

# *Seberg*: The story of actress Jean Seberg racialized and trivialized

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Amazon Studios' recent release, *Seberg*, is a fictional retelling of the tragic story of iconoclastic actress Jean Seberg by director Benedict Andrews, writers Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse.

The film, originally titled *Against All Enemies*, was premiered in Venice in August 2019 and shown at the Toronto International Film Festival a month later. It was intended for release in theaters in January 2020, by Universal Pictures. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted screenings, and Amazon purchased distribution rights in February, retitling it *Seberg*.

Jean Seberg was a significant and courageous figure whose story deserves telling accurately. As an artist, her performance, alongside Jean-Paul Belmondo, in *Breathless*, Jean-Luc Godard's seminal 1960 film, helped launch the French "New Wave" movement in cinema. In addition, she featured in Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan* (1957) and *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), Robert Rossen's *Lilith* (1964), Irvin Kershner's *A Fine Madness* (1966) and Claude Chabrol's *The Road to Corinth* (1967), among others.

Seberg had her life tragically and deliberately destroyed by the FBI because of her sympathy for and association with radical causes, including the Black Panther Party. Seberg became a target by the time, in 1969, Director J. Edgar Hoover identified the Black Panthers as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" and ordered round-the-clock surveillance under his secret and illegal COINTELPRO operation.

The actress first became "collateral" and was then put directly "in the crosshairs" by Hoover. Seberg had long been sympathetic to the cause of equality. She was only one of many celebrities targeted by the FBI, including Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Vanessa Redgrave and, a bit later, former Beatle John Lennon. Largely as a result of the political and psychological pressure, Seberg committed suicide in 1979, at the age of 40.

The problem with Andrews' *Seberg* is that history is used here primarily as a stylized backdrop to pull the viewer, in the director's words, "into an emotional experience" that burrows its "way into your dreams." The underlying assumption is a common one of contemporary filmmakers: that audience members don't want to concern themselves with historical "nuances." They just want a good, i.e., a palatable story. *Seberg* reveals the creators' embarrassing lack of interest in the social and historical context of Seberg's time.

Artistic license is reasonable in cinema when used in the service of a greater truth. On the other hand, however, our age is characterized by vast official falsification and deception intended to keep the population unaware and suppressed.

Unhappily, Andrews and the writers made the decision to craft their narrative in a way that ties the antagonists—the FBI, the black militant

movement and the actress—into a neat, "interactive" package that largely excludes the overall character of the period in question and distorts the real nature of all three phenomena.

From the outset, the filmmakers play fast and loose with history. The significance of the May-June events in 1968 in France is played down, while the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in April of the same year doesn't merit a mention. This was a time of rebellions and confrontations with the authorities in every major US city, the assassination of presidential candidate Robert Kennedy, widespread opposition to the war in Vietnam, police riots against demonstrators at the Democratic convention in Chicago, where Hubert Humphrey, the vice president under the hated Lyndon Johnson, was selected to run against Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon. The Vietnam war continued to rage under Nixon with secret bombings in Laos and Cambodia.

In conformity with the racialism so widespread in liberal and "left" political circles today, all social ills are reduced in *Seberg* to racism. There is no doubt that Hoover was a racist. But Hoover, above all, was an anticommunist and a ferocious opponent of social revolution. The FBI under his direction had spied on King since the early 1960s and used intimidation and blackmail to try to "neutralize" him and the civil rights movement as a whole, considering it Communist-inspired. Though the Red Scare ostensibly ended with the exposure of Senator Joe McCarthy in the mid-1950s, combating leftist influence remained the central preoccupation of the FBI. The secret and illegal COINTELPRO operation of "surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting, and disrupting" all oppositional organizations, was launched in 1956, officially ended in 1979, but its practices continue to this day.

The Black Panthers' founding in Oakland, California in October 1966 quickly attracted African Americans across the country, particularly after the assassination of King, a proponent of nonviolence, 17 months later. By 1969, the organization tried to orient itself to other oppositional forces in the US, not just blacks, and to left-wing ideology. That made them more dangerous in the view of the FBI. Every means was used to destroy or neutralize the Panthers, up to and including murder, as committed in Chicago in a predawn raid against 21-year-old leader Fred Hampton in December 1969 while he was in his bed.

Kristen Stewart, with the reputation as a nonconformist, performs the title role. Her acting is impressive, but it can't compensate for the glaring problems lodged in the artistic decisions that were made well before shooting began.

The pre-credit fades from black as heavy, labored breathing gets louder. An innocent and fearful Jean Seberg appears. Wrapped in heavy chains, her angelic face grows more anxious. A camera crew

zooms in on her and suddenly, intense flames surround her while her anxiety turns to terror as the fiery inferno engulfs her.

The scene symbolically establishes Seberg as a victim by evoking her first film role as the title character in Preminger's *Saint Joan* (adapted by Graham Greene from George Bernard Shaw's play about Joan of Arc). There is more to be said on this later.

The film opens in May 1968 with a fictionalized scene in Seberg's Paris apartment. Her husband, Romain Gary, played by Yvan Attal, is an established French novelist and diplomat. He fought with Charles de Gaulle's Free French forces during World War II and was secretary of the French delegation to the United Nations and later France's Consul General in Los Angeles, where he became involved in the film industry.

Gary is watching the television news, which, the viewer is led to assume, is reporting on the unfolding of the revolutionary May-June general strike. He tells Jean, rushing to catch a flight to Hollywood, that he can't accompany her because striking students have put up barricades at the Sorbonne. Jean is clearly uninterested and retorts that if she needs to find him, she will only have to look for the prettiest students.

In fact, Jean was in the US during the French May-June events. Gary was with her until very late in May when he returned to Paris while she began filming the musical *Paint Your Wagon* (1969). The film's Paris scene establishes once more that Jean is a victim, in this case, of infidelity.

The French popular uprising was so thoroughgoing that it challenged the capitalist de Gaulle regime, forcing the leader to flee the country at one point. Those events were very much a part of the radicalization of masses all over the world, including in the US. Gary's interest in those events was not just a passing one. He was sufficiently in sympathy with the strikes to resign his position as adviser to the French government as a result.

Why include such a sequence only to pass it over with indifference or inattention? It is needed so Jean can be placed in a subsequent scene where, on the flight to Los Angeles, black nationalist Hakim Jamal (Anthony Mackie) creates a disturbance, demanding seats in the upper level of the Boeing 747, and meets Seberg for the first time. (Interestingly, the 747 wasn't introduced into commercial service until 1970, over a year and a half after that scene was to have taken place.) The relationship between the two becomes the basis for the FBI's lie planted in the press about Seberg being pregnant with the baby of a Black Panther.

More significantly, in the screenplay's most absurd veering from the truth, the first few minutes of the film introduce Jack Solomon (Jack O'Connell), a fictional and improbable "good guy" FBI agent. Jack is the agent who first requests permission from his superiors for full round-the-clock surveillance on Seberg, but then quickly (too quickly, unrealistically) becomes the conscience of the story as he develops a peculiar, bordering on perverse, empathy with his target.

Much of the drama in Seberg revolves around this rather silly invention. Jack's foil is his brutish and racist fellow agent Carl (Vince Vaughn). In a scene at Carl's home, Jack and his wife Linette (Margaret Qually) have been invited to dinner. Before dinner, Carl shows Jack a pornographic flyer, a cartoon of a black man and a white woman, drawn as a pig, having sex, under a racial expletive in large bold letters. Later, sitting down around the dining table, Carl proceeds to emotionally abuse each of his family members. He is a stereotypical monster.

It is Carl, after listening to a surveillance tape of Seberg saying she

is pregnant, who proposes she be "neutralized" by leaking the story to local gossip columnists that she is having a Black Panther's child. When Jack gets wind of the scheme, he barges into a meeting of local FBI chief Frank Scully, played by the wonderful character actor Colm Meaney, and Carl, to voice his opposition to it.

The film presents moments of Seberg's explosive rise to fame through the eyes of the FBI. Stewart flawlessly recreates critical sequences in Seberg's early life in front of the camera, including the clip of her 1956 interview by director Otto Preminger. She prevails over almost 20,000 hopefuls in a globally publicized star search for the lead role in Preminger's upcoming *Saint Joan*. She shows herself to be a talented and determined—and young, not quite 18—actress who has what the renowned director calls a "captivating personality."

The film refers to Jean's sympathy for the cause of equality, displayed when she insisted on joining the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at the age of 14, defying her father's warning that people would think she was a Communist. This was 1951 or 1952, at the height of the Red Scare.

The film journeys into fantasy when Seberg declares (during a contrived press conference after a miscarriage caused by the emotional anxiety resulting from the FBI's dirty tricks and attacks on her): "We are all responsible. We are all culpable. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but if we refuse to accept the lies, I believe one day the truth will be revealed." The speech is meant to be moving, but it is largely brainless.

At any rate, being deeply affected by the press conference (which never occurred) in the FBI's offices, Solomon (the agent who never existed) listens to a surveillance tape where Hakim advises winning "one mind at a time. If you can change one mind you can change the world." In response, Solomon carries out a subversive scheme against the FBI that sets up a stupidly improbable denouement in which Solomon and Seberg meet.

The overlaid text in the epilogue implies that COINTELPRO was discovered and ended by Congress. In fact, US government spying on opposition forces has reached new and unprecedented heights in our day. Another implication is that Seberg's death in 1979 was somehow "suspect." The truth is, she was driven into paranoia and mental instability by continuing FBI and media attacks on her and her son. If the reader is interested in a more truthful account of Seberg's life, Garry McGee's *Jean Seberg—Breathless*, is one of the several biographies out there.



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