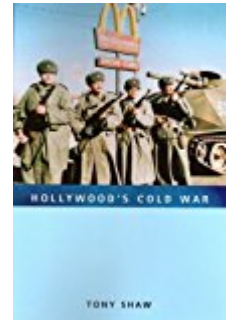


Tony Shaw. *Hollywood's Cold War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007. 342 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55849-612-5.



Reviewed by Giles Scott-Smith

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Of all U.S. cultural products in the twentieth century, surely movies were the most exemplary (with the possible exception of food). They were also the most adept medium for propaganda purposes. Tony Shaw's comprehensive survey of Hollywood's role in the ideological contest between the United States and the Soviet Union from the 1920s onward leaves few archives untouched and few movies unseen. Shaw chronicles how movies were central to the total conflict that was the Cold War and perfect for reifying a U.S. democratic identity while simultaneously undermining, ridiculing, or exposing the truth-claims of communism and its Soviet adherents. All forces in society needed to be mobilized for the cause, and the "state-film network," from government officials and studio bosses down to production staff and the cast, were in their own particular ways part of this escapade.

To illustrate the depth and breadth of Hollywood's commitment to the Cold War, Shaw presents a series of case studies from the 1930s to the 1980s through which he unpacks the many layers involved in cultural production and recep-

tion. He begins his deconstruction of the movie industry's reactionary politics soon after 1917. Prior to the Russian Revolution, filmmakers did not shirk from dealing with social strife, however much the films generally still ended in capitalist bliss. But the Red Scare, combined with the solidification of the studio system and dominance by the big eight (MGM, Paramount, Warner, Twentieth-Century Fox, RKO, Columbia, Universal, and United Artists) turned Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s into a fantasy factory determined to woo its mass audiences with the emotions of romance and the products of success. Big business (and its financiers on Wall Street) saw in movies the perfect vehicle (or opium) for distracting the public away from questioning the realities of quotidian inequalities. However, by analyzing Great Garbo's movie *Ninotchka*, Shaw highlights well the change in mood and environment before and after World War II. Originally released by MGM in 1939, the movie lampooned rather than lambasted the Soviet experiment, while its re-release in 1947, deliberately timed to profit from the growing concerns over the Soviet threat, turned it into a more obvious political document, not least in

Western Europe. By 1957, it had been remade into *Silk Stockings*, a musical that went several steps further than the original in emphasizing the exuberant vitality of the West and the accessibility of its uninhibited consumerism.

Hollywood may have produced some remarkable pro-Soviet movies during the mid-1940s to sell Moscow's war effort to the American public, but it was also during that period that right-wing pressure groups began to gain influence, such as the Catholic National League of Decency and the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. By the 1950s, the portrayal of Communists and communism was far more black-and-white than before the war, in line with Washington's demonization of the main U.S. adversary. But Shaw, as in every dimension of this book, is judiciously careful not to draw any simplistic conclusions. His list of reasons for 1950s conservatism ranges from the financially opportunistic to the wish to protect studio reputations, but it is the need to avoid further mauling at the hands of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that strikes the sharpest cord. HUAC trailed its way through tinsel town in 1947, 1951-2, 1953, and 1955-8 as part of its consistent campaign to ensure an unswerving anticommunist line from the U.S. media and entertainment industry. No direct evidence of communist subversion was ever found, but HUAC demanded retribution anyway, and the studios complied with a blacklist of around two thousand people who were ejected from the Hollywood payroll and not readmitted before the 1960s. An aspect of this story that Shaw does not address is how far the accusation of communism was used as a weapon against those who were suspect because they were recent immigrants. If Hollywood needed to be all-American in outlook, were foreigners more likely to be tainted with subversive tendencies as a result?

Shaw explores the intricacies of Cold War film politics further through a series of studies on

George Orwell, science fiction, race, John Wayne, the CIA, and, unexpectedly, Alex Cox, who represented a remarkable collision between freewheeling British indie filmmaking and the limitations of U.S. corporate conservatism in the 1980s. The details of the Pentagon's involvement with Hollywood, which Shaw dismantles via *The Green Berets* (1968), are revealing enough. But the investigation of the film versions of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1954) and *1984* (1956) takes the analysis to a new level. Orwell, of course, is regarded as an icon of independent left thinking, although this reputation did take a hit with revelations of his list of undesirable leftists provided for the British government's Information Research Department.[2] The intricate story of how these two novels were brought to the screen, by whom, and for what specific reasons, is a gem of a chapter. Were they successful in conveying the essential evils of totalitarianism to receptive audiences? They possibly were. Do these examples give us an insight into the ideological thinking of those involved, and the kind of conflict that they understood the Cold War to be? Yes, they absolutely do.

Two comments can be made on Shaw's approach. Firstly, while he refers to the impact of major changes in the economics of film production, it is presented as no more than one influence among many on the line that movies took instead of being a decisive influence. Nevertheless, there is a sequence of events sketched through the book that clearly had a major influence: the rise of the studio system and the big eight in the 1920s, the decline of the studio system in the 1950s due partly to the rise of television, the need for renewal that brought a younger creative generation to the fore in the early 1970s, and the power of "big capital" in the 1980s. It would have been straightforward to have explained the developing outlook of Hollywood solely on these structural shifts. To Shaw's credit, he avoids this line, instead appreciating at every opportunity the many layers involved when interpreting the production and reception of a movie. Secondly, Shaw neglects cine-

matic satire, and therefore does not examine the critical side of Hollywood. The early 1960s shrugged off the paranoia of the previous decade (only to encounter new ones, of course, but that is another story), allowing space for several movies that sought to undermine the standard interpretation of the East-West confrontation. They did this by turning it into an opportunity for sociopolitical comedy, either of the light (*One, Two, Three* [1961]) or dark variety (*Dr. Strangelove* [1964]), or as a means to highlight how both sides were equally corrupted (*The Manchurian Candidate* [1962]). Shaw mentions all three movies in the book, but only in passing, and he mentions satire only briefly in relation to the spate of swinging spy movies in the late sixties. More could perhaps have been made of these and other examples of how Hollywood sought to deflect the strictures of Cold War politics not by head-on criticism but by pastiche, ridicule, and unbounded eccentricity. Billy Wilder, in this respect, could have featured more here, having been on the production team of *Ninotchka*; refusing to testify to HUAC; suspected by the CIA's man at Paramount, Luigi Luraschi, of being too pro-Soviet; and making a string of second-to-none movies (*Sunset Boulevard* [1950], *Some Like It Hot* [1959], *The Apartment* [1960]) before spoofing the superpower system in *One, Two, Three*. But Wilder was driven by the art of moviemaking, not by Cold War concerns, and he, therefore, does not fit so easily in this narrative.

Throughout the book, Shaw points out the workings of propaganda and lessons to be drawn from its application. The best propaganda, as one astute critic noted in 1955, is indirect, coming in under an audience's radar. The Psychological Strategy Board's approach in the same decade was that to be good propaganda, art itself had to be of a sufficient quality. And above all, propaganda works best by reinforcing existing beliefs and sentiments instead of trying to convert. So where does the book leave us in terms of understanding Hollywood's Cold War? Overall, one has the strong impression that it was big business using the con-

flict to make money as much as government using big business to wage the conflict. But that is precisely the point. The Cold War's agendas, caricatures, and lines of demarcation did seep into every aspect of social life, and it would be strange if the movies did not reflect this. Both government and business were in a "harmonious relationship" based "at root on the need to protect capitalism" (p. 304). The problem for historical analysis such as this, of course, is that everything can easily slip into one-dimensionality—if the Cold War was everywhere, it was, in the end, nowhere. On the whole, Shaw avoids this trap; the quality of his research confirms that Hollywood did not simply project a state-scripted ideology but displayed "a range of different ideologies," generally interlocking, sometimes merging, and occasionally clashing (p. 303). For this reason, the "state-film network" to which he refers is after all best illustrated through the case studies he provides, it being an uneven and constantly shifting marriage of convenience (or conviction, depending on who was involved). Hollywood was no more an agenda-setter than it was a gatekeeper for a Cold War consensus based on U.S. leadership, the vitality of free society, and the fear of failure.

In short, this is a complex and rewarding book, held together with a coherent argument but not afraid to admit the many-sided possibilities when interpreting cultural products. Occasionally, Shaw does overstep the line, such that the infamous *The Blob* from 1958 becomes "an objective correlative for the right-wing fear of 'creeping communism'" (p. 138). But we can forgive him this, not only because this is a fine, well-researched work, but mainly because in dealing with Hollywood, of all subjects, one should be allowed the occasional lapse into excess.

Note

[1]. See Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Penguin, 1992), 483-484; Michael Sheldon, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 468; and Christopher

Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (London: Penguin, 2004), 111-121.

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