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
When the Warner brothers decided to make propagandistic 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”? Hollywood and Washington always cross paths during wartime, starting with the Creel Committee. President Wilson created the committee during World War I to restrain from censoring, restricting or interfering with the film industry so that it could be an effective partner in the war effort. Suddenly, Hollywood became much more didactic – voice-overs were used more often, characters delivered 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, King of the Road (1976), in which one character says, “The Americans have colonized our subconscious.” Although Americans are terrible at didactics, they are quite good at creating and distributing powerful ideological narratives that global audiences accept as entertainment, not propaganda.

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material that emphasised the ambivalence of good and the ambiguity of evil – material that doesn’t necessarily deliver a didactic message. Hitchcock received criticism for portraying the American and English characters as weak and ineffectual, and he was worried that with some cuts, 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 portly — 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 Nazis 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 priorities. While the U.S. government wanted the film studios to create positive representations of its allies, it didn’t want to endorse their policies. The problem of representing Stalin as an ally — as was famously done in Warner Bros.’ Underground (1943), 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.

When Karl Rove Comes to Hollywood

Moderator Martin Kaplan asked Nancy Snow whether historian 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 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.

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 conceived 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 Sime Cité 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 adviser to the president, and Jack Valenti, chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association, convened for Hollywood creatives and representatives of the Academy, Pierson felt a “gentle pressure in the small of the back.” Even so, the studio executives didn’t feel that the Commerce Department told them what to do. At the end of the meeting, Jack Valenti asked the participants to pick up copies of the press release that had been released, 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.

The majority of the response to this film was positive, but its lack of escapist optimism may well serve as a model for other Hollywood films. For example, The Departure of Algerian (1963), which was overtly propagandistic film but “the truest ever made” because it captured virulently the moral ambiguities of the war. In August 2005, the Department of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict screened The Departure of Algerian at the Pentagon, Subsidized and supervised by the post-colonial Algerian government and directed by an Italian Marxist, the film intended for the French that 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. The entire Arab population builds to a mad conflict." The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand this, we need to turn to the screening of this film.” At the same time with powerful tools, propaganda films can serve purposes that their makers never intended.

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 virulently the moral ambiguities of the war. In August 2005, the Department of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict screened The Departure of Algerian at the Pentagon, Subsidized and supervised by the post-colonial Algerian government and directed by an Italian Marxist, the film intended for the French that they were the truest ever made because it captured virulently the moral ambiguities of the war. In August 2005, the Department of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict screened The Departure of Algerian at the Pentagon, Subsidized and supervised by the post-colonial Algerian government and directed by an Italian Marxist, the film intended for the French that 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. The entire Arab population builds to a mad conflict. The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand this, we need to turn to the screening of this film.” At the same time with powerful tools, propaganda films can serve purposes that their makers never intended.

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