

Communism and the Political Subconscious of Film Noir

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Introduction

Film noir was a popular style of filmmaking through the early to mid 1900's, and with it came a whole new era unique from the rest. From sinister plots to visually dim and eerie settings, film noir encapsulated the feelings and fear of a nation during an unbalanced time socially and politically in the United States.

The fear of communism was very prevalent post WWII not only in American society, but within Hollywood as well. During this time period, many anti-communist films began to appear within the industry. Some films blatantly protested it, while others had a more psychological and less aggressive agenda. What is an intriguing question that will be explored further is if certain directors consciously included anti-communist themes within their films, or if they were subconsciously influenced by their surrounding environment. For example, films such as *Pickup on South Street* (1953) and *The Red Menace* (1949) have many similarities but also go about portraying the threat of communism very differently. The years of noir filmmaking that will be explored further with the connection of communism will be 1945-1960, as many significant noir films that include a communist narrative were released during then.

When discussing communism in noir films, hints of such political messages can be found not only within the narrative, but aesthetically as well. Noir films generally include dark visuals involving the use of low lighting and shadows, but the films that possibly have a hint of anti-communism only enhance those technical aspects. However

it is bold to assume each and every visual choice a director is making is associated with their political beliefs. Along with the visuals, the character movement on screen may indicate mistrust within their relationships with one another. A popular theme during this time involves not trusting the police, authority figures, and other members of society. This also symbolizes the crisis that communism fears brought upon society.

The “American Dream” is another topic film noir touched on during its time, and portraying such a bleak and distorted version of it was typically common. After World War II, American society began to change, and themes of this time period include betrayal and mistrust. No one knew if the government was safe to rely on, especially with rumors of communism possibly infiltrating society and its higher powers. Noir generally deals with mistrust within agencies, government, and family as well. The family dynamic is often disrupted or corrupt in this time period of filmmaking. Again, this can be linked to the overall uneasiness felt among society during this time from outside influencers. Is anyone ever telling the whole truth? Or do they have alternative motives that would involve betraying people who harbor their trust. The prominence of communism affected all aspects of American life post war, and the film industry was not immune. It acted as a medium of societal reflection and fear, and the subconscious elements that directors incorporated within their films were telling of the psychological war Hollywood was experiencing within their own borders.

What this paper will dive into is the intersection of noir and Communism, and how the two connect at such a delicate time during America’s political history. Noir film was

growing in popularity during now, as was the fear of communism, so naturally the two found how toward each other. Why people are so frightened of the possible threat of communism within the media and film industries are explored, along with the lasting impact that the Hollywood blacklist had for the long term of film, and where it's led to today.

Historical Background and Significance

The Hollywood blacklist was a term for what was, if truth be told, a broader entertainment industry blacklist put in effect within the 1940's and 50's within the U.S. during the years leading up to the conflict. The blacklist involved denying employment to a variety of professionals within the industry that were believed to be or to have any affiliation with the communist party. It affected not only directors and filmmakers, but also screenwriters, actors, musicians, and other American entertainment professionals, who were also denied employment supported their politics and affiliations. This was usually done on the thought of their membership or assumed membership with the Communist Party within the US, or perhaps on the thought of their refusal to assist investigations into the party's activities. Even during the quantity of its peak enforcement, the blacklist was rarely made explicit or verifiable. It did however quickly and directly damage or end the careers and income of individuals working within the industry. The Hollywood blacklist was significant during events of the 1930s and also the 1940s, including the peak of the Great Depression and World War II. As World War II drew to a close, perceptions of communism began to change, with communism increasingly becoming a more viable threat to society. Two major screenland strikes during the 1930s increased tensions between Hollywood producers and also the unions, particularly the Screen Writers Guild. The first Hollywood blacklist was instituted in 1947, the day after ten writers and directors were cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In

October 1947, drawing upon the list named within the Hollywood Reporter, the HUAC subpoenaed again sort of people working within the Hollywood screenland to testify at the hearings. The committee had declared that its intention was to research whether communist agents and sympathizers had been deliberately placing propaganda in Hollywood films. They were then subpoenaed to testify before the HUAC that year. The citation included a criminal charge, which led to an attempt that was highly publicized within the US and included a conviction with a maximum of one year in jail along with a fine. These events prompted many studios to fire an outsized number of artists. Many of the industry professionals in whom HUAC had expressed interest were purported to be, or to possess at just one occasion, members of the organisation. Of the 43 people placed on the witness list, 19 of them declared that they weren't willing to present evidence. Eleven of these 19 were then called before the committee to testify. Of the eleven witnesses, one, the playwright poet, decided he would comply and answer the committee's questions and shortly after left the country. The other ten witnesses refused, citing their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. Included among the questions they refused to answer was "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the communist Party?" The Committee then formally accused these ten of contempt of Congress, and began criminal proceedings against them in the House of Representatives. The HUAC hearings failed to turn up any significant evidence that Hollywood was secretly including communist propaganda in its films, but the industry nonetheless was changed and transformed. In early 1948, all of the Hollywood Ten were convicted of contempt. Following a series of unsuccessful appeals their cases

arrived before the Supreme Court. Among the submissions filed in attempted defense of the ten was an amicus curiae brief signed by 204 Hollywood professionals. After the court inevitably denied their review, the Hollywood Ten began their one year sentence in prison in 1950. The Hollywood Ten's names and careers are listed below.

- Alvah Bessie, screenwriter
- Herbert Biberman, screenwriter and director
- Lester Cole, screenwriter
- Edward Dmytryk, director
- Ring Lardner Jr., screenwriter
- John Howard Lawson, screenwriter
- Albert Maltz, screenwriter
- Samuel Ornitz, screenwriter
- Adrian Scott, producer and screenwriter
- Dalton Trumbo, screenwriter

Edward Dmytryk was one of the Ten who publicly stated he was at some point affiliated with the communist party, and stated he would also give up the names of other known affiliates.

Actor Larry Parks said this when called before the panel to testify,

“Don't present me with the choice of either being in contempt of this committee and going to jail or forcing me to really crawl through the mud to be an informer. For what purpose? I don't think it is a choice at all. I don't think this is really sportsmanlike. I don't think this is American. I don't think this is American justice” (Cogley, 493)

In 1952, the Screen Writers Guild, founded 20 years before ironically by three future members of the Hollywood Ten attempted to authorize the film studios to not include the names of individuals who failed to clear their names before Congress on

screen. In the anti-communist charged society of post World War II America, many crusaders both within the government and in the private sector targeted the media as a site of communist propaganda infiltration. The blacklist was created by the Hollywood studios to protect the industry from the economic demise that would come from an association of its product with subversives. Though many of the entries on the blacklist were the result of false rumours, the hint of suspicion was more than enough to end the careers of so many. The HUAC continued to repeatedly subpoena members of the Hollywood film industry during the 1950s, asking questions not only concerning their own personal activities but that also of other members in the industry. One third of those that were subpoenaed cooperated with the committee, which often meant accusing friends and coworkers, and those who did not cooperate risked going to jail and being blacklisted as well. Over the course of this drawn out process over the years, what happened next was the installation of fear in the American people. It is also important to note that not only was the threat of communism present in the film industry, but also in American society as well.

Fear is a psychological state that causes human beings to act in ways that are at times unnatural to them, along with acting based on pure instinct. With fear stems paranoia, which inevitably leads to bold and unnecessary actions taken by people in an attempt to prevent an event from happening. When the Red Scare began to appear in Hollywood and later leading up to the Cold War, much of society was in a state of paranoia that Communists were placing propaganda in the media and in film. This led to many anti-communist films being made during this time period. During the time when

the fear of communism began to impact Hollywood, film noir was beginning to rise in popularity, and both would soon intersect. It's a fitting combination considering the core motifs we see in noir film is the mistrust of society and the government. Films such as *Pickup on South Street* (Fuller, 1953), *The Red Menace* (Springsteen, 1949), and *Shack Out on 101* (Dien, 1955) all connect to noir and communism through multiple lenses. While *Pickup on South Street* and *The Red Menace* are more direct in their disapproval of communism within society, *Shack Out on 101* is not as obvious with its message of corruption and communism. Some directors were more keen on expressing anti-communist propaganda through the narratives of their films, and others were more or less influenced by society and their surrounding environment whilst incorporating hidden or less apparent political messages.

Pickup on South Street: An in Depth Analysis

Pickup on South Street is a 1953 noir film directed by Sam Fuller. The plot concerns that of communist spies and top secret information that is being passed through a spy ring. This film centers on Skip McCoy (Richard Widmark), a New York City pickpocket. Skip has recently gotten out of jail following his third arrest, and one arrest would possibly mean jail for life. Naturally, the first week he's out he picks the purse of Candy (Jean Peters), who's unknowingly carrying industrial secrets on microfiche for the Communist Party. The FBI however is already on the case, and what ensues in this film is the ongoing chase to track down the film containing communist information, and who it's stemming from. This film was created in an era where paranoia of communism began to peak, and certain aspects of this film portray that paranoia. Critics, however, interpreted the film based on their own views. That the film refused to make an oblique, outspoken political commentary and rather concerned itself with an otherwise hot cold war topic earned it diverse reviews. Some believed it a pro-communist, anti-American assessment. Others called it a welcomed anti-communist assessment and critique.

While it is easy to assume the narrative is clear cut anti-communism, it perhaps goes deeper than that. The characters were all criminals in their own way, with themes of betrayal and high stakes action that are commonly found in many other noir films. This film also centers around not only secret communist information, but also around the erratic relationship of Skip and Candy. Their relationship with one another is one of mistrust, passion, and deceivry. That relationship dynamic is also found in other

popular noir films as the unpredictability factor creates an aura of intrigue with the audience. The characters in this film all have their personal motives and at times can be viewed as strictly self invested in their own benefits, aside from the interpersonal relationships that some have. While we will take a closer look and analysis at each of the main characters individually, their relation to the main narrative and possible political message of the film remains most relevant.

What makes a film such as this unique is the relationships characters develop with one another aside from the film's overall narrative. Aside from the main relationship we observe with Skip and Candy, we see the dynamic of other character relationships such as Skip and Moe along with Candy and Joey. Candy and Joey used to be a couple with Joey having Candy move along information to others through his "business". It is clear from the start that Candy had no idea what was on a strip of film that she was instructed to pass along to someone else, as Skip picks her pocket in the subway. This is supposed to be Candy's final job as her and Joey are no longer together, so we see her as a possible innocent victim in this plot. As she tracks down the film she finds herself falling in love with Skipper, conflicting morals and emotions hinder her from getting the film back to Joey, and she soon learns what is actually on the film through Skipper. At first, Skip doesn't believe a word Candy says regarding her involvement with the communist party, but later learns after his friend Moe's death that Candy was telling the truth. Skip isn't afraid to get physical and throw Candy around when necessary, which is an interesting detail given how women are portrayed in noir films regarding the

classic femme fatale character. The femme fatale character is certainly one well represented by Candy in this scenario. When she knocks Skip out and takes the film from him, it seems to be an act of betrayal, but we soon learn her intentions are good as she brings it to the police. She does this mainly to save Skip's life as she knows he is wanted not only by the police but by Joey as well. As the film progresses, so does Candy and Skip's relationship, and by the end of the film, there is a rare aspect that we don't find often in noir films, and that is trust.

Joey and Candy's relationship is possibly the most toxic and chaotic of all the characters, as their relationship stems from past romance and business agreements. While Candy and Joey were together, Candy was paid to pass along information to Joey's business partners. After they broke up, Candy agreed to do one last deal, and then she would remove herself from Joey's business. Joey protests he is not a criminal by telling Candy "we are not criminals, we are big business". All the while Joey has been involved with Communist Party from Candy, and planning to pass along a strip of film containing government secrets to communists. She cares about Joey enough to carry out the plan, that's until she meets Skip and realizes the true nature of Joey's business deal. Even after finding out this information, she still remains somewhat loyal to Joey, mostly based on her past love for him. She doesn't want to see him killed, so she attempts to get the police involved by taking the film to them and not him. However, Joey and Candy's relationship takes a dark turn after Joey finds out that there is a strip missing from the film when Candy gives it to him. He beats her up and shoots her,

leaving her to die. To the audience, their relationship always seemed a bit more like a business deal than a friendship or a relationship of past lovers. We rarely see much emotion involved in their interactions, mainly just statements made by the pair that they care about one another. As their relationship meets an explosive end, so do their business agreements together, which ultimately allows Candy to finally be rid of her past and pursue a future with Skip.

Another relationship that is semi-prominent in this film is that of Moe and Skip. Moe has known Skip all his life, and has her own independent relationship with him that she does not share with the other pickpockets in the city. While Moe makes a living off of selling out local criminals to the police, there is a level of trust and respect between her and Skip. We only see one interaction from the two the entire film, but it is enough to let us into the nature of their bond as friends. The interaction between the two would be the last as soon after Moe is killed by Joey for refusing to give him information on Skip. This act of resilience towards Joey further proves her loyalty to Skip as well as her morality. After Skip finds out that no one is going to claim her body, he decides he will bury her himself as he is clearly affected by the loss. Overall, their friendship is a pleasant surprise, as nearly every other character relationship is strained and unpredictable in one form or another.

While everyone in this film aside from the police can be considered in one shape or form a criminal, some of the main characters have their own standards and morals.

While Skip is a pickpocket with a long criminal history, he has never killed someone nor used a gun. Moe is a character that, even though she is in contact with many pickpockets in the city and often sells them out to make a living, chose to give her life in order to keep Skip safe from Joey. She even states “we have to draw a line somewhere” when speaking to Skip about doing business with communists, and refuses to sell out where Skip lives when Joey attempts to pay her for the information, which ultimately cost her her life. Candy is a character that, like Skip, was brought into a dangerous situation without knowing it. While she is still considered a criminal for passing on what we assume is illegal information to Joey’s clients, she had no knowledge that Joey or any of his men were involved with the communist party. Candy is inevitably, a likeable character. We aren’t sure at first of where her loyalties lie, but at the end of the film we assume that her feelings toward Skip are genuine, and that perhaps all along she has been genuine from the start. Candy cares for Joey, and specifically gives him a fake address for Skip in fear that Joey will go to prison for killing him. Candy has everyone’s best interest at heart, and while she embodies the femme fatale character in some respects, her good intentions are made clear as the film reaches its climax. While each of these three characters have committed a crime of some sort, their humanity is shown through the film, making them more relatable and ultimately likeable.

Assessing the technical aspects in this film, it is clear that the director liked the use of higher angles and smoother camera movement. Many scenes are filmed at a slightly higher angle, giving the audience a broader look at the characters and their

interactions. There is a decent amount of tracking shots as well, and not many quick cuts are present. The film therefore becomes softer on the eye to the audience, and due to the amount of character movement that is present on screen, the director made a well thought out choice by deciding to track their movements as if we were along with them, rather than using fast cuts to keep up with them. The director saved the use of fast cuts during the most important scenes, which usually occurred during the climax of the film during the scenes where Joey beats up and shoots Candy, as well as the fight between him and Joey in the subway. Along with the use of camera movement, the lighting in this film resembles that of many other film noirs. The use of low lighting and shadows creates an eerie presence, especially the scenes where someone is not wanting to be seen. In the scenes where Skip is evading the police and Joey he hides under his shack on the dock, which creates many vertical shadows across his body. All of these technical decisions however play a larger role than just visual stimulation in the film. They ultimately contribute to the film's overall message and meaning, and comment on the state of society during a time of unease through the presence of communism.

When looking deeper into the film regarding its involvement with communism, it is clear that this film is touching on politics and isn't just a common noir film. While noir films generally have themes of government and police mistrust, this film was released at the height of the Red Scare in Hollywood and the U.S. The popular noir era had inevitably clashed with the era of the Red Scare. *Pickup on South Street* certainly has up front communist commentary throughout, and an upfront narrative about the threat of

communism classifies as a conscious decision, a more subdued approach could potentially fall in the category of the political subconscious. The director makes a direct commentary on the state of society and the fear that is being brought to many due to the possible presence of communism within the American people as well as the film industry. Communism and anyone who does business/interacts with communists in this film are portrayed as enemies to the country and as people who are committing treason. While some other noir films during this era make a more indirect reference to communism or possibly don't intend to do so, this film certainly does. It paints the Communist Party as the public enemy that cannot under no circumstances be trusted.

The portrayal of communism in this film is that of a negative presence that infects the American society, but how is the intersection of communism and noir present in this film? It's clear that the film's narrative is based on a scenario where secret government information is being sold to the Communist Party, but just having communism present in the film does not mean that its role played a part in the divergence of communism and noir. As noir reflects the state of American society quite often, it was clear that communism was creating more doubt, fear, and uncertainty within society and the film industry. Fear of communism was a significant issue to the American government, and it was reflected in this film. Aside from Joey and his clan of "businessmen", every other character was opposed to the idea of doing business with communists, and thought that a line must be drawn when it comes to morals regarding their criminal activity. While the film's narrative was one of criminal intent, the shadow of doubt cast due to the presence

of communism made the film even more sinister, and perhaps more intriguing in the end.

Essence of Fear

By the 1930's, communism had become an economic ideology that gained much popularity, increasingly among labor leaders. The fear of communism in the United States increased due to the prospect of Soviet deployment of nuclear weapons.. As tensions began to grow between the two nations following the end of World War II, the production of nuclear weapons was a new and imminent threat that created an aura of fear and skepticism within American society. While the physical threat of hydrogen bombs and other nuclear weapons was the main cause for concern, a new societal norm began to arise. Anyone who was suspected to be part of or in sympathy with the communist party was detained and questioned by the government. The fear that within society there were individuals or groups who were part of such an organization led to the majority of the American people questioning each other and even its own government.

Could you be in a state of fear without being afraid? And how would you know? The psychology behind the concept of fear is well documented and has been studied for many years. Our physical and emotional reactions to fear can be both conscious and subconscious. Many people have no issue with using the word "fear" in everyday language, and yet have a hard time comprehending the concept in its entirety. Despite a plethora of recent findings in modern research, spurred in large part by funding to help understand mood and anxiety disorders, the field of emotion research is more

fragmented than ever. “fear is an intervening variable between sets of context-dependent stimuli and suites of behavioral response. Its usefulness is explanatory, and one can be agnostic about any correspondence with other psychological, let alone neurobiological” (Adolfs, 2). There are many different types of fear we as humans experience in our daily lives, whether it be of an animal we come in contact with during a short, passing moment, or the subtle anxiety we feel during the normal day regarding something we have put off or are afraid to confront. Connecting these ideologies to communism and the Red Scare, many American’s didn’t feel as if their lives were in danger during their day to day lives, but it was the presence of anxiety that poisoned the minds of society in regards to the threat of communism.

Some psychological theories propose that fear is a one of the most basic emotions of all humans and other animals as well. However, several theories beg to differ, arguing that emotions such as fear should be replaced by a distinction between a fear and a panic system. A variety of evidence supports a theory that there are different types of fear. Clearly, different instances of fear and anxiety do all feel similar, and we categorize and verbally describe them as similar. “fear is usually conceptualized as an adaptive but phasic (transient) state elicited through confrontation with a threatening stimulus, anxiety is a more tonic state related to prediction and preparedness-- the distinction is similar to the one between emotions versus moods” (Adolfs, 5). When discussing fear and communism, it can be assumed that American society and the government developed a sense of overwhelming anxiety around the uncertainty of what impact communism would have. This new found fear and uncertainty within society then

poured into other aspects of society including the film industry. As noir films had already been on the rise in popularity following World War II, the inclusion of communist fear within those films was inevitable.

Noir films had previously included themes such as mistrust between friends, spouses, crime groups, and now the government as well. Fear of communism was added to the repertoire of themes incorporated into noir . This then begins the debate and discussion around whether the introduction of communism to film noir was done consciously or subconsciously. While some films such as *Pickup on South Street* and *Red Menace* that intentionally created a communist narrative, other films made during this time period that didn't directly comment on communism, still included indirect themes associated with the Red Scare. If this was done on purpose or not will be explored in detail, and if the psychology surrounding the concept of fear may have had an impact as to why these films included these themes. Although some directors may have not consciously included communist narratives, the fear that was present in society's subconscious may be the cause for noir films indirectly addressing the subject.

After discovering such psychological information stated previously, the question then becomes does this research validate a connection between the communist narratives in noir films and fear? One may argue that the fear of communism played minor roles in the writing of films during this time, while another may argue that the subconscious paranoia the U.S. was facing at the time in fact did have a direct impact on the style of noir cinema. Films such as "*Pickup on South Street*" may have used elements of communist paranoia to further portray its crime narrative while not making a

political statement on the matter. Whereas films such as "*The Red Menace*" may have chosen to make a more direct statement on the effects that communism has on American society. After analyzing the stylistic and narrative choices "*The Red Menace*" chooses to incorporate in its film, we may begin to differentiate the two and discover a more concrete conclusion on how the fear of communism truly impacted the film industry.

“The Red Menace” Analysis

“The Red Menace” (Springsteen) is a 1949 film noir drama about a man named Bill Jones who gets drawn into the communist party. The film centers around him as the main character. While in training to become a member of the party, Bill falls in love with one of his instructors. At first they whole heartedly believe in what their leaders are instructing, yet they realize they were deceived when they witness party leaders murder a member who questioned the party's principles and morals.

This film, in contrast with *“Pickup on South Street”*, is a blatant anti-communist noir. The political messages are present throughout the entire film. What makes this film more political than other noirs in this time period is that the political messages put in place do not reside in the film's subconscious. They are very much in the conscious mindset of this film's production and it's director. One aspect this film used was the unique voice over technique. This technique was not used often during the film, but its use had great effect on the audience. It was used during party meetings where we hear the leaders speak communist ideologies to its members in training. One may argue that what the leaders were saying sounded somewhat promising to politically uneducated individuals, but the voice over contradicted what the party leaders were saying. It was almost as if it was addressing the audience and not the main characters on screen, as voice-overs tend to do. The voice over was not that of any character, but just a narrator. The narrator instructed us not to listen to what they were saying about communism as it

was all false, and that thinking in any other way that is not on course with communism will have immense repercussions. The voice over was a direct anti-communist message directed as a warning to Bill in the film, and us as the viewers. While the leaders and instructors made communism sound positive and promising, the reality of communism was brought to light during voice over as a possible propaganda tactic to intimidate the American people and attempt to use fear as a weapon against communism.

There are numerous examples of moments in the film where the director included anti-communist propaganda. Molly, who is used by the party to help attract Bill as a member, is a young party member who fully believes in the principles of communism. However we see the familial impact of her choice as her religious parents are unhappy with her decision and have made multiple attempts to bring her back home to them. After her boyfriend leaves the party because of his differing opinion on morals, he becomes an outcast amongst his friends and Molly is forbidden to see him. It soon becomes too much to bear and he takes his own life. After his death, Molly realizes her mistake in trusting the party and soon comes home to her parents. Another example is that of a recruit who, in a meeting with instructors, publicly speaks out against communism and is soon dragged out of the room, beaten, and murdered. As stated earlier, this film is using scare tactics to warn the American people who might be wondering about what communism entails that they should be afraid and stay far away from it. Another example of such tactics is when Bill and Nina (Nina is a communist instructor) decide to leave the party. They are watched and hunted down by the party's

assassins as they attempt to leave town. This scene shows the audience that if one desires to leave the party, they cannot do so willingly.

The ideologies of communism expressed in this film are that of peace, equality, and prosperity. That sounds tempting to many people who are unfamiliar with communism, and those promises expressed lured Bill into the communist party without knowing the harsh reality he would soon face. What makes this film different from "*Pickup on South Street*" is that this film deliberately attempts to cause fear within its viewers. *Pickup on South Street's* narrative was not centered around communism, but rather around the plot of attempting to get back stolen information for the communist party. This film did not have as much of fear implemented compared to *The Red Menace*. Whilst both narratives involved aspects of communism, *Pickup on South Street* did not present an imminent warning to Americans, whereas *The Red Menace* was a direct commentary on why Americans should be afraid of communism, and what would happen to society if it took over.

When speaking on the divergence of film noir and the Red Scare, *The Red Menace* is a perfect example of how politics bled into the fabric of Hollywood films. While it is common for every generation's fears to be somewhat represented through an artistic medium such as film, what made this era so unique was the specific time period it took place in. The Red Scare was something that affected American society for decades. It set the precedent that the U.S. must keep America "American" and should be aware of any outside threat that could destroy our country. Film noir in the U.S. post WWII was a time of generally dark imagery associated around a plot of government or

societal distrust of one another. In one of our country's most testing societal eras, we found ourselves with not only the fear of each other, but something much larger. The fear of communism spread like wildfire in the U.S., and it wasn't long until that fear made its way into Hollywood. A booming film industry was met with an overwhelming threat to the supposed greatest nation on earth. The intersection of these two concepts created a cultural and societal impact that would have a long lasting impact on the film industry.

“*The Red Menace*” and “*Pickup on South Street*”

Comparisons

While it may be easy to depict certain similarities within the narrative of both “*The Red Menace*” and “*Pickup on South Street*”, just focusing on the narrative comparisons limits what can be said about these two films. Editing and lighting techniques help aid the respective narrative of each film, and continually push forward the message each filmmaker is attempting to show the audience. As stated in the previous chapter, these two films differ within the realm of the political subconscious in that there was certainly a more direct approach to the fear of communism in *The Red Menace*, but it is not just about the film’s narrative that does the job, it’s the technique and specific uses of substance in the mise-en-scene that occurs frequently throughout the film’s duration.

The Red Menace feels like a more personal film, and not that of the director, but that of the characters we see on screen and how the audience feels while watching their story unfold. While watching this film, it almost is if we are the ones being persuaded to join the communist party. The instructors who recruit new members prey upon Bill who seemingly is an everyday hardworking man. If he got persuaded by all these promises the party was telling him, why shouldn’t we believe them too? This where the voice over technique is used effectively , as it acted as the viewer’s conscience, telling us that

what we were hearing was untruthful. Those few moments are what I believe define this film as an anti-communist.

As for *'Pickup on South Street'*, we are taken through the narrative of people who don't wish to be a part of the communist party, and who are dragged into it through unforeseen circumstances. While communism is represented as a threat to society in this film, the film itself is more of a noir style drama about a New York City pickpocket running from "the bad guys". The plot is intense and engaging to say the least, however the idea of communism isn't what drives the narrative forward. While it is incorporated throughout the film, it's not the film's main argument that communism should be feared as intensely as it is in *"The Red Menace"*.

The divergence of communism and film noir is present in both film's narratives and therefore can be stated that they both represent this concept, however it gets more complicated when the concept of the political subconscious is brought into the conversation. Technically speaking, these films are quite similar in their use of low lighting aesthetics to help the film create a sense of tension as if danger lurks around every corner, but they also differ in that *"The Red Menace"* uses more cuts and slightly faster sequencing than *"Pickup on South Street"*. While the majority of the film's pacing is nice on the eye, when the intense scenes are shot, more camera movement is implemented.

The final difference that is present between these films is that between the subconscious and conscious political messages the filmmakers had while in production. Although both film's have a pattern of communist fears, *"The Red Menace "* chooses

the route of bringing the film's political message to the forefront of the narrative. The filmmaker's intention is clearly to show as accurately as possible how the communist party is not like what communists say it is, and could even cost you your life. The filmmaker blatantly portrays many of the main communist characters as liars, manipulators, and greedy. We as the audience witness members of the party who have been "loyal" for many years attempting to flee due to the imminent threat they face on a day to day basis. We are let into a secretive society where loyalty is of great value. The members are promised all these positive changes in society yet when we hear the party leaders preach to them, all we hear is how communism is the best form of government, and how that is should be spread all across the U.S. We don't hear any evidence to support the claims the party leaders are making, or how they will make changes at all. This film overall was purposely meant to scare the audience and uncover some of the truths about the threat of communism in the U.S.

"Pickup on South Street" however uses communism as a backdrop in its narrative, and does not use it in an attempt to create a powerful political message. Instead it uses it to help create an intense and classic noir narrative that was popular at the time. Although the threat of communism is clearly present in the film, it is not something the filmmaker deliberately chose as to make a political statement about, but rather it was the coming together of noir style filmmaking and the era of the presence of communism in society. There is a distinctive difference between the imminent threat of communism, and the underlying tones that it is present in society. This film is one that chooses to use communism as a basis for a crime drama. While the characters speak

about a “dangerous piece of film” that is on its way to being handed over to the communists, communism itself is not posing a threat to the society that is portrayed in this film. The American culture at this time is best represented through film noir, and once communism made its appearance after the end of WWII, noir films included that threat as a compliment to their already dark narratives. It is a very clear example of how two very different aspects of government and culture and Hollywood filmmaking happen to come together for public entertainment.

Lasting Impact

The era of anti-communism in Hollywood lasted for decades. The impact of politics and societal fear colliding with various genres in film is an idea that has been explored previously, and yet somehow in this time period felt more significant than any other. Integrating politics whether deliberately or subconsciously became more common after World War II and since then, it is arguable that politics have played a larger role in filmmaking over the past decades since. Societal and governmental issues have made cameos in modern filmmaking that attempt to provide a direct message for the audience to take in. However in this paper, the argument that is being discussed and explored is that the fear of communism in the U.S. caused a major divergence with film noir that permanently changed Hollywood.

The HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) focused most of their attention on Hollywood and the entertainment industry as an epicenter for communist propaganda. As discussed before with the “Hollywood Ten”, high profile producers, writers, and filmmakers were blacklisted and discredited from further having any part in the industry. This in a sense set a precedent for many years to come regarding censorship within the film and television industry. The HUAC continually subpoenaed members of the film industry throughout the years of the 1950s, asking questions not only about their own activities but also about fellow colleagues. One-third of those subpoenaed chose to cooperate with the committee, which often led to the accusation

of friends and coworkers, and those who chose not to cooperate risked going to jail and being blacklisted. Fear of propaganda from un-American organizations was investigated more in depth than in previous years. Interestingly enough, as the Cold War began, the House Un-American Activities Committee descended on Hollywood with a young congressman named Richard Nixon asking studio executives why they didn't produce anti-Communist films. The industry quickly responded with anti-Communist films such as *Iron Curtain* (1948) and *The Red Menace* and *I Married a Communist*, both released in 1949. However, none of those films did well in theatres.

As the anticommunism crusade subsided in the 1960s, the Hollywood blacklist was eventually discontinued. Hollywood in later years put out blacklist films such as *Guilty by Suspicion* (1991) and *The Front* (1976). Those films touched on the characteristics of the Hollywood Blacklist and how it permanently affected the industry. This era brought upon the industry unwanted negative attention from society, and combined with the business side of the industry, it was uncertain the direction Hollywood would go in the future. However, communist narratives of converting other members of society seemingly blended smoothly into the noir style of postwar filmmaking. The characteristics that were staples of film noir complimented that of the fear of communism in the U.S. Was this positive or negative? Each side of that argument could be convincingly proven with evidence to support it. The overall resulting outcomes was that two different aspects of film and politics collided to set a precedent for future films that eventually started incorporating more societal and political messages within their narratives. In modern filmmaking, we can easily find an

abundance of politically charged films, and they have been deemed important to the progression of our society. Communism within film noir may have not been the beginning of political filmmaking, but it solidified its success.

Conclusion

Political cinema refers to political films that make no attempt to subdue their political messages and opinions. However, this does not mean that they are classified as propaganda films. How the politics are portrayed in these films is what makes them differ from other styles of filmmaking. Even escapist films, of which their purpose is more for entertainment and a break from everyday life, can still however include a political agenda. For example, authorities in Nazi Germany were aware of this concept and style of filmmaking and used that knowledge to produce a large catalogue of escapist films. This type of pattern soon would become prominent in Hollywood when the Red Scare era began to affect the U.S., and the industry's main objective was to not allow the display of communist propaganda to the public.

As communism made its way into the United States following the end of WWII, a new fear emerged that the U.S. would soon be overrun with a foreign government. What occurred in the following decades was an era of societal unrest that included every aspect of the media as well. Hollywood was at the center of the Red Scare due to the threat of communist propaganda and potential writers and directors that were associated with the party. The profound effect communism had in Hollywood would forever change the meaning of political filmmaking and the use of film as propaganda, leading to an era of severe censorship among the film and television industry.

The fundamental object in films is that of experience. It has been a commonplace for nearly half a century, and the possible truth, that the personal is political. But artists, especially filmmakers, have often more trouble coming to terms with the idea that the political is personal and that making a film about a subject of societal importance loses much of its substance, value, and usefulness if it doesn't reflect on a personal scale. Political films such as *Iron Curtain* (1948), *Red Menace* (1949), and *I Married a Communist* (1949) were outwardly politically driven films and yet did poorly at the box office. Why is that? Potentially because of a lack of personal substance the audience had interest in. However the crime drama *Pickup on South Street* (1953) chose a less political narrative yet incorporated communism as a sort of backdrop for the basis of the film moving forward. Does political filmmaking need to be personally motivated? I believe it does. If films produced even in modern times don't make a personal connection to the audience on some level, it is potentially bound for failure. Although some aspects of 'personal filmmaking' can center around the filmmaker themselves, having a political opinion does still fall into the realm of personal filmmaking.

Personal filmmaking aside, we can analyze the concept of political filmmaking early on in Nazi Germany when it was used for propaganda, and also analyze how the Red Scare in the U.S. led to an era of conscious and subconscious filmmaking combined with the popular style of film noir. When speaking on the topic of whether a film is consciously or subconsciously political, oftentimes it is impossible to detect the true nature of how the director might be feeling unless it is overwhelmingly present in their film. As discussed in a previous chapter "Essence of Fear", "fear is an intervening

variable between sets of context-dependent stimuli and suites of behavioral response. Its usefulness is explanatory, and one can be agnostic about any correspondence with other psychological, let alone neurobiological” (Adolfs, 2). While it may seem daft attempting to find a connection between the psychological aspect of fear and how it appears in media, one thing is for certain. Fear is a concept that we as humans subconsciously can feel at times when our personal lives or the state of society can be on edge. And no, just because a director makes a film such as “*The Red Menace*” overtly political does not necessarily means they are fearful of communism, but it can be concluded that the purpose of making a film such as that can lead to the American people fearing communism themselves. No one knows whether Springsteen was fearing the threat of communism, but his film’s intent was clear. His conscious choice to depict communism in such a sinister light was done for more than just entertainment purposes.

When discussing the topic of the subconscious, it is by definition “of or concerning part of the mind of which one is not fully aware but which influences one’s actions and feelings”. When filmmakers choose to incorporate a political topic in their film but by no means defines it as positive or negative, this is perhaps the effect of the subconscious as the events happening in society and the world make their way onto the big screen. It’s what makes a film relevant after all. For example in modern filmmaking, one would not be surprised to see a film with the backdrop narrative of a pandemic or civil unrest, without really touching on the subject further. While a director may choose

to include that in a film's narrative, they may be subconsciously using a relevant topic to enhance a film's narrative, and help connect with a desired audience.

After researching and analyzing political vs non-political filmmaking within the era where communism and film noir crossed paths, it is tough to formulate a formal conclusion on how the conscious and subconscious minds directly impact a film and the subject of it. While the original argument was that the conscious and subconscious mind does in fact impact a film's narrative and overall message, using just one era of filmmaking simply won't provide enough evidence on either side of the argument. The inevitable divergence of the Red Scare and Communism within the U.S. and film noir undoubtedly produced some eye catching pieces of cinema. Some for mere entertainment, and some for the purpose of propaganda. It is without doubt that the intersection of communism and film noir had a profound impact on Hollywood and the rest of the film industry, and how the industry handled political issues moving forward. Attempting to find the connection between conscious and subconscious filmmaking within this divergence of eras was enticing to say the least, and while the conversation will be continually pondered among critics, I can safely conclude that these topics do have a clear connection with one another, and this pattern of filmmaking has since grew to new heights in cinema, and will continue to do so for many years to come.

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