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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

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,

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

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

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-

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

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 superstardom. 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

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

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

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 'hidden 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.