

## Inside the Cold War: From Anxiety to Protest. Six American Films, 1950-1964



Marin Headlands Nike Missile Base, North of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, 1954-1974

The subject of this course is American films of the early Cold War. What do we mean by “the Cold War”? It was the long struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) for international power and influence after World War II. The conflict was the most important event of the post-war period--and the most dangerous, for both sides were soon armed with terrible atomic weapons. Luckily it never came to a shooting war. But the struggle for power lasted for decades, from 1945 to 1991. The Cold War ended with the dissolution of the USSR. But now it seems to have returned.

The Cold War naturally had an enormous impact on American culture—including, naturally, on Hollywood films. Wars create anxiety. Cold War anxieties and especially the threat of nuclear war were major experiences of the childhood and adolescence of most people taking this course. There were nuclear air-raid drills in grammar schools: remember? There was even a Nike missile base in the beautiful Marin Headlands, to defend San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge from an attack by Soviet nuclear-armed bombers. (It's pictured above.) And in Hollywood, because communist ideology was the basis of Soviet legitimacy and Soviet expansionism, the result of the Cold War was a special trauma: the purge of many leftist (and some real communist) film-makers.

The first four of our six films deal with these deep American Cold War *anxieties*.

We start off with a real shocker from 1959: *On the Beach* (dir. Stanley Kramer, starring Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner). Planet-destroying nuclear war and human extinction.

Then--in the chronological order in which these films were made--we will see:

*My Son John* (1952; dir. Leo McCarey; starring Helen Hayes and Robert Walker). The threat of internal Communist subversion.

*Strategic Air Command* (1955, dir. Anthony Mann, starring James Stewart and June Allyson) The tensions involved in constant "preparedness." How do you to keep on a war footing when there is no war? Intended as Air Force propaganda, it was eventually banned at some SAC bases.

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; dir. Don Siegel, starring Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter). The threat of suburban totalitarianism: your neighbors turned into bland pod-people.

Then we will see two films of growing protest against the Cold War situation, from the early 1960's:

*The Manchurian Candidate* (1962; dir. John Frankenheimer, starring Laurence Harvey, Frank Sinatra, and Janet Leigh). A satire on Communist "brainwashing" and fears of internal subversion. To be compared with *My Son John* (a decade earlier)

*Dr Strangelove* (1964, dir. Stanley Kubrick, starring Peter Sellers and Sterling Hayden). A satire on the threat of atomic war. To be compared with both *Strategic Air Command* and the deadly-serious *On the Beach*.

The course lasts six sessions; one session for each film. There's no required reading--the films themselves are the text--but an optional reading list will be provided people. Participants in the course see each film at their own convenience before we meet together to discuss it. All films are available for free or for only little cost on platforms online. The course discussion meetings will be zoom sessions. They will consist of a 40 minute lecture given by me on the background to each film; then a five minute break; and then we will have a 45 minute period of discussion by the class of this week's film. It should be illuminating!

The course meets on Wednesdays at noon, starting Wednesday September 20.

