

Katharine Hepburn, Gregory Peck and American filmmaking

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In their comments on the deaths of Katharine Hepburn on June 29, at 96, and Gregory Peck on June 11, at age 87, the media provided a good many biographical details but not a great deal of insight into broader issues associated with the lives and careers of these two prominent American performers.

A discussion of the lives of film actors presents certain challenges from the outset. Are such performers to be taken seriously as artists, or are they simply “entertainers” or, worse, merely the public faces, as some would have it, of a large commercial enterprise, the “Hollywood dream machine”?

Certainly, the American film industry is no sun-dappled meadow in which the Muses roam free. It was established as a money-making enterprise, and earning a profit, by and large, remains the sole *raison d'être* of studio executives, now generally in the service of giant conglomerates. As for its most celebrated actors, the commercial film world has for decades created, promoted and routinely destroyed (inadvertently or otherwise) personalities as part of its day-to-day functioning.

Nonetheless, it must continually be insisted that the film business is not simply a business, and that while the element of manipulating audiences (and artists) has never been entirely absent, manipulation has rarely been the only process at work.

Two contradictory tendencies operated in the American film studios during their heyday in the middle decades of the 20th century. On the one hand, the studios mobilized an astonishing array of global talent, at work in the most modern and potent medium; on the other, they functioned as ruthless money-making operations in the heartland of ultimately the greatest imperialist power, under the quasi-direct ideological scrutiny of elements of the ruling elite.

This state of affairs inevitably generated extraordinary tension. It produced the most hybrid representations of life (sometimes grotesquely so), whose relative lack of complexity, particularly in regard to examining the structure of society, was offset *in part* by their remarkable vibrancy, intensity and concreteness. In the final analysis, this proved an untenable equilibrium.

The period in which Katharine Hepburn and Gregory Peck, considered together, played leading film roles extended, more or less, from the early 1930s to the late 1960s—the period, that is to say, approximately from the first election of Franklin D. Roosevelt (for whom Hepburn and Peck shared a reverence) in 1932 to that of Richard Nixon in 1968. The Democratic Party held the presidency for 28 of those 36 years, and one might say that American liberalism, with representatives in both major parties, had (and failed) its “historic opportunity” during that epoch. Their careers are undoubtedly bound up with this fact of social life.

It would be terribly shortsighted, however, to contend that Hepburn and Peck merely incarnated aspects of American bourgeois-liberal ideology. Historical and cultural processes do not work themselves out as conveniently as that. It might be more accurate to suggest that their

performances and representations were saturated by certain aspects of American democratic idealism (Hepburn “the independent woman,” Peck “the moral conscience”), an ethos present in the most progressive liberal circles, but one that official liberalism eventually and inevitably betrayed as it made its devil’s bargain with the most predatory sections of the US establishment in the Cold War period.

These were two remarkable personalities, from remarkable generations. Hepburn and her female contemporaries provided most of the dynamic performances by women on screen from the late silent film era through the first days of sound in the early 1930s, the Depression years and into the 1940s—Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Greta Garbo, Mary Astor, Louise Brooks, Barbara Stanwyck, Carole Lombard, Bette Davis and Jean Harlow.

Peck belonged to the group of leading men—including Burt Lancaster, John Garfield, Glenn Ford, Kirk Douglas, Robert Mitchum and William Holden (one might also mention Richard Widmark, Sterling Hayden and the slightly younger Montgomery Clift)—who dominated postwar American movies until the explosive entry of Marlon Brando in the early 1950s.

American cinema 1930-1960

One need not yearn for a return of the “good old days” of American filmmaking (far better, as Brecht suggested, to make sense of the “bad new ones”) in order to acknowledge the genuine depth and texture of this cinema. Within very precise limitations, US filmmakers, both native- and foreign-born, examined life with a good deal of seriousness.

Filmmakers and performers who signed contracts with the large commercial studios lost a portion of their artistic and moral freedom but simultaneously gained access to the most advanced technique and a mass audience. This painful paradox was no doubt evident to the most conscious of the artists. In any event, under the prevailing conditions, they had little choice.

The historic events of the era—the world wars and their consequences, revolution and counterrevolution abroad, the rise of fascism, the Depression, social ills in America—impressed themselves upon the writers, directors, actors and other film artists of the day and found expression in their work, within the limits set by their own views (and skills) and the ideological constraints placed upon them by the industry. Those limitations were real and active elements in film production.

Nonetheless, it is possible to view the better films of the time and gain insight into the character of people’s lives. Films offered ideas and perspectives on life in the United States. Many attempted honestly and directly to deal with the social and psychic realities of the day.

Plekhanov remarks that art’s evolution is “determined by the evolution

of the world” and that “the art of each particular historical epoch has as its content that which is most important to the people of that epoch.” In the same essay, however, he has just observed that “Of course, there’s many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. It is one thing to *pose* a certain problem; it is quite another to *solve* it.” American filmmaking at mid-century and before had more than its share of “slips,” but, in the final analysis, its content bears some coherent, recognizable relationship to external reality.

A viewing of films from the period does not leave one with the intensely alienating feeling, as so often happens with current films, that they were made with contempt for the general population by creatures inhabiting a different planet. One leaves so many “box office hits” today not merely with the sense that one has *wasted one’s time*, which would be bad enough, but that one has actually been *diminished, set back* as a human being.

And there is the question of the film “star” past and present. The star is a peculiar phenomenon at the best of times, inevitably bound up with large doses of fantasy in a society where so many lead phantom existences. Great numbers of people, to whom their own lives feel unreal or insignificant, live, love and die vicariously through the figures on the screen. But here too there is a difference between the leading actors of the Hepburn-Peck era and the current film world.

In the 1930s and 1940s, there was not this extraordinary disjunction that presently exists between the star and the role he or she performs. There are so many pretty, unlined, essentially blank faces today. The faces of individuals who have not known hardship, unlike Barbara Stanwyck, born Ruby Stevens, who quit school at 13 to work as a parcel wrapper in a Brooklyn department store; or John Garfield, alias Julius Garfinkle, the son of poor immigrant parents, who grew up as a brawler on Manhattan’s Lower East Side; or Joan Crawford, the former Lucille Faye Le Sueur of San Antonio, Texas, a waitress, laundress and shop girl before starting a dancing career as the result of winning a Charleston contest; or Burt Lancaster, the son of a postal clerk, raised in East Harlem, who served in North Africa and Italy in World War II with Special Services.

These were performers with the faces and voices and gestures of people who had experienced something of life, to whom suffering meant something, even if they wished at all costs to distance themselves from its grip.

Or the artists came from more affluent or intellectual backgrounds, like a Hepburn or an Orson Welles, and they were understood either to have dedicated themselves to art or to have made an ideological decision of a generally left-wing character to represent social realities.

And indeed the purging or intimidating of leftist and socialist elements in Hollywood in the early 1950s, and the “chilling effect” this had on American filmmaking as a whole, perhaps marks the point at which the relationship between the “gain” and “loss” referred to above shifted decisively to the disadvantage of the honest and principled artist. After this disgraceful episode, the film studios deserved to collapse.

It would be simplifying matters, however, to suggest that even in the 1950s Hollywood films simply became one monstrous conformist lie, although there was that element. A number of the most talented figures continued to create works and the general level of seriousness, which now drew on the very disillusionment and discontent increasingly generated by postwar American society, remained high at least until the end of the decade.

The American cinema has become a largely debased medium as the result of numerous processes, too complex to discuss in the present article. As a general sociological consideration, however, it ought to be obvious that a ruling elite presiding over massive social inequality and the political disenfranchisement of the great majority of the population cannot afford a mass medium that holds a critical mirror up to reality, even in the limited fashion of the American film studios of the 1930s and 1940s.

The depths to which the commercial cinema in the US has sunk over the

past two decades in particular—so that it stands far below fiction writing at this moment—demonstrates how terribly sensitive filmmaking is by its very nature to socioeconomic processes: in this case, the accumulating crisis of American capitalism with all its ideological implications, a general lowering of the popular cultural level, dramatically changed economics within the “entertainment” industry, etc.

Returning to the immediate subject at hand, if Hepburn’s greatest achievements are somewhat more spectacular than Peck’s, this has to do no doubt with not only their respective talents and personalities, but also the different years in which they did their most interesting and enduring work: Hepburn 1932-1952, Peck 1945-1965. (The two never appeared in the same film. During the “overlap” in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they came their closest, so to speak, appearing in two films that Elia Kazan in his pre-informer days directed back to back in 1947—two of his lesser works, in fact—*The Sea of Grass* [Hepburn] and *Gentleman’s Agreement* [Peck]. They also “overlapped” by featuring prominently in two of John Huston’s better known films, the overrated *The African Queen* [Hepburn, 1951] and the underrated *Moby Dick* [Peck, 1956].)

American studio filmmaking was undoubtedly more adventurous in general during the 1930s and 1940s, at least until its final blaze of glory in the late 1950s. Unwittingly or not, Peck became more of a liberal establishment figure than Hepburn, and his most prominent vehicles, particularly *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), had almost quasi-official status.

A free thinker

Katharine Hepburn was born into a family of free thinkers—her father a pioneering doctor in Hartford, Conn., her mother, a suffragette and birth control activist. Genuine non-conformism remained a motif throughout her life, in both large and small matters. She was known for her dislike of Hollywood glamour, preferring to dress in trousers and a loose-fitting sweater. She was known to talk back to directors and producers. After an early marriage and divorce in 1934, she never remarried, but pursued a relationship with Spencer Tracy (who was married but separated from his wife) for a quarter of a century.

After graduating from Bryn Mawr College in 1928, Hepburn began to work in the theater and made her film debut in 1932, in *A Bill of Divorcement* (directed by George Cukor).

On screen, Hepburn is justly renowned for a number of qualities. In the first place, she is unashamedly an independent woman, whose happiness and fate do not depend on “her man” or on anyone else. Whether she fails or succeeds, she has the necessary internal (and perhaps material) resources to make her own way in the world.

Moreover, there is the matter of her intelligence. Hepburn, as much as any performer one can think of, male or female, brought into her performance the process of thought. She is seen to be someone who considers what is being said and done to her and weighs her responses, whether they prove to be proper ones or not.

Hepburn had a number of extraordinary moments in *Morning Glory* (1933), *Little Women* (1933), *Alice Adams* (1935), *Mary of Scotland* (1936), *Stage Door* (1937) and *Holiday* (1938). A special word might be put in for *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936), a highly imperfect work, but one with its own peculiar charms. Hepburn plays a boy for half of the film, before “coming out” because she has fallen for a painter played by Brian Aherne. Director Cukor was gracious or canny enough to place Hepburn in a lengthy closeup in her first scene as a “girl.” Short-haired in a large straw hat, with her bright, alert eyes and shining teeth, the actress, as this newly created female (like Venus, born fully formed), radiates joy, freshness,

vivacity. Hepburn represents the principle of intelligence rendered sensual.

It would not be going too far out on a limb to assert that *Bringing Up Baby* (1938, directed by Howard Hawks, with Hepburn and the incomparable Cary Grant) is one of the most subversive comedies of sexual mores ever produced in any form. Hepburn plays a wealthy young woman, Susan Vance, who enters the life of stifled—and engaged—zoologist David Huxley and utterly disrupts it in the course of two days. “You look at everything upside down,” he complains quite correctly early in the film. She eventually wins him over to this “upside down” point of view.

In his well-known study of Hawks (1968), critic Robin Wood wrote about the appealing “Lure of Irresponsibility” in the director’s comedies, in which warmth, openness and a sense of humor are valued and female characters represent freedom from the burdensome responsibilities of professional life.

In *Bringing Up Baby*, once having decided that the scientist is for her, Susan single-mindedly and ferociously pursues him. Encountering unexpected and unreasonable resistance to her charms, Hepburn’s character quickly grasps that drastic measures are required. On the one hand, her subsequent emotional terrorism is the sole course open to her as a member of the “oppressed sex,” and, on the other, only by dismantling Huxley’s previously constricted personality can she turn him into someone capable of valuing her. At a pivotal moment, Susan leaves the zoologist—who has been quite distant from his “animal nature”—without his clothes, obliging him to dress in a frilly women’s dressing-gown. Huxley reaches rock bottom during the ensuing humiliating encounters; this moment of release is the beginning of his liberating psychological reconstitution.

The spectator is not certain at first, and perhaps neither is Hepburn’s character, whether her harassment of Huxley has a definite aim or is merely mischievous. Any doubts are removed in the brief scene in which she enters the room in her aunt’s house where Huxley has left his clothes while he takes a shower, before his departing for good. There is the briefest pause in the action. Without making a meal of it, Hawks and Hepburn take the time to show us Susan realizing she has the power to leave the object of her desire shirtless and pantsless, and therefore unable to leave her side. Conscious intent has entered the picture, and the spectator’s view of the events has been permanently altered.

The various accounts of Hepburn’s career never fail to mention that *Bringing Up Baby* and a number of her other films in the 1930s were not successful and that by 1938 she was placed on a list labeled “box office poison” by movie exhibitors. What the accounts generally fail to mention is that an early version of anti-leftist witch-hunting was already in operation, which no doubt played some part in her career difficulties.

Philip French writes in *The Observer*: “In 1934 the [William Randolph] Hearst newspapers’ Hollywood correspondent, Louella Parsons, wrote that ‘photographers have agreed not to take a single pic of her because she’s been so rude.’ But what really infuriated Hearst and the studio moguls was that Hepburn refused to go along with the film industry’s concerted effort to prevent the socialist writer Upton Sinclair from winning the 1934 election for the governorship of California. Along with Chaplin, she was one of the few who spoke out against the unprecedentedly vicious campaign conducted by the industry. Almost alone, she protested the warning issued to studio employees not to support Sinclair and the virtually compulsory contribution they had to make to his opponent’s war chest.”

In any event, Hepburn resuscitated her career by buying the film rights to Philip Barry’s *The Philadelphia Story* (borrowing the money from lover Howard Hughes) and starring in the movie version. Critic Andrew Sarris (in “*You Ain’t Heard Nothin’ Yet*”) argues compellingly that *The Philadelphia Story*, in which Hepburn plays a socialite “scolded

incessantly for her shortcomings as a daughter and a wife...marks the beginning of Hepburn’s domestication with her own consent and even collaboration.”

Unquestionably, Hepburn’s films of the 1940s were less threatening. “All the rebellion and hysteria and aggravating indecorousness of her RKO period,” observes Sarris, “have been drained out of her.” *Woman of the Year* (directed by George Stevens, and her first pairing with Spencer Tracy) is a remarkable film in many ways, but it has a horribly conformist conclusion, with its argument that for a woman “fame-and-public-self-fulfillment-are-no-substitute-for-the-private-joys-of-marriage,” as Sarris puts it.

The best of the Tracy-Hepburn films is *Adam’s Rib* (1949), directed by Cukor, written by Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon, and featuring a supporting cast that includes the marvelous Judy Holliday, along with David Wayne, Jean Hagen and Tom Ewell. Hepburn, a defense attorney, and Tracy, a prosecutor, find themselves on different sides of a case involving a woman (Holliday) who has shot and wounded her philandering husband (Ewell). The film has a contrived ending, but along the way sheds a good deal of light on modern American life and the institution of marriage in particular.

Of the scene in which Tracy’s Adam slaps Hepburn’s Amanda on the towel-covered buttocks, supposedly in play, while the two are in the middle of a quarrel, Sarris observes that “Despite Adam’s protestation of injured innocence, he knows and we know that Amanda’s instinct about body language is infallible” and takes note of “Hepburn’s bristling outrage as a woman for all time over a violation of her dignity.”

As the 1950s wore on Hepburn suffered the indignity, which she seemed to accept gamely, of playing “old maid” roles well before her time, in *The African Queen* (1952), *Summertime* (1955) and the particularly offensive *The Rainmaker* (1956). This phase was succeeded by one perhaps even more unfortunate in which the actress became an icon, a stereotyped “grande dame,” worthy of appearing only in classics or would-be classics. Into that general category, Hollywood rather sweepingly placed Tennessee Williams (*Suddenly, Last Summer* and *The Glass Menagerie*), Eugene O’Neill (*Long Day’s Journey into Night*), Jean Giraudoux (*The Madwoman of Chaillot*), Edward Albee (*A Delicate Balance*), Euripides (*The Trojan Women*) and James Goldman (*The Lion in Winter*).

Hepburn played a subordinate role to Spencer Tracy in *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner* (1967) and to Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond* (1981), in each case the actor’s swan song. The former film, about wealthy white parents adjusting to their daughter’s engagement to a black man, seemed particularly tepid in the context of a rapidly radicalizing America. In her final screen appearance, the aging actress adds perhaps the only spark of excitement to the flat and uninspiring second remake of *Love Affair* (1994).

The non-conformism of Hepburn’s political views earned her the distinction of having an FBI file amassed on her activities, including her affair with Tracy. Agents also carefully noted her decision to wear a red dress to attend a rally for liberal-left, third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1948. She made a fiery attack on the House Un-American Activities Committee, written for her by Communist Party member and future blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, which cost her a film role. She once noted that she was never a communist, nor was her father, but that her mother was interested. Reportedly, when Nancy Reagan once called to ask for support for her husband, Hepburn explained bluntly that she was opposed to everything Ronald Reagan stood for.

The actress remained a free thinker till the end, as A. Scott Berg reveals in his memoir of her published only a few days after her death. “I don’t really believe in heaven and hell,” she once told him, “but in the here and now and that we are meant to live in such a way that we can hope there is always something better than what we currently have.”

Moral conscience

Born in La Jolla, Calif., Gregory Peck was raised primarily by his maternal grandmother, after his father, a pharmacist who eventually went bankrupt, and mother divorced. Peck attended the University of California in Berkeley, majoring in English and drama. While in college, he decided to become an actor and moved to New York City in 1939. A serious spinal injury exempted him from military service and he began a film career during World War II when many other leading men were away at war.

He quickly revealed an independent streak, refusing to sign a long-term contract. He reportedly once reduced Louis B. Mayer to tears when he turned down a contract with MGM. Peck played a Russian partisan in his first film, *Days of Glory*, one of the handful of pro-Soviet works made in Hollywood during the war. His third, *The Valley of Decision*, is a confused but striking story about class struggle and class relations in 19th century Pittsburgh, scripted by leftist scenarist Sonya Levien.

His astonishing good looks, sonorous voice and “unusual ability to communicate sincerity” (critic James Agee in 1945) earned Peck roles with virtually every talented director in postwar Hollywood, including Kazan, Huston, Jacques Tourneur, John Stahl, Tay Garnett, King Vidor, Clarence Brown, William Wellman, Alfred Hitchcock, Raoul Walsh, Robert Siodmak, Henry King, William Wyler, Vincente Minnelli, Lewis Milestone and Henry Hathaway.

Among Peck’s more notable early performances are his turns as a volatile and lustful rancher’s son in *Duel in the Sun* (1946), a struggling Florida farmer after the Civil War in *The Yearling* (1946) and a Russian novelist (obviously inspired by Dostoyevsky) who becomes addicted to gambling in *The Great Sinner* (1949). Peck had the misfortune to appear in two of Hitchcock’s weaker efforts, *Spellbound* (1945) and *The Paradine Case* (1947), which he was not able to salvage.

Two of his most striking roles came in films directed by Hollywood veteran Henry King—*Twelve O’Clock High* (1949), later made into a television series, and *The Gunfighter* (1950).

In the former Peck plays Brig. Gen. Frank Savage, ordered to take over a B-17 bomber squadron after it has suffered heavy losses in the early days of US intervention in World War II. The film ostensibly and effectively treats the process by which Savage instills discipline and pride into his unit. The horrors of war, however, dominate the work. The spectator is introduced to the squadron by way of a scene in which a young pilot is in shock after witnessing one of his comrades having the back of his head and an arm blown off and flying with him for two hours.

Peck’s character pushes his men fairly but relentlessly, determined to “find out how much a man can take.” He tells a meeting of the airmen, “Consider yourselves already dead.” In the end, Savage accomplishes his mission, at the cost of shattering his own health and psyche. Having flown bombing run after bombing run, in daylight hours in the face of furious German defenses, Savage collapses and falls into a catatonic state. This is not *Top Gun*. The spectator is struck by the film’s intelligence, sensitivity and seriousness. It benefits from an extraordinary supporting cast, including Hugh Marlowe, Gary Merrill, Millard Mitchell, Dean Jagger and Paul Stewart.

In *The Gunfighter*, one of the first unheroic Westerns, King and Peck examine the problem of legend and celebrity. Jimmy Ringo (Peck) is an aging gunslinger who would like to settle down on a little ranch with his sweetheart and son, but law enforcement officials, revenge-seeking cowboys and a young hothead aspiring to take his place make that impossible. The film has quite charming elements, including Helen Westcott as his unglamorous love.

He starred in two films directed by Raoul Walsh, *Captain Horatio Hornblower* (1951) and *The World In His Arms* (1952). (As with most of Walsh’s films, they were underrated.) During a sojourn abroad, he played

an uncharacteristic comic role in *Roman Holiday* (1953) for William Wyler and appeared in two films for Rank in Britain, *The Million Pound Note* and *The Purple Plain*.

John Huston’s *Moby Dick* has been criticized for failing to live up to the Melville novel from the moment it appeared in movie theaters in June 1956. Sarris, in his *American Cinema*, called it the director’s “one gamble with greatness,” which “he lost.” Peck, as the monomaniacal Captain Ahab in search of the great white whale, has come in for his share of unfavorable comments.

No doubt, the film did not and probably could not capture the titanism of the novel, its portrait of 19th century American hubris in all its grandeur and folly. Nonetheless, the film is intelligently and movingly constructed, and unquestionably catches at critical themes and undercurrents of the book, including its sympathy for the whalers’ harsh existence. Huston’s work stands up under a viewing today. Peck is perhaps not capable of plumbing the depths of Ahab’s madness, but he brings to the character some much-needed humanity. His performance permits one to feel a certain sympathy for Ahab’s “side of the story” and grasp the allure that the doomed but noble quest has for the men aboard the Pequod.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), based on the novel by Harper Lee, was perhaps the high point in Peck’s career. He received his first Academy Award for his performance as Atticus Finch, an idealistic Southern lawyer representing an innocent black man, Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), charged with rape in Alabama in the early 1930s. The film was a byproduct of the historic struggle for democratic rights for blacks in the US and served to further inflame public opinion against the vicious apartheid system in the South.

Robert Mulligan’s work has numerous significant flaws. Much of the film is devoted to the activities of Finch’s two children and a friend, as they make their first foray into the troubling adult world. The children are pleasant enough, but the scene in which they forestall a lynching strains credibility. The final sequence, involving an attempt by the father of the supposed rape victim on the lives of Peck’s children and a miraculous rescue, trivializes Robinson’s tragic fate, killed while “attempting to escape.” The film fails to include a significant detail in the book, that the victimized black man had 17 bullet holes in his body. Nonetheless, Peck’s lengthy speech to the jury remains a humane and democratic moment in the history of American cinema.

Brock Peters movingly delivered the eulogy at Peck’s funeral in June. “The legend of his humanity is a guide for greatness,” he said. “He was an idol of mine as an actor and friend.”

One could easily argue that *To Kill a Mockingbird*, released more than 40 years ago, on Christmas Day 1962, was the last film in which Peck appeared that had a major impact on public consciousness. This, of course, was not the actor’s fault. His skills had not deteriorated, nor had his opinions altered. America and the film world changed. The shattering of illusions (and pretensions) under the impact of the convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s was a generally healthy phenomenon, but what were the socially conscious and conscientious, liberal-inspired films of a previous period to be replaced by? As it turned out, Hollywood was not up to the task of taking the measure of the changes in American life. Important works were increasingly made outside the orbit of the studio system (for example, Robert Altman’s films 1971-1977, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*).

In the latter stages of his career Peck had the opportunity to play a variety of historical figures, including Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Nazi concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele and Abraham Lincoln (in a 1982 television mini-series). His Mengele (in *The Boys from Brazil*), one of the few opportunities the actor had to portray a thoroughgoing villain, was particularly memorable.

Peck served for years on the board of a variety of charitable organizations and aided black artists as a co-founder and benefactor of the

Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center. He received the Jean B. Hersholt Humanitarian Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1967.

Cynics often sneered at Peck's status as America's cinematic "moral conscience." What does this say about the cynics? There are far worse things, one would think, than showing concern about the fate of one's fellow man, even if the concern falls short of the most searching critique of the social roots of human suffering.

World War II, the Cold War with its threat of nuclear annihilation, poverty and discrimination in the US—all this provided grounds for a good deal of anguish and guilt. By a process of natural selection peculiar to Hollywood, Peck was chosen to represent some of that on screen. Even an essentially silly film like *David and Bathsheba* (1951) becomes the occasion for a deliberation on the abuses of power, with Peck as the Old Testament ruler stricken with a guilty conscience.

The actor received criticism as well for his "woodenness." Personal history and individual artistic weakness no doubt played the decisive role, but one might also make a link between this "stiffness" and the character of Cold War liberalism, even at its most sincere. Could such an outlook, which allied itself or turned a blind eye to so much, including murderous American imperialist intrigue around the globe, find an entirely convincing and authentic dramatic representation, even in the person of its noblest representatives? Was there not always something "missing," something "left out"?

Peck's commitment to social justice and democratic principles, however, was undeniable. In 1947, as the anti-communist witch-hunt was getting under way, he signed a letter denouncing a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation of the film industry. Forty years later, he recorded a television advertisement opposing President Ronald Reagan's nomination of right-winger Robert Bork to the US Supreme Court.

The actor once told an interviewer that it was generally assumed that his interest in politics began with *Gentleman's Agreement*, an attack on anti-Semitism. He explained, "I don't get my politics from my roles in movies. It's true I was a Franklin Roosevelt man from way back. And I still am.... I never worry much about the fat cats. They can take care of themselves. I empathize with the people who don't have a decent chance to get anywhere because of unfairness and prejudice."

The passing of Katharine Hepburn and Gregory Peck is a sad occasion. These were honest, humane and talented people. Their finest work stands as an indictment of the shallow, corrupt and trivial products turned out by the current film industry.



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