

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE AND THE GENDER OF THE COLD WAR

The *Manchurian Candidate* (1962) is one of the greatest of US Cold War films but has been discussed surprisingly little. Of the discussions we do have, perhaps the best have been provided by three fine Cold War scholars—Michael Paul Rogin, Stephen Whitfield, and Margot Henriksen—in their various books on US Cold War culture (Rogin 252-254, Whitfield 211-213, Henriksen 264-268).¹ Rogin and Whitfield both relate the film to one of the most revealing of Cold War psychocultural necessities: the requirement that no normal American citizen be shown “going over” to Communism because of actual social conditions in the US. In other words, no normal person could be shown making a dispassionate and informed comparison of the two systems—capitalism and communism—and then deciding to take up with communism because it possibly offered the more just organization of society. There always had to be some other explanation for failure of this kind. So, as Stephen Whitfield writes, “the appeal of Communism could not be attributed to larger social conditions” (138). Given this ideological necessity, any successful appeal of Communism had to arise from some abnormality in the individual involved, which is to say it “had to be psychologized” (Whitfield 138). In a similar vein, Rogin, in his look at communism and motherhood in Cold War films, writes that “[p]sychological explanations for Communism” actually served the further ideological purpose of “divert[ing] attention from social injustice” (Rogin 252). The necessity to psychologize any Communist successes inevitably, especially in the post-Freudian, post-Dr. Spock era, focused on the family as the source of failure. And since the culture was patriarchal and the Cold War itself a most thoroughly masculine affair, the anxious cultural imagination regularly specified the source of failure in the family as “the loving mother” and her relationship to her son (Rogin 252). All this was of course quite ironic, as both Rogin and Whitfield show. It was a cultural given, an essential part of the nation’s sense of itself, that precisely “the American family would triumph over Communism” (Rogin 253). Rogin and Whitfield both interpret *The Manchurian Candidate* in light of these basic premises.

Both scholars make an illuminating comparison between *The Manchurian Candidate* and a much earlier Cold War film of family failure, *My Son John* (1952). Rogin finds the later film to be much more sophisticated (“the most sophisticated film of the Cold War” [252]) and to have made the family relations of the earlier film “demonologically explicit.” But Rogin tends to be overly ideological in his turn, and so sloughs off *The Manchurian Candidate*’s strong anti-right-wing message in order to claim that the film sets out to “reawaken a lethargic nation to the Communist menace” (252). To Whitfield, however, Rogin’s interpretation is “dubious” (212). Where *My Son John* was straight-ahead Cold War ideology, *The Manchurian Candidate* registers “a change in the temperature of the Cold War” (Whitfield 211). The country has learned from McCarthyism, for “the film is unsparing in its demonstration that, while Communism is fiendish and still dangerous, the far right is hypocritical and foolish” (213). Henriksen, who argues the film is a black-humor “exposé

of the brainwashed Cold War mentality" in the US, tends to agree with Whitfield about the film as a whole. She concludes that in "the end the film collapsed all distinctions between anticommunism and communism: both systems emerged as examples of political repression" (268). She, too, discusses both sex and politics, but focuses on the satiric qualities of the film, concluding that *The Manchurian Candidate* "comedically exploded the easy myths and bizarre sexuality" of earlier, more conventional representations of the family in the Cold War (268). So all three critics are aware of the film's mix of family sexual dynamics with cold-war political ideology. Despite the insights of these readings, though, I would argue that all three writers only begin to unearth the significance of sexuality in this film, in part because none of them really go into the film in enough detail to reveal its complexities. A detailed consideration of the film will show what I mean.

The Manchurian Candidate is a fictional retelling of the McCarthy years. It features a grandstanding politician named Iselin (pronounced like the country Iceland to stress the "cold" angle) who comes to fame by making public declarations about the numbers of Communists in various government agencies. In one way this look back presents McCarthyism as it was: a kind of public hysteria, a distinctly negative and shameful page of American history. Senator Iselin is pictured more or less parodically as a drunken fool. At one point, for instance, he is center frame, drunk, dressed as Abraham Lincoln, doing the limbo at a party. The film uses the image in such a way that it does not have to say outright the lyric that would have been known throughout the popular culture of the time: "How low can you go?" The meaning is clear enough. A rather heavy-handed visual association of Iselin with paintings and busts of Abraham Lincoln drives home the irony of such a man coming to power in America.

In opposition to Iselin we are given Senator Jordan, who is the noble and right-thinking liberal opposed to Iselin's conservatism. The senator is at one point, again heavy-handedly, represented with his head as the center of a large golden image of the American eagle. Jordan, though he is anti-Communist and a Republican, is also a member of the ACLU. Later in the film he vows to do everything he can to stop the progress of Iselin, who is aiming for the White House. As a result Jordan is murdered, and in the murder scene mention is pointedly made of the fact that the pistol is equipped with a "silencer," thus dramatizing the consequences of silencing the voices of opposition. In these and other ways the movie makes the point that McCarthyism, mindless anti-communism, was wrong.

But it matters to look at how the film sees this wrong as having happened, for this is where *The Manchurian Candidate* both departs from and goes along with other Cold War films. It hardly needs to be said that the great bulk of Cold War stories somehow managed to find women and/or demasculinization as either the direct cause of male failure or at least as an obstacle to success. In Hitchcock's specifically Cold War films, in such films as *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) and even *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the heroes are most often hampered or brought to destruction by women, who, through some strange distortion of their nature, have an unnatural concern for peace and love and honesty and home, rather than for geopolitics and espionage and nuclear war. In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the Cold War "problem" of the feminine stands out with unusual power.

The story centers around Raymond Shaw, played by Laurence Harvey, who is stepson to Senator Iselin and son to Iselin's wife, played by Angela Lansbury. Shaw returns from the Korean War a winner of the medal of honor, having single-handedly saved all but two men in his company from death at the hands of the Koreans. But we learn early on from nightmare sequences dreamed by two of Raymond's fellow soldiers that the event in Korea did not really happen. The men had been captured and brainwashed to believe in Raymond's heroism and their escape. The famous brainwashing scene features the American soldiers as members of what at first appears to be almost a parodically perfect ladies' garden party. The camera pans round in a circle to reveal a summery, flowery setting, with all grandmotherly, well-dressed women drinking tea and taking notes as a lecturer speaks on hydrangeas and cold air drainage. Once the camera has made a complete circuit of the scene, it abruptly becomes an auditorium in which a Chinese Communist speaker stands before the captured

American soldiers making a presentation to high-ranking officials from various Communist nations. The garden party is what the brainwashed US soldiers see. So from the beginning, the evil of communism is linked to femininity and the demasculinization of the American male.

In this scene we learn that Raymond Shaw has been brainwashed to become a remote-control killer who will work at the hands of the Communists in the US. The almost cartoonishly ruthless Communist leaders at the presentation of course require proof of the success of the brainwashing, so Raymond must kill a fellow soldier right on the spot. Interestingly, he kills the youngest member of the group, a boy really, not even old enough to be legally in the army, who has been thought of by the rest of the guys as a kind of little brother or mascot. This character has appeared in an interesting way in the opening scene of the film. In that scene, which takes place in a Korean brothel, we also first meet Raymond. Dressed for combat though no combat is going on, Raymond comes into the brothel where his men are lolling around in bacchanalian ease with Korean prostitutes. He stops beneath a portrait of General MacArthur and yells at his men to clear out. The camera flips from a closeup of one disgusted soldier to the next. But twice we see the young, clean-cut, fresh-faced mascot, Bobby Lembeck, standing directly beneath a large, strikingly phallic image, apparently some Asian religious ornament hanging from the ceiling just above his head. While the other soldiers make cracks under their breath about "saint Raymond" not approving this sort of entertainment, the boy sticks up for Raymond, saying, "Well, maybe he's got a girl back home or something." So we have in one well-constructed shot a phallic image of lust combined with boyish purity and the claims of love. But of course whereas MacArthur hangs in clear support over militaristic Raymond's helmeted head, the sign of lust hangs rather menacingly over the boy. In any event, the outcome is that Raymond will kill off the image of young, uncorrupted male sexuality on the orders of what he takes to be a matronly lady presiding over a garden party.

When we see Raymond return to a hero's welcome in the states, we quickly learn that he hates his stepfather ("He's *not* my father," Raymond says more than once) and is entirely ambivalent about his domineering mother. On the one hand, at times he does whatever she says as if he were a little boy; but at times he openly despises her. He disobeys her by going off to work in New York for a Republican newspaper editor whom his mother calls a "Communist." (The film, in an effort to be politically even-handed, thus features two main anti-McCarthyite characters who are pointedly said to be Republicans.) Raymond says straight to his mother's face that the editor and he share one quality: "We both loathe and despise you and Johnny."

When we turn to this woman about whom Raymond is so ambivalent, we find the film playing with the psychology of mother/son dynamics in a quintessentially Cold War manner. For Mrs. Iselin negatively affects the identity of her son not only in the "normal" conscious and unconscious ways that the domineering mother was thought to affect a son.² She is, in fact, his stateside controller. She has the secret signal that clicks Raymond into the trance-state in which he will do whatever he is told, in which he becomes a purely unconscious actor of her conscious directions. This signal, the queen of diamonds in a pack of playing cards, metaphorically captures the Lansbury character, who is, as Henriksen notes, the "Red Queen," but is also the ice queen (ice being the slang for illegal diamonds) (268). Though she reigns over Raymond through his unconscious mind, she rules her husband's conscious mind very openly. She feeds him all his ideas, tells him when to talk and what to say and when to shut up, and in fact he openly depends upon her to do all this. So in one of those perfectly twisted ironies that flourished during the age of deterrence theory, Senator Iselin, the American anti-Communist chauvinist, turns out to be working *for* the Communists. But the irony twists once more, for the Lansbury character, we learn late in the film, is actually using the Communists to her own ends. Though she had earlier worked for the Communists, by the time of the film's events she is working purely for herself. She simply wants power and in fact claims that when she gets power, she will use it to crush the Communists. Neither Rogin, Whitfield nor Henriksen notice the importance of this crucial change

of motivation, and as a result they miss the way that gender issues become even more important than political issues. (We will return to this below.) Mrs. Iselin's plan is to get her husband nominated for president by having Raymond assassinate Iselin's opponent for the party's nomination. So in this film that is so involved with international and domestic politics, we find a woman to be the most sure politician of all.

But also the most evil. More sinister and manipulative than Communist or superpatriot. In fact the *only* mother and wife in the film gets to be this center of power. There are two other main female characters involved, both distinctly related to Mrs. Iselin. One is named Rosie, one named Josie. Both are blonde and attractive, as is Mrs. Iselin herself. Both enter the film in the act of saving the two main male characters. Josie is impossibly virginal and giggly, though also immediately associated with sexuality. Our first image of her parallels in an important way the image of young male sexuality mentioned earlier. Josie meets Raymond by chance when she rides by on her bicycle and discovers him lying by the path having been bitten by a snake. The snake is to Josie as the phallic ornament was to Bobby Lembeck. Happily, Josie's father, who worries too much about snakes, has trained Josie for just such emergencies. As she's doctoring Raymond's bite, she says out right that it's all pretty Freudian. Then she whips off her shirt to make a tourniquet for Raymond's wound. In bra and short-shorts and yet still all innocence, she walks the wounded man back home to meet her father and love follows. This is the great event in Raymond's lonely life, but as luck would have it, Josie is daughter to Mrs. Iselin's great opponent, Senator Jordan. Arguing that Jordan is a Communist, Mrs. Iselin forces Raymond to cut off the relationship with Josie. In a kind of self-depriving retaliation, Raymond joins the service. And so, in a way, the boy-soldier was right when he stuck up for Raymond in the brothel scene: Raymond had had a girl back home. When Raymond kills young Bobby in the brainwashing scene, it is as if he is killing off his own sexuality in response to his mother's prohibition of Josie.

The other female character is named Rosie. Where Josie is blonde, young, single, and virginal, and where Mrs. Iselin is blonde, middle aged, married and a mother, Rosie is blonde, mature, single, and not virginal at all. She comes on the scene to rescue Frank Sinatra, who plays Major Bennet Marco, another member of Raymond's platoon in Korea. Marco has been wracked by nightmares about his time in Korea to the point that he has become dysfunctional as a soldier. He takes the train to visit Raymond in New York and asks about these nightmares. Rosie, who happens to be seated nearby, sees his hands shaking so that he cannot even light a cigarette. She immediately falls in love with him, giving him her phone number and more or less brainwashing her address into his disoriented mind. Shortly, when Marco winds up in jail for attacking a Korean spy who works for Raymond, Rosie comes to the rescue, getting the mentally and physically bruised man out of jail and nursing his wounds.

Interestingly, neither Josie nor Rosie come from a normal nuclear family. Josie lives as an only child with her father, Senator Jordan. We never know what happened to Josie's mother. Rosie also is without a complete family. In fact, she says outright at one point that she is an orphan. And so, it turns out, is Major Marco. Among the primary characters in this film, only one family is in the traditional nuclear family model—father, mother, children—and it belongs to Mrs. Iselin, though of course this is Mrs. Iselin's second husband. This absence of whole families has repercussions throughout this very psychoanalytically aware film. We never learn what happened to Raymond's biological father, and of course we have seen that Raymond utterly rejects his stepfather. But Raymond over the course of the film takes on two different surrogate father figures. One is Hoban Gaines, the head of the newspaper for whom he goes to work after returning as a hero from Korea. Gaines has been steadfastly against the chauvinism of the Iselins, and therefore has Raymond's great respect. Raymond's Communist controllers force Raymond to murder Gaines to prove that Raymond is adequately brainwashed. The murder scene is a curious one. Raymond comes to the editor's home late at night. Gaines is a widower whose wife has been dead six years. He is lying in bed in a very frilly woman's house coat, so obviously feminine a garment that he has to explain it away to Raymond. Embarrassed, he warns Raymond not to think any-

thing about "this ridiculous bed jacket, it's my wife's, the warmest thing I have." The editor, who has no children of his own, calls Raymond "my boy" and assumes that Raymond has come by so late to get some fatherly advice about women. But then Raymond, acting unconsciously at the will of his Communist controllers, kills the man, thus ending the sole survivor of this family.

The other father-figure taken on by Raymond is Senator Jordan, who is also strongly anti-Iselin. Josie and Raymond manage, in spite of Mrs. Iselin's wishes, to run away and get married. Mr. Jordan welcomes him warmly to the family as a son. But Mrs. Iselin fears Jordan will ruin her husband's chances for the nomination, so she gives Raymond the secret cue and sends him off to kill Jordan. Again the scene is in the middle of the night. Now it is in the kitchen, and Mr. Jordan is in a housecoat, holding a carton of milk in front of his heart. He, too, refers to Raymond as my boy. Raymond shoots him down. The bullet passes through the carton and a stream of milk jets out of the dying man's breast as he falls.

So in this movie about a kind of war, we have seen death in a ladies' garden party, a bedroom and a kitchen. Raymond has killed the iconic figure of young male sexuality, and two father figures, both liberal politically but also oddly feminized. The other father-figure is of course Senator Iselin, and in the end Raymond will kill him as well.

To turn again to the women in the film, I have spoken as if only Rosie and Josie were sexual, but this is not quite true. In fact, the sexuality of Mrs. Iselin is subtly hinted along the way and then starkly revealed at the same moment that we learn her actual secret plan. Mrs. Iselin gives a costume party for Senator Jordan in a last-ditch attempt to win his support for her husband. She has invited Josie and has even decided that it would be best for her own political designs to support Raymond and Josie's marriage after all. In this scene Mrs. Iselin in a perfect reversal, shows up as Little Bo Peep. In fact her shepherd's staff is the bar under which Senator Iselin does the limbo. Now prepared to give Raymond his final orders—to shoot the presidential candidate of her party, thus thrusting her husband from the vice presidential to the presidential slot—Mrs. Iselin takes Raymond with her into a separate room and gets him to play solitaire until he hits the queen of diamonds. With Raymond in a trance, we hear Mrs. Iselin's plan to take power on her own and then ruin those who have forced her to use Raymond this way; for though she had known the plot beforehand, she had not known they would choose her own son as the robot-killer. She explains this as a kind of vow to an unhearing Raymond and then gives him a long, un-bopeepish kiss on the lips to confirm her commitment. Significantly, when the plot makes this move beyond the realm of east/west political conflict, it moves ever more into the realm of gender conflict. The Lansbury character has sacrificed the essence of her femininity—her maternity—in order to get herself into a position of power with the Communists. Thus, the defection of an attractive, intelligent, self-assertive American woman to Communism is explained psychologically by this woman being thoroughly unnatural, and masculinized. She swears a kind of maternal revenge upon the Communists for having forced her to sacrifice Raymond. But just at the moment when Mrs. Iselin does seem to retain some sense of motherhood, the kiss on the lips makes her at once all the more unnatural because it is clearly sexual, not maternal. Further, this is a sexual contact in which the woman has complete power.

Before she can complete Raymond's orders, though, Mrs. Iselin is called away for a moment, leaving Raymond under her spell. But Josie shows up just then in a costume of black leotards and a huge queen of diamonds that completely covers her torso. Therefore we have the evil older woman dressed as the virgin, and we have the virgin become overtly sexual and in the image now thoroughly associated with the evil mother. When Josie shows up as the queen of diamonds, it is as if she has somehow taken over the power of the red-ice-queen, transforming that power for a moment into some kind of normal, healthy sexuality, one that Raymond can respond to in a normal, healthy way. Josie and Raymond instantly rediscover their old love and run away to get married. Having transmuted the queen of diamonds into an allowable and healthy object of desire, the two of them pointedly leave the costume behind. Raymond has finally thrown off the oppressive weight of his mother and returned to "the girl back home." We have a true marriage to offset the fraud of the

Iselin marriage, the two widowers who have been Raymond's father figures, and the incestuous relationship between Mrs. Iselin and her son.

But of course it is not so easy. His marriage and one-night honeymoon with Josie transform Raymond into a regular person. He can even, for the first time in his life, make jokes. Because he has become normal, he resolves to return to Washington immediately and one way or the other wreck Senator Iselin's run for office. Before he can take action, though, Mrs. Iselin, seeing that she must silence Senator Jordan if she is to move her husband into power, gets to Raymond with her cards again and has him kill his new father-in-law, Jordan. And in a really horrible moment of the film Josie comes down from upstairs, all dressed in flowing white, to see what is the commotion. Raymond, who has been programmed to kill any witnesses to his actions, turns and shoots her dead. Earlier, acting unconsciously at the behest of his Communist controllers, he had killed off the image of young, healthy male sexuality. Now acting unconsciously at the behest of his power-hungry mother, he has killed off the image of young, healthy female sexuality. He ends what is left of another family, the Jordans, as well as killing off the infant new family of himself and Josie.

The only family left is the Iselins. Mrs. Iselin's final project for Raymond is to assassinate the one man who remains in the way of her husband's presidential nomination. Raymond is to sneak into the convention to do this. Dressed as a priest in order to avoid suspicion, Raymond finds a secret perch high above the political action. But at the very last moment he summons up some residue of individual will and shoots both his mother and her husband instead. Major Marco, who has been trying to help Raymond, bursts in at the last second. Raymond, just before killing himself, explains to Marco that "not you nor the police nor the army could stop them." The threat no longer lies at the level of social or political or military institutions. In fact it appears that only one of the family could possibly undo this evil.

At the end of the movie only the two orphans, Marco and Rosie, are left, though they do get married. We see, then, that by the early sixties the McCarthy era has been recognized for what it was, but the appeal of communism must still be psychologized, the success of communism still blamed on the feminine and the maternal. In fact, in some ways it appears that the real danger, the real fear, involves the feminization of the American male and the coming to power of the American female, rather than Communism. Whatever else we may say of Mrs. Iselin, she is smart, ambitious and interested in realms of power heretofore restricted to men. She is quite simply more of a danger than either McCarthy or Communism.

However, by this time in Cold War history, the injustice of blaming the feminine has turned back on itself. In the earlier Cold War family story, *My Son John*, while the mother takes most of the blame for the son's failure, she nonetheless remains a good citizen by turning her son over to the FBI. The nuclear family fails in one way, but in another way it succeeds and so can still be seen as the bedrock of American, anti-Communist culture. The woman is to blame, but can still see the political error of her ways. Politics remains straightforwardly the main issue. *The Manchurian Candidate* is not at all simply a purveyor of Cold War ideology. It looks back critically at McCarthyism and satirizes all political sides. But at the same time, in standard Cold War fashion, it imagines masculinized women and feminized men to be the real source of cultural failure. In fact, it is because the film does not take political sides that it reveals the not-so-indirect blaming of the feminine that has been a kind of unnoticed sub-text of Cold War ideology. It is as if in not taking political sides in the usual Cold War way, the film has no choice but to reveal what has been there all along, unseen beneath or within the bipolar political opposition of east and west. But this critical awareness of politics and the resultant, uncampaigned representation of the feminine as the real danger brings the androcentrism of Cold War culture to an impasse, for the feminine is indispensable to the concept of the nuclear family. Having located the feminine as the real source of failure, the film seems bound by its own androcentric values to imagine the destruction of the nuclear family itself as the only way out. Further, the feminine is indispensable to masculinity in general. Demonizing the maternal/feminine to this entirely apolitical extent has required the imaginary destruction not just of female sexuality, but of male sexuality as well. To conclude, though the film has set out to provide a Cold War history of the

political dead-ends of the McCarthy era, it has also revealed, perhaps in spite of itself, the dead-end of androcentrism.

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Notes

¹ The film is based on the 1959 novel of the same name by Richard Condon. Though the novel is a good example of Cold War popular fiction, I, like Rogin, Whitfield, and Henriksen, find the movie to be the far more important work. It is one of those cases where the film seems to eliminate the need for the text from which it comes.

² Rogin discusses this stereotype of the domineering mother as "momism" (240-45).

³ The one other family we actually see consists of a husband, another of the men in Raymond's outfit, and his wife. But they play only a passing part in the film. Interestingly, though, they appear not to have children, and the husband, like Major Marco, is mentally wrecked by his experience in Korea.

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