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MOVIE POLITICS

THERE IS NO LACK of protest on the screen today—but almost no politics. The distinction ought to be shocking, in a world having so much that is wrong with it, and so many who know it. Not that there are no political meanings in all the entertainments of an era of such ominous actuality and desperate flights of imagining. But that there is so little choice of politics as a theme or as a ground for drama is itself a most significant fact of contemporary politics. For one thing, the flood of protest—and not only on the screen—chiefly articulates the sensual violences and aggressive apathies of those too young to vote, or not much older. And both violence and apathy, of course, are themselves repudiations of any franchise other than that exercised in infantile states of self-indulgence.

There is probably more pro-juvenile protest on the screen today than at any time since the movies came into this world that the young never make, and always perpetuate. Most movies, as always, are about the young. But now they are more than ever *for* the young—and even by the young, rising in various "new waves" of production along old, familiar beaches of show business. The avoidance of politics in the movies—as in all the currents of protest running through the entertainment industry — shows sound commercial sense, as the young, perpetually replenished, have come to form the largest, most faithful bloc at the box office. And if what appears on the screen has anything to do with what audiences want and believe, it seems that a large part of the hard core of constant moviegoers—typically and essentially young—go to the theatres today seeking corroboration and catharsis for massive resentments against the world and its works. But whatever dreams they may have of doing something about whatever they think is wrong, they do not seem to be troubled much by politics, real or fantastic.

The Explosive Generation (1961), for example, may be the nearest thing to an expression of adolescent political awareness put out by Hollywood in years. But this is only by grace of the slightest whiff of burning gunpowder over world affairs

in a single scene—amid a lot of smoky noise about sex, and sputtering sentimentalities about education, in all the others. It does occur to a group of high school seniors, led by Patty McCormack and Lee Kinsolving, that free discussion in the classroom might touch upon such subjects as military service, the H-bomb, religion, and politics. But these are clearly afterthoughts, much less important than "how far a girl has to go just to be popular", especially after she has gone so far as to be out on a clandestine all-night party at a luxurious beach house.

The film is meant to make propaganda as it entertains, and writer Joseph Landon and director Buzz Kulik bravely reassure their audience that it is part of an historic, world-traversing wave. The rebellion of the entire student body, to force reinstatement of a sympathetic, studiously permissive teacher (William Shatner), is not only a satisfying cliché of uncounted adolescent films, but is presented as an heroic paradigm of youthful political action. At a sane distance from the fad-fringed boulevards of Southern California, however, it becomes difficult to associate these over-privileged rebels and their play-school cause with the agitated youth of so many streets and cities in each day's headlines. In fact, a lot of people may miss altogether any subtleties about the civil rights of adolescents, taking the film at whatever word comes across the loudest, as it proclaims the clean worldliness of "teenage love" and the dirty-minded naiveté of grown-up concern.

A fully suspicious or disillusioned observer of American movies might even suggest that the form and content of *The Explosive Generation* are carefully Aesopian. All the phony furore over free speech about sex, he might say, is really meant to represent controversies over political issues that cannot be proclaimed openly, in classrooms or on the screen—the morality of our era having come to an ironic turnabout. The sad, indeed tragic, sense in which this may be said to be true does not have to do with strictures of censorship, but of commerce and culture, measured in the film-makers' estimation of their audience—and the audience's estimation of itself. To grant Hollywood its due is to diagnose a deep derangement of spiritual vigour in a democratic society. And there may be much that is symptomatic, too, in the fact that the only film seriously treating youth's confrontation of political realities today comes not from Hollywood, but from a category of motion-picture production largely devoted to religious education.

Question 7 (1961) is explicitly anti-Communist in purpose, and providently topical during the extended crisis over the division of Germany. In an arrangement similar to that for *Martin Luther* (1953), perhaps the most successful sponsored religious film, *Question 7* was commissioned by Lutheran church organizations of the U.S. and Germany, and produced by Lothar Wolff of the Louis de Rochemont

organization. As was *Martin Luther, Question 7* is intended to reach as many people as possible in commercial movie theatres, and as many more, for many years to come, in church and school auditoriums, union halls, club meeting rooms—and, eventually, in all the living spaces dominated by the television screen.

Many of the young people for whom *Question 7* primarily was made are likely to decide that it is not meant to be enjoyed, and therefore is not really intended for them, but only for grown-ups, forever certain of the kind of medicinal entertainment that is good for children. Moreover, from the point of view of the conventions of romantic fiction which they have been trained to understand and enjoy, there are surely reasons for them to suspect the careful, almost didactic opposition of arguments for Communist doctrine and Christian conscience in the screenplay by Allen Sloane, dramatized under Stuart Rosenberg's direction in a semi-documentary style familiar from class-room presentations of teaching or propaganda films. But once the openly, even proudly announced persuasive purpose of the film is acknowledged, there may come recognition of a most unmovie-like sincerity of concern for the problems of youth.

It may even be hoped that some of the audience that is supposed to triumph in empathy with the embattled brats of *The Explosive Generation* may note the difference in the respect shown the young people of *Question 7*. This expectation, if it needs to be said, would be quite apart from any aesthetic reservations about the film, or whatever doubts it may raise or reinforce concerning the moral and political dilemmas of the Germans. Among these must be included a certain nagging wonder at the punctuality of this particular incarnation of Christian conscience in Germany, whether Eastern or Western, two thousand years after the birth of Christ and fifteen years after the death of Hitler.

The problems of the boys and girls of *The Explosive Generation*, playing at painless politics in coke-filled rooms, partake of communicable reality insofar as they may be reflected in the behaviour of the members of the audience. This would only define their validity as fictions, were it not for their intended meanings as propaganda for a version of reality, offering prepared fantasies to the order of the particular public that is paying admission to the theatres. In contrast, *Question 7* also makes propaganda—but for an interior critique of reality, an assertion and examination of conscience. The makers of the film want to persuade, to influence minds in order to evoke strength for dealing with reality.

The choice confronting the young protagonist (Christian de Bresson), as he must fill out the official East German student questionnaire, is no play version of a grown-up problem, but the real thing. Involved are not only the boy's own adjust-

ments to life among Communist youth and his dreams of a future as a serious musician, but his realization that whatever he does must implicate others, particularly his father (Michael Gwynn), a pastor struggling to preserve his Christian faith and worship under the direct and open hostility of the East German regime. A conveyance of realism is vital to the film's purposes. While it cannot pretend to newsreel representation, there is a careful insistence that "This is a contemporary story based on actual incidents and documents" and a scrupulous use of locales not far from the East German border itself. It is no diminution of the film's temper of actuality that its climax depends upon a possibility of escape from East Germany that was all but eliminated with the building of the wall across Berlin. In fact, a certain light upon that barrier of stone and barbed wire may be thrown by the film's illumination of the barriers of beliefs and ideas that may be raised to separate men having a common language, heritage—whether noble or depraved—and national identity.

Again, it is to be expected that *Question 7* may bore or offend those viewers, young or old, to whom all politics is hopelessly "square" and any realism in the theatre an outrage upon a public paying for fantasy. These ideologues of escape, in fact, may be even more formidably resistant to the film as propaganda than would be its ultimate targets, the devout Communists. Their own anti-Communism, of course, is unquestionable—firstly and essentially because no questioning of anything is encouraged or practised. On this point, there ought to be scant comfort for either liberal or reactionary anti-Communists in the realization that it was the ordinary, absolutely patriotic unthinkers, trained by advertising and entertainment to be insatiable consumers of manufactured dreams, who were the most vulnerable to ideological attack by the Chinese Communists in Korea.

To insist that politics is an appropriate subject for entertainment is not to advocate turning theatres into chambers for propaganda, but precisely the opposite. The purest and deadliest propaganda of all in the popular arts is the simple avoidance of criticism and controversy. By such default, the most innocuous material of entertainment is made, at the least, into reinforcement of whatever is officially approved. And once again, the transient joys of daily circuses may only postpone the caustic terrors of a pervasive civic despair.

But the mere use of politics as a background for melodrama is no assurance of worth-while political point, as the plainly anti-political politicking of *Ada* (1961) amply illustrates. Although intended for maturer audiences than those to be attracted by *The Explosive Generation*, this film, from the novel *Ada Dallas* by Wirt Williams, enjoys a comparable rarity as a Hollywood production containing some treatment of politics. (This distinction is not lessened by the not unusual and almost

never meaningful inclusion of incidental elections for sheriff or district attorney in standard Westerns or crime films.) But it must be said that although there is more politics in *Ada,* what there is has hardly more significance. The film, directed by Daniel Mann, from a screenplay by Arthur Sheekman and William Driskill, may follow a guitar-twanging hillbilly (Dean Martin) through his election as governor of some apparently composite Southern state; but it is soon apparent that what really is intended is an old-fashioned soap-opera about the rise of a good woman (Susan Hayward), who just happens to have been a whore, to be the governor's lady and his right arm against the forces of organized corruption (personified by Wilfrid Hyde White).

All along, the audience is made well aware of the fact that all the backroom bargaining and boudoir intrigue are fiction—and comfortably distant fiction, as the time is supposedly the late 1930s, despite certain anachronisms, such as a tape-recorder. And the way the governor's cracker-barrel confession of his own lack of political intelligence saves the reform program in the legislature at the last instant is more old-time, hokey corroboration of the popular conviction that it is impossible to do anything politically about evils in government. The rescue of the democratic masses by the providential self-disparagement of peerless leaders is out of an ancient tradition of political rhetoric, as well as of movies such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Hail The Conquering Hero* (1944), *Cass Timberlane* (1947), and scores of others. These have happily celebrated the people's faith in the movies, rather than in politics, as the movies forever proclaim the ultimate triumph of chance sentiment over the perennial enemies of popular democracy. The point of the myth, however, is not protest or criticism, but affirmation—as may be most appropriately illustrated in comparing the above-mentioned movies with another movie dealing with the rise of a hillbilly to political power, one that has become a standard of the movie repertoire on television: Robert Rossen's provocative *All The King's Men* (1949), from the novel by Robert Penn Warren.

A contemporary, and therefore more disturbing comparison surely must be made with the British *No Love For Johnnie* (1961)—and not merely because this is so much more serious and stimulating a drama played in a setting of politics, but because it appears to be the only other such work, in too long a time to go unmeasured. Apart from random hints, usually invisible to the unconcerned eye, as in *The Explosive Generation,* there are no other films directly treating politics, so far, in this young decade—except Dore Schary's biographical *Sunrise At Campobello* in 1960, and Otto Preminger's *Advise And Consent,* completed the following year, but delayed by legalities until mid-1962. The lacuna is only partly explained by the

effectiveness of the various elements, some of which have been lumped as "McCarthyism", that sought to leach controversy out of the movies during the 1950s—a caveat suggested, for example, by the number of films vigorously dealing with so bitterly contested a matter as the Negro problem, including *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Take A Giant Step* (1959), and *Raisin In The Sun* (1961).

No Love For Johnnie itself continues what has impressed American observers —and even many of the most fastidiously alienated English commentators—as an upsurge of self-critical vigor in recent British films, exemplified by *Windom's Way* in 1958, *Look Back In Anger*, *Sapphire*, and *Room At The Top* in 1959, and *The Entertainer*, *Our Man In Havana*, *I'm All Right, Jack*, *Tunes Of Glory*, and *The Angry Silence* in 1960. Of course, to those as immersed in the common wash of Wardour Street as Americans are in the drainage from Hollywood, these films must seem especially precious. For one thing, they again corroborate the commercial as well as aesthetic propriety of producing works genuinely grounded in the concerns and particulars of British life, without apologies for eschewing the old staples for home and export—endlessly, as Paul Rotha complained in 1957, "turning back to the heroics of the last War, and to more suburban middle-class comedies, more dreary musicals (our most unsuccessful *genre*) and the ubiquitous crime-thriller".

Even so, *No Love For Johnnie* is a departure from the course of the new movement in the British cinema which has profound political significance in being specifically about people in politics. More, it is one of the most seriously planned and sensitively executed examinations ever made on screen of flesh-and-blood ambition in politics and its relation to the popular will. Also the considerable sophistication of its treatment of politics is in no way compromised by its commendable care in modulating the didactic approach of a patriotic lesson in British civics. In fact, the assumption of the audience's maturity in matters of politics, as well as in accepting the indeterminacies of character in real people, is quite prodigious. The rich, precisely heard dialogue of the screenplay by Nicholas Phipps and Mordecai Richler, from the novel by Wilfred Feinburgh, is the more eloquent in leaving so much unspoken. And Ralph Thomas's direction, in the production by Betty E. Box, is a model exercise in leading viewers to discover for themselves what they come to know about complex, ambiguous characters, and what they come to understand to be the course of events on and off the screen.

In so subtly implicating the audience, Thomas's direction achieves the integration of medium and subject matter that is so plainly absent in movies such as *Ada*, or any of the endless host of hortatory melodramas that shout speeches and slogans about the surpassing virtues of democracy, while demanding only utter unconscious-

ness on the part of the democrats sitting in the theatres. This integral co-ordination of movie-making and political commitment stimulates viewers to be at once entertained and intellectually alert. It becomes both fascinating and intellectually provocative to follow the delicate inflections of Peter Finch's virtuoso performance as the protagonist, in the entangling complexities of his private search for a love he is incapable of giving, and his all-too-public greed for political prominence and power. The revelation of character is gradual, in the unloved Johnnie's behaviour with the sharply delineated, separate persons of what so easily could have been a gallery of types.

There is his politically active, emotionally barren wife (Rosalie Crutchley) whose recantation of Communist activities serves Johnnie not as a last chance for a life of companionship, if not affection, but as an opportunity to make sure of the Cabinet post that is the fixed star of his career. There is the lovely model (Mary Peach), young enough to be his daughter and mature enough to know it in time, in whose embraces—explicitly, but appropriately detailed—he so plainly feels the first full passion of his life. There is the devoted friend and neighbour (Billie Whitelaw), who would be much more, but whose warmth he inevitably uses, and whose respect he cannot avoid betraying.

There are brilliantly focused encounters with the young model's acidly unimpressed photographer-employer (Dennis Price); with her carefully courteous father (Michael Goodliffe); with a veteran M.P. (Stanley Holloway) of his own party (Labor), who tries to help him to overcome his bitterness at being passed over for the Cabinet; with a pair of plainly Reddish dissidents (Donald Pleasence and Hugh Burden), who want to manipulate his disappointment to embarrass the government; with the not idealized, yet impressive Prime Minister (Geoffrey Keen), who must try to dissuade him for the sake of the country and the party, if not of himself; and with the P.M.'s coldly perfect secretary (Paul Rogers), who despises him as a sycophant and opportunist. A meeting of the party committee in his grimy industrial constituency to bring him into line is a shattering exposure of his capacity for self-abasement, as well as the sharpest movie snapshot of Communist tactics in seeking to use political action groups since the roaring fund-raising rallies of Mark Robson and Don Mankiewicz's *Trial* (1955). There is acid irony, but also responsive sympathy, in the unreeling of the twisting threads of coincidence and character that finally pull the unloved Johnnie to a seat on the front bench in the House of Commons—and to that consummatory gesture of his private ambition and his public purpose, the jaunty putting of his feet up on the Treasury table where rests the great mace of Crown authority.

The politics in *No Love For Johnnie*, then, is more than a background for drama. It is the warp in which the lives of the characters are inextricably woven and an inseparable element of the film's very substance as a work of theatre. In portraying Johnnie, there is no assertion that here is any politician, or every one, but that here is one politician, a very human, fallible, yet in his way, capable one. Viewers may judge that it is his faults more than his virtues that make him seek out the people for the rewards they can give. But if the judgment is to be mature in the way the film itself requires, it must carry the recognition that this very quality of ambitious dedication is itself something the people may use—in fact, must use, for the good of most, in the long run that is the life of government.

More than this, the gradual discovery of Johnnie's character by the audience is an engrossing, stimulating experience—a vindication, surely, of the drama of politics as a subject for entertainment. And again, in such responsive participation, the theatre rises to that enhancement and celebration of the critical spirit in open discourse that is the triumph of the art as well as the thought of free people—and the true and final security of the institutions of liberty.