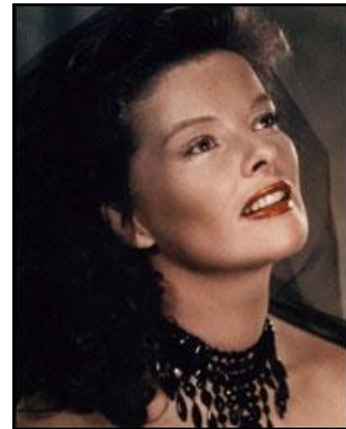


Schlesinger Essay on 1930s Movies and American Society

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s essay ‘**When the Movies Really Counted**’ asserts that there was a much closer mental and cultural connection between Hollywood movies and the American public in the 1930s – when the “movies were near the operative center of the nation’s consciousness” – than in later decades. America was going through a severe economic and social crisis in the Depression, and the public, beset by “doubt, discouragement and despair,” “had a need for reassurance and hope.” Along with Franklin Roosevelt, Hollywood provided “an affirmation of individual identity” and “**chance for individual possibility**.” In essence, the heroes and heroines of Hollywood in this period, “bold and strong” men and women who did not take adversity passively, gave the American moviegoer a model of self-assertiveness and aggressiveness that would help lead them out of their difficulties. Some examples: Groucho Marx’s comedy of aggression; wise-cracking, self-assertive females like Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, and Katherine Hepburn; “bold and strong men” like James Cagney and Paul Muni (in his early 30s movies), who “when they could not order their environment, at least took revenge on it;” the private detectives such as Humphrey Bogart in “The Maltese Falcon” (1941). The intimate connection began to loosen when things got better, America went to war, and postwar prosperity after 1945 reduced America’s cultural malaise.



Katherine Hepburn inspired independent women

Universal: Horror Movies



In the early 30s **Universal Studios** attempted to maintain its contact with the public by specializing in horror movies. The trendsetting movies, ‘Dracula’ and ‘Frankenstein’ were both produced in 1931.

Review: Dracula 1931 Tod Browning 3.0 Bela Lugosi, Edward Van Sloan, Dwight Frye. Not so good original Dracula movie. Best things are Lugosi, who although not a great actor, has great presence with piercing eyes, penetrating stare, and some good campy lines, e.g., as the wolves howl outside the castle, “Listen to them. The children of the night! What music they make!” and “The spider spinning his web for the unwary fly. The blood is life, Mr. Renfield!” Karl Freund’s semi **expressionist cinematography** (he was emigrated from Germany) creates some good effects in creepy crypts, grandiose, high vaulted entrance halls filled with spider webs and disgusting creepy-crawly creatures such as rats, beetles and armadillos, fog-laden landscapes with camera gliding, etc. Best part of movie is opening castle sequences, which are genuinely creepy (and campy); and the contest of will between

the Count and the heroic anti-Dracula crusader, Van Helsing (this is the battle of foreign accents between the Hungarian and the German). The whole movie is spoken in British and other foreign accents. Most of the acting is stilted with stiff lines and artificial sounding English accents. Renfield’s raving doesn’t even qualify as scenery-chewing. Movie takes Dracula seriously, since Van Helsing has to resort to superstition himself (wolf’s bane, crucifixes, stakes through hearts, etc.) to defeat an obviously real

supernatural menace. Dracula has a certain sexual presence, with his devouring young women with his eyes and his lusting for female partners (he exults that Mina will be with him for all eternity); but the sexual aspect is buried compared to the novel.

There is virtually no music on the sound track, and the mise-en-scène and acting are extremely **stagy and static**; there are long periods of silence where all you can here is the popping noise on the optical sound track. The Spanish language version of the film that was shot at the same time is actually superior in its editing and soundtrack. One assumes that Browning was not a skilled sound movie maker, although the silent approach works well in the initial castle scenes. It is a bit difficult to imagine that this once scared the pants off people, including the writer who lay awake screaming two nights in a row after he saw it at the age of 12!

It is perhaps difficult to imagine the extent to which Depression audiences were terrified by this movie. One reason is the mise-en-scène and editing, which is **slow** and perhaps awkward by contemporary standards (the complete absence of music seems to leave a void). Another is the extent to which Bela Lugosi's appearance, acting style, and delivery of lines has become a part of "**camp**" in American popular culture (camp is a pretentious style or gesture, especially when amusing or consciously contrived); it is often difficult to resist laughing in the most horrific parts of the film.

'Dracula' illustrates the specialization of Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios in horror movies, which often spawned sequels in the 30s and 40s: there were several 'Dracula' movies, several 'Frankensteins', as well as movies on the Mummy and the Wolf Man.

The other Universal horror groundbreaker in 1931 was 'Frankenstein'.

Frankenstein 1931 James Whale 3.0 Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, Boris Karloff. Pretty klunky original version of the Frankenstein film tradition based on the celebrated Mary Shelley novel. The groundbreaking film is noteworthy for the sensitive performance of Boris Karloff as the Monster and for its special effects. Impressive is the laboratory scene with the electricity sparking around and the operating table with the body on it being lifted toward the ceiling and through the roof. Karloff gives famous performance in which he learns to be angry and destructive. He doesn't begin that way; starting as a mostly blank slate, he shows a fear of fire and a desire to be friendly and sweet to the little girl; he throws her playfully in the water without understanding the danger. The sets are German Expressionist, although more cluttered than the German ones or the later ones in the series; the Tower with its rough-hewn, slanted walls is impressive, especially on the inside. The film is set in Central Europe with lots of peasants (borrowed from a Victor Herbert operetta?), but they become bourgeois in top hats when they chase and catch up with the monster. Special effects (Karloff's makeup, the burning windmill, etc.) must have been startling at the time, but they look distinctly fake and cheesy to modern audience. Acting is uneven, from moving (Karloff), to dead and unconvincing (Clarke and Clive), to overheated – the Burgermeister and especially Henry Frankenstein's father. The film does not appear to have a music soundtrack, leaving several scenes with a vacant feeling. The film is not in good condition; I suspect some scenes are missing, e.g., the visit to the deaf hermit. This movie is interesting primarily as the beginning of the tradition of sound monster movies. The sequel, 'The Bride of Frankenstein' 1935 is a more interesting film. Mel Brooks' parody, 'Young Frankenstein' 1974 is hilarious especially if you have seen the original.



**Boris Karloff in Universal's
Frankenstein' 1931**

Warner Brothers: Social Realism

'Public Enemy' illustrates **Warners'** commitment to gangster films and films characterized by gritty social realism (see also 'I was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang'). It shows the attempt of Warner Brothers to appeal to the male audience in this period by featuring grittier, more violent films.



Jimmy Cagney in the 30s

Review: Public Enemy 1931 William Wellman 4.0
James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Jean Harlow, Edward Woods as Mike. Excellent WB gangster film. Very realistic texture, set in Chicago (one assumes), working class Irish immigrants (Tom Powers) making their way in urban life; then moves to gangster milieu with snappy suits, tough guy behavior, gangster molls, etc. JC cocky ("I'll kick your teeth out one at a time"), dialogue full of underworld slang, becomes cold-blooded killer (even of horse that killed "Nails;" and when he exacts revenge on gang that killed Matt, he walks in fearlessly), but for whom friendship with Matt Doyle really matters and with his characteristic affectionate nudge with his fist.

Acting is generally good; no early 30s fake accents. Direction is good; movie moves well from background about gangster youth through the increasing crisis as gangsters, and then the two gangs turning against one another. Sometimes excellent imaginative mise-en-scene such as: Cagney goes off screen to kill the horse that killed his boss; the scene in which Cagney gets his revenge for the death of his friend, particularly the camera's lurking in the rain and recording the shootings of the rival gang members only with sound effects, Cagney's "dance" in the rain after he is shot; when an impatient Cagney squashes a half grapefruit in the face of his girlfriend; or when the sound of dumping coal in the street presages the murder of Matt. The camera almost always turns or cuts away when carnage occurs, such as when Tommy enters the café to exact revenge for the murder and the camera continues the long shot of the exterior of the café and we hear the many shots from the outside.

The viewer's interest is held by rivalry and hostility between Tommy and his straight brother, and Tommy's affection for his Ma. Jean Harlow as floozy who seduces Tom; she is not however very believable with a tinny unclassifiable accent.

The film ends in a rising paroxysm of violence beginning with the murder of Matt; final scene terrifying, when Tommy, who is "coming home" from the kidnapping and Ma, Tommy and Sis are happy that he has survived, is delivered dead, bound and bandaged (looking like a mummy) standing at the door, and he falls heavily on the floor in front of his brother. The phonograph record of "Blowing Bubbles" continues on the soundtrack, while Ma unawares continues making Tom's bed.

The movie begins and ends with assurance that **WB is not "glorifying" crime**, but just depicting it, a big "problem" we as Americans have to do something about.

Cagney was a **big star in the 1930s**. He played cocky and pugnacious characters often in gangster movies. "An atypical Hollywood star, he was short and ordinary-looking, but his eager energy and two-fisted vitality made him an ideal lead for the



gangster films and the social dramas of the Depression era.” (Katz) According to Richard Schickel: **Cagney’s crook** was “the first **existential antihero** of the American film. Totally lacking in ideals, supremely contemptuous of conventional morality, he was interested only in the destruction of the world he never made. In every sense, he was the man alone, responding to the world’s absurdity with a deadly and magnificent display of chillingly humorous destructiveness.” This “existential” quality was to become an important part of the psychology and condition of the male protagonists of the *film noir* tradition in the 1940s and early 1950s.

To the dismay of the guardians of morality, Cagney’s characters were in part sympathetic (his affection for his mother, or his endearing way of lightly clipping friends on the jaw with his fist) and in part admirable (they remain true to themselves and go down fighting).

An interesting footnote to Cagney’s career as a gangster was his performance as the mentally unstable Cody Jarrett in “**White Heat**” (1951). Although filmed in the supposedly conformist 1950s, the film challenges authority – mainly through a sympathetic presentation of Cagney’s character who is shown close (perhaps neurotically so) to his mother, but also through a somewhat unflattering portrayal of the police as a heartless tracking machine; one of Cagney’s best friends turns out to be a policeman who shoots him three times with a high-powered rifle. The movie ends in violence, when Cagney, cornered by the police on top of a gasoline storage tank, is killed in an enormous explosion (resembling an atomic explosion) as he shouts, “**I made it, Ma! Top of the world!**”



Jimmy Cagney defies the world at the end of ‘White Heat’

Frank Capra and the Creation of a Patriotic American Myth

Frank Capra, the author of the 1936 romantic comedy, “**Mr. Deeds Goes to Town**”, was the son of an impoverished Sicilian immigrant. He rose from rags to riches in the film industry, becoming one of the most popular and independent directors of the 1930s. He received several Academy Awards in this period including one for ‘Mr. Deeds Goes to Town’. He was one of the very few directors who were allowed to list their name on the title page of their movies. He made most of his films for Harry Cohn’s **Columbia Studios**, which rose from “poverty row” to prosperity largely on the basis of Capra’s success. For most of his films, he teamed with Robert Riskin, a New York writer who had immigrated to Hollywood in search of success.



**Frank Capra:
‘The Man Behind the Camera’**

Capra’s story formula, which he repeated in several films between 1934 and 1941, seemed dedicated to reinventing the “**myth**” of American success stories and faith in the wisdom and prospects of the common man. **The pattern** is something as follows: The hero (Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart) is from a small town, where people are simple and straightforward and support one another; they are folksy and bucolic. For some reason, he goes to the city where he encounters various well-educated, sophisticated and professional people who are snobby, greedy and corrupt. The people with good sense are the common folk, the decent working people from back home. People need to learn to trust one another and exercise a little simple **everyday loving kindness**. Capra’s films always hark back to an imagined “social stability founded upon an image of the

American small town, with comfortable homes, close-knit families, friendly neighbors....” It is perhaps most accurate to “describe him as a Jeffersonian agrarian, or more simply, a pastoralist.” (Sklar, 210)

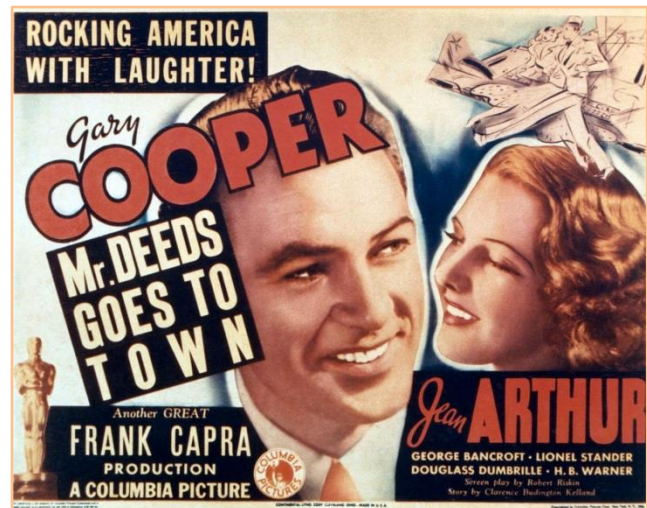
He also meets a working woman (usually Jean Arthur), with whom he at first has a tense relationship, but since the films are usually romantic comedies, they of course eventually fall in love. The hero suffers some sort of **ritual humiliation** (the attempt to have Longfellow Deeds declared insane; the trumped up accusations against James Stewart in ‘Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’), but he emerges **vindicated** – perhaps more easily in “Deeds” 1936 than in later films such as ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ 1946, when Capra seems to have become more pessimistic. The possibility of violent or revolutionary change is explicitly rejected. One often notices a **Christian subtext** in his films – the loving kindness, the generosity toward others and the willingness to help them, the crucifixion of the hero, his final ‘resurrection’, etc. The system often gives in, particularly in “Deeds,” where the judge clearly moves to Longfellow’s side in the course of the trial. The working woman embraces the hero, and she can now look forward to true fulfillment happily married to her man; what she will go with her job is left somewhat ambiguous.



Gary Cooper (right) with Frederick March And Miriam Hopkins in ‘Design for Living’

All the way Capra shows his mastery and inventiveness in “creating **warm incisive humor out of simple moments.**” (Sklar, 207)

Capra’s vision seems to become **darker as the years progress**. After the happy ending of ‘Deeds,’ Claude Rains in ‘Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’ (1939) appears to have triumphed over the virtuous Smith when he suddenly goes berserk at the end, leaving the outcome of the film in doubt; unlike the judge in ‘Deeds’, Rains has not been converted to the side of justice. Capra seems to have painted the story of ‘Meet John Doe’ (1941) into a corner and has difficulty coming up with a satisfactory solution. and whereas the ever-popular ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ (1946) at first comes across as an optimistic, heart-warming movie, upon closer inspection one can see that the town is in the clutches of an evil banker, and despite the good intentions of some of the townspeople, it is only divine intervention (the angel) that allows decency to win in the end; if the ending had been left to natural forces, the town would have remained in crisis. As the years passed, Capra seems to have lost confidence in the virtue of the people and the values of small-town America.



Review: Mr. Deeds Goes to Town 1936 Frank Capra. Gary Cooper, Jean Arthur, Lionel Stander. Capra attacks the sophisticated, **corrupt city** in behalf of the little guy from a small town. Longfellow Deeds inherits \$20 million and goes to New York (big city) to take possession, where he encounters the wicked city. Deeds comes across at first like a **naïve rube** (he plays the tuba and jumps on the first fire truck that clangs by), but then shows that he is the **salt of the earth** – innocent, patriotic, unpretentious, humble, and yet wise with commendable **common sense** – he knows right off the bat when he is being made fun of or being cheated. Capra praises **small town values**, and pillories the wealthy and

sophisticated – greedy (the lawyer and the in-laws), the snobbish (practically everyone including the rich who support the opera), the intellectuals like the poets at the restaurant who sneer at Longfellow’s Hallmark Card-style verse, the incredible Austrian psychiatrist, who with his neat psychological



**Wholesome Jean Arthur
in the late 1930s**

explanations does his best in climactic courtroom scene to have Longfellow committed as insane (about the same thing as going to prison!). Only sensible and honest big shot is **the judge** in the final hearing (played by H.B. Warner, the actor who played Jesus in the silent ‘King of Kings’ and who played cards with Gloria Swanson in ‘Sunset Boulevard’), who makes sure Longfellow gets a fair hearing; when he begins to smile during Longfellow’s soliloquy, we know he has been won over. Note that the system bends when faced with decency and fellow-feeling, and there is no need for revolution or radical action.

Longfellow and Mandrake Falls, VT are “**pixilated**,” what with their tuba playing, good heartedness, staying in touch with decency and sensibleness. Deeds proposes Depression solution: use his \$18 million to give land to each of about 2000 men – 10 acres, a cow, a horse, and some seed -- and they will become prosperous farmers (what, with those depressed farm prices in the midst of the Depression?). He is a low profile and **kind hearted demagogue**, who punches the pretentious in the nose (the literati in the restaurant and the lawyer in the trial scene; some mild personal violence seems to be a sign of virtue and good sense!) and has the farmers cheering for him in court.

Jean Arthur, reporter, and her editor start off exploiting Deeds for their tabloid story, but turn to defend him when they see what a decent, good man he is. Reporters are down to earth guys, who with all their rough edges are also good hearted folk. Plot has additional complication since Arthur falls in love with Deeds (and vice versa), and her defense of him plays big role in his exoneration. Arthur starts off independent, good-hearted character with no boyfriend, and she enjoys the payoff of romantic love and the prospect of marriage in the final scene. In keeping with the conventions of romantic comedy, **boy gets girl** in the end; and we know they will live happily ever after. Arthur is typical of female stars in the late 30s in that she was straightforward and wholesome, unlike some of Hollywood’s leading women before and after.

Smaller characters are wonderful, as for example the two spinster sisters from Mandrake Falls who in the trial speak in echoes and think being “**pixilated**” (quirky and amusingly eccentric) is a good thing. Perhaps a weakness is the usually wooden acting of Gary Cooper, who perhaps makes up for it through his good looks; anyhow the rudimentary acting suits the character in the film.

The Late 1930s

Partly because of the grip of the Motion Production Code, by 1936 Hollywood leaves behind its smart-ass, “subversive” attitude toward American culture and now embraces the **basic rightness of the American system** and institutions, and the fundamental virtue of the American people. Perhaps encouraged by Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policy, Hollywood preaches loyalty and affection for America; we may have lots of problems, but we are decent and hard-working, and with good leaders we can work them out. (This new attitude made Hollywood’s **support of the war effort** [World War II, 1941-45] just a few years later natural and easy.)

The trend toward conformism and acceptance can be seen in the trends in Hollywood comedies, which generally avoid the satire and social commentary of the early 1930s. **Screwball comedy** predominates in the late 1930s. These films are usually romantic comedies that feature an anarchic style of absurd farce and “a fierce conflict of words and wit” between the principals. The main characters are usually rich

(living in Connecticut): they are depicted as zany, incompetent, lovable and amusing rather than exploitative or reprehensible. Perhaps the most famous example of screwball comedy is 'Bringing Up Baby' 1938 starring Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn.

.....
Why BRINGING UP BABY is Essential (Thanks to TCM)

In the eyes of many critics, Bringing Up Baby is the quintessential screwball comedy, incorporating all the standard elements of the genre such as the madcap heiress, a hapless leading man virtually victimized by her attentions and a group of stuffed shirts whose pomposity is deflated by the farcical goings on. It also stands as a prime example of the liberating influence of eccentricity (and the female) in the screwball comedy.

Critics would also link Bringing Up Baby to such recurrent Hawks trademarks as the aggressive female who destroys a man's composure, fast-paced action and dialogue and the sparse use of close-ups. Throughout his career, Hawks preferred to shoot his romantic leads in two-shots that emphasized a sense of partnership, even among such unlikely pairs as Susan Vance and David Huxley in this film. In tribute to Hawks, the French critics would refer to the medium two-shot as le plan Americain.

Like Casablanca (1942), Bringing Up Baby is a film that became a classic thanks to television airings starting in the '50s and revival screenings during the height of repertory cinema in the '60s. It is now regarded as one of the greatest comedies of Hollywood's golden age and has influenced the work of such contemporary directors as Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Demme and the Coen Brothers.

[by Rob Nixon, Kerry Sherrod & Jeff Stafford]

.....
The trend can also be seen in the prominence of the **Women's Film** in this period. Designed to appeal to a female audience, these movies include women-centered narratives and female protagonists. Woman's films usually portray "women's concerns" such as problems revolving around domestic life, the family, motherhood, self-sacrifice, and romance; women's involvement in the workplace is usually not treated. These movies often starred actresses such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Barbara Stanwyck.

A prime example of the women's films is 'Stella Dallas' 1937:

Stella Dallas 1937 King Vidor (Samuel Goldwyn) 3.5 Barbara Stanwyck cute with pretty toothy smile, outwardly gentle and sweet working class girl in small factory town; she has a flat American accent and improper grammar – always talking fast, she is obviously anxious to move up in life; she is spoiled and loves to have a good time; her clothes are of questionable taste—huge ribbons in her hair, jangles on her wrists, fur-lined bathrobes, and she gets more slovenly as time passes; and she reads 'True Confessions' magazine in bed. John Boles as cultivated businessman – always fit, handsome, and perfectly decked out; he is lonely and sitting duck for Stella, and then becomes a resented and long-suffering voice of reason with the willful Stella. Marjorie Main (Ma Kettle) as put upon mother. Anne Shirley plays Stella's pretty and enthusiastic daughter Laurel who is often over the top – Stella adores her. Alan Hale plays good ol' fun-loving Uncle Ed, who loves to play practical jokes and would like to hook up with Stella; he plays an excellent drunk. Boles goes off to New York for work, and the two live separately for most of their marriage. Stella is lonely, but she doesn't drink and doesn't fool around – "I don't think there is a man around that could get me going now." She is too attached to her daughter for whom she sews a varied wardrobe! Things begin to get tough for sweet-hearted Stella, when Dallas strikes up a relationship with a wealthy widow in New York, and Laurel's head is turned by her wealth and elegance. Stella decides that she will compete with Stephen's girlfriend and give Laurel the best of

everything – she plays tennis, goes to polo games, and rides bicycles with the best set. Laurel falls in love with her tennis instructor (played by a very young Tim Holt), and he gives her his fraternity pin. More heartbreak for Stella when she parades at the country club in cheap clothing, and she is cut and criticized behind her back by the cruel rich; Laurel tries to resist, but she can't help being humiliated by her mother. Stella has a classic self-sacrificing interview with Mrs. Morrison in which she agrees to allow her beloved Laurel live with Stephen and his future wife. Laurel refuses loyally; but Stella plots to turn her away by pretending that she is marrying alcoholic Ed, giving Laurel the impression that she sent her to the Morrisons because she wanted to get rid of her. At Laurel's wedding Stella stands outside the window in the rain; she is happy when she sees Laurel kiss the groom; tears roll down her cheeks, and she walks away beaming with happiness. Music is extremely sentimental, heart-tugging, sometimes cloying with intense weeping strings. Woman's movie characteristics appear in everyone's finest and most up-to-date clothes and the Morrisons' perfectly appointed house. An inspired women's weeper, put together with taste, honesty, grace, sincerity.

World War II

The United States was at war with Japan and Germany between 1941 and 1945, and Hollywood, already conditioned by the proto-patriotic and anti-German approach of the late 1930s, was fully supportive of the war. The American film industry turned out several products in support of the war: directors like Frank Capra and John Huston made documentaries on American military campaigns and on why we are fighting; there were numerous patriotic films depicting the sufferings and the heroism of American fighting men and even singing the praises of the Soviet ally in its fight against the Germans (some of the pro-Soviet films were to come back to haunt the studios in the postwar period); Hollywood also turned out entertainment films to distract the GIs and their loved ones back home from the rigors of war – musical comedies, inventive comedies such as 'The Lady Eve' 1941 produced by Preston Sturges, detective stories, the beginnings of *film noir* ('Laura' and 'Double Indemnity'), etc. After the financial doldrums of the 1930s, World War II was a time of soaring profits for Hollywood.

Ernst Lubitsch, already a famous director known for musicals and his slick, sexy comedies in the 20s and 30s, made a famous anti-Nazi war comedy in 1942.

To Be or Not To Be 1942 Ernst Lubitsch 4.0 Jack Benny as "that great, great Polish actor, Joseph Tura"; Carole Lombard breezy and cheerful as his seemingly wayward wife; Sig Ruman clowning hilariously as Colonel "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt"; Robert Stack in early role as Polish flyer who may be having an affair with Lombard.

Totally hilarious spoof of Nazis occupying Warsaw early in World War II. Very witty script. Based on anti-Nazi shenanigans of troupe of Polish actors who run circles around the incompetent Gestapo; a comedy of disguises and mistaken identities. Carole Lombard very fetching as Maria Tura, she of ambiguous morals who uses her beauty and wiles to get what she wants from the Gestapo. Jack Benny as the *pièce de résistance* with his trademark wistful sideways glance: "that great Polish actor," Joseph Tura, with a huge ego, who is mocked frequently as ham actor; he loves to do 'Hamlet', the only problem being that every time (three times) he recites soliloquy, his wife's lover walks out of the theater! (a different lover walks out of the London theater at the end.) Benny also gets mileage as the (rightfully) jealous husband. Lubitsch gets away with a lot of marital infidelity in 1942! Many at the time of release thought the movie made too much light of a very serious



Ernst Lubitsch with trademark cigar

subject, e.g., Benny: “They call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt! We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping!” The film was mostly ignored by audiences and critics complained of its bad taste, wondering what had happened to Lubitsch’s fine-tuned wit.

Sig Ruman overwhelmingly funny as hypersensitive Gestapo colonel with the bulging eyes and the pugnacious relationship with his assistant, Capt. Schulz, whom he constantly accuses of trying to shift blame for errors on his boss! Ehrhardt is a fool, with an ego and a desire for the good things in life, including Mrs. Tura. Great scenes and gags: “So they call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt!”, repeated three times by Benny when he is trying to stall the real Prof. Solinski, and then twice more by the real Ehrhardt; Ehrhardt’s expression when he thinks Maria is having an affair with Hitler; at the end; the fake Hitler commands two pilots to jump out of the plane, and of course they do giving the Nazi salute and saying “Heil, Hitler!”; the last soliloquy scene – we expect Stack to walk out, but another lover does, and both Benny and Stack are outraged! Much mocking of the German Führer-Prinzip, German subservience to authority and fear of their superiors, and fear by Germans that they will be cashiered for some imagined offense or for repeating an anti-Hitler joke. One of the classic comedies.

Film Noir

Film noir is a film style popular in the late 40s and early 50s that corresponded to disturbing world events in this period, when the destruction of World War II (400,000 American fatalities), the horrors of concentration camps (6 million Jews murdered), the invention and use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the threat of the Cold War produced **anxiety** in filmmakers and the American public, despite the superficial optimism of the postwar period. It also seems to correspond to the very popular philosophy of **Existentialism** (the Frenchmen Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre) that emphasized the fundamentally bleak, “alienated” condition of human beings in the 20th century (often described as *Angst* or anxiety) until they make an “authentic” choice to inject meaning and significance into their existence (think of Jimmy Cagney in his gangster films or Humphrey Bogart in ‘Treasure of the Sierra Madre’).



**Lana Turner – beautiful
but dangerous**

It is possible to imagine that the **biographical condition** of young men and women in the immediate postwar years had an impact on *film noir*. After serving in the military for several years, the men returning to their homes in 1945 had serious challenges, including reintegration into the American economy and reestablishing their relationship with their wives, who had acquired a freer life style during the war. American women would have similar problems. The popularity of the image of the *femme fatale*, for example, might reflect anxieties about the men reclaiming their jobs after the women had filled many of them during the war.

These films (*Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Out of the Past*, etc.) were often adapted from hard-boiled detective stories and novels written by authors such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain (author of 'Double Indemnity') and published in the 1930s and 1940s. They also owed stylistic and thematic debts to the 1930s gangster movies. They often take place in the dark alleys, dive bars, night clubs, cheap apartments, and dilapidated police stations of **Los Angeles**, the "mean streets" of the American city. Instead of the "exterior" films of the 1930s – crime films, sex comedies, adventure films, historical films, "Who dun it" films where the emphasis is on a detective finding out who committed the crime and all the suspects are gathered in a room at the end for the detective to announce the guilty person – these new films of the 40s dealt with **interior** psychological issues: a sense of **dread**, anxiety, of being trapped inside a **nightmare** and not able to get out.



Los Angeles City Hall in the 1940s

The main characters are often cynical and disillusioned **loners** lost in a hostile, empty and meaningless world. When they become enmeshed in the world of crime or they lose their heads over a beautiful woman, they are forever banished from the respectable middle class world of work and family. The films are usually stories of lust, greed, murder and revenge, in which the male protagonist is often tempted and led to his destruction by an irresistible **femme fatale** (the sexually alluring but treacherous and usually man-hating 'fatal woman' to whom the unsuspecting male falls victim). One *film noir* film ('Born to Kill' 1947) quoted Ecclesiastes 7:26:

I find more bitter than death
The woman whose heart is snares and nets
And he who falls beneath her spell
Has need of God's mercy.

In a film noir the story unfolds in an atmosphere of **claustrophobia**, in which the protagonists are caught and trapped by forces bigger than themselves and over which they have no control (perhaps **Fate** or **Doom**). The principals inevitably suffer in the end (death, execution, etc.) in accordance with the dictates of the Production Code, but not before we have thoroughly enjoyed their transgressions. *Film noir* films



Film noir lighting in 'The Big Combo' 1955

were among the few Hollywood films in this era that were allowed to have unhappy or **tragic endings**. Since the exposure of the audience to crime, weak men and destructive women is usually very high, the enforcement of the Production Code seems considerably weakened in these films.

The stories are often **narrated by the protagonist** in flashback; the voice-over gives the impression of inevitability, i.e., that fate is controlling the outcome since in the course of the film the viewer already knows how the story turns out. The films are shot often at night, in pools

of shadows and mists with dramatic **contrasts of light and dark** often on the faces of the principal characters (hence the name 'film noir' from the French for 'dark/black film' or 'gloomy' film). The term was coined by 1950s French critics who studied and greatly admired these hard-boiled American films.

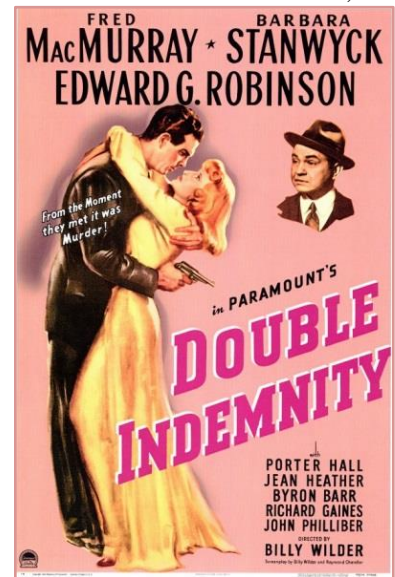
Many of these stylistic characteristics are associated with directors of German origin like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Otto Preminger, who emigrated from Germany in the years before World War II.

In your instructor's opinion, film noir is one of the great stylistic and thematic achievements of the American cinema. "Film noir" has become a kind of catch-all label that critics apply to virtually any film of this era that deals with crime and retribution, but a true noir film would have to include many of the characteristics mentioned above.

1) **'Double Indemnity'**, perhaps the best and best known of *film noir* films, was actually made in the previous year before the end of World War II. It is an 'A' film with top stars and a top director, **Billy Wilder**, the brilliant, cynical, and amusing author of films such as 'Sunset Boulevard' and 'Some Like It Hot.' Wilder was an immigrant from Austria who made it big in Hollywood.

Review: Double Indemnity 1944 Billy Wilder 4.0 Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson. Superior, and perhaps the original, *film noir* movie from the end of the war years. Focus: MacMurray persuaded by *femme fatale Stanwyck* to murder her husband for the insurance money, the murder committed, and then the plot is discovered and the two lovers murder one another; MacMurray's boss, Edward G. Robinson, has a sixth sense for mayhem and he eventually tracks down MacMurray, who confesses to him.

Stanwyck, already an accomplished actress with a long Hollywood career, is terrific as the *femme fatale*; she is a cool, sexy scheming "broad" with the seductive sex appeal that Ann Savage ('Detour') lacks. She stands out in the first flashback scene (see script of the scene on the course website) -- her anklet as she walks down the stairs, her cheap blond wig, her suggestive posture, her lipstick applied above the lips, her witty **off color conversation about speeding** with Neff in the living room (the screenplay was cowritten by Wilder and Raymond Chandler, who specialized in the atmospheric voiceover). It is clear she is motivated purely by **greed**, and plots to use sex to rope Neff in for the kill; she says at the end, "No, I never loved you Walter – not you or anybody else. I'm rotten to the heart. I used you, just as you said. That's all you ever meant to me."



Neff (**MacMurray**) is a more complicated fellow, who seems to love Stanwyck (lust for her?) at least at first until he realizes the mess he has gotten himself into; unlike Tom Neal in 'Detour', he seems intelligent enough, but it is swept away in Stanwyck's presence. He has a father-son type of relationship with his boss, the obsessive insurance investigator Keys (played by Robinson), and much of the feeling in the film comes from the affection between them and the tragedy inherent in Keys' finding out at the end that Neff is guilty. Throughout the movie Neff has been lighting Keys' cigarettes, and as he dies Keys returns the favor by lighting Neff's. Neff also resents having a desk-type, salesman's job at the insurance company (no organization man, he!); part of his motivation for the murder is to break out of his repetitive, dead-end job.

Both characters admit in the end that they are no good and that they deserve their sorry fate.

Most of the movie shot in typical *film noir style* – lots of nighttime shadows, bright lights reflected in dark evening street scenes, close-ups of faces divided into light and shadow, interior scenes shot against the shadow of Venetian blinds, etc. The dark interior scenes contrasted with the sunny California light



Fred MacMurray and Edward G. Robinson

outside depict the moral corruption of what is happening in this story. The lengthy murder sequence on and around the train is a masterpiece of *noir* atmosphere.

Story told in **flashback** by Neff, who at the beginning of the film is dying of a gunshot wound and is telling the story into a Dictaphone; he confesses, “I killed for money. I killed for a woman. I didn’t get the money. I didn’t get the woman.” No doubt that there is no stopping the machine of tragedy – **“all the way down the line,”** there is no way to get off the trolley of destruction until it reaches its destination – failure, loneliness and death are all inevitable, **fated**. As MacMurray says as he walks down the sidewalk right after the murder, “Suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it’s true, so help me. I couldn’t hear my own footsteps. It was **the walk of a dead man.**” As in most noir movies, MacMurray dies at the end realizing that he deserves his sorry fate.

Evocative picture of suburban/business Los Angeles in the mid-1940s. Great pictures of the two lovers meeting in small supermarkets and plotting the murder in front of the canned peas! Music is somber and repetitive. Very little humor in the film. The theme of the adulterers committing murder, the strongly implied sex between the principals, the double entendres in the “How fast was I going, Officer?” scene all show that only ten years after the creation of the Production Code Administration, its enforcement was already loosening up.

2) Although sometimes weighed down by an improbable plot, Jacques Tourneur’s ‘**Out of the Past**’ 1947 is another classic *film noir*. It helped launch the careers of Kirk Douglas and Robert Mitchum and starred two very sexy actresses, Jane Greer and Rhonda Fleming.

Out of the Past 1947 Maurice Tourneur (RKO) 3.5
 Robert Mitchum, weary, droopy-eyed, apparently indifferent, cynical, worldly wise, and wise-cracking as gangster/private investigator obsessed with a woman; Jane Greer in the role of her life as beautiful red-headed (?) woman without a straight or honest bone in her body; Kirk Douglas as nasal talking, greedy, twisted, and often foolish and inconsistent gangster with a lovely house on the west shore of Lake Tahoe; Rhonda Fleming glamorous (and sometimes confusingly similar to Greer) San Francisco woman with a short appearance; Virginia Huston as clean-cut good girl in Bridgeport; Dickie Moore as the deaf-mute boy who works for Mitchum at his service station in Bridgeport, California and who has the last “line” of the film.



Very famous film noir that may be a little overrated. Focuses on Mitchum’s obsession with Greer – begun in her famous entry out of the sunlight into the cantina in Acapulco – and his inability to shake her off despite his perfect understanding of her vicious faithlessness. Begins in wonderful shots of brightly lit, sparsely populated streets of Bridgeport, California and the Sierra pines and lakes around it, where Mitchum is trying to build a new life after bad experiences with Douglas and Greer; while driving to Tahoe, he tells the story in flashback to good girlfriend Virginia Huston ; he then accepts a job from Douglas which takes him through some very confusing complications in a studio set San Francisco reminiscent of ‘The Big Sleep’; then back to Bridgeport and the hope of salvation, only to be dragged to destruction by the inexorable Greer. Greer is

indecipherable and constantly deceptive – double-crossing both of her boyfriends, Mitchum and Douglas – and yet Mitchum with all his insults cannot break with her, until she leads him to his death in the car at the police roadblock. After the dark shadows of the intrigue in San Francisco and of the death drive down the nighttime Sierra road, the film ends in light-filled Bridgeport, where Huston has to decide to cast her lot in with her upstanding forest ranger friend; when she hesitates, the deaf-mute boy lies to her telling her that Mitchum had meant to run off with Greer (most probably not true), and she walks smiling into the Sierra light to her nuptials.

Terrific cynical one-liners that are great for memorable dialogue, although not very realistic speech – “when I saw her, I quit caring about the 40 grand”; “Sure I’m going to die, but I want to be the one who dies last”; “You’re like a leaf being blown from gutter to gutter”, etc. Script suffers from unrealistic characters, whose schemes and mind changes make for interesting intrigue, but which can get on the nerves of a viewer expecting real character motivation – Douglas takes Greer back after she has double-crossed him and run off with the \$40,000; Douglas hires Mitchum back after he had run off with his girl after finding her in Mexico; Mitchum’s repetitive inability to get Greer out of his heart. But the dialogue, the dangerous beauty of Greer, Mitchum’s obsession and his inexorable progress toward destruction *à la film noir* drive the film forward. Elegant film, surprisingly moving at the end when good survives in the light of Bridgeport after the persistent corruption of the long night.

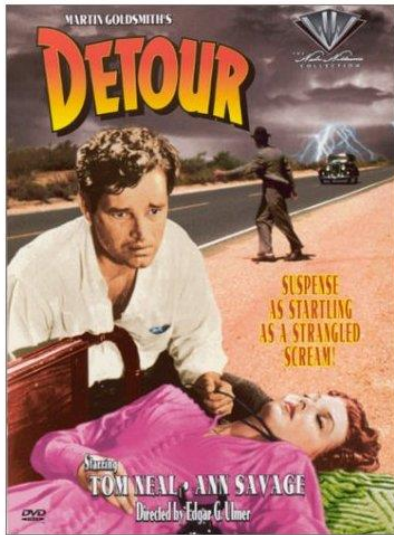
3) **‘Detour’** is a minor ‘B’ movie made in a marginal studio at the end of World War II. It has become however a low budget classic of the *film noir* genre. It features the male protagonist’s flashback narration, an extreme version of the *femme fatale*, and the iron hold of Fate over the two main characters.



Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer

Review: Detour 1945 Edgar Ulmer 3.5 Tom Neal, Ann Savage. Shot in six days in Poverty Row studio with only backdrop process shots (no locations) for a road movie! Film’s **low budget** shown in Savage’s death scene, where Neal’s confusion is expressed for a minute or so by simply filming out of focus. Follows Neal’s journey hitch-hiking from New York to LA for reunion with his girlfriend, who is trying to break in with the movies. “Fate” drags him down, according to his narration (narrator -- **“Fate can put the finger on you or me with no reason;”** “No matter what way you turn, fate will be there to hit you in the face”; “Whichever way you turn, fate will stick out his foot and trip you.”); he can’t seem to get a break. His downfall (arrested for murder) in the end comes from a combination of very bad luck (“fate;” how unlucky can you be when you strangle someone by mistake!) and **weak character** – he complains constantly about being a victim (of Fate!), he makes bad decisions and can’t say ‘no’ to the reckless, dominating woman he is hooked up with; he is virtually a slave to her through most of their relationship.

Early in the film he makes the bad decision to run with the money and the car when Haskell dies (of heart attack?) on the road, whereas he could have easily waited for the cops to come. He picks up Savage near the California border, having the **bad luck** to pick up a person who knows that he is not Haskell (she had previously hitch-hiked with Haskell!); he compliantly hands over his fate and the money to her when she demands it, and then, after he resists her hare-brained plan to pose as the dead Haskell and collect his inheritance, he strangles her by mistake with a telephone cord in a dingy motel room, when she tries to call the police on him.



Script is a model of film noir’s colorful and **cynical tough talking**. Neal on life – “Life’s like a ball game. You gotta take a swing at whatever comes along before you find it’s the ninth inning.” Savage on Neal’s claim that Haskell died by natural causes – “Say who do you think you’re talking to - a hick? Listen Mister, I been around, and I know a wrong guy when I see one. What’d you do, kiss him with a wrench?” Savage’s not-so-veiled threat to Neal – “I’d hate to see a fellow as young as you wind up sniffin’ that perfume Arizona hands out free to murderers!” Neal’s later riposte, [When I picked you up], “you were so broke you couldn’t even pay cash for a postage stamp!”-

Movie’s simulated outdoor location is convincing despite the **process shots** (back screen projections). Some ‘noir’ lighting, especially in close-ups of Neal as he narrates

the story in the diner. Essentially a two character film. Neal is reasonably good at enlisting the sympathy of the audience, since he is not a bad person. He is weak and wimpy next to the **hellion, femme fatale** Savage, who loses her temper at the drop of a hat, often spits words at him in anger in her sharp, nasal, ‘tough broad’ voice, and generally dominates him; her sudden outbursts – sideway snarls and dagger eyes that resemble a snake’s or a mad dog’s – in car with Neal are particularly striking. Her voice is scratchy, harsh, and vulgar. **Savage’s performance is expressionist** and baroque. Unlike most *femmes fatales*, Savage is not beautiful and seductive, merely tough and dominating. Pretty amazing that such low budget offering achieves respectability – good script and good direction.

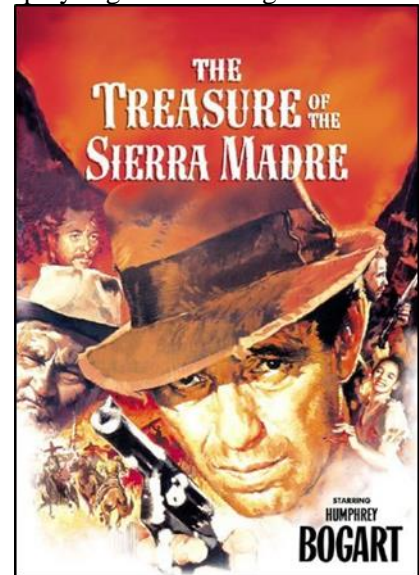
Existentialism in the Movies after the War

The world wars seem to have exercised a pessimistic influence on the movies. Especially following World War II, the ideas and attitudes of existentialism had an impact: the focus on the predicament of the individual when faced with the meaning of his/her existence; the vision that the individual human being is isolated and confronted with a lack of meaning or absurdity in the universe about him – “the heavens are empty”; the command to confront and wrestle with this meaninglessness and, by an act of will to assert an “authentic” existence characterized by one’s own freedom.

The phenomenon was perhaps more common in European films than in the USA, but some American film makers such as John Huston were influenced by the trend. A good example is his ‘The Treasure of the Sierra Madre’ 1948, perhaps Huston’s masterpiece.

Treasure of the Sierra Madre 1948 John Huston (also writer): Warners 4.0 Humphrey Bogart playing against type as psychotic, greed ridden Howard Dobbs (“You have to get up awful early to pull one over on Howard Dobbs”), Walter Huston (AA) as grizzled old prospector who tells the two tenderfeet what to do, Tim Holt as more idealistic and decent Curtin, Alfonso Bedoya in scene-stealing role as Gold Hat, leering and sneering chief of the bandidos, Bruce Bennett as pushy American prospector killed by Dobbs (but he does have a devoted woman waiting for him back home in Texas). Correct quote by Gold Hat: “We don’t need no badges. I don’t have to show you any stinkin’ badges.” Sui generis tragic drama by John Huston; it has elements of a western (although set in the 1920s), but it is really a tragic drama with a strong theme (destructive effects of gold/greed) and the destruction of an originally decent character – Dobbs. Set in Mexico and much of it shot in Mexico (the seams between the on location scenes and the studio scenes are a bit obvious); much of the cast are actually Mexicans, who

speak Mexican slowly but without subtitles (Walter often translates for us). Mexican peasants are sometimes presented sentimentally (e.g., Walter’s healing scene in the Mexican village, where he is treated like a god/magician), but then Huston undercuts it with biting wit when he is back with his buddies. Location shots of Mexican mountains are wonderful – panoramic, atmospheric, etc. Performances of the principals are outstanding: Holt rather retiring and decent; Huston irascible, humorous, good-natured, full of blarney, and philosophic – don’t expect too much out of life; if things turn bad (lose all your “goods”), then roll with the punches; Bedoya thrusts his ugly mug into the camera and he lisps, sneers, wheedles, insinuates showing his big teeth; Bogart plays against his tough man heroic image to play a down-and-out beggar in Tampico who goes to pieces under the influence of gold (greed), becoming paranoid, compulsive, violent (almost killing Curtin) and finally getting killed by the bandidos for his shoes and the pelts hiding the \$105,000 in the burros’ packs. Bogart’s journey is almost worthy of Shakespeare. Striking picture of being a Mexican bandit – constantly chased by the Federales, whom they fear for good reason, since they execute you summarily if they catch you; the bandits are often without guns, as when they kill Dobbs with a rock and (apparently) cut his head off with a machete. End is reasonably upbeat – Huston and Holt go off to continue their lives and neither seems to care too much about having lost their gold. Irony is strong at the end – the bandits break open the bags, and heedlessly spread the gold around on the ground thinking it was just something to make the pelts appear to weigh more; when the gringos return to scrape it off the ground, the wind has born it away, and Huston begins to laugh, followed soon by Holt: the mountain gave us the gold to begin with (they had thanked the mountain when they first left it), and now the mountain is taking it back. No female characters, and only one reference to a romantic connection (Bennett’s wife back home), which does bring tears to our eyes. Huston at his best in a tale about men working together and then splitting apart under the impact of greed. (2006)



HUAC and the Blacklist in Hollywood

The euphoria arising from the Allied victory over Germany and Japan in 1945 did not last very long. By 1947 at the latest the European world was divided into two hostile blocs – the western, democratic one backed by the United States, and the eastern, communist one backed by the Soviet Union. The USA in the postwar era was beset by the paranoid feeling that Communist forces from without (the Russian army) and from within (Communist spies and subversives supposedly loyal to Soviet Russia) were threatening the “democratic way of life.” This constituted another aspect of the malaise affecting the public consciousness of the United States in this period.



Stalin

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) began hearings in 1947 to find out whether Communists were influential in Hollywood and whether they were using their influence to cover America with Communist propaganda. There had undoubtedly been some Communist Party members in Hollywood before and during the war – a minority of the writers, who were particularly active, made up the bulk of the “unfriendly” witnesses questioned by the Committee. Hollywood studio executives were inclined to partial cooperation with HUAC. They were annoyed with some left-leaning Hollywood unions who had called out numerous strikes after the war; but they resisted Congressional interference in the movie business and they were not initially inclined to draw up blacklists

of supposed Communists working in Hollywood.

Studio executives were cautiously cooperative in the HUAC hearings: they did not want government bodies telling them who to hire and they wanted to take care of in-house problems in their own way; e.g., Eric Johnston, then head of the MPAA, swore, “As long as I live I will never be a party to anything as un-American as a blacklist.” On the other hand, the executives had already shown that they were susceptible to outside pressure from public opinion and were easily intimidated by anti-Communist crusaders.

The friendly witnesses called in early Fall 1947 generally cooperated, admitting past associations with the Communist Party and naming names to the committee. With this information, the committee, under the chairmanship of the rambling and abusive Parnell Thomas, who always seems to be shouting and banging his gavel and who did prison time a few years later for corruption, called another 19 unfriendly witnesses. Nine of them cooperated (including Bertolt Brecht and Adolphe Menjou). The other ten (including screenwriters Ring Lardner and Dalton Trumbo, and director Edward Dmytryk) refused to testify: invoking the First Amendment, they refused to answer whether they had ever been members of the Communist Party, and they refused to name names of others they knew had – this was the famous ‘Hollywood Ten.’ For tactical reasons they declined to invoke the 5th Amendment at this time.

The testimony of the Hollywood writer, John Howard Larson, illustrates the stormy, confrontational atmosphere in 1947. The committee was pressing for more information with the threat that, if the “unfriendly” witness did not cooperate, he would be cited for contempt of Congress. Rather than reply to Chairman Parnell’s questions (“...are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?”), Larson (and others among the Ten) belligerently disrupted the proceedings by attempting to deliver speeches denouncing the committee’s flouting of the Bill of Rights: “[What the committee is doing] is an invasion of the right of association under the Bill of Rights of this country....It is absolutely beyond the power of this committee to inquire into my association in any organization.” Lawson even refused to confirm that he was a member of the Screenwriters’ Guild, declaring that “It is absolutely beyond the power of this committee to inquire into my association in any organization.” He told Parnell that he was using techniques of intimidation that had been used by Hitler.



Cited for contempt of Congress, Larson and the others were ejected from the hearing room and subsequently served short prison terms after watching their judicial appeals fail in the U.S. Supreme Court. Larson’s “deliberately abrasive, arrogant and unruly” demeanor (Sklar, 264) and his systematic lambasting of the committee are thought by many sympathetic observers to have been counterproductive.

Fearing that they may be subject to censorship if they did nothing (remember that at this point films were not protected by the 1st Amendment), the studio executives finally gave in to Congress. In the Waldorf Declaration of November 1947 they agreed to dismiss any studio employee that they knew was a member of the Communist Party, and they established a blacklist of individuals, who would not be employed until their names had been cleared. There were never any formal prosecutions of blacklisted individuals; they were simply deprived of their livelihoods in this underhanded fashion.

The blacklist, which eventually included over 300 names, ruined many careers and demoralized many people. Hundreds were deprived of work until they got their names ‘cleared;’ others moved to Mexico; others continued to write screenplays and had their scripts submitted to Hollywood by surrogates. Some like Edward Dmytryk repented in the presence of HUAC in the second round of hearings in 1951 and

were reinstated, much to the chagrin of other members of the Ten. Even original opponents of HUAC like Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, and John Garfield recanted, claiming that they were “not Red” and that they had been “duped” in their stand on the Bill of Rights. A good film on writing through surrogates is Martin Ritt’s 70s film, ‘The Front,’ starring Woody Allen and Zero Mostel, the latter one of the actual actors put on the blacklist. Another film focusing on the impact of the blacklist was the famous classical western ‘High Noon’ 1951, which implicitly criticized the Hollywood professional community for not standing together to oppose the witch hunt. One of the destructive aspects of the blacklist was the bitterness it caused among members of the moviemaking community.

The Hollywood studios had thus agreed to self-censorship for the third time since the early 1920s; the first two were over sexuality, violence, and bad language in the movies; the third was about supporting the campaign against alleged Communist influence in American society and government. Despite the resistance of public figures like Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall who formed ‘The Committee for the First Amendment’, Hollywood allowed itself to be caught up in the anti-Communist hysteria of the Joseph McCarthy era. As in the 1930s, the studio heads were afraid of “adverse publicity and empty theaters”. Whether, as Robert Sklar asserts, it was the main factor in the decline of Hollywood in this period is an issue open to discussion. (And did the quality of movies really decline in this period? Are 50s movies really so bad?)

Science Fiction and Paranoia

The intensity of the fear of subversion in this period can be seen in Hollywood movies that in paranoid fashion depicted various threats to the USA.

Low budget 50s sci-fi movies (often called “paranoid”) portrayed various attacks aimed at the USA by forces from outer space or from deep beneath the sea. Generally speaking, American protagonists relied upon scientists, the US government, and the US military to defeat the threat – giant ants mutated by atomic explosions roaming the sewers of Los Angeles in ‘Them’ 1954; a bloodthirsty ogre rampaging through an isolated military installation in Antarctica in ‘The Thing’ 1951; a huge octopus-like sea monster tearing down the Golden Gate Bridge in ‘It Came From Beneath the Sea’ 1954; another sea monster killed with an atomic isotope but only after devastating New York City and the roller coaster in Coney Island in ‘The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms’ 1953; and viciously destructive high-tech invaders from Mars, who are finally defeated only by earth microbes (perhaps with the help of God) in ‘War of the Worlds’ 1953. (There were also 50s sci fi movies that criticized the pugilistic tendencies of the human species – ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still’ 1951 has a robot from outer space warning humanity that its time is running short; and ‘It Came From Outer Space’ 1954 presented Americans as paranoid and refusing to help stranded well-intentioned alien visitors in the Southwestern desert.)

‘The film ‘Them’ is one of the most exciting of the 50s sci-thrillers.

Them 1954 Gordon Douglas 3.5 James Whitmore, James Arness (sounds exactly like John Wayne), Edmund Gwenn, Joan Welton. Effective sci fi/monster thriller from 1950s; playing on fear of nuclear energy, postulates large sugar-loving but also carnivorous ants produced by atomic explosion mutation. Science is very accurate: the ants behave just like real ones, and a good part of the danger comes from fears that the queens will escape and start new nests in other parts of the world. Special effects consist of credible constructed semi-robotic ants that wave their antennae and mandibles and then



are incinerated by frame throwers. Script is taut and interesting. Cinematography often noirish, and always sharp. Early scenes in the New Mexico desert are particularly good, as we are spooked by the sounds of the ants, the shock of the little girl, and the creepy scene in the Johnson store (a very ‘noir’ scene); we are kept on edge and the threat unfolds bit by bit.



The finale confrontation in the sewers of Los Angeles is violent, tense, well directed and exciting. All acting is good, with perhaps exception of Arness sounding a bit too much like John Wayne; Whitmore is engagingly decent as sensitive policeman; Gwenn is avuncular, serious, yet eccentric as all-knowing scientist; Fess Parker does picturesque cameo of pilot who has encountered queen ants that he identifies as ‘flying saucers.’ Characters are developed enough so that audience becomes engaged and cares what happens to them. Welton is daughter of the scientist who knows a lot more about bugs than any of the men; she does not develop a

romantic relationship. Typical 50s threat pick. The threat comes from something 50s folk were worried about – atomic energy – and we have to rely on the good ol’ establishment authorities – police, military, politicians cooperate seamlessly under the guidance of the scientists to defeat the threat. There is no possibility of negotiation; the enemy is wiped out by extreme military measures. Excellent edgy, modern score by Bronislau Kaper (‘Red Badge of Courage’). (2006)

The most famous, and probably the best, of them is the first ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’. (It was ably remade with more graphic special effects in 1978 by Philip Kaufman.)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers 1956 Don Siegel 4.0 Kevin McCarthy as Doc, Dana Wynter. Superior low budget, paranoid 50s sci fi about invasion of forces bent on replicating and replacing human beings – they lay pods near the individual to be replaced, and the new replica replaces the real person when he falls asleep. An excellent example of the Don Siegel style – straight- forward shooting with no frills and sharp fast-paced editing that moves the story ahead efficiently and effectively. The film was shot in Sierra Madre (Southern California).

Big emphasis on the threat to our individuality, our emotions, our ability to be excited and enthusiastic, the experience of love, the enjoyment of beauty. The pod people who replace us look exactly like us but they are like robots/automatons. “They’re taking you over cell for cell, atom for atom. There is no pain. Suddenly, while you’re asleep, they’ll absorb your minds, your memories, and you’re reborn into an untroubled world.” They take over when you go to sleep and your guard is down. Under their regime, “There’s no need for love...Love, desire, ambition, faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me.” There will be no emotion. Everybody will be satisfied and happy, sort of like a plant (they grow from pods) or the experience of sleep.



Big question is – is this a critique of communism that turns us into political robots, subverting us from every side while our leaders bury their heads in the sand? Or are the authors addressing the forces of conformity in American society, and perhaps even criticizing the public’s craven acceptance of McCarthyism?

Special effects play a minor role – only the major scene in the hothouse with the rapid development of the slimy pods into human replicas. Paranoid atmosphere; it takes place in a small California town where everybody knows everybody and the town is cut off from the outside world; the protagonist arrives by

train in the beginning and has to cross a chain of mountains to reach a freeway at the end. The atmosphere becomes especially intense in the later scenes, when it is clear to our protagonist that everyone else in the town was being transformed. Rushing in a frenetically paced chase to try to stop the transformation process, McCarthy recognizes his friends but then realizes that they are not the same. The viewer shares in the paranoia since the transformations make us suspicious of anything ordinary and



Replica Town inhabitants prepare to distribute a pod

familiar like our own relatives and the friendly corner policeman. Lots of chills and little shocks as the doctor and his girlfriend figure out what is going on. The chase ends with beloved Becky finally falling asleep and when he kisses her, Doc realizes to our horror that she has become one of them; then he has to flee, now entirely alone.

The comfortable and reassuring small town culture of the films of Frank Capra is now under attack.

The current version of the film ends somewhat ambiguously with emergency room personnel in another town finally taking Doc seriously and calling the FBI and police, but it is not clear whether the campaign to get them will be successful. The ending (and the prologue) were tacked on by the studio to play down the paranoia of the script. The film originally ended with the scene where Kevin McCarthy wanders in the freeway (dangerous!) shouting wildly in a grotesque close-up, “You’re next! You’re next!” This would have been a much more chilling ending.

Although it is possible to make an argument that “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” was presenting McCarthyite conformity as the threat to red-blooded Americans, it is easier to argue that the enemy is Communism. This enemy takes us over quietly, step by step while we sleep, and turns us into soulless, identical automatons that have no need for love, family, faith, desire, ambition, all slaves of the totalitarian Communist state. We have to be alert ... you may be next!

There is no indication that the director was a rabid anti-Communist. Most likely the studio was exploiting the anti-Communist hysteria in the country to sell the movie. In Hollywood the profit motive will always prevail over ideology.