

Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War*. London: IB Tauris, 2006, 280 pp.

#### ROBERT MURPHY

IB Tauris has finally deemed Tony Shaw's *British Cinema and the Cold War* fit for a wider readership five years after it came out in hardback. Fortunately, nothing has happened to make his study less useful or relevant. Apart from disappointingly murky stills, which look as if they have been deliberately drabbed down by some publishing apparatchik, this is a surprisingly approachable volume, written clearly and undogmatically, full of generous and perceptive analyses of (sometimes) unjustly forgotten films. *State Secret* (1950), for example, Sidney Gilliat's complex and intelligent thriller about a doctor who finds it is impossible to maintain his medical neutrality in a Central European country moving towards totalitarianism; the Boultings' *Seven Days to Noon* (1950), boldly extending sympathy to a disturbed scientist driven to terrorism and madness in his bid to block the road to nuclear Armageddon; and Carol Reed's *The Man Between* (1953), a flawed masterpiece set in Berlin before the wall went up.

Shaw covers his subject comprehensively. He diligently tracks down rare films set in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution – Maurice Sandground's *The Land of Tomorrow* (1919) and Harold Shaw's *The Land of Mystery* (1920) – and finds condemnations of socialism in Dinah Shurey's patriotic melodrama *The Last Post* (1929) and Randall Faye's low-budget comedies *Hyde Park* (1934) and *If I Were Rich* (1936). He explores the brief wartime honeymoon when the Red Army was the epitome of courage, the Russian people our staunch allies against Hitler, and Laurence Olivier starred as the Russian engineer Ivan Kouznetsoff in Anthony Asquith's *The Demi-Paradise* (1943). Shaw points out that this and other positive representations of Russians were an anomaly and that

British cinema was soon substituting communists for Nazis as the villains of low-budget espionage thrillers such as *Paul Temple's Triumph* (1950).

Not that Britain ever suffered the rabid anticommunism perpetrated by Senator McCarthy and the HUAC in the USA. Britain's mildly left-of-centre consensus never seemed threatened by an enemy within: the Communist Party of Great Britain, unlike its French and Italian counterparts, was a minor irritant rather than a serious political contender, and though the defection of Burgess, Maclean and eventually Philby was an embarrassment, they were leftovers from the 1930s rather than a fresh new danger. Indeed Britain was sufficiently secure to extend a (lukewarm) welcome to refugees from HUAC and allow them to work in the British film industry. Restrictions on their opportunities came less from the security services than from distributors wary of how credits for blacklisted writers and directors might damage a film's commercial prospects in the USA. Shaw concentrates on Joseph Losey, disinterring the anti-McCarthyite subtext of *The Intimate Stranger* (1955) and *Blind Date* (1959) and presenting *The Damned* (1961) as one of the few British films to attack government secrecy over nuclear issues and point to the danger this posed to British democracy and society.

Shaw's most scholarly chapter focuses on the film versions of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Rumours of CIA involvement have long been in circulation but Shaw provides concrete evidence, asserting that 'The origins of the animated feature-length film of *Animal Farm* lie within the American secret services' (p. 93), and meticulously charting the activities of the OPC (a spin-off of the CIA), the Psychological Warfare Workshop, and the (CIA-funded) British Society for Cultural Freedom in helping Louis de Rochement obtain the rights from Sonia Blair (who was enticed by the promise of a meeting with Clark Gable) and steering British-based animators John Halas and Joy Batchelor towards a message of simple-minded anticommunism. Halas and Batchelor proved to be unwilling stooges, and even with an upbeat ending the film retains its Orwellian satirical edge. Not so Michael Anderson's *1984*, which, despite hefty financial backing from the US Information Agency, was unenthusiastically received by film critics and performed poorly at the box office.

The Orwell adaptations are central to this study, but Shaw rounds up more than the usual suspects. He devotes a chapter to films about industrial relations, beginning with *Chance of a Lifetime* (1949), a mildly leftwing film which provoked Sir Godfrey Ince, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour, to splutter that 'This film can do nothing but harm to the cause of greater friendliness and understanding between management and labour' (p. 142). Ironically, the government, concerned at the way independent producers suffered at the hands of the Rank-ABPC duopoly, insisted that it be given a circuit release; it was the sullen exhibitors who did their best to bury it. Shaw is exceptionally good at filling in the political context around these films. *The Angry Silence* (1960), with its dumb shop steward and manipulative communist

agitator, is set against the scandal of communist infiltration in the Electrical Trades Union and concern over the spread of 'wildcat' strikes.

Another chapter is devoted to science fiction allegories, a disappointingly meagre bunch beyond the spin-offs from Nigel Kneale's BBC Television *Quatermass* serials. Shaw sandwiches them between films dealing with the possibility of nuclear explosion and those showing its likely consequences. This leads to fruitful juxtapositions – Stanley Kubrick's unique black comedy *Dr Strangelove* (1964) jostles against *The Mouse that Roared* (Jack Arnold, 1959), a lighter intervention into Cold War politics which also stars Peter Sellers in multiple roles. *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), Val Guest's fanciful but intriguing Fleet Street epic about the likelihood of nuclear testing destroying the world, neatly complements Peter Watkins' grim television film *The War Game* (1965), allowed a limited theatrical release though considered too disturbing for the television audience until 1985. A chapter on 'Deviants and misfits' corrals together a diverse bunch of films ranging from Victor Saville's openly anticommunist *Conspirator* (1949) and Roy Boulting's equally hysterical *High Treason* (1950) to Robert Tronson's impressively realistic *Ring of Spies* (1963) and the witty adaptation of Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (Sidney Furie, 1965), with Michael Caine's agent's loyalties determined as much by the class war as the Cold War.

Each chapter offers nuggets of valuable information. 'And never the twain shall meet' concentrates on films showing (generally in the bleakest terms) conditions of life behind the Iron Curtain and contrasts them with Russian and East European films purporting to show 'the sunshine of socialism'. Peter Glenville's *The Prisoner* (1955) is paralleled with a discussion of the persecution and trial of Cardinal Mindszenty, the staunchly anticommunist Primate of Hungary on whom Alec Guinness's anonymous Cardinal is obviously based. *The Man Between* (Carol Reed, 1953) had to be shot on location in West Berlin because the communist authorities, particularly sensitive over the recent death of Stalin, were unhappy about the representations of Russians in Reed's *The Third Man* four years earlier. Shortly before the film was released, striking East Berlin construction workers 'sparked the first recognisable uprising against communist rule in Eastern Europe' (p. 74). Shaw interviews Stanley Forman and corresponds with Charles Cooper, two prominent leftwing film distributors, but inexplicably he only discusses the most propagandist communist imports, none of them later than *Moscow and Muscovites* in 1957. He mentions the Khrushchev thaw but ignores the films that took advantage of it to break with stifling orthodoxy and reach out to an international audience. Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1958; Andrzej Wajda's trilogy *A Generation* (1954), *Kanal* (1957) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), along with the two parts of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958) and Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962), reached beyond leftwing circles to the wider audience of the film society

movement, whose members even Senator McCarthy would not have mistaken for communists. All these films – precursors of a wave of fresh, innovative cinema from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the mid 1960s – were shown on television in the early 1960s and, although certainly not fostering communism, were hugely influential in shedding light on life behind the Iron Curtain.

As the Cold War period recedes into history, it comes to seem increasingly bizarre. The basic unreality of a world divided between capitalism and communism was only possible to sustain, while the populations of the two halves were kept in ignorance of each other. One might expect cinema to play an essential role in perpetuating myths and propagating falsehoods, but it could also question and illuminate. Shaw insists that although the crude Red-baiting of Hollywood films like *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (Gordon Douglas, 1951) had few British equivalents, the substantial number of films that did deal with Cold War themes must have had some impact on the British cinemagoers ‘feeding suspicions and helping to produce what we can now judge to be an exaggerated fear among the public of an enemy within’ (p. 62). He argues his case well, but there is a distinct bias.

The thoroughness and integrity of Shaw’s research guarantee that he allows space for – indeed in the case of *Dr Strangelove*, *The Damned* and several other films enthusiastically endorses – the growing number of films that dispute the Cold War line. But he nonetheless downplays their influence. The Carol Reed/Graham Greene collaboration *Our Man in Havana* (1959), which makes fun of Cold War politics and was shot in Cuba with the approval of the Castro government, was ‘only a modest commercial success’ (p. 177), so presumably had little influence on public opinion; but the considerably less successful *1984* – despite its ‘generally poor quality and low-budget appearance’ – ‘was still of some value to Western propagandists’ (p. 113). *The Ipcress File* ‘suggested that the Cold War fight against the enemy within had become a complex drudge’ (p. 62), but like the even more cynical adaptation of John Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (Martin Ritt, 1965), it is folded into the conformist mainstream because, though critical of the management of the secret services, it does not question the need for their continued existence.

With exemplary Cold War rigidity, Shaw refuses to see the writing on the wall. He feeds off outdated myths about the 1950s, refusing to acknowledge the seething discontents beneath their placid surface, and he makes little attempt to come to terms with the ‘cultural revolution’ of the 1960s. He fails to realize that a Cinematograph Exhibitors Association appeal to make ‘films of family entertainment value’ in 1960 fell on deaf ears (British cinema of the 1960s can be accused of all sorts of vices, but a concentration on family values is not one of them). And his discussion of British New Wave films reworks John Hill’s pessimistic Marxist conclusions from *Sex, Class and Realism*<sup>1</sup> to support his thesis that there was no real challenge to conservative orthodoxy.

1 John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1996).

Part of the problem is that by stopping abruptly in 1965 Shaw is able to shut his eyes to what happened in the late 1960s when all hell broke loose and, for young people at least, the Cold War became a meaningless concept. It does not say much for the effectiveness of twenty years of Cold War propaganda that Prime Minister Harold Wilson felt unable to send troops to support the Americans fighting what they considered a pivotal war against communism in South East Asia. Even without direct British involvement, massive demonstrations were held in London and the Trotskyist groups that led them were as contemptuous of Soviet style communism as they were of western imperialism. Things did change rapidly between 1965 and 1968, but even so it is difficult to square such anti-establishment radicalism with the picture Shaw draws of a sheep-like populace moulded into docile conformity by subtle government propaganda. Shaw's book is an invaluable guide to a previously ignored and extremely interesting area of British cinema, but now that our own supposedly more sceptical and media-savvy society has allowed itself to be drawn into a disastrous war on the basis of evidence so amateurishly fabricated as to make a KGB agent blush, the conclusions he draws look unsustainably smug.