“God, Man, and Hollywood: Politically Incorrect Cinema from ‘The Birth of a Nation’ to ‘The Passion of the Christ,’” by Mark Royden Winchell. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008, 451pages.

Reviewed by Gary Jason

One of America’s major contributions to world culture is its cinema, the body of films produced, during more than a century, by an industry far larger than any other country’s. American film at its finest has equaled the best products of the other great film producing countries. And it is the most popular art form: in any given week, far more people will go see a movie than will read a book, visit a museum, or attend a concert.

However, there is a curious anomaly in American cinema. America is, in colloquial political terms, a Center-Right country. Most Americans support private enterprise and at least the ideology of limited government. And they are --especially in comparison with the people of all other industrialized countries -- extraordinarily religious. But the film industry has always, on the whole, been markedly left of center. The dominance of the left in Hollywood became near absolute in the 1960s, with the demise of the studio system, which had usually been led by people on the Right.

As a consequence, most of the movies that come out of Hollywood are either politically neutral or politically correct. And the politically neutral movies tend to be PG types – which, as Michael Medved has often noted, bring in more money than the R-rated movies. But occasionally a movie sneaks through that, despite the critic’s neglect or even disdain, is politically incorrect, and resonates with the public. Mark Royden Winchell has written a delightful book about popular, though politically incorrect, flicks. “God, Man, and Hollywood”reviews a good number of such movies and never fails to deliver new insights.

Winchell is an English professor at Clemson University, and heads its Great Works of Western Civilization program. He is much published, with books of literary history and criticism, and many essays and reviews. He is thus unlike most movie reviewers in that he is well-versed in literature and well as film.

His book has four sections. In Part One, he reviews in depth six major movies produced before 1960: D.W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation” (1915); David O. Selznick’s “Gone With the Wind” (1939); Walt Disney’s “Song of the South” (1946); Clarence Brown’s “Intruder in the Dust” (1949); and the two versions of “Ben-Hur,” Fred Niblo’s (1926) and William Wyler’s (1959). I found Winchell’s comments about the first four especially perceptive; he deals skillfully with the issue of race and racial stereotypes in the movies, and his strong literary background serves him well.

Of special interest is his deft defense and explanation of “Song of the South,”a popular movie when it was released, but rarely visible now. Disney’s movie was based on the books of Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908).

Harris was born illegitimate and poor, and got his first job working on a plantation. From his fictionalized autobiography and other writings, it is clear that he empathized with African-Americans, slave and free, and was no naïve defender of the plantation system. He is most famous for recording the folklore of African-Americans in his Uncle Remus books, from “Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings” (1880) to “Told by Uncle Remus” (1905). He uses a literary frame that was also used by his admirer Mark Twain in “*Huckleberry Finn”* (1884): he invents a lonely young white boy who finds friendship and support in an older black man. He dares to suggest that deep interracial fraternity is possible, and presents a black man as kind and supportive to young whites.

In the film, a man brings his wife and his son Johnny down to the plantation where he grew up and leaves them, apparently because of marital strains. Uncle Remus, who had told his tales to the father when the father was a child, takes Johnny under his wing. With his stories of the clever Brer Rabbit, he helps Johnny become more confident and independent. His mother reacts by forbidding Uncle Remus from talking to her son, and the disheartened Remus leaves in a cart for Atlanta, where the father lives. Johnny chases after him but is knocked out by a bull. The father returns, but neither parent can awaken him. Only Uncle Remus can bring him back. The film ends with Johnny and his young friends walking up a hill with Uncle Remus, as a young black boy sings “Zip-a-dee-Doo-Dah” (a song that won the Academy Award in 1947). Interspersed in the movie are animated sequences of Brer Rabbit and his associates, Brers Fox and Bear.

Movie critics complained about the movie’s sentimentality, and a number suggested that it would have been better if it had been fully animated (as it stands, it is less than a third animated). But it Uncle Remus caused the real controversy. The complaint was that he was an Uncle Tom stereotype--not a real man but a playmate of white boys (hence just a “boy”). Ironically, the movie put Harris’ books into disrepute. Winchell helps to reestablish the value of the Uncle Remus story cycle.

In the second part of the book, he gives extended reviews of five major films of the 60s and 70s: John Ford’s “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” (1962); Franklin Schaffner’s “Patton”(1970);

Stanley Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange” (1971); Sam Peckinpah’s “Straw Dogs” (1971); and Michael Cimino’s “The Deer Hunter” (1978).

His discussion of “Patton” rightly points out how great an anomaly it was -- coming, as it did, during the unpopular Vietnam war. Hollywood and literary circles were churning out anti-military works, with even World War II coming in for criticism (in books and movies such as Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22” and Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse-Five”).Though “Patton” was a fine bio-flick, its popularity with people of the Left as well as the Right came as a surprise. But here is one subject on which I am not sure that Winchell, as insightful as his discussion is, has exactly the right take.

In Winchell’s view, the Oscar-winning script (written by Francis Ford Coppola) portrays the general as a “maverick.” Those who were protesting the war, being rebels themselves, could respect this general, a rebel himself. And, Winchell adds, the general’s belief in reincarnation may have appealed to the counterculture’s tendency toward mysticism and non-traditional religions. But I think there is a better reason for the film’s popularity. The script is cleverly Janus-faced, showing the general in two opposing ways: as a brilliant and heroic general, a man who stands on top of a truck to fire his pistol at a Nazi fighter strafing near his headquarters; and as a man of incredible vanity, a war-monger (during a banquet celebrating victory over the Nazis, he deliberately and without any provocation insults a Soviet general), and a crank who harbors screwy beliefs in reincarnation (he knows he fought the Carthaginians, and can even locate the battlefield). Pro-military viewers saw the story of a war hero brought down by small-minded, namby-pamby people; anti-military viewers saw a blood-thirsty wing-nut finally brought to justice.

The third part of Winchell’s book provides discussions of seven movies from the period 1989 to 2004: Bruce Beresford’s “Driving Miss Daisy” (1989), Richard Attenborough’s “Shadowlands” (1993), Ang Lee’s “Ride with the Devil” (1999), Martin Scorsese’s “Gangs of New York” (2003), and Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” (2004).

Winchell’s treatment of Gibson’s movie is especially worth commenting upon. He observes that critics and journalists generally heaped vicious insults it, alleging that both it and its director were anti-Semitic. No doubt Mel Gibson’s own behavior before (and after) the movie would give the average person the same kind of qualms. But what about the movie?

I certainly saw nothing anti-Semitic in the film, and I am not exactly a fundamentalist Christian--far from it. I’m an agnostic and completely indifferent to religion of any form. In the movie, of course, the people who condemn Jesus are Jews, but then so is Jesus, his disciples, and all the people who defend him. Really, the people portrayed most harshly are the Romans and the Devil (who is placed in a very bad light, indeed).

And Winchell rightly notes that prominent (conservative) Jews defended the film--indeed, Michael Medved, a prominent film critic, political commentator, and observant Jew, used his good relationship with the Gibson team to try to bring them into a dialogue with the Anti-Defamation League. It was the ADL that refused. Medved was shown the pre-edited version of the film, and while he didn’t see it as anti-Semitic, he did suggest a number of changes to make it less controversial and more palatable to Jewish audiences. Gibson incorporated these suggestions, but that didn’t avert the critical whirlwind.

Why the fury? Some critics complained about the film’s graphic violence. But those complaints were obviously both phony and fatuous. They were phony because for decades now even the most critically acclaimed movies, such as “Saving Private Ryan” and “The Godfather,” have been laden with graphic violence, not to mention all the teenage horror flicks -- consider “Saw” and “Nightmare on Elm Street” -- that are even more packed with gore. And the complaints were fatuous because this is a movie that is precisely about one of the most violent ways to torture and kill a person -- crucifixion.

No, I think that Winchell is spot on in his identification of what made this movie so offensive to the critics -- its pure religiosity. It presents realistically the most important claim of Christianity, the idea that Jesus was crucified and resurrected. It is the most vivid and accurate rendition of that key piece of Christian theology as can be imagined, with most of the dialogue in Aramaic, and the rest in Hebrew and Latin. It is far more frankly and unequivocally Christian than all the religious movies that went before it, especially Biblical epics such as “The Ten Commandments.” (Pope John Paul was reported to have said after seeing it, “It is as it was.”) This is what was so especially galling to many viewers, and most critics, especially those of secularist or liberal Christian outlook.

In the last part of his book, Winchell gives very short (three- or four-paragraph) synopses of and commentaries upon one hundred other politically incorrect movies. Many of them are well known (“On the Waterfront,” “The Chronicles of Narnia,” “Braveheart”), and many rather obscure (“Destination Moon,” “We the Living,” “The Fanny Trilogy”). Again, his discussions are always interesting.

One film of great interest is “Dirty Harry,” the 1971 movie directed by Don Siegel and starring Clint Eastwood, which spawned several sequels. Winchell points out that it was a popular hit because (like a movie he doesn’t mention that appeared at about the same time and with the same number of sequels, “Death Wish,” starring Charles Bronson), it tapped into the public’s frustration at the explosion of violent crime. He recognizes that while a number of critics reacted hysterically to what they called “fascism,” the title character was actually portrayed as an honest detective who defies the system to achieve justice. The critics’ hysteria showed that they were part of the dominant power elite that was truly “soft on crime.”

Winchell’s book is learned but lightly-written treat, one not to be missed by anyone who loves film and is concerned about the reaction against films that violate some aspect of a dominant ideology. Perhaps in any future edition of the book Winchell will spend a few paragraphs on “Grand Torino,” a 2009 movie that Eastwood directed. Here he stars as an aging Korean War veteran who confronts the local gangs in his ethnically changing neighborhood. It doesn’t end in a politically incorrect way; it appears, in fact, to be an act of atonement by the now established, Oscar-winner Eastwood, a way of saying to the film community that he regretted those earlier, popular anti-crime flicks.

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