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Book Reviews

Prince, Stephen, *Firestorm. American Film in the Age of Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009 and Cettl, Robert, *Terrorism in American Cinema. An Analytical Filmography, 1960 - 2008*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2009. Reviewed by Janka Skrzypek

The attacks of September 11, 2001 ignited a firestorm, indeed. Not only did they result in an outburst of terrorism literature (Silke, in: Ranstorp, 2007: 76-91), they also changed the way terrorism is described and shown (Hall, in: Prince, 2009: 121). If one looks at 9/11 as a watershed, one accepts what had happened before. If one looks at 9/11 as a beginning or something that had emerged out of nowhere, one is guilty of a-historicism.

Prince's 2009 account on American Film in the Age of Terrorism cannot be accused of the latter. Although set during George W. Bush's presidency, Prince's analysis draws heavily on the "ages of terrorism" that America has witnessed since the late 1960s. Prince's focus is on American movies, documentaries and TV series on the 9/11 attack and the war in Iraq, however, and for reasons not explained by the author, not on the campaign in Afghanistan.

Prince provides a very good insight into how the attacks and the subsequent War on Terror came about (by invoking either a description of the decision-making process as such or the data gathered by the 9/11 Commission, for example). What is more, he delivers an interesting analysis of what American cinema looked like during the Bush presidency and how his Administration employed the movie/documentary making industry to create and legitimize its own spectacle of terrorism and/or terrorism of spectacle (Giroux, 2006).

Using the Vietnam War as a main point of reference, Prince claims that the American movie industry is still coming to terms with how to "deal" with the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. He lists the efforts of finding a "right" narrative and genre to tell the 9/11 stories as part of the ongoing process of adjustment. In his concluding chapter he invokes three movies re-telling the stories of ancient conflicts (*Troy*, *The Kingdom* and *300*), leaving the reader with a feeling that traumatic events such as the 9/11 attacks are deeply imbedded in the social and cultural history of the world - Western and non-Western, alike. He also argues in favour of documentaries to be able to better capture the essence and complexity of 9/11 images and experiences.

One could criticize Prince for failing to disclose the criteria that guided the choice of works analysed in his book as well as for providing a rather restricted view on the world post-9/11, limited to American televisions only. At the same time, one has to acknowledge the depth and



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breadth of his research, the usefulness of the filmography and historical timeline provided as appendices, and the accessibility of Prince's writing, all of which make *Firestorm* of great interest and use to the students of film, terrorism, politics as well as the general public.

Another 2009 publication worth mentioning in the context of Prince's thought-provoking *Firestorm* is Cettl's *Terrorism in American Cinema. An Analytical Filmography, 1960-2008*. Unlike in the case of Prince, Cettl's focus is predominantly on American movies, with only some documentaries mentioned and hardly any analysed. Also, in contrast to Prince, Cettl focuses on films created long before the 9/11 attacks, as well as those not related directly to the War on Terror declared in their aftermath. In addition, such a long timeframe also allows him to set his discussion in reference not only to the Vietnam War, but to the Cold War in general.

Compared to *Firestorm*, Cettl's book is less political in a sense that he does not cast the movies he describes in the 9/11-War on Terror mega-movie/spectacle. To a large extent this comes with the format of the book as such which is first and foremost a filmography, in which movies are ordered alphabetically, and not chronologically or thematically. Also because of its informative, guide-like format, Cettl's description is not only more technical and detailed, it also focuses on various guises of terrorism (one of the movies he analyses is Attenborough's 1982 *Gandhi*, for example) rather than just Terror - against which the post-9/11 War has been fought. Last but not least, despite lesser focus on the historical/political context behind certain productions, so well analysed by the author of *Firestorm*, on many occasions Cettl lets the films talk for themselves, which ultimately allows the book's readers a more active and critical engagement with the material presented. This is only one of many reasons why the two books, both of which provide very interesting and thought-provoking accounts on terrorism-inspired cinema, complement each other, and as such, it is interesting and informative to read them together.

Bibliography:

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