From Pathology to Symbology: *The Manchurian Candidate* on Page and Screen

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It is a commonplace of adaptation studies to say that the film version represents a compression of the contents of the literary text. In this short position paper I plan to examine such a presumed axiomatics from the perspective of the critique of Cold War domestic ideology in the United States. What are the implications, I ask, for counter-narratives to hegemonic discourse when, in the process of the transition from page to screen, description becomes iconography, diagnosis becomes allegory, and pathology becomes symbology? Few films seem more aligned with the peculiar mix of paranoid politics, sexual repression, and familial conflict that we now associate with the collective portrait of America of the 1950s and early 1960s than John Frankenheimer's 1962 film adaptation of *The Manchurian Candidate*. However, the critically neglected original novel by Richard Condon (published in 1959) proves to be an even more alluring and complex pop-cultural artifact of the era. My thesis is that book and film offer provocative challenges to ideological formations of the time period (McCarthyism, "momism," heteronormative mental "hygiene," civil defense, etc.); but both the expressive vehicles and the resulting substance of the subversive views they adopt differ. If, in this vexed example of literary-cinematic transference, the two works "speak" different "languages" of critique (of analysis and iconoclasm, respectively), do we, as readers / spectators, grasp for distinct hermeneutics to evaluate their efficacy?

Given the vast, sprawling nature of Condon's running commentary in the original fiction, it might be said – without exaggeration – that Frankenheimer's film appears as if it were an overdetermined symptomatic condensation of the author's account – a phantasmatic object. The book takes the form of satire; the film that of a suspense thriller. Settings and scenes from the book are transformed into *film noir* set pieces.

Whereas, moreover, the central enigmas of the novel are typically explicated by means of baroque, pseudo-clinical case studies for purposes of tracing inter-generational trauma, the corresponding mysteries of the film are explored by rearranging a shared national mythos and its resonant icons of the post-WWII years. Indeed, the differently inflected character of Major Ben Marco in the film (played by Frank Sinatra) assumes the dual *film noir* roles of amnesiac and detective in his efforts to investigate his recurring nightmare, which represents an elusive part of his experience during the Korean War. Yet, rather than employ the methods of Freudian dream analysis, he eventually unravels his conditioning or "brainwashing" at the hands of Soviet and Chinese communists by situating his memories within pertinent Cold War contexts – suburbia, the bureaucratic "organization," the blacklist, etc.

Of course a certain tendency toward the imagistic is inevitable in view of the passage from a written medium to a visual-auditory medium. Except that, beyond the formal properties of particular arts or communications technologies, the case of *The Manchurian Candidate* could be upheld as exemplary of the problematic of film adaptation, what Linda Hutcheon calls the "transcoding of [a] print text[]" (*A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 43), by virtue of the historical framework it brings to separate critical approaches. Despite the directional pull of the translation, neither part of it is indicative of materialistic bases for the relevant mode of representation. As we move, in other words, from the novelist's vision to the film director's (and screenwriter George Axelrod's) vision, the exchange does not merely follow that of verbal signs for "indexical and iconic signs" (Hutcheon, p. 44). Rather, the shift involved betrays a persistent rhetorical entanglement: from specifically *Cold War discourses* to specifically *Cold War symbologies.* While the novel draws on the idiom of clinical analysis to link psychopathology and the catastrophic politics it generates to the baleful influences of consumerism, advertising, Hollywood, television (all variants on "brainwashing"), and, in a conclusive irony, therapeutic culture itself, the film – by contrast – seizes on and magnifies the novel's icons, including, most prominently, the Queen of Diamonds ("the red queen")

playing card and the Medal of Honor.

The investigation on which Marco embarks into the meaning of the recurring nightmare in the film *The Manchurian Candidate* illustrates this complex process of transfer. Far from compressing contents, however, Frankenheimer's adaptation expands on visual-discursive constellations only hinted at in the book. Contrary to an emphasis on the elementary psychoanalytical symbolism that typically informs both *film noir* dreams sequences (e.g., that of Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*) and the wider Cold War mass and popular culture, Marco engages a distinctly *cultural* reading of the nightmare, which depicts the forced ideological indoctrination of American POWs. He poses a series of questions about the dream, ultimately unmasking the propagandistic "cover" of a meeting of a gardening society by relating it to suburban club activities. Likewise he links gestures made in the dream to the playing of the card game solitaire and (by extension) the tautological solitude of social alienation, while reading the special aura surrounding the Queen of Diamonds card to ambivalent Cold War ideological associations with motherhood and (again, by extension) the nuclear family writ large.