In defense of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: The 1962 film about racism in theaters this week

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Fathom Events, TCM and Universal Pictures are screening *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) in select cinemas this week. Directed by Robert Mulligan, produced by Alan J. Pakula and with a screenplay by Horton Foote, the movie is based on Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same title.

Set in the Depression era of the 1930s, the book and movie center on attorney Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout. Atticus opposes the legal frame-up in a small Alabama town of an African-American falsely accused of raping a white woman during the period of Jim Crow segregation.

The writing of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was made possible in part by the mass struggles of the Civil Rights movement, and it further encouraged them. Lee, a native Alabaman born in 1926, was influenced by the case of the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 and the 1934 trial in Monroeville, Alabama, (Lee's hometown) of Walter Lett, a black former convict, accused of sexual assault by a poor white woman. Lett was initially sentenced to death, but his sentence was reduced to life and he died in prison. The horrifying murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, a black youth, in 1955 in Mississippi was still a fresh wound.

Lee's book, which has sold more than 30 million copies and been translated into 40 languages, is deservedly beloved. Its themes of tolerance and compassion, and its related sensitivity toward the emotional life of children, have unquestionably influenced generations of young people in particular.

The showing of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is timely and appropriate for a number of reasons, including for its calling attention to the struggle against entrenched racism in the South.

The movie takes on a new significance, however, in light of the toxic arguments of contemporary identity politics advocates. First, the latter insist—in the face of social and demographic evidence proving the opposite—that the races can't get along and that the white population is hopelessly racist. Second, these forces attack due process and the presumption of innocence, insisting that in cases of alleged sexual misconduct accusers "must be believed."

To Kill a Mockingbird has faced numerous attempts—in the first place, by explicitly right-wing forces—over the years by school boards to ban it. One of the first was carried out by the Hanover County, Virginia, board in 1966, on the grounds that the novel was "immoral literature." In the face of public outrage, including an open letter from Harper Lee, the board retreated.

Only last year, the Duluth, Minnesota, schools decided to remove Lee's novel, along with Mark Twain's classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), from its schools' curricula. And in 2017, the Biloxi, Mississippi, public school district removed *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the eighth-grade English lesson plan nine weeks into the semester.

In the racialist and anti-democratic #MeToo atmosphere in which movies like *Green Book* have been vehemently attacked, Lee's work, some 60 years down the road, has found a new swarm of right-wing critics, often in "left" disguise. We will discuss this further on.

"*[R]emember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird … Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy.*"—Atticus Finch

The first half of the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* deals with the lives and actions of three white children, Scout (Mary Badham), Jem (Phillip Alford)—the offspring of Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), a widowed attorney in the fictional rural town of Maycomb, Alabama—and their friend Dill (John Megna).

Through his interactions with the children, Atticus is fleshed out, as a man of deep integrity and unbendable humane values. ("You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.") He and his children are very attached to their black housekeeper, Calpurnia (Estelle Evans).

In the second half, Atticus' humanity is put to the test when he has to battle racist authorities and a portion of the town's white population for the life of a black man, Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), accused by a poor white female, Mayella Ewell (Collin Wilcox), of rape.

The tense courtroom scenes stick in the mind of everyone who has seen the film. The spectators are segregated, with black residents confined to the balcony, where Scout and the other children also sit.

Finch's cross-examination of the desperate, miserable Mayella suggests strongly she was not beaten by Robinson, but by her father. The black man has one withered arm and could not have carried out the actions he is accused of. When Robinson takes the stand, he denies he attacked Mayella, but testifies she kissed him. He explains he helped the young woman because he felt sorry for her, a sentiment the prosecutor (William Windom) seizes upon: "You felt sorry for her? A white woman? You felt sorry for her."

The core of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Atticus' summation for the defense. It is worth citing at length:

> *To begin with, this case should never have come to trial. The State has not produced one iota of medical evidence that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied, instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant. There is circumstantial evidence to indicate that Mayella Ewell was beaten savagely by someone who led, almost exclusively, with his left.*
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> *Tom Robinson now sits before you, having taken the oath with the only good hand he possesses: his right. I have nothing but pity in my heart for the chief witness for the State. She is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance. But my pity does not extend so far as to her putting a man's life at stake, which she has done in an effort to get rid of her own guilt. I say 'guilt,' gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She's committed no crime.*
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> *She has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our*

society. A code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. She must destroy the evidence of her offense. But what was the evidence of her offense? Tom Robinson, a human being. She must put Tom Robinson away from her. Tom Robinson was to her a daily reminder of what she did. Now, what did she do? She tempted a Negro. She was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that, in our society, is unspeakable. She kissed a black man. Not an old uncle, but a strong, young Negro man. No code mattered to her before she broke it, but it came crashing down on her afterwards.

The witnesses for the State, with the exception of the sheriff of Maycomb County, have presented themselves to you, gentlemen, to this court in the cynical confidence that their testimony would not be doubted. Confident that you gentlemen would go along with them on the assumption—the evil assumption—that all Negroes lie, all Negroes are basically immoral beings, all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women. An assumption that one associates with minds of their caliber and which is, in itself, gentlemen, a lie. Which I do not need to point out to you. And so a quiet, humble, respectable Negro who has had the unmitigated temerity to feel sorry for a white woman has had to put his word against two white people's.

The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in this courtroom is. Now, gentlemen, in this country our courts are the great levelers. In our courts, all men are created equal. I'm no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and of our jury system. That's no ideal to me. That is a living, working reality!

Despite the lack of evidence, Robinson is found guilty, then shot down while supposedly attempting to escape.

The movie has its limitations, many of them imposed by the times. This is a product of Hollywood and American liberalism. Certain characters are idealized, certain events strain credulity. The film fails to include a significant detail in the book, that the victimized black man had 17 bullet holes in his body.

However, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a product of a liberal social and intellectual milieu when it still had some substance, even in the aftermath of the McCarthyite purges. Peck-Atticus' speech to the jury remains a compassionate and democratic highlight in the history of American cinema. (It was undoubtedly the highlight of Peck's lengthy career.) The movie's hatred for and depiction of the fascist, racist forces is entirely legitimate and enduring, even if it does not explain the historical and social processes that make such reactionary elements possible.

Mulligan's work did not emerge in isolation. From the end of the blacklist in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, Hollywood produced numerous works aimed against racism or anti-Semitism, including *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *West Side Story* (1961), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *Pressure Point* (1962) and *The Pawnbroker* (1964), or of an overall socially critical character, among them, *Spartacus* (1960), *Inherit the Wind* (1960), *Elmer Gantry* (1960), *The Children's Hour* (1961), *Town Without Pity* (1961), *The Young Savages* (1961), *The Outsider* (1961), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Miracle Worker* (1962), *Advise & Consent* (1962), *David & Lisa* (1962), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962), *A Child is Waiting* (1963), *Seven Days in May* (1964), *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *The Best Man* (1964). The artistic quality varies widely, but for the most part, the filmmakers' sincerity cannot be questioned.

However, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one of the first major productions that confronted racist oppression directly. There had been numerous anti-lynching films made in Hollywood in the past, including *Fury* (1936), *They Won't Forget* (1937, a fictionalized account of the Leo Frank case), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *The Sound of Fury* (1950) and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), and even such relatively minor efforts as *Outcast* (1937) and *Woman They Almost Lynched* (1953), but all of them had white (or Asian) characters as victims. *To Kill a Mockingbird* took some courage and principle.

This was recognized by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1964 book *Why We Can't Wait.* His comments reflect the contradictions of the period and the politics that produced *To Kill a Mockingbird*. King first praises Finch for his non-violence, "to refrain from hitting back requires more will and bravery than the automatic reflexes of defense," which matches King's own pacifistic and reformist views. However, he goes on to make a quite perceptive and sensitive comment, which ought to serve as a slap in the face to our contemporary racialists.

After criticizing the American "frontier tradition" of "violent retaliation," King writes, "Yet there is something in the American ethos that responds to the strength of moral force. I am reminded of the popular and widely respected novel and film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch, a white southern lawyer, confronts a group of his neighbors who have become a lynch-crazy mob, seeking the life of his Negro client. Finch, armed with nothing more lethal than a lawbook, disperses the mob with the force of his moral courage, aided by his small daughter, who, innocently calling the would-be lynchers by name, reminds them that they are individual men, not a pack of beasts."

To Kill a Mockingbird brought together genuinely talented artists. Robert Mulligan (1925–2008) is an undervalued director. Born in the Bronx in modest circumstances, Mulligan rose to prominence during the early days of television drama in the 1950s, like contemporaries John Frankenheimer and Sidney Lumet.

Mulligan collaborated with Alan J. Pakula, also from the Bronx, on his first feature film *Fear Strikes Out* (1957), about the emotionally tormented baseball player Jimmy Piersall, a work highly praised by French critic-filmmaker François Truffaut. It is a "bitter and disillusioned film," Truffaut commented, "that doesn't make you want to live in America. But if there were French directors as lucid and talented as Mulligan … the image of our country on the screen would be a bit less simplified."

Mulligan made numerous uneven but interesting films with Tony Curtis, Steve McQueen and Natalie Wood in the early 1960s. He had one of his greatest commercial successes with *Summer of '42* (1971). His last film, *The Man in the Moon* (1991), introduced audiences to Reese Witherspoon.

Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum described Mulligan as "underrated and neglected," and suggested that the filmmaker "may be one of the only American directors left with a fully achieved style that is commonly (if misleadingly) termed classical. Indeed, he is a master of carving out dramatic space with liquid camera movements and precise angles, a mastery that's matched by a special sensitivity in handling adolescents."

In a 1978 interview, Mulligan disclosed that "none of my family was in show business. They went to the movies, they listened to the radio, but my father never got past grammar school, my mother never graduated high school. I used to read a lot as a kid. … My aunt had a collection that I'm sure came off some sort of gift book thing, because none of the people in my family really read. It was a collection of Dickens: everything he wrote. I read all of it, I don't know how many times." Mulligan directed a "star-studded" version of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* for television in 1958.

Mary Badham (younger sister of director John Badham), who played Scout at age 10 but never pursued an acting career, had only kind words to say about Mulligan's role during the production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "He was so patient," she told an interviewer. "He would get down at eye-level. He would squat down and talk to us. He didn't talk to us like children. He basically would set up the scene for us and let us do the scene. If he needed to tweak it, he would tweak it. He made a game out of it. He made it really fun." Badham also expressed great affection for

Brock Peters and for Peck, with whom she maintained a friendship until his death in 2003.

Pakula went on to a significant career as a director in his own right, responsible for *The Sterile Cuckoo* (1969), *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Presumed Innocent* (1990) and *The Pelican Brief* (1993).

Screenwriter Horton Foote, score composer Elmer Bernstein, cinematographer Russell Harlan (*Gun Crazy, The Thing, The Big Sky, Witness for the Prosecution, Rio Bravo*, etc.) and renowned art director Henry Bumstead (on *Vertigo* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, among many others) each deserves recognition for his contribution.

None of the effort or artistry, or courage, that went into *To Kill a Mockingbird*, however, satisfies or even concerns our present-day identity politics know-it-alls. Mulligan's film now elicits a generally hostile response from the media, in particular the *New York Times*, the leading #MeToo warrior. What scathing reviews it would attract from the *Times* if it were made today!

In a July 2015 *Times* article, "Now We Can Finally Say Goodbye to the White Savior Myth of Atticus," Osamudia R. James, a professor of law at the University of Miami, writes: "Atticus Finch presented an enduring model to which many white liberals still cling. But besides being a fictional character, Atticus Finch is a myth."

Finch's virtues may be exaggerated or the character may possess qualities that are maximized, but what does it mean to argue that Finch is a "white savior myth"? The implication of the remark is that no white people have ever stood up against racism in a principled fashion. Several hundred thousand white Northern soldiers died in the Civil War to end slavery, socialist labor leaders like Big Bill Haywood, Daniel De Leon and others ferociously fought racial prejudice and backwardness, Communist Party members in the 1930s braved death in the South to oppose Jim Crow and figures such as Viola Liuzzo, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman paid with their lives. James' comment is as ignorant as it is saturated with racialism.

In a June 2018 article in the *New York Times Book Review*, Roxane Gay, the gender and racial politics promoter and *Times* columnist, writes: "The 'n word' is used liberally throughout [the book] and there are some breathtaking instances of both casual and outright racism. The book is a 'product of its time,' sure, so let me just say that said time and the people who lived in it were plain terrible. As for the story, I can take it or leave it. Perhaps I am ambivalent because I am black. I am not the target audience. I don't need to read about a young white girl understanding the perniciousness of racism to actually understand the perniciousness of racism. I have ample firsthand experience."

What blindness and selfishness! This casual, cynical dismissal of Lee's novel and Mulligan's film lets us know what we need to know about Gay and her ilk at the *Times*.

The "perniciousness of racism" is not the central theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee and Mulligan hardly felt the need to make that case. Standing up for principle and demonstrating what King termed "moral force" in the face of prevailing public opinion is the central issue here.

Gay and company are self-centered cowards and conformists, who have never engaged in a serious struggle in their lives, at least none that didn't promise career and income improvement at the end of it. Gay can "take or leave," i.e., "leave," the struggle against racist violence in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, just as she can "take or leave," i.e., "leave," opposition to America's catastrophic wars in the Middle East and Central Asia or defense of Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden.

There's another issue, of course, involved in any discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the insistence of the #MeToo campaign that women have to be believed when they make allegations of sexual abuse. Lee's novel revolves around Mayella Ewell's self-serving lie. Although Gay won't say so, this facet of the novel also makes her and the rest of sexual witch-hunters unhappy and uncomfortable.

In a particularly vile "left" commentary, Nick Pemberton in *CounterPunch* ("Killing a Mockingbird" on March 11, 2019), asserts that Lee's novel is simply an example of "a fairy tale of good and evil" about "heroic rich white men in a history that produced none of these characters." The book, according to this deranged reading, teaches its readers "that justice comes from the top. Now power no longer corrupts. Power does not oppress. Power, when in the right hands, saves. To those in power, power is always in the right hands." What is he talking about? In fact, power in the genuinely right hands, the hands of the working class, absolutely does "save." This is semi-anarchist nonsense.

And later, the *CounterPunch* writer argues, "*To Kill A Mockingbird* should never go near a child again because it means nothing beyond a reproduction of its own mythos. Truth is not found in the books that rich people require children to read, nor it is in the verdicts of rich lawyers who decide who is good and bad." None of this empty-headed "radicalism" has anything to do with the book or film and their real place in American society.

The reactionary fantasies of James, Gay, Pemberton and countless others disregard the actual history, which King's comment took for granted. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both book and film, generated outrage and encouraged protest in the US and worldwide. And many young people, shaken by those works, went far beyond them in the political and social conclusions they drew, conclusions that rejected the entire capitalist social order. The lack of such works, changing what must be changed, is one of our great cultural problems at present.