

Brainwashed

Where the “Manchurian Candidate” came from.

By [Louis Menand](#) September 8, 2003

Photograph by John Bryson / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty

Most people know John Frankenheimer’s movie “The Manchurian Candidate,” which stars Frank Sinatra, Laurence Harvey, Janet Leigh, and Angela Lansbury in the story of an American soldier who is captured in Korea and programmed by Chinese Communists to kill on command. And most people probably think of the movie as a classic of Cold War culture, like “On the Beach” and “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”—a popular work articulating the anxieties of an era. In fact, “The Manchurian Candidate” was a flop. It was released in the fall of 1962, failed to recover its costs, and was pulled from distribution two years later, after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It turned up a few times on television, but it was not shown in a movie theatre again until 1987, which—nearly the end of the Cold War—is the year its popularity dates from. The true artifact of Cold War culture is the novel, by Richard Condon, that the movie was based on.

Condon’s book came out in 1959 and was a best-seller. It was praised in the *Times* (“a wild, vigorous, curiously readable melange”) and *The New Yorker* (“a wild and exhilarating satire”); *Time* named it one of the Ten Best Bad Novels—which, from a publisher’s point of view, is far from the worst thing that might be said about a book. The novel’s success made Condon rich; he spent most of the rest of his life abroad, producing many more works in the genre that *Time* had identified, including “Winter Kills,” in 1974, and, in 1982, “Prizzi’s Honor.” His adaptation of that novel for the John Huston movie received an Academy Award nomination in 1986. He

died in 1996.

Condon was a cynic of the upbeat type, not unlike Tom Wolfe: his belief that everything is basically shit did not get in the way of his pleasure in making fun of it. He learned that attitude in the finest school for it on earth, Hollywood. Before he was a novelist, Condon was a movie publicist. He began, in 1936, at Walt Disney Productions, where he promoted "Fantasia" and "Dumbo," among other animated masterpieces, and moved on to a succession of studios, finishing up at United Artists, which he left in 1957. He didn't know what he wanted to do next; he just wanted out. "The only thing I knew how to do was spell," he later explained, so he did the logical thing and became a writer. Condon claimed that his work in Hollywood had given him three ulcers. He also claimed that he had seen, during his years there, ten thousand movies, an experience that he believed gave him (his words) "an unconscious grounding in storytelling."

Frankenheimer called "The Manchurian Candidate" "one of the best books I ever read," but admirers of Frankenheimer's movie have not been so gracious. Greil Marcus, in a characteristically overheated appreciation of the movie in the British Film Institute's Film Classics series, calls the novel a "cheaply paranoid fantasy," and he goes on, "That the story would lodge in the nation's psyche and stay there was the work of other hands." The film historian David Thomson describes it as "a book written so that an idiot could film it." No doubt Condon wrote "The Manchurian Candidate" with a movie deal in mind. It was his second novel; his first, called "The Oldest Confession," was also made into a movie—"The Happy Thieves," starring Rex Harrison (a flop that stayed a flop). But the claim that Condon's "Manchurian Candidate" is not much more than a draft for the screenplay (which was written by George Axelrod, the author of "The Seven Year Itch") is peculiar. Michael Crichton writes books that any idiot can film; he practically supplies camera angles. But Condon's is not an

easy book to film, in part because its tone is not readily imitated cinematically, and in part because much of it is, or was in 1962, virtually unfilmable. Strange as the movie is—a thriller teetering on the edge of camp—the book is stranger.

Time, a magazine whose editors, after all, have daily experience with overcooked prose, was not wrong in seeing something splendid in the badness of Condon's book. "The Manchurian Candidate" may be pulp, but it is very tony pulp. It is a man in a tartan tuxedo, chicken à la king with shaved truffles, a signed LeRoy Neiman. It's Mickey Spillane with an M.F.A., and a kind of summa of the styles of paperback fiction circa 1959. The writing is sometimes hardboiled:

The slightest touchy thing he said to her could knock the old cat over sideways with an off-key moan. But what could he do? He had elected himself Head Chump when he stepped down from Valhalla and telephoned this sweaty little advantage-taker.

Sometimes it adopts a police-blotter, "degree-zero" mode:

"Thank you, Major. Dismiss," the general said. Marco left the office at four twenty-one in the afternoon. General Jorgenson shot himself to death at four fifty-five.

Occasionally, and usually in an inconvenient place, it drops a *mot recherché*:

Raymond's mother came out of her chair, spitting langrel. ["Langrel": irregular pieces of iron loaded into shell casings for the purpose of ripping the enemy's sails in naval battles; obsolete.]

He clutched the telephone like an osculatorium and did not allow himself to think about what lay beyond that instant. ["Osculatorium":

medieval Latin, for a tablet that is kissed during the Mass. There appears to be no connotation involving clutching.]

It signals feeling by waxing poetic:

Such an instant ago he had paddled their wide canoe across that lake of purple wine toward a pin of light high in the sky which would widen and widen and widen while she slept until it had blanched the blackness.

It signals wisdom by waxing incomprehensible:

There is an immutable phrase at large in the languages of the world that places fabulous ransom on every word in it: The love of a good woman. It means what it says and no matter what the perspective or stains of the person who speaks it, the phrase defies devaluing. The bitter and the kind can chase each other around it, this mulberry bush of truth and consequence, and the kind may convert the bitter and the bitter may emasculate the kind but neither can change its meaning because the love of a good woman does not give way to arbitrage.

And, when appropriate, it salivates:

Her lithe, solid figure seemed even more superb because of her flawless carriage. She wore a Chinese dressing gown of a shade so light that it complemented the contrasting color of her eyes. Her long and extremely beautiful legs were stretched out before her on the chaise longue, and any man but her son or her husband, seeing what she had and yet knowing that this magnificent forty-nine-year-old body was only a wasted uniform covering blunted neural energy, might have wept over such a waste.

Some people like their bananas ripe to the point of blackness. "The Manchurian Candidate" is a very ripe banana, and, for those who have the taste for it, delectable.

The magnificent forty-nine-year-old body in the last passage belongs to the mother of Raymond, the assassin, who in Frankenheimer's movie is played by Angela Lansbury as a proper and steely middle-aged matron. For Condon, though, Raymond's mother is no matron. She is a sexually predatory heroin addict who commits double incest. She is the serpent in the suburban garden of Cold War domesticity, and, in imagining her and her history, Condon almost certainly had in the back of his mind the book that, three years earlier, had become the first blockbuster in American publishing, Grace Metalious's "Peyton Place"—a story that also had to be sanitized for the movies. The plot of "Peyton Place" turns on incest (as, for that matter, does the plot of "Lolita," a sensation when the American edition came out, in 1958). But the luridness of Condon's novel did not make it to the screen. There is no equivalent in the movie, for example, of the proto-Pynchonesque sequence in which Raymond's stepfather, Johnny Iselin, attempts to have sex with an Eskimo. Frankenheimer's idea of satire was a lot more conventional than Condon's. He was also a Hollywood filmmaker, of course, and obliged to observe a different decorum.

Counterintuitive as it sounds, the secret to making a successful thriller, as Michael Crichton and Tom Clancy have demonstrated, is to slow down the action occasionally with disquisitions on Stuff It Is Interesting to Know—how airplanes are made, how nuclear submarines work, how to build an atomic bomb. Ideally, this information is also topical, food for the national appetite of the day. In "The Manchurian Candidate," the topic is brainwashing.

Fear of Communist brainwashing seems an example of Cold War hysteria,

but in the nineteen-fifties the fear was not without basis. United Nations ground forces began military action in Korea on July 5, 1950. On July 9th, an American soldier who had been captured just two days earlier delivered a radio speech consisting of North Korean propaganda. Similar broadcasts by captured soldiers continued throughout the war. At the end of the war, the Army estimated that one out of every seven American prisoners of war had collaborated with the enemy. (The final, generally accepted estimate is one out of ten.) Twenty-one Americans refused to return to the United States; forty announced that they had become Communists; and fourteen were court-martialled, and eleven of those were convicted.

The term "brainwashing" was coined by a journalist named Edward Hunter, who had served in the Morale Operations section of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services during the Second World War, which he spent mostly in Asia, and who became an outspoken anti-Communist. Hunter's book "Brainwashing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's Minds" appeared in 1951. In it, he explained that "brainwashing" was his translation of the Chinese term *hsi-nao*, which means "cleansing of the mind," and which he said he had heard frequently when speaking with Europeans who had been caught inside China in 1949, the year of Mao's revolution.

In 1955, two years after the armistice ending the Korean War, the Army issued a huge report on the treatment of American prisoners called "POW: The Fight Continues After the Battle." The Army had interviewed all surviving prisoners of war on the ships that brought them back across the Pacific—more than four thousand soldiers—and had learned that many of them underwent intensive indoctrination by Chinese Communists. The Chinese had carefully segregated the prisoners they had identified as incorrigibles, sometimes housing them in separate camps, and had subjected the prisoners they judged to be potential converts to five hours

of indoctrination a day, in classes that combined propaganda by the instructors with “confessions” by the prisoners. In some cases, physical torture accompanied the indoctrination, but in general the Chinese used the traditional methods of psychological coercion: repetition and humiliation. The Army discovered that a shocking number of prisoners had, to one degree or another, succumbed. Some were persuaded to accuse the United States, in signed statements, of engaging in germ warfare—a charge that was untrue but was widely believed in many countries.

The Army report instigated a popular obsession with brainwashing that lasted well into 1957. Stories about the experiences of American prisoners appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, the *Times Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*. The term itself became a synonym for any sort of effective persuasion, and writers struggled with the question of whether aspects of contemporary American life, such as advertising and psychiatric therapy, might really be forms of brainwashing. Condon must have read much of this material; he did know Andrew Salter’s “Conditioned Reflex Therapy” (1949), a book he has the Chinese psychiatrist in his novel, Yen Lo, cite in the speech in which he announces his successful brainwashing of the American prisoners. Yen Lo names a number of other studies of hypnosis and conditioning, including “The Seduction of the Innocent,” by Frederic Wertham, an alarmist account of the way comic books corrupt the minds of American youth. (Yen Lo evidently has, in addition to his other exceptional powers, a crystal ball, since “Seduction of the Innocent” was not published until 1954, after the Korean War was over.) These books and articles apparently persuaded Condon that brainwashing, or psychological conditioning using a combination of hypnosis and Pavlovian methods, was a real possibility—as the recent experience of the Korean P.O.W.s had persuaded many other Americans that it was.

Condon's book played on the fear that brainwashing could be permanent, that minds could be altered forever. By the time Frankenheimer's movie came out, though, it had become clear that most conditioning is temporary. In 1961, in "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China," the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who had conducted some of the shipboard interviews with returning P.O.W.s, concluded that the indoctrination of prisoners was a long-term failure. All of the "converts" eventually returned to the United States, and the former prisoners who had come home praising the good life to be had in North Korea soon reverted to American views.

Still, conditioning is the theme (if "theme" is not too grand a term) of Condon's novel. Even before Raymond falls into the hands of Yen Lo, he is psychologically conditioned, by his mother's behavior, to despise everyone. His mother is conditioned, by her early incest, to betray everyone. And the American people are conditioned, by political propaganda, to believe her McCarthy-like husband's baseless charges about Communists in the government. It is not, in Condon's vision, the Communist world on one side and the free world on the other. It is just the manipulators and the manipulated, the conditioners and the conditioned, the publicists and the public. In such a world, it's probably better to be the publicist, if you can deal with the ulcers.

Frank Sinatra, who plays Marco, the only friend Raymond has, is supposed to have asked his friend Jack Kennedy for his approval before Frankenheimer's movie was released. United Artists was apparently afraid that the assassination scene might give some nut an idea. Kennedy, as it happened, loved the movie; he was, after all, the world's most famous Ian Fleming fan. He was killed a year after "The Manchurian Candidate" came out. Did Lee Harvey Oswald see it? The problem has been examined in depth by John Loken, in a book called "Oswald's Trigger Films" (2000).

Loken concludes that although the evidence is not definitive, Oswald almost certainly did see it. "The Manchurian Candidate" opened in Dallas in November, 1962, and played there for several months; Oswald, who was living in Dallas at the time, had a habit of going to the movies by himself (he was in a movie theatre when he was arrested on November 22, 1963); and Loken has determined that the bus Oswald probably took to work passed within ten yards of a theatre where the movie was playing. (Loken is much struck by the fact that references to "The Manchurian Candidate" are almost nonexistent in the literature, official and otherwise, on the Kennedy assassination. He concludes, in the spirit of all scholars of that assassination, that "the probable Oswald connection, so utterly obvious if one but thinks about it, has been suppressed for decades by a powerful conglomerate that might aptly be called the 'media-entertainment complex.' ")

Immediately after Kennedy was shot, Condon got a call from a newspaper reporter asking if he felt responsible. Condon couldn't see the relevance, and he was not being defensive. He had not introduced political assassination to popular American culture. Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" was published in 1946 and was made into a movie in 1949; a version for television, directed by Sidney Lumet, was broadcast in 1958. Assassination is the subject of John Huston's "We Were Strangers" (1949) and Lewis Allen's "Suddenly" (1954), also starring Frank Sinatra. Oswald might easily have seen those movies as well. More to the point: "The Manchurian Candidate" is the story of a man programmed to kill at the command of other people. What self-respecting assassin would take such a character for his role model? Either Oswald acted according to his own wishes, in which case he wasn't imitating Condon's killer, or he really was programmed by the Communists, in which case the question isn't whether Oswald saw Frankenheimer's movie but whether his Communist masters

did.

United Artists withdrew "The Manchurian Candidate" from theatres in 1964, although the movie could occasionally be seen on television and in art houses. In 1972, Sinatra bought the rights and, in 1975, removed it from circulation entirely. Whether or not he was motivated by guilt over Kennedy's death is unclear. He did, however, give his daughter Tina permission to produce a remake, and it is being shot, this fall, by Jonathan Demme. (Demme's previous movie, "The Truth About Charlie," was also a remake, of Stanley Donen's "Charade," of 1963. His method, judging from that effort, is to update the story and then salt it with allusions to the period of the original. "Charade" was filmed in Paris at the time of the French New Wave, and so in Demme's version there are appearances by Charles Aznavour, Agnès Varda, and the grave of François Truffaut—none of which have anything to do with the story. Demme has reportedly set "The Manchurian Candidate" in the time of the Gulf War; Liev Schreiber plays Raymond, Meryl Streep is his dragon mother, and Marco is played by Denzel Washington. We can be fairly confident that at some point Denzel Washington will be seen listening to a Frank Sinatra song.)

The Kennedy assassination does not fulfill Condon and Frankenheimer's prophecy. On the contrary, it buries it. If any assassin might plausibly have been a Communist puppet, it was Oswald, a man who had lived in the Soviet Union for three years, who had a Russian wife, and who once handed out leaflets for an outfit called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. These facts were widely known within hours of Oswald's arrest, and yet the theory that he was an agent who was directed, wittingly or not, by Communist handlers has never been an important part of the folklore of the Kennedy assassination. Until the late nineteen-seventies, the official line (endorsed, incidentally, by Condon at the time) was that Oswald acted alone. Dissenters from that view have been drawn mainly to theories

involving the Mafia and the Central Intelligence Agency, even though hooking Oswald up with those entities requires a far greater imaginative stretch than associating him with the Soviets. Almost no one thinks of Kennedy (except in some convoluted way) as a casualty of the Cold War, and his death does not represent the culmination of the national anxiety about Communist infiltration. It represents the end of that obsession, and of the panic that Condon's novel and Frankenheimer's movie both so happily exploit. ♦