidStuff," *American Spectator*, Vol 18, Iss 09, 1985, 30.



unrealism and infantilism. Also, as with horror, it should use the genre as a tool to seek answers to complex moral and ethical problems that all humans deal with. Therefore, the centrality of the movie lay with the character and their issues, not the technology or special effects. Finally, conservatives were drawn to films where they felt religion, especially western religion was respected and not thrown underfoot.

The last point and one that has stood out in several films in both genres was the changing of gender roles and feminism in film. As early as 1976 Brudnoy took note that, “[a] new day dawned, feminism mutated into women’s lib, and a new cliché has it now that woman is nothing unless she is decisive...,” and cinema’s depiction of women “mirrors the image of reality rather than reality itself—of what is happening in our society.”<sup>690</sup> By 1999 and 2000 the shift Brudnoy witnessed seemed to have made a permanent impression on cinema. Conservative writers commented on what they saw to be common tropes in a number of films by director James Cameron. Patrick Coffin in *The New Oxford Review* observed that “...according to Cameron, gender is more or less a pliable social construct. Whether it be Linda Hamilton negotiating shards of broken glass in the Terminator movies, Sigourney Weaver decimating the space creature in *Aliens*, or Jamie Lee Curtis white-knuckling it beneath the strut of a helicopter in *True Lies*, Cameron pioneered the trend of the androgynous female heroine.”<sup>691</sup>

Independent historian and frequent contributor to *Chronicles* J.O. Tate wrote in February 2000 that “[o]ver 30 years of sexual revolution, radical feminism, ethnic truculence, homosexual agitprop, and all the rest of it have resulted in the present confusion, a situation in which one cannot even expect to see a good movie.”<sup>692</sup> It seemed the trend which started in the 1970s and

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<sup>690</sup> David Brudnoy, “Woman’s Fate,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol. V, No. 2 March/April, 1976, 8,15

<sup>691</sup> Patrick Coffin, “We Love to Look in the Mirror,” Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LXVI, October, 1999.

<sup>692</sup> J.O. Tate, “Unisex Multiplex,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 24 No.02, 2000, 16.

evolved in the 1980s and 1990s with the female protagonists taking on more and more male attributes finally reaching its zenith by the end of the 1990s, with complete role reversals between the genders. Tate took issue with the “feminization of the male,” a theme tied directly to the masculinization of females in the horror and sci-fi films reviewed in this chapter.<sup>693</sup> Movies for Tate were not the source of the problem, but just as Brudnoy said, they “mirror the image of reality,” that the culture was pushing towards. One should remember that feminism in film should be viewed within the context of the larger culture. The shift occurring in film seemed to portend a shift in society where male and female, masculinity and femininity were becoming mere constructs to be shed and interchanged. Add to this the reversal of child and adult in the familial hierarchy and the basis for a functional society seemed to be being turned on its head.

However, unlike many of the other predominant themes throughout this study, the rise of feminism in film and its pushback among the majority of conservatives (*Libertarian Review* aside) is rather unique. It is not mentioned in the last chapter, so deeper analysis is pertinent here. While researching early on feminism became one of the initial redundant themes to pop up across publications and over long stretches of time. So, its importance should not be neglected. Indeed, feminism and feminist characters were a constant theme often derided by conservative culture and art commentators. Grenier in 1984 said it “stalks the land,” and was “the most pervasive force in our society.”<sup>694</sup> Simon wrote how the 1980s and early 1990s were “an era of unleashed radical feminism.”<sup>695</sup> In *Chronicles* Herbert London commented how in “Hollywood feminism is as close to a religion as we get,” and in *The American Spectator* Bowman suggested

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<sup>693</sup> Tate, “Unisex Multiplex,” 17.

<sup>694</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: “the Bostonians” Inside Out,” *Commentary* 78, no. 4, Oct 01, 1984, 64-65, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-bostonians-inside-out%2Fdocview%2F1290142269%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>695</sup> John Simon, “Batman and the Girls at Bat,” *National Review* 44, no. 15, August 3, 1992, 45, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9208176259&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

that many critics and elites in Hollywood even had an “obsession with feminism.”<sup>696</sup> While this is only a small cross-section of the plethora of comments made about the impact of feminism on film and culture, it exemplifies how it weighed heavily on the minds of many conservative critics, more so than arguably any other cultural issue.

Indeed, feminism seemed to rankle film critics’ feathers more than most other cultural issues. The reasons for this seem to be that by the start of this study in 1976, there were a plethora of economic, cultural, and legal changes that were occurring across the country. In 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had passed Congress and was on its way to ratification while *Ms.* magazine a periodical that “championed a proudly aggressive feminism,” was first published, by 1976 the divorce rate doubled in only a decade and Barbra Walters became the first female co-anchor of network nightly news show, in the late 1970s shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, *Maude*, *Wonder Women*, and *Charlie’s Angels* were all portraying women in ways that spoke to many of the fluid changing dynamics, and by 1985 50% of mothers were in the workforce compared to 1970.<sup>697</sup> These rapid shifts in society were of course reflected in a “range of popular movies,” which “celebrated women’s independence.”<sup>698</sup> While an entire chapter of these pictures would prove useful and enlightening, it seems that many conservatives were troubled by characters, plots, and entire films being based around a political ideology. This was especially true in three instances: if feminist characters were placed anachronistically in pictures from the past, if women lost all traces of their femininity and basically became male characters with breasts, or if an over-generalization occurred where all men were made out to be

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<sup>696</sup> Herbert London, “Screen: Reconstructing the Bostonians,” *Chronicles of Culture*, January, 1985, 32, 34; and James Bowman, “Looking for a Good Time?,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 24, Iss 06, 1991, 34.

<sup>697</sup> Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 66-76.

<sup>698</sup> Christensen, *Projecting Politics*, 325.

evil and all women were painted in a positive light. This last point will be touched on in greater detail in the next chapter and should clarify this position more than what is present.

Taken as a whole, the analysis throughout this study thus far has pointed to a few integral themes. It is not a stretch to argue that along with the need for complex characters, logic/rationality, and the avoidance of infantilism; the need for any film to be and take its subject matter in a “serious” nature should also be taken into account as criteria for conservative film critics. What it means for a film to be “serious” is multifaceted: One, the subject matter at the core of the film is something that speaks to our human nature or a major societal issue. Two, it deals with the subject in a way that shows respect and is therefore honest and does not for political or ideological reasons distort its characters, the past, or the plot in ways that dilute the film. Three, it is not infantile in any way. Four, it steers clear of heavy-handedness throughout the film and handles difficult issues with a light touch so as to not seem too sensationalistic. Last, serious films always keep the character at the center of the plot. When a film takes its subject matter in a serious fashion it will come across not only in the acting but the plot, set design, camera movement, lighting, sound, music, costumes, and most importantly there will not be any contemporary messaging tied to the film, rather these films aim to create something timeless and transcendent. This last point will become more pronounced in the last chapter where the focus is on films where race and race relations are front and center. Other criteria just mentioned will undoubtedly come up again as will the last theme rounding out our study: generalization or oversimplification. These interrelated concepts compound on a theme already listed, but that will have to wait until the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Projecting Race Relations on the Silver Screen: From Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy to Spike Lee

Of all the genres and the vast number of sub-topics within cinema, why would the last chapter be one where the films deal primarily with race, racism, and/or black urban culture? Besides piquing the author's curiosity, the answer is multidimensional. First, it offers a variation needed at this juncture. The previous two chapters explored genres that were based mainly on fiction with an emphasis on the infantile, thus geared toward teenage and children's audiences. Therefore, a chapter dealing with the adult theme of race in America offers a necessary variation to grant a broader understanding of conservative critics and interaction with popular culture. The second point is an offshoot of the first, but by focusing on films with more serious adult-oriented narratives, the goal is to then bypass the major criticisms of infantilism and logic that were inherent in the last two chapters, bringing to light other issues and concerns. Third, this category of cinema should clarify a rather contentious issue within the historiography of modern American conservatism. Explicitly, the charge that racism and the exploitation of racial anxiety among whites was an integral part of 20th-century conservatism. Some of the most vocal and prominent proponents of this were and are history professors Dan Carter, Kevin Kruse, Nancy MacLean, and Glenn Feldman.<sup>699</sup> While these historians largely focused on the origins of conservatism during the decades directly following World War II and the Civil Rights era, their implications always pointed toward the fact that they believed this continued to be a factor in

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<sup>699</sup> See: Glenn Feldman, *The Great Melding: War, the Dixiecrat Rebellion, and the Southern Model for America's New Conservatism* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2015); Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Critchlow, Donald T., and Nancy MacLean. *Debating the American Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Dan Carter, *Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1995).

conservatism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and indeed some political science professors like Corey Robinson and Alan I. Abramowitz have claimed exactly this argument in their own works.<sup>700</sup> Therefore, movies that tacitly or unequivocally tackle the topic of race in America should provide some further insight into this thesis.

The issue of race has always been a contentious issue in America. By the bicentennial, when this study begins, there was a haziness surrounding race relations across the nation. As black Americans gained more political and cultural power, there was a sense of discontent and impatience in many communities of color over the glaring inequalities and rampant discrimination within the larger society. In many cities where desegregation had legally been enforced, de facto segregation increased furthering the racial divide.<sup>701</sup> Meanwhile, many whites believed the Civil Rights Act and various other legislation had for lack of a better term, “corrected” the racial tensions inherent in the country. Now, while this was not the case, there was definitively not, as historian John Ehrman pointed out, “a return of national or systemic racism,” in the post-Civil Rights era.<sup>702</sup> Unquestionably, Ehrman continued, “[n]o one claimed that equality had been achieved or that all vestiges of prejudice and racism had been eliminated—they certainly had not—but all the evidence pointed to a sea change in white attitudes and drastic, continuing decrease in prejudice throughout American society.”<sup>703</sup> Nevertheless, in black communities around the nation, many were struggling to escape the stranglehold of poverty and crime. Resentment and frustration grew from the inability to solve racial disparity and inequality despite legal recourse and the “growing black anger amid

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<sup>700</sup> Corey Robinson, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>701</sup> Zelizer and Kruse, *Fault Lines*, 51.

<sup>702</sup> Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 193.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

diminishing white racism confused many older whites,” who tended to be more conservative.<sup>704</sup>

The overall disconnect stemmed from two conflicting views of society; one which held sway with conservatives and was associated with a “colorblind” understanding of race and the other was a “race conscience,” understanding.<sup>705</sup> The former fit snugly into the historical and intellectual history of conservatism which placed emphasis on the individual and was wary of distinctions in society based on constructs like race, ethnicity, or class.<sup>706</sup> The latter aimed to see and understand the world through the prism of one’s race. The idea was based on the belief that historically black Americans had a very different (legal, economic, cultural, etc..) experience in the country than whites, thus they and other minorities needed to be seen and understood through the lens of race, and remedies to fix the societal ills like economic disparities needed to targeted with race at the forefront of the discussion. These two views of race remain as the two dominant social constructs for the Left and Right to the present day.

On the silver-screen race had no less a contentious history. In “the very early years,” (the first two decades of the twentieth century), the preeminent historian of African Americans in film Donald Bogle wrote that “the movies were a parade of embarrassing, insulting, demeaning caricatures,” of African Americans which “flourished and took root in American film.”<sup>707</sup> This depiction of African-Americans in a distasteful and egregious fashion was the norm throughout

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<sup>704</sup> Troy, *The Age of Clinton*, 34.

<sup>705</sup> For more on the dichotomy between colorblind and race consciousness, its political and social history, and how it has “become [more static, and] fully identified with the two major parties... [including but not limited to] opposing economic ideologies,” see: Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama’s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7, 245-261, 11. In *Politics After Hope: Obama and the Crises of Youth, Race, and Democracy*, Henry A. Giroux argued that the color-blind mode of viewing race is in fact “a new racism.” (87).

<sup>706</sup> This point can be debated as many conservatives including paleoconservatives and many traditionalists believed in the necessity of a hierarchical society, but this was usually based on merit, education, and ability not race or class.

<sup>707</sup> Donald Bogle, *Hollywood Black: The Stars, The Films, The Filmmakers* (New York, NY: Running Press, 2019), 3-4.

much of cinematic history as their own stories were overlooked by the large studios and black Americans were often used in an auxiliary fashion within movies.<sup>708</sup> By the late 1940s, a handful of films began to “place black/white conflict front and center,” which “promoted...an idealized theme of racial reconciliation and unity between black and white,” when in reality the “powerlessness of blacks in popular film mirrored their status in the political system itself.”<sup>709</sup> The 1950s and 1960s essentially continued the theme of racial reconciliation. However, with the rise of Sidney Poitier and hits like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, *In the Heat of the Night*, and *To Sir, with Love*, the studios seemed to discover, as political science professors Peter Haas and Terry Christensen asserted, that “race could sell tickets.”<sup>710</sup> These movies condemned racism on the part of whites but did so “in a sanitized way calculated not to offend white audiences.”<sup>711</sup> However, Poitier’s characters, who were “conciliatory, idealized heroes” started to “look dated” as the newer generation began looking for an “alternative set of black narratives.”<sup>712</sup>

By the 1970s “blaxploitation” films were all the rage with *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1970), *Shaft* (1971), and *Superfly* (1972). Although the genre was short-lived, dying off in the same decade it reached its prominence, it featured black “existentialist heroes [who] lived in the face of violence, injustices, and inequities,” and featured themes like “sex, drugs, and violence” that resonated with many of those immersed in the urban culture of the day.<sup>713</sup> By 1976, movies and studios were more open than they had ever been to the possibility of depicting African-Americans on their own terms and for dealing with some of the thornier issues

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<sup>708</sup> There were certainly independent black filmmakers who attempted to tell their own stories like Oscar Micheaux, but they had very little success compared to the larger studios. Again see Bogle’s work cited above as well as his *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* for more on Micheaux and other attempts by black filmmakers and actors to tell their own stories.

<sup>709</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 86,69; and Hass, *Projecting Politics*, 293.

<sup>710</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 123; and Hass, *Projecting Politics*, 293.

<sup>711</sup> Hass, *Projecting Politics*, 294.

<sup>712</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 131; and Lewis, *American Film*, 344.

<sup>713</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 141; and Hass, *Projecting Politics*, 294.



surrounding race relations in the country, yet major studios basically steered clear of the issues of racism in the late 1970s and even throughout most of the 1980s. This period in cinematic history Bogle explained, “often presented a world without deep-seated racial tensions. Or if racism reared its ugly head, it was a subject for humor, not necessarily angry drama.”<sup>714</sup> Nevertheless, this is where the analysis begins.

Conservative film review sections at the tail end of the 1970s offered up a small handful of reviews by mostly libertarian critics. The first few films were ones in which the cast was made up of largely African Americans or the plot at least centered around black society in America. *Mahogany* (1975) was one of the earliest. It was a romantic comedy starring Diana Ross as an up-and-coming fashion student who initially gets involved with a political activist (Billy Dee Williams). However, thanks to a famous fashion photographer who sees potential and drags her off to Europe; she becomes one of the most famous models in the industry. Ross’s character is eventually able to start her own fashion label but is left unfulfilled by her newfound success and has to decide whether to stay in Europe or return to Chicago to help Brian’s aspiring political career. David Brudnoy reviewed it in “Brudnoy’s Film Index” in *The Alternative: An American Spectator*. He did not think highly of the movie calling it one of the worst films of 1975 and provided a few succinct and sarcastic takeaways, “Afro-Americans have more fun,...white homosexual photographers commit suicide,...clothes make the women,...[yet] the movie is breaking all box office records in New York and other centers of advanced culture.”<sup>715</sup> Meanwhile, Charles F. Barr in *Reasons* stated how it started off promising but was filled with too many “stereotypes and cliches.”<sup>716</sup> He believed that Ross’s character’s urge to return to her love

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<sup>714</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 165.

<sup>715</sup> David Brudnoy, “Brudnoy’s Film Index,” *The Alternative: An American Spectator*, Vol 9 Iss 4, January, 1976, 36, 39.

<sup>716</sup> James F. Carey and Charles F. Barr, “Movies,” *Reason*, January 1976, 38.

interest and her lack of fulfillment in her new career was too antiquated a plot for the 1970s. He wrote, “[t]o see such outdated white middle-class philosophy being resurrected in a 1970s black movie is ludicrous.”<sup>717</sup>

There were a couple of other films that featured a mostly all-black cast like *The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings* (1976) about a group of ex-negro league baseball players. Barr called it “entertaining from beginning to end,” and featured “some of the best comedy sequences this side of the Harlem Globetrotters.”<sup>718</sup> Then, Ben Yagoda in *The American Spectator* reviewed *The Wiz* (1978) in 1979, a remake of the Wizard of Oz, featuring another all-black cast with Diana Ross as Dorothy. Yagoda was hopeful for a “film in which the humor and texture of black culture would abound...[but] it didn’t work.”<sup>719</sup> The movie became a “bore...(due to her [Ross’s] painful shyness and [her] advanced age as compared to the book age 6 and 1936 film teens),” while “the sets are a disgrace,” “screenplay is lacking humor,” and the production numbers just fell flat.<sup>720</sup>

The only point to be made at this early juncture is that there was not really any analysis coming from conservative corners of the film review world on films dealing with black culture. However, as already noted, this most likely had nothing to do with preference but rather the lack of studio support for films having to do with race/ racial issues or having a majority black cast. It would be almost a decade before this changed but in the meantime, there were some films and actors which provide interesting inflection points. The three films cited so far were in fact the only films reviewed in conservative magazines dealing with black culture from 1976 to the end

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<sup>717</sup> Carey and Barr, “Movies,” 38.

<sup>718</sup> Charles F. Barr and James F. Carey, “Movies,” *Reason*, August, 1976, 43.

<sup>719</sup> Ben Yagoda, “The Talkies: The Wiz and Comes a Horseman,” *The American Spectator*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1979, 21.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*

of the decade, but the last two movies had one other unifying characteristic besides genre; a supporting actor Richard Pryor who played comedy relief in both. Pryor would go on to personify a shift in the genre that would extend across much of the 1980s. Born in Peoria, Illinois in 1940, he had a turbulent childhood. His father was a former boxer and his mother was a prostitute in a brothel run by his grandmother.<sup>721</sup> He joined the army as a teen for a new start and afterward began his comedy career doing stand-up, writing for television programs, making comedy albums, and acting in supporting roles including in the two films above. Pryor was a hit as a comic in many communities of color, poking fun at the white man, commenting on cultural issues familiar to African Americans, and voicing concerns albeit in a comical way about matters important to black America. He was known in the early 1970s as a “ribald satirist, using language that was profane and jolting,” as well as for his antics offstage including drug use, tumultuous relationships, and interactions with the law.<sup>722</sup>

However, the movie that would launch him to stardom and mainstream success was *Silver Streak* (1976). A comedic spin-off of the *Oriental Express* where a murder is committed aboard a fast-moving train; one man (Gene Wilder) attempts to save himself along with his new love interest with the help of a newfound companion who also happens to be a thief (Richard Pryor). Although Barr was once again the sole reviewer, he gave Pryor much of the credit for the film being “side-splitting funny” and posited that he should get the nomination for “Best Supporting Actor,” in that year’s Academy Awards.<sup>723</sup> While Pryor was not nominated, his popularity had grown so much that by 1977 he ended up a co-host at the forty-ninth Academy Awards with Warren Beatty and Jane Fonda.<sup>724</sup> Not all conservative critics necessarily believed

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<sup>721</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 159.

<sup>722</sup> Ibid.

<sup>723</sup> Charles F. Barr, “Movies,” *Reason*, February, 1977, 40.

<sup>724</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 160.

the accolades were merited as Philip Terzian from *The American Spectator* asked, “who, or what, is Richard Pryor, another master of ceremonies? Do a few parts in poorly received comedies qualify one to cavort about as a host to filmdom?”<sup>725</sup> The critique of Pryor seemed to be less about him than about the continued politicization of the Oscars that many conservatives found agitating.

Although *Silver Streak* was unlike the previous films mentioned, in that it was not a film with predominantly black actors and actresses, it foreshadowed an alteration in the race-based genre that “would dominate many movies of the...era,” the “interracial male bonding” movies, otherwise known as the white/black buddy pictures.<sup>726</sup> Indeed, Pryor would star in two other films with Wilder, one being *Stir Crazy* (1981) directed by Sidney Poitier. This time, he and his costar from *Silver Streak* continued their onscreen friendship as two wrongfully accused pals who needed to break out of prison. John Hospers, while not enthusiastic about the film, believed Pryor had “real comic flair,” and applauded his comedic efforts.<sup>727</sup> By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Pryor was the most acclaimed black actor and comic in the country, yet he was barely mentioned or noticed by conservative critics. While there is no clear-cut evidence for his lack of presence in conservative circles, it seems to have stemmed from Pryor’s counter-culture attitude and crude humor dating back to the early 1970s. Many conservatives likely found his routine alarming for its language and no-holds-bar approach to comedy, while also personally feeling wary due to his openness about his illicit drug use.

While not necessarily indicative of film critics’ view of Pryor, in 1984 near the height but also tail-end of his popularity *Chronicles* took Pryor to task over his latest stand-up movie *Here*

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<sup>725</sup> Philip Terzian, “The Talkies: The Oscars,” *The American Spectator*, May 1977, 18.

<sup>726</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 160, 168.

<sup>727</sup> John Hospers, “Movies,” *Reason*, April, 1981, 57.

*and Now*. They specifically took issue with Pryor, who they considered “unable to articulate a mental or social condition other than through foul language, screams, or obscene gesture,” as being regarded as the modern conveyor of the “black experience.” The idea that Pryor was the artistic representation of black culture in America was considered to be a “grave insult” to the likes of W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Langston Hughes, or Ralph Ellison, and the impression of him as an actor or performer was a “slap at Sidney Poitier, Bill Cosby, [and] Leslie Uggams.”<sup>728</sup> Again, there is not enough material from film critics to overlay this thinking over the entirety of conservative culture critics, nevertheless, *Chronicles*’ disposition toward those black actors and artists who they deemed figureheads of black culture more so than Pryor who they saw as too vulgar, too counter-cultural, and too reflecting of the angry urban experience is insightful.

However, like many of the libertarians (Barr and Hospers) who found his antics entertaining and funny, there were those on the Right who believed by the 1980s that Pryor had made such a shift personally and in his act that at least one film critic saw him as embodying, if not a conservative, a more mainstream persona and philosophy. Commenting on *Stir Crazy*, *Silver Streak*, as well as Pryor’s stand-up comedy special *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982), Richard Grenier in *Commentary* labeled Pryor “the most brilliant new solo performer” and “a kind of black comedian we have never had before.”<sup>729</sup> In his six-page article “Black Comedy” Grenier took the reader through the sordid details of Pryor’s life, writing about his childhood, drug use, criminal record, and near-death experiences, but the majority of it centered on the changing trajectory of his comedy career. In 1970, he wrote, that Pryor “was not

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<sup>728</sup> “Liberal Culture: A Siskel,” *Chronicles*, February 1984, 31.

<sup>729</sup> Richard Grenier, “Movies: Black Comedy,” *Commentary* 73, no. 6, Jun 01, 1982, 54-55, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-black-comedy%2Fdocview%2F1290140767%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

considered acceptable entertainment for a white audience,” but that changed in 1976 with *Silver Streak*, and “now that white society has accepted him, Pryor had adopted an at least partly conciliating attitude toward white society,” not there previously.<sup>730</sup> This turn towards the conventional and away from some of the more provocative material especially concerning race seemed to encourage Grenier. Commenting on his latest comedy specials he noted how some, definitely not all, of the foul language like N\*\*\*\*\* was out of his act, as were the derogatory labels for whites, “the black man was shown less as a victim” than in the past, and he contended that Pryor was “anti-crime and anti-black crime.”<sup>731</sup> Grenier referred to several jokes from his stand-up career, using them to return to his central point, “[w]e have come quite a distance from the black as pure victim of white society.”<sup>732</sup> The only problem Grenier found with Pryor was his portrayal of Africa as “some kind of black Garden of Eden.”<sup>733</sup> He pushed back on this idea ardently and in detail, by commenting on the massacres between the Tutsi and Hutus as well as the authoritarian and feudal nature of many African countries.

There are a couple of points to make about Grenier’s analysis and the films reviewed thus far. Films directed at largely black audiences (*Mahogany*, *The Wiz*, *The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings*) did not earn much attention in the pages of conservative publications. This would change as films with all or nearly all-black casts gained critical acclaim in the late 1980s and 1990s. But the attention they did receive was mixed with little to take away in the way of analysis. There did seem to be a willingness and conviction to want to see more films about black culture, but this would not happen for another decade. Second, as Pryor gained popularity, some conservatives took note of his latent comic ability (mostly libertarians) while Terzian and

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<sup>730</sup> Grenier, "Movies: Black Comedy," 56.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

later writers in *Chronicles* viewed him as too tasteless and crude. Still, others like Grenier were quick to point out certain perceived changes in his act and identified specific facets of his stand-up that fit into the larger conservative paradigm when it came to race. At a time when Affirmative Action was one of, if not the central issue, when it came to racial politics, Grenier saw Pryor as someone who opposed the culture of victimhood and seemed to side, at least to Grenier, on the side of a colorblind society.

As referenced earlier, the white and black buddy picture came to be the central medium in which race played out on film for most of the 1980s. There was a litany of films one could list: Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes in *White Men Can't Jump*, the side story in the original *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis and Reginald Vel Johnson, and *Die Hard with a Vengeance* with Willis and Samuel L. Jackson, Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd in *Trading Places*, Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte in *48 Hours*, and then there is the most well-known *Lethal Weapon I* through *IV* with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. In all these movies, but most noticeably in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, the “Riggs [Gibson]/ Murtaugh [Glover] relationship is meant to signal, despite whatever else happens in the *Lethal Weapon* films, the lopsided notion that fundamentally racism among good, decent people was a thing of the past.”<sup>734</sup> This long-ranging trend of largely colorblind films in which racial issues were not dealt with or even touched on is an essential point to understanding how conservatives would see films that dealt with the issue more explicitly later as the film industry moved to a more race-conscious position. Yet, little was said on the burgeoning theme of black and white buddy films by conservative critics. Rather *White Men Can't Jump* was panned by Brudnoy for its title, *Trading Places* was only mentioned as being a childish and unfunny version of *Prince and the Pauper*, while *Lethal Weapon II* was

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<sup>734</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 178.

labeled “as bad as it gets,” by *Christianity Today*, and a conveyer of “blatant political propaganda” depicting South African officials “unfairly and inaccurately as an all-white group of fascists, racists, and murderers,” in *Human Events*.<sup>735</sup> It was only John Simon writing in *National Review* who considered *Die Hard*’s “main emotional strand...the buddyhood between whites and blacks.”<sup>736</sup> Building on this idea, he wrote how when Willis’s character hugs Al (Reginald Vel Johnson) at the end of the movie it was “scarcely less warm” than when he did so with his wife.<sup>737</sup> “So, here,” he continued, “the encoded message is interracial brotherhood, with which one cannot quarrel, except for the calculated way it is present in this altogether cynical movie.”<sup>738</sup> If Hollywood aimed to depict the idea of racism as somehow a distinct relic of a bygone error, they seemed to be succeeding.

Grenier once again came to the forefront and epitomized this thinking when he wrote a piece, this time about Eddie Murphy. Murphy, born a generation after Pryor in 1961, took the helm from Pryor as the black comedian and actor of the 1980s. He got his start on *Saturday Night Live* and had a block of hit films in the early 1980s. *48 Hours* (1982) a cop buddy picture and the comedy *Trading Places* were already mentioned, but his biggest hit was *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). Only *48 Hours* received a review, once again by libertarians in *Reason*, where

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<sup>735</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Apr 25, 1992, 14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ffright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310031256%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Roy M. Anker, "The Magical Kingdom's Box Office," *Christianity Today*, Sep 08, 1989, 70, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fmagical-kingdoms-box-office%2Fdocview%2F211903212%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; Stephen Macaulay, "Bombs: Cinematic and Otherwise and Cheap Trick," *Chronicles of Culture*, September, 1983, 39; and Joseph Farah, "Lethal Weapon 2 Takes Aim at South Africa," *Human Events*, Aug 26, 1989, 14-15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Flethal-weapon-2-takes-aim-at-south-africa%2Fdocview%2F1310027493%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>736</sup> John Simon, "Good Citizenship, Dubious Packaging," *National Review* 40, no. 19, September 30, 1988, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12232070&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*



Hospers labeled Murphy's character as "fun without a doubt" but thought the comic relief diluted too much of the drama.<sup>739</sup> It was a year after *Beverly Hills Cop* premiered that Grenier penned his celebratory article "Eddie Murphy: American." As with Pryor, he gave a summation of his career, but the focus was less on Murphy or his career and more on the idea that "something rather large is happening on the American racial scene."<sup>740</sup> To Grenier, Murphy symbolized a new type of black actor. Murphy did not "interpret [the] 'black experience' except to a minor degree. He interprets American experience."<sup>741</sup> According to Grenier he "freed himself entirely from the...tradition of playing to white guilt," and he called the idea of a "racist America" a "liberal mythology" which Eddie Murphy will not indulge in at all.<sup>742</sup> The last paragraphs went on to extol the fact that Murphy "does not take drugs, he does not drink...even goes light on the caffeine..., [and] wears a small gold crucifix around his neck."<sup>743</sup> There was then a comparison with Pryor "whose whole comic persona is based on the stereotype of the feckless, improvident, black wastrel," nevertheless he said, as they were both "extremely gifted" but their differences he believed were generational with Eddie Murphy, Michael Jackson, and Bill Cosby being "the first black superstars of the post-racist America."<sup>744</sup>

Hereafter the analysis takes a rather sharp turn. Grenier's comments on a "post-racists America" were either wishful thinking or ignorance, but they signified a hope on the Right that the contentious issue of race would fade away into the dustbin of history, and from the spate of films that had been released during the late 1970s and early 1980s, this seemed like it may have

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<sup>739</sup> John Hospers, "Movies," *Reason*, April, 1983, 49.

<sup>740</sup> Richard Grenier, "Movies: Eddie Murphy, American," *Commentary* 79, no. 3, Mar 01, 1985, 63, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmovies-eddie-murphy-american%2Fdocview%2F1290082297%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>741</sup> Ibid.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>744</sup> Ibid.

been happening. However, as was usually the case, Hollywood was hardly a reflection of reality, but rather a diluted or hoped-for reality. For most of Ronald Reagan's second term the buddy picture still reigned supreme and would continue with some success in the 1990s. Yet, by the latter half of the 1980s, a number of filmmakers began to address the issue of race, racism, and America's historical role in the two in a more direct fashion spurring more comments from conservatives on the topic than in the previous decade and a half combined. One director would come to exemplify the changes during this period, but before getting to him, a few films should be examined.

The first movie to truly get a wide array of attention on the Right that dealt with race was one where its black characters were supplemental to the plot. *Mississippi Burning* (1989), was released on a limited basis in December of 1988, and to wider audiences a month later. Based on a true story, it was about the investigation of three civil-rights workers (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner) who went missing in Mississippi in 1964. It followed two FBI agents Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Ward (Willem Dafoe) as they attempted to find the missing boys and solve what was a heinous crime. Patrick Buchanan, fresh off his 1988 republican presidential primary challenge of George H.W. Bush, wrote a piece in *Human Events* just weeks after its national release. The first half-hour is true, he remarked, but the movie "moves swiftly into fantasy."<sup>745</sup> "[T]he central falsehood," according to Buchanan, was that "it slanders an entire...region, for a single atrocity committed there."<sup>746</sup> The other point Buchanan made is one of the major criticisms that is replete throughout this chapter, the amalgamation of an entire race into a simplistic caricature. What he saw in the film was that "blacks are noble"

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<sup>745</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, "Mississippi Burning: Smear of the South," *Human Events*, Feb 11, 1989, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fmississippi-burning-smear-south%2Fdocview%2F1310029275%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

while whites were "base and ugly."<sup>747</sup> Reminiscent of Grenier's ideas about a post-racist society, he remarked how Hollywood focused on "the old, dead, racism," but then added his own take that they fail to see "the new racism, where crime, primarily black crime, holds an entire nation hostage."<sup>748</sup>

Buchanan's points were repeated in a toned-down fashion by Lorrin Anderson, the former editor, and producer of WNBC-TV News in New York, in *Chronicles*. She argued, "Honesty on matters of race — an approach that actually explored today's complexities and ambiguities — would of course mean giving the Zeitgeist a sharp kick in the shins. Far easier — and far safer—to give us tracts like *Mississippi Burning*, to go on dredging up bitter, violent memories of a bygone America, obsessively and tendentiously picking away at yesterday's scabs, making sure that old, half-healed wounds are kept open and bleeding."<sup>749</sup> She went on to compare *Mississippi Burning* with the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s "clear-eyed humanism — with many decent white as well as black characters — this work of honest fiction presents a far more convincing version of the segregated South than the 'based-on-fact' movie does, a portrait of a tragically flawed but by no means monstrous society coming face to face with the moral imperative for change."<sup>750</sup>

Richard Alleva in *Crises* believed the film to be pandering and disparaging calling it "a piece of sadism masquerading as social inquiry," "cinematic demagoguery," and a "rabble-rousing movie for liberals."<sup>751</sup> Summing up his view, he wrote, "[t]his movie...was made by

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<sup>747</sup> Buchanan, "Mississippi Burning: Smear of the South," 15.

<sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 19.

<sup>749</sup> Lorrin Anderson, "Vital Signs: The Way It Was?" *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol 15, No. 9 September 1991, 56.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>751</sup> Richard Alleva, "On Screen: Bone Crunching for Liberals," *Crises*, Vol. 7 No. 03, March 1, 1989, Crises Magazine Archives, [On Screen: Bone Crunching for Liberals \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://crisismagazine.com).

liberals who would rejoice to be able to play, once again, big brothers to blacks but who have observed the course of the civil rights movement, have seen the rise of black separatism within and without the movement, and who ruefully realize that most politically conscious blacks don't want Whitey to play Lone Ranger on their behalf anymore."<sup>752</sup>

In the other conservative Catholic publication *New Oxford Review* Robert Cole, the professor of Psychiatry and Medical Humanities at Harvard University had a different take, having personally met and had lunch with the three men who went missing before they left for Mississippi. He believed the film made "no pretense at documenting in any scrupulous detail," what actually took place.<sup>753</sup> But unlike some of his peers, he noted how "aware [the country is] that things have changed enormously, true, but aware, also, of how persistent the racial discord the film portrays is yet among us as a people."<sup>754</sup> Like Cole, Simon in *National Review* had a more nuanced view of the film. He believed the film had to be judged on three levels, "a thriller, as history, and as a human-interest story."<sup>755</sup> As a thriller it had "effective moments," but as a human-interest story, it fell short.<sup>756</sup> While as a history, just as with Cole, he saw it as "mostly fabrication" where "the film shows Southern blacks in 1964 as patient victims, a sea of angelically anonymous faces, not in the least involved in their own liberation. Equally unhistoric is the presence of blacks in the FBI at that time, and more besides."<sup>757</sup>

As the first film to acquire serious attention from a broad cross-section of critics, *Mississippi Burning* provided some unique perspectives. First, the idea that racism was

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<sup>752</sup> Alleva, "On Screen: Bone Crunching for Liberals," *Crises*.

<sup>753</sup> Robert Coles, "Memories of 1964," Archives, *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LVI, March, 1989, [Memories of 1964 | New Oxford Review](#).

<sup>754</sup> Ibid.

<sup>755</sup> John Simon, "The Frenzied and the Frozen," *National Review* 41, no. 4, March 10, 1989, 55, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=8903270111&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid.

something of a “bygone era” or described as “old dead racism” by Buchanan and Anderson is vital to understanding how they viewed the film. The systematic or institutionalized racism present during the time portrayed in *Mississippi Burning* was something to be disregarded or overlooked as an anomaly in the overarching picture of American history. The focus on race and the evils of groups like the Ku Klux Klan and their supporters seemed to Buchanan and others as unnecessary and detrimental to assimilation into American society and culture. Others like Cole saw the progress that had been made but were not ready to declare America a post-racist country. Second, two issues popped up in the mind of conservative critics: the blanket characterization or over-generalization of groups of people (or even geographic regions) and the problem of being historically inaccurate. Both critiques become repetitive throughout the chapter.

As more movies during the 1990s looked back on American history and continued to interpret history through the prism of race, more conservatives became dismayed not only with the messages in the film, but also sticklers for historical accuracy. Two points should be noted here. One, many conservative film critics had a healthy respect for history and were well versed in the subject. But this did not mean they expected films based on historical events to be documentaries. However, when facts were deliberately distorted to make a political point, this riled them up more so than playing fast and loose with the facts. The blatant manipulation of the plot and characters to make a political point has been noted in early chapters as a sign that the film in question did not take itself seriously, and here too, with the manipulation of history one could argue that this is another mark that the filmmakers lacked the intention to deal with their subject matter in a serious fashion. Also, it was not only in the realm of history and race that conservative critics looked at historical accuracy as an important factor in a movie but in a wide-

ranging grouping of historical films.<sup>758</sup> So, this critique of historical inaccuracy should not be seen as having to do only with films they found politically antithetical or with race.

When it came to the generalization of races into simpleminded caricatures, usually whites equal bad and blacks equal good, conservatives found this to be one of the more disturbing aspects of many of the films they reviewed. This theme should be fresh in the reader's mind as it was mentioned at length in the horror and Disney chapters, but the problem in them was related to men and women and adults and children. Here, the distinction was race, but the problem was the same. When an individual is stripped of their individuality and made into a political pawn or a merging of all that is good or bad they lose their sense of humanity. This was a problem not only for conservative cultural critics but also for film critics who harped on the importance of character development when reviewing films.

The next film only received two reviews but once more touched on race relations in the South. *Driving Miss Daisy* released in 1990, “won Oscars, for Best Picture, Best Actress (Jessica Tandy), Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Makeup,” and though nominated for Best Actor Morgan Freeman did not take home the prize.<sup>759</sup> It was an adaptation of an Alfred Uhry play, where Morgan Freeman played a chauffeur in 1948 Atlanta, Georgia for an exacting ex-school teacher Daisy (Jessica Tandy). Described as a film “about a friendship and, later, old age,” it became in a unique way a twist on the older buddy films from the 1980s. John Simon who

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<sup>758</sup> For some examples see: Jonah Goldberg, “Gibson’s Revolution,” *National Review* 52, no. 13, July 17, 2000, 52–54, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3295095&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; and James Bowman, “Patriot Games,” *American Spectator*, Vol 34, Iss 07, 2000, 64-65; on their reviews of *The Patriot*. Michael Hill, “Angry White Males,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 19, No.11, November 1995, 45-47; and his review of *Braveheart*; or Philip Gourevitch, “A Dissent on ‘Schindler’s List’,” *Commentary* 97, no. 2, Feb 01, 1994, 49-52, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fdissent-on-schindlers-list%2Fdocview%2F1290123345%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678> and his review of *Schindler’s List*. There are many more, but the author has attempted to include movies that were mostly lauded by the majority of conservative critics.

<sup>759</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 181

longed for serious, adult movies was admiring in his analysis. “Driving Miss Daisy,” he began, “accomplishes the impossible task of transferring a small, intimate three-character play that uses specifically theatrical, non-naturalistic devices to the realistic screen.”<sup>760</sup> It implicitly showed “the growing acceptance of Jews by the Old South” as well as “the integration of blacks into white society,” and most of all “does not cheat.”<sup>761</sup> By “does not cheat” Simon meant that the film does not seek to answer all nagging questions having to do with racial animosity between the two protagonists, nor was there an overreach into sentimentalism, and there was often much left unsaid as was the case with the real people. These all are hallmarks of not only a film that took itself and its subject matter seriously but also one in which its characters reflected this as well.

Bruce Bawer in *The American Spectator* was equally congratulatory, calling it “one of the most spare, understated movies ever made,” with “an honest, humane, and intelligent script, a company of dexterous and discerning actors, and a sensitive, compassionate director with a first-rate eye for illuminating detail.”<sup>762</sup> He appreciated the realism in the characters even when it came to the issue of race, writing that “[w]hen it comes to the question of race, the characters contradict and deceive themselves just as in real life,” there were no saints in the film only people.<sup>763</sup> One of his two concerns with the film, which Simon also took issue with, came from a clash where an Alabama highway cop made some ethnic and racial slurs concerning the main characters. To this, he stated that it “is unfair to the many white Protestant Southerners who, despite their often deeply ingrained notion that political equality for blacks would represent a

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<sup>760</sup> John Simon, “Minority Reports,” *National Review* 42, no. 3, February 19, 1990, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12293102&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid.

<sup>762</sup> Bruce Bawer, “Black and White in Color,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 23, Iss 04, 1990, 35.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid.

threat to their own precarious socioeconomic position, have helped in the last few decades to make the South (in the eyes of many observers) a less racially polarized place than, say, New York City.”<sup>764</sup>

Both Bawer and Simon as highbrow critics could appreciate a slow-moving, but thoughtful, serious, and intelligent film like *Driving Miss Daisy*, where the characters were “infinitely rich in shading.”<sup>765</sup> Yet the next film was one that was every bit as different from *Driving Miss Daisy* as could be. Another historically-oriented picture, *Glory* (1990) depicted “an often unheralded piece of American history:...courageous black soldiers during the Civil War.”<sup>766</sup> It retold the heroic tale of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, an all-black military unit led by the white Colonel Shaw (Matthew Broderick). It had Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington as supporting actors, the latter of which would win Best Supporting Actor of 1989.<sup>767</sup> This time Bawer was not as impressed and spent a large portion of his time ridiculing the popular reaction to the movie rather than the movie itself. He lamented how, “at a time when American schools-especially those in the inner cities-are graduating kids who can’t read, write, or find the United States on a map, teachers (in New York City, at least) are hauling their classes to the movies during school hours.”<sup>768</sup> This he believed to be a waste as he found himself in a theatre with a group of high schoolers on a weekday who jeered at Washington’s “Big Speech,” laughed at the well-educated soldier Thomas when he was tormented, and were only amused by the graphic battle sequence and pre-movie “soft drink commercial.”<sup>769</sup> The educators “figure it must be inspiring to blacks, especially to disaffected

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<sup>764</sup> Bawer, “Black and White in Color,” 35.

<sup>765</sup> Simon, “Minority Reports,” 58.

<sup>766</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Blacks*, 182.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

<sup>768</sup> Bawer, “Black and White in Color,” 34.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid.



young members of the ‘underclass. But popular culture,” he wrote, “is not going to save these kids.”<sup>770</sup> The film itself was “not without merit,” yet in nearly every aspect the film was “exactly as you’d expect.” The one saving grace was the performance of the black actors whose “riveting, beautifully shaped performances, lending depth and nuance to characters that might easily have been rendered as caricatures.”<sup>771</sup> When the characters were well played and more than one-dimensional conservative critics usually took note.

In *National Review*, Simon thought that there were “excessive fabrications,” and that it “depends on too many cliches or near cliches...[but, like Bawer] what makes *Glory* very much worth watching is the performances.”<sup>772</sup> He praised Broderick as Shaw, but the “true distinction...comes from a quartet of black actors,” who thanks to them it became “a movie that surpasses its artistic shortcomings into something long on humanity.”<sup>773</sup> Alleva also agreed “with all those critics who have heaped praise on the black actors involved.”<sup>774</sup> He saw the film as a war film more than a film on race, and stated that “this is the first American war movie in years that completely forgoes both the macho puffery of *Rambo* and the self-despising flagellation of *Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, et al.”<sup>775</sup> In the pages of *Christianity Today* the intermittent reviewer during the late 1980s and 1990s, Stefan Ulstein also had a positive take on the film. Unlike his peers, he took note of the “explicit Christian messages” like the scene where they sing Gospel hymns.”<sup>776</sup>

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<sup>770</sup> Bawer, “Black and White in Color,” 34.

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>772</sup> John Simon, “Swords and Bullets,” *National Review* 42, no. 5, March 19, 1990, 58, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12231758&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>773</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>774</sup> Richard Alleva, “On Screen: Engraving *Glory*,” *Crises*, Vol. 8 No. 04, April 1, 1990, *Crises Magazine Archives*, [On Screen: Engraving \*Glory\* \(crisismagazine.com\)](http://www.crisismagazine.com).

<sup>775</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>776</sup> Stefan Ulstein, “Chaining the Dogs of War,” *Christianity Today*, Mar 05, 1990, 50-51, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fchaining-dogs-war%2Fdocview%2F211903725%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

Before diving into some deeper analysis and shifting gears a bit there was another 1990s blockbuster. Different from all the films that have come so far, nonetheless, the criticism and its major themes augur its inclusion. *Dances With Wolves* (1990), took home seven Oscars including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Writing, Best Cinematography, Best Sound, Best Film Editing, and Best Music/Original Score.<sup>777</sup> In the film, Union Army Lieutenant John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) is placed at the furthest outpost on the Western Front after actions he took during a Civil War battle. He has a tenuous yet warming relationship with the Sioux tribe near him where he eventually acclimates to their culture and customs. However, this brings a host of issues where Dunbar must decide exactly where his loyalties lay. Likely due to its critical acclaim, *Dances With Wolves* (DWW) had an unusual number of reviews and articles written about it. As with *Mississippi Burning* the dual themes prominent then came up again here.

In *Chronicles* David Slavitt even before seeing it said he had “heard and read enough to know that the Indians are the good guys, noble and ecologically responsible, while the white men are the bad guys, rude, crude, and careless of the ecosystem in which they are working out a sordid caricature of Manifest Destiny.”<sup>778</sup> After viewing it he sarcastically remarked, “[t]he white guys are, to be blunt, inharmonious. They shoot the lieutenant's horse...and they shoot his pet wolf...[t]hey are so inconsiderate and disagreeable that they destroy the whole country and make impossible the harmonious nomadic life that the Sioux have been living.”<sup>779</sup> Slavitt posited how “Costner's officer discovers the p.c. truth that Indians are finer, truer, nobler human beings than whites, and he marries Stand With Fist and, in the end, goes native.”<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>777</sup> “Experience Over Nine Decades of the Oscars from 1927 to 2022,” Oscars.org, accessed July 22, 2022, [1991 | Oscars.org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](https://www.oscars.org/academy-of-motion-picture-arts-and-sciences).

<sup>778</sup> David R. Slavitt, “Horse Plays,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 17, No.08, August 1993, 49-50.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>780</sup> Ibid., 50.

Richard Grenier first commented on *DWW* in *Commentary* but would revisit the film by writing larger pieces for *National Interest* in 1991 and 1992. *DWW*, he claimed seemed to be about the “seizure of Indian lands and the despoliation of Indian cultures in the present territory of the United States.”<sup>781</sup> He quoted the star Kevin Costner as saying, “we didn’t need to have it,” ‘it’ being the land taken from the natives, but Grenier jeeringly asked if he meant all lands West of the Mississippi or if he truly believed that the United States “could have established flourishing, modern, high-technology urban communities...with compact discs, fax machines, and cellular phones while leaving the vast expanses of the American West to a stone-age people who knew neither writing, nor metal of any kind, nor the wheel.”<sup>782</sup> The “[r]omantic idealization of Indians” he noted “is not new in American history,” but rather it all too common within a “revisionist” version of history.<sup>783</sup> This was a similar take to that of Marian Kester Coombs who contributed an article to *Chronicles* on the “recent spate of movies and documentaries that side with Amerindians against the white man.”<sup>784</sup> *DWW* was foundational to her larger analysis where she concluded that “[i]f we confine our view to the revisionist ‘Native American’ epics, the denunciation of aggressive, imperialist white American culture is virtually all that is noticeable.”<sup>785</sup> Like many of his peers, Grenier believed that depicting native Americans in an idyllic unrealistic fashion and whites equally unrealistic but on the opposite end of the spectrum was not only morally repugnant but historically dishonest, and in the two separate articles for *The National Interest* he made his point. First, he observed that if *DWW* was taken as historical

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<sup>781</sup> Richard Grenier, "Indian Love Call," *Commentary* 91, no. 3, Mar 01, 1991, 46, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Findian-love-call%2Fdocview%2F1290135893%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>782</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>784</sup> Marian Kester Coombs, “Mad Scots and Indians,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 19, No.11, November 1995, 47-48.

<sup>785</sup> *Ibid.*

fact then it could be said that there were “no good white men, except...an officer in the Union Army who defects in the middle of the Civil War to the Sioux,” and more so “[b]y converting these Sioux Indians into gentle, vaguely pacifist, environmentally responsible bucolics, Kevin Costner, in a state of holy empty-headedness, has falsified history as much as any time-serving Stalinist of the Red Decade.”<sup>786</sup>

The criticism did not end with Grenier as nearly all other conservative critics continued on the themes already mentioned. Brudnoy reviewed the film in *Human Events* in his “The Right Movies” column as well as another more concentrated review focused solely on *DWW*. He encapsulated the feeling of many conservative critics when he wrote that it was “very much imbued with the spirit of the moment: anti-white.”<sup>787</sup> Like Grenier and Coombs, he mentioned the “all-consuming” and “fashionable revisionism” that has “taken hold in many sectors of American society” where an all-out “assault on ‘Eurocentrism,’ [and] the excoriation of the DWMs—the dead white males,” had become chic.<sup>788</sup> Charles Colson in *Christianity Today* echoed this, but with an expected focus on the religious facet stating how the message of the film seemed to be that “the Judeo-Christian civilization is the real enemy,” and “the pantheistic Native Americans...are the real good guys.”<sup>789</sup> James Bowman in *The American Spectator* put it this way, “the Lakota...are as handsome, gentle, wise, ‘and in touch with nature as the U.S.

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<sup>786</sup> Richard Grenier, “Hawkeye as a Moral Hermaphrodite: From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to ‘Last of the Mohicans,’” *The National Interest*, no. 30, 1992, 68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42896829>, and Richard Grenier, “Hollywood’s Foreign Policy: Utopianism Tempered by Greed,” *The National Interest*, no. 24, 1991, 76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894748>.

<sup>787</sup> David Brudnoy, “The Right Movies,” *Human Events*, Dec 08, 1990, 12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310023797%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>788</sup> David Brudnoy, “Dances with Wolves Flirts with Racism,” *Human Events*, Dec 15, 1990, 12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fdances-with-wolves-flirts-racism%2Fdocview%2F1310031029%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>789</sup> Charles Colson, “Dances with Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing,” *Christianity Today*, Apr 27, 1992, 72, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fdances-with-wolves-sheeps-clothing%2Fdocview%2F211924581%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

Cavalry are ugly, violent, stupid, and in touch with nature the way a bulldozer is.”<sup>790</sup> The bifurcation between the whites and the natives was something that undoubtedly stood out in many conservatives’ minds as it was the central theme in many of their writings.

Nothing new needs to be stated at this time about the importance of generalizing an entire race, or the lack of seriousness it shows by distorting history that the critics have not already stated themselves, but Grenier made an interesting point when he tied the two together. He wrote how by making the Sioux into something they were not, the writers and filmmakers have done a disservice not only to whites the film disparage but also to history itself. Slavitt too touched on this, writing “Native Americans hate to be categorized together even as noble victims” and thus the twisting of Sioux history to fit some current political trend or make a barbed point about the evils of Westward expansion was in reality a slap in the face to Native American history and culture.<sup>791</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to take a step back and look once again at films that featured plots and casts that centered solely around African Americans, their issues, and culture (*Glory* could arguably be one of these films, but was indeed different due to its historical nature). Films like these received little attention both from critics and at the box office in the early 1980s, as they did in the 1970s. Yet as stated earlier, one director seemed to portend a seismic change in attitudes. Sheldon Jackson Lee, better known as Spike Lee became one of the most successful but conceivably controversial directors of the late 1980s and 1990s. Born in Atlanta in 1957, he received a master of fine arts from New York University and wrote, directed, and produced his first film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) in two weeks for \$175,000.<sup>792</sup> Not reviewed by any

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<sup>790</sup> James Bowman, “Homes Rearranged,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 24, Iss 02, 1991, 34.

<sup>791</sup> Slavitt, “Horse Plays,” 50.

<sup>792</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Blacks*, 183.

conservative critics contemporaneously, Simon, described it in a later review as a “cutesy, trivial sex carrousel;” featuring a black female lead which told the story of her having to decide between three very different male suitors.<sup>793</sup> However, Bogle explained the importance of the film saying, “much of the appeal of *She’s Gotta Have It* were the African American cultural markers and references—whether it be comments about political leader Jesse Jackson or choreographer Alvin Ailey—that ran throughout, providing moviegoers with a portrait of a culturally cohesive African American community.”<sup>794</sup> The immersion into the black culture was a central point of distinction between these next films and the ones that have come before them. These points, as well as Lee acting in his own films (as he did in *She’s Gotta Have It*) would be signatures of Lee’s work moving forward.

In 1989 Lee released his best-known and most provocative film up to that time, *Do the Right Thing* (1989). It centered around “a series of confrontations between Sal (Danny Aiello), a white pizzeria owner, and the young African Americans who patronized his restaurant, which lead inexorably to a race riot.”<sup>795</sup> It opened with “Fight the Power” by the rap group Public Enemy, depicted the escalation of racial tension, a police killing of a young black man, and ended with quotes by Martin Luther King Jr. and also Malcolm X with two diverging thoughts, one peaceful and one “by any means necessary” on how to solve the racial tensions in the nation. John Simon was the sole conservative critic to review the film. He noted that Lee had shown “skill” and “wit” in his earlier films but nothing that would suggest he was capable of making “something genuinely disturbing, strongly controversial, and nervily powerful. Not good, mind

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<sup>793</sup> John Simon, “My Thing, Right or Wrong,” *National Review* 41, no. 14, August 4, 1989, 45, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=8908071262&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>794</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Blacks*, 183.

<sup>795</sup> Lewis, *American Film*, 380.

you, but slick, savvy, explosive.”<sup>796</sup> He went on to explain why he believed it to not be a good film:

...though a work of art need not have the answers—indeed, it usually doesn't—it must ask its questions honestly. It must, even if it knows that there are no answers and not just no easy answers—try to shed as much light as it sensitively and searchingly can. And it must be fair to all sides or be candid about which side it is taking. Above all, it must know itself. None of this is true of *Do the Right Thing*, a clever film that, every step of the way, outsmarts itself.<sup>797</sup>

Simon's desire for veracity and truthfulness on the part of the characters and the filmmakers has continued to be the focal point of his writing. He commented on the “manipulativeness” of the film in that none of the characters are shown working, omitting an integral detail of their lives, and “a whole larger social reality is ignored by omitting references to crack,” remarking how this was odd since the film crew had to “dislodge crack dealers from two locations” where it was filmed.<sup>798</sup> In the end, Simon came away with three conclusions:

1)The movie, consciously or unconsciously, intends to be rabble-rousing. 2) It is highly unlikely to succeed, but if it does, no one will be happier than Spike. 3) That happiness would have less to do with the weal of "fellow brothers" than with the ego trip of a middle-class armchair revolutionary.<sup>799</sup>

*Do the Right Thing* set the expectations and stage for many of Lee's other works with its focus on racial justice, black culture, and a provoking tone throughout. Similarly, Simon's review presaged some of the themes that came up when other critics began to review his films as Lee's prominence rose; mainly that Lee seemed to be a bit self-indulgent and that there was dishonesty in the way in which portrayed the characters. Yet *Do the Right Thing* was a seminal film of the era and Bogle offered an apt summary as to why:

During the politically conservative Reagan era and the start of the George Herbert Walker Bush period, some still preferred to believe that racial divisions had

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<sup>796</sup> Simon, “My Thing, Right or Wrong,” 45.

<sup>797</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>798</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid., 50.

subsided, that there was a social/racial balance and calm in America and old problems had been resolved. [This was prominent in the writings of Grenier, Buchanan, and Anderson and grounds for frustration among conservative writers when movies portrayed America or whites in ways many of them found distasteful] *Do the Right Thing*, however, exposed a nation's denial of ongoing though suppressed racial conflicts. *Driving Miss Daisy*, also released in 1989, had taken a comforting look back to an idealized past. *Do the Right Thing* took a realistic look at the then—here and now. In the end, it still stands as one of the era's most significant films.<sup>800</sup>

The distinct divide between movies like *Driving Miss Daisy* along with many of the black and white buddy films where race was an issue that decent individuals could overcome in an imperfect world (not colorblind but leaning that way) and Lee's films where systemic, historical, and cultural issues made reconciliation seem impossible (Race conscience) only furthered the divide between how a dividing culture came to view racial issues. Conservative critics continued to hold tightly to the idea that a colorblind society where assimilation into the Judeo-Christian Western society was not only ideal but necessary for a cohesive and functioning society, while films like *DWW*, *Mississippi Burning*, and directors like Lee continued to poke holes in an idealized past and argued that the country should not be a melting pot, as historian Bruce Schulman put it, but a "tapestry, or salad bowl" where "many different people and cultures contributed to one common stew, but as discrete peoples and cultures sharing the same place."<sup>801</sup>

Nevertheless, the following year Lee released *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) where Denzel Washington portrayed a jazz musician Bleek "torn between two women and the demands of his art."<sup>802</sup> Once again Simon reviewed the film, but this time was joined by James Bowman at *The American Spectator*. Bowman found it "long, boring, and self-indulgent," but observed how "it does manage to cast a different light, from the point of view of a black ghetto culture."<sup>803</sup> He

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<sup>800</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 185.

<sup>801</sup> Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 64.

<sup>802</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 197-198.

<sup>803</sup> James Bowman, "Ms. Polhemus, She Dead," *The American Spectator*, Vol 23, Iss 10, 1990, 37.



believed Giant (Spike Lee) “represents the drag of ghetto culture upon talented black individuals,” and that all Bleek’s problems “can be seen as different manifestations of the black community’s values, which he has had to rise above in order to be successful.”<sup>804</sup> While pointing out the “disingenuous appeal to brotherly solidarity” made in the film, he did concede that there was “a serious point,” and it was that “[t]he collapse of individual order sums up Bleek’s surrender to the anomie of urban black culture. Only a black man could get away with such a portrayal today, and Lee deserves credit for not sentimentalizing negritude or wallowing in victimization.”<sup>805</sup>

Bowman seemed drawn to certain aspects that intrigued him but was still hesitant to be overly complimentary. Like Grenier, he was wary of victimization and saw certain aspects of “ghetto culture” as antithetical to success in American society. Simon was even less pleased than Bowman. Remarking how two filmmakers had made similar movies to this one, he believed “Spike Lee’s intention with his new film, *Mo’ Better Blues*, was to tell the life of a jazz musician accurately, not as seen in movies by white filmmakers.”<sup>806</sup> “But are we to believe,” Simon asked, “that it is the white sensibility’ that undercut [the two other films]?” Leaving the possibility for this to conceivably be true, he nevertheless stated, “the corrective is not *Mo’ Better Blues*, which has no more character development, no more originality of plot, and rather less, or less good, music than the two films Lee keeps badmouthing. It also has prettification of the jazz-club surroundings, ugly whiffs of anti-Semitism, and horribly formulaic story-telling to contend with.”<sup>807</sup> Simon, like with *Do the Right Thing*, found it implausible that no one in a *Jazz* movie

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<sup>804</sup> Bowman, “Ms. Polhemus, She Dead,” 37.

<sup>805</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>806</sup> John Simon, “All That Bebop,” *National Review* 42, no. 17, September 3, 1990, 48, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12480634&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

does drugs. “That's like making a movie about Scotland without a kilt in it; or, more precisely, about a string quartet without showing a viola.”<sup>808</sup> But the real problem Simon saw for Lee was that he needed “controversy to score. *She's Gotta Have It* and, especially, *Do the Right Thing* had it; in *Mo' Better Blues*, there's nothing for him to be controversial, or blow his horn, about.”<sup>809</sup> Once more, Simon was one to point out the distortion of the past, this time of a jazz club and jazz culture to make the characters look better than they might have been if portrayed realistically. Distortion, in itself, was not an unforgivable sin, but when done to make a political point or to make a character or group of characters more saintly or evil, it was an indication to many conservative critics that the film lacked honesty, a trait lauded in serious films and realistic characters, possibly the central quality required by conservative critics.

With that said, Lee's next film two films and the controversy surrounding them seemingly made up for the lack of controversy Simon referred to in *Mo' Better Blues*. But before getting to them, Lee had opened the door to a new generation of filmmakers where black urban culture was at the forefront of the narrative. Indeed, 1990 through 1992 saw an explosion of films of what Bogle called “Bringing the Hood to the Movies.”<sup>810</sup> Films like *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) about a young black youth growing up in housing projects who robs a drug dealer to try to escape his situation, and *Juice* (1992) chronicling four black teens growing up in Harlem who have to decide where they draw the line between friendship, crime, and their hopes for a future. Brudnoy was the only one who reviewed these films calling the former “the ‘oh aren't we miserable because we're black' school of self-pitying cinema, but thoughtfully acted and chillingly concluded,” and the latter the “latest black-oriented movie to lead to violence (and

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<sup>808</sup> Simon, “All That Bebop,” 48.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>810</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 195.

death and paralysis) at movie theatres around the country. The usual vulgar, youthful, strutting fools getting into trouble, mouthing off, and sinking into barbarism.”<sup>811</sup> *New Jack City* (1991) was another film but this time about a small-time gang in Harlem that because of the creation and flooding of crack cocaine into urban neighborhoods, became a major crime syndicate. Grenier touched on it in *Commentary* because it presented both blacks and whites as good and bad. He believed it to be “a cry from the black community for harsher punishment for the black criminals who are corroding black society,” and saw race relations as being represented by a black and white cop who ended up “solid buddies,” but was still “not a very good movie.”<sup>812</sup>

These “hood films” depicted the struggles of growing up in urban areas infested with drugs, crime, and a lack of opportunity. This genre was best exemplified by another up-and-coming black director, John Singleton, and his groundbreaking work *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). This time the story took place in South Central Los Angeles where Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) is sent to live with his father (Laurence Fishburne) as the film “focused on a troubled community in which children stumble upon dead bodies, in which gangs rule individual turfs, in which women and girls are often marginalized, in which there does not seem to be much hope unless one gets out of the hood, and in which, tragically, African American fathers are mostly absent.”<sup>813</sup>

An undeniably powerful film Brudnoy awarded it three stars and remarked how it was “[e]xcellently acted, albeit strongly stereotypical,” while Simon noted how “[i]t does my teeth on

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<sup>811</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Aug 17, 1991, 14, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310026751%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>. and David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Feb 22, 1992, 12, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310030848%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>812</sup> Richard Grenier, "Spike Lee Fever," *Commentary* 92, no. 2, Aug 01, 1991, 50-53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fspike-lee-fever%2Fdocview%2F1290191674%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>813</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 197.

edge to write out *Boyz N the Hood*," he "would rather have made this film than any one of Spike Lee's, or the lot of them rolled together."<sup>814</sup> There is only one "overtly white-hating speech," but this was overlooked due to "how much of this film rings true," and how it "accomplishes most of its bitter aims with unsensationalistic [sic] honesty."<sup>815</sup> Anytime honesty is mentioned by a critic, it should be noted as directly corresponding to the seriousness of the film. However, the "shootings, injuries, and deaths" that took place in several cities both inside and outside the theater, "almost eclips[e] the merit of the film."<sup>816</sup> Simon reflected on this solemnly, "[t]he terrifying paradox is that a work condemning shooting and killing among young blacks should elicit the opposite effect. What does this tell us? That tension has gotten so out of hand that anything, or nothing, can trigger violence? What is ultimately so discouraging is human -- and I mean universal human -- stupidity."<sup>817</sup> Simon's humanity and rare empathetic intuition are on display in these comments as is his willingness to overlook small "white-hating" parts if the film is true to itself. Bogle provided a succinct summary of the significance of the film. "*Boyz N the Hood*," he wrote, "stands as one of the most emotionally affecting dramas of the era and perhaps in movie history. It captured the nihilism of a new generation, and like an old Warner Bros. film, it seemed to have sprung from headlines of that period (and later): the drive-by shootings, the senseless violence, the feelings of entrapment within urban communities."<sup>818</sup>

A month before *Boyz N the Hood* hit theatres, Spike Lee released another racially challenging film *Jungle Fever* (1991). This film prodded into the interracial/extramartial love

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<sup>814</sup> David Brudnoy, "The Right Movies," *Human Events*, Sep 28, 1991, 15, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ffright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310029390%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>; and John Simon, "Growing Pains, Growing Joys," *National Review* 43, no. 17, September 23, 1991, 54, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9110070940&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>815</sup> Simon, "Growing Pains, Growing Joys," 54.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>818</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 197.

affair between a black architect Flipper (Wesley Snipes) and his white assistant who worked under him (Annabella Sciorra). It was “a far cry from the tame portrait” in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*.<sup>819</sup> Racial animosity is at the forefront in a whole host of relationships but is not the sole issue as the interfamily workings of Flipper with his Southern Baptist religiously conservative father and crack-addicted brother (Gator) come to a head towards the end of the film. The reception of the film among conservative critics was not encouraging. Reviewed by four critics, many called the film out for being “anti-white” and having cardboard cutouts as characters. James Bowman only dedicated a couple of paragraphs to the film in *The American Spectator*. He believed the “evil of bigotry” to be at the center of the story, but that it did not mesh well in combining the drug plot with the interracial narrative.<sup>820</sup> Brudnoy in *Human Events* was more forgiving stating, “as always with Lee, contentious and mean-spirited, but also at times wonderfully acted and imaginatively photographed.”<sup>821</sup>

However, when it came to Simon and Grenier their thoughts were very much in line with each other and how they felt about Lee. In *National Review* Simon seemed to be fatigued by Lee writing, “[t]he general tastelessness of our pop-culture world combined with pandering to minorities has allowed two clever mediocrities, Madonna and Spike Lee, to bestride our screens like titans.”<sup>822</sup> He called *Jungle Fever* “a poorly thought out movie that makes little sense, its plot and subplots unable to mesh, its main characters either unbelievable or boringly obvious, its minor characters mostly cliches, its attempts to be experimental ludicrous, its pretensions to

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<sup>819</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 198.

<sup>820</sup> James Bowman, “The Banality of ‘90s Evil,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 24, Iss 08, 1991, 35,

<sup>821</sup> David Brudnoy, “The Right Movies,” *Human Events*, Jun 22, 1991, 13,  
<http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Ffright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310026624%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>822</sup> John Simon, “The Trashcan School,” *National Review* 43, no. 13, July 29, 1991, 48,  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9107292694&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

profundity even more so.”<sup>823</sup> Reiterating a point about the characters he fumed how they “refuse to come to life,” and then Simon for the first time focused on what many of his colleagues had been stating about racial depictions; “Italian-Americans are crudely racist stereotypes. The blacks, needless to say, get much more sympathy, but only one, Gator, achieves reality and stature, thanks to Samuel Jackson's remarkably humane performance.”<sup>824</sup>

Meanwhile, like Simon, Grenier saw the film as saying “black is the clear social and educational superior of the white.”<sup>825</sup> What bothered him even more though was that he viewed Lee as “a product of Hollywood’s real if unofficial affirmative-action program” yet in film after film Lee “presents the white and black communities in America as irreconcilably hostile.”<sup>826</sup> So once more special attention was paid to the generalizations of race this time by the highbrow Simon while he also continued to zero in on the absolute need for characters to be realistic, human, and not tools for a director’s message. Grenier had a comparable takeaway as Simon but also brought attention to the point he made in *Capture the Culture* that it was usually the artist class who were the most antagonistic toward the society they hail from.

It appeared all Lee’s films had been building toward something, and in 1992 with the release of the biopic *Malcolm X* (1992) Lee’s status as a filmmaker seemed to reach its zenith. It was a biographical piece that follows Malcolm Little (Denzel Washington) from his youthful life of crime, through his conversion to Islam, onto his role as a social reformer, and finally to his untimely assassination. *Malcolm X* while not as successful in a financial sense, was a cultural phenomenon. *National Review* ran a separate article in addition to Simon’s usual review of the

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<sup>823</sup> Simon, “The Trashcan School,” 48.

<sup>824</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>825</sup> Richard Grenier, “Spike Lee Fever,” *Commentary* 92, no. 2, Aug 01, 1991, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fspike-lee-fever%2Fdocview%2F1290191674%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>826</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

film, *Human Events* had five different pieces on it, and *Commentary* and *Reason* both had their own reviews. Adding to the hype surrounding the film was an incident of police brutality captured on video and replayed for the nation to see. In March the previous year with fifteen officers on the scene, three brutally kicked and beat Rodney King with nightsticks between fifty-three and fifty-six times in less than a minute.<sup>827</sup> The video, captured on a Sony camcorder by a plumber, became the first viral video before there was such a thing, making it rounds on nearly all of the local channels and by then the semi-recent 24-hour news station CNN. The acquittal of the police officers the following summer in April of 1992, triggered one of America's deadliest modern riots in Los Angeles killing fifty-three people, causing over one billion dollars in damages with over 1,600 businesses destroyed, and the faith in the criminal justice system done irreparable harm for a generation of young black men and women.<sup>828</sup> Lee decided to open *Malcolm X* (X) with the video of the Rodney King beating in the pre-title sequence.

As one might imagine the film conjured a wide assortment of emotions. The main positions taken by reviewers and critics alike were common to the chapter: historically erroneous and Lee's heavy-handedness in depicting whites as evil are front and center, but there was also the acknowledgment of wonderful acting and some interesting arguments and opinions on Malcolm X the man. The latter will be examined first. Jeffrey Hart, a professor of English at Dartmouth, as well as a previous book reviewer and editor for *National Review* wrote in *Human Events* that he had no plans of seeing (X) because there was a zero percent chance "it will tell the truth" about Malcolm X's poisonous influence on black Americans.<sup>829</sup> Another article in *Human*

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<sup>827</sup> Troy, *Age of Clinton* 33.

<sup>828</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>829</sup> Jeffrey Hart, "Lee's Movie Shouldn't Glorify Malcolm X," *Human Events*, Nov 21, 1992, 7,17, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Flees-movie-shouldnt-glorify-malcolm-x%2Fdocview%2F1310031395%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

*Events* entitled “Malcolm X in His Own Words,” pushed back on the idea that appeared in the movie, in which Malcolm X may have toned down his racial animosity towards whites later on in life, stating that this portrayal was “totally false” and “Malcolm X died a virulent black racist”<sup>830</sup> The rest of the article went on to portray him as someone with “anti-Western and anti-Christian views,” and according to the author “[f]or Malcolm X, the white man can do no good.”<sup>831</sup> A month later *Human Events* reprinted a *New York Post* article that took a gentler tone, at least on Malcolm X the person. It placed blame on the failure of the film to reach blockbuster status, at the feet of “Hollywood’s master of self-promotion and racial hype,” Spike Lee, rather than a “reflection on Malcolm X the man—a gifted leader with commendable qualities of self-discipline and seriousness.”<sup>832</sup>

The belief that Malcolm X should be viewed through a more nuanced lens was seconded in *National Review* by frequent contributor Carol Iannone in “Bad Rap for Malcolm X.” She contended that, if alive, Malcolm X would have been more culturally conservative than many imagine, pointing to the fact that someone who was twelve years celibate before he married, “would have been dismayed at the distribution of condoms to children. The faithful husband and devoted father would be horrified at black men making babies and leaving them to the care of the white man's state.” She continued, “[t]he slovenly and disordered appearance of youth today, black and white, would have appalled him, as would their language, and the language of rap,” while the “affirmative action and curricula based on ‘self-esteem’ might well have broken his

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<sup>830</sup> “Malcolm X in His Own Words,” *Human Events*, Dec 05, 1992, 3, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fmalcolm-x-his-own-words%2Fdocview%2F1310035228%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>831</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>832</sup> *New York Post*, “Spike Lee Deserves Failure of ‘Malcolm X’,” *Human Events*, Feb 06, 1993, 13, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fspike-lee-deserves-failure-malcolm-x-new-york%2Fdocview%2F1310028737%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.



heart.”<sup>833</sup> The divergence of thought on the man himself portends the reception of the film among conservatives.

Brudnoy reviewed the film for *Human Events* in his “The Right Movies” column as well as in a longer piece. For his blurb on the movie he gave it three stars and wrote that it was “[c]inematicly powerful (albeit way too long), finely acted, ...and cogently written, but with infused anti-white preachments that go beyond necessity.”<sup>834</sup> In his fuller review, he expounded on his thinking acknowledging it was “better than average,” but still a “monstrous distortion of history.”<sup>835</sup> He believed it to be “as much myth as biography,” which skipped over or embellished parts of Malcolm’s life but the worst part was Lee’s “one overriding message: that the lot of blacks in America is and must be separate from whites. It is the separation dogma, the we-are-forever-victims message.”<sup>836</sup> Meanwhile, fellow libertarian Charles Oliver in *Reason*, like Brudnoy thought that the film “certainly isn’t a failure,” and that Washington gave “the performance of his career.”<sup>837</sup> The problem, he claimed, could be summed up in “two words: Spike Lee.”<sup>838</sup> “Judging from Lee’s interviews-where he always railed against someone or some institution for oppressing him, looking very much like a petulant cricket-one could be forgiven for thinking that the film was three and a half hours of Caucasian baiting,” yet the film according to Oliver, except for a few scenes, did not have a “hate whitey thrust.”<sup>839</sup>

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<sup>833</sup> Iannone, Carol Iannone, “Bad Rap for Malcolm X,” *National Review* 44, no. 24, December 14, 1992, 47–49, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9212142263&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>834</sup> David Brudnoy, “The Right Movies,” *Human Events*, Jan 09, 1993, 18, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fright-movies%2Fdocview%2F1310033292%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>835</sup> David Brudnoy, “‘Malcolm X’: Movie, Man, Myth,” *Human Events*, Dec 05, 1992, 5, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fmalcolm-x-movie-man-myth%2Fdocview%2F1310035281%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>837</sup> Charles Oliver, “That’s Life,” *Reason*, April 1993, 57.

<sup>838</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>839</sup> *Ibid.*

Simon who evaluated the film two weeks after Iannone made only passing comments on the historical accuracy, telling his readers if they needed more on the historical aspects to see Iannone's comments as he was not qualified to assess it "from the historical standpoint."<sup>840</sup> *Malcolm X* was, according to Simon, the first film in which "Shelton Jackson Spike Lee, assistant professor of Contemporary American Cinema in Harvard's AfroAmerican [sic] department, has made a genuine contribution to Contemporary American Cinema."<sup>841</sup> It was "a genuine piece of filmmaking, with a savvily paced story, bustling and bristling atmosphere, security of technical execution, and devilishly good acting," where the only time it stooped "to agit-prop" is at the opening of the film with the video of Rodney King beating and at the end where children jumped to their feet one after another to shout, "I am Malcolm X!"<sup>842</sup>

The last review came from Tamar Jacoby in *Commentary*. Jacoby was the deputy editor of the *New York Times* op-ed pages as well as the justice editor for *Newsweek* before becoming a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a rightward-leaning policy think tank for economic ideas impacting urban communities. Jacoby labeled it a "big letdown, both as entertainment and as politics."<sup>843</sup> She clarified her position as having to do with the fact that "Lee has overwhelmed his subject, substituting costumes, crowd scenes, and fancy undercutting for virtually all real human drama."<sup>844</sup> While not a film critic, Tamar came away with many of the same conclusions saying that the film is too manipulative, "heavy-handed" in its racial politics, "too-heroic" and

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<sup>840</sup> John Simon, "Biopics," *National Review* 44, no. 25, December 28, 1992, 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9301031752&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>843</sup> Tamar Jacoby, "The Bitter Legacies of Malcolm X," *Commentary*, 02, 1993, 27, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fbitter-legacies-malcolm-x%2Fdocview%2F195901255%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>844</sup> *Ibid.*

too much a simplified a portrayal of X, and when it came to race “all [the] whites...are sinister; all blacks are righteous victims.”<sup>845</sup> She then concentrated on Malcolm X himself and his legacy:

The tyranny of Malcolm X's legacy is everywhere evident in the black community, and yet, in the name of solidarity, virtually no one dares suggest that it may have been a sadly misleading distraction: a recipe for stagnation and empty bitterness...Most damaging in the long run, and most undermining for black people, was Malcolm X's conviction that America could never heal itself. Even after he left the Muslims, he scorned the civil-rights movement. Even after his trip to Mecca, he remained convinced that American society was irredeemably racist...By telling young blacks that things would never change, in effect he blocked real change forever.<sup>846</sup>

*Malcolm X* would not be the last Spike Lee film in the 1990s, but it did arguably represent his apotheosis atop Hollywood. However, by this point, many critics on the right believed Lee to have both made an entertaining and beautifully shot film, but it was he who was the prime cause for many of its failures. Lee's incessant need to make Malcolm X a saint more than a person as well as his abrasive personality seemed to turn many off from the film before they even saw it. The two-fold themes of historical misrepresentations and race-based generalizations once again were in the spotlight. The idea that Malcolm X was not depicted as fully as he could have been, that this biopic may have leaned too heavily in the hagiography category, is what seemed to throw many conservative critics off, while the demonization of whites continued to be something conservative critics looked for, some (Jacoby/Brudnoy) noticing it more than others (Oliver/Simon).

As the 1990s rolled on, some critics and commentators continued to critique Lee's work. James Bowman would review *Clockers* in 1995, which might have been his “best movie” since *Do the Right Thing* if not for his usual “self-indulgence” and “fashionable politics” which placated “the sentimental liberal's belief that life in the ghetto is so horrible that it explains, if not

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<sup>845</sup> Jacoby, "The Bitter Legacies of Malcolm X," 27.

<sup>846</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

excuses, even the most improbable of wicked deeds.”<sup>847</sup> Jonah Goldberg, a researcher at the *American Enterprise Institute* who would rise through the ranks of neoconservatism to become one of the leading rightward political analysts in the country reviewed the documentary *We Were Kings* by Spike Lee in 1997. About and Muhammad Ali/ George Foreman fight, Goldberg had comparable criticisms to what has become expected, i.e., “a great disservice...to history,” the protagonist Ali is a “saint” while Foreman “plays the devil,” and overall was “the most improbable, enjoyable, and deceptive documentary in years.”<sup>848</sup>

The last film of Lee’s to be reviewed in the allotted time frame was *Bamboozled* (2000). One of Lee’s biggest box office failures, it featured Delacroix (Daman Wayans) under the employ of a tactless white boss who denies all his TV show ideas where blacks were shown in a positive light. So, he cynically came up with a racist show depicting black characters in black face, and overtly stereotypical tropes which his boss delightfully approved becoming an overnight success; chaos and trouble ensue. This was the first film reviewed under the “Movie Guide Ratings” in *Human Events* by Ted Baehr’s group. The movie made “some good points about negative stereotypes, [but] it does not really try to come up with a strong moral solution to the issue of ethnic conflicts or the alleged problem of the lack of minority groups in power positions in the media,” rather it “includes politically correct elements that hint at a Marxist ideology, which is hidden under a mood of valid social outrage.”<sup>849</sup> Another small excerpt came in *Human Events* from radio talk show host, lawyer, and television personality Larry Elder who

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<sup>847</sup> James Bowman, “Showtime,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 29, Iss 11, 1995, 70-71.

<sup>848</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Politics & Pugilists,” *Commentary*, Jun 01, 1997, 51, 52, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fpolitics-pugilists%2Fdocview%2F1290132619%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>849</sup> “Movie Guide Ratings,” *Human Events* 56, no. 38, October 20, 2000, 14, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3675752&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

describe the film as having the “[t]he not-so-subtle message: Hollywood seeks out the worst possible images of blacks.”<sup>850</sup>

The last review was composed by Simon, who seemed fed up with Lee’s antics in a complete one-eighty from *Malcolm X*. More than all other critics Simon was open to acknowledging the racism that once inflicted irreparable harm on generations of black families. Yet, like many of his contemporaries, he recognized the progress that had been made over time and refused to accede to Lee’s dark portrayal of America and his simplistic view of whites and blacks.

In *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee set out to prove that blacks have been variously patronized, ridiculed, and insulted in American movie, radio, and TV. This, alas, was largely true. He shows it best with a montage, near film’s end, of sorry clips, more demeaning than funny. His further point, that not much has changed since then, is hardly tenable. Even less so is the satirical story he concocts—a satire both ham-fisted and absurd that is as unfair to whites as they once were to blacks...And further, there is a Jewish female media expert, whose portrayal is nothing short of venomous...Spike Lee has scored better points elsewhere; here, the brew is too spiked to be intellectually stimulating.<sup>851</sup>

Spike Lee for better or worse was one of the most important directors of the late 1980s and 1990s. His movies spoke “in personal, political, and cultural terms,” mostly to younger audiences and the subjects in his film nearly always touched on some aspect of black culture or race relations.<sup>852</sup> Conservative critics were not dismissive of his movies, in fact, his works were reviewed more than any other black director during this time. His talent as a filmmaker was noticed from the start by critics like Simon and Brudnoy. However, themes not imputed solely to Lee, but personified by him in the minds of many

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<sup>850</sup> Larry Elder, “Does Hollywood ‘Bamboozle’ Blacks?” *Human Events*, November 17, 2000, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3762731&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>851</sup> John Simon, “Taking the Low Road,” *National Review* 52, no. 21, November 6, 2000, 66–67, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3701368&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>852</sup> Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 197.

critics, were what appeared to drive a wedge between his films and critics on the right. In 1991 Grenier wrote an article in *Commentary* where he articulated some of the harsher points held against Lee writing that he was an “ardent believer in the principle of collective guilt, and...hold[s] an indiscriminate attitude toward retribution.”<sup>853</sup> Whites, Grenier argued, needed to be punished from Lee’s perspective for the “sins committed against blacks.”<sup>854</sup> This perception of Lee along with the overarching issues of boiling down entire races to epitomize the best and worst of each along with the manipulation of history to make political points made Lee a filmmaker many conservatives could not get behind.

Yet, there was one more film, this time not associated with Lee, that received a rather large assortment of reviews. Possibly not surprising, the last film is another historical piece, this time dating back to the antebellum period in America. Dealing directly with slavery, the slave trade, and its legality, *Amistad* (1997) directed by Steven Spielberg attempted to retell the court case following the taking over of the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* by a group of illegally purchased slaves. Conservative critics varied greatly in their overall assessment of the merits of the film. As a historical piece, many once again jumped on any historical spin while others brought attention to both the religious aspects, and the simplemindedness of the film.

Podhoretz and Bowman concentrated on the simplicity factor. Bowman praised the fact that it was “beautifully photographed and brilliantly edited,” as well as having “technical wit and sophistication.”<sup>855</sup> Yet, these factors were always secondary to other more pressing details.

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<sup>853</sup> Richard Grenier, "Killer Bimbos," *Commentary* 92, no. 3, Sep 01, 1991, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fkiller-bimbos%2Fdocview%2F1290129715%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>854</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>855</sup> James Bowman, “There’s No Growing Up,” *American Spectator*, Vol 32, Iss 02, 1998, 76.

Bowman insisted that the film conveyed such a “childishly simple morality that would have put a writer of Victorian chapbooks to shame,” i.e., “slavery was bad.”<sup>856</sup> In a similar fashion, Podhoretz believed *Amistad* to be “an act of piety with all the brio of a gradeschool Thanksgiving pageant” awash with performances “a fourth-grader would be ashamed of.”<sup>857</sup> But he also brought up the ever-present theme of needing the fullness of the characters’ humanity brought to light, writing that the “movie’s worst failure has to do with its portrayal of the forty-four slaves themselves. We learn almost nothing about them except that they are slaves and are really buff.”<sup>858</sup>

Then there were those like author and *Christianity Today* contributor Tim Stafford who emphasized the religious qualities in the film. More forgiving than others in his historical assessment, Stafford believed while it “takes some liberties with the facts, it is mostly faithful,” in its retelling of the story.<sup>859</sup> He seemed to focus on one particular facet, specifically the fact that “[m]ost abolitionists were Christians, as *Amistad* plainly reveals, and wanted not only to free the *Amistad* captives but to tell them about Jesus Christ.” However, he was perturbed that Lewis Tappan, the man who did the “most to free the *Amistad* prisoners,” and a very religious man, was painted as “something of a racist,” but ended by telling his readers to “go ahead and enjoy a worthwhile movie.”<sup>860</sup>

Gary Rosen, author, a frequent contributor to *Commentary*, and future managing editor of *Commentary* believed it to be a “deft piece of movie-making,” which was “gorgeous to look at

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<sup>856</sup> Bowman, “There’s No Growing Up,” 76-77.

<sup>857</sup> John Podhoretz. “MISSING HEAVEN, MAKING HELL,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 29, 1997, January 5, 1998, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3RN7-YYY0-00CY-N045-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>859</sup> Tim Stafford, “*Amistad*’s Unsung Hero,” *Christianity Today* 42, no. 5, April 27, 1998, 90, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=523430&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>860</sup> *Ibid.*

and persuasive in its evocation of period ambience.”<sup>861</sup> But, Rosen took issue that it “misrepresented...the racial relations that form the very heart of the events he depicts.”<sup>862</sup> He charged Spielberg with using a “particular species of reverse racism” not new to him with white characters, taking “their historical lumps” while black ones were “allowed to create a history of their own.”<sup>863</sup> In *Chronicles* history professor at the University of South Carolina and contributing editor at the magazine Clyde Wilson also wrote about the historical qualities of the film or lack thereof. While the film was being made Wilson was contacted by Spielberg’s team to gain insights into one of the characters in the movie, John C. Calhoun. Wilson, having been the editor of the Papers of John C. Calhoun, was well versed in his ability to help, but had to tell them “Calhoun had nothing to do with the Amistad case and [therefore he had] nothing to say about it,” yet Calhoun appeared in the film “declaiming about slavery and impending civil war in relation to the case,” which “did not happen and could not have [happened].”<sup>864</sup> Wilson believed *Amistad* to be two films in one. One was about the slave trade which was a “powerful piece of filmmaking,” while the other was “about American politics and law, is completely hokey and misleading.”<sup>865</sup> He then went on to point to “other things the movie...distorts,” like the fact that “no black man, no matter how affluent, [referring to Morgan Freeman’s fictional character] would have been permitted to sit in a courtroom or ride in a carriage with white people in the North in 1839.”<sup>866</sup> Overall, it was a “distorted” and “cartoon version of American history,” one that could even “arouse hatred” through the “rehearsal of ancient guilt and outrage.”<sup>867</sup>

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<sup>861</sup> Gary Rosen, “‘Amistad’ and the Abuse of History,” *Commentary*, Feb 01, 1998, 46, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Famistad-abuse-history%2Fdocview%2F1290186861%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>862</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>863</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>864</sup> Clyde Wilson, “A Clever Diversion,” *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 22 No. 06, 1998, 48.

<sup>865</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>866</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



John Simon on the other hand was troubled by still another aspect of the film. The film, he wrote, “shows that one can follow a factual outline reasonably closely and still come up with poster art for the delectation of knee-jerk liberals.”<sup>868</sup> In fact, as in *Malcolm X*, he had little to quibble over when it came to historical merit. He did not mind the meeting between the leader of the rebellion Cinque and John Adams “even though history records no such meeting,” nor did he mind the “other reasonable liberties of historical fiction,” but what did bother him was “vulgarization.”<sup>869</sup> The performance by Anthony Hopkins as Adams was “as bad a performance...as you’ll ever see,” with his mannerisms stealing scenes, casting a feeling of “absurdity [that] is all-pervasive.”<sup>870</sup>

But not all of those who reviewed the film were derogatory. The ex-military author Brian Mitchell who wrote *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster*, pushing back on the integration of genders in the military wrote a review in *Human Events* which was highly complementary. It was “a very American movie” with the depiction of “slaves as noble and innocent victims,” and white Americans of the time “presented by and large as fair-minded and compassionate.”<sup>871</sup> He believed Spielberg may have “set out to make a **movie** that would offend no one and instead improve race relations by helping whites feel the evil of slavery and blacks believe in the goodness of America.”<sup>872</sup> Mitchell’s take was undoubtedly the outlier, one that choose to see the positives and may have spawned from a less critical eye than his fellow reviewers and critics.

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<sup>868</sup> John Simon, “Souls at Sea,” *National Review* 49, no. 25, December 31, 1997, 56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6404&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>869</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>870</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>871</sup> Brian Mitchell, “Spielberg’s Amistad Speaks Kindly of America,” *Human Events* 54, no. 2, January 16, 1998, 23, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=102683&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>872</sup> *Ibid.*

There are a few points to wrap up as the chapter comes to a close. First, there was indeed a monumental shift in films dealing with race and how conservatives viewed these films during the latter half of the 1980s. Spike Lee, “hood movies,” and other historical portrayals with race as a central subject became ubiquitous and overtook, but did not eliminate, the popular black and white buddy movie dominant early in the decade. Grenier who wrote that everyone was living in a post-racist America in 1985, looked back in 1991 as Lee and other “hood movies” rose to prominence in a type of post-mortem looking at films where blacks were the majority of actors and actresses. His thoughts should prove useful in the larger analysis. After discussing the blaxploitation films of the 1970s where the white characters in supporting roles “were usually well-disposed toward blacks, even sympathetic...[and] there was no black-white antagonism,” a “second wave of black movies” came up in the mid 1980s.”<sup>873</sup> By then these films were “generally about black grievances or at least black problems” and he listed *New Jack City*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Livin’ Large*, *The Five Heart Beats*, and others suggestive of this genre. However, it was Spike Lee who was the “standard bearer” and “of all the new black filmmakers it is Spike Lee, the most stridently anti-white, who is beyond question the media’s favorite, the critics’ darling.”<sup>874</sup> He compared Lee to Woody Allen, asking if he might be “the black Woody Allen.”<sup>875</sup> Pointing to the fact that both acted in their own movies, were physically small, and while Allen was “preoccupied with Jewish-Gentile relations,” Lee was “preoccupied, not say obsessed, with black-white relations.” Yet the differences were vital. Namely, while Allen approached the Gentile world with “ingratiating self-mockery,” Lee’s view of the white world

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<sup>873</sup> Richard Grenier, "Spike Lee Fever," *Commentary* 92, no. 2, Aug 01, 1991, 53, <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fspike-lee-fever%2Fdocview%2F1290191674%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14678>.

<sup>874</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>875</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

was filled with “ominous threats and bullying, coupled with an assumption that whites feel a limitless...hatred toward blacks.” Also, Allen “wants Jews to be accepted in the larger community” while Lee “has been at best ambivalent on this score...arguing angrily for separatism.”<sup>876</sup>

What bothered Grenier was that he viewed Lee as “a product of Hollywood’s real if unofficial affirmative-action program” yet in film after film Lee “presents the white and black communities in America as irreconcilably hostile.”<sup>877</sup> The last few points are foundational to understanding why many conservatives, including Grenier, pushed back on Lee and films like his that pushed “separatism.” In a colorblind society, the point was for all races and ethnicities to assimilate into the larger culture whatever it may be. For many conservatives, this looked very much like a Judeo-Christian westernized culture. But, when Lee and others like him not only derided the culture for its historical racism, but argued that the only answer was not assimilation, but separation, from the cultural perspective this was in direct opposition to the colorblind portrait of society many conservatives argued for. On a side note, Grenier specifically and possibly others as well were hostile to those artists who despite having become successful in the society they so often mock, they continued to see themselves as victims or iconoclasts. Larry Elder put it another way.

Spike Lee faces the dilemma that all successful they're-out-to-get-us ‘victicrats’ must answer: how to explain his eye-popping success. His triumph means one of three things. One, he has simply been lucky. The customary evil forces that conspire to bring blacks down failed against him. Two, Lee is so supremely talented, so gifted, that he conquered the odds. Or three, the system, with all of its flaws, actually works when talent and determination meet opportunity.<sup>878</sup>

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<sup>876</sup> Grenier, "Spike Lee Fever," 50.

<sup>877</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

<sup>878</sup> Larry Elder, “Spike Lee Preaches Woe,” *Human Events*, June 25, 1999, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1974825&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

A second point that bears repeating is the centrality of multi-faceted characters within a film and the keeping of historical accuracy when films delve into the past. As already discussed, the need for historical accuracy was a necessity in itself when dealing with film, but accuracy was not the end-all, be-all of filmmaking. However, it should not be forgone simply for the sake of politics or to make a point. When this was done in a film it made it dishonest, and it could no longer be judged as a serious piece of filmmaking, only propaganda. Furthermore, if a film was based in the past, the more accurate it was in the details the more poignant and powerful the story, and the more the characters would come to life. This point dovetails with the importance of having fully-human characters, flaws, and all within the film. James Bowman explored the importance of this in a 1995 article in *The American Spectator*.

“there are an infinite number of ways for movies to be good or bad, an almost infallible predictor of quality is the liveliness or lack of it of the characters. If they strike you as having the complexity and messiness and fascination of real people, then it’s a good movie; if they are flat, or their lives are subordinated to some moral or political abstraction or (as is so often the case these days) to their resemblance to other movie characters, then it’s a bad one. But it is a very special kind of bad movie that takes the trouble to create a living character, and then throw it away for the sake of politics.”<sup>879</sup>

Finally, the historiographical question brought up at the start needs to be assessed in light of this chapter and the larger study. Taken solely on an individual basis, these film reviews and criticisms could possibly be taken as provoking racial animosity or playing to white racial anxiety over demographic changes that were indeed occurring during this time. Truth is, those who were not film critics and were focused on cultural commentary, may have indeed been doing just that. Indeed, much of the rhetoric throughout this chapter was inflammatory and provocative, to say the least. Thus, at first glance, it seems to be supporting the race-based thesis of the origins and evolution of conservatism some have made. However, when taken in

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<sup>879</sup> James Bowman, “Showtime,” *The American Spectator*, Vol 29, Iss 11, 1995, 70-71.

conjunction with the rest of the analysis in this study the idea that race was at the forefront of critics' minds as they reviewed these films seems wrongheaded. Rather the preponderance of the evidence shows it was the issues of the individual and of deeper characterization that shaped many of these film critics' thoughts on these films.

As has been hopefully proven not only by this chapter but in others, was the absolute need to not oversimplify individuals. This also went for entire groups of people. Simplification or generalization to many conservatives took away from the individuality of the people the filmmakers were attempting to portray. So, when conservatives mocked the idea that Native Americans or blacks were angels and whites were evil, the focus should not be solely on race. The same was said about females and males, adults and children, and human and non-humans. Unrealistic generalizations took away from a central tenet of conservatism, the individual. Whether it was libertarians, traditionalists, neoconservatives, or nearly any other faction of conservatism, the individual was almost always central to their core ideology. By amalgamating an entire people group the filmmakers erase all individuality from the characters in the movies, thus erasing one of, if not the most important aspect for conservative filmmakers.

## EPILOGUE

Now that this study has officially come to a close the major conclusions and some ideas for further research can be explored. Indeed, each chapter was unique in that it brought very specific issues to the forefront, while also contributing to the larger thesis. The chapter on Vietnam movies revealed how anti-Americanism and a harsh portrayal of American servicemen were two themes that impacted how conservative critics viewed movies having to do with the Vietnam War. Yet, it also brought to light the central theme of character development and introduced the need for logic in film which came back up in Chapter 5. The animation chapter explored the relationship between Disney and conservatives with themes like child reverence, adult mockery, role reversals between the two, and feminism all coming to the forefront of the study, and more importantly the recognition of the centrality of infantilism in film and its adverse impact on the aesthetic qualities of a film. It also tracked the fall of libertarian publications and the rise of the religious right and the impact the latter had on conservative film reviews.

The sci-fi/horror chapter continued the adult and child mishmash from the previous chapter, and it delved deeper into the role of feminism in the two genres. In this chapter the theme of logic and the need to keep the film based in some kind of reality made a reemergence, making it the third major condition for conservative film criticism. However, it also showed how in horror there was a need for a spiritual aspect, a belief in good and evil, showing they took their subject seriously. This last point, taking the subject of film seriously, became the final benchmark to round out the major thesis of unifying ideas of film criticism. The last chapter on movies dealing with race only strengthened many of the points already made, including the one just mentioned but primarily it reinforced the importance of the individual character as the focal

point in film. Yet, it also pushed back on some historiographic claims having to do with the nature of conservatism itself.

Taken together, the four unifying cornerstones of conservative film criticism were: opposition to the infantile, the need for logic/ rationality or a basis in reality, a film to take its subject matter seriously, and most important the absolute need for the individual characters to be representative of realistic, complex, multifaceted people who were not made to be symbols of an entire people group, ideology, or political message, but actual individuals the audience could identify with. If one was to take each point and break it down a bit more it is easy to see how each fits into the larger conservatism intellectual paradigm.

Infantilism in film is the first piece of the puzzle. At baseline, its simple-mindedness separated the highbrow art-focused critics (the majority of critics) discussed in chapters two and three from the rest, i.e., the low and mid-brow critics focused more on entertainment value or the ideological aspects (Brudnoy, Podhoretz, and Rothbard), and from those only concerned with the religious aspects (Baehr, *MovieGuide*, *Human Events* in the 1990s, *Christianity Today*). Now there were undoubtedly highbrow critics who were concerned with the ideological facets of the films reviewed, one need only to look back at some of the reviews by Grenier (the most ideologically influenced of the highbrow), Bowman, Alleva, or even the penultimate highbrow Simon. However, for these highbrow critics, what was infantile could never be “good.”

The reason for this ties into the conservative disposition. As explained in Chapter 4 infantilism was equated with simple-mindedness and its primary aim was not to probe the deep recesses of the human soul but to please the audience with childish stories where onlookers left the theater content to have spent the last ninety wallowing in sentimentalism or appealed to their more primal impulses with scenes filled with sex, violence, and anything with shock-value. A

glaring fact jumped out relating to the wider intellectual history of conservatism. The type of films described above fit well into a category of films where hedonism would be the highest moral value of the viewer. To see films that were pure entertainment with no higher quality than to only fulfill one's most base desires of self-fulfillment ran counter to some very basic conservative values. This argument within conservative ranks has already taken place over a half-century ago with Ayn Rand and her Objectivism on one side and much of conservative orthodoxy on the other.<sup>880</sup> Her philosophy, laid bare in her masterwork *Atlas Shrugged*, was ridiculed by the likes of Russel Kirk, Whittaker Chambers, Frank Meyer, and William F. Buckley among others. Buckley made the point very clear that her self-indulgent philosophy was inconsistent with "the conservative emphasis on transcendence," thus here is the heart of why infantilism in cinema was not accepted by most conservative critics.<sup>881</sup> An "ideology of universal selfishness," as Kirk put it, ran in direct contrast to many of the principles of conservatism.<sup>882</sup> Yet, this insight also provides some explanation as to why the libertarian-leaning Brudnoy, who came to conservatism through Ayn Rand, was drawn to these films more so than his cohorts.

The second cornerstone is rationality/logic or being grounded in reality. Now the author is not stating that the qualities listed are solely belonging to conservatism, but they were inherent in conservatism philosophy. When a film either began to falter by not playing by the rules or had too many idiosyncrasies critics were quick to point to the flaws. For instance, if a ghost could walk through walls in one scene, but in another is trapped in a room, something was amiss, and there is no tether to the reality of the film. Or, if a character is a prisoner in a foreign jail, there should be guards who looked, acted, and talked like natives of the land they were in, not like

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<sup>880</sup> For an explanation of Ayn Rand's Objectivism see Chapter Two, page 36.

<sup>881</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 143-145.

<sup>882</sup> Nash, *Reappraising the Right*, 80.



Americans, or else logic in the film was lacking. This was not just a matter of taste. These issues could throw an entire movie's premise underfoot and when done when dealing with historical works, the consequences were even worse.

Roger Scruton explained the conservative need for rationality and logic describing modern conservatism as being the “product of the Enlightenment,” where conservatives tended to “share Aristotle’s conception of human rationality.”<sup>883</sup> Indeed, while rationality may not be as high on the list of conservative precepts as pragmatism or individualism it was nevertheless important for conservatives. Even more relevant was the need for tethering the film to some kind of reality, where universal laws were clear and evident, and chaos did not abound. Chaos was in direct opposition to conservatism. Kirk wrote about the necessity for a morally ordered society, in *The Conservative Mind* where liberty came from order, not the other way around, and Richard Weaver pushed back against the emerging leviathan of relativism in *Ideas Have Consequences* where he argued for the need for absolutes that guide not only temporal lives but more importantly our morality. For conservative critics then, a film had to reflect that it understood that it took place in a reality where absolutes existed, logic was followed, and rationality was valued.

The third cornerstone, that a film had to take itself seriously is one that probably has the most tenuous relationship with conservatism but a relationship nonetheless. Conservatism, by its nature, tended to be a more serious and solemn political philosophy. This was for two reasons. One, conservatism as described by Frank S. Meyer, Scruton, and many others, conservatism was an attitude or disposition, not a set-in-stone list of ideological dogma one must follow to be an adherent. A conservative disposition stemmed from the knowledge that anything good worth

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<sup>883</sup> Roger Scruton, *An Invitation to the Great Tradition* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 9,14.

preserving was easily broken down, but arduously maintained or built. This went for political order and liberty as well as the culture. This led to the second point, the ardent reverence for the generated accumulation of knowledge passed down over generations or put more succinctly, tradition. Traditions in the past had acted as a guidepost for the culture to let those in the present know what was acceptable and what was not. It did the same for art. Tradition informed the present day of the great works of art, literature, and music and by doing so molded the criteria for judging the art of the present. In a society of relativism run amuck, cultural critics stood athwart the culture yelling, "Stop!". Film critics were sincere in their aim to preserve what was good in the culture and in art. They expect the artists and the artwork they judged to also attempt to do the same when it came to their craft. They also expected the artist to deal with serious, not trivial subjects, that can speak to our human existence or coexistence.

The final cornerstone and the most vital was the importance of the character to the plot. This meant a few things. The character or characters should not have been used as props to be moved around in a plot-centric story, as in life, people were at the core of every good narrative. They, especially those at the heart of the film, needed to be multi-faceted individuals who were fully human in every way, having their strengths and weakness exposed to the viewer to make their struggles more humane and relatable. The individual is at the core of varying conservative strains, libertarians being the most obvious, but far from the only one. While an unrestrained individualism was clearly pushed back against within the Right as was evident with Ayn Rand's Objectivism, it was the individual who stood in stark contrast to the behemoth of the "State." Albert Jay Nock used the individual as a foil to the collectivism he saw as growing ever more expansive in pre-World War II America in *Our Enemy the State*, while Fredrick Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman emphasized the dichotomy in economics between those

governments that were centered of furthering the power of the state and those with the individual at the epicenter.

Certainly, in a world split in half by the iron curtain the individual became ever more the symbol for those pushing back against collectivism. Frank Meyer, the godfather of fusionism, argued that the “primacy of the person was inherent” from the very start of Western civilization and that the “freedom of the person” was the concept from which America both derived its power and end goal to which it strove.<sup>884</sup> By the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the individual became not only a fountainhead for conservative political and economic order, but many viewed the individual as the vanguard of American social order, hence directly associated with the aversion to communism.

These four traits came to the forefront of this study over a drawn-out period and came together in a nebulous fashion. Only after piecing together hundreds of different reviews did these characteristics make themselves known. In fact, an expanded study including the genres of comedy, films with a feminist bent, crime thrillers, religiously themed films, and one detailing the rare picks that were extolled by various critics would bring further clarity to this area of research. Also, an expansive and comparative look at liberal critics may offer further insights into what defined and separated the two groups. Yet time constrains the best of intentions. In the end, the wide array of film critics were as varied as expected from such a divergent philosophy as conservatism, but these unifying traits exemplify why, despite their many, many differences, all were indeed considered conservative.

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<sup>884</sup> Frank S. Meyer, “A Rebel Finds His Tradition,” in *Conservatism in American Since 1930*, ed. Gregory L. Schneider (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 177.

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