

Don't Believe Everything You See at the Movies: The Influence of Anti-Communist and Anti-Slavic Governmental Propaganda in Hollywood Cinema in the Decade Following WWII

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"Don't Believe Everything You See at the Movies" is an evaluation of the American film industry in the decade following WWII. It analyzes government involvement in the private film sector and how the film industry responded to pressure to produce films with pro-American stance as well as themes of anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiment. The essay argues that these films were the direct result of government involvement in the lives/careers of the actors, actresses, writers, producers, and directors of the time, and how their reaction came to shape American film culture throughout the decade.

Movies, like the theatre productions that preceded them, are largely based on the suspension of disbelief in their viewers. This means that in order to enjoy a movie, one must immerse oneself in the world presented on screen and, for that moment, accept this reality rather than their own. This tactic of self-imposed selected ignorance for the purpose of entertainment has acted to hold moviegoers captive for nearly a century. A movie's reality can include a variety of different perspectives based on the motivations and perspectives of the actors, producers, directors, and writers. Film always has a purpose. The American government actively intervened in the film industry in the 1940s and '50s in order to denounce communism and promote "American values". The intent of this paper is to illustrate to the reader that this deliberate intervention had a direct influence on the way that Hollywood would present their movies to the American people over the next decade, using positive reinforcement or negative censorship of their Constitutional rights to expression.

Without film, there is no film theory, the same way that without cinema, there can be no cinematography. Similar to literary theory, film theory operates on the basis of skepticism on the part of the viewer, which puts the object in question at a distance and the things surrounding it closer, creating a stronger socio-cultural viewpoint as opposed to just the film itself. A nation's film, like the nation's literature, becomes a symbol of the nation itself, and can be used to represent a larger group of people because certain films are just so popular that it is expected that someone of that nationality must have seen the movie. For example, today certain fan fiction-based films, such as the Harry Potter series, are so assimilated into our immediate culture that even someone who has not actually seen the films is familiar enough with them to understand what Hogwarts is. Through film theory, historians are able to take information about movies of a particular time, and then apply that information to the culture in which they were presented under the assumption that this work had an impact on those watching it, and how they were to go about their day-to-day lives.

The difficulty, however, arises when it is time to “canonize” films appropriate to film theory.¹ What do you include? Does a movie with blatant propaganda make its way into the canon? Is this film as worthy as a blockbuster that was not influenced by government intervention? Yes. Not only is it as worthy, but it is more worthy in that this film represents to the viewer a more accurate representation of a primary source at the time, influenced by the world around it, depicting that with which a society is most concerned. By viewing these films laced with obvious propaganda, we are able to see the bigger picture painted for us by the people who made them, and the reasons for making them.

First, we must address what is propaganda. What makes something propaganda, as opposed to just a movie or just a poster? Propaganda is defined as a “one-sided communication designed to influence people’s thinking and actions,” by *World Book Encyclopedia* in 2005.² It is recognizable often due to its call for internment action by the viewer, appealing to the observer’s sense of logic and reason. Materials of propaganda typically purposefully employ psychological tactics such as repetition or drawing off the reader’s sense of moral right and wrong or their patriotism, suggesting that certain actions make them more or less a part of their nationalistic group.³ The purpose of propaganda is to deliberately manipulate the viewer’s understanding of the world around them as well as their interpretation of current events, often without the viewer being aware that this was the original intent.

Propaganda in film began with the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in 1915, when what was once the pure consumer-interest market of the American cinema became subservient to the government, and on March 3 of that same year, the first propagandic film was produced with *The Birth of A Nation*, which showed the Ku Klux Klan as the saviors of the Reconstruction south, a film that received approval from president Woodrow Wilson himself.^{4 5} By taking the film point of view and applying it to a governmental agenda, the film itself was no longer the pure representation of the film industry, but rather a joint issue shared by both the film makers and the government under which that film was produced. This partnership would come to create the film industry that we know today, in which outside forces acting upon a film in a negative or a positive way by the American government would have an influence on the film itself, whether film makers are choosing to comply or to rebel.

As the cinema became increasingly popular among the American public, this new age of technology and entertainment soon became a puppet to the American government as a new form of outreach to its citizens. Throughout WWII, the American government used cinema to promote war efforts. It is even suspected that during WWII, while the Nazis were relying on Joseph

¹ Deborah Knight, “Back to the Basics: Film/ Theory/ Aesthetics”, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 31, no 2, (Summer 1997): 37-44.

² Paul A. Kobasa, *World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15. Chicago, IL: World Book Inc, 2006, 823.

³ Kobasa, Paul, 823.

⁴ Brian Manley, “Moving Pictures: The History of Early Cinema,” *Proquest Discovery Guides* (July 2011) 11-14, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.csa.com/discoveryguides/film/review.pdf>.

⁵ N. O’Shaughnessy, “The Death and Life of Propaganda,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 12, no. 1 (November 2010), 32.

Goebbels to push their agenda through breakthrough cinematic technological advancements, Hollywood cinema was pushed by the White House to make movies that depicted the Soviets in a positive light due to the two countries working together to stop the Nazis.⁶ Such movies included *Mission to Moscow* in 1943, which depicted Stalin as a powerless figure and failed to even mention communism, and *Song of Russia* in 1944, which was a semi-musical that ignored the Nazi-Soviet Pact and showed Russians as happy dancing creatures when they were not fighting off the evil Nazis.⁷ While during the war these movies were celebrated as pro-American agenda propaganda, only a few short years after the end of the war they were both named as Un-American by the House Un-American Activities Committee and banned from movie theaters around the country.^{8 9}

In the years following the end of WWII, roughly 1945 to 1990, the United States and the Soviet Union entered a war of ideals, in which they competed for the hearts of their own people as well as those around the world. At its start, the Cold War was the concern of the American government. Soon, the concern would spread to the people as the government tasked them to actively participate in the protection of Capitalism and democracy. It became the responsibility of the American people to not only be an American, but to prove that they were more American than their neighbors. It was a time of fear and distrust, abroad as well as at home. Domestically, this push began with the governmental leadership. Then it trickled down to Hollywood producers, actors, and writers who were genuinely afraid of what any opposition would do to their careers. From there, it made its way to the American people - the audiences attending these movies.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a group fueled by the charismatic Senator Joseph McCarthy, rose to unparalleled prominence. The committee's primary focus was to find communism on the home front in the form of the ACP, the American Communist Party. To do this, the committee looked closely at every nuance of public forum, especially that of film. If the Hollywood filmmakers were not with the HUAC, then they were, by definition, against it. This pressure from the HUAC divided Hollywood, causing major filmmakers to implement blacklist policies for any individual who had been accused of having ties to or sympathies for the Communist Party. This meant that anyone found guilty or even suspected of guilt would be banned from the Hollywood scene, unable to return due to expressed dissonance by major Hollywood players.¹⁰ While countless actors, actresses, directors, producers, and even

⁶ "Joseph Goebbels," *History*, A&E Television Networks (2010), accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/joseph-goebbels>.

⁷ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen; 'Song of Russia' Rich Musical Picture, With Robert Taylor and Susan Peters, Opens at the Capitol," *The New York Times*, "Movie Review" (11 February, 1944), accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9905EED7103CE03ABC4952DFB466838F659EDE>.

⁸ Nora Sayre, "Assaulting Hollywood," *World Policy Journal* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 51-52.

⁹ Bosley Crowther, "Mission to Moscow 1943," *The New York Times*, "Movie Review," (April 30, 1943), accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9505E5DD1638E33BBC4850DFB2668388659EDE>.

¹⁰ "HUAC," *History*, A&E Television Networks, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/huac>.

auxiliary personnel lost their jobs because of this reign of terror, only ten were ever actually prosecuted for their work, known collectively as the infamous “Hollywood Ten”.¹¹

Among those to pay their career for their art was famed comic, actor, and playwright Charlie Chaplin in his movie *Monsieur Verdoux*.¹² The movie, a comedy as one would expect from Chaplin, is about the French serial killer Henri Landru, who by day was a furniture maker with a happy middle-class family, and by night married rich widows and then killed them and took their money. The film is known as one of Chaplin’s darkest creations, and he himself oversaw the writing of the script. The film may have gone down in history as a work of brilliance, maybe even one of the first comedies to contend for an Oscar, had his timing been different. Although Chaplin had never been, nor did he ever become, a communist, the character he chose to portray announced with his dying breath, “One murder makes a villain, millions a hero. Numbers sanctify, my good friend.” This ambiguous reference to Soviet leader Josef Stalin, in the eyes of the public, killed his character as well as his film. In 1947, the movie was removed from circulation due to demonstrations by the American Legion outside movie houses where the film was shown.¹³ In the wake of negative response, Chaplain fled the United States in order to live out the rest of his days in France.¹⁴

While some stars fell, others embraced the capitalism of another’s misfortune, using the beginnings of the Red Scare to flourish their careers. These stars and starlets fed on the misfortune of those being persecuted by the HUAC, as they took Hollywood in a completely different direction, one that willingly mass produced the governmental agenda not only to avoid an ill fate, but to garner a positive one. Through this, many film companies were able to stake their brand on their shining patriotism and rise to the top of the rankings, taking the place of those who had fallen and turning anti-communist propaganda into corporate pressure propaganda that built up their names in American households.¹⁵ One of these starlets whose name still rings true in the hearts of movie lovers everywhere is that of Elizabeth Taylor, who starred in her first adult role in the film *Conspirator*, released in 1949 both domestically and internationally by MGM in an attempt to use international relations with Great Britain and France in order to free up funding that had been previously tied up in the European markets.¹⁶ In this 87-minute film, Taylor’s character plays an innocent eighteen-year-old girl who unwittingly marries a communist. When she finds out that he is a member of the Communist Party, she, like a true American patriot, tells her husband that he must choose between their marriage and his party. The movie ends with the “evil” Communist Party telling the husband, played by another Hollywood A-list, Robert Taylor, that he must kill his

¹¹ Glenda Pearsons, “The Red Scare: A Filmography,” *The All Powers Project*, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/AllPowers/film.html>.

¹² Sayre, 52.

¹³ Sayre, 52.

¹⁴ David Robinson, “Filming Monsieur Verdoux,” *Charlie Chaplin: Official Website*, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://www.charliechaplin.com/en/biography/articles/8-Monsieur-Verdoux>.

¹⁵ O’Shaughnessy, 35.

¹⁶ “Conspirator (1949),” *Turner Classic Movies*, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/71448/Conspirator/>.

beloved wife. Of course, as one would expect in a propaganda film of the decade, the husband chooses the side of democracy and the lovely Elizabeth Taylor.¹⁷ Today, the movie is ranked 32nd in Taylor's best box-office films, only grossing \$28.8 million (adjusted for inflation); however, the movie was responsible for transitioning Taylor from child star to adult symbol.¹⁸

Over fifty explicitly anti-communist films were produced in Hollywood between 1947 and 1954. Many of these films were cheaply made and shot as quickly as possible by Hollywood companies that wanted to garner as much governmental favor as possible in order to protect them from persecution led by the HUAC. The idea was that if a company was producing enough anti-communist films, then they were not members of the ACP and were, therefore, safe from inquiry or blacklist tactics. Most of these box office disasters were run as the second film in a double-feature so that Hollywood could make back the money that they lost during filming. Such films followed a basic platform and featured B-list actors that the public would likely never see again. In these movies, the communist spy antagonist in his signature trench coat would lurk in corners and sport an unusually large and dark shadow. Unfortunately for audiences everywhere, this description also tended to apply to the FBI protagonist hunting the evil communist. Therefore, moviegoers had to watch for other signs as well, such as cruelty to animals or babies, or a tell-tale sign of communists expelling smoke from their nostrils when they became angry. Communists often also had in their employ a "bad blonde," who would seduce the good democratic American boy to the dark side with her sensual curves and her red lipstick.¹⁹ These films, sporting names like *I Married a Communist* (1949), *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Was A Communist for the FBI* (1951), and *The Commies are Coming, The Commies are Coming* (1957) made no effort to hide their overt themes of propaganda, but rather boasted it on the big screen in rapid fire, despite economic losses, all in an attempt to prove to the American people as well as the government that the actors, writers, producers, and directors were all patriotic and proud.²⁰

Among the many genres subjected to anti-propagandic themes, westerns were one of the most scrutinized as they were wildly popular with the American people. In 1949, *Bells of Coronado* began the HUAC witch hunt for westerns, as it is commonly accepted as the first western film to depict overtly an anti-communist theme, rather than relying on subversive ideas of freedom and the American West to do the job.²¹ The film gained attention from moviegoers due to the appearance of actor Roy Rogers and his faithful steed Trigger, and the attention of the government as it featured strong themes of espionage and anti-communism.²²

In the 1950s, America saw the rise of science fiction pictures. In these movies, characters were often riddled with fear of an unknown enemy such as an alien invaders or a nuclear mishap.

¹⁷. *Conspirator*, directed by Victor Saville (Chicago, IL: Warner Brothers Archive Collection, 1949), DVD.

¹⁸. Bruce Coogerson, "Elizabeth Taylor Movies: Best to Worst", *Coogerson Movie Score*, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://coogersonmoviescore.com/elizabeth-taylor-movies-best-to-worst.html>.

¹⁹. Sayre, 58.

²⁰. Glenda Pearsons, "The Red Scare: A Filmography," *The All Powers Project*, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/AllPowers/film.html>.

²¹. *Bells of Coronado*, directed by William Witney, (1950; New York, NY: Republic Productions, 2012), YouTube.

²². Pearsons.

These films were successful because of breakthrough technology as well as the American fascination with space and science. They also acted to spread the paranoia of an unseen enemy, be it the danger of infiltration and brain washing by the alien visitors in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), or simply the fear of the leader of the Parent Teacher's Association living down the street.²³

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The best enemy is that which one never sees coming, and the same goes for swaying tactics. What filmmakers did not say was just as important as what they did. Throughout the decade following WWII, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was constantly in the Hollywood news. Many films focused on the FBI agents rooting out communism at home and doing the good work for the good people of the United States of America. J Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, even steps out himself on occasion, voicing his opinion when he felt that a movie may not have served the best interests of the FBI or represented them in the "correct" light, even going so far as to actively protest *The Crooked Mile* (1948), a film in which Hollywood A-List star Dennis O'Keefe played an FBI agent teamed up with a Scotland Yard operative to uncover a ring of communist spies in Los Angeles, and which made the FBI look absolutely incompetent and belittled the work of American nuclear scientists.²⁵ When *The New York Times* published its review for the movie in October 1948, raising questions as to why the FBI would allow its name to be used in such a film, Hoover himself released a statement to the press saying that the film was not supported by the FBI in any way, undermining the documentary feel of the film.²⁶

Despite all the fuss being created by the FBI, and occasionally the House Un-American Activities Committee, it is important for the film historian to take into account those organizations that used their influence not to take the limelight, but to stay off the screen completely. Among these organizations, the most successful is that of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a group that dealt mostly with operations overseas, and remained largely undocumented by the film industry. Historically speaking, the 1950s are often referred to as the "Golden Age" of CIA activities as they carried out covert operations in almost every democratic country in the world in attempts to stamp out communism where it might lie, yet most Americans did not even know what the CIA stood for, much less what they did for the democratic cause. It could be easily said that this is because that is the way the CIA wanted things to go. As an organization it preferred secrecy, and through tactical denial of cooperation with Hollywood producers, who were scared to film anything that did not hold the seal of approval from the government agency that it portrayed on threat of being blacklisted or jailed, the CIA successfully managed to carry out their covert operations largely undetected and without being scrutinized by the American public.²⁷

²³ Sayre, 58.

²⁴ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel (1955; New York, NY: Republic Pictures, 2000), DVD.

²⁵ Pearsons.

²⁶ Bosley Crowther, "Walk A Crooked Mile 1948: Review #1," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1948, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9407E0D81F3EE53ABC4B52DFB6678383659EDE>.

²⁷ Simon Willmetts, "Quiet Americans: The CIA and Early Cold War Hollywood Cinema," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 1 (February 2013): 127-131.

Throughout the decade following WWII, American filmography is permanently marred by the influence of the government in what films were or were not allowed to be shown to the general public. The government employed everything from basic scare tactics and the threat of jail to actual jail time for martyrs like the Hollywood Ten. It was a time of turmoil as well as peace within the hearts of a country torn by a war that the government never actually fought. While the careers of some Hollywood stars and starlets were forever cemented in fame, others watched helplessly as their careers were ruined as their names appeared on blacklists. In order to understand the true meanings of these films, drenched in themes of fear and paranoia, we as historians must look at them in the larger context, taking into account the ongoing ideological battle between the communist Soviet Union and the democratic United States of America, and see them for what they are, blatant anti-communist propaganda pushed on an unsuspecting audience in order to target the most successful yet subliminal impact.²⁸

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