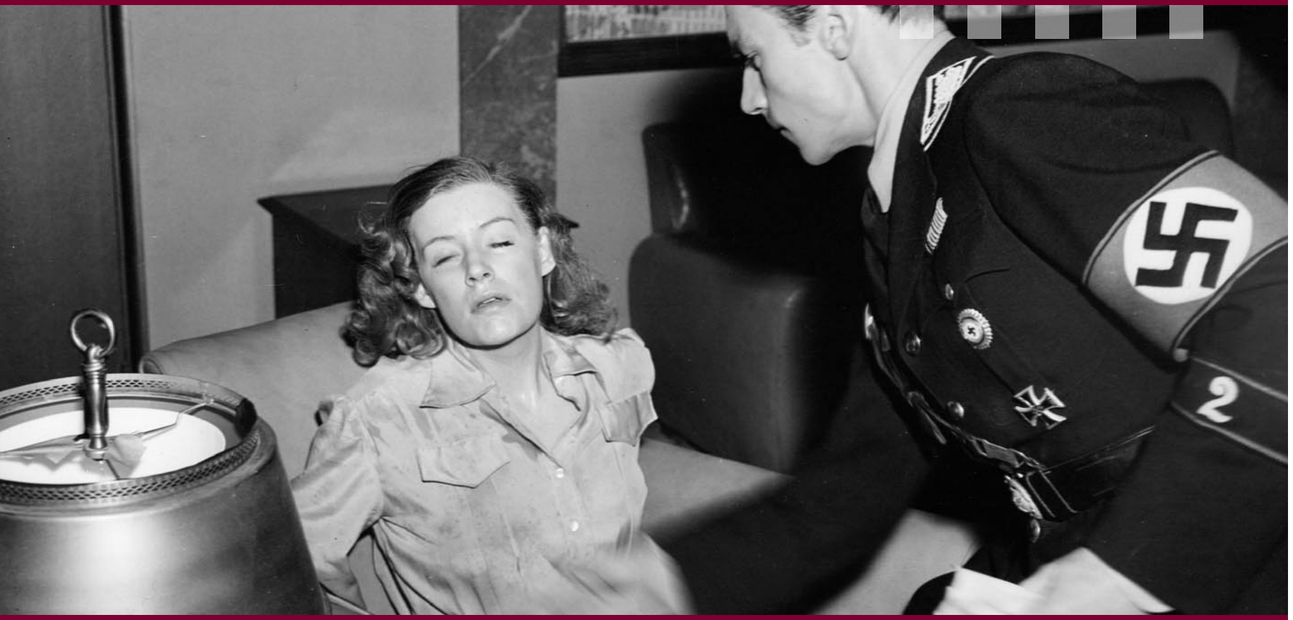


49. A sadistic Nazi officer strikes a member of the Resistance in *Underground* (1941).

# Propaganda, Pop Culture & Public Diplomacy

## by Johanna Blakley

On October 30, 2003, the Norman Lear Center convened a panel discussion at the USC Annenberg School for Communication on the relationship between politics, pop culture and propaganda in America today. Using the World War II period as a distant mirror, the panel debated the role of Hollywood and Washington in crafting national discourse and disseminating propaganda. Taking the Warner brothers' efforts in the 1930s and 40s as a touchstone, panelists explored the contemporary situation in Hollywood and lessons to be learned from the fractious political battles of the last century.

Panelists were director and producer Frank Pierson, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and writer of *Presumed Innocent*, *A Star is Born*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Cool Hand Luke* and *Cat Ballou*; USC English professor Leo Braudy, author of *The Frenzy of Renown*; USC cinema-television professor Dana Polan, author of *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and the American Cinema*; USC history professor Steven J. Ross, author of the forthcoming *Hollywood Left and Right: Movie Stars and Politics*; and senior research fellow in the USC Center on Public Diplomacy Nancy Snow, author of *Propaganda, Inc.* and *Information War.* Norman Lear Center director Martin Kaplan moderated the discussion.

While the panel set out to locate the boundaries between propaganda and public diplomacy, the group discovered that these boundaries were vague in the 1930s and they remain undefined now. When asked to describe the appropriate roles for Hollywood and Washington in wartime, the picture became even less clear: Acknowledging that Hollywood usually tells stories in a more compelling way than Washington, history shows us that the film industry and the political establishment do not work together easily, making it difficult for Hollywood to take the lead in political matters, and making it nearly impossible for any administration to determine Hollywood's creative output. The complex financial, political and cultural forces at play deserve more attention than they've received. This panel discussion helped to explain these forces and frame the pressing issues we face in wartime today.

During the World War II period, Hollywood films were considered excellent vehicles for propagandistic messages, but that didn't mean those messages were consumed without question, or that they were apparent to the film industry's widely diverse global audience. The American public – which prided itself in its belief in individual determination, tolerance and free speech – was deeply divided in its attitudes toward the war in Europe, and the American response to any overt political message in a film could be unpredictable at best. Considering all the warring factions on the production side – including the various political sympathies and economic interests of screenwriters, directors, actors, producers, studio bosses and Production Code Administration (PCA) officials, who were empowered to censor the motion picture industry – it is a wonder that any films were made in the World War II era that addressed contemporary politics in any

coherent fashion whatsoever. While people often assume that propaganda is easy to spot, the films from this period prove otherwise. Now that the motion picture industry is protected by the First Amendment (which didn't occur until 1952), many would argue that economic priorities have taken over all else in the industry, and there is no longer room above the bottom line for politics of any kind, let alone for "combining good citizenship with good filmmaking" – the mantra of Harry Warner.

When the Warner brothers decided to make progressive films about social problems, were they doing a service to America, or taking advantage of their power to change the collective mind of a country? When does a "good citizen" turn into a "warmongering propagandist?" A Senate subcommittee broached this issue in 1941 when it accused the film industry, and the Warner brothers in particular, of inciting the country to war, but it never resolved it.

## Hollywood, Washington and the Censors

Hollywood and Washington always cross paths during wartime, starting with the Creel Committee. President Wilson created the committee to regulate the film industry during World War I – to mixed effect. Creel enlisted the voluntary collaboration of the film industry in the war effort, while threatening that a failure to cooperate would result in direct government censorship of all movies. At the Lear Center panel discussion, Steven Ross recounted the history of the PCA, which held sway during the 1930s and 40s and basically outlawed any representations of ethnic conflict, any attack on political parties or governments and any references to religious organizations. After taking several trips to Germany in the 1930s, Harry Warner decided to use his studio to fight fascism. His decision infuriated the other studios, which regarded Germany as a key market that they could not afford to alienate, and raised the hackles of Joseph Breen, the notoriously anti-Semitic director of the PCA. In order to circumvent PCA rules, Warner Bros. developed film projects such as *Black Legion* (1937) and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) which were based on court records, giving them the factual basis they needed to avoid charges of propagandizing. These movies and others were cited in the 1941 Senate subcommittee hearings.

Frank Pierson described a pervasive fear among Jews in Hollywood in the 1930s: Studio executives, actors and writers did their best to remain anonymous and downplay any ethnic or religious overtones. Pierson described this self-censorship as a dangerous form of "negative propaganda," the dissemination of a powerful message via omission. He found the absence of anything Jewish in American film up to the 1960s as extremely troubling. However, Leo Braudy suggested that the decision to concentrate on prejudice in general, rather than anti-Semitism in particular, was a calculated move that protected a predominately Jewish industry from accusations that they were making self-serving propaganda. Is the problem of prejudice minimized by effacing the particular minority groups affected by it, or is prejudice more easily defeated when it's attacked in its aggregate form?

While the PCA rules made it virtually impossible to create propaganda films before the U.S. joined the war, it became advantageous to do so afterwards. Dana Polan mentioned some enticements offered to studios during World War II to produce propaganda films. There were special dispensations for those businesses with "essential industry status," so it was financially advisable for the industry to participate in the war effort so that they could earn better rations. The government could deny lucrative export licenses to films considered detrimental to the war effort – then as now, foreign box-office often made the difference between a financial success and a failure. An anti-monopoly suit, which pressured the major studios to divorce exhibition from production and distribution, was pending before the war began. During its wartime postponement, the studios no doubt felt that if they could collaborate with the government on propaganda films, they would be in a better position when the case resumed. Immediately after the U.S. entered the war, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Lowell Mellett, the soon-to-be head of the Bureau of Motion Pictures, telling him to refrain from censoring, restricting or interfering with the film industry so that it could be an effective partner in the war effort. Suddenly, propaganda films were no longer verboten, they were encouraged.

## Propaganda, Truth and Narrative

Propaganda seems like an obvious term, but it's actually very slippery. Depending on how it's defined, one could claim that everyone is a propagandist of some sort. When asked what films are propaganda and which ones are not, Frank Pierson suggested that any movie with a discernible point of view could be regarded as propaganda. Often those who are accused of creating propaganda respond by saying they are simply telling the truth. Since the truth is often contested,

50. Ronald Reagan visits the set of *Underground* (1941).


51. Ad campaign for *Underground* (1941).

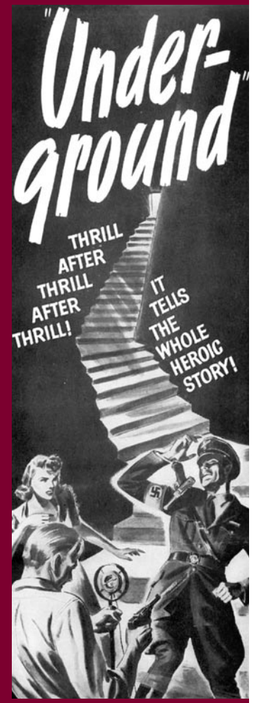
the label of "propaganda" will be contested as well. Leo Braudy said the term was coined during the Counter-Reformation, but it did not return to popular parlance until the 20th century, when an expanded popular culture could be leveraged for massive propaganda campaigns. In Europe, propaganda is a neutral term, while in the U.S. it's considered diabolical. Americans take the attitude that "we are natural, not ideological," and so we don't produce propaganda, we just say what we mean. Braudy referred to a famous quote from a Wim Wenders film, *Kings of the Road* (1976), in which one character says, "The Americans have colonized our subconscious." Although Americans are terrible at didacticism, they are quite good at creating and distributing powerful ideological narratives that global audiences accept as entertainment, not propaganda.

Dana Polan argued that the smooth Hollywood film style that had developed in the 1930s made propagandistic messages palatable to very diverse audiences. After the U.S. entered the war, films became more didactic – voice-overs were used more often, characters delivered didactic speeches and films like *Casablanca* (1942) often used full-screen images of maps and globes to orient the audience in the story of real international conflict. Hollywood cinematic devices made message-movies seem less heavy-handed than they could have been. And Hollywood's typical film narrative was a very advantageous form for propaganda because most stories focused on a character's conversion to a new position. Sergeant York, for instance, overcomes his pacifism to fight for the American way, while *Casablanca*'s Rick overcomes his political cynicism and his romantic longings to serve the anti-fascist resistance. Filmgoers were so familiar with these story conventions that the didactic message seemed plausible, motivated and natural.

## Ambiguity: The Enemy of Propaganda

But Hollywood propaganda films from the World War II period have not always fared well with critics and audiences. Leo Braudy chalks this up to the mixed messages that emanate from many of them. During the 1930s in particular, Warner Bros. released several films with very oblique propagandistic messages. Swashbucklers, westerns, gangster films – all these popular forms were utilized to provide commentary on the fascist threat without directly invoking it. These "displaced narratives," as Braudy calls them, addressed the themes of prejudice and tyranny and subtly asked audiences to see the parallels between those historical moments and the present situation. Steve Ross pointed out that the messages were often confusing because of the propaganda wars *within* Hollywood itself. Scripts during the period were so heavily edited and censored by the studio and the PCA that audiences were left to wonder whether the nationalists in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943) were really fascists and if Robin Hood was supposed to be a communist or a member of the American Front, a prominent fascist organization at the time.

Dana Polan discussed how indeterminacy in propaganda can undermine its political potency. Hitchcock, for instance, gravitated toward




52. Ad campaign for *Underground* (1941).

material that emphasized the ambiguity of good and the ambiguity of evil – material that doesn't necessarily suit itself well to didactic purposes. *Lifeboat* (1944), for instance, featured a Nazi U-boat commander who seemed to be the only competent person in the film. Hitchcock received criticism for portraying the American and English characters as weak and ineffectual, and he was warned that with some edits, the Nazis could use the film as a piece of propaganda against the Allies. Polan argued that the key to representing a wartime enemy is to create the perfect balance between an enemy that's strong and cold and one that's weak, decadent and perverse – such as the Nazi officer in *Underground* (1941), who is in control but made to appear out of control when he beats women and old men. The enemy must be terrible, but he also must be defeatable. Since propaganda works best when its message is clear, the studios had a difficult time achieving this balance in their films.

Polan indicated that depictions of allies in wartime films can also be fraught with compromise and ambiguity. Depictions of the French are always tricky, because the American government doesn't necessarily approve of France's left-leaning political proclivities. While the U.S. government wanted the film studios to create positive representations of its allies, it didn't want to endorse their politics. The problem of representing Stalin as an ally – as was infamously done in Warner Bros.' *Mission to Moscow* (1943) – was even more of a challenge since no studio wished to suggest that it had communist sympathies.

Frank Pierson agreed that ambiguity may very well be the enemy of propaganda. He described *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) as a very moving film, but one that stirred conflicted feelings about the war. Although the film ends with a thundering affirmation of Allied power, it begins with a shocking scene of a lost tank wandering in the desert. We discover that all the inhabitants are dead, suggesting that the war is no longer in human control. Coupled with Erich von Stroheim's humane portrayal of a Nazi, *Five Graves to Cairo* did not achieve any clear-cut propagandistic goals for the Allies.

## When Karl Rove Comes to Hollywood

Moderator Martin Kaplan asked Nancy Snow whether historian Paul Fussell was right when he said, "The function of Hollywood during war is propaganda." Snow said yes, but the problem has been that Hollywood hesitates to admit that it makes propaganda. Snow claimed that there is no escape from the perception of the world that American film influences global audiences. If Hollywood and the U.S. were more honest brokers, if they worked toward a dialogue with global citizens, Snow suggested they might face less global outrage about their dominant position on the world stage.

The Bush Administration's "Shared Values Campaign," which was developed at the State Department by former advertising executive Charlotte Beers, was a case in point. The campaign, which was canceled after a disastrous debut in Indonesia, depicted happy Islamic people in the U.S. Muslim audiences responded by saying, "What have you done for us lately?" essentially rendering the campaign counter-productive. Snow argued that public diplomacy efforts will not work unless they initiate a dialogue, and the Pentagon should not be left to do this work itself. While she felt the best public diplomacy will come from NGOs and civic organizations such as Sister Cities International, she emphasized the role that Hollywood should play in depicting democratic principles in creative and appealing ways that will encourage engagement and interest in cross-cultural communication.

But communication between Hollywood and Washington is no smoother now than it was during the 1930s. Frank Pierson described the atmosphere as "poisonous" at a meeting that Karl Rove, senior advisor to the president, and Jack Valenti, chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association, convened for Hollywood creatives and Washington operatives in the aftermath of 9/11. Representatives from Washington made no threats and Hollywood executives made no promises, but Pierson was very disappointed by the group's inability to have a substantial conversation about First Amendment rights and the ethical responsibilities of the filmmaking community. As president of the Academy, Pierson felt a "gentle pressure in the small of the back" to *not* air the Oscar ceremonies in early 2002, and he knew he was not alone: He had heard about the nightly calls from Washington to the network news outlets, but he didn't know how effective they had been. Rove told the group that he wasn't telling them what to do, but what they *should* do. At the end of the meeting, Jack Valenti asked the participants to pick up copies of the press release that had been written about the meeting before it even started.

When moderator Martin Kaplan asked Pierson whether Harry Warner's effort to combine "good citizenship with good filmmaking" was still plausible in contemporary Hollywood, Pierson was not optimistic. When studios were family-owned, they had the option to produce pet projects and lose money if they chose. But once the studios became corporate entities, with shareholder interests to keep in mind, money became the only priority. Pierson describes the situation as growing worse over the years. It used to be that some movies were made simply because enough people at the studio thought they were good. Now, Pierson believes that every movie is made only after rigorous financial calculations are computed. As a result, there is no room for pet projects, political sympathies or good citizenship. Any topic is game—including movies that excoriate the American political system, such as *Wag the Dog* (1997)—as long as someone determines that it is likely to make money.

Of course decision makers in Washington are not immune to the persuasive power of film. Pierson mentioned *The Battle of Algiers* (1963) as an overtly propagandistic film but "the truest ever made" because it captured vividly the moral ambiguities of war. In August 2003, the Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict screened *The Battle of Algiers* at the Pentagon. Subsidized and supervised by the post-colonial Algerian government and directed by an Italian Marxist, the film indicts the French for their tough counter-insurgency campaign against the FLN, without demonizing the French commander or whitewashing the murderous methods of the resistance fighters. The invitation to the film screening at the Pentagon said, "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film." As is the case with most powerful tools, propaganda films can serve purposes that their makers never intended.