

This Gun for Hire: the Transformation from Fiction to Film

Module III Research Paper

Models of Critical Inquiry: Relationships to the Past: History and Culture

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This Gun for Hire, a film from Paramount Pictures, premiered on May 15, 1942.¹ It was an adaptation of the British novelist Graham Greene's prewar novel *A Gun for Sale*. The manuscript, purchased in 1936, was eventually turned into a propaganda film to aid in the war effort and bolster support for America's entrance into World War II, which began just a few months prior to the release.² Such a change makes little sense in light of other films, such as *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), which remained in their native settings. So why did Paramount buy the rights to Greene's story and then change it?

To explore the reasons, it is a good idea to go over both the novel and the film to list the differences. Greene's novel takes place in England. Philip Raven, a hitman, is plagued by a hair-lip and a terrible past. His mother committed suicide (he witnessed the body as a boy) and his father was a convicted murderer. All of this leads him to a life of crime culminating in him being hired to assassinate a foreign minister. Once the job is done, he's paid off in marked bills, meant to set him up for the fall. In trying to get revenge for this move, he uncovers a plot by those who hired him, a corporate boss and his philandering lackey, to start a war that would mean enormous profits for their company. During this, Raven comes into contact with a young woman, Anne Crowder, who is an aspiring chorus girl or stage performer and fiancé of a police detective. Anne gets swept up in Raven's revenge scheme, nearly getting herself killed and ruining her relationship with her fiancé to help him. She believes there is still good in Raven and that he can be redeemed. Together they take down the corporate plot but Raven sacrifices himself in the process. Other factors in the novel are the evidence of Depression era conditions, as felt in England, Catholic overtones of salvation and redemption and anti-Semitic resonances.

¹ Brown, Gene, *Movie Time*, (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 165.

² Sherry, Norman, *The Life of Graham Greene: Vol. 1 1904-1939*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 585.

According to Quentin Falk in his book *Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene*, the story would make a great film, containing all the great American elements of the medium: “unscrupulous big business, an assassin that could have been plucked from Capone’s Chicago streets, gun-happy cops and a feisty female.”³ To further satisfy an American audience, the film setting was moved to Los Angeles California. Raven’s hair lip turned into a badly healed broken wrist, as Hollywood would not want an unattractive hero. His mother and father disappeared into an abusive aunt. He’s still hired to assassinate someone, but this time a chemist who is about to turn in his boss for selling weapons to the enemy. Just as before, Raven is double crossed by those who hired him. Anne becomes Ellen, a magician who sings and dances kitschy tunes for the amusement of men in a nightclub, but retains her policeman fiancé. From there the story remains basically the same. The only difference is that the corporate men who hired Raven are selling poison gas and chemicals to the Japanese, so they can bomb America. The evidence of the Depression remains but the anti-Semitic tones have been quelled.

The initial question about why such changes were made are quickly met with further questions like, did personal backgrounds influence the alteration? Was the setting and other factors changed due to greater political reasons beyond creating a propaganda piece? In light of understanding the backgrounds of the artists involved, their histories, affiliations and the political climate they were part of, a clearer picture of why such changes were made comes into focus. Likewise, some tantalizing facts about the film and novel also are revealed. Greene was from a liberal British family.⁴ He converted to Catholicism in the 1920s.⁵ The American director and

³ Falk, Quentin, *Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene* (New York: Quartet Books, 1984), 29.

⁴ Atkinson, William, “The Lives of Graham Greene: A Review Essay,” *South Atlantic Review* 61, no. 3, (1996): 117.

⁵ Sherry, 192-193.

writer of the film were also leftists.⁶ Frank Tuttle (director) and Albert Maltz (screenwriter) were both Jewish. The coincidence of their economic beliefs and disparaged faiths implies a possible collaboration. It also suggests a closer relationship between the allied countries of the United States and the United Kingdom while simultaneously hinting at the actual distance that existed between both nations. It is evident that a number of factors played into the creation of the novel and then the film. For example, in doing further research, one finds out that Greene spent some time as a British spy and was even suspected of aiding Russia.⁷ Also, one of the most turbulent times in Hollywood history, investigations by The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), unfolded behind the scenes.⁸ So, alongside national and international politics, as well as cultural constraints, both film and novel were erected.

The politics and culture of the pre-World War II era which Greene's novel was written in, as well as the film are equally reflections of their times and the nations their creators called home. Though the United States and Britain were allies during the war, the relationship was fraught with complications, as Kevin Smith explores in his 2009 work published in the periodical *Diplomatic History* (The Journal of the Society for the Historian of American Foreign Relations). In the 1930s the Americans and British enjoyed a strained relationship, due to "British suspicion of America's power, intentions and reliability."⁹ In the reverse, America was disgruntled by Britain's failure to repay its war debt (while Britain blamed the U.S. for that failure in penning policy that made it impossible to do so) and also in the British failure to enact suitable foreign

⁶ Buhle, Paul, and Wagner, Dave, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5-6, 84-86.

⁷ Atkinson, William, "The Lives of Graham Greene: A Review Essay," *South Atlantic Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 114-115.

⁸ Biesen, Sheri Chinen, *Blackout*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 68.

⁹ Smith, Kevin, "Reassessing Roosevelt's View of Chamberlain after Munich: Ideological Affinity in the Geoffrey Thompson-Claude Bowers Correspondence," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (Nov 2009): 839.

policy in other arenas.¹⁰ Both countries initiated protective tariffs and held a “desire to avoid another war [which] imposed domestic political constraints.”¹¹ Further strain came from the coolness of Neville Chamberlain (then Prime Minister of Britain) toward Americans and their president, while he also “occasionally recognized that a firm American stand could potentially deter Hitler.”¹²

Much of this tension and mistrust was born of experiences the nations had during the First World War. John A. Thompson notes that the United States had gained a great deal of strength during the war and “exercised [it] to determine the outcome of that conflict and to play a major part in shaping the peace settlement.”¹³ The United States had also adopted a policy of neutrality in 1935-37.¹⁴ Not to mention that “a significant portion of the [American] public believed they had been ‘suckered’ into the war by those...who had something directly to gain.”¹⁵

Such foreign relations led to precarious results. One of these results was the effect of the British naval blockade on American shipping at the end of the decade. Robert W. Matson explains British actions, as they attempted to starve Germany of needed supplies and cripple them into surrender.¹⁶ In his piece “The British Blockade and U.S. Trade, 1939-40,” Matson also shows how policy threatened American business and trade, and hence the American economy. Britain claimed a right to investigate all shipping and negotiated a system of certification with the United States, by which officials would certify cargoes before they left port. A ship must

¹⁰ Stevens, Donald G., “World War II Economic Warfare: The United States, Britain, and Portuguese Wolfram,” *Historian* 61, no. 3 (1999): 541 and Thompson, John A., “Conceptions of National Security and American Entry Into World War II,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 16 (2005): 839.

¹¹ Thompson, 839.

¹² Thompson, 839-40.

¹³ Thompson, 671.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Thompson, 677.

¹⁶ Matson, Robert W. “The British Naval Blockade and U.S. Trade, 1939-40,” *Historian*, 53:4, 1991, paragraph 2.

have their papers in order to pass the blockade and go about their business. This system of certification led to blacklisting of companies and the seizure of their cargoes. It also led to a loss of markets and profits for the corporations engaging in foreign trade.¹⁷ These policies created a great deal of tension between the nations while the United States was still neutral and also recovering from the Great Depression. On top of this, most Americans did not feel an immediate threat from Germany in the 1930s or the start of the following decade and did not wish to aid Britain in her fight or disadvantage themselves over it. In fact, President Roosevelt continually had to try and make the case to rally Americans to the cause as they were complacent, and that included military officials who were against any aid to Britain, even while war drew close. Citizens and officials alike felt the ocean provided enough of a barrier.¹⁸ Then, Pearl Harbor ended the delusion of safety and the United States was catapulted into war. However, the United States and Britain remained “suspicious of each other’s motives” though their alliance deepened out of common cause.¹⁹ With such foreign policies in place and the resentments they created between their peoples, it is of great wonder that any of Graham Greene’s novels were purchased by American film companies to be made into movies. Yet, most of his work was purchased.²⁰

During this time, cultural politics chugged along just as it had for generations. “Catholics still experienced alienation from aspects of American and modern life,” just as their Jewish counterparts.²¹ Immigration laws from the 1920s clearly discriminated against both these groups, reflecting this disfavor for them throughout society.²² Tension grew in the late 1930s between

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thompson, 675-679.

¹⁹ Stevens, 541.

²⁰ Phillips S.J., Gene D., *Graham Green: The Films of His Fiction*, (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1974), 15.

²¹ Carey, Patrick W., *Catholics in America: A History*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 79.

²² Carey, 81.

the two groups when Catholics perceived a preference for Nazi persecutions of Jews that to them disregarded the similar treatment of Catholics throughout the world.²³ Yet, once the war began and the true face of the atrocities committed were revealed, citizens relinquished such claims, while they also turned for comfort to religiously based works. This change made a climate of tolerance that saw “Anti-Semitism and Anti-Catholicism decline sharply.”²⁴ As briefly mentioned before, Greene was a Catholic convert and his beliefs often made their way into his work.

Another aspect of the historical climate was the Great Depression and its affects through the 1930s. As a result of the economic collapse, Capitalism’s “credentials had come into question.”²⁵ According to the *Oxford Guide to World War II*, 15% of the U.S. population was still unemployed in 1940 and the New Deal legislation had not fully recovered the economy.²⁶ Pressures on commerce from Britain’s blockades caused further hardship.²⁷ Corporations were “hostile towards Roosevelt’s administration” while they kept an eye on growing support for unions they felt would undercut their bottom line. The strengthening of Unions, like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), in answer to the abuses of corporations were seen as leftist movements which leaned toward socialism if not communism and bent away from capitalism.²⁸ The economy was suffering quite similarly in the United Kingdom. Though already socialist, the country had high unemployment and the effort against Germany was underway

²³ Carey, 91.

²⁴ Dear, 925, 942.

²⁵ Stephanson, Anders, “War and Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 3 (2001): 393.

²⁶ Dear, I.C.B., editor, *The Oxford Guide to World War II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 926.

²⁷ Matson, Robert W. “The British Naval Blockade and U.S. Trade, 1939-40,” *Historian*, 53:4, 1991, paragraph 26-32.

²⁸ Dear., 921.

putting a strain on resources.²⁹ This climate is the setting of the novel: an unregulated Corporate Baron hires the protagonist Raven to kill a foreign minister and propel Britain into war so he can make a huge profit. Such topics were also popular in the United States as people came to understand the causes of the Great Depression. Yet, in the United States, the capitalistic structure was undergoing a period of reconciliation in which the people were being fed propaganda to convince them that capitalism was the right path to ease their economic woes.³⁰

One of the mediums used to propagate the United States government agenda was film. The U.S. ramped up control over the film industry through the Office of War Information (OWI) and its Hollywood controlled office called the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP).³¹ Another mechanism was the House Un-American Activities Committee which saw its start in the late 1930s, and used scare tactics to keep a tight fist on popular media and other aspects of American life. Part of its purpose was to control the silver screen and the material presented on it to the population and use it for government advantage.³² Sheri Chinen Biesen explains,

Domestic political policy and national debate, antitrust legislation, social and economic concerns, wartime business and consumption following the Depression, and mobilization of propaganda in other media significantly influenced film production and Hollywood's motion picture industry in relation to over-all American popular and political culture during World War II.

²⁹ Dear, 882.

³⁰ Biesen, 69.

³¹ Biesen, 68.

³² Ceplair, Larry and Englund, Steven, "The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960," Review by Steven Andries, *Film Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Winter 1980-81): 61.

Chinen Biesen is more delicate in expressing how politics invaded film. Many novels and original screenplays were written and refined through lenses imposed by the BMP and censorship controls long since placed on the industry.³³ To say influence is to understate the level of control the BMP exercised as the shadow of HUAC (which became a huge scandal in the post war years) waited in the cue for anyone willing to step out of line.³⁴

The conditions that shaped the climate in which artists worked directly affected what they produced. Starting in the late 1930s, it is documented that Greene worked for the British Government as a spy. In Atkinson's review of Greene's biographies, it is mentioned that in this capacity he was associated with a notorious figure by the name of Kim Philby who was exposed as a double agent for the Soviet Union.³⁵ Anthony Burgess, in his piece "Politics in the Novels of Graham Greene" mentions Greene's anti-American sentiment which became more evident in his later works.³⁶ Across the Atlantic, Both Frank Tuttle and Albert Maltz were known communists among the Hollywood elite. Tuttle openly raised funds for the communist party.³⁷ Maltz did the same and often wrote Marxist themes into his work.³⁸ Eric Smooden mentions in his brief review of Edward Dmytryk's *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten*, that Maltz "refused to write a word without clearance from the top."³⁹ It is not known or proven that Greene had any direct involvement in the Philby scandal, but the salaciousness of this idea combined with information about the screenwriter and director of the film makes a compelling case to suspect a clandestine collaboration. However, that is all it appears to be, a salacious coincidence.

³³ Biesen, 68-69.

³⁴ Buhle, 48.

³⁵ Atkinson, 114-116.

³⁶ Burgess, Anthony, "Politics in the Novels of Graham Greene," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 2, (April 1967): 96.

³⁷ Buhle, 84.

³⁸ Buhle, 86.

³⁹ Dmytryk, Edward, "Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten," Review by Eric Smooden, *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 64.

Graham Greene sold the rights to his novel before it was even in print. He was in need of the money it could potentially bring him, which can be found restated in many inquiries into his life and work.⁴⁰ This makes the greatest sense considering the economic climate of the time and that Greene found it easier to live off the sale of the rights to his work than to find alternative work to support a young family.⁴¹ As for the subject matter of the novel, much of what Greene believed politically was influenced by Catholicism and found its way into his work.⁴² The coincidence of his spying venture was nothing more than a way for him to keep from getting bored.⁴³ It must also be mentioned that he was not given to writing the screen versions of his work or getting involved in the process at all.⁴⁴ It appears that Mr. Greene had no salacious motives that can be found in current evidence.

So, the changes in the adaptation of Greene's work lies wholly with the Americans. In the United States, gangster characters had been banned by censors, fearing that it could be used in the propaganda of the enemy.⁴⁵ Yet, they felt "the independence, isolation and irreverence of hard-boiled antiheroes were ideal prewar qualities readily adaptable to more politically charged protagonists in topical espionage pictures."⁴⁶ The censors soon allowed Maltz's script to pass, happy with how it played upon American fears of homefront "espionage, sabotage and chemical warfare."⁴⁷ But other than censors having a hand in just what was put on the screen, wartime

⁴⁰ Sherry, 585.

⁴¹ Philips, S.J., 20.

⁴² Burgess, 94-95.

⁴³ Adamson, Judith, *Graham Greene: The Dangerous Edge Where Art and Politics Meet*, (London: MacMillan, 1990) 13-15.

⁴⁴ Philips, S.J., 19.

⁴⁵ Biesen, 48.

⁴⁶ Biesen, 48.

⁴⁷ Biesen, 57.

budget constraints fashioned much of the film produced at that time. *This Gun for Hire* had been relegated to “B” production status and did not have the resources to support location shoots.⁴⁸

The factor of both director and writer being members of the American Communist Party also had a role in the production. Famed filmmaker Abraham Lincoln Polonsky (another leftist of the era) once told Maltz, “You don’t have to understand religion in order for it to have an effect on you.”⁴⁹ This is to say, Maltz’s left leanings would find their way into his writing whether he was aware of them or not. It also tells us that the political and cultural climate one is working in can have a heavy hand in what is produced. This group of filmmakers also believed in making socially poignant film without compromising the entertainment value.⁵⁰ Maltz did not need to reach very far. Greene provided him everything he needed. He just had to make it American. The sentiments of these writers and artists are put into words best by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner:

They believed in unionism for themselves and others in Hollywood. They believed in defeating fascism, racism and anti-Semitism. They believed in the Soviet Union, even if most believed in Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal almost as strongly and as far more appropriate for America. They believed that global socialism was...probably inevitable, including the United States sometime in the future. But for them, as artists, for the most part as Jews in a world of pervasive anti-Semitism, and as successful American professionals, millenarianism mainly offered a necessary, ethical conclusion to history, a redemption of the

⁴⁸ Biesen, 50-51.

⁴⁹ Buhle, 5.

⁵⁰ Buhle, 49.

materialistic wickedness and needless cruelty always evident in class society but especially so in the era of capitalist mass-production.

It is this sentiment that fashioned the changes to the novel in making it a film. Not only did Maltz make a propaganda piece for the war effort, but he supported his efforts in attempting to awaken the American people to the evils of unchecked capitalism. Greene gave him the story, Paramount provided the means and the political climate gave the proof and strength to his argument.

One must keep in mind that a film and a novel present “two different media of expression.”⁵¹ The Graham Greene novel *A Gun for Sale* (UK Title) was purchased by Paramount pictures on the prospect of making it into a propaganda film for the U.S. war effort. The novel underwent the usual changes necessary to turn one media into another, but other factors had a play on the end result, such as cultural and political climates and personal agendas.

The production was heavily influenced by United States culture and politics as the nation was propelled into war, controlled by censorship and the rise to power of House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that eventually fueled the Cold War. It is important to note that the message would not have been an effective piece of propaganda had it remained in its original setting. Resentments held by Americans for the British would have cooled any fluttering of outrage and no sense of national duty would be raised from something presented to them as a clearly British issue. The threat had to be to America and the writers provided what was required of them. However, the filmmakers, exercising their freedom of speech and right to dissention of a system that had failed its people, as evinced in the Depression, utilized their chosen media to reach people with their own message. To do this, Albert Maltz carefully maintained the

⁵¹ Philips, S.J., 16.

overarching warning about the evils of unchecked Capitalism the author of the novel had provided him. The anti-Semitism was squashed and the Catholic redemption ideology retained. Making effective use of the times, Maltz set his warning against the backdrop of an America recovering from the Depression with resonances of corporate greed at its root. The idea that another company was out to do in America was softened by the conclusion that the boss and his lackey were criminal subversives (as they hired Raven to kill the chemist). The whole story was safely tucked inside a tale of salvation through the ultimate sacrifice for the nation, embodied in the unlikely hero Raven. Essentially, the novel *A Gun for Sale* became an American film through the fascinating mire of politics and personal motives.

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