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History 398
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Popular Films, Public Opinion, and the Cold War

> Hollywood, and any national film industry for that matter, is both a leader and follower of public opinion. In portraying foreign characters it reflects what it believes to be the popular attitudes of the time, but it also turns these often vague attitudes into concrete images (*The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1. Spring, 1949).

good find

This was the view of some concerning popular movies in 1949.However, it is evident from the Hollywood films produced in the decades since this statement was written that the aim of Hollywood producers went from supporting government policy to exploring the different moral aspects of the Cold War, to actively mocking the prospect of Communist domination of America. By the mid-1960s the era of the Hollywood Blacklist and the Red Scare was long gone, and the American film industry not only sought to change or reflect American public opinion, but also to change world opinion by releasing films that no longer sustained the American government's us versus them mentality.

good intro

During the long period between1947 and 1989, the Cold War assumed many distinct shapes according to world events. After WWII, the perceived threat was the Communist tide in Europe as well as the internal threat here in the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) were on the hunt for Communist infiltration within the U.S. Hollywood soon became an easy target, because the views of those in the movie industry were put on display everywhere through motion pictures. Producers, directors, studio executives, as well as actors and writers were all subject to scrutiny. It was in 1947, in the witch-hunt atmosphere that pervaded America when major changes in the industry occurred.

According to Lawrence L. Murray, in his online article *The Film Industry Responds to the Cold War, 1945-1955 Monsters, Spies, and Subversives*:

> Because movies are not made in a social vacuum, they were bound eventually to reflect and to re-enforce the garrison state mentality which pervaded most people's minds here. That timetable, grounded in Hollywood's predilection to supply the public with films in which the viewing audience's needs, desires, and interests -- dreams -- are accommodated, was accelerated by extrinsic factors, specifically the 1947 HUAC investigation.

These public needs were exhibited in films like *Guilty of Treason* (1949), *The Big Lift* (1950), and *Walk East on Beacon* (1952). They included themes such as capitulation to the evil empire, the Berlin airlift and government infiltration of Soviet spies (Landon, Films of the Cold War).

Shortly thereafter, political and social issues were replaced with allegory and reflected government and public opinion. As Philip J Landon writes in his piece entitled *The Cold War*, published in the *Columbia Companion to American History on Film*:

> By the late 1950s, as Stephen Whitfield points out in *The Culture of the Cold War*, attitudes toward the cold war were undergoing significant changes. The excesses of "McCarthyism" had discredited the anticommunist crusades of the previous decade, making it difficult to stifle criticism of the country's Cold War policies by labeling them un-American…More important, perhaps, the idea of winning a war between the United States and the Soviet

> Union became suspect. No ideological differences seemed to justify a nuclear holocaust.

Allegory is also exhibited in films of the Cold War period as science fiction. By the mid to late 1950s, it was still not prudent for the studios to include political and social themes related to Socialist or Communist issues. Victoria O'Donnell writes in her essay *Science Fiction Film and Cold War Anxiety,* printed in *History of American Cinema: The Fifties*:

> ...science fiction films presented indirect expressions of anxiety about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust or a Communist invasion of America...Although both government and private groups discouraged criticism of U.S. policies and expressions of fear about national security during the Cold War, the producers of science fiction films were generally left alone by government regulators and the private groups that tried to shape public opinion.

These films tried to reinforce the fear of invasion from outside forces, which was symbolic of invasion by the Soviet Union, but were unsuccessful because attitudes had already changed by the late 1950s. In addition, the public viewed these allegorical films as more and more ridiculous as time passed, but that is not to say they were not popular.

Public attitudes would again be affected by the film industry as the 1950s ended and the turbulent era of the 1960s began. By the mid-1960s, the combination of anti-establishment sentiment, the continuation of the long stand-off between the U.S. and Russia, and the film industry's switch back to political themes led to several films that openly mocked Cold War tensions. One of those films was *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). In his

article, *Just What the Doctor Ordered: Cold War Purging, Political Dissent, and the Right Hand of Dr. Strangelove*, posted online, Jeremy Boxen writes:

> To a nation that was living through the stress of the nuclear arms race and had faced the real prospect of nuclear war, the satiric treatment of the nation's leaders was an orgasmic release from deep fears and tensions. Its detractors argued that the film was juvenile, offensive, and inaccurate. Viewed, however, in its context of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation, *Dr. Strangelove* represents to the United States a purging of Cold War rhetoric and anxiety and the beginning of the wave of political and cultural dissent that would climax in the late 1960s.

Another film released in 1966 had an enormous effect on public and even government opinion. *The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming* (1966) seemed to bring the people of both countries closer together. This is evident from many scenes from this movie, a few of which will be discussed here. The second scene in this movie starts with the son, Pete Whittaker, claiming that the men he saw creeping around the house were Russians. Walt, the father has a hard time believing this and discounts Pete's declarations out of hand. This conveys the public's attitude toward invasion by the Soviets as almost non-existent. Another example is when Jonathon Winters' character, Officer Norman Jones, claims that the whole affair must be some kind of misunderstanding. Still another comes at the very end of the movie when in the process of escorting the Russian submarine out to sea, the Whittaker family affectionately bids the Russian sailors farewell. Allusions to equality between nations are pervasive

throughout the film. If this did not reflect public opinion, it certainly sought to change it. In 1966, Toni Mastroianni from the Cleveland Press wrote this about the film in his review, "While the movie is hilarious it also is warm and human and even has a message of sorts—though no one is hit over the head with it. It portrays the good and bad in all people, and especially the absurd."

Films of the cold war can be very indicative of public opinion, but could also change it. The film industry of Hollywood went from an instrument for government propaganda, to a period of allegory, to voice of opposition to government Cold War policy, and this was reflected in the public sentiment, albeit slowly.

10/10

Jeff -

Whew! Great work on the context of the films of the Cold War. Outside of sci-fi, do we see any softening even by the 1961 doc?

The paper is well argued, makes excellent use of the material you found, and is clearly written. Great work!

Works Cited

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