

'Red Dawn' Stirs Liberal Hysteria

By FRED BARNES

Not often is a Hollywood movie denounced for airing the "cockeyed nightmares of those on the lunatic fringe, the self-styled patriots who might even embarrass the members of the John Birch Society."

Yet that's what Vincent Canby, the easily aroused film critic of the New York Times, wrote about "Red Dawn."

Nor do reviewers routinely dismiss a movie that emerges as a box-office hit as "the first homegrown fascist film since 'The Fountainhead.'" But that's the rap that Peter Biskind, the editor of American Film and critic for the Washington Weekly, laid on "Red Dawn."

Nor does TRB normally take time in his column in the New Republic to mention a movie, much less attack one as exemplifying "the worst kind" of patriotism, appealing to "nativist sentiment," and signifying that Hollywood "can swerve right just as fatuously as it swerved left fifteen years ago." But he made an exception in the case of "Red Dawn."

What is it about this movie that touches off such hysteria in the press?

Admittedly, it is hokey in parts, clumsy in others, and poorly acted in still others. The plot isn't without holes, either. But it's not these flaws that get much criticism.

The objection to "Red Dawn" is

that it is anti-Communist — and unabashedly, aggressively and noisily so.

This is unacceptable. It's one thing for a movie to be critical of swinish North Vietnamese soldiers, as "The Deer Hunter" was a few years ago, so long as the movie also makes the point that the Vietnam war had a devastating impact on Americans.

But it is something else to show Communist troops in an unfavorable light, while lionizing the American guerrillas who resist a Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan invasion.

That is what "Red Dawn" does, and that is against the rules.

As TRB noted, Hollywood took a sharp turn to the left about the time of the student revolts and anti-Vietnam demonstrations.

Maybe a slew of movie critics protested this trend, but if they did, they managed to mute their complaints enough to keep me from hearing them.

To my knowledge, the only one to comment critically on Hollywood's drift to the left was Richard Grenier of Commentary, who last year drew an interesting distinction between "soft left" movies like "The Big Chill" and "hard left" ones such as the pro-Sandinista "Under Fire."

For other critics, however, a double standard applied.

Leftist films might be criticized for their artistic failings, but never for the tilt of their political message.

But movies with a conservative message — not that there are many of them — are likely to be judged as fatally flawed because of their political slant, no matter what their artistic worth.

Sometimes a movie slips through the critical net. This happened with "Improper Conduct," the documentary that brilliantly lays out Fidel Castro's record of oppression in both the European and American press, perhaps because its emphasis on Castro's cruel treatment of homosexuals links the movie to the trendy issue of gay rights.

In any event, American Film, which is published by the American Film Institute and is probably the most influential film magazine in the country, sought to erase the effect of those reviews with a sweeping attack on the film and the two Cuban exiles who produced it.

The "real story behind the film's making has yet to surface in any of the rapturous appreciations," declared B. Ruby Rich.

The real story? As Rich told it, the real story is that Castro is a great guy and homosexuals are treated just swell in Cuba.

"I was one of the 600 delegates to the annual film festival in Havana last December, and we were all invited to the Palace of the Revolution to meet the Commandante," Rich wrote. "I, too, can testify: He had no horns! He had no tail! ... The litany of evil in the film is so extreme, so motivated by personal animus, that it is self-defeating, particularly in its endless and absurd comparisons of Cuba and Nazi Germany."

"Improper Conduct" is simply a "revenge film" put out by two filmmakers, cinematographer Nestor Almendros and director Orlando Jimenez-Leal, with ties to the Cuban "emigre Right," Rich said.

Sure, Rich conceded, there was once a period of unpleasantness for homosexuals in Castro's Cuba, but that's all over now. "... My own trips to Cuba before and after Mariel (in 1980) and my contacts with a number of lesbians and gay men there suggest a very different reality from that constructed by the emigres in 'Improper Conduct,'" Rich insisted.

"Things have certainly changed for homosexuals: Gays can be found throughout the island's cultural and political scenes; they are known in their communities; there is a world of parties and networks that exists outside any bar scene."

Anyway, Rich claimed, the filmmakers don't care about homosexuals; they're just using them to nail Castro.

"The entire issue of homosexuality is ultimately a means to an end: the attack on Fidel Castro and, through him, Cuba itself.... The film is mediocre propaganda, lacking the stirring montage of 'Triumph of the Will,' and predictably conservative in its talking-heads format."

Notice the mention of "Triumph of the Will," the pro-Nazi film made 50 years ago by the German director Leni Riefenstahl. An old tactic is at work here: tarring any conservative offering with the Nazi brush.

Which brings us back to "Red Dawn."

Guess what Biskind, who edits the magazine that ran Rich's pro-Castro rantings, says about John Milius, the director of "Red Dawn."

"Milius sees himself as the Leni Riefenstahl of the Reagan administration," he wrote. The movie "resembles" a type of German movie in the years before World War II that extolled tough, virile mountain climbers, "later to become Hitler youth."

On the smear level, you can't do much better than that.

Despite the frothing reviews — or maybe because of them — "Red Dawn" has touched a popular chord. TRB argued that it represents patriotism of an exclusionary sort.

"We're told that the communist invasion began with illegal aliens from Mexico blowing up a SAC base — an appeal to nativist sentiment made especially ugly by its complete illogic," he wrote. "But the dominant form of exclusionary patriotism is political, and the main purveyor is the Republican Party. Republicans have taken as a campaign theme that anyone who disagrees with them is un-American."

TRB meant that as a slur on the movie; Milius, after all, disclosed to "Human Events" that he is a supporter of Ronald Reagan.

But I think the appeal of the movie has nothing to do with what type of patriotism it reflects. Folks happen to like a film in which communists, not some evil cabal of Americans, are the bad guys.

And they don't care if every movie critic of every newspaper and magazine in the country tells them otherwise.

Fred Barnes is National Political Reporter for the Baltimore Sun and wrote this article for The American Spectator.

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