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ARTICLES

Libertarian Film Critics in the Late Twentieth Century: A Brief Introduction

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Movies are uniquely American and over time have become a part of our shared cultural heritage. So too then has the film critic had his or her own time in the spotlight, offering sharp barbs or delightful praise on those films deemed worthy. During the latter half of the twentieth century, film critics saw both their precipitous rise and fall. Libertarian magazines and publications were not exempt from adding their own takes to the array of voices already in the fray. Men like Murray Rothbard, John Hospers, and David Brudnoy are just a few of the libertarian names who aimed to bring film criticism to the readers of libertarian literature like *Reason*, *Libertarian Forum*, and the *Libertarian Review*. A closer look at these men and their understanding of American cinema and culture sheds light on libertarianism as well as a better understanding of what unified and differentiated libertarian film critics from each other and their peers.

Movies in the United States have a long and celebrated history dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. As cinema moved from being a novelty to embedding itself into the American ethos, many began to view the medium as not only entertainment but an art form. In the wake of any art form, the critic must soon follow. Film critics rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, but their heyday was short-lived, and their influence was largely surpassed by the movie reviewer, who could give readers a quick thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or a certain star rating. Nevertheless, libertarian literature made it a point to include movie reviews and critiques in its pages. A quick glance at a cross section of libertarian literature during the latter quarter of the twentieth century—for example, *Reason*, *Libertarian Review*, and the *Libertarian Forum*—reveals this point. All had dedicated film-review sections at one time or another, but they either ended abruptly in the early

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1980s or withered into nonexistence. Still, during a short time frame—the late 1970s and early 1980s—libertarian film critics offered a vast array of cultural and ideological critiques of some of the biggest films of the era.

A legitimate question might ask whether anyone cares. Well, if these bastions of libertarian ideals, leaders within the movement, and culture critics therein believed cinema deserved to be dissected and critiqued, then any student of libertarian thought should seek to better understand the ideas behind the film criticism. Thus, this short foray will accomplish a single goal: mainly, to bring to light the major libertarian film critics of the last quarter of the twentieth century, especially Murray Rothbard, John Hospers, and David Brudnoy. This research will expound on how each individual understood and critiqued cinema. The following pages will not provide any major biographical sketches or the in-depth philosophical principles of each critic (limited space restricts this), although short synopses of each will be provided. Rather, this article hopes to show the diversity and commonality between these three major libertarian critics by presenting their film reviews as the central pieces of evidence for how each critic understood twentieth-century film and cinema's impact on American culture.

Two clear trends unfold through this research, creating an overarching thesis: First, libertarian film critics separate themselves from their more prestigious and well-known peers of the era—for example, Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Vincent Canby. This is not for a lack of talent or knowledge of cinema but rather stems from the way in which the former understand the medium of film and their role in critiquing it. Kael and the like first and foremost viewed all film as an art form; thus, the movies they wrote about were judged through this lens. All the political and cultural aspects of the film took a back seat to more aesthetic concerns. The libertarian critics viewed cinema as a form of entertainment; therefore, when they wrote about specific films, their individual predilections, political leanings, and cultural taste came to the forefront of most of their reviews. This segues into the second point. The libertarian critics discussed below are united in the overarching way in which they view film, but, like libertarianism itself, the individual critiques therein are extremely varied and diversified in what exactly they claim makes a movie enjoyable or lamentable—whether it is the individual being at the heart of the narrative, a yearning for films that reflect values and ideas of an idealized past, or simply personal preference. Each of the following three libertarian critiques is unique in how it understood film. Thus, libertarian film critics were simultaneously united and divided among themselves and their fellow critics.

Before jumping into the fray, a brief note on the organization of the article. There will be three distinct sections, each with one critic and the magazine they wrote for as the fulcrum. At the start, a brief biographical introduction to the critic and the corresponding publication will be presented. What

separated the critic from his peers will then be discussed, using film reviews as evidence, followed by a broader examination of how he viewed the role of cinema in society and separated good movies from bad. The final, shorter segment will summarize the findings and reiterate a few overarching observations made throughout the research.

The objectivist *Reason*, originally released in 1968, offered a one-to-four-page typewritten newsletter with single-topic issues, like "Student Brutality," "Student Power," and "Violence in the U.S." In May of 1968, the first editor's note laid out the newsletter's core belief: "Objectivism presents the only consistent opposition to the underlying premises of the New Left," which it considered its main opposition. Objectivism would continue to form the fulcrum on which *Reason* would rest throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

In 1970, the magazine expanded and began to look and feel more professional in nature, and, by August of 1972, it had movie reviews by Charles F. Barr. Barr, originally a computer programmer, held tightly to Ayn Rand's objectivism. Her book *Atlas Shrugged* is what converted him to libertarianism (Reason Staff 1973). Barr would usually review two to three movies in the "movies" section. Not trained as a literary or culture critic, Barr's style was less dense and more amiable than that of many of his peers. In 1977, he left to focus on screenwriting, leaving the column to John Hospers, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California and a 1972 Libertarian presidential candidate. Hospers is the first critic whose ideas and reviews will be explored in greater detail. He was a more academically minded critic and less caustic than many contemporary film critics. Although he did not focus so much on the artful perspective of a film, he took note of the technical aspects quite often and his libertarian leanings were frequently apparent in the reviews (Hospers 1981b, 1981c, 1984).

Hospers's takes were usually tepid but enjoyable and, as already noted, not nearly as acerbic as those of many of his peers. However, he could be quick with a barb or pointed jab, like when he stated that there was "not a single coherent political or economic argument to be found in . . . [*Reds*], only people voicing convictions, usually with a degree of coherence that might earn one a C-minus in a freshman composition class" or when he called the plot to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* "sheer hokum" (Hospers 1982a, 1981a). But for the most part, Hospers had more positive things to say than negative. An unusual trait for any critic.

One thing that separated Hospers from his libertarian peers Brudnoy and Rothbard was that he could vehemently disagree with the political leanings of a film and still think it a worthwhile piece of cinema. A wonderful example of this was his review of the pro–labor union film *Norma Rae*. He labeled it an "exceptional American film"; however, "one would not be well-advised to swallow its message whole." "The film," he argued, "pinpoints the

owners as the sole villains; the idea that government is the villain, hostile to the interests of both owners and workers, is never so much as hinted at. The filmmakers would undoubtedly consider this a heretical suggestion." He ended by making his stance very clear, contending that Americans should "by all means . . . keep *Norma Rae* around; but let's also have a film exposing OSHA, the EPA, and other government bureaucracies that are making life difficult for all segments of all industries and lowering our standard of living at the same time" (Hospers 1979b). Thus, in Hospers's mind, a movie could be offensive in certain ways to his ideological disposition but still worth watching.

Another clear example is from his 1979 review of *The China Syndrome*. Once more, his abhorrence of overregulation influenced his take but was not so overbearing as to disqualify the film completely. Calling it a "well-done and exciting film" and at the same time "one of the most gruesomely evil films ever made," Hospers laid out his analysis plainly:

> What is evil, however, is to imbue people with, falsehoods masquerading as truth, so that the reasoning guiding their action is based on lies. This is precisely what *The China Syndrome* does, and consequently it will probably produce more harm than a thousand degenerate Pasolini films put together. . . . There are two main reasons. The implausibility of some of the characters and situations is one reason, but the lesser one . . . [the larger sin is that] the film is anti-industry and anti-technology, but not anti-government: the government enters the film as the savior of the situation in response to the "greed" of private industry. As such, it aids and abets totalitarianism and hammers another nail in the coffin of freedom. There is hardly a surer way to turn the United States into a totalitarian State than by drying up its sources of energy. This film richly deserves to be called false propaganda, evil, obscene, and many another such epithets. For if the propaganda message of this film were to succeed, the result would be infinitely worse than that of any nudity, sex, or violence that could possibly be displayed on the screen, even to children. (Hospers 1979c)

The distinction Hospers repeatedly made between a good film and his political values made him unique not only in the world of libertarian film critics but also in the larger conservative one. Yet, like his libertarian colleague Brudnoy, who will be dealt with later, Hospers reviewed films that other more refined conservative critics, like John Simon at *National Review*, Robert Asahina at The *Spectator*, and William Pechter at *Commentary*, did not touch. These include horror or slasher films, like *Halloween*, *When a Stranger Calls*, and *Alien*, which all except *Alien* received positive reviews, or more

sacrilegious comedies like *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, which he thought to be "extremely clever and often hilarious" (Hospers 1980a). Others dealing with the contentious issue of being gay (in the age of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, and the questions surrounding the AIDS epidemic) were not judged through a moralizing lens but were lauded as "delightful comedies"(*La cage aux folles*) or open and honest, doing for homosexual relations "what *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* did for racial relations" (*Making Love*) (Hospers 1980c, 1982b). The willingness to praise films that were considered offensive to the sensibilities of many Waspy audience members was not a solely libertarian trait, but it was a feather in the cap of libertarian critics like Hospers. The inclination on Hospers's part to not only review but applaud films that could have been considered anathema to many on the religious Right showcased the precarious predicament of libertarianism as a political movement. Not only did libertarians find themselves fundamentally marginalized by those on the left who had no problem growing and utilizing the Leviathan state for any and all purposes but also by those on the right who did little better, especially when it came to foreign policy. The cultural divergence from the latter only amplified as the political Right found itself listing toward a sect inside its ranks where the religious and moral hegemony of American culture overshadowed an emphasis on individual liberty. Hospers and others no doubt saw this and did their best to push back.

Still, for the amiable Hospers, certain films stood head and shoulders above the rest. They featured particular traits not at odds with libertarian ideals, which made them not only good movies but wonderful pieces of cinema. A few examples should lay bare his thinking. In 1978, he reviewed the Academy Award-winning *Julia* (1977), starring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave. The plot follows two friends as one takes on the risky role of smuggling funds into Nazi Germany as a favor to the other. Hospers believed the film to be "an experience of such intensity as is seldom seen on the screen." He was mesmerized by the acting and characterization of Jane Fonda as Lillian Hellman and argued that to call *Julia* "the most clearly articulated, the most moving, and the most sensitively rendered American film to appear in 1977 would be, if anything, an understatement. The film is a fulfillment of Aristotle's ideal of dramatic catharsis" (Hospers 1978). A year and a half later, he reviewed Woody Allen's "virtually flawless" *Manhattan*. Here, he extolled its honest and realistic nature and believed it to be "full of human insight and tragedy," probing the "important aspects of man's inner life" (Hospers 1979a). On a similar note, *Kramer vs. Kramer* was hailed as one of the most "honest and involving American film[s]" of 1979, portraying "real-life drama with no hint of soap opera" (Hospers 1980b). The last two examples came in back-to-back issues in March and April of 1983. *Gandhi* and *Sophie's Choice*, both historical pieces, seemed to move Hospers once again by the "stunning characterizations" by Ben Kingsley in the former and Meryl Streep in the latter. The films are described as "thought-provoking," "absorbing," "shattering," and a "richly textured historical saga" (Hospers 1983a, 1983b).

There are two points to take away here. One was that the centrality of the role of the individual in the films he reviewed was of the utmost importance to Hospers. A story could be gripping or well-told, but if the individual was not at the heart of the story, then it undoubtedly fell short of his criteria. What made the narratives of the films all the more prescient was that they showcased a form of human struggle, whether common to all mankind (male and female relations in *Kramer vs. Kramer*) or unique in a historical context (*Julia*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Gandhi*). This facet of cinema overshadows more technical or aesthetic aspects common to the average film critic. Yet it makes perfect sense for the film critic grounded by libertarian values.

The second point is a reiteration of an earlier one but deserves to be reiterated. The films Hospers praised (*The Life of Brian*, *La cage aux folles*, *Julia*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Norma Rae*) were most definitely more culturally left- than right-leaning. *Gandhi* especially was roundly criticized by critics on the right, especially Robert Grenier of *Commentary*, who ended up turning his harsh review of *Gandhi* into a book. Still, Hospers found features of these films worth lauding. This spoke to the fact that during the late 1970s and early 1980s, some libertarian critics felt more aligned, at least socially, with the political Left than the Right. The conservative movement had, by this time, already begun to move further away from its more libertarian origins and started to meld itself more solidly with the religious Right. Thus, libertarians like Hospers and, as we shall see later, Brudnoy were more forgiving toward certain films that other, more conservative critics may have considered distasteful to their senses.

In any case, by 1983, *Reason* had become "the nation's fastest growing magazine of ideas," outpacing *Human Events*, *Commentary*, *National Review*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Progressive* in growth (Zupan and Poole 1984b). The outlook for *Reason* to be able to make a meaningful impact on American culture seemed to be on the upswing. Yet just the following year, managing editor Robert Poole announced he was ending the "long tradition of monthly movie reviews" for a new section, "Life and Liberty," that would cover the "cultural terrain" (Zupan and Poole 1984a). Unfortunately, movies were essentially overlooked; there were only a handful of reviews moving forward into the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

Nevertheless, a year after *Reason* got off the ground, the *Libertarian*, known later as the *Libertarian Forum*, got its start. A twice-monthly newsletter that began in March of 1969, intending to "act as a nucleus and communications center for libertarians across the country" and arm its readers with a workable "libertarian world-view," it was the brainchild of Murray Rothbard, an economist, philosopher, contributing editor for *Reason* for a time, and arguably the penultimate libertarian voice of the twentieth century. His singular pursuit throughout his life was to create a cohesive, coherent, and fully independent libertarian movement. He attempted to ally with the

intellectual and political Right in the 1950s only to find himself cast aside because of his strict adherence to anarchocapitalism and his less militant foreign-policy stance than those at *National Review*. He then sought common ground with those on the New Left in the 1960s, but differences were too vast, and nothing ever coalesced. In the 1980s, he found himself aligned with traditionalists and paleoconservatives, who also seemed to be purged from the mainstream by the neoconservatives, but never had the level of success he knew was necessary to make libertarianism a viable political movement (Hawley 2016, 161–66).

Under the moniker "Mr. First Nighter," Rothbard penned movie reviews in the *Libertarian Forum* rather frequently. He made his libertarianism a central but not *the* fundamental facet of his critiques. Indeed, certain films were undoubtedly dismissed for their antilibertarian stances, like Woody Allen's *The Front*, which was bashed for its "left-wing 'message'" and portrayal of communists as "good guys," while *Red Dawn* was extolled as "anti-State" and described as "worth seeing—exciting as well as libertarian." Two other germane examples came in July of 1976 when he extolled two films that "deserve to be seen by every libertarian." One was the horror flick *The Omen*, about an unwitting family that ends up raising the Antichrist. A "gripping and exciting picture" that was a blend of "fun and anti-State," where the Antichrist child winds up "in the bosom of a Kennedyesque President of the United States." The second was *All the President's Men*. "Superbly directed," with "excellent acting," it seemed to fly by for Rothbard. He dubbed it a "superb film, worthy of the 'best movie' accolade." The centrality of his praise was that both *The Omen* and *All the President's Men* "identify the prime evil [in the film] resting in government" (Rothbard 1976a, 1977). Similar to Hospers, Rothbard even more so was keenly drawn to films that displayed libertarian values. Yet this was always secondary to his larger concern. He viewed most films through a highly sensitive cultural lens where adherence to certain standards was expected, and through this lens, he made his most damning and uplifting commentary.

By the middle of 1976, Rothbard believed cinema to be amid a "grievous decline." In fact, by 1977, he had stopped making a ten-best-films list because "the quality of films had been so dismal that the exercise seemed scarcely worth it" (Rothbard 1976b, 1977). The reason for this, according to Rothbard, had to do with the attempt in movies to upend "Old Culture" values. He used the term "Old Culture" twenty-eight times during his movie-reviewing career at the *Libertarian Forum*. It refers to the culture within cinema itself or what he sometimes called "movie-movies"; namely, movies where there are no "avant-garde gimmicks and camera trickery," where the "quintessence of the Old Culture" centers around a "marvelous plot, exciting action, manly hero vs. villain (instead of antiheros), spy plots, crisp dialogue, . . . the frank enjoyment of bourgeois luxury . . . , and at the "heart of Old Culture," according to Rothbard, is romanticism (Rothbard 1972, 1973,

1974a, 1974b, 1979). Movies where men were men, women were women, and there was a clear delineation between good and evil, right and wrong, were the type of films in which Rothbard delighted.

His insistence on the values of the Old Culture became the defining feature of his reviews. For instance, when he reviewed Allen's *Manhattan*, he called it not only Allen's "best film to date" but "the greatest movie of the 1970s." Besides being "marvelously funny," to Rothbard's delight, Allen attacked the "epitome of contemporary values" by mocking contemporary art, relationships, drug culture, avant-garde films, and TV culture. To Rothbard, Allen was one of the "cultural conservatives and reactionary" satirists of the age. This analysis was directly connected to the fact that Rothbard saw Allen as "an embattled and devoted champion of the Old Culture." On the other end of the spectrum was the film *Rich and Famous* about two female friends, one who finds success in a literary career and the other who is discontent in her marriage but who ends up surpassing her friend as a writer. "This is one of the most odious and repellent movies I have seen in many a moon. . . . The most abhorrent aspect of this picture is its moral values." Not so much the cursing, nudity, or even "softcore porn" (in fact, Rothbard criticizes the nudity and sex as being "dreary and tiresome" and "hope[d] . . . [for] a lesbian scene [which] would have relieved a bit of the monotony." No, it is the message of the picture that "females should get with it, [and] cast off monogamy." The lead, Jacqueline Bisset, was labeled "the standard-bearer for the New Hedonism," and the end of the movie is the advancement of "sluthood as a way of life"; Rothbard 1982). Unlike Hospers, Rothbard it seemed, at least when it came to cinema, valued certain traditional principles he believed to be central to any good piece of moviemaking.

Two examples should accentuate this point: *Chariots of Fire* and *My Favorite Year*. Both were set in the not-so-distant past and were reminiscent of the old movies he loved. *Chariots of Fire* was a "charming old-fashioned movie-movie . . . [which] celebrated old-fashioned values like hard work, dedication, and competition." The critics, he believed, misunderstood the main point points of the film, which were a "celebration of values, of dedication and individual integrity, and of older charming styles of movie-making, that have virtually disappeared from the modern cinema." Then, there was *My Favorite Year*. "Undoubtedly the best movie of the year . . . evocative of the Golden Age of Comedy," it is the "antithesis of the modern 'art film,'" which Rothbard detested. In a moment of self-reflection, he remarked how he had been drawn to several films that were in some way "set nostalgically at some time in the past." He then asked, "Will it ever again be possible to make an Old Culture movie . . . about the current world [and] [w]ill we ever be able to turn the current culture around?" These questions are telling of how Rothbard viewed the current state not only of cinema but of American society.

Unfortunately, *Libertarian Forum* would come to an end at the end of 1984, just a few months after the movie review section at *Reason* ended, basically eliminating all libertarian periodicals, but not every libertarian voice, from the array of conservative film critics.[1]

While there are a few areas of Rothbard's analysis that could be expanded on, it is one central point that comes to the fore, his disgust with contemporary culture and a longing for the "Old Culture" both in reality and on the silver screen. His insistence on more stoic cultural values (very different from those of the religious Right, which focused more on violence, nudity, and profanity), including individual integrity, honor, duty, truth, and loyalty, and his shunning the moral relativism of the late 1970s seemed to provide guideposts to his movie-criticism criteria.[2] This was a major differentiating mark between himself and both Hospers and Brudnoy. There were of course some similarities between the three, which will be touched on at the end, but this focus by Rothbard on culture in decline and a longing for a bygone era of cinema separated him from his peers.

The last publication to be examined is *Libertarian Review*, a bimonthly libertarian magazine first published in 1972. It was founded by Roy A. Childs and had Rothbard as a contributing editor and David Brudnoy as its sole film critic. It had a "deep and abiding commitment to individual Liberty"; thus, it "begins with the principle of inviolable individualism" (*Libertarian Review* 1977). The final issue in 1981 laid out in greater detail what the magazine stood for. Childs wrote that it began by "defending the free market . . . defending gay rights and feminism, and announcing our support for a noninterventionist foreign policy that neither Republicans nor Democrats cared to entertain" (Childs 1981). Their "one consistent mission" was "to oppose the mythology of Left and Right, of Liberalism and Conservatism, twin branches of the political establishment which have found the maintenance of intellectual package deals so very convenient in blocking the consideration of political alternatives. Today, we face the alleged choice between a triumphant conservatism in power, which offers insignificant cuts in domestic spending and cosmetic deregulation, combined with an enforced social conservatism and increasingly belligerent foreign policy on the one hand, and a cosmetically resurrected liberalism, defeated and decaying, on the other."

Their film critic, David Brudnoy, seemed to find a perfect fit for his values. He was the host of a talk-radio show in Boston, a deputy sheriff, a TV commentator, an author, an essayist, and a professor of journalism at Boston

1 David Brudnoy, who is discussed below, would continue to write for *Human Events* and many other conservative publications, inserting a more libertarian twist than many of this conservative culture critics.

2 Rothbard continued to write film reviews in the paleolibertarian *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*, which he contributed to until his death in 1995. A brief selection of these reviews is available in *The Irrepressible Rothbard* (Rothbard 2000).

University (Brudnoy 1981a, 1997). But most relevant to this analysis was the fact that he wrote for a variety of conservative publications over his career. His ideas and writings appeared in *National Review*, *Modern Age*, *Libertarian Review*, *Reason*, *Human Events*, and the *American Spectator*. Brudnoy was indeed a fascinating character: he was a closeted homosexual who was "libertarian in [his] conservatism," had Frank Meyer, the fusionist at *National Review*, as his mentor, was not "religious in any formal sense," was clearly antagonistic toward the growing influence of the religious Right within conservativism, and owed his conversion to libertarianism to Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness*, which he picked up at an airport bookstore (Brudnoy 1997). And when the conservative quarterly academic journal *Modern Age* printed its selection of seventy-eight seminal essays from its first twenty-five years "that distinguish the genus of scholarship arising from conservative sensibilities" and offered a "manifold conservative outlook that goes beyond place and time," Brudnoy's name and work were there among such conservative stalwarts as Ludwig von Mises, George Nash, M.E. Bradford, Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, Eric Voegelin, and Richard M. Weaver (Panichas 1988, xvii, 154–67). He started reviewing films for the *Libertarian Review* in 1976 in the "Cinema in Review" section of the magazine. Reviews were not all that common from 1976 to 1978, with only one or two a year, but from 1979 to when it closed down in 1981, they ran closer to nine a year.

While Brudnoy wrote film reviews for a whole host of libertarian and right-leaning publications, only those in the *Libertarian Review* are discussed below. Certainly, this limits the analysis of Brudnoy to a select handful of reviews; nevertheless, there are insights to be had. Brudnoy believed movies were a form of entertainment before they were works of art. A movie could fall short on some technical or cinematographic aspects but still exhibit all the qualities necessary to be a worthy piece of filmmaking. Yet some issues piqued his ire; namely, crass depictions of homosexuals or overt religious moralizing. Like Hospers, and most assuredly due to his sexual preferences, he frequently found himself defending movies that depicted homosexual characters or relationships in a normative or positive fashion and objected to what he saw as a rigid morality coming from some films or critics. This was also true in his personal and professional life. Brudnoy left a position at the *Spectator*—where he reviewed films and wrote the odd column—when the magazine "began to make sneering references, obviously, to gay people" (Brudnoy 1997). During his time at the *Spectator*, Brudnoy found himself "mortified by articles" that demonized homosexuality but attempted to "nudge [the editor] Tyrrell" into taking a less adversarial editorial stance (Brudnoy 1977). However, Brudnoy decided to leave in January 1977 after "The Lavender Menace" was written by Stephen R. Maloney the previous December, the "final straw" in a long line of supposed "undiluted attacks on homosexuals" (Brudnoy 1977).

Brudnoy used his position at the *Libertarian Review* to continue his defense against what he believed to be inaccurate or homophobic representations in cinema. In 1980, he brought the film *Cruising* to task over its alleged "queerbashing." "The demagogues are legion," he began. "The New Right needs it scapegoat, Jews, and Negroes now having lost that special something that made them such ideal scapegoats until just yesterday, the homosexuals, who dare to demand—demand!—from the collectivists what only libertarians would willingly grant, providing now just the ticket." The film, he believed, became a "trump card" for those "who want to crush homosexuals" (Brudnoy 1980b). Then, there were more positive takes, like the review of *The Last Metro*, which he considered to be the best foreign film of the year. It was an antiwar movie but also, and more importantly, "a no-nonsense affirmation of the humanity of people who are homosexual" (Brudnoy 1981b). Building on some of the themes present in the historical drama, he delved into the past and present state of homosexuals in contemporary society: "The Nazis, the French collaborators with the Nazis, the Communist regimes of today, Khomeini's followers in Iran, the fascistic New Right haters in our own country right now, all manage without a moment's hesitation to include homosexuals among their bugaboos and their intended (and in the case of the Nazis and the Khomeini regime, to name only two examples, their actual) victims" (Brudnoy 1981b). Once again, Brudnoy, like Hospers, found himself more in line with the New Left from a sociocultural perspective than the burgeoning New Right.[3]

Indeed, his stance on gay rights and his homosexuality played a critical role in how he viewed the rise of the religious Right into the mainstream of American culture. This point was evident in his comments on *Cruising* but is clear too in his review of *Altered States*: "At a time in our national life when 'religion' is identified most prominently with the ravings and rigidified bigotries of Moral Majoritarian fanatics, such that many of the rest of us recoil from such horror, I am delighted to note that elsewhere, if only in a movie, one can find a serious reflection on higher theological and philosophical matters, unsullied by polyester hucksterism and Sunday School childness [*sic*]" (Brudnoy 1981c). Then again, in his reviews of *Superman II* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, his indignation was drawn out when discussing how the culture had no real heroes to emulate: "The Moron Majority and its witch-hunting comrades in the battle against the twentieth-century fall short in the heroism department . . . but they have ingeniously allied a specific combine of repressive atavisms with the endlessly repeated claim to

3 Yet not every film that depicted homosexuals in a positive light was automatically praised by Brudnoy. Just take *La cage aux folles II*, in which he said it was "not so funny" and "especially remiss in offering not so much as one hint of a fully rounded human being who happens to be gay." Just because a film may have checked off a box or two when it came to his personal beliefs, it still had to be a quality piece of filmmaking.

the blessings of God" (Brudnoy 1981a). His disdain for the arbiters of social morality drips from his pen onto the page whenever he mentions them. This will be revisited shortly.

Now, what made a good movie for Brudnoy is more difficult to ascertain than it is for his peers. Unlike Hospers, who valued the individual, or Rothbard, who explicitly talked about the values of the "Old Culture," Brudnoy drifted somewhere in the ether between the two. A proponent of films that were, more than anything, entertaining, he seemed to be drawn to those that he found to be either true to life or at least in some way reflective of his personal political beliefs. Some apt examples came from reviews he wrote in 1979. His antiwar sentiment, combined with his allure for certain grandiose cinematic features, culminated in two reviews about the Vietnam epics *Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. Both received critical acclaim from Brudnoy, whose antiwar stance seeped into his writing rather clearly. The former was a movie "to be experienced" and "a movie of such brilliance, such power, . . . and shimmering just below its surface, of such savage perceptiveness about the weakness in our national experience, that it should prove unbearable to anybody who still delights in the fantasy that the American government and the American people are the same" (Brudnoy 1979a). *Apocalypse Now* was "a film of breathtaking excellence" with "stunning images" and "wonderful sounds" (Brudnoy 1979b). Again Brudnoy zeroed in on the antiwar undertones he found appealing, saying the lesson of the movie was that the "true horror . . . [is] obvious, by now, to anyone who knows what *we* did, what *they* did, what was done by and done to almost everybody who set foot in Indochina for a decade or more" (Brudnoy 1979b). Brudnoy would likely have never written these words in one of his reviews in the *Spectator* or the feverishly hawkish *Human Events*, but in the *Libertarian Review*, Brudnoy was free to intermingle his libertarian thinking on foreign policy mistakes into his movie reviews.

Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*, featuring Dustin Hoffman, about the changing gender roles and relational responsibilities in marriage, were two banal films (in the sense that the protagonists were not in the jungles of Southeast Asia but working their way through the sometimes monotonous and ordinariness of life), yet Brudnoy seemed drawn to this fact. He wrote that *Kramer vs. Kramer* was neither "ideological tract" nor propaganda but simply a story of "three people . . . [who] in a contemporary way, a way repugnant to the generations of our past, managed to make due." He believed it to be "funny as well as tender, and hard-nosed about everything" (Brudnoy 1980a). Meanwhile, much like Rothbard and Hospers, he found Allen's *Manhattan* to be a huge success and Allen's "magnum opus." To Brudnoy, it exuded a certain individuality in which it warned "against emotional suicide" and urged "people [to] enjoy what they

have while they have it." He ended his review by predicting it would win best picture of 1979 and that it, along with *Deer Hunter*, belonged to the "Olympian reaches of true cinema brilliance" (Brudnoy 1979a).

As previously stated, Brudnoy's predilections are harder to nail down. He seemed drawn to films that were, in the simplest sense, entertaining. A film could be made better by hitting on certain preferences he may have had: being antiwar or depicting homosexuality in an unbiased way. But Brudnoy enjoyed movies that were mainly enjoyable to him and his preferences. This is not a critique of Brudnoy—many film critics would readily agree that their tastes are subjective. What makes Brudnoy unique is that the criteria he uses for films are much more difficult to quantify than, say, Hospers, Rothbard, or even less libertarian and more conservative critics like John Simon, Richard Alleva, Robert Asahina, or Bruce Bawer.

To be clear, Rothbard, Hospers, and Brudnoy were not the sole libertarian film critics during this time, but their pivotal and long-lasting positions within these and other libertarian magazines allow them to serve as reliable examples of how libertarians viewed the medium of film and its impact on American society. The one unifying factor among these men that differentiated them from the larger cohort of conservative film critics—like John Simon at *National Review*, William Pechter and Richard Grenier at *Commentary*, and Robert Asahina at the *Alternative* (later, the *American Spectator*)—was that nearly all libertarian critics saw film primarily as entertainment rather than an art form. When viewed through this lens, movies could be understood with their cultural impact and entertainment value acting as the foundations of judgment rather than more aesthetic-centered criteria. The artistic aspect of film was something all these libertarian critics treated as peripheral to more pressing concerns, like cultural values, the individual at the core of the story, and the enjoyability of the film as long—as it was not offensive to their ideological or personal preferences.

At this juncture, one last point must be addressed before closing. Why was the libertarian film critic such a short-lived experience, and why did these magazines cease to exist at the same time? The answer is intertwined and one of our critics answered it concisely. When Murray Rothbard shut down the *Libertarian Forum* in 1984, he wrote about three reasons for the "implosion" of libertarian literature and the movement as a whole in the early 1980s: the refocusing in the 1980s on careerism over the search for ideology and answers that defined the despondent 1970s; the election of Reagan, which only furthered the shift away from ideological debate and toward the focus on Americanism; and, finally, the corruption of libertarianism by "the Kochtopus," big money, and the allure for power. By the early 1980s, Rothbard noted how nearly all "libertarian institutions have either collapsed, greatly contracted, or abandoned principle in a generally unsuccessful attempt to corral more support and more funding." He then listed the

various libertarian periodicals and newsletters that collapsed in 1983 and 1984, including his own, leaving only *Reason*, which "has gotten so soft-core, and so outreach [*sic*] (to say nothing of even more boring), that it is now scarcely discernible as being libertarian at all."[4] Add to this the fact that *Reason* stopped its "long tradition of monthly movie reviews" in the summer of 1984 and it becomes plain to see how sources could so easily dry up (Rothbard 1984).

Brudnoy, too, reflected on the collapse of libertarianism and the rise of the religious Right, in a symposium—"1968–1988–2008: The '80s Will Be Remembered . . ."—for *Reason* in 1988. He assumed the 1980s would be remembered for "the near-complete breakdown of . . . the libertarian impulse within the conservative movement." "What had once been a genteel and thoughtful amalgam of traditionalist and libertarian elements," Brudnoy began, "became—in the hands of the manipulators surrounding the president and in the rhetoric and pamphleteering of the operators who took for granted their benediction from what they imagine is their God—a bitter and vicious thing." Thus, to his dismay, filling the space left by libertarians were publications associated more with the religious Right: *Christianity Today* began regular movie reviews in 1983 and, although it had a brief hiatus from March 1985 to March 1988, it continued sporadically afterward. *First Things* did not offer a regular review but did opine occasionally on film, the right-leaning, Catholic-oriented *Crises* and *New Oxford Review* ran their review sections starting in 1985 and December of 1994, respectively, and finally there was *Human Events* and *Movieguide*, which, by the late 1990s, were indistinguishable in their film criticism (Mack et al. 1988).

It should be remembered that this research is only a survey of a few libertarian film critics during a short but dynamic time within the movement. There is much more to learn and more research to be done about all these men, their roles as critics, and libertarianism's interaction with popular culture. Even so, the point that they all viewed film primarily as a form of entertainment and not art should not be overlooked. Neither should the fact that Hospers and Brudnoy both seemed to distance themselves (one much more than the other) from the rise of the religious Right and focused on either the centrality of the individual in the films or their own individual preferences. The last point, and maybe the most interesting, was that Mr. Libertarian himself, Rothbard, was the outlier among his peers, advocating for more traditional films with certain values and cinematic styles he enjoyed. To be perfectly clear, never once did he argue for censorship or the toning down of certain aspects that

4 Here is a list of some of the publications: *Inquiry*, *Frontlines*, *Free Texas*, *Caliber*, *Competition*, *Libertarian Vanguard*, the *Voluntaryist*, *Libertarian Review*, *Update*, *Literature of Liberty*, and *Libertarian Forum*.

bothered other more religiously minded critics, like nudity, violence, or crass language. Rather, it always seemed to be the implicit and sometimes explicit message the film sent that he found distasteful.

In the end, libertarian film critics deserve a deeper and broader look. A singular study of Rothbard or Brudnoy and film criticism would prove insightful, as would a broader survey of libertarian culture critics of the twentieth century. The author hopes that this brief foray into libertarian film criticism will encourage others to add to and hopefully build on these or any other connected themes. There are undoubtedly new facts to uncover and insights to delve into. Future research will undoubtedly add to the knowledge of libertarian studies.

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