

*The Manchurian Candidate* – comments

*The Manchurian Candidate* is a chilling story about how the national security of the United States is compromised. The story includes several memorable characters: Sergeant Raymond Shaw, Major Bennett Marco, Senator John Yerkes Iselin, Senator Thomas Jordan, and Jocelyn Jordan. However, one character dominates the story: Senator Iselin's wife, Mrs. Eleanor Shaw Iselin, played with exceeding effectiveness by Angela Lansbury. Mrs. Iselin is one of the most detestable characters in the history of Hollywood cinema. She is a cold-blooded manipulator and murderer. Sam Spade and Mike Hammer would have had no chance against her. She is too ruthless. She is a Fifth-columnist, a Quisling, and a Benedict Arnold all wrapped up into one, but worse because she is essentially apolitical, which makes her actions seem even more irrational. She is not preaching the party line. She believes in one thing only: Mrs. Iselin. She will stop at nothing to achieve her aim, which is absolute power. She is a megalomaniac. There is nothing too low that she won't do to achieve her goal, which includes committing incest with her hapless and troubled son, Sergeant Shaw, whose surly yet pliable nature fits perfectly into her sordid and nefarious plan. Mrs. Iselin is even more sinister in the way she wraps herself in the mantle of patriotism to disguise her wicked scheme. Who could ever suspect that such a patriotic flag-waving American, married to a loud, brash, commie-baiting US senator, would be plotting her country's downfall? Only one person knows: Sergeant Shaw.

But is Mrs. Iselin really in control of her actions? As the movie depicts, victims of brain washing are not even aware that they are being controlled. Indeed, it is unclear whether Mrs. Iselin herself is acting on cue from her handlers, or is she taking the initiative and using her handlers for "technical support" instead. Is she the master operative or the tool? The idea that outside forces hostile to the United States could plant operatives inside highest levels of power gives cause for concern, because it could happen. Such concern is as relevant today as it was during the Cold War, which is why, in the post 9-11 world, this movie, although released in 1962, would resonate with today's audience.

Is this movie *film noir*? It has the trappings of *film noir* – the black and white photography, the dysfunctional characters, the violence, the odd camera angles – yet deals with such a wide range of sub-textual themes – political, international, social, societal, familial, military, and psychological – and tells a story set in locations so far-flung – from Korea to Washington, DC to New York City, that it may not fit in the *film noir* genre. This movie is not a crime drama. There is no detective getting caught up in a quest for a McGuffin and the bad guys are not street hoodlums, but rather Soviet operatives using a radical method of behavioral conditioning to infiltrate and subvert the government of the United States. This makes the movie either a political drama or a war movie depicting a new and insidious kind of psychological warfare based on mind control.