

Three filmmakers who were silenced

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The recent San Francisco film festival presented the work of three directors—American Abraham Polonsky, Frenchman Paul Carpita and Belgian Paul Meyer—who faced censorship or blacklisting in the postwar years as a result of their filmmaking efforts. The trio were on hand at the festival to discuss their movies and their experiences.

Polonsky, born in New York City in 1910, was permitted to make one extraordinary film, *Force of Evil* (1948), before the McCarthyite witch hunts halted his directing career. The film used the numbers racket, in Polonsky's words, “as a metaphor for capitalism in the US.” The film opens, on the eve of the Fourth of July, with the words, “This is Wall Street.” Crooked lawyer Joe Morse, superbly portrayed by John Garfield, tries to convince his brother to throw in his lot with the big criminals. “The money has no moral opinions,” he says at one point to his brother, who replies, “I find I have.”

Polonsky's screenplay is strong. Morse says of the man who corrupted him, “He opened his pocket and I jumped in.” The crime bosses conspire to allow the three-digit number ‘776’—which thousands bet on each July 4—to win, wiping out the local numbers ‘banks.’ As one explains, “We're normal financiers.” In one of the film's most memorable scenes, Morse both repels and charms his brother's young secretary in a taxi cab: “You want me to be wicked to you?...I'll give you money and sin.” In the end, after his brother's death, Morse has a change of heart. He says in a voice-over, “Something was horrible.... I decided to help.”

In an interview I asked Polonsky how he'd developed his ideas. “I was born into Depression, into the failure of [President Herbert] Hoover to do anything. My father was a socialist. The house was full of socialists. The attitude in our family was: if you're not smart enough to be a socialist, you're not smart enough to live.”

At a joint press conference I'd asked Polonsky, Carpita and Meyer why they thought the present period of social crisis had not yet produced artistic and intellectual ferment as similar periods in the past had done. Polonsky answered in one word: “Money.” In our interview, I remarked that there was also a lack of interest in social problems on the part of many filmmakers.

“Everything always changes,” he said. I remarked that I thought the beginning of a change was taking place. “That'd be great,” he said cheerfully, “because it's awful now.” I agreed and added, “I think the black list and the anticommunist witch hunt have a great deal to do with the period we're living in now.” “Of course,” he said. I asked him: “What did the witch hunt do, in your opinion, not merely to the film industry, but to the social atmosphere as a whole?”

Polonsky said, “It made people afraid to have their own ideas. The blacklisting created self-censorship right throughout the community. Could you say something like that? Was that safe to think? It created

that atmosphere and we're not over it yet. That's much worse than the damage it did to some of the blacklisted movie people.”

I asked Polonsky about his blacklisting. He explained that he'd been in France when he received a subpoena. His wife tried to convince him to stay in Europe. “‘They're not going to chase me out of my own country.’ Very romantic attitude. So we went back. I got a job at 20th Century-Fox to write and direct a picture. Darryl Zanuck kept me working because he hated the blacklist. But there was too much publicity. So he said, work at home. Finally, he called me and apologized: ‘I have to do this. I'll pay you off, anyway.’”

I mentioned that the scenes between Garfield and Beatrice Pearson, as the secretary, were among the most enduring. He held up a closed empty fist and quoted Garfield's character, “What have I got in my hand?... A ruby.” “Why does she fall for him?”, I asked. “Why not? He's attractive, he really loves her. He doesn't know who else to love. He's different from anyone she's ever had anything to do with. She's really honest. He never tells her the truth. He tries and tries to tell her the truth. And he courts her in a strange kind of way.”

Along with works like Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*—also made in 1948—*Force of Evil* was one of those films which made clear what postwar America was going to be like. It's no wonder Polonsky was prevented from making another for 20 years.

The story French filmmaker Paul Carpita has to tell is an extraordinary one. Born in 1922 in a working class quarter of Marseilles, Carpita took part in the Resistance during World War II and joined the Communist Party. After the war he made newsreels and later, with the launching of the Cold War, ‘anti-newsreels,’ in Marseilles's streets and factories.

In 1950 the longshoremen in Marseilles walked out in a protest partially aimed against the French colonial war in Indochina. In a conversation Carpita explained that the longshoremen saw their work shrinking, as more and more of the port was turned over to military purposes. Also, they saw the soldiers going and the coffins coming back. The workers refused to load any more war materiel. The government tried various means to break the strike. Finally they got lumpen elements, criminals and the like, to work. The strike was lost and the local union crushed.

“After the strike people asked me, why don't you make a film, with a scenario and so on. *Le Rendez-vous des quais* [*Rendezvous on the docks*] took three years to make. I was an elementary school teacher. We shot on Sundays, during vacations. I shot scenes during other strikes. The film was only finished in 1955. When we finished we showed it in the biggest hall in Marseilles. People were very enthusiastic.”

Carpita recounted how his film was suppressed by the French government of Radical Edgar Faure. “At this particular showing, the film was already threaded in the projector. Three trucks of the CRS [national paramilitary force] showed up. They seized the film. They

said it was going to be destroyed. I was arrested. They said I'd filmed military operations in the port, that I was going to be charged with treason, etc. I was never charged. I was just sent to teach in a small village far away.”

I asked Carpita whether there had been a campaign to defend him and his film. The short answer was, no. “There was no reaction in the cinema world,” or among the intellectuals. What about the CGT [the Communist Party-led union], hadn't it uttered a peep?

Carpita then explained. “Well, the police took the film, and the negative disappeared too. I thought they had burned it all, like they said. But, in reality, it was the Communist Party which took the negative. They hid it. The war in Indochina was over, the Algerian war had begun. The Communist Party's position was ambiguous. The party's deputies had voted full powers to [new Prime Minister] Guy Mollet. They didn't want to bring up this history. I only found this out years later, when the negative turned up in an archive. I went crazy, I was furious when I found out. It wasn't the CP which made the *Le Rendez-vous des quais*, it was us, in Marseilles. It's some story, eh?” Apparently nothing about this incident or indeed the entire treacherous history of the Communist Party has led Carpita to consider critically his political outlook. He remains to this day a member of the French Stalinist party.

Le Rendez-vous des quais —not shown at the festival—was a significant achievement. Made exclusively with longshoremen and their families, it tells the story of two brothers who work on the docks. Carpita wears his heart on his sleeve, but the film is honest and sometimes touching.

Encouraged by the reaction to the film when it was finally brought to light and shown to the public in 1990, Carpita set about making a second film, *Quicksand*, which was presented at the festival. The new film tells a story about immigrant workers in the south of France in the late 1950s. Manuel, forced to leave Spain because he's killed one of Franco's policemen, finds work with a local architect set on making a fortune in shady real estate speculation. Under threat of being turned over to the authorities and deported, he confronts a variety of moral dilemmas.

Like Carpita's first film, *Quicksand* is not a study in subtlety. The director explained at the press conference that he'd made his new film as if the three-and-a-half-decade gap in his career had never taken place. Ignoring 35 years of history is not necessarily anything to boast about. In his film, the workers suffer humiliations and oppression, but they always retain their honor and class consciousness. The picture which emerges catches at certain aspects of reality, but it feels as though it's being shaped to fit into Carpita's simplified, ahistorical view of the social process.

Perhaps the most beautiful film—also with an extraordinary history—presented at the festival was Paul Meyer's *From the Branches Drops the Withered Blossom*. In 1958 the Belgian Ministry of National Education asked Meyer, who'd worked as a theater director for years, to make a short film on the conditions of the children of immigrant workers in the Borinage, a coal-mining region of Belgium. “Of course,” explained Meyer in an interview, “they wanted me to show how well the children were adapting.”

Meyer continued, “We went to the region. It was January and February of 1958. The workers were in the midst of a strike. They had just learned that the coal mining industry was going to be rationalized and that all the mines in the region were to be closed very soon. It wasn't possible to make the film. We returned in August. We soon realized that we couldn't make the planned film. There had been no

adaptation, nothing had been organized for the immigrants or their children. We decided to show things honestly. I showed a rough cut to the government bureaucrats. It didn't go well. They had all sorts of proposals. One said, make 20 minutes of no matter what, we'll accept it. I said, I'll make a feature film for the same money as you paid for a short. It was very difficult.”

The political situation in Belgium was tense. “We made the film in a period of relative calm,” Meyer noted, “between the strikes in the Borinage and the general strike of 1961. I was glad about that. We didn't want to show big demonstrations, we wanted to show daily life.”

Meyer's film recounts the first day of an Italian immigrant family in the Borinage and the last day of Domenico, another immigrant, who is returning home after 17 years working in France and Belgium. Quietly, patiently, the film shows what life is like for the children of the immigrants—at school, at a dance, at play. The film is suffused with regret, longing.

In the final sequence, Domenico says good-bye to those he's leaving behind. It's night. In a long shot we see him leaving the company of friends and standing outside the lighted house. One of the immigrant teenagers, Valentin, is there as well. The two stand still, apart, on the edge of the darkness. I asked Meyer about the character of Valentin. “He's a boy who has lost his parents, who lives with his uncle who is never there. He is representative to me of a certain type of worker who came to Belgium who were used to working in the open air. And they had to work underground in the mines. From this point of view, this kid deprived of tenderness and affection, represents the drama of the immigrants. And perhaps something more than that.”

After finishing the film, which the government didn't want anything to do with, Meyer showed it in Brussels and Mons and sent it to a number of festivals abroad, where it received prizes and critical praise. In Belgium, however, Meyer was accused of misusing public funds and had to spend decades paying off the accumulated debts. He went to work in television and hasn't made another film until the present day. He now plans to make a new film on the children of those he filmed in 1958.

I asked Meyer as well whether there had been protests on behalf of his film. “There was no fuss. The Left and culture, it's a problem, you know. I showed the film to the secretary general of the Communist Party—a very nice man. He said to me: ‘Ah, it's so pessimistic, it's so pessimistic. Why didn't you put flowers on the window sills?’”

The encounters with Polonsky, Carpita and Meyer and their films were fascinating. The personal fates of these three men, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, are bound up with significant—and unresolved—historical and artistic problems. In addition, the severity of the censorship which they confronted underscores the political fragility of the postwar era, which is often superficially perceived as free of potential danger for the existing social order. What was meted out to them also points to the great power of the film image and the extreme nervousness which critical-minded cinema generates within the ruling classes. The festival is to be congratulated for presenting these filmmakers and their films.



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