

Communism Amongst the Stars: Anti-Communism in Film during the 1940s-50s

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Following the end of World War II, a new ideological dichotomy engulfed the entire world. The emergence of the Cold War could be seen at every corner of the globe, and also every facet of American life. Anti-communism became a national ideology, and for many, an obsession. In the early years of the Cold War paranoia reigned supreme. Men like Joseph McCarthy initiated witchhunts in order to root out the communist threat that had supposedly embedded themselves in American society. Any semblance of a connection to communism, no matter the circumstances, essentially doomed you in front of the eyes of the House Un-American Activities Committee. The greatest fear was that communists infiltrated American institutions. One institution that drew much attention, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was Hollywood. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI at the time, testified in front of the HUAC in regards to Hollywood's communist problem.

The Communists have developed one of the greatest propaganda machines the world has ever known. They have been able to penetrate and infiltrate many respectable and reputable public opinion mediums... Communist activity in Hollywood is effective and is furthered by Communists and sympathizers using the prestige of prominent persons to serve, often unwittingly, the Communist cause.¹

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¹Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

Oddly, this growing concern came after the most successful year Hollywood had to date. Hollywood and its influence grew, yet so did its worries. The HUAC formed the Blacklist that sought to purge the industry of communists and their sympathizers.

Hollywood's adoption of the anti-communist rhetoric was not wholly due to pressure from Washington. Many of the decision makers in the industry saw the adoption as a necessity in order for Hollywood to survive. (a means of survival for the industry?). Following the Blacklist, anti-communist themes began to appear in films across a multitude of genres. The films varied in the prevalence of their anti-communist rhetoric. Some films were blatant propaganda films. Works like *Walk East on Beacon!* (1952), which J. Edgar Hoover was given a writing credit for, and *Big Jim McClain* (1952) blared their anti-communist sentiments. Other filmmakers, like Cecil B. DeMille, sought to present their ideology in a more subtle fashion.

Many different genres incorporated anti-communism into their films. The growing genre of science fiction made the public leery of science experiments. Westerns warn viewers of an encroaching threat that must be stopped. The enormous religious epics, from men like DeMille, tapped into the religious aspect of the ideological difference between America and the U.S.S.R. The theme of anti-communism was apparent throughout hundreds of films following the HUAC hearings regarding communism in Hollywood, and was primarily brought about by Hollywood itself.

Leading up to 1947, the HUAC was becoming increasingly concerned with the growing influence of Hollywood and cinema. Films like *Mission to Moscow* (1943) and *Song of Russia* (1944) concerned the HUAC. The two big studios, MGM and Warner, appeared to produce pro-communist propaganda.² In 1946 Hollywood saw their highest revenue yet, making around \$1.7

2007. (accessed December 3, 2013).

²Lawrence Murray, "Monsters, Spies, and Subversives: The Film Industry responds to the Cold War, 1945-1955." *Jump Cut*, 1975. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC09folder/ColdWarFilms.html> (accessed December 3, 2013).

billion with over 4 billion admissions.³ Seeing the steady increase in revenue, the HUAC knew that such an influential institution was a prime target for communist infiltration. This culminated in a nine-day hearing to assess the communist threat in Hollywood. The Blacklist was created, and the Waldorf Statement was issued by Hollywood declaring that executives would comply with the blacklist. By 1960, the Blacklist contained over two thousand names, and ruined a multitude of careers.⁴

The film industry has tried to avoid external censorship. In 1934 The House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce looked establishing a federal censorship board. Hollywood instituted The Motion Picture Code in the 1930s as an internal form of self-censorship to appease the government and avoid external regulation. Many of the rules denounce showing evil in a positive light. "I. No picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it. This is done: (a) When evil is made to appear *attractive*, and good is made to appear unattractive. In accordance with the general principles laid down: 1) No plot or theme should definitely side with evil and against good."⁵ The HUAC would bring many of these rules up years later during their inquiry into Hollywood.

The film industry had other reasons to insert anti-communist themes in their works besides government pressure. Even though 1946 was a record year for Hollywood, they still worried about their future profits. *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* ended the ownership of theaters and exclusive holding rights by the movie studios.⁶ This made studios fearful of drastic cuts in their profits. Other factors made the studios fear for their profits. Television became a mainstay with full-scale commercial broadcasting beginning in 1947, and by 1955 half of all households owned one.⁷ Television was also affected by McCarthy's witch-

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 46.

⁵*The Production Code of 1930*. (manuscript., 1930), <http://www.und.edu/instruct/cjacobs/ProductionCode.htm>.

⁶*United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. - 334 U.S. 131 (1948)*

⁷Mitchell Stephens, *History of Television*. (manuscript., New York University),

hunts, however. Another issue was that many European countries in 1947 began raising taxes on foreign films. England imposed a 75% customs duty on all incoming films, which lost the studios millions.⁸ With the pressures from T.V., along with increasing cost of production, increase of foreign taxes, and labor issues, Hollywood feared collapse or significant harm to their industry.

In order to attract more viewers, Hollywood sought to embrace the public's fear of the communist threat. They knew that addressing the Cold War, whether directly or in more subtle fashions, would put more people in the seats. Exposing the public to this sort of confirmation bias would not only increase revenue, but also appease Washington at the same time.

Darryl Zanuck, head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox, said "If you have something worthwhile to say, dress it in glittering robes of entertainment and you will find a ready market... without entertainment no propaganda film is worth a dime."⁹ Zanuck knew that the public wanted to be entertained; that is why that is why Hollywood had over four billion admittees three years later. Zanuck knew that these propaganda films would be no where near as effective without Hollywood's touch. The direct propaganda films were the simplest and most blatant forms of anti-communism in the industry. *Walk East on Beacon*, directed by Louis de Rochemont and adapted from a *Reader's Digest* article written by J. Edgar Hoover himself, was a detective film that sought to directly address Soviet subversion.¹⁰ It tells the story of a federal agent tracking down leaked atomic secrets and bringing light to the communist subversion. Of course this film has a very positive view of the FBI, and is trying to convey to the audience that they should trust the FBI to keep them safe from the communist subversion. This movie is about as good as one would assume a movie in which J. Edgar Hoover has a writing credit would be. Only receiving a 33% on Rotten Tomatoes, the film is not great, but it is very apparent in its goal.

[http://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/History of Television page.htm](http://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/History%20of%20Television%20page.htm).

⁸Murray, "Monsters, Spies, and Subversives."

⁹Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 9.

¹⁰Murray, "Monsters, Spies, and Subversives."

Westerns became a great voice for Hollywood's anti-communist sentiments directed at the public. John Ford was one of the most highly regarded western film directors who included his anti-communist views in his work. Ford was a very accomplished director winning seven out of twelve Academy Awards. His name was often associated with the greatest movie cowboy of all time: John Wayne. Wayne, who was brought in by the HUAC during their investigation of Hollywood and was the co-founder of the Anti-Communist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, was a cold warrior who did his part by starring in these westerns pregnant with anti-communism. "the growing defeatist attitude in the Cold War imposed on us by the Soviet [Union]', and consequently needed to appreciate the struggle our ancestors made for the precious freedom we enjoy."¹¹ Wayne starred in *Big Jim McClain*; *Big Jim McClain*, a simple film that does not try to hide its anti-communist sentiments. In the film, Wayne plays HUAC investigator who saves Hawaii from communist subversion. He worked with John Ford on eighteen films. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), being one of the Wayne and Ford collaborations, exudes the ardent anti-communist sentiments in a more nonchalant manner. In the opening scene a group of Indians are shown riding while narration plays over it. The narrator speaks of the threat the unification of red people everywhere poses to America, and how if they are not stopped soon, they will take centuries to defeat.¹² Anti-communism undertones were very apparent in the narration of the opening scene, but it was not wholly spelled out, leaving some connections for the audience to make. More anti-communist westerns would arise in the late 1950s and early 1960s including *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and John Wayne's directing debut, *The Alamo* (1960).

Science Fiction was a growing genre in the 1950s and was wholly affected by anti-communism. The sci-fi movies being produced in the late 1940s and 1950s were generally B grade films that could be churned out because of low budget costs. Due to the

¹¹Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 207.

¹²Murray, "Monsters, Spies, and Subversives."

sheer number of sci-fi movies being produced they were the perfect vessel for anti-communism, but in more subtle ways than films like *Walk East on Beacon* or *Big Jim McClain*. Films like *Them!* (1954) taught the public to be weary of atomic power.¹³ *Them!* is about ants that became mutated by atomic tests in New Mexico. This radiation exposure makes the ants giant, and they begin to wreak havoc on society; they are eventually stopped by the brave military men. The American public already feared the power of the atomic age, and this only reinforced their fear. Kids hiding under their desks during fallout drills began to fear the threat of giant mutated creatures coming for them more than they feared the actual bomb. *Them!* also shows the public that their military is there to protect them from this new atomic threat. Films like *Them!* successfully play off the fears of the unknown nature of the atomic era.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) is a prime example of science fiction making commentary on ideology. It tells the story of a small town doctor who begins to see paranoia running high in his town due to the people of the town being replaced by imposters. Just in the opening scenes one can easily see the similarities to the Red Scare, with paranoia running high and people concerned that their family or friends are communists. The main character, Dr. Miles Bennell, discovers the people of his town are being replaced by imposters that are coming from the pods found all over town. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* exudes familiar characteristics that are common during the Red Scare of the 1950s, conformity, paranoia, and alienation.¹⁴ Conformity, as shown in the movie as accepting the pod people, was an important ideal during this time. The U.S. spoke of conformity against communism, urging citizens to report anything suspicious and to display Americanism and capitalism. "Excessive conformity, as in the 1950s, was a salve to smooth over obvious conflict and turmoil"¹⁵ Bennell's paranoia

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Samuels. "Hollywood's America: United States History Through its Film, in " *The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)*, Edited by Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, 223. New York: Brandywine Press, 1993.

¹⁵Ibid, 224.

while telling his story to others captivates the paranoia that drove the McCarthy witch-hunts and is what the government used to keep their citizens ever vigilant against communism. In the closing scene of the film Bennell's psychiatrist, who put his story off as the ramblings of a crazy man, sees one of the aforementioned pods and calls the FBI. Like in *Walk East on Beacon* or *Them!* this affirms the public's dependence on institutions such as the FBI and the military, and the message of if you see something call it in. Just looking at the movie poster for the movie indicates an undertone of communism. The background is washed with red and yellow with a hand coming out as if to snatch Bennell from the foreground of the poster. Something like this is subtle, but still conveys the message.

One of the most ardent anti-communists in Hollywood was Cecil B Demille. He created biblical epics such as *Ben Hurr* (1959) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Demille, like many directors such as John Ford, mobilized the past for political use in the present.¹⁶ Biblical tales were often used in not only Demille's films but also in films like *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Prodigal* (1955) to make political statements. Many saw the Cold War as more than merely a political disagreement; they saw it in terms of religious context also.

This can hardly be a coincidence. Many people, including some in Hollywood, believe that the Cold War is fundamentally a conflict between Christianity and atheism and that religion is therefore a strong weapon against Communism. Whether the pictures dealing with these three subjects are deliberate propaganda, or not, they belong to the same, easily recognisable, pattern of ideas... The best propaganda, of course, is indirect, hardly noticeable. How many of us, I wonder, have not been taken in by any of it.¹⁷

Demille, being the son of a Protestant minister, saw the importance of religion in the battle against communism. His

¹⁶Shaw. *Hollywood's Cold War*, 113.

¹⁷ Catherine de la Roche, *Films and Filming*, 1955, quoted in Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: the State, Propaganda, and Consensus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 76.

greatest contribution to this was *The Ten Commandments*, the “historical” account of Moses’ exodus from Egypt. The theme of the film being “whether men are to be ruled by God’s law, or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Ramses.”¹⁸ One could replace Ramses’ name with Stalin in that statement and tell someone that this was a quote from Joseph McCarthy, and they would most likely be none the wiser. Demille clearly meant for Charlton Heston’s Moses to be an allegory for America leading the rest of the world to freedom from the tyranny of the allegorical Egypt. Demille opens the film by walking on screen and asking, “are men property of the state? Or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today.”¹⁹ Demille’s biblical epic won six out of the seven Academy Awards it was nominated for and is now seen as a classic. Most versions shown today have edited out Demille’s questioning prelude to the film.

Over time, as the Cold War cooled down, films became less subtle about their anti-communist sentiments, especially with the rise of action movies in the 1970s and 1980s. Movies like *Rocky IV* and *Red Dawn* pit America directly against the Soviets in more non-traditional settings unlike the direct propaganda movies of the 1940s and 1950s. This history of anti-communism could possibly be blamed for all of the Russian villains in modern cinema. The popularity of film only continued to rise, and with it came a rise in public influence. Whether it was direct propaganda in frankly poor movies, like in *Walk East on Beacon*, or more subtle themes of the times in highly revered classics, like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, anti-communism was very apparent throughout American film and was consumed by millions of viewers.

¹⁸Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 119.

¹⁹Ibid., 121.