

# H-Net Reviews

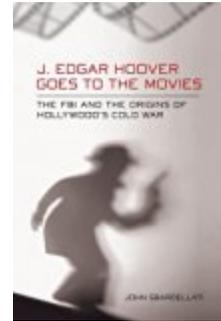
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Sbardellati. *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. viii + 256 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5008-2.

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Published on H-War (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



In recent decades, historians have examined the evolution of film as an industrial product, the cultural importance of film, and the interplay between the film industry and other key institutions. Naturally, much of this historiography centers on the United States because of American film producers' dominant influence dating back to World War I. The incredible growth in popularity of filmed entertainment led officials within the U.S. government to focus on the medium as a transmitter of ideas. Some agencies, such as the U.S. Navy, sought to exploit film to further their own purposes, but, as John Sbardellati explores in this excellent volume, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Bureau of Investigation until 1935), J. Edgar Hoover, took a much dimmer view of films' effect on American politics and society.[1]

In *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies*, Sbardellati analyzes the FBI's scrutiny of the film industry from the days of the first Red Scare after World War I through the second Red Scare of the late 1940s. In Sbardellati's estimation, Hoover's "sincerely held, if ill-founded" belief that Communist agents had infiltrated the industry and used the screen to spread pro-Communist propaganda to gullible, unsuspecting audiences motivated the investigations (p. 3). Two factors aided Hoover's campaign to root out subversion in Hollywood. First, Hoover had personally selected new FBI recruits and continued to monitor agents throughout their careers, which meant that the bureau and its agents reflected Hoover's jingoistic and paranoid worldview. Second, Hoover began investigating suspected subversion in Hollywood without notifying his superiors in the Department of Justice. In combination, these two factors allowed Hoover to conduct unprecedented surveillance of American mass entertain-

ment.

The title of the book suggests a singular focus on the activities of the FBI, and, indeed, Hoover is the driving force of Sbardellati's narrative. That said, much of the book describes how the FBI became only one of several interested players attempting to exert greater control over the content of Hollywood films. The bureau investigated leftist filmmakers during the early 1920s, but abandoned the effort as the studios began moderating their own content to increase audience share and avoid political and social controversy, an effort that led to the enactment of the so-called Hays Code in 1934. The bureau's official interest was renewed in the late 1930s as the Popular Front alliance of Communists and other sympathetic leftists gained traction in Hollywood to combat Fascism, a development that continued into World War II with the formation of the Grand Alliance between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. As the war wound down and suspicions of the Soviet Union grew, the FBI found common cause with the anti-Communist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals and the Screen Actors Guild, both of which desired to expel subversives from the industry. By the onset of the Cold War in 1947, the FBI and conservative industry groups formed an alliance with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and brought the anti-Communist crusade into public view.

In Sbardellati's analysis, the FBI's quest to root out suspicious film content proved time consuming, difficult, and quixotic. The truth was that little to no outright Communist propaganda made it onto movie screens because many Communists in Hollywood devoted their ef-

forts to commenting on social issues. Hoover viewed the highlighting of societal ills, typical of “social problem films,” as un-American and subversive. Moreover, he believed that filmgoers would immediately assimilate any dangerous ideas they viewed on screen even though the bureau never initiated any studies of audience reactions to determine the veracity of this claim. In the estimation of reviewers at the time and later film scholars, bureau scrutiny usually failed to suppress the messages that social problem films intended to convey, demonstrating the supreme difficulty of the mission that the FBI had assumed. Later, Hoover and his agents turned their attention on films with suspected Communists in their cast and crew regardless of the film’s content, but this also proved unsuccessful. Instead, the FBI’s quest to root out Communists only succeeded once the Popular Front broke down in the wake of the 1946 Maltz affair. The affair, in which committed Communists rejected screenwriter Albert Maltz’s call for maintaining and even broadening the Popular Front’s notions of politically useful art, drove the Communists apart from liberals. This left Communists politically vulnerable just as the FBI’s relationship with HUAC flourished, and led to the disastrous public trials of 1947 and the “blacklists.” The blacklists caused much personal and professional ruin in Hollywood and led to a stifling of creativity in the film industry. The social problem films that had aroused so much of Hoover’s attention largely disappeared and lay dormant for much of the next decade.

Sbardellati could have drawn more of a connection between Hoover’s emphasis on movies as transmitters of propaganda and his own obsession with publicity, but this minor omission in no way detracts from an otherwise fantastic book. The research draws heavily on FBI case files, but weaves in a broad array of sources, including material from the Office of War Information, the Production Code Authority, and HUAC. Sbardellati deftly shifts between his evolving narrative and critical analysis of the films crucial to the story. *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies* should appeal to scholars working in many history subfields, especially those interested in film history, the Cold War, the FBI, and American culture. Thanks to Sbardellati’s ability for concise explanation, lay readers with only a limited knowledge of the topic can also find much to enjoy in the volume.

#### Note

[1]. For other works on the use of film by the U.S. government during this period, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Lawrence Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen: Hollywood and the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996); and Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image on Film*, rev. and exp. ed. (Frankfort: University of Kentucky Press, 2002).

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**Citation:** Ryan Wadle. Review of Sbardellati, John, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood’s Cold War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

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