

Introduction

Near the conclusion of *The Manchurian Candidate*, as Bennett Marco begins to peel away layers of false memory and dimly to make out the communist plot whose method has included his own brainwashing, he urgently presses Raymond Shaw, another pawn in this monstrous game, “What have they built you to do?” This is of course *the* question within the cosmos of the film: Marco’s mind has been tampered with and his memory of events rewritten; Shaw’s will has been occupied, as it were, by a foreign power, his very agency made the instrument of another’s intention, but to what end? The answer will be revealed only in the tautly paced final scenes.

But the question “What have they built you to do?” resonates well beyond the film itself. Within the context of the Cold War, the question eloquently expresses the fears and anxieties of a political culture in which some nearly omnipotent “they” are presumed to be both encircling from without and gnawing from within. The “they” who have designs on us, the “we” who have been rendered partly or wholly untrustworthy, and the nation’s overarching inability to compose its own destiny—this is the very stuff of the Cold War’s Manichaeic plotlines, from Hollywood B movies to President Harry Truman’s foreign-policy speeches to Joseph McCarthy’s hectoring accusations from the Senate floor. “What have they built you to do?” is also a particularly poignant version of the question that has long guided the inquiry into “culture” and its workings by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, Joan Scott, and Stuart Hall. Although in this instance “they” are perhaps invested with less intentionality or motivation than Marco’s fantastic Manchurian plotters, still, as Hall writes, social subjects “are unable to speak, to act in one way or another, until they have been positioned by the work that culture does.”¹ One has first to be “built,” in other words; and there is no fully comprehending the political universe of power relations, hierarchy, domination, contest, and resistance without first understanding how a culture has “built” a particular populace to behave and respond.

What Have They Built You to Do? is an extended meditation on these layers of meaning and the mutual engagements among them a close reading of *The Manchurian Candidate* (both Richard Condon’s 1959 novel and John Frankenheimer’s 1962 film), to be sure, but also an analysis of the ways in which this text opens out onto larger questions and themes of American politics and culture in the Cold War years. In its design, the book is intended not only to capture the multiple and contending meanings at work in the film, but to look outward to the wider concerns and tendencies of Cold War America, and from there to the broadest questions of culture and power in general.

The book is composed of eight chapters, each adopting a slightly different angle of vision on *The Manchurian Candidate* as both comment on and expression of common American ideas and ideologies at the height of the Cold War. Some chapters begin with the text and work outward to off-camera concerns, coaxing the film's details and devices to cast some light on the culture and the historical moment that produced them; others tend in the opposite direction, establishing a cultural or political cartography of the era as a way of situating this or that element of the film for interpretation. But taken together these inquiries are meant to converge and to undertake three interlacing projects: to explicate the film; to elucidate the era; and, in carrying out these tasks, to suggest some basic principles in the more general approach to "culture" as a historically and politically significant object of study.

Chapters 1 through 3 are largely contextual, situating both the narrative and the details of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s production against the historical backdrop of the first decade and a half of the Cold War. Chapter 1 excavates the "backstory" of the film's production—not only its source material, Richard Condon's novel, but the off-camera dealings among Frank Sinatra (star), John Frankenheimer (director), and George Axelrod (screenwriter) in getting this property to the screen. Sinatra looms largest here: he was—and remains—the most significant cultural figure associated with the film, linked so strongly to the Kennedy White House and at the time embroiled in a controversy over his having hired a blacklisted screenwriter for a previous project. Specifically, we examine how the Hollywood blacklist, the election of 1960, and Sinatra's own political past prevented him from pursuing another film (an adaptation of William Bradford Huie's 1954 best seller, *The Execution of Private Slovik*) and led him, indirectly, to *The Manchurian Candidate*. The story of how Sinatra came to the project embodies many of the cultural and political currents that produced the fevered vision of the narrative itself.

Chapter 2 expands the frame, reading the film against some of the era's broader cultural contradictions. This was a political moment when individualism was deemed both the hallmark and the chief virtue of American-style "liberty," for example, and yet when nothing was prized quite so highly or enforced quite as sternly as unwavering conformity. Hence America's ever-chafing "organization men," Ben Marco included. It was also a time when McCarthyite repressions were fairly peaceably accepted, in some quarters, as the price to be paid for a society without repression—a slightly disfigured version, perhaps, of the "vigilance" that Thomas Jefferson had spoken of generations earlier. At such a moment of contradiction and paradox, a plotline involving a communist conspiracy spearheaded from the McCarthyite right at once expressed and commented on some of the society's most deeply resonant anxieties.

Chapter 3 continues this investigation of context, examining the relationship of Frankenheimer's masterpiece to five films that, we argue, were crucial in constructing the Cold War cinematic vocabulary

that *The Manchurian Candidate* would both borrow from and explode. Our choice of films here is necessarily selective and therefore subjective (this is not a survey); but, as antecedents, they highlight important aspects of the cultural conversation that Frankenheimer was joining. The five films sampled here are forceful meditations on the growing power of the state apparatus (*Panic in the Streets*); on the anxiety surrounding the perceived influence of women—particularly mothers—in the culture (*My Son John*); on the centrality of the nuclear family to Cold War ideology (*Suddenly*); on the growing complexity of geopolitics in the atomic age (*Kiss Me Deadly*); and on the peculiar dualities and contradictions of Cold War culture, including the dangerously unreliable epistemology by which one might know “us” from “them” (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). In its method, sensibility, and aesthetic Frankenheimer’s film may seem a bolt from the blue; but its most arresting themes engaged and advanced a discussion that had been taking shape in Hollywood for some time.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 turn toward the text of *The Manchurian Candidate* itself, shuttling between on-screen representations and offscreen social and political realities in an effort to allow each to illuminate the other. Chapter 4 examines the film’s portrayal of McCarthy and McCarthyism, as embodied in the figure of Johnny Iselin. The film is among the first sustained and unsparing parodies of McCarthy, and yet so does the conspiracy at the center of this thriller seem to ratify all the claims that McCarthy had written across the firmament in his meteoric rise. This is not an instance of Hollywood trying to have it both ways in cool calculation of the metrics of the market, but rather a sign of just how deeply the epistemology of McCarthyism had taken root in American culture. Appearing at a time when McCarthyism had been repudiated but when the communist threat had yet to be vanquished, the film conveys perhaps more than Frankenheimer knew of the traces that McCarthyism had left on American conceptions of conspiracy, danger, and security. That the film is both McCarthyite and anti-McCarthyite is largely why its detractors can be found on both the left *and* the right.

Chapter 5 examines the “Manchuria” of Frankenheimer’s vision, setting the villains Yen Lo and Chunj in within a much longer tradition of anti-Asian imagery from song, story, and screen. Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu (in both pulp and celluloid) is the most famous exemplar, but Rohmer’s “catlike” and “cruelly cunning” monster traces his own lineage back through nearly a century of social commentary and reformist writing (Jacob Riis on Chinatown); the “curiosities” of the Orient (as put on zoological display by P. T. Barnum and others); and scholarly theorizing about the peoples and lands of “the Orient” (Lord Cromer’s ruminations on the Orient as the *opposite* of the West). These longer-term ideas about Asia and Asianness assumed heightened significance between the 1940s and the 1960s—the era of U.S. engagement in the Pacific, Korea, and Vietnam—as both hot wars and cold caused American political culture singularly to seize upon interpretations of the Orient as a key to the nation’s own destiny. *The Manchurian Candidate* may raise vernacular Orientalism to ridicule, but it replicates its cherished images and its overriding logics just the same.

Chapter 6 similarly reads the themes of gender and sexuality in the film, analyzing the cultural logic by which the *subversion* plotted by Eleanor and Johnny Iselin in the political sphere is finally inseparable from the *perversion* of their private lives—the perversion of Eleanor’s “unnatural” usurpation of her husband’s rightful authority, and the perversion of her relationship with her son, treacherous, smothering, and incestuous all at once. The linkages here were not unusual. As the civic imperatives of the Cold War era collapsed distinctions between the public and the private—as defense of “the American way of life” urged

both the definition and the policing of particular patterns that could be called “the American way of life”—public figures like McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover quite openly expressed the political importance of “normal” gender and sexual arrangements, especially patriarchal authority and heterosexual coupling. If communists were “made and not born,” as most supposed, then the “normal” family would be among the nation’s most important and jealously guarded assets, just as gender or sexual “deviance” would be a fairly reliable symptom of political trouble.

Chapter 7 offers a second angle on the theme of gender, examining what remains one of the film’s most celebrated and misunderstood scenes: the moment when Marco (Sinatra) first meets Rosie (Janet Leigh) aboard a New York-bound train. The scene arouses unease not because (as so many critics have argued) Rosie is somehow mixed up in the communist conspiracy, but for the manner in which it exploits Cold War cultural anxieties regarding gender roles. Comparing the scene to two similar, near-contemporary scenes from Alfred Hitchcock’s canon, we argue that the train scene in *The Manchurian Candidate* is not only narratively disruptive but ideologically so because it subverts one of the era’s dominant paradigms, the linkage between normative masculinity, female submissiveness, and citizenship. The Marco-Rosie coupling, in other words, offers a variation on the theme more conspicuously treated in the representation of the Iselin family.

Finally, chapter 8 turns outward once again to consider how the film was received during its different releases or iterations: in Kennedy’s America upon original release in 1962, and again in Reagan’s America during the “second” Cold War in the mid-1980s, when the film, long dormant, was rereleased and discovered anew. As the text traveled, we argue, *The Manchurian Candidate* became a kind of “found” commentary on the Reagan presidency, just as it had been a richly signifying document of the Kennedy era. Finally, we examine the ways in which Jonathan Demme’s 2004 remake further extended the original film’s function as cultural metaphor. As much an homage as a “remake” per se, Demme’s film rewaves the original fabric of cultural anxiety in a way better suited to the descendants of the “organization man,” who have seen Americans’ earlier, tacit fears of the Organization itself come true. Here the gravest threat of takeover is posed not by a national rival like the old Soviet Union, or even by an extranational one like Al Qaeda, but by multinational “friends” like Halliburton.

For some readers, the question might remain, why would two reasonably intelligent people devote untold months and years to producing an entire book about a single movie? We have done so because, for one thing, our experience with the text tells us that *The Manchurian Candidate* will repay nearly any amount of critical attention that one is willing to pour into it. We don't mind letting our admiration show. But, more important, we have done so because the circuitry of ideas and ideologies from the cultural realm to the political and back again *matters*—it mattered in 1962, in the wake of Korea and at the dawn of Vietnam; and it matters still, as the Cold War's end has come merely to mark the beginning of a new and seemingly perpetual “war on terror.” Our government once again makes extraordinary claims upon our allegiance, and it once again tests our settled assumptions about where the line is drawn between the public and the private; about the difference between prudent vigilance and proto-totalitarian surveillance; about the relationship between liberty and danger, and the dangers that “homeland security” itself might pose; and about how to distinguish “us” from “them.” And once again along with the government, the culture, too, seems to have gone on high alert—one thinks of TV shows like *24* and the new sword-and-sandal spectacles like *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *Kingdom of Heaven*. This project has seemed worth the effort, then—like the enterprise of cultural analysis in general—because in a sprawling democracy whose most important exchanges in the public sphere are necessarily mass-mediated, the preconditions for genuine liberty and meaningful citizenship must include a clear-eyed, conscious reckoning with whatever it is we have been “built” to do.

The Red Queen

Sexuality, Subversion, and the American Family

You just cannot believe, Ben, how lovable the whole damn thing was. All summer long we were together. I was lovable, Jocie was lovable, the senator was lovable, the days were lovable, the nights were lovable, and everyone was lovable. Except, of course, my mother.

—Raymond Shaw

“The queen of diamonds,” says Yen Lo, “in so many ways reminiscent of Raymond’s dearly loved and hated mother, is the second key that will clear his mechanism for any assignments.” The original referent here would seem to be the murderous queen in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, whose response to every rising circumstance was “Off with their heads!” The association with *Alice* is reinforced when Jocie appears at the Iselins’ costume party dressed precisely after the fashion of the playing cards in “The Queen’s Croquet-Ground” (and reinforced, too, perhaps, by the absurdist aesthetic of the brainwashing sequences and the white-rabbit loopiness of Marco’s first encounter with Rosie). But finally the subversive character and the dominance of Raymond’s mother—that is, her “redness” and her “queenness”—evoke less about life through the looking glass than they say about the Cold War’s twinned discourses of communism and gender. Eleanor Iselin’s power *as a woman*—her power over both Johnny and Raymond, and her ruthless deployment of power in her dealings with Jordan—is depicted as nothing short of perverse; and this brand of “perversion” is closely aligned with the communists’ geopolitical scheme of *subversion* of which she is a chief instrument.

The concurrent sexual and political valences of the Cold War era’s privacy discourse begin to indicate, as noted earlier, a profound ideological nexus between political loyalty and the imperatives of U.S. nationalism on the one hand, and enforced gender arrangements and codes of sexuality on the other—the readiness “with which questions of national security turned into questions about normative gender and sexuality,” as Deborah Nelson has put it. Michael Rogin’s insight on Cold War film and Cold War ideology is apposite here: “Domestic and cold war ideologies not only dissolve the private into the public; they also do the reverse. They depoliticize politics by blaming subversion on personal influence.” There is no such thing as privacy, in other words, and not only because of the various ways that the national security apparatus now reaches into those “private spaces” that might afford “sanctuary” to national enemies, but also because the conceptual scheme of countersubversion identifies a spectrum of “private” behaviors running from the aberrant at one end to the normative at the other, whose every point signifies something important about “public” questions of loyalty, allegiance, patriotism, and acceptable Americanism.¹ The figure of Eleanor Iselin, to take a case, operates in a constellation of Cold War images and ideas regarding proper femininity, proper motherhood, and a healthy (“normal”) family as the embodiment of “the American way of life”—a constellation of politicized sexual and gendered meanings which in its turn lent both form and portent to notions of proper manhood, “natural” sexual hierarchy, normative heterosexuality, and “deviant” homosexuality. The innermost sanctuaries of private life are where the seeds of a vigorous national life are nourished; and thus national duty is itself refracted through the details of private habits, decisions, and arrangements. “Domesticity,” writes historian Elaine Tyler May, “was not so much a retreat from public affairs as an expression of one’s citizenship.”²

The poster boy for the era’s conflation of gender imperatives and national imperatives is Philip Wylie, a prolific—and, in his time, quite popular—writer of short stories, novels, and works of social criticism and

moral philosophy, now best remembered for his 1942 social tract *Generation of Vipers*. This work most thoroughly laid out the brief against “mom” as a too-powerful, emasculating, finally nation-threatening figure on the American scene—“the taloned, cackling residue of burnt-out puberty in a land that has no use for mature men or women.”³ If Wylie’s chapter “Common Women” is primarily a misogynist screed (“I have researched the moms, to the beady brains behind their beady eyes and to the stones at the center of their fat hearts”), still the real pitch of the chapter is a lament for the fate of American manhood in the face of this momist onslaught (204). The pedestaled virtues and powers of American motherhood, and the concomitant “softening” of American masculinity, represent for Wylie an inversion of the natural order and an abdication of proper social authority as potentially catastrophic as the inversions and abdications in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. In his view, “megaloid momworship has got completely out of hand. Our land, subjectively mapped, would have more silver cords and apron strings crisscrossing it than railroads and telephone wires” (198). “Our society is too much an institution built to appease the rapacity of loving mothers. If that condition is an ineluctable experiment of nature, then we are the victims of a failure” (216). Expect “hurricanes,” *Lear* might say.

Wylie himself did not necessarily see the communist threat as momism’s sole province. Indeed, in a postscript for a later edition of *Generation of Vipers* he averred that, “as the news photos abundantly make plain, mom composes the majority of Senator McCarthy’s shock troops—paying blind tribute to a blind authoritarianism like her own.” McCarthyism, he concluded, “the rule of unreason, is one with momism: a noble end aborted by sick-minded means, a righteous intent—in terrorism fouled and tyranny foundered” (196). But writing in 1942, Wylie had posited a natural alignment between mom’s authoritarianism and authoritarianism plain and simple, and so notwithstanding his caveats on McCarthyism, as wartime gave way to the postwar’s shifting geopolitical concerns, an interpretation of momism resting upon the Hitler analogy did become easily transposed to the perceptions and imperatives of Cold War anticommunism: in either case, natural lines of social authority had been inverted and befouled in the United States, and American manhood was reduced to a cowering sentimentality that ill became a nation at war, whether hot or cold.

But to focus too intently on Wylie’s fantastic vision is to understate the import and the reach of such geosexual ideology. Wylie’s may be the clearest and most jaw-dropping rendition of the mid-century’s gendered and sexualized nationalism—“the women of America raped the men, not sexually, unfortunately, but morally, since neuters come hard by morals” (200)—but some version of this thinking surfaced over and over in myriad cultural and political venues throughout the postwar years, *The Manchurian Candidate* being merely one instance among many. As (Hearst columnist and Sinatra nemesis) Lee Mortimer and Jack Leit wrote in *USA Confidential* (1952), “America has become a matriarchy. Women own and run it. Under a matriarchy men grow soft and women masculine. The self-sufficient girl who doesn’t want to become an incubator or Kitchen slave for a man is a push-over for a predatory Lesbian . . . Marxian teachings, the examples of women in high political and social places, and the propagandized knowledge that many of the movie set prefer it that way are contributory.”⁴ Matriarchy, homosexuality, Marxism—a formulation ratified a thousand times over, from the aproned and ineffectual father in *Rebel without a Cause* to the urbane (read: homosexual) son/spy in *My Son John* to J. Edgar Hoover’s contention that communism abets “sexual immorality” and vice versa (even if, as has been supposed, Hoover might have known a bit more about “deviance” than he was letting on).⁵

The genesis of this thinking began well before the Cold War proper, with long-standing Euro-American assumptions about the relationship between citizenship, war, and masculinity. The fused categories

represented by the familiar political icon of the “citizen soldier” hint at the ways in which not only has the civic realm been traditionally defined as male, but this masculinist construction has itself been upheld and policed primarily by reference to warfare or the threat of warfare. Activities that are said in the vernacular to “separate the men from the boys” most often accomplish the more portentous cultural work of separating the boys from the girls, and war is unequalled in this respect. As Margaret Higonnet and others have argued, war is a “gendering activity,” a grand civic ritual that consolidates and even augments preexisting definitions of gender and systems of gender relations.⁶ War accomplishes this gendering ideological work, first, by ritually separating the nation into defenders and defended—as one scholar puts it, into “warriors” on one hand, and “beautiful souls” on the other—and so heightening cultural ideals of “male” valor and “female” vulnerability. The culture of war defines violence as masculine, and exalts the “masculine” capacity for violence as a political virtue.⁷ As a writer in *Ladies’ Home Journal* wrote during World War I, “the biggest thing about a principle or a battle or an army is a man! And the biggest thing that a war can do is bring out that man.” The Allied objective, according to this writer, was “to demonstrate the right kind of manhood.”⁸

Which brings us, inevitably, to the right kind—or right *kinds*—of womanhood: the Spartan Mother, who births and rears her sons as vigorous and loyal fighters to be sent off to battle; the nurturing nurse, who selflessly cares for the fallen; the sweetheart, whose purity is the symbol of all that is to be defended in war, and yet whose sexuality is war’s very prize. By their peculiar patterns of erasure and revision, moreover, popular conceptions of “front” and “home front” exaggerate these representations of sexual difference and enforce the notion that only male combatants (as distinct from the women who inhabit cities under siege, say) really can and do “experience” the horrors of war. Cynthia Enloe has argued that, just as the “front” is masculinized in popular perception, so is the “home front” feminized in a manner that corresponds more to preconceived assumptions about the sexes than to the facts of a given case.⁹ (This has largely continued to be so even in the era of the mixed-sex combat arrangements of the Gulf and Iraq wars, which perhaps explains both the sensation and the ideological work of the captivity-and-rescue narrative of Private Jessica Lynch. It might also explain the depth of Americans’ revulsion toward Lynndie England—on the far right, for example, where the perversions of Abu Ghraib prison were interpreted as a by-product of the “perversion” of putting women in uniform in the first place.)

The masculinized citizen soldier and the feminized home front constituted a powerful enough ideological inheritance, particularly coming off the gendered and gendering national experience of World War II. But the decade of the 1940s added its own layer of specificity to these longer-standing cultural inclinations and ideals. “Because of the thinness of public life” in U.S. political culture, argues Robert Westbrook, “modern American statesmen and their allies have found it difficult to call upon their fellow citizens *as citizens* to defend their nation in time of war.” They have “relied heavily on appeals to private (which is not to say selfish) obligations in order to legitimate the sacrifices of war, including the moral commitments believed to exist between men and women.”¹⁰ During World War II, American political culture mobilized around a philosophy of political obligation that was couched not in public terms, but private. Representatives of the state and other propagandists “implored Americans as individuals and as families to join the war effort in order to protect the state that protected them.” The most prevalent appeal to America’s young men was “to go to war to defend *private* interests and discharge *private* obligations.”¹¹ Although rhetorical resort to abstractions such as “liberty” were common enough, private obligations “to families, to children, to parents, to friends,

and generally, to an 'American Way of Life' defined as a rich (and richly commodified) private realm of experience—were tirelessly invoked in the campaign to mobilize Americans . . . , and they formed the centerpiece of the propaganda produced by the state and its allies in Hollywood, the War Advertising Council, and elsewhere."¹² If World War II scare posters depicting Japanese rapists represented but another rendition of the typical gendering work of war, the Betty Grable pinup represented something slightly different: a sexualized icon of soldierly obligation— "why we fight"—for a new, privatized conception of public duty.



Actress Betty Grable in the most famous pinup of World War II.
(Bettmann/Corbis)



World War II “nose art.” Like the pinup, sexualized paintings on military equipment at once articulated the rigidly gendered ideas of “front” and “home front” and provided a highly personal vocabulary for understanding “why we fight.” (Guy Motil/Corbis)

In this emergent discourse, in Westbrook’s view, “no private obligation outranked the one to the family,” a trope of national belonging and political duty reflected across an array of cultural forms, from the familial or parental reference points in Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom from Fear* and *Freedom from Want*, to Red Cross or Dixie Cup ads that depicted little girls asking, “Are they coming over here to fight, Daddy?” and “[Daddy] won’t let them hurt us, will he, Mommy?”¹³ This “thickening” of public commitment in U.S. political culture in the 1940s, then, was a first step toward that fusion of public and private that Michael Rogin and others have identified in the Cold War years. If the family represented the most direct link between the individual and the nation-state during the war, “A ‘normal’ family and vigilant mother” was to become “the ‘front line’ of defense” in the tense postwar period, according to family historian Stephanie Coontz: “anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition.”¹⁴

Interpreting the sexual, patriarchal, and familial imperatives lacing through Cold War political culture, then, is not just a dicey matter of extrapolating principles from Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers*: Joseph McCarthy railed against the “Communists and queers” in the State Department, occasionally collapsing the charges into one another, as when he referred to Dean Acheson as “the Red Dean of Fashion”; J. Edgar Hoover outlined American mothers’ unique duties in combating “the twin enemies of freedom—crime and communism,” and he wrote of communists’ “degradation as parents”; *Life* magazine saw a deep significance in the fact that accused spy Gerhard Eisler had abandoned his wife and daughter; and in a report on American communism, Morris Ernst posited a marked and meaningful “tendency” that “in Communist marriages the wife is the more dominant partner.” It was broadly asserted, for instance, “that [CPUSA leader] Earl Browder was henpecked”; and Hoover himself relied on a psychological profile of the Rosenbergs that reported, among other things, that “Julius is the slave and his wife, Ethel, the master.”¹⁵

The spectrum of “abnormal” behaviors and arrangements whose significance was presumed to be politically menacing ran from fully “aberrant,” “deviant,” and “perverted” sexual practices to merely “nontraditional” familial patterns or gender arrangements. But in the political terms of the day, such categories were very closely related. The easiest and least subtle judgment according to this sexual-political logic was the judgment against homosexuality, a notion often cast not in theoretical, but in highly practical terms. “One reason why sex deviates are considered security risks,” explained Joseph McCarthy, “is that they are subject to blackmail. It is a known fact that espionage agents often have been successful in extorting information from them by threatening to expose their abnormal habits.”¹⁶ Thus McCarthy’s concern for “State Department perverts” and the other “Communists and queers” and “striped pants boys” in government. One senator promised to fire the “lavender lads” in the State Department, while another asserted that “You can’t . . . separate homosexuals from subversives.” Indeed, in 1950, at taxpayers’ expense, the federal government generated a

report titled *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*.¹⁷

Such presumptions, as these latter comments indicate, quickly shaded off from the specific, tightly defined concern for potential blackmail toward a more generalized equation of homosexuality not only with “perversion,” but with subversion—the concurrent “politicization of homosexuality” and “homosexualization of left-wing political activity,” and the extent to which “the differences between communist activity and homosexual practice tended to commingle” in the popular imagination, as recent scholars have written. It was in this vein, for instance, that a Senate appropriations committee report might worry that “one homosexual can pollute a [whole] Government office.”¹⁸ Deborah Nelson disentangles and explicates the Gordian logic at work here:

defining communists as invisible internal threats, as subversives passing as ordinary Americans, permitted a widespread surveillance of and attack on homosexuals, who were also passing as ordinary Americans, whose subversive “tendencies,” a favorite word in the job-testing industry, could also be unmasked by surveillance. From the early years of the cold war, when, for example, Eisenhower issued an executive order declaring that homosexuality was sufficient grounds for disbarment from federal employment, homosexuality and political deviance were merely different species of the same crime: undermining the “American way of life.”¹⁹

(A similar outlook on such “tendencies” has persisted, of course, into the “don’t ask, don’t tell” era of U.S. military policy, when the question in some quarters remains as to whether homosexuality represents an inner personal essence to be identified and expunged, or a species of conduct to be proscribed and punished. At stake in either case is unit cohesion, basic trust, and a host of threats to the “normal” functioning of the military unit in the face of “abnormal” tendencies.)²⁰

The concurrent politicization and sexualization of “the American way of life”—most readily apparent in the conjoined logics of anticommunism and homophobia—ultimately led outward from questions of compulsory heterosexual coupling, to questions of “proper” familial arrangements, child-rearing practices, parenthood, and especially motherhood. It was not just that communism abets “sexual immorality,” as J. Edgar Hoover remarked, and thus that sexual and political “deviance” functioned more or less reliably as symptoms of each other; but in their totalizing conception of “the *communist man*,” Hoover and others were led inexorably to examine the family as the seedbed of the subversive character, since “this type of man doesn’t just grow; he must be created,” “communists are not born; they are made.”²¹

Proof was to be found in the functioning of the Communist Party itself: “the Party feels that the basic responsibility of indoctrinating the child lies with the communist parents,” wrote Hoover, and in this respect the communist family was not a family at all, but merely another organ in the political apparatus of Moscow. Within the communists’ presumed scheme of nurturance and discipline, “loyalty to the Party supersedes all emotions of love and mercy and justice,” either within the family or without. “If your marriage is such that you can’t work for the Party,” one communist official advised, according to Hoover, “. . . I’d seriously consider divorce.”²² Elsewhere Hoover described the way in which communists prey upon those whose discontents amid the rising postwar order have left them particularly vulnerable to unorthodox pleas:

the Communist Party is attempting to exploit the rise of materialism, irreligion, and lack of faith in our society. In an era when moral standards have been lowered, when family life has been disrupted, when crime and juvenile delinquency rates are high, communists have tried to set forth a goal . . . that would captivate the longings and hopes of men and women.²³

This passage is particularly interesting in that communists’ “captivating the longings and hopes” of ordinary Americans is quite a different conceptual model for the spread of communism than the one usually posited

by Hoover, who more often favored viral metaphors of disease and contagion. Nonetheless, the linkage Hoover establishes here—irreligion or lack of faith, declining morality, disrupted familial relations, juvenile delinquency, crime, and communism—was standard fare between World War II and the 1960s. Strong, patriarchal, “normal” families were at once the nation’s best defense against subversive tendencies and its most reliable emblem of political health and vitality.

Like Philip Wylie and J. Edgar Hoover, many saw “mom” as the key figure in this equation. The social-scientific literature contributed a great deal to the era’s iron framework of normativity on these matters, defining women’s seeking fulfillment outside motherhood as “unnatural,” or intoning, as one advice manual did, that “the family is the center of your living. If it isn’t, you’ve gone far astray.” *Esquire* magazine defined working wives as a “menace”; *Life* saw women’s employment as a “disease.”²⁴ In the context of the times, the political valences of words like *unnatural*, *astray*, *menace*, and *disease* could hardly be mistaken. As Elaine May observes, “Behind every subversive, it seemed, lurked a woman’s misplaced sexuality.”²⁵ Motherhood itself, adds Cynthia Enloe, became “an embattled strategic turf during the Cold War.” The militarization of femininity was not fully reversed once the war was over and Rosie the Riveter had been banished from the factory, but was “simply reconstructed upon women’s postwar demobilization”:

From 1946 until 1972 femininity was imagined by American government policymakers and nongovernment proponents of Cold War culture in a fashion that would harmonize with militarized national security goals. Loyal wives of male engineers working for defense contractors, loyal wives of male officials working in intelligence services—all were upholding forms of feminine behavior that sustained the Cold War. Likewise, women teaching elementary school children about the dangers of Communism, mothers who believed they were doing the right thing to support their sons in accepting their draft call-up, women who felt proud doing volunteer work for patriotic organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars—all of them, as well, were fulfilling this Cold War, militarized ideal of American femininity... as the hot war was replaced by the Cold War in American gendered political culture, there was less ideological confusion over, but not necessarily less militarization of, American femininity.²⁶

Richard Condon’s *The Manchurian Candidate* takes up these sexual themes fairly explicitly. The novel is shot through with sexualized references that link communism and subversion to unorthodox familial and gender arrangements, or perversion: the key players in the fantastic Manchurian plot are all linked in one way or another to homosexuality, “abnormal” sexuality, or incest. When, unlike all the other red-blooded American boys home from Korea, Raymond proves a little shy when it comes to sex, his consort Winona Meighan asks, “What the hell is the matter with you, honey? . . . Are you queer?” And when his mother seeks to break up the budding romance between Raymond and Jocie—Raymond’s one shot at normalcy—she tells the Jordans that her son is “homosexual and in other ways degenerate.”²⁷ Johnny and Eleanor’s marriage, meanwhile, has never been consummated, because Iselin “found himself as impotent as a male butterfly atop a female pterodactyl when he tried to have commerce with Raymond’s mother” (70).

Iselin’s sexual history also includes an extraordinary tale, recapitulated from a 1944 diary entry by one of the men he had served with during the war, of his attempted conquest of an Eskimo woman—any Eskimo woman—in the Arctic. “Johnny Iselin has become possessed by the idea of sex,” this character wrote. “To get that interested in sex on top of this ice cap is either suicidal or homosexual, on its surface, but Johnny isn’t either. He is a persistent and determined zealot.” The fictive diary entry goes on to recount the odd and fairly ugly story of Iselin’s acclimatizing himself to “the special smell of the Eskimo women” who “wash their hair in stored urine, . . . live sewed up in those musty skins, and . . . eat an endless diet of putrescent food like fish

heads and whale fat.” On one of his treks across the ice to the Eskimo women, Iselin encounters a German officer of similar predilections in the igloo; when he mistakenly makes advances on that officer’s Eskimo girlfriend, an arctic fracas ensues in which Iselin ends up getting bitten so fiercely, the wound festering so badly, that he is relieved of duty and reassigned elsewhere (85–86). Although this strange episode functions mainly to establish the distance between public and private truths in Iselin’s life (he makes quite a lot of his “war injury” on the campaign trail), nonetheless the constellation of sexual and political ideas at work here—the conflation of perversion and subversion—is symptomatic: his aberrant sexual zealotry puts Iselin in the same category with homosexuals and Nazi officers; it also leads to his discharge from military duty. No ordinary citizen soldier he.

But by far the most significant element in the novel’s marriage of perversion and subversion is Eleanor Iselin’s own sexual biography, which reaches back to an incestuous relationship with her father:

She had loved her father with a bond so secret, so deep, and so thrilling that it surpassed into eternity the drab feelings of other people, all other people, particularly the feelings of her brother and her clot of a mother. She had had woman’s breasts from the time she had been ten years old, and she had felt a woman’s yearnings as she had lain in the high, dark attic of her father’s great house, only on rainy nights, only when the other slept. She would lie in the darkness and hear the rain, then hear her father’s soft, soft step rising on the stairs after he had slipped the bolt into the lock of the attic door, and she would slip out of her long woolen night dress and wait for the warmth of him and the wonder of him. (73–74)

“How much you look like Poppa!” she later tells Raymond, indicating that perhaps her son is not only an instrument of her political subversion, but also of her sexual perversion. “You have his beautiful hands and you hold your beautiful head in that same proud, proud way. And when you smile! Smile, my darling.”

Raymond smiled, naturally and beautifully, under orders. She caught her breath in a gasp. “When you smile, Raymond dearest, for that instant I am a little girl again and the miracle of love begins all over again. How right that seems to me. Smile for me again, sweetheart. Yes. Yes. Now kiss me. Really, really kiss me.” Her long fingers dug into his shoulders and pulled him to her on the chaise, and as her left hand opened the Chinese robe she remembered Poppa and the sound of rain high in the attic when she had been a little girl, and she found again the ecstatic peace she had lost so long, long before. (290)

In Frankenheimer’s rendering, most of these sexualized strands are boiled down to one, telling, incestuous kiss between Eleanor and Raymond. Frankenheimer augmented the sexual/incestuous charge in this relationship by casting Angela Lansbury as Raymond’s mother, though she was only three years older than Laurence Harvey. Audiences (at least college audiences) invariably “eewww” and squirm when Eleanor takes Raymond’s face in her hands and kisses him deeply; but in fact the perversity of this relationship is woven into their exchanges long before the distasteful kiss. The character of Eleanor Iselin, one might say, is a patchwork creation whose elements are the very ideological elements of sexualized nationalism—neither Elaine Tyler May nor Cynthia Enloe could improve the character to better illustrate the argument about gender, sexuality, the family, and the politics of citizenship during the Cold War.

Eleanor Iselin occupies the screen for eleven scenes, virtually every one of them speaking directly to this constellation of gendered, sexual, and political concerns:

1. At the Washington airfield where she has arranged to turn Raymond's Congressional Medal of Honor ceremony into a "disgusting TV circus" on behalf of Iselin's campaign, Eleanor charges through the parade guard, jostling two soldiers aside, in an effort to secure a photo op for Iselin with Raymond. Then, in the limo with her husband and son, she chides the latter for his cold reception ("What's the matter with you, Raymond, we've gone to a lot of trouble..."), before justifying her behavior in language that could have been scripted by Philip Wylie: "You know I want nothing for myself. You know that my entire life is devoted to helping you and to helping Johnny. My two boys, my two little boys." (Raymond, meanwhile, holds his palms over his ears; rocking and grimacing, he chants, "Stop, stop, stop.") This fleeting scene establishes Eleanor as crass, crude, smothering, and brash—in a word, as "mom."
2. On board Johnny Iselin's plane, Eleanor continues to denigrate her son: "What's the matter with you, Raymond? You look as though your head were going to come to a point in the next thirteen seconds." Raymond reveals that he does not intend to stay with his family, but instead has taken a job in New York journalism working for Holborne Gaines—"that communist," "that dreadful old man," in Eleanor's view. Raymond explains his affinity with Gaines: "For one thing, we discovered that we both loathe and despise you and Johnny." This in a nutshell would be that rotted familial pattern that Hoover and others had described, in which a severing of the proper tie between parent and child portends a disease in the body politic.
3. Eleanor watches Iselin on a TV monitor as he confronts the secretary of defense. Then she, he, and a small crowd of inquiring reporters and others (including Marco) move into the adjoining vestibule. Confronted by Marco on the question of how many communists were in defense, Johnny answers only when he is prompted by Eleanor, who first mouths "104" and then "275." It is our first inkling that Mom not only rules the roost at home, but wields an unnatural power in Iselin's political cosmos as well—rather like Hoover's Ethel Rosenberg.
4. Shortly after, Johnny pleads with Eleanor to provide him one consistent number of communists to cite, as his inconsistencies are making him look like an "idiot." "You're going to look like an even bigger idiot if you don't just go out there and do as you're told," she barks. She then explains the brilliance of her chosen method: in the context of Iselin's inconsistencies, no one is asking *if* there are communists in the Defense Department, but rather *how many*. This scene augments the creeping sense of Eleanor as a political operative that had been introduced in scene 3.
5. In a flashback sequence (part of Raymond's tale of woe to Marco), Eleanor and Raymond are alone in her library, she trying to pry her son's affections away from Jocie Jordan. "We are at war," she warns. "It's a cold war, but it will get worse and worse until every man and woman and child in this country will have to stand up and be counted, to say whether they are on the side of right and freedom, or on the side of the Thomas Jordans of this country." This scene reiterates Eleanor's unnatural powers within the

family, as in scenes 3 and 4 (“She won, of course,” Raymond tells Marco. “She always does. I couldn’t beat her. I still can’t.”). But Eleanor’s language of “every man and woman and child” having to stand up and be counted also firmly hitches the domestic realm to the geopolitical realm of the Cold War. There is no such thing, exactly, as a “private citizen” as this war rages; and all kinds of private concerns—romance, for instance—will finally come to bear on public questions of “right and freedom.”

6. Eleanor and Johnny (with Johnny’s entourage present) now plot to bring Jocie and Raymond back together. It is here that Eleanor warns, “I keep telling you not to think . . .” and instructs her husband to “just keep yelling ‘point of order’ . . . [and] I’ll handle the rest.” As in scenes 3 and 4, Eleanor’s domination of Iselin is the crux (made all the more unnerving, perhaps, by the frankness of her discussion in the presence of Iselin’s aides). Her control of Iselin is unabashed and it is total.

7. Eleanor, Raymond, and “Chu Chin Chow or whatever your name is” (actually, Chunjin) are in Raymond’s den for what Raymond cynically terms his and his mother’s “annual meeting.” Eleanor invites Raymond to a party “in honor” of Jocie Jordan upon her return from Europe, a conciliatory gesture in view of “the shabby way [Raymond] treated her.” Like scene 5, this exchange annexes the realm of private romantic desire to Eleanor’s political projects. It also ratchets up our understanding of Eleanor’s capacity for treachery toward her son: as we know that it was she who disrupted Raymond and Jocie’s brief domestic idyll earlier on, her remark about his “shabby treatment” of Jocie reveals an astonishing willingness to trample Raymond underfoot, wholly without art, subtlety, or hesitation.
8. The party for Jocie: dressed as L’il Bo Peep, Eleanor demonstrates her virtues as both wife and mother (she yanks her husband around using the crook of her shepherdess’s walking stick, for example, and later commands him to “run along, the grown-ups have to talk.” She instructs Raymond to get “a drink or a tranquilizer or something,” before going on to complain about what a “royal pain” he is). When she leads Raymond into the library, locks the door, and suggests, “Why don’t you pass the time by playing a little solitaire,” we understand for the first time that she is her brainwashed son’s “American operative.” The immensity of her ambition becomes clear when she sounds out Thomas Jordan on the prospect of securing for Johnny the party’s vice presidential nomination. Mommy is a commie.
9. In Eleanor’s library, Raymond has come to confront her after seeing Iselin on TV slandering Thomas Jordan. “Darling,” she says, “something very important has come up. There’s something you have to do.” She reaches for a deck of cards. This, of course, is where (offscreen) she will issue the order to assassinate Senator Jordan. This scene skitters past in a mere thirteen seconds, but in some ways it is the most powerful of all in conveying Eleanor’s power over her son and her ensnarement with wider geopolitical conspiracies.
10. Raymond and Eleanor are in her library as she gives him his final instructions for the assassination at the convention site. It is here that Raymond’s mother speaks of amassing “powers that will make martial law look like anarchy.” Her roles as red queen and mother become thoroughly entwined here, as she first pleads with Raymond, “You must believe that I did not know [the Soviets’ handpicked assassin] would be you.” She then vows revenge: “When I take power they will be pulled down and ground into dirt for what they did to you, and for what they did in so contemptuously underestimating me.” In a pale but still quite powerful replication of the novel’s incest motif, she takes Raymond’s face in her hands and kisses him three times—on the forehead (almost maternally), on the cheek (somewhat too intimately), and on the mouth (far too deeply). This is the only scene in the film where the “merely” aberrant merges into the fully perverse; but the skein of entangled sexual-political themes is tight: momism, poisonous familial relations, inverted domestic lines of authority, political subversion, espionage, and sexual deviance. The private is public, as commentators like Hoover suggested, because sexuality and the domestic arrangements of the family will invariably radiate outward to affect those spheres more typically identified as “public” or “civic.”



Raymond Shaw and his mother. “Our land, subjectively mapped,” wrote Philip Wylie, “would have more silver cords and apron strings crisscrossing it than railroads and telephone wires.”

11. Eleanor Iselin’s final scene depicts her on the dais at the nominating convention, first alive and then dead. Her stranglehold has been broken, though Raymond cannot live without her.



The kiss—the most clearly “perverse” moment in the Iselin/Shaw family’s private dealings. The perversion of Eleanor’s iron matriarchal rule and the rotted bonds between mother and son have offered clues to her subversive intentions throughout the film.

Perhaps more thoroughly than any other text in the era, then, *The Manchurian Candidate* articulates the complicated linkages between the private and the public, the familial and the national, the sexual and the political in Cold War ideology. Like its reflexive Orientalism and its stealthy McCarthyism, this subtle commitment to politicized sexuality—or sexualized politics, if one prefers—suggests that, however intelligent, as an artifact of the period the film perhaps has as much to tell us by its preconscious impulses as it does by its highly self-conscious and stylized narrative declarations.

The “anticommunist story” may have indeed been in “tatters” by 1962, as Thomas Engelhardt has it, and certain elements of *The Manchurian Candidate* may indeed capture the unraveling.²⁸ But, on the other hand, a figure such as Jude Wanniski (later an archconservative economic adviser to Ronald Reagan) still remembers the straight anticommunist punch that the film held for him as a young man. Working as a reporter for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Wanniski had voted “for JFK over the hated Richard Nixon” in 1960, but began to experience some “disillusionment with ‘liberals.’” “Then along came *The Manchurian Candidate*,” he writes, “... about how the COMMUNISTS were able to scheme in ways that could actually capture the American presidency. The movie hit me at a vulnerable moment and may have helped push me toward an eventual

vote for Nixon in 1968.”²⁹ How many Jude Wanniskis there were among Frankenheimer’s 1962 audience we cannot know. But that there were any at all indicates that the film cannot be read simply as wry commentary on a waning political consensus. Rather, the kind of cinematic power described by Wanniski could only derive from the film’s having imbibed and recapitulated some of the period’s deepest—if subtlest—predispositions. *The Manchurian Candidate* may lampoon many of the sexual, patriarchal, and political beliefs peddled by Hoover, McCarthy, and others, but so does it rearticulate them and, in doing so, uphold them.