

Questions and answers on the Hollywood blacklists—Part 2

An interview with film historian Reynold Humphries

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Last month the WSWs posted a review of Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History by Reynold Humphries [The anti-communist purge of the American film industry]

We explained: "The monograph treats a number of processes and events in some detail: the bitter union struggles in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s; the first round of Hollywood HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] hearings in October 1947, which brought about the blacklist; the committee's hearings in 1951-1953; the 'Anti-Communist Crusade on the Screen' and the consequences of the purges for its victims."

We noted that the anti-communist purge of the entertainment industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s—"This disgraceful episode, in which the FBI, ultra-right elements, official liberalism and Hollywood executives all played their parts"—had "far-reaching consequences, not only for the film industry, but American society and culture as a whole."

Complex questions are bound up with the witch hunts. As part of an ongoing process of clarifying those questions, a number of WSWs writers on film—David Walsh, Joanne Laurier, Richard Phillips, Hiram Lee, Charles Bogle and Mile Klindo—put together a series of questions for Reynold Humphries, who was gracious enough to agree to an interview by email. He answered at length, and we are posting the questions and answers in two parts, the first of which was posted yesterday.

There are obviously issues on which we do not see eye-to-eye, but we are convinced that a discussion of the historical and artistic matters at stake is critical in clarifying new generations of film artists and others.

WSWS: Why do you suppose writers seem to have been the staunchest left-wing element in the film industry? What distinct artistic or psychological qualities did these left-wing writers bring to filmmaking?

RH: We must not forget that Hollywood desperately needed people who knew the force and value of carefully chosen words once sound came to stay. This is speculation, but I wonder if the fact that the coming of sound and the arrival of the Depression coincided was not instrumental in radicals heading for Hollywood, less to make money than to be able to address a vastly more substantial audience. The fact that they could never get anything really radical into their scripts because of the reactionary studio bosses did not prevent many of them from championing alternative views—particularly on the importance of collective action—and wangling ways of introducing working-class people into plots.

The simple fact of being a Socialist or a Marxist, and therefore rejecting bourgeois individualism as the only motivating force in society, could not but lead to a deepening of audience understanding of the social and psychic forces behind human behaviour. Directors with a genuine understanding of Freud, such as Hitchcock and Sirk, and the intellectual means of communicating this via their *mise en scène*, were able to

transform the thriller and the melodrama. This understanding, although often less (self-) conscious, was already more than apparent in film noir throughout the 1940s and certain major examples of the genre (*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *Ruthless*, *Gun Crazy*, *The Prowler*, to cite only a few) made a major use of Marx and Freud.

WSWS: *We made the point in the review that many Communist Party members were sincere about their desire to change American society, but that they largely ignored critical theoretical and international questions. You know some of the blacklist victims. Do you believe they knew about the reality of the Moscow Trials and the other crimes of Stalinism, and, if so, what was their attitude toward them? Did it, in the end, have a moral and political impact on them?*

RH: I'm sure ALL Communist Party members sincerely desired to change American society, without necessarily seeing that change in other than profoundly ethical, progressive terms: rights for Negroes, the right to form unions, etc. Do not forget that the Hollywood CP organised regular discussion groups around basic Marxist texts. It is revealing that future friendly witnesses found these reunions boring and unhelpful, whereas a steadfast and genuinely Marxist intellectual like Abraham Polonsky (an unfriendly witness who was blacklisted) has written of the effervescence of the period and the exceptional importance for him of the meeting of minds when people from different artistic and social backgrounds got together and collaborated. Guy Endore, novelist and screenwriter, played a major role in the 1930s in the dissemination of theory, but drifted away from the CP for religious reasons. However, he refused steadfastly to give names and remained blacklisted for the rest of his life.

I did ask blacklist victim Norma Barzman if she knew of the presence of supporters of Trotsky in Hollywood. The question clearly surprised her: nobody had ever raised the issue, and she was unaware of any such activity. So either supporters of Trotsky were so scarce that they remained in the closet, or else everyone put their faith in the CP and Stalin. Again, there is nothing surprising about this: I have never doubted the sincerity, even the revolutionary fervour (albeit verbal), of Hollywood's Communists.

I have one item of information that will interest you. Writer Howard Koch (who wrote the anti-fascist *Sea Wolf*, *Casablanca* and the notorious *Mission to Moscow*, as well as Max Ophüls's greatest movie, *Letter to an Unknown Woman*) makes a number of remarks in his Oral History (held by the American Film Institute, Louis B. Mayer Library). He never joined the Party, which made him a sort of liaison between the Communists (who appreciated his radicalism) and the liberals (who admired his independence). This fact made him suspect in the eyes of the ultra-reactionary Motion Picture Alliance and led to blacklisting.

Koch just could not believe that those accused of treason by Stalin would admit to such crimes if they were not guilty and this seems to have been the attitude generally. Once again, it would be possible to argue that Hollywood's Communists closed their eyes to something they simply could not entertain: that Stalin was betraying the Revolution. Given that the "traitors" to the Revolution were accused of being supporters of Trotsky and that opposition to *Mission to Moscow* was led by the Right and supporters of Trotsky outside Hollywood, you can see how the circle was neatly squared by people like Koch.

Even that great man Paul Robeson denounced Trotskyists as fascists!

WSWS: *The most complicated question, and perhaps the subject of a book (or books) by itself: the intellectual-aesthetic consequences of the anti-communist purges.*

You have said, and I concur, that Hollywood filmmaking did not collapse in the 1950s. Many of the great veteran directors carried on, in some cases making their most insightful work. Nonetheless, I believe the long-term impact was devastating.

Many younger and more talented directors (Abraham Polonsky, Joseph Losey, Jules Dassin, John Berry, Cy Endfield) and numerous writers were excluded. A "lost generation" was created. The careers of Chaplin and Orson Welles were unquestionably altered. You suggest that individuals like John Huston, who sidestepped the blacklist, were never the same. Those who collaborated with the authorities, like Elia Kazan, Edward Dmytryk, Robert Rossen, were irrevocably damaged in their own fashion.

What did the blacklist remove from Hollywood in an aesthetic sense, what was lost, or prematurely brought to an end by the anti-communist witch hunts, in terms of themes explored (the critique of American society) and the corresponding heightened level of realism? Or, perhaps, what potential was lost? Was a particularly American form of neo-realism lost as a result of the blacklist?

If directors like Polonsky, Losey, Dassin, Berry and others had been allowed to continue developing their work in Hollywood in the 1950s, what impact—if it's possible to say—would this have had on the aesthetic direction of American cinema?

If you have any general thoughts, what was the impact of the virtual criminalization of socialist ideas on the arts in America in general?

RH: That "particularly American form of neo-realism" that you refer to needs to be both explained and contextualised and would require, if not a book, then at least a long article, with examples and analyses.

Arguably, there were two distinct manifestations of this neo-realism. That represented by, say, *Call Northside 777*, which was a purely formal matter (shooting on location = reality). And that represented by, say, *Caged* (women's prisons) and *The Sound of Fury* (lynching, but of whites by whites). In both cases the social dimension of crime, in particular the question of alienation through poverty (very forcefully analysed in *The Sound of Fury*), are foregrounded in a context where location shooting heightens the social rather than simply supplanting it.

Other and equally crucial examples of film noir succeeded in creating an immediately recognisable physical environment while juxtaposing both a neo-realist and a symbolic or poetic approach: *Gun Crazy*, *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Prowler*. Losey's attention to the smallest detail of décor and gesture in the long sequence near the beginning of *The Prowler* and his brilliant use of the ghost town in the final sequence merge to offer the most complex and intricate examination of the interaction of social alienation and psychic tensions imaginable.

So the loss suffered by the departure of Dassin, Losey, Endfield, Polonsky and others was incalculable. Only Losey was able to take up where he left off with a string of remarkable movies in England up until 1961, after which (with the notable exceptions of *King and Country* and *The Go-Between*) he too easily succumbed, less to the siren song of celebrity than to the tiresome topic of British upper-class "decadence,"

which is not a left-wing theme by any means. You only have to compare *The Go-Between* and *Accident* to see how and how not to approach class and prejudice in England (the use of cricket matches in both films is an eloquent indication of this). The later film continued the magnificent work carried out in *Blind Date/Chance Meeting*, made during Losey's great period.

Just as writers and directors had to find subterfuges to circumvent censorship when it came to treating sex, so directors and directors from 1950 on—whether radical or just plain anti-conformist, itself a blessing during the 50s, that decade of complacent self-satisfaction on the part of politicians and their Hollywood sycophants—had to turn to means other than neo-realism to achieve their aims. However, there are many openly critical films in a variety of genres (dramas, war films, zany comedies) by directors such as Aldrich, Fuller, Lang, Mankiewicz, Preminger, Tashlin and others (I have already mentioned Sirk and Hitchcock).

The anxieties, whether conservative or progressive, that lay festering beneath the frothy surface often burst through to show that American society was in a very bad way indeed. Think of the remarkable series of movies made by John Ford from *The Searchers* on. Take a look too at horror and science-fiction movies of the decade to see just how profound and insistent that anxiety was. Ultimately, it was not Communists in the form of aliens that threatened the country, but the repression linked to the most reactionary conceptions of the family.

In other words, with the departure of Hollywood's Marxists, angst went underground. But the simple fact that Huston never again made a film that resonated quite to the extent of *The Asphalt Jungle* testifies to what was lost.

I do not feel competent to discuss "the arts in America in general," but for me it is a truism to state that, as from the moment you criminalize an idea, be it socialist or not, you are creating a repressive climate where art cannot flourish except via the displacement of the issues that might have been broached without such policing of minds. There most definitely was a "lost generation," but it can perhaps best be summed up by referring to Dalton Trumbo's incisive remark that those who were prevented from practising their craft for a decade or more were simply unable to adapt to shifts within the industry in the 1960s. Trumbo never stopped writing until his death, 30 years after being blacklisted.

That, however, is just one reason, and I would not want to give the idea that it is the only one. Certainly, by the time the political climate improved, it was too late for too many and, as a result, there were insufficient major talents to take up the challenge. But Hollywood in the 1960s and 70s was far more resilient, radical, go-ahead, inventive and, simply, intelligent than it has been since Reagan took over the White House.

Obviously, there are many exceptions, but the tendency to turn a given successful movie into an endless franchise or to indulge in remakes of, say, Asian horror movies is not conducive to invention. All the carefully orchestrated publicity to launch a mostly crass spectacle like *Twilight* thus eclipses, except for horror lovers, a genuinely original take on those living in the margins, the Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In*.

WSWS: *What are some of the mistaken conceptions about the anti-communist witch-hunt—e.g., that the period was an aberration in American history, that once McCarthy was exposed, the threat was over, etc.?*

RH: It was no aberration but the logical conclusion to 30 years of unbroken persecution and harassment of radicals, of anyone who stood up for workers' rights, civil rights and free speech and who was ready to be counted in the struggle against fascism, part of the long struggle against the inherently undemocratic and repressive nature of capitalism and big business. Hollywood existed to repress any mention of class, to distil the usual lies about individual success, etc.

Hollywood's Communists were not alone in highlighting poverty,

injustice and the appalling consequences of the Depression and frequently managed to put over progressive ideas turning on collective rather than selfish action. But the endings were also an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction, as Lévi-Strauss put it. Thus Eric Johnston [president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)] made it clear immediately on arriving in Hollywood that there would be no more films like *The Grapes of Wrath* that foregrounded the failures of the system: everything would be geared to propaganda, Hollywood style, in order to show the world that the US was a better place to live in than the Soviet Union.

Remember that McCarthy NEVER investigated Hollywood (he was a Senator and HUAC was a Committee of Congress) and did not make his mark until February 1950. Since January 1944 right-wing intellectuals and journalists like the venomous Westbrook Pegler were insisting that the war was an interlude: once it was over the US would be forced to confront its real enemy, the Soviet Union. McCarthy climbed, with extraordinary acumen and alacrity, on a gigantic bandwagon that built up speed and force as it advanced, turning into a juggernaut crushing everything.

Liberals, of course, made sure they placed their political enemies in its path and stood by the wayside, cheering politely as the body count rose. Ultimately, they went along with the consensus and betrayed all the progressive social movements they supported, along with the Communists, before the war, putting the new consensus in the place of ethics and the most simple and basic decency. Thus liberals had renounced any social criticism before the Senator from Wisconsin came on the scene; he just carried out brutally what they had been calling for in more elegant terms, then started to wring their hands over the harm he was doing the "real" anti-Communists, i.e. themselves.

In other words, liberals agreed totally with what McCarthy stood for; he just made too visible and audible the anti-democratic values they now espoused. Liberalism as a credo quite simply ceased to exist, except for some principled individuals (such as writers Philip Dunne and Dudley Nichols in Hollywood; other liberals simply left the industry to work on the stage).

WSWS: *Do you have any thoughts on why the Committee for the First Amendment, which assembled an impressive array of Hollywood stars against the HUAC hearings, collapsed so rapidly, and why the film industry left in general was so unprepared for the assault?*

RH: Very complex and difficult questions.

The CFA sent representatives to Washington to attend the hearings. Basically, most of the members were liberal and therefore quickly shocked, as actress Marsha Hunt pointed out (she was a non-Communist blacklisted for standing up to the right-wing of the Screen Actors Guild led by Robert Montgomery), by the verbal violence indulged in during the hearings. Moreover, the climate in Hollywood was already changing before the hearings got under way. Johnston was in favour of eliminating Communists early in 1947. Bogart was hauled over the coals by Jack L. Warner (who never forgave the Left for supporting the union strikes of 1945-6) and backed down: his career was more important, much as George Clooney is in favour of liberal measures and statements, provided they don't threaten his huge earnings.

The Communists didn't see it coming, probably because they remained just as blind to what they didn't want to see as in the past. At the same time, watching non-Communist friends turn tail when they appeared must have been a sickening experience. The Communists were the victims of their own obsession with secrecy, and liberals reacted like terrified virgins when it was revealed by HUAC that the Ten had Party cards.

How did HUAC know? Elementary: the FBI had broken into the CP offices in Los Angeles and taken copies of all the evidence. That this was illegal was never discussed publicly, as the Ten's lawyers did not have the right to cross-examine witnesses. But there was much hypocrisy here on

the part of liberals who reacted as in the old joke where people express horror at the fact that a woman is naked beneath her clothes! In other words, a tacit agreement ("we know you're Reds but that doesn't bother us, as long as you don't shout in on the roof-tops") was made public in sensational circumstances, and liberals, aghast at being caught in flagrante delicto, took to their heels, with right-wing anti-Communists baying in full pursuit.

WSWS: *Are you familiar with Trotsky's writings on art and culture, and, if so, what do you think of them?*

RH: *Literature and Revolution* is lying gathering dust on a shelf, along with a score of other volumes on a variety of topics. So my only contact, David, is second-hand, via your talk in Australia a decade back. The quotes from Trotsky there made me sit up and take notice because of their uncanny prescience for our day and age and their remarkable ability to pay attention to form as a necessary way in to history and such little matters as class. So I am surprised that modern Marxists will refer to Lenin without mentioning Trotsky or discuss aesthetics as if he had never existed. Is this also the heritage of Stalinism? I have indicated in private correspondence with you that we have areas of disagreement over Adorno, Marcuse and Jameson. But that's another story.

Concluded



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