Why was Stanley Kramer so unfashionable at the time of his death?

David Walsh
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American film director and producer Stanley Kramer, who died February 22 in Woodland Hills, California, was one of those unfortunate once-prominent artists who are best known by the time of their death, fairly or unfairly, for their defects and limitations. The producer of *Champion* (1949), *Home of the Brave* (1949) and *The Wild One* (1954) and director of *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *On the Beach* (1959) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), Kramer's reputation as the somewhat heavy-handed conveyor of liberal themes and sentiments attached itself to any discussion of his work. He was known for his concerns with racism (*Home of the Brave*, *The Defiant Ones* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* [1967]), fascism (*Judgment at Nuremberg*, *Ship of Fools* (1965) and war (*On the Beach*).

Kramer, never apparently on the radical left even in his youth, associated himself with New Deal liberalism. In a revealing comment, he told writer Donald Spoto in the late 1970s: “I was brought into the film world in the era of Franklin Roosevelt, an era noted for the ‘liberal approach.' Now nothing is more anathema in the present day than the liberal approach—it's called the failure approach. That's the one that promised a good deal and didn't deliver it. I have been the flag-bearer of that viewpoint, and therefore somewhat viciously attacked along the way for being part of a ‘do-good' era. But I never started off a film with a message. If to make a film contemporary and provocative, if to make film drama out of what is already drama, is to communicate a ‘message,' then I am guilty.” (Donald Spoto, *Stanley Kramer: Film maker*, 1978)

It seems reasonable to ask whether it was Kramer's cinematic infelicities or his increasingly unfashionable political views that brought about the precipitous decline in his standing in the late 1960s and 1970s, or whether it was perhaps a peculiar combination of the two. We need to look briefly at his life and career.

Kramer was born in Manhattan in September 1913. His parents separated when he was young. His mother worked for Paramount Pictures; an uncle also worked in the film business. Kramer graduated from New York University, a private institution, at 19 and immediately moved out to Hollywood with the intention of writing films. After some initial difficulties he landed a job in MGM's research department, working his way up to editor and screenwriter. In 1942 he worked as executive assistant to the producer on *The Moon and Sixpence*. After three years in the army he returned to the film industry. In 1947 Kramer formed an independent film company along with Carl Foreman, the writer/producer later blacklisted and exiled in England, and a few others.

Kramer's first serious effort as a producer was *Champion* (1949), a hard-nosed account of a boxer's rise to the top over the bodies of just about everyone close to him. The film, directed by Mark Robson and starring Kirk Douglas, is a competent and sometimes compelling work, a study in corruption. Arthur Kennedy and Paul Stewart are excellent in supporting roles. Foreman, in an interview with Bertrand Tavernier and Pierre Rissient (included in *Amis Américains* by Tavernier, 1993), asserted that Kramer “was not terribly interested in the shooting and preferred to stay in his office. On the other hand, I was always on the set, in as much as Robson, like [director Fred] Zinnemann, often had difficulty directing actors. They concerned themselves above all with technique. But Kramer played a large role in the editing stage. He was a tremendous, virile editor.”

The next of Kramer's productions, *Home of the Brave*, is considered the first Hollywood film to tackle the issue of racism. It concerns a squad of soldiers sent on a dangerous mission behind Japanese lines in World War II. The black member of the group, Peter Moss (James Edwards), is an old high school buddy of one of the white soldiers (played by Lloyd Bridges). One of the other squad members is an open racist. When the Bridges character utters a racial epithet at a desperate moment and subsequently dies in his old friend's arms, Moss cracks up. The story is told in flashback in conversations between a psychiatrist and the black soldier.

The film, based on a play by Arthur Laurents about anti-Semitism, has some interesting and convincing moments. Again, character actors, Frank Lovejoy and Steve Brodie this time, play a major role. The action is a bit overheated and contrived, and the psychiatry on the dimestore side, but it took some courage to make the film. Kramer, Foreman and Robson deserve credit for that. To forestall studio interference or pressure, the film was “planned, written, cast and produced in absolute privacy” (Spoto). Hundreds of crew members, technicians and film laboratory workers were sworn to secrecy. The film proved a success at the box office.

Kramer has the claim to fame of bringing Marlon Brando to the screen for the first time, in *The Men* (1950), directed by Fred Zinnemann, again scripted by Foreman. For this story about the plight of paraplegic war veterans, Brando went to live for a month with paralyzed soldiers, staying in a wheel chair and hooking himself up to a catheter. The film has its false moments, but there is something touching and sympathetic about the central dilemma, the difficult relations between a paraplegic veteran and his young bride.

Kramer's credit for producing *High Noon* is somewhat questionable. Both Zinnemann and Foreman, director and writer once more, assert that he had nothing to do with it. Foreman told Tavernier and Rissient: “Kramer, not concerning himself with a film which he didn't believe in, had left for Columbia to prepare an ambitious series of films with [director and informer Edward] Dmytryk... I was thus the producer of the film and I chose Zinnemann, who wanted to make a Western at any cost.”

High Noon follows the efforts of a beleaguered small-town sheriff on the eve of retirement, Will Kane (Gary Cooper), to round up support for an impending confrontation with a gang seeking his death. Each man he asks has an excuse. Kane's wife too, a violence-hating Quaker, threatens to abandon him. In the end the sheriff has to meet the desperadoes on his own. As Kane and his wife leave town, after the shoot-out, he throws his badge to the ground.

Foreman intended the film to be a parable about the McCarthyite witch-hunt, of which he was about to be a victim. A certain confusion about this has been aroused by the presence of Gary Cooper, who was one of the

first actors to denounce the Communist Party before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). According to Foreman, Cooper's attitude was more complex than that. The actor had considered himself generally on the left during his youth, Foreman insisted, but felt that he had been exploited by the latter and abandoned it. Cooper made *High Noon* understanding that it was an anti-HUAC work and supported Foreman when, part way through the shooting, he was denounced.

Putting a good face on things, Spoto asserts that, “Stanley Kramer's involvement in these unfortunate proceedings [the anti-Communist witch-hunt and blacklist] ... was never more than marginal.” He goes on to write: “His partner, Carl Foreman, ran afoul of the committee [HUAC], was repudiated by Kramer (who subsequently bought Foreman's share of partnership in the Kramer company) and dismissed by him.” That Kramer betrayed his friend and colleague, Spoto considers “marginal.”

Perhaps by the standards of the day it was, but it seems to me that the devil's bargain Kramer made, as did countless American liberals, had to take its toll. The position of the anti-Communist liberal was essentially a dishonest and dirty one; he or she was obliged to cover up essential truths about American life—the existence of class exploitation, the brutal reality of US imperialism—and offer, with whatever degree of criticism, a sanitized and officially-approved version of social reality.

In Kramer's case, the witch-hunts probably did not bring about some kind of inner revolution, or counter-revolution. That is not a testament to his seriousness as an artist or a thinker. He could go on, relatively unaffected, because he had never been an opponent of capitalism to begin with. Nonetheless, I think it could be said that the enthusiasm and idealism of these first films are rarely matched in his later work.

The most notable film Kramer was associated with in the immediate post-HUAC period was *The Wild One* (1954), a story about bikers invading and disturbing the peace and quiet of a small California town, directed by Laslo Benedek. Brando, in leather jacket, jeans, cap and sunglasses, became an icon for the age. It contains the following immortal exchange between the “nice” girl (Mary Murphy) and Brando's character: “Johnny, what are you rebelling against?” “What have you got?”

Kramer begins directing

Following his work as producer on the uninspired version of *The Caine Mutiny* (directed by Dmytryk, whom Kramer hired as soon as his informing to HUAC and prison sentence—for not cooperating in his first appearance before the Committee—were at an end), Kramer began to direct his own pictures. His first two efforts were not memorable, but he returned to the question of race relations in 1958 in *The Defiant Ones*, starring Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis. The film concerns two escapees from a chain gang, one black and one white, who are forced to cooperate with one another to avoid capture. The film ends with the wounded or dying white man in the black man's arms, an image first used in *Home of the Brave*. This is generally considered one of Kramer's best works. Curtis, who insisted on his black co-star receiving top billing, and Poitier are energetic and convincing.

On the Beach has a terrible reputation, but a recent reviewing suggests that the film has some definite merits. Kramer, in fact, is generally not bad with his actors—relatively restrained and understated much of the time. Where he falls down almost completely is in translating abstract ideas into film language. Critic Andrew Sarris suggested that Kramer simply didn't know enough about his own medium. That may have been one of the problems.

Based on the novel by Nevil Shute, On the Beach contemplates the situation after a nuclear war, triggered by unknown events, has destroyed much of the planet. The events take place in Australia (Melbourne), where the population awaits the arrival of the radiation—in five months' time—that will finish off the human race. Gregory Peck, an American submarine commander who has lost his wife and children, falls for Ava Gardner, a local woman with a past. Anthony Perkins, as a young Australian navy lieutenant, and Donna Anderson, as his wife, make up the other central couple.

By the late 1950s some of the illusions in American society were beginning to dissipate. It had clearly not solved the problems of poverty and social inequality. A number of films of the day indicate the change in mood: Touch of Evil, Vertigo, Some Came Running, Bonjour Tristesse, Imitation of Life and Written on the Wind. The end of the McCarthyite period had seen the emergence of an anti-nuclear weapons and anti-Cold War movement, as well, of course, the social explosion bound up with the civil rights movement. On the Beach, in its limited fashion, no doubt speaks to some of these developments.

Certain things about the film, including its cinematography (the work of Giuseppe Rotunno, the director of photography on many important Italian films of the postwar period, including Visconti's Senso and The Leopard, as well as Fellini's Amarcord), stand up. Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck are unusually sprightly, especially considering this is, after all, a film about the end of the world, and Anthony Perkins is excellent. The horrors of nuclear war are hinted at, although not truly brought home. Unfortunately, Kramer cannot avoid the habit of underlining "important” points, generally with intrusive close-up, as he does in virtually every film. Largely because of its defects, On the Beach is the sort of film that made Kramer a favorite of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy.

All in all, Kramer's films become progressively less interesting as the postwar crisis of American capitalism emerges in the 1960s. His liberalism, which could appear timely or even ahead of its time, seemed more and more inappropriate or “ill-suited” to the age. *Inherit the Wind* (1960), based on the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee fictionalized drama about the Scopes anti-evolution trial of 1925, has its stirring moments. Spencer Tracy as the Clarence Darrow character and Fredric March as the demagogue based on William Jennings Bryan have a field day in their speechifying and harangues. The film takes the side of science, but is careful not to offend the religious. Tracy exits with a copy of Darwin under one arm and the Bible under the other, as the soundtrack bursts into “Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord” from The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Judgment at Nuremberg is a relatively sincere effort to deal with the trials of German officials, judges and prosecutors, responsible for carrying out the everyday orders of the Third Reich. Tracy, again Kramer's alter ego, is an American judge dispatched to preside over a war crimes tribunal in 1948. He comes under pressure from US government and military officials to go easy on the defendants, in the interests of gaining German support for the Cold War effort. He refuses and the defendants are sentenced to life in prison. A title at the end notes that of the 99 defendants tried at the time, none were still serving time in prison in 1961.

Much of the film is stodgy and predictable. The zooms in the courtroom scenes are disastrous and look almost parodic today. There is a great deal of discussion about collective guilt, but none of the historical issues that gave rise to fascism are even mentioned. The essentially benevolent and peace-loving character of American capitalism is assumed. The scenes that seriously hold one's attention involve Montgomery Clift as the son of a Communist rail worker who has been sterilized according to Nazi regulations and Judy Garland as a woman sent to prison under the Hitler regime for a relationship with a Jew (her lover was executed).

Another scene, a brief one, not on the level of those, that rings true takes place at a hot dog stand. An attractive young woman—a prostitute?—watches Tracy, then in his 60s, as he puts mustard on his hot dog. She smiles, he smiles flirtatiously, she leans toward him and says (in German), “Good-bye, grand pa,” and leaves. When Tracy gets a translation from the stand operator, his face registers a convincing combination of understanding and irritation. (This proves he was capable of a light touch. Why aren't there more such moments in Kramer's work?)

It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World (1963) is Kramer's only comic effort

and something of a bright spot. The cast included virtually every comic performer in the US at the time, from Jonathan Winters to Jerry Lewis to Buster Keaton. The film is not as funny as it would like to be, but as a critique of American greed and materialism it holds up. A group of motorists are present at a crook's dying moment; he tells them where $350,000 is buried. The race—with all its rampant avarice and nastiness—is on. Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, of all unlikely people, apparently admired the film.

Ship of Fools, based on the Katherine Anne Porter novel about a boatload of vaguely doomed passengers in the 1930s, is pretty much a disaster. It seems one of the laziest films ever made. I don't know what Kramer did on this film. The screen is almost always filled up with one or two of his stars' faces. He could have stayed at home; maybe he did. Simone Signoret and Oskar Werner are at least watchable as a political prisoner on her way to exile and a ship's doctor with a bad heart. George Segal and Elizabeth Ashley as a pair of young painters are horrendous; they look and feel more like up-and-coming ad executives. This was perhaps Kramer's first and last attempt to make an “art film” and it failed miserably.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner marks the point at which Kramer's liberalism comes dramatically into conflict, shamefully so, with the reality of American life, which was now dominated by protest, rioting and a general mood of popular discontent. The film envisions a world of upper middle class complacency, in which an aging pair of liberals has to deal with their daughter's decision to become engaged to a black man. Tracy, who was to die only ten days after shooting completed, is the father of the bride and made uncomfortable by the thought of Sidney Poitier as his son-in-law.

The film is formulaic, dishonest and turgid. Kramer even has a benevolent Irish priest (Cecil Kellaway)—as Spoto suggests, “a refugee from *Going My Way*”—turn up to offer sage advice. Kramer defended Poitier's impeccable character—he's an internationally respected doctor: “We took special pains to make Poitier a very special character in this story, and to make both families, in fact, very special. Respectable, yes. And intelligent. And attractive. We did this so that if the young couple didn't marry because of their parents' disapproval, the only reason would be that he was black and she was white. They had everything else in their favor...” Whatever else this may be, it is not a recipe for serious art. The possibility that making Poitier less than perfect, i.e., a real human being, might challenge an audience to examine its assumptions or prejudices at a deeper level never occurs to Kramer.

After *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which had considerable financial success, the decline is steep and rapid: a facetious film about Italy under the German occupation, *The Secret of Santa Vittoria* (1969); a dreadful film about student unrest, *R.P.M.* (1971); a children's film, *Bless the Beasts and Children* (1971); a forgettable film about oil wildcatting, *Oklahoma Crude* (1973); a disorganized and incoherent thriller, *The Domino Principle* (1977); and the story of an affair between a priest and a nun, *The Runner Stumbles* (1979), which was received with scathing reviews.

To return to the question: how is Kramer's generally unfavorable standing to be explained? To portray him *simply* as a casualty of the rightward turn by the American establishment, its abandonment of liberal consensus politics, would be a simplification. In the first place, it is hard to look at Kramer, who made his peace with the American establishment very early on, as a victim of anything in any real sense. Second, other directors of somewhat similar temperament continued to work and even thrive well into the 1970s. Zinnemann, for example, had some of his greatest success— *The Day of the Jackal* (1973) and *Julia* (1977)—in that decade, and he, if anything, was to the left politically of Kramer. Or one could mention a left-liberal director like Arthur Penn (*Bonnie and Clyde* [1967], *Alice's Restaurant* [1969], *Night Moves* [1975]), albeit from a different generation.

Kramer's technique and approach did fall out of favor. Although this was not, of course, merely an aesthetic question. The didactic piece of social commentary, associated with the postwar years and the naïve belief that American society would live up to its promises simply by being confronted with its “blemishes,” seemed less and less of a fit. Other, more anarchic and fluid film approaches appealed to the younger generation—particularly the New Wave from France and the European movements it inspired.

Was this wholly a positive development? I would be unfashionable enough to say that it was not. I think the New Wave, looked at from this point in history, was a distinctly mixed blessing, which ended up delivering a good deal less than it promised. Kramer denounced the European stylists as con men, which was foolish, but further suggested that “Technique covers a multitude of sins.” His own cinema did not offer a serious alternative, unhappily, but as far as the latter comment goes, this may be an occasion when Kramer had a point.

If Kramer's fall from grace cannot simply be ascribed to a shift in social mood, that change nonetheless played a major role. The period since the late 1970s has been characterized by an official repudiation of social reformism. Greed, individualism and ruthlessness are privileged. In filmmaking, bland blockbusters and self-conscious “auteurism,” devoid of any concern for social life, predominate. One might say that Kramer's great cinematic weaknesses, in so far as they were considered (his name hardly appears in film reference works), helped reinforce moods that valued ideas and causes less and less, that substituted formal play for serious thought and feeling, that made a fetish out of film style in an ultimately hollow and unproductive manner.

Kramer's fatal flaws became part of the dishonest and essentially reactionary argument against making *any* films about social problems and “great issues.” This is one reason why clarifying his career and legacy is useful and necessary. Kramer was a wholly inadequate artist and thinker; the pleasing moments he helped create were perhaps exceptional. If anything, his career is evidence of the inevitably artistically limiting character of *not* making a thoroughgoing break with the establishment, not of the supposed dangers of presenting social criticism in art.