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"A Dangerous Piece of Celluloid"?
British Fascists and the Hollywood Movie

The fascist political project in inter-war Britain was permeated by cultural concerns.

British fascism, particularly in its more mature "palingenetic" variants, such as Oswald

Mosley's British Union of Fascist's (BUF), was a movement that aimed at the cultural as

well as the political and economic transformation of the nation.[1] According to one of

Mosley's senior lieutenants, Alexander Raven-Thomson, fascism was "a new and

revolutionary creed of national and cultural regeneration." This parallel cultural mission

would give shape and coherence to many of British fascism's more general ideological

preoccupations and perceptions concerning national regeneration. This article will

illuminate the fascists' cultural agenda by focusing on a cultural form that occupied a

prime place in the fascist mental universe during the years between the two World Wars:

the Hollywood motion picture. In particular, the article will consider the ways in which

Britain's fascists perceived and reacted to this key icon of the new "mass culture"

industry and one of the foremost cultural novelties emanating from the United States

during these years. The following analysis will thus examine the influence of a key

segment of modern American culture on the British fascist mind. It is the premise of this

article that British fascists harboured an ambivalent attitude to American cinema. The Hollywood movie was thus represented in a variety of ways by fascist writers, as a symptom of encroaching decadence, for example, or, more benignly, as a model of cinematic and technical excellence.

Many native fascists feared the cultural fall-out from this portentous trans-national cultural movement and imagined the wholesale "Americanisation" of British culture. They deplored the American motion picture, its thematic content, its perceived ideological message, and its significance for the national culture, British identity, and even the native English language. Hence the conviction of one of the BUF's leading personalities and most strident cultural commentators, A. K. Chesterton, that Samuel Goldwyn was "symbolically Lord of the English scene." Chesterton went on to berate the Britons who spurn Shakespeare yet "swallow the soporifics of the culture dope-pedlers [*sic*] or welcome the degrading aphrodisiacs which they sell."[2] Another Mosleyite remarked on the glut of American films showing in British cinemas, "which are no encouragement to national pride."[3] Another follower of Mosley complained that Metro-Goldwyn film products, wherein British men and women were "being taught to sentimentalise over foreign dope that is totally unlike the life we live," had displaced the "whole-hearted entertainment of English plays and variety."[4]

For many of Britain's fascists, the Hollywood movie was a key prop of the mass culture industry, its quintessential expression. Fascists, as with other cultural elitists of this ilk writing between the wars, such as Clive Bell, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, John Cowper Powys and Aldous Huxley, expressed disquiet about the onset of an apparently all-consuming "philistine" mass culture. Powerful trends in modern life, which included

technological change, the mass democratic suffrage, a mass-based popular press, and increased leisure time and disposable income, were bringing forth a "mass society" and this supposedly philistine mass populace, who were the eager consumers of the new mass culture. The charges levelled against mass culture by the elitist self-appointed guardians of the nation's cultural heritage were damning. A mass cultural form like the Hollywood movie, for example, because it was a product tailored to fit the demands of the new mass consumer market, supposedly pandered to the cheap, unthinking emotional response and lowered and homogenised taste. It was also accused of producing standardised mass thoughts and immobilising minds. "Uniform mass man" was the outcome, living a standardised mass existence and languishing in a drugged state of mental stupor, the "unvarying Deltas and uniform Epsilons" of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).[5] Britain's fascists expressed similar views. "We live in an age of standardisation, not only of things but of ideas and recreations," complained J. F. C. Fuller, a prominent Mosleyite writing in 1932, just prior to his joining the BUF.[6] "The film buffoon and heroine are standardised performers," he went on to complain.[7] To its detractors, mass society was an intellectually and spiritually barren cultural desert that signalled the death of authentic self-hood, a bleak place which stifled all noble thought, inspiration and creativity. Britain's fascists, in particular, believed that mass culture lacked a heroic base, and was thus the antithesis of "true" culture as they defined it.

The Hollywood motion picture, of course, loomed large in this pessimistic critique of mass society. Thus we have Huxley in *Brave New World* deriding the "stereoscopic feely," or mass audience film, of the type regularly churned out by Hollywood, as well as the mass audience that so eagerly consumed its messages.[8] British

fascists could be just as dismissive. "Authentic" culture, according to the fascist mind, should be expressive of humankind's aspiration to achieve noble ends in the struggle that is life. In other words, the goal of art and culture was to inspire and elevate the human soul. Culture should affirm supposedly eternal verities, too; truths which were thought to be universal and in tune with life's higher aspirations. In the opinion of the fascists, such elevated themes were simply not in evidence in American feature films. The offerings of the escapist "dream palaces" of the Hollywood mass-culture industry, the wearisome round of trite love stories and sensationalistic melodramas, lacked the ability to inspire and uplift the human spirit. One BUF member referred to "the 99 per cent of gangster, prostitute, and idiot films" showing in Britain's cinemas, while a columnist writing for the far Right journal *The New Pioneer* in 1939, complained about "all the slush imported into our cinemas from Hollywood" during that year.[9] In a similar vein, a BUF film reviewer considered the standard Hollywood plot to be "incredibly naïve." Reviewing two Hollywood adventure features, he found the usual stock of "tough cowboys and bouncing young women, hold-ups and bank robberies" and "marches through trackless forests, where pools are so crowded with alligators that the intrepid marchers walk over their backs to the other side."[10] Pronouncing on another American adventure film, the same writer poured scorn on the Hollywood "mass production plot" which apparently disfigured this particular movie.[11] The American motion picture industry, to its fascist detractors, debased culture by simplifying reality in this manner. The celluloid images disseminated by the Hollywood 'dream factory' were perceived to be hollow, bogus and duplicitous, symptomatic of the artificial, "synthetic" culture that was part of an

increasingly "Americanised" post-war England. In the elaborate prose of one Mosleyite, Hollywood was all "tinsel artifice and meretricious sentiment."[12]

It was a commonplace fear on the fascist Right during the inter-war period, that Britain's inhabitants were turning their backs on reality and political participation by retreating into a cinematic escapist world of fantasy, make-believe and "synthetic" pleasures. Britain's youth, the so-called "Bright Young Things," were thought to be particularly prone to falling under the spell of cinema's overpowering illusions. A certain James Rudd of the BUF feared that a large segment of Britain's post-war youth generation was caught in the grip of hedonism and had an "incessant desire to get away from the facts of life."[13] The young "pursue pleasure and cease to exist in the outside world," he complained. What particularly concerned Rudd, was that "in their pursuit of pleasure they subject themselves utterly to the influence of the cinema" which, for him, was wholly objectionable. Another BUF member, Michael Goulding, attacked those of Britain's youth who, by frequenting the cinema, sought "adventure by artificial means."[14]

To the fascists, the eager consumption of the Hollywood mass product by "Britons," and particularly the nation's youth, was a sure sign of encroaching decadence. The inter-war fascist imagination was characterised by a fear of impending national disintegration, and it was decadence that was assumed to be the harbinger of this decline. To the pessimistic fascist mind, decadence was a spiritual and moral blight that stifled the regenerative urge. The regenerative urge was imagined as a sort of enigmatic Bergsonian inner spiritual "life-force" which, if assiduously cultivated within the national psyche, would ensure the nation's survival and allow it to pass to a higher state of evolution. The cultural stakes were thus very high indeed for Britain's fascists. Fascism had a mission

and it was to regenerate youth, a task upon which "may well depend the moral and physical culture of our race," declared James Rudd.[15] Evidently, Mosleyite fascism had set its face against the destiny of the decline of Europe's "Faustian" culture prophesied by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1918, 1922), a pessimistic and fatalistic tome which had exerted much influence on the BUF's imagination. In proclaiming that fascism would beget the rebirth of Faustian Europe and its transition to a higher plane of existence, however, the BUF recognised that the struggle would be long and hard. Mosley and his followers recognised, too, that the terrain of aesthetic culture would be the site on which many of the key battles against the scourge of domestic decadence would be fought.

Britain's fascists were convinced that great nations and empires passed away as a result of domestic decadence. A British Fascisti member, writing in 1926 claimed that it was the destructive power of internal "immoralities" which brought Rome, Egypt, Carthage and Greece to heel, rather than the power of external foes.[16] The onset of "immorality" terrified the fascists, and to many of them the cinema was heavily implicated in spawning it. Films, declared a Mosley follower, which along with contemporary theatre and novels "pervert and distract" Britain's youth with their "sordid entertainments," are "now used to destroy our moral conception of social order."[17] The Hollywood film, therefore, would provide some British fascists with an anti-phenomenon to juxtapose with their own moral paradigm.

In the same vein, palingenetic fascists accused American film of being excessively "sex-conscious" which, for them, served to encourage the seemingly ever-increasing tendency towards sexually promiscuous behaviour and "unnatural" vice in the

wider society. Reviewing *The Gay King,* a historical period piece dealing with the

Risorgimento produced in Mussolini's Fascist Italy, a BUF writer thought it a "great a

relief" from the "fantastic and erotic thing usually offered from Hollywood."[18] The senior

BUF official, Robert Gordon-Canning, also was disapproving of Hollywood films, which

too often "appeal to the cruder sex emotion of the audience" and whose narrative content

contained barely concealed ideas "bordering on the pornographic."[19] This imagined link

between American cinema and apparently unrestrained sexual indulgence within the

wider society mirrored a deeper anxiety, of course: the fascist fear of sexuality-out-of-

control.

American movies were lambasted in other respects. Apparently they glorified and

made heroes of the more permissive, delinquent and darker characters within society.

This was certainly the case for one fascist, who was writing under the pseudonym

"Junius." He saw these American films as

> lauding of just those spectacles of barbarity to which the
> falling Roman Empire was a constant witness in the arena
> of the Colosseum. Horrific pictures, animal fights, torture,
> gang fights, swindling and gladiatorial combats displayed
> between one low criminal and another.[20]

"Junius" also believed that Hollywood maligned Britain's imperial heritage. The soldiers

and sailors who "fought with cutlasses" to win an empire for Britain were depicted in

American features as "bloody pirates" and Cecil Rhodes as "building an Empire with a

cheque book and murder." Even more calamitous for "Junius" was that these negative

images of Western habits and the British imperial experience, were being shown

throughout the Empire. In his mind, Hollywood's obsessive preoccupation with the

West's dark "underbelly," and its attempt to displace traditional native historical

narratives with "Americanised" images of the British past, were damaging Britain's prestige in the eyes of the non-white peoples of the Empire. The Empire was "being soused with the decadent materialism of Hollywood," and "what effect it has had on India and the East I dread to say," he declared.[21] Others imagined that an insidious conspiracy was afoot to undermine the entire edifice of "white" civilisation through ridicule and caricature. Reviewing the 1936 Paramount production, *Klondike Annie*, a star vehicle for a then fading Mae West, a BUF member complained that the movie "is merely one more assault upon the standards, the traditions, the manners, and even the physique of the white peoples."[22]

So how did Britain's fascists rationalise this "deadly" assault on Britain's culture and imperial heritage? In tandem with the frequent references to the disease of decadence, the finger of accusation was often pointed at "international Jewry," a body whom many fascists imagined to be the eternal enemy of Western civilisation and its Christian values. It was a myth, of course, but the embrace of the fantasy of the international Jewish conspiracy proved comforting for those seeking simple explanations for what were complex shifts in aesthetic boundaries and cultural modes of expression. Conspiratorial anti-semitism and the myth of a Jewish "hidden hand" financing and orchestrating a global network of anti-British, anti-imperial, anti-Western and anti-Christian intrigue permeated the thinking of the British far right and fascist fringe during the inter-war period. The inter-war far Right proto-fascist journal the *Patriot*, founded by that avid propagator of the "hidden hand" myth, the 8th Duke of Northumberland, was possessed of a particularly vivid imagination where the Jewish conspiracy myth was concerned. Contributors to its columns were convinced that a baneful Jewish influence

lurked behind an assortment of historical characters and events that included Nero, Kaiser

Wilhelm II, Ramsay MacDonald, Sun Yat-Sen, the French Revolution, the Illuminati,

Japanese militarism, the Versailles Peace, and the Dawes Plan.[22]

The Jewish "hidden hand" fantasy entered the discourse of Britain's principal

fascist party, the BUF, and account for many of its anti-semitic reactions to the

Hollywood movie. "Junius" was in no doubt. The decadent Hollywood images that were

apparently "saturating" the Empire were "Judaic American products."[24] This was a

common refrain amongst palingenetic fascists. A. K. Chesterton, no lover of Samuel

Goldwyn as we have seen above, wrote of the Jews that "swarm all over the theatre and

cinema rackets" in 1930s Britain.[25] One reason why Jews fomented domestic decadence

via the Hollywood motion picture, in the view of Britain's fascists, was commercial self-

interest. Indeed, within the fascist mind-set, the pernicious presence of the Jews lurked

behind the modern phenomenon of commercial mass culture, in that they profited from

the crude 'dumbing down' of aesthetic taste supposedly associated with it. The

commercialisation of the arts by the Jews was an "attempt to mould our thoughts,"

declared one BUF member, so as to increase the potential for economic exploitation.[26]

Some fascists, on the other hand, depicted the Hollywood film as an instrument for the

promotion and dissemination of "international" Jewish "propaganda," or Jewish values,

the latter being perceived as wholly reprehensible. An example of this frame of mind

with regard to their perception of "international" Jewish "propaganda," can be seen if we

look at the period just prior to the outbreak of World War Two. With war between Britain

and Hitler's Germany looking increasingly possible from the September 1938

Czechoslovakian crisis onwards, Britain's fascists were convinced that "international

Jewry," for reasons of communal self-interest, was conspiring to create bad blood

between London and Berlin. The Jews were prepared to utilise any instrument to

implement their anti-German foreign policy, according to the fascists, even motion

pictures. One American movie in particular, *The Great Dictator*, Charles Chaplin's satire

on Adolf Hitler, was singled out as an example of this anti-German, pro-War propaganda.

Chaplin's film was an "insult to the German nation and Herr Hitler," complained a BUF

reviewer, who urged that it should not be exhibited in Britain. In the words of this

Mosleyite,

> the Chaplin film is the most dangerous piece of celluloid
> ever to come into this country. It may set all Europe on fire,
> and every theatre exhibiting it will be selling Jewish
> propaganda and endangering the relationships of England
> and Germany.[27]

The "mass manipulation" perspective on the American movie outlined above, and

the view that the eager consumption of it by the ignorant 'mass' was a sure sign of

advancing decadence, was commonplace amongst palingenetic fascists in Britain

between the wars. So, too, was the perception that Hollywood films represented a

particularly virulent strain of the disease of decadence. There were exceptions to this

general rule, however, for we can detect the presence of another discourse within British

fascist ideology, which exhibited a benign, even positive, stance towards the Hollywood

motion picture. The Hollywood historical epic, for example, was frequently eulogised in

the BUF press during the 1930s. Reviewing the Gary Cooper historical spectacular, *The

Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, for example, a BUF film critic could barely contain his

excitement as he surveyed the grand cinematic extravaganza unfolding before his eyes.

"It is magnificent!" he enthused. "The scenes in India baffle description when it comes to

technical difficulties…. Intense pity, breath-taking admiration, pride of race, all combine

to thrill. That is how I felt sitting amongst a packed and delighted house, watching Sir

Guy Standing, Gary Cooper, Aubrey Smith, and Richard Cromwell giving us the return

of the Briton. The people gasped. Could it be true? Dare anyone eulogise the soldier, dare

anyone remember the North-West Frontier...?"[28] Another BUF film reviewer was equally

enthralled by another rousing Hollywood historical feature, the 1936 Warner Brothers'

spectacular, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which catapulted Errol Flynn to super-

stardom. Commenting on the famous charge at Balaclava, he enthused that "it is

impossible to be British, to watch it, and not to be proud." Despite being irritated by

some historical inaccuracies in the feature, he went on to say, "the fact remains that here

is a film calculated to thrill every British audience to its marrows and to make the finest

type of British propaganda throughout the world."[29]

How should we explain this anomaly? Grand historical epics such as *The Charge

of the Light Brigade* drew squeals of delight from the fascists in the audience because

they found such overt expressions of manly valour and the martial values impossible to

resist. In another respect, however, this more benign narrative about American "pictures"

reflected a deep disquiet about the condition of the domestic film industry. Britain's film

industry was regularly depicted in the BUF press as being technically inferior to its

American counterpart and heavily in the grip of Jewish control and influence to a degree

that was thought to even exceed that of Hollywood. Accordingly, it was alleged, the

British film industry frequently produced films caricaturing and maligning the British

past, or innocuous vulgar farces that were emblematic of the trivialities and obscenities of

post-war decadence. As the BUF reviewer of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* put it with

regard to the latter tendency, "While our Jew-controlled film industry wobbles between vulgar humour and still more vulgar grandiosity it is left to Hollywood to turn out occasionally one of these grand films glorifying Britain."[30] Thus, ironically, for those British fascists who subscribed to this more benign perspective on the American movie, the Hollywood representation of the British past depicted in the historical epic conformed more closely to their preferred image of the nation's history, an image that was heroic, celebratory, and reassuringly nostalgic. Within the Mosleyite mind-set, the past should act as a source of inspiration for the present, while representations of the British past, including those in the realm of film aesthetics, should always celebrate national achievements and supposed national virtues.

In conclusion, then, although we are dealing with a relatively internally coherent discourse which was generally consistent with the core palingenetic mythic belief at the heart of fascist ideology that the native culture was sick and ailing, and that American films as an allegedly particularly odious manifestation of decadence bore some responsibility for this, there was another narrative in play which adopted a more benign and even appreciative stance towards Hollywood features. We have seen, for example, that the nostalgic rhetoric of the grand historical epic depicting a British imperial theme clearly struck a chord with a British fascist audience. One might also suggest that, despite the prevalence of the elitist cultural rhetoric and the disparaging comments made about mass cultural taste in the realm of "official" fascist cultural pronouncements, individual native fascists easily fell prey to the seductive images churned out by Hollywood's dream factory. It was not solely Hollywood films depicting a British imperialistic theme that thrilled them. Indeed, many fascists would find the range of aesthetic delights served up

by a variety of Hollywood features simply too alluring to resist. "What a blessing are films!" exclaimed the leading BUF film critic Henry Gibbs, "for a shilling, eighteen-pence, we escape drab realities, inherit worlds of make-believe,....attain various forms of Utopia, Atlantis, where life achieves poetic, if unhappy, conclusion."[31] Such pro-Hollywood sentiments seem to demonstrate that the British fascist view of the American movie was not always driven by ideological concerns, and that fascist film evaluations were not mere reflections of fascist political ideology. At another, deeper level, perhaps, native fascists admired the power of mass seduction that Hollywood had at its disposal, the ability of the Hollywood film magnates to both reach a mass audience and then, having entered a private psychic space, proceed to orchestrate the emotions and desires of the individual. Ironically, the fascist political project aimed at precisely the same mobilisation of thoughts and primal emotions, though for different and more sinister purposes, as history all too clearly demonstrated.

Notes
1. In the context of the fascist political project, 'palingenetic' refers to the fascists' desire to eradicate the so-called blight of modern decadence and usher in an age of political and cultural rebirth. For an excellent account of 'palingenetic' myth and its workings by the scholar who 'invented' the term see R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), passim.
2. *Action*, 24 July 1937.
3. *Blackshirt*, 13 July 1934.
4. *Action*, 2 October 1937.
5. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).
6. J. F.C. Fuller, *The Dragon's Teeth. A Study of War and Peace* (London: Constable, 1932), 37.
7. Ibid.
8. Huxley, *Brave New World*, 169
9. *Blackshirt*, 11 January 1935; *The New Pioneer*, February 1939.
10. *Action*, 23 July 1936.
11. Ibid.
12. *Action*, 27 August 1936.

13. *Blackshirt*, 28 September 1934.
14. *Action*, 29 June 1938.
15. *Blackshirt*, 28 September 1934.
16. *Fascist Bulletin*, 20 February 1926.
17. *Action,* 14 November 1936.
18. *Action*, 13 August 1936.
19. *The Fascist Week*, 20-26 April 1934.
20. *Blackshirt*, 21 November 1936.
21. Ibid.
22. *Action*, 28 May 1936.
23. On the Patriot's fantasies and the Jewish 'hidden hand' conspiracy myth, see Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism, 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). On the Jewish world conspiracy fantasy, see also N. Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Chico, Ca: Scholars Press, 1981). For an example of 1930s fascist 'hiddden hand' paranoia, see the article entitled "The Hidden Hand Again" in the edition of the BUF press dated 10 January 1936, which imagines the presence of Jewish intrigue in contemporary government.
24. *Blackshirt*, 21 November 1936.
25. Action, 24 July 1937.
26. *Action*, 2 October 1937.
27. *Action,* 18 February 1939.
28. *Blackshirt*, 1 March 1935.
29. *Action*, 9 January 1937.
30. Ibid.
31. *Action*, 24 April 1937.