

## **Mark Sachleben, Kevan M. Yenerall: Seeing the Bigger Picture. Understanding Politics through Film and Television**

New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Brüssel, Wien, Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing 2005 (Politics, Media & Popular Culture, Bd. 9), 338 S., ISBN 0-8204-6248-9 € 32,10

The first thing to remember when approaching this book is, that it has been written for students in film and politics and as a creative resource for courses in political science, American government and international relations. They use Michael Genovese's classification of what defines a political film: He says a political film must be a vehicle for international propaganda and/or has the intention to bring about political change and/or is designed to support the existing economic, political and social system. Although the content is very interesting, the writing level is appropriate for a pre-graduate level and therefore simple and quick to read for an adult with previous knowledge in this area. The authors, Sachleben and Yenerall, don't go into great depth but they do stimulate the enquiring mind and indicate where to look for the answers.

*Seeing the Bigger Picture* is divided into eight chapters: an introduction followed by Liberal Ideologies (Democracy and Capitalism), Alternative Ideologies (Communism and Fascism), The American Presidency, Civil Rights and Social Justice, Campaigns and Elections, War and a mixed bag of topics under the heading Special Topics dealing with the interplay between International and Domestic Politics. Examples are taken from feature films and documentaries (American and non-American) and American TV. The authors demonstrate clearly the link between films and politics especially with regards to the presidency. They make some pertinent points about how the changed nature of media ownership over the years has been reflected in the portrayal of political institutions, and what is considered 'newsworthy' has become much more lurid.

Every chapter has a box containing a list of questions designed to provoke thought and discussion in the target student audience. For example, in Chapter 4: The American Presidency, the reader is posed questions about the nature of character and whether "character" is a useful framework for reporting presidential politics and behavior (p.110). As well as giving a formal framework for discussion, the book provides lists of recommended reading, films to be viewed and useful internet resources. There are also some mini-biographies on influential filmmakers and politicians, Miloš Forman (p.71) and George Wallace (p.136) are two examples. There is also an eclectic mix of additional information such as the complete text of Chaplin's speech to close *The Great Dictator* (1940) or the English lyrics of the two competing songs sung by the French ("La Marseillaise") and the Germans ("Die Wacht am Rhein") in Rick's café in *Casablanca* (1943).

*Seeing the Bigger Picture* is very accessible, lively, with some nice touches of

humour, for example, the president in *Independence Day* (1996) saves the world from “the hands (or antennae?) of sinister invading aliens” (p.95). Unfortunately, there are some notable exceptions from their filmography. William Richer’s *Winter Kills* (1979) and Alexander Payne’s *Election* (1999) seem obvious omissions.

According to the back cover “this book can be an invaluable and exciting tool to help explain political concepts and to demonstrate the relevance of politics in our daily lives”. I can certainly agree with the former, but I’m not so sure about the latter. In any case the inclusion of some more fantasy/SF films such as the *Star Wars* series (1977-2005) or *Starship Troopers* (1997) would make some of the book’s themes more accessible to the apathetic student mind.

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