
THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

Week 3: War Time Propaganda and PTSD

Film Noir – Key Elements

- Cynical crime melodrama
- American – with European influences
- Low key productions
- Black and white
- Stylized and shadowy
- Low angle shots
- Unusual compositions

The Rules of Film Noir (BBC 4)

1. Choose a dame with no past and a hero with no future
2. Use no fiction but pulp fiction
3. See America through a stranger's eyes
4. Make it any colour as long as it's black
5. It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it

The Femme Fatale

- Mysterious
- Seductive
- Manipulative
- Beautiful
- Morally bereft

The Maltese Falcon (1941)

- Directed by John Huston
- Screenplay John Huston
- Based on Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same name
- Was the second screen version of the story

Supporting Characters and Queer Representation

Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre)

- Explicitly homosexual in Dashiell Hammett's novel
- But in the movie "turns him into a perfumed fob with lace hankies"
- Mary Astor though, refers to the 'trouble' he had with that 'young boy in Istanbul'

Wilber (Elisha Cook Jr.)

'...is implicitly homosexual. He is referred to as "sonny," "boy," and "kid" and Bogart derisively calls him a "gunsel"...Since around 1915 'bums' and prisoners had used the German word gansel or gosling, corrupted to gunsel for a passive sodomite, especially a young inexperienced boy companion'

Russo, V. (1981) p.46

The Maltese Falcon (1941) CONT...

“An intriguing piece of melodramatic entertainment, “Maltese Falcon” weaves swiftly through a series of attention-holding episodes to crack through to a most unsuspecting climax. To secure utmost in audience reaction, exhibitors can take advantage of the surprise finish by publicizing starting times of the picture, and advising patrons to get maximum entertainment by seeing it from the start. Extra advance exploitation to obtain first day patronage will roll up hefty momentum in the key runs.”

Variety

“What a gallery of characters there was enmeshed in the baffling – but never mind – coils of plot centering on the hunt for possession of a priceless antiquity, the statuette of the Maltese Falcon itself.”

The Movie Treasury Thriller Movies
Lawrence Hammond

US Isolationism

- On Sept. 1, 1939, after previously seizing Austria and Czechoslovakia, Nazi Germany invaded neighboring Poland, resulting in Britain and France declaring war on Germany and thus kicking off World War II in Europe.
- As all of this was unfolding, in a poll conducted Sept. 1-6, 1939, Gallup asked Americans to what degree they supported assisting England, France and Poland.
- Americans supported providing material assistance to these three countries but were overwhelmingly opposed to sending military forces to fight Germany.

US Enters World War II – Hollywood’s Response

- Hollywood as a whole was recruited during World War II by the Office of War Information (OWI) and expected to put its production forces into the war effort.

‘Films acted as propaganda and, due to the audio-visual nature of the medium, had the ability to be even more effective at motivating people than other forms of propaganda such as posters. With their combination of audio and visual elements, as well as their ability to tell stories, films were (and still are) able to really affect people on both intellectual and emotional levels, making the medium a very effective instrument of propaganda.’

An Unknown Ally: Hollywood's Role in World War II
Maria Tommerdahl

‘To a nation that had been “enlightened” about the role of propaganda in whipping up wartime emotion by the congressional investigations led by Senator Gerald P. Nye and others, the movies were expected to have a tremendous impact on public morale and motivation in wartime.’

David E. Meerse, “To Reassure a Nation: Hollywood Presents World War II,” *Film & History* 6 (1976): 79.

Casablanca (1942)

- Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) – the cynical, yet good hearted anti-hero, might be seen as representing the initial US isolationist response to WWII
- His ‘simple’ yet effective form of ‘hiding’ is made more complex by the reappearance of his past love Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman)

Casablanca (1942) CONT...

- The fact that she is non-American (European), yet needs Rick's help, is another audience reminder that fighting in Europe is the 'moral' response

'Thus Casablanca is not just one film. It is many films, an anthology. Made haphazardly, it probably made itself, if not actually against the will of its authors and actors, then at least beyond their control. And this is the reason it works, in spite of aesthetic theories and theories of film making. For in it there unfolds with almost telluric force the power of Narrative in its natural state, without Art intervening to discipline it ... When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion.'

Umberto Eco

The Post War Period

- World War II comes to an end
- The troops return home – often to wives they barely recognize
- The birth rate sky rocketed

The Kinsey Report

- Suggested half of America's men had sex with women other than their wives
- Changing attitudes to sex meant the (Will Hays) Motion Picture Production Code seemed increasingly out of step
- Will Hays was made redundant in 1945 (\$1.5 million)
- The code remained in operation under director Joe Breen

Mental Health Issues in the Post War Period

'Mental disorders measured on a lifetime and past-year basis included major depressive disorder, a number of anxiety disorders (agoraphobia with/without panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], social phobia, specific phobia), and alcohol use disorder (alcohol abuse with or without dependence).'

Civilians in World War II and DSM-IV mental disorders: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Initiative

The Motion Picture Production Code

- Writers and directors become increasingly frustrated by the MPPC
- Several films come along to directly challenge the code
- *Notorious (1946)* - the longest screen embrace
- *The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)*
- The birth of the American Arthouse – introduced a new era of motion picture expression - Scandinavian and Italian neo realism.
- Stromboli/Bergman scandal

Hollywood and Post-War Maladjustment

- From 1945, Hollywood produced a series of thrillers where male war veterans return and find themselves caught up in criminal conspiracy or worse

'The returning-veteran thrillers provide a useful case for examining the relations between the cultural context of America in the 1940s and the 'tough' thriller as a generic mode.'

Krutnik. F (1990) p.65

Hollywood and Post-War Maladjustment CONT...

'...genre films are as determined by the conventions of storytelling as much as by cultural and social issues...the movies don't directly reflect their social context, but reflect society more in the manner of a funhouse mirror, with all its peculiar aberrations of size and perspective...'

Selig. M

Alan Ladd

Though arguably more well-known for his lead performance in classic western *Shane* (1953), Ladd would, like many stars of the time, ply his talents in a host of varied productions. Not being tied to a fixed contract with any one studio meant he was at liberty to work with Paramount, Warner Bros, and Universal enabling him to weave his way in and out of different types of movies. This also somewhat cemented his image as the outsider, the kind of character he would excel at onscreen.

Though he began his career in the early 1930s, after first working as a studio grip and then playing many small parts on radio, his first starring role in a feature wouldn't transpire till 1942 when he landed the lead in Frank Tuttle's *Lucky Jordan*. But though he would play in comedies, musicals, and mainstream melodramas, he perhaps shone most brightly, or should that be hid in the shadows most convincingly, in the string of dark crime thrillers he made alongside Veronica Lake.

From *Gun for Hire* (1942), *The Glass Key* (1942) through to *Saigon* (1948), his roles in conjunction with that erstwhile screen siren, are often the most fascinating to look at. But it would be the Chandler scripted *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) that would see him channel most effectively the kind of wide-brimmed anti-hero, we recognize now so well.

The Blue Dalilah (1946)

Three demobilized United States Navy aviators, Johnny Morrison, Buzz Wanchek, and George Copeland, arrive in Hollywood, California. All three flew together in the same flight crew from Kwajalein Atoll in the South Pacific. Buzz has shell shock and a metal plate in his head above his ear. Johnny surprises his wife, Helen, at her hotel bungalow where she is hosting a riotous party with many drunken revelers. Johnny discovers that Helen is having an affair with Eddie Harwood, the owner of the Blue Dahlia nightclub on the Sunset Strip.

- From the outset, the film outlines the difficulties of readjustment or maladjustment
- Both Buzz and Johnny return with the trauma of World War II – Buzz (physical and emotional) Johnny – a quiet bitterness
- The complex situation involving his wife and her new lover act as a metaphor for the returning vet and the shattered lives they were either coming back to - or with
- In a way, these Film Noir features pre-figured the kinds of 80s/90s Vietnam vet movies such as *First Blood*
- However, the betrayals often felt in these films feel more palpable as World War II was seen as a just conflict whereas Vietnam was a less palatable affair to many
- Though Johnny finds redemption in Joyce, his anger is still there
- He does wish to kill Joyce but cannot bring himself to do it
- The fact that his buddy Buzz is suspected, can be seen as another version of survivor's guilt – Buzz has (possibly) done what he cannot – allowing Johnny his wish fulfilment without getting his hands bloody
- In the original script (Raymond Chandler) Buzz had been written as the real killer, however, pressure from the US Navy Department meant that the ending was changed and the relatively minor character Newell was put in the frame
- When Johnny initially confronts Helen, he draws his gun – a war time response
- It also is a reassertion of his manhood – he pulls out his 'weapon' when faced with her mockery
- The fact that he cannot carry out his threat can either be seen as him losing his masculinity or as an attempt to reintegrate back into a non-war time situation where killing equals murder

'For Johnny to achieve social integration, he has to abandon his 'service family' of Buzz and George for a more acceptable peacetime alternative, signified by the relationship with Joyce. The war had resulted not only in a separation of many men and women but also in an intensification of male bonding...The Blue Dahlia opens at a point of transition between war and peacetime...'

Krutnik. F (1990) p.69