

Review Essay

Hollywood and American Politics: The Play's the Thing

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RONALD REAGAN IN HOLLYWOOD: Movies and Politics. By Stephen Vaughn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994.

November 1948 marked the beginning of Ronald Reagan's winter of discontent. He was in London to make a movie with Patricia Neal and Richard Todd, but he could not anticipate this overseas assignment with enthusiasm and hope. He was, in fact, in the depths of personal and professional despair. Cast as the second male lead in this movie, *The Hasty Heart*, he faced a dubious future as an actor who could neither reach nor sustain the pinnacle of Hollywood stardom that he sought. Equally devastating to him was the condition of his marriage to Jane Wyman. The marriage, which had been publicized as so successful that it could serve as a model for moviegoers, in reality meant a great deal to Reagan, providing him with a sense of well-being and happiness. However, it was at this point doomed, a victim of the reverse directions of Reagan's and Wyman's careers as she moved toward ever greater financial and professional ascendancy. As Stephen Vaughn writes in this important and impressive study of the melding of politics and personality, Patricia Neal, the female star of *The Hasty Heart*, "remembered him in tears at a New Year's Eve party. 'It was sad,' she said, 'because he did not want a divorce.'" (229) He tried in London to come to terms with what he called his "'lonely inner world.'" (229)

To later critics of Reagan's politics and influence, it might come as a surprise that he had any "inner world" at all. However, Vaughn demonstrates that Reagan not only had an inner life but also inner resources that could foster resilience and growth. In his late thirties and sensing a future of uncertainties, Reagan was finding a new means to direct and structure his ambitions and energies. Equally important, Vaughn delineates the process and means of Reagan's transformation from actor to political force. He indicates how it happened in a way that should prove instructive, even if painfully so, to those liberal partisans who underestimated Reagan's political potential. Vaughn not only gives us an intensely researched and well-written political biography and history of Reagan in Hollywood; he also renders a perspicacious interdisciplinary study of the formation in Hollywood of a new kind of culture based on the merging of media and image with social and economic forces that were transforming America into a post-industrial society of consumerism, entertainment, and accelerating change of all kinds.

From a distance, perhaps, Reagan seemed inconceivable. How could such a figure ultimately gain such dominance and influence? In his attempt to answer this question, Vaughn does not proffer a dramatic psychological analysis of the inner forces that helped shape Reagan the man into Reagan the leader and President. Leaving psycho-history and criticism to others, he concentrates instead on providing a vivid and penetrating understanding of the environment in Hollywood from which Reagan emerged. It is ironic that the superficiality of the images associated with Reagan the actor fooled many of us, including many serious scholars and critics of media and communications, from perceiving the context of such popular material and trivia. In fact, Reagan the national figure and world leader emerged from a thoroughly political world. It was an electric environment of debate and controversy that could be both exhilarating and destructive as well as deadly dull. In his own way, Reagan in Hollywood was getting the training others received in the more conventional worlds of ward politics and local elections. Vaughn details how many of the people in Reagan's era in Hollywood lived and breathed politics of both the left and right. They met, they worked, they voted, they debated, and they fought. While today we may be inured to insufferable celebrities with fashionable causes, it comes as somewhat of a shock to be reminded about the depth of commitment and intensity of activity of people from all sides of the political spectrum during Reagan's years. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, of course, but also Olivia De Havilland, Edward G. Robinson, Katharine Hepburn, Frank Sinatra, Sterling Hayden, Melvyn Douglas, Ida Lupino, William Holden, and John Garfield are the kinds of names that emerge in Vaughn's detailed accounts of political life and activities. In contrast to such stars and celebrities, those people in the production and creative areas of movie making often were even more committed politically, including mainstream leaders such as Dore Schary, those to be condemned unfairly as part of a left-wing conspiracy and clique such as Dalton Trumbo and John Howard Lawson, and activists from the right like Cecil B. DeMille. Political process itself and political activity were intrinsic to the lives of many of these



Nancy Davis and Ronald Reagan at New York City's Stork Club in the early 1950s. Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Library.

people. In this milieu, Ronald Reagan became a prominent figure leading the Screen Actors Guild as its president through five terms during bitter internecine wars involving volatile political activists, various contentious groups, and union organizations such as the Conference of Studio Unions. Thus, Reagan entered politics with more preparation and background than many people appreciated.

This book succeeds at its most basic level as a political biography of Reagan in Hollywood. It delineates the origins of Reagan's political views in the grass roots optimism of his youth in Illinois and his radio days as a sportscaster and personality in Iowa. It shows the development of his basic beliefs in the myth of rags-to-riches success, the compatibility of religion and politics, and the equality of all peoples including, rather surprisingly given the controversy over race in his later years, sincere support for fair treatment of African Americans. Documenting his development as a leader within the Hollywood community and his concomitant emergence as a public figure with authority to speak on matters relating to Hollywood and politics, the book describes the construction of an ideological foundation for Reagan's eventual move from liberal voice to conservative icon. It provides a history of his involvement in a broad range of issues and activities of the 1940s and 1950s: his firm stand as a liberal and as friend of the Warner brothers, who were Jews and despised Naziism, against Hitler and his support of intervention in the war against the Axis nations; his instinctive defense

of creative and intellectual freedom as guaranteed by the First Amendment coupled with a contradictory ambivalence toward the pressures for censorship from various religious and institutional boards and agencies; his growing conservatism and opposition to left-wing elements in Hollywood culminating in his secret collaboration with J. Edgar Hoover as “an FBI informer” with “the code name T-10” (148); his cooperation with the dreaded House Un-American Activities Committee in its infamous treatment of the now fabled Hollywood Ten; and his abiding faith from the days of his youth in Americanism as an ideology and system of belief. Both liberal partisans who continue to deride and demonize Reagan as a tool of repressive forces as well as conservative zealots who deem him a saviour of the American spirit can use *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* as a source book for material and information.

However, Vaughn goes beyond simply documenting the political biography of Reagan in Hollywood to write a complex work of cultural and intellectual history. In Vaughn’s study of Reagan, film, and politics, one can discern Reagan at the center of three political domains, and Vaughn suggests how these worlds mesh and work together. There is the world of the internal politics of Hollywood, with its great battles of the left and right over the control of the medium itself. Then comes the external politics of Hollywood’s relationship to the broader political issues and institutions of the day, such as Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, the Production Code Administration, the Legion of Decency, the American Legion, and various ethnic, regional, and religious interest groups. In both of these domains, the creative producers and makers of culture tended to be mainstream, New Deal liberals who admittedly sometimes overly dramatized their roles in society as an artistic proletariat of sorts, while management in the form of studio bosses, owners, and financial backers usually worked to protect their economic and class interests. Of course, exceptions to such a simple division often occurred, as in the cases of the actor Gary Cooper and the director Cecil B. DeMille, who were conservatives. In any case, the tension between liberal and conservative elements probably reached its most extreme during the crusade launched by forces both outside and within Hollywood against alleged communist influence on the film industry. Needless to say, the growing fervor of Reagan’s own anti-communist sympathies and his acquiescence to abuses committed in the name of cleansing Hollywood of communists left him permanently alienated from major segments of the film community and many liberals in general.

The third area of politics is the most theoretical and the most difficult to conceptualize and articulate. This involves the emergence of a politics of culture which merges the real and the “reel” worlds so that off-screen and on-screen thought processes interact and fuse. Vaughn’s portrait of Reagan in Hollywood suggests that in the evolution of his career, Reagan came to personify a new cultural phenomenon that now pervades contemporary experience, namely the symbiotic relationship of politics, media, and film. In Vaughn’s depiction of Reagan’s construction in Hollywood of a personal platform and political program



Publicity shot of Ronald Reagan used by General Electric Theatre, 1954-1962. Courtesy of Ronald Reagan Library.

from which to rise to later state and national leadership, we can see the beginnings of the dissipation of the wall separating media, film, and fantasy from political reality, action, and belief. Of course, as an actor and leader, Reagan was part of a vast industrial, technological, and cultural process much greater than any individual member or any particular institution or entity. He was just one participant among countless others who were far more talented, powerful, and influential in establishing and promulgating this new method for inventing and marketing reality. However, together they all were creating a system that revolutionized human experience by transforming our ways of seeing and

knowing. Especially as it was developed in Hollywood, the cinematic experience in its entirety, including the totality of its various processes of production, presentation, and massive distribution and promotion, inevitably changed patterns of perceiving and understanding reality. Apparently—at one time, anyway—many of us thought of Jimmy Stewart as the average American, Bedford Falls as everyone’s hometown, and Donna Reed as the center of the typical American family. By title and definition, this was a wonderful life even for those who could not really participate in it, like George Bailey’s black maid. Reagan’s involvement in this transformation achieves importance not because of his rather undistinguished acting career, but because of his movement from the screen to political life. Through the method and process of his political success, he helped to extend the Hollywood phenomenon into political life and modern consciousness. Eventually, he became crucial to this new cultural politics that emphasizes seeing and feeling over knowing and acting while proffering vicarious visual experience as a means to validate personal reality and belief.

In suggesting the union of the public and the private in the body and figure of Ronald Reagan, Vaughn probably should have elaborated more upon the importance of Reagan’s experience and development in Hollywood to the formation of his political ideology and the organization of his mind and thought concerning political issues and values. Vaughn indicates that Reagan’s ideology and beliefs took shape and matured in the cauldron of liberal activism and enthusiasm in Hollywood during the New Deal and Second World War. The liberalism of the time and place and the scripts for many of his patriotic and historical films adhered in Reagan’s mind to his own political beliefs and solidified his original political proclivities. Script and reality became one. The political text of his later years as governor and President continued the on-screen script and the off-screen saga of his Hollywood years. The scripts were written and presented by true experts in communication who often were genuine advocates and proponents of common notions of basic American values and beliefs. Many of these writers, directors, producers, and actors who participated in this process of ideological construction often saw themselves as examples of the fulfillment of the promise for personal and group renewal that the system held out. From such Hollywood figures came a congeries of images and ideas and myths about America that were to provide Reagan with material for years: American heroism, the survival of frontier values of self-reliance, the opportunity for regeneration through work and faith, the traditional American family as the basis of community, the importance of maintaining small-town values amidst change, capitalism and free enterprise as a necessary basis for political freedom, and the divine protection of America’s place in the world. All of these symbols would resonate in his persistent claim as President that America continues to be the founding Puritan’s vision of “a city on a hill” and a beacon to the world. Wherever Reagan went in his political life and activities after Hollywood, this master text remained with him to provide a basis for structuring his views, dealing with crises, and presenting himself and his case.

Moreover, Reagan also had to believe in the truth and value of his lines the more he repeated them because they helped to define him both as a person and a political entity. In a sense, they were especially true for Reagan because they helped to save him at mid-career from his own potential future of failure and abandonment. Michael Paul Rogin broaches such a theory about the synthesis of the Hollywood script with the text of Reagan's politics in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, but he ultimately pursues other themes that propel and justify his radically negative view of Reagan the man and his politics. Nevertheless, it still needs to be emphasized that the ideas and emotions that filled Reagan's later thoughts and speeches go back to the common-sense liberalism and individualism that dominated mainstream Hollywood political thought from the 1930s to early 1950s. As much of the world changed and grew steadily more complex and diverse, the script for Reagan remained strangely static, leaving him in a place ironically at the forefront of what appeared to be a new and freshly energized force from the right, a development that helps to explain why so many former liberals switched their allegiance to him as neo-conservatives. His increasing disillusionment with government bureaucracy during the war and his steady disenchantment with liberal rhetoric and activism in the post-war era, as exemplified by the Committee for the First Amendment, also could be presented as a natural outgrowth of his hard-core beliefs and basic values. As he began to carve out a new career for himself in public relations and politics, he could claim consistency in his ideas and accuse others of deviating from the individualism and independence of the original ideology. By the time Reagan appeared as a serious national political figure in the late 1960s and 1970s, his identification with such political beliefs and positions as the sanctity of private property, the veneration of corporate America, and the hegemony of American power in opposition to communism or underclass revolution throughout the world, certainly was more palatable to many former liberals and neo-conservatives than the radical values, behavior, and lifestyles of the New Left or the new activism of marginalized groups and peoples.

In addition, the significance and consequences of the marriage of Hollywood and politics so well dramatized by Vaughn in *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* also may shed some light on contemporary cultural politics and the film community. Obviously, many of President Clinton's most enthusiastic admirers and supporters in Hollywood believed that his presidency would remake the world and assure a new tomorrow with new freedoms and opportunities for all the peoples that Reagan and his ilk seemed to neglect and oppose for so many years. Instead, they now may be considering the possibility that what we have experienced is something closer to a change in studio heads and the takeover by a younger generation dissimulating the old cynicism of personal power and success with a new rhetoric of idealism. Behind both generations may stand contrasting versions of Robert Altman's *The Player*, showing different faces but sending forth remarkably similar messages and meanings about politics and culture in America.