

University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Cold War Narratives in American Cinematography

Bachelor Thesis

2025

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Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2024/2025

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

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Osobní číslo: **H21397**

Studijní program: **B0231A090018 Anglický jazyk**

Specializace: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**

Téma práce: **Zobrazení studené války v americké kinematografii**

Zadávací katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

Zásady pro vypracování

Bakalářská práce se bude věnovat vyobrazení studené války ve vybraných filmech z dějin americké kinematografie. V teoretické části autor objasní základní koncepty, strategie a narativy související s tematikou studené války, respektive s její ideologickou obhajobou. Tento teoretický základ pak využije v přehledové studii zkoumající vývoj či proměny prezentace studené války v americké kinematografii v rozmezí čtyř dekad (od konce 40. let po konec let 80.). Výběr filmů autor práce náležitě odůvodní, přičemž se očekává, že každá zkoumaná dekáda bude rovnoměrně zastoupena min. 3-5 filmovými tituly.

Příklady filmů podle dekád:

Konec 40. let a 50. léta:

”The Iron Curtain” (1948)

60. léta

”Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964)

70. léta

”The Kremlin Letter” (1970)

80. léta

”Rocky IV” (1985)

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:
Rozsah grafických prací:
Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

- Rogin, Michael. "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies." *Representations*, No. 6 (1984): 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928536>.
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- Carosso, Andrea. *Cold War Narratives: American Culture in the 1950s*. Peter Lang AG, 2013

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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **2. dubna 2024**
Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **30. března 2025**

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V Pardubicích dne 31. března 2025

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Tomáš Kellich

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to the supervisor of this thesis, Mgr. Michal Kleprlik, Ph.D., who provided me with valuable guidance and advice. Thank you for generously dedicating your time and effort.

I also want to thank my whole family. Namely, I want to thank my mother and my father. You made it possible for me to pursue a college education.

Lastly, I express my love and thanks to my girlfriend. Thank you for standing by me no matter what.

Annotation

This thesis examines the portrayal of the Cold War in selected films from American cinema history. The theoretical section outlines key concepts and narratives associated with the Cold War. This framework serves as the foundation for a comprehensive study analysing how the depiction of the Cold War evolved over four decades, from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. The selection of films ensures a balanced representation of each examined decade, with a minimum of three to five films per period. By exploring shifts in cinematic narratives and their historical context, the thesis aims to provide insights into the role of American cinema in shaping Cold War discourse and public perception.

Keywords

Cold War, American cinematography, Cold War narratives, Hollywood and the Cold War, Film analysis

Název

Zobrazení studené války v americké kinematografii

Anotace

Tato práce zkoumá vyobrazení studené války ve vybraných filmech z dějin americké kinematografie. Teoretická část představuje klíčové koncepty a narativy spojené se studenou válkou. Tento rámec slouží jako základ pro komplexní studii analyzující, jak se zobrazování studené války vyvíjelo v průběhu čtyř dekad, od konce 40. let do konce 80. let 20. století. Výběr filmů zajišťuje rovnoměrné zastoupení každého zkoumaného desetiletí, přičemž pro každé období je analyzováno minimálně tři až pět snímků. Zkoumáním proměn filmových narativů v historickém kontextu se práce snaží poskytnout vhled do role americké kinematografie při utváření diskurzu o studené válce a veřejného vnímání tohoto konfliktu.

Klíčová slova

Studená válka, americká kinematografie, narativy studené války, Hollywood a studená válka, analýza filmů

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Introduction

The conclusion of the Second World War was made possible through the collective efforts of the Grand Alliance, which included the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. The world awaited whether this alliance would endure into the post-war era. Unfortunately, it did not.

As tensions grew, ideological differences between the capitalist West and the communist East emerged. What followed was a period of intense rivalry and suspicion that would come to define the Cold War. The alliance that had once stood firm against a common enemy was now fragmented. The stage for the ideological and political struggles dominating global relations for the next several decades was set.

People can learn about the Cold War through various sources. They learn about it at school or read books. However, another equally insightful way to understand the shifting narratives of this period is through cinematography.

This thesis focuses on American films and how they reflected the Cold War narratives in each decade of the conflict. The movies reflect the political and social climate of individual periods. They can also be a tool for shaping public perception. Through the lens of Hollywood, one can trace how the conflict was portrayed, how ideologies were reinforced, and how the fears and tensions of the era were dramatised on screen.

The thesis is structured into two main parts, each containing chapters and subchapters. The first is the theoretical part. Its purpose is to introduce the political and social climate in the United States of America during the Cold War. To fully understand the narratives in the analysed movies, it is crucial to know what events, decisions, policies, conflicts, and social changes shaped the individual decades.

The content of the theoretical part is then utilised in the practical part. This section focuses on the analysis of selected American films from specific decades.

One of the thesis goals is to analyse the portrayal of the Cold War in American cinema. Examine how films from different decades reflect the political and social climate of the Cold War era, focusing on how the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was depicted in mainstream Hollywood films.

Another is to explore how cinema shaped public perception of the Cold War. Investigate how American films influenced or reinforced societal attitudes toward the

Soviet Union, communism, capitalism, nuclear warfare and other topics, as well as how they contributed to shaping ideological narratives during the Cold War period.

Additionally, to identify the impact of specific historical events on film narratives. Examine how major Cold War events - such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the arms race, and many others - were reflected in American films' narratives, characters, and themes from that time.

The fourth goal is to understand the evolving representation of Cold War ideologies. Investigate how the portrayal of key ideological themes, such as fear, democracy, and the "other," shifted throughout the Cold War and how these changes are visible in American cinema over time.

And last but not least, to critically assess the role of film as a historical source. Evaluate the role of cinema as a tool for understanding history. Especially concerning ideological and cultural battles, and assess its influence as both a reflection of and a participant in the Cold War narratives.

1. Philosophy of the Cold War

The Cold War was a geopolitical conflict that shaped our world from the end of the Second World War until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the conflict, our planet was virtually divided into “Three Worlds”. One of them, frequently referred to as the Western Bloc, constituted of the United States and its allies, primarily liberal democratic states. The second one, the Eastern Bloc, was formed by the Soviet Union and its allied states. Later, during the Cold War, the two sides were also described as the nations of NATO and the nations of the Warsaw Pact after the defence treaties they formed. The term “Neutral World” refers to the neutral countries.

There are two leading narratives of the Cold War which circulate amongst the public. In the United States, the Cold War was initially presented as an inevitable reaction to “Russian expansive tendencies”.¹ The need to put a stop to these tendencies was presented by a career Foreign Service Officer, George F. Kennan, in “The Long Telegram”, also known as the “X-Article”. Here lie the beginnings of the policy of containment that President Harry S. Truman later built his administration upon. Harry Truman gave a speech in March 1947, during which he requested \$400 million to be allocated by Congress to aid the Greek and Turkish governments, which were on the verge of communist subversion. Congress accepted this request. This action, together with the considerable financial commitment, demonstrated how much the United States would prioritise the containment of socialism.

The second narrative, presented by certain revisionist historians, suggests the thought that the American government abandoned the attempts at further collaboration with the Soviet Union right at the end of the Second World War.² It may seem like Americans felt empowered by being the only nation bearing the atomic bomb. Therefore, they underwent a series of radical steps that could have been perceived as aggressive by the Soviet Union. Americans were now a dominant influence in Japan and partially in Germany. Considering what the revisionist historians say, it would seem as if the Soviets did not have any other choice than to take specific measures and secure their own sphere of influence.

Additionally, there was a question of world order after the Second World War. There were two most likely scenarios. The first being the universalist way, which lays its foundations on the existence of an intergovernmental organisation where, in the best

¹Arthur Schlesinger, “Origins of the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 23-24.

²Schlesinger, “*Origins of the Cold War*,” 24–25.

possible scenario, all member countries cooperate in the pursuit of a better future. Former United States President Woodrow Wilson was an important protagonist of the universalist way of world order. As a result, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the establishment of the League of Nations. The 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, shared this “Wilsonian” way of thinking. That is because he was a member of Wilson’s subcabinet during the First World War, and he witnessed his pursuit of creating the international body that would, in their eyes, prevent future conflicts. The reason for the United States’ inclination towards the universal world order could also be the aspiration to stop the spread of socialism. One of the loudest critics of the communist governments was Dwight Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, who stated that the significant threat to peace would lie in the revival of sphere-of-influence thinking.³

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, desired the sphere of influence solution. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. suggests that the reason for this was that the Soviets needed to move the border of their area of influence further West to prevent another potential invasion.⁴ The Soviet perspective could be considered understandable in light of their historical experiences. In their history, they have been invaded numerous times, and very often, the attacker came from the West. The first French forces that invaded Russia in 1812 came through what was then named the Duchy of Warsaw. Nazi troops, in 1941, also got over the Russian border through Poland. Therefore, as far as the question of Poland was concerned, Joseph Stalin said during the Yalta Conference in 1945,

For the Russian people, the question of Poland is not only a question of honour but also a question of security. Throughout history, Poland has been the corridor through which the enemy has passed into Russia. Poland is a question of life and death for Russia.⁵

This statement might hint at why Stalin wanted to create the so-called satellite states in Eastern Europe over which the Communist Party would have absolute control. By creating this imaginary wall, these states would present zero danger of being the middleman between a hostile force and the actual Russian border. Stalin’s stated desire for Russian security could be viewed as a rational response to historical invasions from the West.

³ Schlesinger, “*Origins of the Cold War*,” 26–28.

⁴ Schlesinger, “*Origins of the Cold War*,” 29–30.

⁵ The Latin Library. “Yalta.” *The Latin Library*. Accessed January 20, 2025. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/yalta.html>.

The Cold War can be perceived as an inevitable result of the collision of socialism and capitalism. These two systems differ in understanding the relationship between the individual and the state. The United States emphasised individual liberties, while the Soviet Union the priority of the collective. To elaborate, one of the core American values is individualism, where the interests of an individual are vital, emphasising independence and self-reliance. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was primarily based on collectivism. In this belief, people are seen as a group aiming for a common objective, and individuals are prompted to compromise. However, there are more aspects in which socialism and capitalism are incompatible.

Capitalism is a system where individuals or businesses own property and have the right to control it. The supply and demand of the competitive market shape a free market. Also, a level of competition is present. Most importantly, all this happens with the government seldom intervening. The state functions merely as a regulatory body. On the other side of the picture, in a socialist state, there is a command economy. This means that the state directly controls all the processes in the market. Production, distribution, price control, demand and production regulations and many other aspects of the market were set by the leading Communist Party.

With many aspects, events, disputes, and ideological differences, the Cold War was a complex conflict that may have been difficult to avoid given the circumstances. On the surface, it may seem like a conflict where two world superpowers fight over who gets a more extensive influence. Nevertheless, there were many reasons why the Cold War escalated so quickly and lasted for so long. The Cold War displays a clash of two ideologies that contradict each other in many ways. Moreover, the conflict was fueled by distrust towards each other, attempts to glorify one side while vilifying the other and numerous races, with the most notable one being the arms race.

1.1. The Post-World War II Era and the 1950s

When the Second World War ended, the prospect of the United States and the Soviet Union cooperating even after the war seemed quite possible. The then President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, called for a meeting of the “Big Three” (the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Soviet Union) to discuss the post-war reorganisation of Europe. This resulted in the Yalta Conference, which took place in February 1945. In the wake of the conference, F. D. Roosevelt said: “*I come from the Crimea with a firm belief that we have made a start on the road to a world of peace.*”⁶ This shows that Roosevelt must have felt optimistic about the likelihood of further cooperation.

With the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, his former vice president, Harry S. Truman, assumed the role of the president of the United States of America. However, no significant changes were expected in the US's foreign policy. In his memoirs, Truman writes that at the first meeting with the Cabinet, he made it clear that he would continue the domestic and foreign policies of the Roosevelt administration. The recently appointed president of the United States was asked whether he wanted the United Nations Conference in San Francisco on April 26 1945, to take place as F. D. Roosevelt intended. He, by his own words, did not hesitate a second. He referred to the conference as being of supreme importance and stressed the significance of building an organisation to help keep the world's future peace. The US president further supported the claim of not deviating from Roosevelt's policies by asking all the members of the cabinet to stay at their posts.⁷ However, the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated at the San Francisco Conference. Harry S. Truman believed that the Soviet Union was not complying with the agreements made at the Yalta Conference. The head of the US had a heated exchange with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov. The American historian John Lewis Gaddis, best known for his work on the Cold War, believes there to be no doubt about the fact that the Soviets interpreted this exchange as a sign that the United States had deviated from the policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union established by Roosevelt.⁸

⁶ “Yalta Conference,” *Timenote*, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://timenote.info/en/events/Yalta-Conference>.

⁷ Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions, Vol. I* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 19.

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 205–206.

The aftermath of the Moscow conference between December 16 and 26, 1945, was crucial. Harry S. Truman was dissatisfied with how his close adviser and U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes handled the conference as one of the results was the recognition of pro-Soviet governments in Bulgaria and Romania. This is only one example of many other successes for the Soviet Union that stemmed from the Moscow Conference. John Lewis Gaddis considers Truman's outburst towards Byrnes, which followed, not only as an expression of his discontent with how the conference was handled but also as a sign that The President wanted to apply a firmer policy towards the Soviet Union.⁹

One of the most significant turns in post-war US-Soviet relations was the creation of the X-Article/Long Telegram by George F. Kennan, followed by the announcement of the Truman Doctrine to the U.S. Congress on March 12 1947. The Truman Doctrine is even included in the book published by the United States National Archives and Records Administration, which focuses on one hundred of the most significant milestones in American history.¹⁰ The policy of containment of socialism was now in effect, and President Truman would continue his whole time in office similarly.

In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower became the next President of the United States after Harry S. Truman. He continued the policy of containment, but his approach differed. The newly elected president aimed to lower military spending but without decreasing the effectiveness of the policy. This was to be achieved by relying on nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence.

Apart from the worsening of the relationship between the two countries, another major topic in America was the fear of Soviet infiltration and espionage. One of the earliest occurrences was the Gouzenko affair, also known as the Canadian Spy. Igor Sergeyeovich Gouzenko was a Soviet cypher clerk who defected from the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa. His defection started an investigation that led to the arrests of 21 people and 11 convictions. The Canadian Spy Affair became known to the general public on February 3 1946, when Drew Person, an American columnist, revealed it on his broadcast show on Radio NBC.¹¹ The whole affair, though happening in Canada,

⁹ Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, 289.

¹⁰ United States. National Archives and Records Administration, *Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003), 194.

¹¹ John Earl Haynes, *Early Cold War Spies: The Espionage Trials That Shaped American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52.

greatly impacted the American public and their stance towards the Soviet Union. This can be observed in the results of public opinion polls. When asked, "*Do you think Russia will cooperate with us in world affairs?*" 44% responded yes, and 40% answered no on October 17, 1945. When the same question was asked on February 27 1946, twenty-four days after the Gouzenko Affair became known to the general public, the results were 35% yes and 52% no.¹²

This and similar subsequent events contributed to what is known as the "Red Scare" (fear of Communist influence, infiltration and takeover). This period is also known as "*McCarthyism*", named after US Senator Joseph McCarthy as he powered the panic regarding the possible Communist infiltration. One example is his Wheeling Speech in West Virginia on 9 February 1950, during which he proclaimed that he had a list of 205 (he later changed the number numerous times) Communist spies. McCarthy's impact started to decline after 1954, with it, the fear of a Soviet takeover. Still, the effect on the period is undoubtable.

The early Cold War period saw a significant shift in U.S.-Soviet relations despite initial efforts by President Truman to continue Roosevelt's policies. Disagreements and growing Soviet influence in Eastern Europe created a more confrontational U.S. approach, building up to the policy of containment and the Truman Doctrine in 1947. Under President Eisenhower, containment remained a priority, though with a more substantial reliance on nuclear deterrence. Public fear of Soviet espionage shaped American perceptions of communism. The period reflected widespread anti-communist sentiment.

¹² George H. Quester, "Origins of the Cold War: Some Clues from Public Opinion," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (1978): 658, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150108>.

1.2. The 1960s, Escalation and Counter-Culture

The previously mentioned policy of President Eisenhower fueled the already ongoing arms race. The US and the Soviet Union tried to improve their weapons and invent new ones. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who became the president after Eisenhower, also supported the policy of containment. However, his policy of Flexible response differed from the policy of Massive retaliation used by the Eisenhower administration. J. F. Kennedy wanted the United States to be able to respond to threats not only through nuclear weapons.

Ironically, it was during Kennedy's first year of the presidency that the world arguably came the closest to total nuclear combat. In 1962, an American U-2 aircraft confirmed the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, which meant that the Soviet Union now had atomic weapons only 145 kilometres away from Florida. The US had to decide. Robert F. Kennedy, brother to JFK, describes the decision-making process in his memoirs of the Cuban missile crisis. He writes that the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were sure that a full-scale attack on Cuba was the only possibility. John. F. Kennedy protested, saying the Soviet Union would react to the attack. After days of consultations, the decision was to impose a blockade.¹³ After days of tension, the US and Soviet administrations came to a resolution. For the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles, the US had to pledge not to invade Cuba in the future and also to dismantle and remove its missiles from Turkey.

The Cuban missile crisis did not last long. Still, it had a significant impact. A period of détente followed. Everyone was well aware of the possible mutually assured destruction. Therefore, both sides took a series of steps to de-escalate the situation. The Limited Test Ban Treaty was enacted in 1963, forbidding anyone from performing nuclear tests in the atmosphere. The possibility of nuclear war was a crucial element in the 1964 presidential election, which followed the assassination of J. F. Kennedy. Robert Mann, an American professor, mentions a survey taken in 1963 showing that 90% of people thought that nuclear war was possible.¹⁴ The way the two presidential candidates perceived atomic weapons was the main difference between them. The republican candidate Barry Goldwater voted against the Limited Test Ban Treaty and supported the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam if necessary. The democratic

¹³ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 14-21.

¹⁴ Robert Mann, *Daisy Petals and Mushroom Clouds: LBJ, Barry Goldwater, and the Ad That Changed American Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12-13.

candidate Lyndon Baines Johnson represented the opposite stance, which he supported with the famous " *Daisy* " ad.

In this ad, a little girl is seen picking a daisy's petals and counting in ascending order. When she reaches number nine, she stops, and a male voice starts counting from ten to zero. A shot of a nuclear explosion follows, and the voice of L. B. Johnson can be heard saying: "*These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.*"¹⁵ When acknowledging the previously mentioned survey results showing that the public was aware of the threat of total annihilation by atomic weapons and the ad's narrative, it can be seen as one of the reasons for L. B. Johnson's landslide win in the elections.

Additionally, the 1960s saw the rise of the counterculture movement. The counterculture movement had equality and environmental awareness among its many concerns. In the context of the Cold War, the calls for world peace, ending the American involvement in the Vietnam War and opposition to nuclear weapons were the most significant. The movement was influential as it received a lot of support from the young population in the US. The people born within the after-war period called the "*Baby Boom*" were now in their teens or early twenties and, as John Lewis Gaddis writes, "*old enough to make trouble if they wanted to*"¹⁶, or in other words, able and willing to express their opinion.

High Cold War tensions, nuclear anxieties, and significant shifts in public sentiment marked the 1960s. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 had the world on the brink of nuclear war, which led both superpowers to steps toward de-escalation. Furthermore, atomic issues were crucial in the 1964 U.S. presidential election, highlighting the growing public concern regarding global security. This anti-war and anti-nuclear sentiment was now rooted within society and making its way to popular culture. These political and cultural responses reflected a decade shaped by confrontation and a desire for peace.

¹⁵ Library of Congress. "Daisy' Ad (1964): Preserved From 35mm in the Tony Schwartz Collection," September 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riDypP1KfOU>.

¹⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 145-147.

1.3. The 1970s, Détente in the Cold War

When the 1970s began, the Oval Office already had a new tenant. The president to succeed L. B. Johnson was Richard Nixon. He assumed the president's role when the public's anti-war sentiment was arguably at its peak. With hundreds of American soldiers dying in Vietnam each day¹⁷, violent protests were taking place all over the United States of America. That's why his main goals were to regain an upper hand in the Cold War and, most importantly, to get the US out of the war in Vietnam. That could lead to calming the situation in the country. During his inauguration, he said: "*the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker*", which can also be seen engraved on his gravestone.¹⁸

By 1972, with another presidential election approaching, Nixon could look back at his goals and see some success. His plan to reduce the amount of US troops in Vietnam was in effect, which calmed the situation in the country, and the number of anti-war protests lowered significantly.¹⁹ Per his peace statement, he signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the SALT I Treaty in 1972. These two and some other successes led to another victory for Richard Nixon when he acquired a respectable 61% in the election. Yet, two years later, Richard Nixon resigned after the Watergate scandal.

After Nixon's resignation, Gerald Ford, as the sitting vice president, naturally became the Chief of State. No matter the change in the Oval Office, the period of easing tensions would continue. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks continued, and G. Ford signed the Helsinki Final Act to promote détente further. On April 23 1975, Gerald Ford declared that the war in Vietnam was over "*as far as America is concerned*"²⁰. G. Ford managed to continue the period of détente, and his public approval data steadily climbed throughout 1976.²¹ The same year, another presidential election was to take place. However, the nomination by the Republican Party was not certain for Ford. Some members disapproved of what they saw as a lack of initiative in South Vietnam, while

¹⁷ "Vietnam War Deaths and Casualties by Month," *The American War Library*, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.americanwarlibrary.com/vietnam/vwc24.htm>.

¹⁸ "Richard Nixon Gravesite," *Presidents of the United States*, last modified 2014, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.presidentsusa.net/nixongravesite.html>.

¹⁹ "Annual Number of Protests in the United States Against U.S. Military Involvement in Vietnam from 1963 Until 1975," *Statista*, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1333974/annual-us-protests-against-vietnam-war/>.

²⁰ "President Gerald Ford Speech at Tulane University," *The History Place*, accessed February 16, 2025, <https://www.historyplace.com/speeches/ford-tulane.htm>.

²¹ "Gerald R. Ford Public Approval," *The American Presidency Project*, accessed February 16, 2025, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/gerald-r-ford-public-approval>.

others objected to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. Ultimately, Gerald Ford was nominated but lost in the election to James Earl Carter Jr. of the Democratic Party.

One month after Carter was elected the president, he said: "*I've called on the Soviet Union to join us in a comprehensive test ban to stop all nuclear testing for at least an extended period of time, 2 years, 3 years, 4 years.*".²² On June 18, 1979, both countries signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II. Nonetheless, the treaty was never actually ratified by the US because of the Soviet Union's invasion to Afghanistan at the end of 1979. This event marked the end of the détente period, and tensions between the two world powers started rising again.

²² Jimmy Carter, "The President's News Conference," *The American Presidency Project*, February 8, 1977, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-112>.

1.4. The 1980s, From Reescalation to the End of the Cold War

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on December 25, 1979. The US reacted by withdrawing the SALT II treaty from the Senate, imposing embargoes on the Soviet Union and boycotting the Moscow Olympics. President Carter asked for an increase in defence spending while stating that the invasion was “*the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War*”.²³ The period of détente was over, and with the election of Ronald Wilson Reagan as the new US President in 1981, it became clear that it was not coming back soon.

Ronald Reagan was opposed to the policy of détente, mocking it by saying: “[I]sn’t that what a farmer has with his turkey—until Thanksgiving day?”²⁴ Henry Kissinger, an American diplomat and national security advisor to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, says towards Ronald Reagan that he was the first US president to “*take the offensive both ideologically and geostrategically*”.²⁵

It was believed that Communism had spread too much during the last decades. Therefore, the strategy of containment (keeping Communism from spreading), established during Truman’s presidency and still in effect, was now rendered useless. Reagan adopted what is known as the Rollback strategy. Supported by the Reagan Doctrine, this strategy focused on supporting anti-communist movements worldwide, such as in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Once more, the United States were in a confrontation with Soviet-supported governments.

The United States was building its military forces, and the arms race began anew. By 1985, the Pentagon’s budget had almost doubled compared to 1980.²⁶ Again, the world was close to a direct conflict between the two nuclear powers. Some critical situations occurred during this period. For instance, the Soviet Union thought the Able Archer 83 military exercise by NATO to be a cover for a nuclear first strike. In reaction, the Soviet Union put their nuclear forces in East Germany and Poland on high alert.

The gravity of the troubled situation is well captured in the sentence said by the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev: “*Never, perhaps, in the postwar*

²³ Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union Before a Joint Session of Congress," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy*, January 23, 1980, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d138>.

²⁴ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 217.

²⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 772.

²⁶ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 225.

decades has the situation in the world been as explosive and, hence, more difficult and unfavourable as in the first half of the 1980s."²⁷

The heightened apprehension and the possibility of a nuclear confrontation also took their toll on the public. According to surveys of public opinion, it would seem that war-related anxiety peaked once more between the years 1982 and 1983.²⁸ An estimated one million people attended the nuclear disarmament protest, which took place on June 12, 1982, which makes it the largest protest to ever happen in America.

Tensions, and with it, the related anxiety amongst the public, started to decline a few years later. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the Communist Party General Secretary. Seemingly, the doors for cooperation and negotiation were now open again. Indeed, the two countries successfully negotiated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), eliminating many nuclear and conventional missiles. Both leaders would continue their attempts to lower the rigidity by carrying on with the talks regarding the limitation of weapons. A new environment for discussion and cooperation was created.

Meanwhile, significant reforms were happening in the Soviet Union. The "Perestroika" and "Glasnost" reforms brought greater political freedom and openness in the Soviet Union. Reagan wanted Gorbachev to go even further with his reforms. Arguably, the most well-known is Reagan's speech at the Berlin Wall in 1987, where he stated:

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union, Central and South-East Europe, if you seek liberalisation, come here to this gate; Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!²⁹

It would take two more years, but the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989. It was now clear that the Cold War was nearing its conclusion. The Soviet Union was losing the grip it had on Eastern European states, with their respective Communist governments collapsing and their soldiers returning home. The Cold War, which defined global politics for more than four decades, ended with the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991.

²⁷ Chris Woolf, "Declassified Document Casts a New Light on Soviet War Scare in 1983," *The World from PRX*, November 24, 2015, <https://theworld.org/stories/2015/11/24/new-light-soviet-war-scare-1983>.

²⁸ Smith, Tom W. "A Report: Nuclear Anxiety." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1988): 557–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749262>.

²⁹ National Archives, "Tear Down This Wall: How Top Advisers Opposed Reagan's Challenge to Gorbachev—But Lost," *Prologue Magazine*, Summer 2007, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/summer/berlin.html>.

2. The Post-World War II Era and the 1950s, Anti-Communism and the House Committee on Un-American Activities

The anti-Communist sentiment mentioned in the chapter “*The Post-World War II Era and Early Cold War Films in the 1950s*” also made its way to Hollywood and influenced the movie industry to a great extent.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) played a significant role in prosecuting possible infiltrators in many sectors, including Hollywood. In the year 1947, the HUAC started a series of hearings to investigate whether Communist propaganda was being secretly put into American movies. Numerous screenwriters, directors and other artists were blacklisted as a result. Probably the most well-known is the so-called “Hollywood Ten”, a group of ten artists suspected of being members of the Communist Party. They were sentenced to one year in prison, apart from being forbidden from creating. Several movies were retrospectively marked as Soviet propaganda. For example, in the films *Mission to Moscow* and *The North Star*. The first mentioned was even referred to as “*unquestionably the most blatant piece of pro-Stalinist propaganda ever offered by the American mass media*”.³⁰

The HUAC's activities also aimed to transform the ideological content of American cinema. When the president of the Motion Picture Association of America, Eric Johnston, visited HUAC, they expressed the need for more anti-Soviet movies.³¹

³⁰ Richard Schickel, *You Must Remember This: The Warner Bros. Story* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 125.

³¹ J. Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms* (New York: New Press, 2011), 38.

2.1. The Iron Curtain and Anti-Communist Film in the Cold War Era

"The Iron Curtain", released in 1948, can be considered the first Cold War movie. It deals with Igor Gouzenko's story, which was mentioned in the chapter *The Post-World War II Era and the 1950s*. The movie was shown to many opinion makers before being put into the cinemas. Most media praised the movie. The magazines *Life* and *Time* complimented it with the first mentioned, placing it as "Movie of the Week". It was also referred to as "*the most amazing plot in 3300 years of recorded espionage!!*" by Fox.³² The movie did quite well after its release. It made over \$500,000 in the first week, which put it in the first place in the national box-office sweepstakes.³³

Already affected by McCarthyism and the situation in Hollywood surrounding the prosecutions and blacklisting, the movie portrays elements of the Red Scare narrative. Soviet agents are depicted as ruthless, secretive and deeply embedded within Canadian society. A few minutes after the character John Grubb, a Canadian communist working for the Soviet Union and one of the main antagonists of the movie, appears on the screen for the first time, he orders his driver to take him to the "*House of Commons, Members' Entrance*".³⁴ This shows that a soviet agent can casually enter such a vital government building as the House of Commons through the Members' Entrance. This subtle line can be seen as a powerful indicator of how deeply rooted the espionage network could be.

Scenes of so-called "Marxist Study Groups" also support this particular narrative. These gatherings are a chance to recruit more spies for the Soviet Union. One of the attendants of these gatherings is Captain Donald P. Class, a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force. His presence symbolises military infiltration and adds to the fear that even the military can be vulnerable to Soviet influence.

A different feature of the movie is the portrait of the "Western easy way of living" compared to life in the Soviet Union. Many lines clearly try to imply that. One of the first instances is when Igor Gouzenko is taken to his colleague Nina Karanova's flat. Igor drinks numerous glasses of alcohol, and Nina offers him another one. Igor asks if she has plenty, to which she replies, "*Here in Canada, there is plenty of*

³² Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms*, 71.

³³ Variety, May 19, 1948, 138, <https://archive.org/details/variety170-1948-05/page/n138/mode/1up?view=theater>.

³⁴ *The Iron Curtain*, directed by William A. Wellman (20th Century Fox, 1948), 16:00, YouTube, Silver Screen Classics, May 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDaJBpTnvoM>.

everything".³⁵ Furthermore, when Igor's wife Anna arrives in Canada, she speaks keenly about seeing New York and San Francisco and that the enormous buildings made her dizzy. Anna Gouzenko reacts even more excitedly to the flat they will live in in Canada. An extended scene follows, showing the nicely furnished spacious apartment. At the end of this scene, Anna tells Igor that she is pregnant.

The baby boy plays a significant part in Gouzenko's decision to defect from the Soviet embassy. After shouting at his wife for being too friendly towards their neighbour, something Igor has been told not to do by his superiors at the Soviet Embassy, a segment follows where Igor and Anna stand near their child's crib. Anna says, directing her words toward their baby: "*It would be a pity to have him grow up thinking the world is his enemy.*". This is followed by: "*These people are not our enemies, they are our friends, it is we who are acting like enemies.*".³⁶ This situation, together with another, can be considered as one of the turning points when Igor starts properly questioning his loyalty to the Soviet Union. The second situation is when Maj. Semyon Kulin suffers what appears to be a mental breakdown, first talking about how he once had to shoot ten of his soldiers for not volunteering for a dangerous patrol during the war to comply with the orders he had. This memory has haunted him ever since. Maj. Kulin continues: "*As a man, I'm called a sadist, but what of governments that pile dead upon dead and justify murder as a means to an end? What name do you call them?*".³⁷ In an attempt to stop Maj. Kulin continues his wild outburst, and his superior says, "*You are making it very difficult for me, my friend. Don't force me to send you back to Russia.*", in a threat-like manner. Maj. Kulin mocks this line by saying towards Gouzenko: "*Did you hear that? The threat of threats, to be sent back to Russia.*".³⁸

What is also worth mentioning is the portrayal of how the Soviet agents refer to the alliance between the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union. In one scene, one of the Soviet agents refers to the three previously mentioned countries as allies to one another with the same goal of defeating Germany. John Grubb's response is: "*Don't be blinded by this alliance. The interests of capitalism and communism can never be the same.*".³⁹ When the war ends, there is a scene showing a meeting of the

³⁵ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 10:40.

³⁶ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 43:50

³⁷ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 48:00.

³⁸ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 48:52.

³⁹ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 35:45.

representatives of the Soviet Union in Canada. They are told to remain vigilant, suspicious and aloof until the “*decadent plutocratic democracy is completely destroyed*”.⁴⁰

In the end, Igor Gouzenko manages to acquire protection from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and lives in a secret Canada location with his family. The final scene shows Igor and his family entering a large estate in the picturesque countryside, with the narrator saying, “*They (Igor and his wife) know that ultimate security for themselves and their children lies in the survival of the democratic way of life.*”⁴¹

Similar aspects of thorough anti-Communism can be observed in many other Cold War movies produced at the end of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Daniel J. Leab, an American historian, lists such films in his journal article “*How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and I Married a Communist*”. Leab hints that the names of these movies communicate their “flavour” quite well. Some examples are: “*The Red Mance*” (1948), “*The Woman on Pier 13*” (initially called “*I Married a Communist*”) (1950), “*I Was a Communist for the FBI*” (1951) and “*The Girl in The Kremlin*” (1957).⁴²

⁴⁰ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 41:30.

⁴¹ *The Iron Curtain* (1948), 1:26:27.

⁴² Leab, Daniel J. “How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and I Married a Communist.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 1 (1984): 65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260425>.

2.2. Fear, Paranoia, and Anti-Communist Allegories in Film

However, Leab also states that in these times, “no genre proved immune to the Cold War attitudes which dominated American society”. As an example, he provides the 1954 sci-fi horror movie “*Them!*”.⁴³

“*Them!*” tells the story of a small town in New Mexico where giant ants mutated because of nuclear testing. The mutant ants first terrorise the small town but could potentially endanger the whole world.

Many critics and analysts have made comparisons between the ants and Communists. One of them is Peter Biskind, an American cultural critic and film historian, who said:

If the ants are like humans, which humans are they like? In 1954, when *Them!* was made, those humans that America regarded as antlike, which is to say, behaved like a mass, loved war, and made slaves, were, of course, Communists, both the Yellow Hordes that had just swamped GIs with their human waves in Korea, and the Soviets, with their slave labour camps.⁴⁴

Features that reflect what Peter Biskind is saying can be noticed during the scene in which Dr Harold Medford, one of the two scientists trying to identify the threat, gives a lecture on ants to high-ranking US military and government officials. He refers to ants, in general, as “*savage, ruthless and courageous fighters*”.⁴⁵ Doctor Medford then continues, “... *they campaign, they are chronic aggressors, and they make slave labourers of the captives they don't kill.*”.⁴⁶ He finishes with, “... *even the most minute of them have an instinct and talent for industry, social organisation and savagery that makes men look feeble in comparison.*”.⁴⁷

Initially, Warner Bros. planned to set up a recruiting booth in the cinema lobbies where the movie would be projected. A press book for the movie was prepared saying, “*What would you do if (name of city) were attacked by THEM!? Prepare for any*

⁴³ Leab, “How Red Was My Valley,” 65.

⁴⁴ Jeff Smith, *Film Criticism, the Cold War, and the Blacklist: Reading the Hollywood Reds* (1st ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 256.

⁴⁵ *Them!*, directed by Gordon Douglas (Warner Bros., 1954), 00:52:04, Archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/Them.theatrical>.

⁴⁶ *Them!*, 00:52:25.

⁴⁷ *Them!*, 00:52:40.

danger by enlisting in Civil Defense today.”.⁴⁸ This idea was scrapped later. However, it supports the movie’s ideological undertones.

Another example of a sci-fi movie where one can pick out anti-Communist narratives is the 1956 picture “*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*”. The main character is a small-town doctor who discovers that people in his community are being replaced by duplicates grown from mysterious plant-like pods. The Library of Congress put the movie in the National Film Registry, a programme for the survival, conservation and increased public availability of America’s film heritage, in 1994.⁴⁹

Similar to “*Them!*”, this movie has also been analysed by many as covertly reflecting Cold War fears of the 1950s. The audience sees numerous scenes where crucial American values get shattered. For instance, during a conversation between Dr Miles J. Bennell, his ex-girlfriend Becky Driscoll, and two duplicates, one of the duplicates says that life is so much easier without love, desire, ambition and faith. Ambition and faith can be seen as core American values, especially concerning the ethos of the American Dream, a belief that individuals can achieve success through hard work, determination, and personal initiative. Both of the main characters seem repulsed by the idea of living in such a world, and Becky later says that she would rather die.⁵⁰

Moreover, when most of the inhabitants of the small city are already substituted by the duplicates, Dr Bennell and Becky Driscoll hide in Bennell’s office. A segment showing the square of the town is shown. All the duplicates can be seen marching unthinkingly towards a man with a megaphone who is shouting orders towards them, and they perform these orders with zero hesitation.⁵¹ Similarly, towards the end of the movie, when Miles and Becky try to flee the town, all the duplicates start chasing them as one.⁵² These two scenes show that the new society created by the duplicates lacks any form of free will and self-determination. Individualism, one of the core American values, is non-existent there, and the people function merely as a mass listening to orders. This loss of autonomy reflects the Cold War anxieties about the potential spread of Communism.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Film Criticism, the Cold War, and the Blacklist*, 254.

⁴⁹ Library of Congress, "Complete National Film Registry Listing," National Film Preservation Board, accessed February 24, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/>.

⁵⁰ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel (United Artists, 1956), colourised version, Archive.org, 01:00:45, <https://archive.org/details/invasion-of-the-body-snatchers-1956-colorized>.

⁵¹ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 00:56:25.

⁵² *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 01:07:10.

At the movie's end, Dr Bennell manages to escape the town. Understandably shaken after seeing most of his loved ones become emotionless duplicates, he runs into traffic, trying to stop the bypassing cars. At one point, he looks straight into the camera, shouting, “*They’re here already. You’re next!*”⁵³ By breaking the fourth wall, the line between fiction and reality is broken, forcing the audience to think about the world around them.

Influenced by the HUAC activities, McCarthyism and anti-Communist sentiment, Hollywood produced many motion pictures with ideological tones. Sometimes openly, sometimes indirectly, many of the movies from this period compared the Soviet regime with the American way of life and reflected societal fears.

⁵³ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 01:18:04.

3. The 1960s, Countering the 1950s

At the beginning of the 1960s, the political climate for McCarthyism was declining, and the HUAC was losing its prestige. Cold War fears shifted from internal subversion toward external threats, particularly the escalating arms race. Still, one can spot lingering traces of narratives similar to those in the previous decade, especially in the films from the early 1960s. However, later in the 1960s, some movies took a different approach. Opposing the previous decade, they mock the far-right narratives of the 1950s and present a different view of Cold War issues.

3.1. Lingering Traces

An example is the 1962 psychological thriller “*The Manchurian Candidate*”. The film was well-received by the audience. Including the first release and all re-releases, the movie grossed almost eight million dollars at the domestic box office.⁵⁴ It has a rating of ninety-four points out of one hundred on Metacritic in the Critic Reviews section, including ratings from the Los Angeles Times, The New Yorker, Washington Post Variety, and many others. Similar to *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Manchurian Candidate* was also chosen for preservation by the Library of Congress in 1994.⁵⁵

The movie starts with Sergeant Raymond Shaw returning from the Korean War after being held captive. Seen as a war hero, he will receive a Medal of Honor from the U.S. Congress. Whenever asked about him, the soldiers who served with him automatically describe him as the bravest, kindest person they have ever known. However, this answer seems unnatural. When Major Marco Bennett, who served with him in the war, speaks about Shaw on his own accord, he acknowledges feeling positively towards him. Yet deep down, he knows it is not true. In reality, Marco describes Shaw as an unlikeable, even repulsive, individual - one of the most unpleasant people he has ever met.⁵⁶ It soon becomes clear to the audience that Shaw and his men became victims of intense brainwashing. Major Marco, portrayed by Frank Sinatra, is the one who starts to realise that Sergeant Shaw has been programmed by secret Russian and Chinese agents as a killing machine capable of killing anyone if given the right command.

Sergeant Raymond Shaw is seen as a hero by the Americans. He was awarded the Medal of Honor and hailed as a symbol of American patriotism. This makes him immune to suspicion, thus making him the perfect sleeper agent. The contrast between his public image as a hero and the reality of him being secretly under the control of Soviet and Chinese forces touches on the fear of infiltration and internal subversion that can be observed in many movies mentioned in the chapter focusing on the 1950s.

Another essential part of the plot is Eleanor Iselin’s, Sergeant Shaw’s mother, exploitation of her son for political gains. She and her husband, Senator John Iselin,

⁵⁴ “The Manchurian Candidate (1962) - Financial Information,” The Numbers, 2024, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Manchurian-Candidate-The#tab=summary>.

⁵⁵ Library of Congress, “Complete National Film Registry Listing.”

⁵⁶ *The Manchurian Candidate*, directed by John Frankenheimer (1962; New York: United Artists), 00:40:48, accessed February 24, 2025, [Archive.org](https://archive.org).

pose as extreme anti-Communists. However, they are Communist agents cooperating with the same agents that brainwashed Shaw. To support their anti-Communist image, Senator John Iselin makes numerous declarations about him having a list of Communists within the U.S. government. He changes the declared number of people on the list several times during the movie. The character is a direct satire of Joseph McCarthy, mentioned in the *“Post-World War II Era and the 1950s”* chapter, who also claimed to have a list of Communist spies within the American government, also changed the number frequently and never actually presented the list.

By using satire to criticise figures like McCarthy (and their attempts to use paranoia and public fear for political gain) and extreme anti-Communism, the film hints at a significant shift compared to films of the 1950s, where anti-Communist sentiment was often portrayed with greater seriousness. Later in the 1960s, satirical motives became increasingly common, frequently using an absurdist approach to critique Cold War tensions and military policies.

3.2. Satire in Cold War Movies

The 1964 movie “*Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*” illustrates this switch. Coming out just two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Stanley Kubrick transformed Cold War fears into a darkly comedic critique of military and political madness.

The plot of the movie follows a deranged U.S. general. The man unilaterally orders a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. This triggers a desperate attempt by the military and political leaders to prevent a global catastrophe. These attempts end up futile as nobody succeeds in bringing down the American planes carrying the nuclear bombs. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has secretly developed a Doomsday Machine, a failsafe device designed to automatically trigger a devastating global nuclear response in the event of an attack, ensuring mutual destruction regardless of any efforts to prevent it.

The picture did quite well at the box office, making a little over five times its original budget.⁵⁷ It also received four Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay.⁵⁸ The picture is included in the United States National Film Registry, too.⁵⁹ Although the movie received great reviews and did well financially, the studio tried to distance itself from it. Co-screenwriter Terry Southern describes this in his Notes from the War Room:

In the months that followed, the studio continued to distance itself from the film. Even when *Strangelove* received the infrequent good review, it dismissed the critic as a pinko nutcase, and on at least one occasion the Columbia Pictures publicity department defended the company against the film by saying it was definitely not “anti-U.S. military” but “just a zany novelty flick which did not reflect the views of the corporation in any way.” This party line persisted, I believe, until about five years ago, when the Library of Congress announced that the film had been selected as one of the fifty greatest American films of all time, in a ceremony at which I noted Rothman in prominent attendance. Who said satire was “something that closed Wednesday in Philadelphia?”⁶⁰

Additionally, Terry Southern describes the concerns that the producers had:

⁵⁷ Box Office Mojo, “*Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*,” March 6, 2025, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl2521728513/>.

⁵⁸ Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, “Ceremonies: 1965 Oscars,” accessed March 7, 2025, <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1965>.

⁵⁹ Library of Congress, “Complete National Film Registry Listing.”

⁶⁰ David Hudson, “Notes from the War Room,” *The Criterion Collection*, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4125-notes-from-the-war-room>.

It was about this time that word began to reach us, reflecting concern as to the nature of the film in production. Was it anti-American? Or just antimilitary? And the jackpot question: Was it, in fact, anti-American to whatever extent it was antimilitary?⁶¹

Concerns that the movie would be seen as antimilitary are justified, at the least. There are numerous scenes where the military as a whole or the individual leaders are portrayed in a negative light. For instance, when the camera first shows the crew of the plane receiving the order to attack Russia, they are seen reading a *Playboy* magazine, playing cards, sleeping, or eating instead of maintaining a disciplined or vigilant demeanour.⁶² Similar hints of unprofessionalism can be seen in other scenes as well. When the attack is already in progress, the viewer is taken into a War Room, where American leaders try to devise a way to solve the situation. During the emergency meeting, General Buck Turgidson, a military advisor to the President, takes a personal phone call, shifting his focus from the agenda at hand to his personal matters.⁶³ This critique of military authority goes beyond moments of unprofessionalism. The fact that General Jack D. Ripper can initiate a nuclear attack so quickly without proper oversight exposes the illusion of control over nuclear weapons.

Focusing on individuals, they also do not help to portray the military in a better light. The previously mentioned General Buck Turgidson is portrayed as an advocate of full-scale war. He treats mass casualties as mere statistics, talking about ten to twenty million people killed as modest casualties.⁶⁴ Furthermore, his character functions as an embodiment of paranoia and distrust towards the Soviets, constantly warning that they cannot be trusted and even attacking the Soviet ambassador invited into the War Room.⁶⁵ General Buck Turgidson's anti-Communism can very well be interpreted as a satire of the excessive anti-Communism sentiment present within the society in the 1950s and visible in the movies of the 1950s. However, he is not the only character portraying this.

General Jack D. Ripper, the man who orders the attack in the first place, is depicted as a man who is not in his right mind. He states his belief that war is too important to be left to politicians, and therefore, he decides to take matters into his own

⁶¹ Hudson, "Notes from the War Room."

⁶² *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1964), 5:57.

⁶³ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 29:00.

⁶⁴ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 31:30.

⁶⁵ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 33:10, 35:06, 35:45.

hands to stop Communist infiltration, subversion and the conspiracy to corrupt American “*precious bodily fluids*” through fluoridation of water.⁶⁶

The scene towards the end of the movie, where Maj. King Kong rides the atomic bomb like a cowboy rides a wild bull, which adds to the ever-so-present absurdity of some characters in the movie.⁶⁷ The audience is witnessing the end of civilisation, yet Major Kong fulfils his last order with playful energy, apparently disconnected from the catastrophic consequences of his actions.

No less important is the depiction of the leaders of the two opposing nations. The president of the United States, Merkin Muffley, keeps a calm, rational and well-meaning demeanour throughout the film. Ultimately, though, he proves ineffective in preventing the catastrophe. His counterpart, Soviet Premier Dimitri Kissoff, is not introduced in a particularly favourable light. When the Soviet Ambassador hands the phone to Muffley with the Premier on the line, he advises the President to be careful, as he suspects that the Premier might be drunk. The subsequent phone call resembles more of a couple fighting than the leaders of two strongest nations discussing such a critical issue.⁶⁸

The film also satirises the various competitions between the two nations. The Soviet Ambassador attributes the creation of the Doomsday Machine to the Soviet Union's inability to financially manage the Arms Race, the Space Race, and the Peace Race simultaneously.⁶⁹ The first two races—the Arms Race and the Space Race—were indeed real competitions of the 1960s, often criticised for the large amount of resources spent on them. The Peace Race is a fictional creation in the film, functioning as a sharp satire. It highlights the absurdity of the Cold War competition by suggesting that even peace itself became a race.

The Soviet Ambassador then continues by saying that the deciding factor was the fear that the Americans were working on a similar device and that they were afraid of “*a Doomsday Gap*”.⁷⁰ This serves as another layer of satire. It mirrors the real-world fear of technological gaps during the Cold War, particularly in the 1960s. The U.S. and the Soviet Union were both obsessed with maintaining an edge in nuclear weapons, missile technology, and other military advancements. These gaps were often

⁶⁶ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 22:18.

⁶⁷ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 1:23:08.

⁶⁸ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 38:45.

⁶⁹ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 48:07.

⁷⁰ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 48:25.

exaggerated, fueling both paranoia and the escalation of arms. This is not the only “gap” mentioned in the movie. When it is already apparent that mutual annihilation is inevitable, it is proposed that certain individuals, specifically the U.S. elite, hide in mineshafts to survive. General Buck Turgidson immediately suggests that the Soviets are likely to react similarly and states: “*Mr. President, we must not allow a mineshaft gap!*”.⁷¹

Ultimately, *Dr Strangelove* presents an apt satire of the Cold War anxieties. It mocks the dangerous impulses that defined the era. Using humour and exaggerated characters, it tries to show both nations as trapped in a seemingly endless competition cycle fueled by paranoia and distrust.

⁷¹ *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 1:28:38.

3.3. Can Machines Doom Us?

In the same year as *Dr Strangelove*, the movie *Fail-Safe* was released. The plot resembles that of *Dr Strangelove*. So strongly, a copyright infringement lawsuit was filed by Stanley Kubrick, the director of *Dr Strangelove*, and Peter George, the author of the novel *Red Alert*, on which *Dr Strangelove* is based.⁷²

Fail-Safe also follows a tense Cold War scenario. However, in this movie, it is a technical malfunction that sends U.S. bombers on a mission to drop nuclear bombs on Moscow, triggering a potential global disaster. Overall, the movie takes a much more serious approach to the issue.

The military is portrayed in a much more positive light. Most appear professional and rational. The same can be said about the two nations' leaders, the President of the United States and the Soviet Premier. The contrast between the depiction in *Fail-Safe* and *Dr Strangelove* is well noticeable during the phone call scenes. The president speaks with the Soviet Premier quietly and deliberately compared to the unconventional phone call between the same two people in *Dr Strangelove*.⁷³

Another difference is the already mentioned cause of the attack on the Soviet Union. In *Dr Strangelove*, it is the decision of a deranged individual. In *Fail-Safe*, a faulty piece of technology triggers the disaster. The idea of technology malfunctioning and leading to significant consequences was a prominent concern in the early 1960s when the film was released. By then, the world had already witnessed incidents where technological failures could have led to serious problems.

On October 5, 1960, a U.S. radar reported the detection of dozens of Soviet missiles. Later, it was determined that the radar had mistaken the moonrise over Norway for an all-out attack on the United States. On November 24, 1961, another radar malfunctioned, and the military lost contact with it. Additionally, the phone lines appeared to be non-functional, leading to concerns about an attack. In both situations, all the forces were put on maximum alert.⁷⁴ The fear of technological failure supported by these and similar events is well reflected in *Fail-Safe*.

⁷² "Time," *Life*, May 22, 1964, 49-50. Google Books. Accessed March 18, 2025.

https://books.google.cz/books?id=oU8EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA49&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁷³ Sidney Lumet, *Fail-Safe* (New York: Columbia Pictures, 1964), 59:50.

⁷⁴ Union of Concerned Scientists. "Close Calls with Nuclear Weapons." Fact sheet, April 2015. Accessed March 18, 2025.

<https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/04/Close%20Calls%20with%20Nuclear%20Weapons.pdf>.

Also exciting is the clash between *Dr Groeteschele* and various other characters. Right at the movie's beginning, *Dr Groeteschele* has a heated argument with a character named *Foster*. *Groeteschele* says: “I say every war, including thermonuclear war, must have a winner and a loser. Which would you rather be?”. *Foster* answers: “In a nuclear war, everyone loses.”. Their argument continues with *Foster* arguing that a nuclear war would have catastrophic consequences and would cost millions of people their lives. *Dr Groeteschele* sees human lives merely as a price he is willing to pay to preserve American culture: “I would rather have an American culture survive than a Russian one.”⁷⁵

Later in the movie, as the decision-making process unfolds, *Dr Groeteschele* suggests that the United States should “finish what they started” - send an all-out attack towards Russia. He justifies this extreme measure by portraying Communism as the mortal enemy of the United States. Most leaders oppose his proposal. The loudest critic is *General Black*: “... now there is no difference between you and what you are to kill.”⁷⁶ This exchange reflects a shift between the 1950s and 1960s. *Groeteschele*’s call for a full-scale nuclear attack, rooted in the idea of stopping the spread of Communism at any cost, mirrors the stance of the 1950s. Yet, in the movie, his view is a minority opinion, much like in society during the 1960s.

In conclusion, the evolution of Cold War cinema in the 1960s reflects a broader shift in societal attitudes toward Communism, nuclear war, and military policies. As the 1960s progressed, the tone of Cold War films began to shift. The critical and satirical elements used in films like *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Manchurian Candidate* illustrate a growing disillusionment with the ideologies that fueled the Cold War. Where once anti-Communism was depicted with a sense of urgency and seriousness, by the 1960s, filmmakers began to mock and question the extreme measures taken by both sides. Ultimately, the films of the 1960s represent a more complex perspective on the Cold War, moving beyond the good versus evil narrative that characterised earlier decades.

⁷⁵ Lumet, *Fail-Safe*, 07:13.

⁷⁶ Lumet, *Fail-Safe*, 01:15:13.

4. The 1970s, Détente in Hollywood

As said in the chapter “*The 1970s, Détente in the Cold War*”, the 1970s mark a much calmer period of the conflict compared to the previous decades. Many film historians agree that this has even projected into the movie industry. Tony Shaw, an American historian focusing on the politics of film, acknowledges this in his book *Hollywood's Cold War (Culture and Politics in the Cold War and Beyond)*. At the same time, however, he points out that “*a closer look at Hollywood movies of the seventies reveals that the Cold War remained the subject of entertainment and debate at the cinema throughout the decade*”.⁷⁷

In another book, co-written by Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood (a Professor of History at the University of Vermont), called *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, they mention another principal aspect of the movies in the 1970s:

A large number of the anti-Cold War films of the early 1970s were, like some of their 1960s counterparts, complex dramas highlighting diplomatic intrigue and political skullduggery. Gone were the simple, black-and-white images of the McCarthy era, with their easily identifiable, ugly “baddies” and well-dressed, honorable “goodies.” Audiences had to work harder, both to follow the plots and to work out who was on whose side (or indeed if there were any clear-cut sides anymore).⁷⁸

This statement describes the pictures of the 1970s quite well. The deviation from the straightforward anti-Communism of the 1950s, which started in the 1960s, was even more pronounced in the 1970s. Filmmakers moved away from explicit portrayals of good versus evil and began to focus on more complex stories involving espionage and political intrigue. The influence of real-world events, such as the Watergate scandal or the failed intervention in the Vietnam War, might have contributed to this shift, leading to a more sceptical and critical view of the U.S. government.⁷⁹

Once again, a parallel between what is shown in the movies and what is present amongst the public can be observed. Trust in the government of the United States of America steadily declined throughout the 1970s after peaking in 1964. The percentage of people trusting the government in 1964 was 77%. Following the Watergate scandal and civil unrest related to the Vietnam War, trust dropped to approximately 35%. By the

⁷⁷ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War. Culture and Politics in the Cold War and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 235.

⁷⁸ Shaw, Tony, and Denise J. Youngblood. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*. Hardcover ed. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010, 31.

⁷⁹ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 10.

end of the 1970s, only around 25% of US citizens said that they trusted the government to make the right decision permanently or at least most of the time.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Pew Research Center, "Trust in Government 1958-2015," November 23, 2015, accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/11/23/1-trust-in-government-1958-2015/>.

4.1. Countering with Humour

Tony Shaw, in *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, uses the 1971 comedy *Bananas* as an example, which “illustrates nicely how Cold War cinema in fact largely went underground during this period, with filmmakers continuing to comment on the conflict, but indirectly.”⁸¹

The movie, directed by and starring Woody Allen, was well-received. Vincent Candy, an American film chief film critic for *The New York Times*, referred to it as “an indecently funny movie, on its own, and in spots—a qualification I add with some hesitation because I’m not sure that its unfunny spots are terribly important.”⁸² The plot follows Fielding Mellish, a neurotic New Yorker, who gets involved in the revolution of the fictional Latin American country of San Marcos to impress his activist girlfriend. He becomes entangled in the country’s revolutionary struggle; he witnesses the conflict between the rebels and the oppressive government of San Marco, led by General Emilio Molina Vargas, an anti-communist leader. Through a series of absurd events, he unintentionally becomes the nation’s leader, only to be put on trial upon returning to the U.S.

The movie satirises Cold War-era interventions in Latin America through several scenes. One of which shows General Emilio Molina Vargas planning to have Fielding killed by assassins dressed as rebels so that the United States back his cause, suggesting that the United States could be easily manipulated into supporting the anti-Communist leader.⁸³ In another scene, when the fight between the government and the rebels begins, the audience can see a group of American Soldiers being flown to San Marco. One of the soldiers asks: “Are we fighting for or against the government?” to which another replies: “The CIA is not taking any chances this time. Some of us are for, and some of us are going to be against them.”⁸⁴ This scene gives the impression that the United States Government is inconsistent with their interventions in other countries with not even their soldiers knowing which side they are supposed to be fighting for.

Additionally, when Fielding becomes the president of San Marco, he visits the United States disguised with a fake beard. The United States Government, however,

⁸¹ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 10.

⁸² New York Times, "Movie Review," archived April 17, 2014, accessed March 19, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140417111639/http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B00E4DA1639E43BBC4151DFB266838A669EDE>.

⁸³ Woody Allen, *Bananas* (United Artists, 1971), 38:20, accessed March 19, 2025, Dailymotion, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7z6i05>.

⁸⁴ Allen, *Bananas*, 55:48.

uncovers his real identity and links him to his activist past. In one particular scene showing a meeting of US officials, one of them says, addressing Fielding: “*He has a history of subversive acts, demonstrations and peace marches. This man is attempting the overthrow of the United States government from without and within.*”⁸⁵ Fielding is then arrested and put on trial. The court hearing, however, is highly dubious. Numerous witnesses - who have not been introduced earlier in the film and thus lack credibility - provide incriminating statements against Fielding. When one witness eventually offers a favourable testimony, the judge manipulates it, making it unfavourable.⁸⁶ This portrayal of the trial can be compared to the so-called "witch hunts" and the subsequent trials of artists initiated by the HUAC in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

To summarise, *Bananas* is consistent with Tony Shaw’s observation that Cold War-era commentary often went underground during this period. The film doesn’t openly blame one side or the other. It uses satire to highlight the absurdities of the revolutionary movement and U.S. interventionism. Through humour, *Bananas* mocks not only the characters within the film but also the real-world political dynamics they represent, leaving the audience to interpret its underlying message.

⁸⁵ Allen, *Bananas*, 1:05:42.

⁸⁶ Allen, *Bananas*, 1:08:10.

4.2. Was “The Enemy” Always Here?

As hinted, political and espionage thrillers were quite popular in the 1970s. Tony Shaw calls them “*liberal conspiracy thrillers*” and presents a list of some examples as follows: *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973), *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), *All the President’s Men* (Pakula, 1976), and *Twilight’s Last Gleaming* (Robert Aldrich, 1977).⁸⁷

Another example is the 1975 thriller *Three Days of the Condor*, directed by Sydney Pollack. Tony Shaw calls it “*the first major political thriller to be released in the wake of the Watergate scandal*”.

From the critics, it received mixed reviews. Vincent Canby wrote for *The New York Times*:

Three Days of the Condor [...] is a good-looking, entertaining suspense film that is most effective when it's being most conventional, working variations on obligatory sequences of pursuit and flight and on those sudden revelations that can reverse the roles of cat and mouse.⁸⁸

At the same time, however, he also states: “*...the film is no match for stories that have appeared in your local newspaper. [...] and, if I understood it correctly, it's never as horrifying as the real thing.*”⁸⁹ This statement suggests that the reality might have been even worse than it is showed in the movie.

The magazine *Variety* called the movie “*basically a B*”, which has been elevated in form⁹⁰, while the movie critic Roger Ebert said: “*Three Days of the Condor is a well-made thriller, tense and involving, and the scary thing, in these months after Watergate, is that it's all too believable.*”⁹¹

Despite the mixed reviews, the movie did well financially, making almost seven and a half million US dollars more than its budget.⁹²

⁸⁷ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 31.

⁸⁸ Vincent Canby, “Three Days of the Condor,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1975, archived March 9, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140309045028/http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173CE577BC4D51DFBF66838E669EDE>.

⁸⁹ Canby, “Three Days of the Condor.”

⁹⁰ “Three Days of the Condor,” *Variety*, July 1, 1974, archived September 15, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200915003558/https://variety.com/1974/film/reviews/three-days-of-the-condor-1200423315/>.

⁹¹ Roger Ebert, “Three Days of the Condor,” *RogerEbert.com*, January 1, 1975, archived December 31, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201231141654/https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/three-days-of-the-condor-1975>.

⁹² IMDbPro, *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), accessed March 20, 2025, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0073802/boxoffice>.

Three Days of the Condor follows Joe Turner (Robert Redford), a CIA low-level analyst who discovers a secret operation. Turner reports this discovery. Later, his colleagues are murdered by a professional hit squad. Turner goes on the run. He realises that the CIA itself may be involved. Turner uncovers a deeper conspiracy within the very agency he is employed by. The film explores themes of government secrecy, paranoia, and the blurred lines between protecting national security and unethical covert operations.

The fact that the CIA plays the role of the antagonist in this movie represents the shift from portraying external threats in early Cold War films to focusing on internal conspiracies, suggesting that the danger is within the United States.

Distrust towards the CIA progressively develops throughout the film, with numerous scenes aiding this sentiment. A bit over ten minutes after the start of the movie, professional hitmen attack the office where Joe Turner works, killing all his colleagues in cold blood while Turner is away buying lunch.⁹³ This early scene sets the tone for the rest of the film, building a sense of paranoia. It also introduces the CIA as a dangerous entity, which makes the audience question just how far it is willing to go to protect its secrets and interests.

Throughout the film, a sense of isolation stems from the individual vs. the system setting. Turner has to work alone most of the time, only sometimes with the help of Kathy, a civilian who becomes involved in the situation almost by chance. In opposition to Turner are the professional hitmen sent to eliminate him and the cold and ominous CIA. Together, they create a potent force seemingly unbeatable by a lone individual.

At the movie's end, the final verbal confrontation between Turner and the leader of the New York division of the CIA, Higgins, can be seen as a clash of realism and idealism. Higgins defends the CIA by saying that the ends justify the means. Turner argues that these actions cost seven people their lives.⁹⁴ Once again, the CIA is put in a negative light, seeming as a ruthless institution willing to sacrifice individuals for the sake of political and economic gains.

In *Three Days of the Condor*, the traditional Cold War narrative of an external Communist threat is replaced by an internal enemy - the CIA. Rather than portraying

⁹³ Sydney Pollack, *Three Days of the Condor* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1975), 13:00.

⁹⁴ Pollack, *Three Days of the Condor*, 1:52:00.

the struggle as one between nations or ideologies, the film suggests that the danger to liberty lies within the institutions meant to protect it.

To continue, Tony Shaw and Denise Youngblood write about what they call “a short-term national shift to the left”, stating that it was encouraged by “*Vietnam and Watergate imbroglios*”.⁹⁵ Mentioning this shift for the first time in the book *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, they use the already analysed 1971 comedy *Bananas* as an example.⁹⁶

Later, when they mention the shift again, they exemplify it with the 1979 thriller *The China Syndrome*.⁹⁷ The motion picture, directed by James Bridge, starred the actress Jane Fonda, who helped fund the movie through her company, IPC Films, as a part of her long-term campaign to expose economic and corporate power elites in the United States.⁹⁸

Upon the film's release, it received mostly positive reviews. The previously cited movie critic Roger Ebert said: “*The China Syndrome is a terrific thriller that incidentally raises the most unsettling questions about how safe nuclear power plants really are. [...] the movie is, above all, entertainment: well-acted, well-crafted, scary as hell.*”⁹⁹

Financially, the movie was a success. Its all-time box office earnings are more than eight times higher than its budget.¹⁰⁰

In *The China Syndrome*, TV reporter Kimberly Wells, portrayed by Fonda, and her cameraman Richard Adams witness a near-meltdown at the Ventana Nuclear Power Plant. When they try to report on it, their footage is suppressed. Meanwhile, engineer Jack Godell uncovers falsified safety reports and warns of the catastrophic risk it could have, but corporate officials attempt to silence him, Kimberly and Richard. Jack then takes control of the plant's control room to expose the truth on live television, but security forces kill him. The live feed gets cut off, so the public cannot see what is happening in the power plant.

⁹⁵ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 10

⁹⁶ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 10

⁹⁷ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 32

⁹⁸ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 32

⁹⁹ Roger Ebert, “The China Syndrome,” *RogerEbert.com*, March 16, 1979, archived January 20, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210120185725/https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-china-syndrome-1979>.

¹⁰⁰ IMDb Pro. *The China Syndrome - Box Office*. Accessed March 21, 2025. <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0078966/boxoffice>.

Consistent with the aim of the previously mentioned campaign led by Fonda and her company, the movie's antagonist is the large corporation which owns the power plant. Throughout the film, several instances portray the corporation negatively. For example, when Kimberly Wells returns from the power plant after witnessing the accident and tells her colleagues about it, they ask her why she did not call them immediately. She replies, "*We didn't want to risk talking on the mobile phone. You never know who might be listening.*".¹⁰¹ By this utterance, she hints at the possibility that the corporation could gain access to their private communications. The corporation then released a public statement inconsistent with what Wells and her colleagues had seen. They believe that "*an unanticipated transient*", as the corporation called the accident, is a massive understatement of what really happened.¹⁰² This demonstrates their prioritisation of protecting their image and financial interests over the truth and highlights their willingness to deceive the public.

Progressively, the corporation takes on the role of an entity willing to do anything to maintain its good name and protect its financial interests. When Well's colleague, Hector Salas, is on his way to a court hearing with incriminating evidence against the corporation, he is attacked and rammed off the road. He survives, but the evidence is stolen.¹⁰³ It is more than evident that the corporation is behind this attack. Jack Godell, the engineer from the power plant who decides to turn on his employer, is also followed while trying to get to the court hearing, barely escaping a fate similar to that of Hector.¹⁰⁴

In conclusion, *The China Syndrome* serves as a critique of corporate power and corruption. It depicts the corporation's relentless efforts to suppress the truth and protect its financial interests. The film suggests how powerful entities will maintain control and avoid accountability.

While it was possible to pinpoint individual scenes in the movies of previous decades that directly addressed political or social issues, the films of the 1970s often present a broader reflection of the era's anxieties and cultural shifts. Rather than relying on singular, isolated moments, these films tend to embody the overall mood and concerns of the time - such as disillusionment with government, the questioning of authority, and the growing distrust of powerful institutions.

¹⁰¹ *The China Syndrome*. Directed by James Bridges. 1979; Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1979, 22:20.

¹⁰² *The China Syndrome*, 27:30.

¹⁰³ *The China Syndrome*, 1:20:40.

¹⁰⁴ *The China Syndrome*, 1:23:00, 1:23:20, 1:24:15.

5. The 1980s, Hollywood's Last Stand Against Communism

With the escalation of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1980s, American cinema once again assumed the role of a powerful medium for reflecting and shaping public perceptions of this geopolitical struggle.

The previous chapter noted that during the 1970s, both the nation and the film industry shifted toward the left of the political spectrum. However, with the election of the conservative Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the country moved in the opposite direction. Regarding this switch, Cass Sunstein, an American legal scholar, notes: “*What was then in the centre is now on the left; what was then in the far right is now in the centre; what was then on the left now no longer exists.*”¹⁰⁵

In the book *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, editor Stephen Prince compiles original studies from ten respected scholars in the field. In the introduction, he says that Ronald Reagan “*invoked the spectre and fear of Soviet expansion, in the process returning the country to the hard-line anti-Communism of the 1950s*”.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, some of the movies of the 1980s can resemble their 1950s counterparts in how they portray America as superior to its enemies. Some years before, filmmakers would probably be more careful about such depiction of the military because of the disillusionment caused by the result of the Vietnam War. As Ronald Reagan came to power, this sentiment became much more prevalent. However, it was not entirely gone.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Prince, ed., *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 12.

¹⁰⁶ Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 12.

5.1. Taking Pride Back

The 1986 blockbuster *Top Gun* can be used as an example. *Top Gun* was a huge financial success as it became the highest-grossing film of 1986.¹⁰⁷ From movie critics, the reviews were mixed. For instance, Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* gave the movie three stars out of four¹⁰⁸, while Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* gave it only two point five out of four, praising its dogfight scenes but advising the audience to “look out for the scenes where the people talk to one another.”¹⁰⁹, expressing his opinion that the movie

Upon its release, movie critics were hesitant to attribute any formulaic meaning to the movie.¹¹⁰ Leger Grindon, a professor of film studies, highlights an interesting parallel. The protagonist, Maverick, is a highly skilled Navy pilot, yet he is burdened by the mystery surrounding his father’s death in the Vietnam War, which hinders his confidence. Only after discovering that his father died heroically is he able to reach his full potential. Grindon connects this to the broader sentiment in America at the time - a nation fighting with the psychological aftermath of its failure in Vietnam:

The young man’s triumph on the fighting front, cooperating with his fellow fliers, is a vindication for the earlier tragedy in Vietnam. Banishing the criticism of the Vietnam War and promoting a belligerent nationalism was central to the ideology of this film.¹¹¹

Overall, the movie tries to show the military in a positive light. It repeatedly emphasises, both directly and indirectly, that the military exists to serve the people of the United States - the civilians and taxpayers.¹¹² A military recruitment poster is visible on the wall at one point in the movie. The poster features the slogan: “Navy. It’s not just a job. It’s an adventure”¹¹³, reinforcing the film’s favourable depiction of military service.

¹⁰⁷ “*Top Gun* - Weekly Box Office,” Box Office Mojo, archived June 22, 2019, Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190622143410/https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&iid=topgun.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Gene Siskel, “Cruise’s ‘Top Gun’ Suffers from Story Stall,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1986, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/chicago-tribune-gene-siskel-top-gun-1/104389089/>.

¹⁰⁹ Roger Ebert, “*Top Gun*,” *RogerEbert.com*, May 16, 1986, Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160420095448/http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/top-gun-1986>

¹¹⁰ Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 149.

¹¹¹ Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 149.

¹¹² *Top Gun*, directed by Tony Scott (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1986), 13:59, 16:55.

¹¹³ *Top Gun*, 57:29.

Throughout the picture, it is occasionally admitted that the MiG 28s flown by “the enemy” are somehow better than the United States F-14s. During the first training exercise in the TOPGUN program, the pilots are told that the jets they are against are “*smaller, faster and more manoeuvrable, just like the enemy MiGs*”.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the mentioned advantages of the enemy technology are discarded by the individual skills of the pilots and their superior training. This supports the film’s intended message that it is the U.S. military's discipline and skill that ultimately lead to success, as shown in the final fight scene of the movie.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ *Top Gun*, 28:37.

¹¹⁵ *Top Gun*, 1:30:50.

5.2. But Should We Be Proud?

The war film *Platoon* was released in the same year as *Top Gun*, taking a drastically different look at the military. While *Top Gun* presents an idealised and heroic vision of the military, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* takes a vastly different approach, offering a raw and unfiltered depiction of the Vietnam War.

The plot follows Chris Taylor, a young American who enlists in the Vietnam War. Assigned to Bravo Company, he quickly loses enthusiasm due to harsh conditions and relentless enemy attacks. The platoon is divided between two sergeants, Elias and Barnes. Their growing conflict escalates after a violent raid on a Vietnamese village. Later, Barnes murders Elias, framing it as an enemy ambush. Taylor knows the truth. During a massive assault, the platoon is devastated. Wounded Taylor confronts Barnes and executes him. Evacuated from the battlefield, he reflects on how the war has permanently changed him, believing he must rebuild himself after witnessing its horrors.¹¹⁶

Similarly to *Top Gun*, *Platoon* was a financial success, making over one hundred and thirty million dollars compared to its small budget of six million dollars.¹¹⁷ Additionally, it received seven Academy Awards and won four at The 59th Academy Awards in 1987.¹¹⁸

However, aside from their release year and financial success, these two films share little in common. Each takes a distinctly different approach to portraying the military and war. Professor Leger Grindon says: "*Platoon expresses an alternative perspective [to Top Gun].*"¹¹⁹ and:

Platoon questions the ethos of a heroic military, characterises divisive social values, and challenges a ruthless pragmatism often disguised behind the slogans of anticommunism. As a result, *Platoon* forcefully contests the politics of *Top Gun*, *Heartbreak Ridge*, and Ronald Reagan.¹²⁰

This contrast between *Top Gun* and *Platoon* illustrates that unlike the 1950s - when the film industry was primarily restricted to a single ideological perspective due to the political climate - it was possible in the 1980s to present glorified and critical portrayals of the military and war on the big screen.

¹¹⁶ *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone (Orion Pictures, 1986)

¹¹⁷ "*Platoon*," IMDb, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091763/>.

¹¹⁸ "*The 59th Academy Awards Memorable Moments*." Oscars.org. Accessed March 25, 2025. <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1987/memorable-moments>.

¹¹⁹ Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 149.

¹²⁰ Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 150.

5.3. Cold War as a Sport

Not all movies from the 1980s focus on war or the military, yet they still manage to depict the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. One such film is *Rocky IV*, which shifts the battleground from the battlefield to the boxing ring.

In the 1985 sports drama film, Soviet boxer Ivan Drago arrives in the U.S. to try and prove Soviet superiority. Apollo Creed challenges him but is fatally beaten in the ring. Seeking revenge, Rocky travels to the Soviet Union to fight Drago.

Less than a minute into the film, the audience is presented with a striking visual: two boxing gloves - one decorated with the American flag, the other with the Soviet emblem - colliding in a dramatic explosion.¹²¹ This powerful image sets the stage for a cinematic showdown that transcends sports, symbolising the larger ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

A key element of *Rocky IV* is the stark contrast between Rocky Balboa and Ivan Drago, which goes beyond their fighting styles. Balboa is depicted as a father figure to his son¹²², an attentive husband¹²³ and a great friend¹²⁴. Rocky's speech is filled with emotion, personal reflection, and even moments of wisdom, making him appear almost intellectual in contrast to his opponent.¹²⁵ Conversely, Ivan Drago is pictured as a cold-blooded fighting machine, rarely speaking. When Drago speaks, he sounds cold and robotic, reinforcing his portrayal as a nearly inhuman, Soviet-engineered fighter.¹²⁶

One rare occasion when the character of Ivan Drago shows at least a hint of emotion is before the movie's first fight against Apollo Creed, as he appears overwhelmed by the American way of introducing the battle. As *Living in America* plays, Apollo Creed enters the ring, surrounded by a dazzling display of lights and fireworks, dressed in a sequined Uncle Sam outfit. The entire event is a celebration of entertainment, individualism, and national pride.¹²⁷

In stark contrast, the introduction to Rocky's fight against Drago in Moscow is much less extravagant, and the atmosphere is different. The Soviet crowd is uniform

¹²¹ *Rocky IV*, directed by Sylvester Stallone (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1985), 0:49.

¹²² *Rocky IV*, 3:39, 9:41, 44:14.

¹²³ *Rocky IV*, 6:14.

¹²⁴ *Rocky IV*, 14:00, 19:41.

¹²⁵ *Rocky IV*, 14:17, 32:30, 38:21, 1:21:25.

¹²⁶ *Rocky IV*, 27:23, 31:37, 32:09.

¹²⁷ *Rocky IV*, 22:27.

and controlled, waving red flags in unison, emphasising collective strength over individual expression.¹²⁸

Another instance highlighting the contrast between individualism and collectivism is seen in the training scenes of Rocky and Ivan.¹²⁹ Rocky Balboa trains mainly alone, supported only by a close-knit group. His training is raw and personal, emphasising his determination and individual strength. In contrast, Ivan is surrounded by a large, organised team of experts who manage and monitor his every move. His training is highly structured, using advanced technology, showcasing collective effort's power.

During the final fight, the crowd is initially silent and cold, even referred to as the most hostile crowd they have ever seen by the commentators.¹³⁰ Then, the atmosphere begins to warm up and give Rocky a standing ovation after he wins. This signals the shift in sentiment and the breaking down barriers between the two fighters and their respective countries.

Rocky then delivers his iconic victory speech. He acknowledges the common humanity shared between the American and Soviet people despite their political differences. His words can be seen as a plea for peace and mutual understanding between the two nations, saying that if he can change and the people around him can change, then there's hope for the world to change.¹³¹

The sentiment of mutual understanding and easing tensions was present in many other movies of the 1980s. Stephen Prince says: "*A larger group of films focused in a less combative way on U.S.-Soviet relations.*". He provides a list of such films, which includes: *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), *Spies Like Us* (1985), *White Nights* (1985), *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985), *Russkies* (1987), *The Fourth Protocol* (1987), *Little Nikita* (1988), and *The Package* (1989).¹³²

In the 1980s, American cinema was a powerful tool for depicting the final phase of the Cold War. Some films painted the United States as strong and victorious, reinforcing patriotic messages. Others took a more critical approach, questioning the realities of war and the cost of blind nationalism. Unlike the 1950s, when Hollywood largely followed one ideological direction, the 1980s allowed for a mix of perspectives.

¹²⁸ *Rocky IV*, 1:04:16.

¹²⁹ *Rocky IV*, 53:06.

¹³⁰ *Rocky IV*, 1:07:20.

¹³¹ *Rocky IV*, 1:21:25.

¹³² Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, 12.

This period reflected the broader shifts in American society, from Reagan-era conservatism to a growing desire for peace as the Cold War neared its end.

Conclusion

The depiction of the Cold War in American cinematography changed significantly throughout the decades of the conflict. Very often, it was consistent with what was happening in the world, in America or its society.

The late 1940s and the 1950s marked a transformation of the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union for the worse. In parallel, Hollywood mirrored this shift. The HUAC investigated alleged communist influence in film, and the artists were motivated to produce works containing anti-Communist narratives.

The cultural shift in the 1960s, mainly through the counterculture movement, saw increasing opposition to the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons. This was a direct response to the political climate, with the Baby Boom generation becoming vocal in advocating for peace. This cultural shift was expressed in films that reflected and critiqued Cold War tensions.

In the 1970s, the *Détente* period established a trend resulting in fewer films with direct Cold War narratives. Instead, filmmakers focused on portrayals reflecting the complex political atmosphere of the time within The United States.

With the end of *Détente* at the beginning of the 1980s, tensions started rising again, and with it came the presence of Cold War narratives within American cinematography. However, as it became clear that the Cold War was nearing its end, so did some of the movies depict the possibility of The United States and The Soviet Union cooperating and coexisting in peace.

This thesis has demonstrated that American films from the Cold War era offer a valuable supplementary source through which we can learn about the period. The films analysed throughout this work reflect the evolving political climate and cultural shifts, often aligning with the real-world events and sentiments of the time. By examining how filmmakers depicted the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and the social and political undercurrents of the period, it becomes evident that these cinematic representations serve as both historical documents and cultural commentary, enriching our understanding of the Cold War.

Furthermore, I investigated how significant historical events, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the arms race, were reflected in American films' narratives, characters, and themes. This exploration highlighted how

the film was used as a medium to engage with and respond to significant geopolitical events of the Cold War.

Resumé

Studená válka vznikla v důsledku rostoucího napětí a ideologických rozdílů mezi kapitalistickým Západem a komunistickým Východem po skončení druhé světové války. Bývalí spojenci – USA, Spojené království a SSSR – se rozdělili, což vedlo k desetiletím politické a vojenské rivality.

Kromě historických a politických studií lze studenou válku pochopit i skrze filmovou tvorbu. Americká kinematografie nejen reflektovala tehdejší atmosféru, ale také formovala veřejné mínění o konfliktu, ideologiích a klíčových událostech.

Tato práce se zaměřuje na analýzu amerických filmů v kontextu studené války. Nejprve představuje politické a společenské dění v USA v jednotlivých dekadách, které ovlivnilo filmovou produkci. Poté zkoumá konkrétní filmy a jejich zobrazení studené války, včetně reflexe historických událostí a ideologických střetů.

Hlavní cíle práce jsou, analyzovat, jak americké filmy zobrazovaly studenou válku a její klíčové momenty. Zkoumat, jak kinematografie ovlivňovala veřejné mínění o Sovětském svazu, komunismu a kapitalismu. Identifikovat vliv historických událostí na filmové příběhy a postavy. Sledovat proměnu ideologických témat ve filmové tvorbě v průběhu studené války. Posoudit roli filmu jako historického pramene a jeho vliv na interpretaci studené války.

Práce tak poskytuje komplexní pohled na vztah mezi historií a kinematografií a ukazuje, jak Hollywood utvářel obraz studené války ve společnosti.

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