

NAZIS & COMMIES IN NOIR

TAKING THE LOW ROAD OF CARICATURE AND OMISSION

By Marc Svetov
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First, two questions: What did film noir show of Nazism and Communism? And what did Nazism and Communism stand for in these films?

The paucity of both ideas and ideology is immediately apparent. Most of these movies portray a ring of conspirators spying for either Germany or the Soviet Union. That is the case with *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Pickup on South Street* (1953), *Notorious* (1946), and *The House on 92nd Street* (1945). But these spies in action act no different than mobsters or common criminals. And presenting Nazism and Communism without their underlying philosophies is like portraying the Ku Klux Klan—see *Storm Warning* (1951)—without the racism.

The virulent, fervid *Woman on Pier 13* (1949, aka *I Married a Communist*) deals with Communism at home and gives a hint as to why the movement could be attractive as a *Weltanschauung*, especially to idealistic young people longing for a more righteous society. It was especially seductive to those born on the wrong side of the tracks—like Frank Johnson (Robert Ryan), for example, who is now living under the name of Brad Collins, having been a radical and staunch Party member in the 1930s.

Collins has changed sides. We see how he was unable to find a job in Depression America, became angry at social and economic conditions, and found a home in the Party. But soon it becomes clear to him that striving for justice is only its cynical pretense. Thomas Gomez plays Vanning, Party boss in San Francisco, who runs his empire the way any gangster would and is after increased power on the docks. Unable to dominate the unions by sheer numbers, the Communists resort to illegitimate means to bend union politics their way. Their ruthless tactics are always at the expense of the union and the workers.

William Talman plays a cold-blooded Party henchman and Paul E. Burns a Stalinist-style bureaucratic murderer and gofer. Under Vanning's leadership, union negotiations are subverted and people suspected of betraying the Party are simply eliminated. The Party brainwashes young, impressionable workers with lofty rhetoric and blackmails former members to coerce subversive action that will consolidate their power. At the film's conclusion, Ryan kills Vanning with a grappling hook, showing that it is the working man who will take care of the Commies.

Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* tells us little about Communists other than that they are a bunch of mobsters who, when crossed, do just what gangsters do. It is unclear what motivates them. But the complexity of lead character Skip McCoy (Richard Widmark) sustains our interest. An FBI agent tries to appeal to Skip's patriotism: "If you refuse to cooperate, you'll be as guilty as the traitors who gave Stalin the A-bomb." McCoy: "Are you waving the flag at me?" FBI agent: "Do you know what treason is?" McCoy: "Who cares?"

Skip turns patriotic only after Candy (Jean Peters) is beaten to a pulp by the Communist agent Joey (Richard Kiley) and police informant Moe (Thelma Ritter) is murdered when she refuses to divulge Skip's whereabouts.

Gordon Douglas's *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), starring Frank Lovejoy, is a heavy-handed propaganda film, demonstrating how a noir visual style could be tailored to such a purpose. The story covers familiar territory—a band of criminals and gangsters—but they are more political than Communists in other films. The Party leaders are so incredibly cynical about racism, union members, and anti-Semitism that it's hard to see how they ever attracted followers. This is probably the point. Every time one sees the uncomfortably wooden "average guy" Frank Lovejoy, thoughts stray unwillingly to Richard Nixon (right down to the disturbingly similar hairline).

Not even a whiff of anticapitalist justification survives in *Shack Out on 101* (1955), a low-rent production that is almost Surrealist in execution, featuring the world's most unlikely Communist agent: Lee Marvin as "Slob."

There is a vast difference between dealing with Nazis as war opponents and portraying Nazism as an ideology. Unlike Communism, with its claim of struggling for social justice, Nazism is ideologically unredeemable.

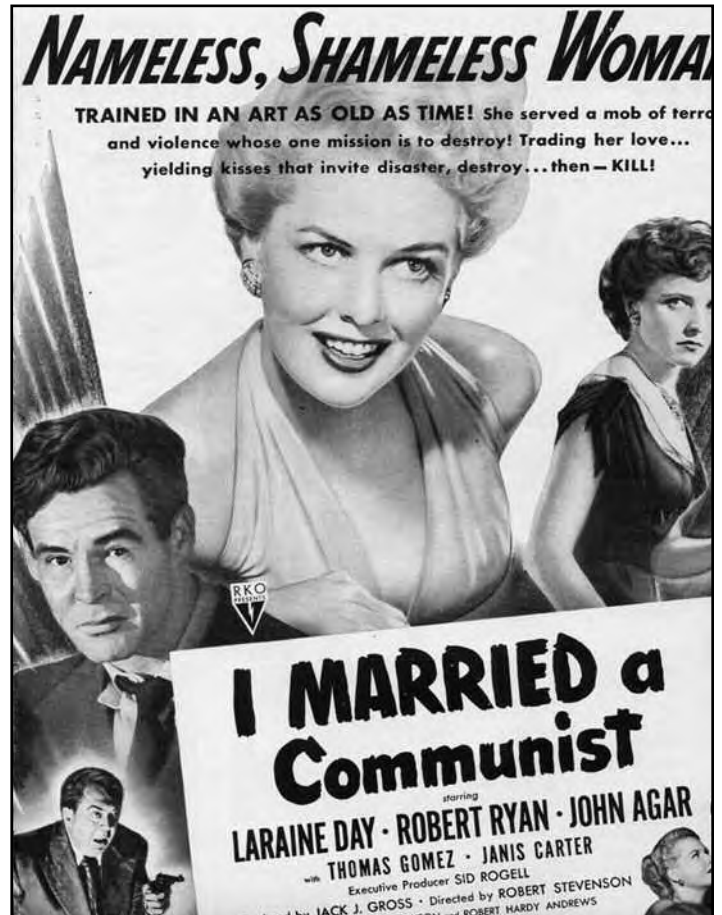
In *Witness to Murder* (1954), Nazism plays a caricatured role. Slayer Albert Richter (George Sanders) justifies his deeds via the ideology of the master race and a bowdlerized Nietzscheanism. These ideas play a pivotal role in the plot. They have since been regurgitated ad nauseam in crime stories and films—the lone murderer feeling superior to the anthill below. Here, though, Sanders is a Nazi acting alone, without politically motivated cronies.

We get a hint of Nazi psychology when Carl Esmond, playing Willi Hilfe in Fritz Lang's *Ministry of Fear*, states that he would not mind killing his own sister, to whom he is quite close, if it will benefit the "cause." Later, of course, he actually attempts it. With Nazis, family relationships simply don't count.

In other spy-ring films, Nazis are portrayed as particularly capable of cannibalistic ruthlessness, thinking nothing of disposing of their own people. Claude Rains in *Notorious*—with its characteristic Hitchcockian MacGuffin of uranium ore hidden in wine bottles—is more fearful of his Nazi coconspirators than he is of the Americans.



Loretta Young and Orson Welles in the often-underrated *The Stranger*.



The Stranger (1946) is by far the best film of this type, dealing with Nazism in a more fully dimensional way. Vital elements of its plot touch on genocide, escaped mass murderers, war-crime trials, and anti-Semitism. It is a true film noir with its expressionist lighting and camerawork by Russell Metty. And since it is directed by Orson Welles, with his characteristic preference for baroque imagery, the visuals are tightly linked to the film's thematic elements.

Welles plays escaped Nazi mastermind Franz Kindler. He is hiding under an alias: Charles Rankin, an American professor in a small college town in New England. (It is not explained how Kindler has managed to lose his German accent!) We get several harrowing glimpses of Nazism's aberrant psychology as Rankin displays an alarming degree of coldness—for instance when he disciplines the family dog "for its own good," eventually killing it.

Then there is his double-edged dinner-table talk. He seems to be making accusatory remarks about the Germans, while in reality he is praising them. He justifies German arrogance by claiming the German feels superior to "inferior people, inferior nations." There's also his matter-of-fact repudiation of the idea that Germans might long for social justice à la Karl Marx: "But Marx wasn't a German. Marx was a Jew."

This anti-Semitic remark gives him away to Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson), an investigator for the Allied War Crimes office who has tracked Kindler/Rankin down. As for Germany itself, he coldly suggests something akin to a final solution. In his mind there is no choice but "annihilation, to the last babe in arms," which, of course, is alarmingly similar to what the Germans actually tried to do.

Wilson informs the audience that Kindler was no small fish, but on a par with

Joseph Goebbels and Heinrich Himmler. When he is finally captured, Kindler dissembles, as many high-ranking Nazis did: "It's not true, the things they say I did. It was all their idea. I followed orders." Wilson counters with: "You gave the orders." Here we have accurate representations of actual Nazi psychology and behavior. Welles even makes use of 1945 documentary material from the Ohrdruf-Buchenwald concentration camp, in which the United States army shows the press what they discovered when they liberated the camp.

This is a singular event in Hollywood filmmaking, which was quickly overtaken by anti-Communist propaganda. Once the Cold War became the dominant American ideology, Hollywood audiences would not be shown anything like this again. It would be nearly two decades before a sober, documentary approach emerged with Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).

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different eras, and an equally convincing trip through the brainscape of Jun Nakayama. Especially rewarding is Revoyr's decision to have the resolution of the mystery plot not the *raison d'être* of the narrative, but rather just a setup for the novel's unexpected and genuinely moving conclusion.

Revoyr, daughter of a Japanese mother and a Polish American father, is also the author of *Southland*, a terrific Los Angeles noir novel also published by Akashic. She has clearly established herself as one of Southern California's most prominent new voices. *The Age of Dreaming* is a deep, graceful, beautiful book—a gift to readers and movie lovers alike.

—Eddie Muller