



J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War

By John Sbardellati

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Between 1942 and 1958, J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted a sweeping and sustained investigation of the motion picture industry to expose Hollywood's alleged subversion of "the American Way" through its depiction of social problems, class differences, and alternative political ideologies. FBI informants (their names still redacted today) reported to Hoover's G-men on screenplays and screenings of such films as Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), noting that "this picture deliberately maligned the upper class attempting to show that people who had money were mean and despicable characters." The FBI's anxiety over this film was not unique; it extended to a wide range of popular and critical successes, including *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947) and *On the Waterfront* (1954).

In *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies*, John Sbardellati provides a new consideration of Hollywood's history and the post-World War II Red Scare. In addition to governmental intrusion into the creative process, he details the efforts of left-wing filmmakers to use the medium to bring social problems to light and the campaigns of their colleagues on the political right, through such organizations as the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, to prevent dissemination of "un-American" ideas and beliefs.

Sbardellati argues that the attack on Hollywood drew its motivation from a sincerely held fear that film content endangered national security by fostering a culture that would be at best apathetic to the Cold War struggle at best, or, at its worst, conducive to communism at home. Those who took part in Hollywood's Cold War struggle, whether on the left or right, shared one common trait: a belief that the movies could serve as engines for social change. This strongly held assumption explains why the stakes were so high and, ultimately, why Hollywood became one of the most important ideological battlegrounds of the Cold War.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Sbardellati draws upon FBI documents to detail how J. Edgar Hoover, beginning in 1942, directed his agents to undertake a massive, secret review of the Hollywood film industry. . . . Sbardellati's thorough research on Hoover's early investigations of Hollywood makes this a great choice for readers interested in 20th-century American cultural history." *Library Journal*

"With this comprehensively researched book, Sbardellati adds momentum to a scholarly movement that reframes McCarthyism as an outgrowth and extension of the politics and practices of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover. He specifically focuses on the ways in which Hoover's decades-long surveillance?beginning in 1920, prior to his rise to the directorship of the FBI?of the US film industry set the stage for the high-profile investigations of Hollywood by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 and eventually for Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist crusading." *Choice* (October 2012)

"John Sbardellati's book explores a well-known historical topic?the red scare and the blacklist in Hollywood?yet his close examination of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's role offers an important new perspective. By following the 'archival turn' in film history and delving deeply into FBI records, Sbardellati uncovers the breadth and impact of the agency's investigative activities in the motion picture industry from 1942 to 1958. He rejects the idea that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his agents were motivated solely by political opportunism or the desire for publicity. The most well-known consequence of the bureau's years of investigation was the blacklist, but Sbardellati emphasizes another: the transformation in film content, as socially conscious filmmaking declined. 'It turns out that the red scare in Hollywood was about the movies after all,' he notes. The FBI's investigation in Hollywood entailed surveillance of filmmakers to identify communists, but what makes Sbardellati's work innovative are his findings of FBI film analyses. As it turned out, American audiences disagreed with Hoover's film preferences, but then film executive Darryl F. Zanuck had already told him, 'Mr. Hoover, you don't know movies.'" Fortunately for the history of Hollywood and politics, Sbardellati does, making his *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies* fascinating reading." *American Historical Review*

"John Sbardellati offers the most complete study to date of the investigation of communism in Hollywood by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Presenting a sympathetic portrait of Hoover and his bureau, Sbardellati argues that the FBI's surveillance of the movie industry was motivated not by political opportunism but by a 'sincerely held, if ill-founded, fear of Communist propaganda.' . . . Presenting a clear-eyed account of the often incompetent activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Sbardellati sees the FBI, not HUAC, as the driving force behind the Hollywood investigations. The book's greatest strength is its analysis of the interplay and tensions among the FBI, the MPA, and HUAC, the

three main actors in the anticommunist crusade."? *Journal of American History*

"Sbardellati's book is, indeed, a valuable contribution to the literature of the Cold War, its cultural history, and the history of the FBI."? Douglas M. Charles, *The Historian* (April 2014)

"No one knows the FBI's movie files like John Sbardellati. His book shines light on the enigmatic J. Edgar Hoover and on the FBI's role in the Red Scare. It is a must-read for students and scholars of the cultural Cold War."? Tony Shaw, author of *Hollywood's Cold War*

"In *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies*, John Sbardellati adds a whole new dimension to the story of anti-Communism in Hollywood. His original research in FBI documents and archives clearly demonstrates the intense involvement of the FBI with the House Un-American Activities Committee and their long-term effort to remove any taint of left-wing politics from the nation's screens. Sbardellati shows with convincing detail that the FBI, conservative politicians, and Hollywood anti-Communists were motivated by an intense drive to reshape American culture."? Lary May, University of Minnesota, author of *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*

"John Sbardellati expertly blends cultural and political history in this trenchant and lively analysis of the countersubversive attack on Hollywood. The book tells the chilling story of how the politics of un-Americanism dramatically altered film content and left a lasting legacy of fear."? Kathryn Olmsted, author of *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*

"In exploring FBI surveillance of and operations against the Hollywood film colony prior to the 1950s, John Sbardellati has illuminated a previously obscure yet clearly important chapter in the history of both the U.S. 'countersubversive tradition' and American cinema. Sbardellati combines the history of the FBI with that of the Hollywood left so as to create the roundest possible account of the subject. His original and wide-ranging archival research informs a valuable and fascinating reconstruction of the attitudes and activities of the Los Angeles division of the FBI."? Hugh Wilford, California State University Long Beach, author of *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*

"*J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies* is essential reading for anyone interested in the politics of the American movie industry and the impact on it of J. Edgar Hoover, the bureau, and FBI agents at a crucial

time."?Daniel Leab, editor of *American Communist History*

"This penetrating book highlights the FBI's decades-long obsession with the movie industry. John Sbardellati well shows us how Hoover's conservative and patriarchal worldview stifled the making of a wide spectrum of social-problem films after World War II and undermined the very democratic principles he claimed to be defending from Communism."?Katherine A. S. Sibley, author of *Red Spies in America: Stolen Secrets and the Dawn of the Cold War*

About the Author

John Sbardellati is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Waterloo.

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Samuel Crader:

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