

Was 1933's "Gabriel over the White House" inspired by California gubernatorial election?

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To the Editor:

I recently read David Walsh's excellent series of articles discussing the San Francisco Film Festival. In the last of these Mr. Walsh discussed "Gabriel over The White House," an obscure 1933 film directed by Gregory LaCava and starring Walter Huston and Karen Morley, the latter of whom later was blacklisted.

Mr. Walsh notes that this seemingly surreal film revealed the depth of the crisis facing Depression-era America. Huston plays a machine politician who has become president although he has no idea how to ameliorate the agonies of the country's millions of jobless. With social revolution threatening, Huston's character has a bizarre vision featuring the Archangel Gabriel. Subsequently he concocts a governing plan in which a massive New Deal-style public works program is monitored by an authoritarian paramilitary army under Huston's direct control.

In fact, this Hollywood plot device appears to have been inspired by contemporaneous California events. During 1933 the Socialist writer Upton Sinclair began his famous campaign for California governor. The state Democratic Party was badly fractured among numerous rivals, and Sinclair captured its gubernatorial nomination by running on a platform he entitled "End Poverty In California" [aka, EPIC].

The heart of EPIC was Sinclair's proposal of running the Depression-mired state's economy on the principle of "Production For Use." This was in essence a strategy in which the state would take by eminent domain the vast amount of bankrupt privately-owned means of production: farms, factories, etc. By 1933 unemployment in California was nearing a staggering 30%. Sinclair proposed to put this massive unemployed populace to work in the idled fields and factories, then set up a statewide barter system in which citizens impoverished by the Depression would support

themselves by exchanging their produce and services to meet their needs. Workers thronged to his program, and he won the primary in a landslide.

Not having seen "Gabriel over The White House," I do not know how closely Sinclair's Production For Use program is paralleled by the employment program in this film made as Sinclair was garnering daily headlines nationwide for his daring program.

Sinclair ultimately was defeated during the general election. The victor, with a plurality—but not a majority—of the popular vote, was the state's Hoover-ish GOP Acting Governor, Frank Merriam. Seeing the approaching tsunami and hamstrung by a blandly unimaginative Republican candidate strongly identified with the defense of the failed status quo, the forces of capital barely mentioned their own candidate during the entire fall 1933 general election. Instead they created the first modern negative campaign, pouring vast sums into smearing the upright Sinclair by fair means and foul. Over the next half-century numerous American political reactionaries would refine the savage techniques they first deployed against the working class as Merriam campaign gophers, most notably Richard M. Nixon. That story is told in Greg Mitchell's gripping account "The Campaign Of The Century: Upton Sinclair's Race For Governor and the Birth of Media Politics" (Random House, 1992).

Within six weeks of his defeat Sinclair had authored and published an astute campaign memoir "I, Candidate For Governor: And How I Got Licked" (reprinted by the University of California Press in 1994). Sinclair couldn't have known the precise details of the vast dirty-tricks machine created to crush him, but this work shows he suspected it existed. The book is full of interesting vignettes proving the truth of David Walsh's assertion that in 1933 US film reflected a society in crisis.

Sinclair dryly relates the tale of a Los Angeles physician named Dowie who sought to run with him as Lieutenant Governor: "He had a program of his own devising; he wanted to put all the police in the state under the control of the governor, then have the governor declare martial law and wipe out all the crooks. When Dr. Dowie found out we did not favor him as a candidate, he lost interest in our movement."

The bizarre platform urged upon Sinclair by the mysterious Dr. Dowie is, of course, virtually identical to the strange program concocted by a Hollywood scriptwriter for the character of the president in "Gabriel over The White House." Could that scriptwriter have heard about Dowie's program on the way back to the typewriter with a cup of coffee? Who knows.

But the mere possibility proves the truth of Mr. Walsh's thesis that feature films are a mirror of the conditions in which they are created.

Cordially,

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