

A conversation with film historian Max Alvarez: How the #MeToo campaign echoes the McCarthyite witch hunt of the 1940s and 1950s

“The climate is chillingly similar in terms of the massive capitulation and conformity”

David Walsh
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It is “Scoundrel Time” again in Hollywood, complete with denunciations, anonymous informants, humiliating “confessions,” trial by media and the banning of prominent performers.

The ongoing sexual misconduct campaign, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the *Washington Post* and leading sections of the Democratic Party, has “cleansed” the film and television industry of dozens of figures and threatens a great many more. It goes hand in hand with the anti-Russia and “fake news” hysteria and attempts by Google and Facebook to clamp down on the Internet.

The charges against producer Harvey Weinstein, launched by the *Times* and former Obama administration official Ronan Farrow, were merely a pretext, the thin end of the wedge. The effort that began in October has turned into a full-blown witch hunt, in which careers and reputations have been destroyed overnight, democratic rights and due process trampled on, the sexually unorthodox denounced and excluded, attention diverted from the social crisis in America and the drive to war, and sections of the upper-middle class whipped into a frenzy.

Like every other “human rights” and “women’s rights” campaign, foreign and domestic, staged by the American ruling elite during the past two decades or more, the supposed drive to root out “sexual predators” in Hollywood, the media and elsewhere is a cynical fraud. By now such slogans ought to arouse a great deal of skepticism.

This drive will not advance the position of working class women or the overwhelming majority of female performers one inch, although there is an already affluent layer that hopes to improve its lot. On the contrary, the current witch hunt is directed at imposing conformity and repression in line with reactionary identity politics.

It has already resulted in unprecedented acts of censorship, including the elimination of Kevin Spacey from a film and James Franco from a national magazine cover, and the cancellation of a major exhibition by painter Chuck Close. If the initiators of this effort have their way, all this is merely the beginning.

The Golden Globes awards ceremony on January 8 was an appalling display of self-centeredness and self-pity. A succession of extremely privileged individuals, led by billionaire Oprah Winfrey, bemoaned their sad fate and, as we noted, “expected viewers to believe that the ‘MeToo’ movement constituted an epic chapter in the struggle for human liberation.”

The Academy Awards broadcast on March 4 will presumably offer more of the same. It already takes place under the shadow of intimidation. Actor Casey Affleck has announced that he will not attend the event. Traditionally, the winner of the previous year’s Best Actor award—won in 2017 by Affleck for *Manchester by the Sea*—hands out the Best Actress prize. Affleck has come under fire because of a settlement he reached with two women over their claims of inappropriate behavior, claims he denies.

Remarkably, UltraViolet, a feminist organization, in its own words, “is calling on the Oscars to have all-women presenters at this year’s award ceremony.” This “one, urgent and important step,” according to Karin Roland, chief campaigns officer for UltraViolet, would demonstrate the Oscars’ “commitment to women in Hollywood.”

The Academy Awards nominations already reflected the filthy atmosphere that prevails. “James Franco... was bypassed for a Best Actor nod [*The Disaster Artist*]—he won at the Golden Globes and the Critics’ Choice Awards—amid allegations of sexual misconduct and exploitation.” Meanwhile, Christopher Plummer, who disgracefully replaced Kevin Spacey in *All the Money in the World*, “received a nomination for best supporting actor, making director Ridley Scott, the film’s producers and Sony’s risky and expensive decision to reshoot the film a good one[!].” What’s more, “Kate Winslet may well have been overlooked for her award-winning performance in *Wonder Wheel*—perhaps because of its association with director Woody Allen.” (*Deadline Hollywood*)

It is difficult to summon up the adequate amount of disgust for the hypocrisy and cowardice at work. A new generation of stool pigeons and their accomplices is being groomed.

There are many in the entertainment world who know full well that the current campaign is a fraud, with sinister implications. But in the present atmosphere of fear and intimidation, they do not dare speak up. It might well mean the end of their careers if they do.

The spectacle of performers and others being pressured to confess, and their friends and former co-workers pressed to turn them in, should alert anyone with a trace of historical memory to parallels with the McCarthyite purge of left-wing figures in Hollywood in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

I recently spoke about these echoes of the postwar “Red Scare” with Max Alvarez, author, film historian and speaker on the subject of world cinema culture based in New York City. A former visiting scholar and guest lecturer for The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, Max

has presented over 200 lectures, seminars, study tours and film screening events for cultural organizations around the US. His current lecture topics include “Cold War Hollywood: The Blacklist Years,” “Hollywood in The White House,” and “The Media and the Movies.”

Max was previously a newspaper film critic, entertainment journalist and museum film curator, and is the author of *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann* (University Press of Mississippi) and a major contributor to *Thornton Wilder/New Perspectives* (Northwestern University Press).

This is our conversation.

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David Walsh: Our article on the WSWS the other day was headlined “Scoundrel Time Returns,” and it argued that there were definite parallels between the present sexual misconduct campaign and the anti-communist purges of the late 1940s and 1950s. Based on your knowledge of that history, does this seem legitimate to you?

Max Alvarez: Absolutely. Clearly, this is not as organized a political campaign as the one that took place in the 1940s and 1950s, but the climate is chillingly similar in terms of the massive capitulation and conformity in the entertainment industry. We saw this conformity back in the 1950s, when people were very quick to turn on their friends, inform on them and deny employment to people who they formerly worked with, based on political orientation.

I think that many people in the industry are unnerved, particularly as we move into the awards season. There is a degree of tension in the film industry that we have not seen since the 1950s.

We see these extraordinary attacks going on at present, this type of public shaming and humiliation in which the media serves as judge, jury and executioner. Charges are being made without the accused knowing who the accuser is. Careers are coming to an immediate end without any kind of official investigation or attempt at some semblance of a legal process. This is not coming from the evangelical right, from the nether regions of the Republican Party, although there are many sympathizers there no doubt.

The attacks are coming from liberal, “left” quarters. That is very sobering. In Hollywood, in safer times, after the fact, when people looked back on the blacklist era, they would say things like, “What were they thinking?” “That would never happen again,” “We would never turn on our own like they did back then!” So much for that theory! It’s incredible how people are caving in today, in many cases within a matter of milliseconds.

DW: For the benefit of our readers, and there may be many younger readers who don’t know a great deal about it, could you explain a bit about the anti-communist blacklist and its origins?

MA: Certainly. It’s a strange journey. We see in early 1934 something called House Resolution No. 198, and that establishes what we come to know as the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC.

HUAC became notorious for its investigations into the Hollywood film community, officially starting in 1947, going after people who had been involved in left-wing activities. Perhaps they had been involved with the Communist Party USA, perhaps they were just supporters of the New Deal, perhaps they were liberals who had signed a few too many petitions that were no longer politically convenient. Such individuals were called to testify before this committee and account for their political activities.

In 1934, however, the committee was focusing on Nazi supporters in the United States. It was about a year and a half after Hitler came to power in Germany, and there were concerns about Nazi sympathizers in the US. At the same time, there was some interest in people who were sympathetic to communism and supportive of the Soviet Union. But that didn’t really develop in a significant way until somewhat later.

The first citation I’ve been able to find in regard to “reds” in Hollywood is a *New York Times* article from August 9, 1934. The headline is “Hollywood stars said to back Reds.” A Los Angeles police

captain is telling HUAC at that time that there were all these film stars who were sympathetic to the Communist Party.

In 1938, we have something called the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, which is also known as the Dies Committee, and that’s chaired by Rep. Martin Dies, a right-wing Democrat from Texas. It started looking into alleged communist subversion in Hollywood and held some hearings at that time.

That committee was heavily involved in attacking the Federal Theatre Project and Federal Art Project, and that was one of its major victories, being able to cripple or get those organizations basically shut down based on the left-leaning character of the projects that were receiving funds. So that’s the late 1930s.

In 1941, a US Senate War Film sub-committee held hearings. Leading figures were Burton Wheeler, a Democrat from Montana, and Gerald Nye, a Republican from North Dakota. They were isolationists. They were looking into films that were anti-Nazi and were trying to stir up support for US intervention in World War II.

A book that came out in 2014, *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York*, by Phillip Deery, discusses the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, which was called to appear before HUAC in June 1946. These were not people in the Communist Party, these were people committed to anti-fascism. They tried to do what the Hollywood Ten tried to do a year later. They tried to read statements, they were gavelled down into silence. They were all cited for contempt, and eleven of them later went to jail.

I had never heard of this case until the Deery book, but I think it’s explosive. These were hearings in Washington. They started sending out subpoenas in December 1945. No one ever linked these hearings and the Hollywood Ten before.

In any case, the main hearings involving Hollywood did not occur until October 1947. That’s when you have the subpoenaing of the so-called Hollywood Nineteen, many of whom were affiliated with the Communist Party, although not all. That was reduced to the Hollywood Ten, who actually were called before the committee. These were the people who ultimately went to jail for contempt of Congress. On the other hand, you had “friendly witnesses” appearing, right-wing figures, who were insisting there was a communist plot to infiltrate Hollywood and affect film content.

The anti-communist blacklist itself we can officially trace to November 24, 1947. This was not quite a month after the HUAC hearings ended in Washington, DC. It’s the so-called Waldorf Conference at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. The heads of the major film studios, their legal counsel, the major producers for those studios all attended this gathering at the Waldorf-Astoria.

They ultimately passed something called the “Waldorf Agreement,” which stipulated that the studios would no longer employ the Hollywood Ten because they had refused to cooperate with HUAC, and no longer employ anyone affiliated with the Communist Party and anyone affiliated with a political organization committed to the overthrow of the US government.

DW: As I understand, the studios denied there was a blacklist, because a blacklist was actually illegal.

MA: They always denied it. The HUAC members too, whenever someone testified and mentioned the blacklist, always denied one was taking place. But the studios were not subtle about firing people who had not cooperated with HUAC.

DW: What was the role of informers, denunciations, rumors, the media?

MA: In terms of informers, we have that already taking place at the initial hearings in October 1947 on Capitol Hill. There was the testimony of the so-called friendly witnesses. These were people like Jack Warner and Walt Disney, Robert Taylor, Ayn Rand and Adolphe Menjou, who testified supporting what the committee was doing. Not everyone gave

names. Gary Cooper, for example, did not implicate anyone. Warner and Taylor named people. That set the stage for the first wave of informing.

The media was a mixed bag. At first, there was some skepticism in the media. There were the Walter Winchells and Hedda Hoppers, gossip columnists, who were totally committed to the witch hunt. But there was some skepticism before, during and after the first round of hearings.

For example, I've found an article from *Variety* in June 1949 that attacks the efforts to besmirch the film industry with a "red" label. Hollywood as a red scapegoat, it says, is no longer paying off. "Loose labeling misfires." It's a sarcastic article about the hearings.

This skepticism will become less frequent by the time of the next hearings in 1951.

DW: By that time, politics had swung much farther to the right, and the victims were in far less favorable circumstances.

MA: Liberal opposition to the victimization of the Hollywood Ten and others was very short-lived. At the time of the 1947 hearings, there was the Committee for the First Amendment, which was organized by Hollywood liberals like Danny Kaye, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Richard Conte, Paul Henreid and John Huston. They flew to Washington to show their support for the Hollywood Ten.

They became very frightened once they got there and realized how serious things were, and they were clearly unprepared for the viciousness of the campaign. As well, their employers back in Hollywood made it clear that if they were to continue their protests they would not be able to find employment. Marsha Hunt, for example, who was a liberal Democrat, found herself blacklisted simply because she had been part of the Committee for the First Amendment. So that initial wave of support evaporated almost instantaneously.

Between the hearings, there were columnists like Hopper and others who were denouncing communists in Hollywood. A few years later, she notoriously congratulated the judge who sentenced the Rosenbergs to death.

The *Hollywood Reporter*, a very right-wing trade paper at the time, was also very committed to keeping alive the myth that there was a communist conspiracy to take over Hollywood.

It's hard to be pro-labor and pro-union when you read how the Hollywood guilds and unions behaved. The Screen Actors Guild, the Writers Guild and others. The Screen Actors Guild had Ronald Reagan as its president, from 1947 to 1953, at the height of the red scare. And, unbeknownst to his members, he was an informer for the FBI. Reagan was turning in his own members to the bureau while acting as president.

The foul role of IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees]—the powerful technicians union—under the right-wing stewardship of Roy Brewer is very well-known. Brewer testified before HUAC and decades later worked in the Reagan administration. The unions were very committed to the anti-communist fight.

DW: This is a big question, which you may want to answer briefly. What was the long-term cultural and artistic impact of the witch hunt in the 1940s and 1950s?

MA: The impact was quite significant. Thom Andersen, who made an excellent documentary, *Red Hollywood* [1996], wrote an essay and referred to a series of films of this time as *film gris* [grey film], not *film noir* [black or dark film], films made roughly between 1947 and 1951.

Many of these films were made by people who later were blacklisted or who later became cooperative witnesses. Films such as *Body and Soul*, *Force of Evil*, *Ruthless*, *Try and Get Me* [*The Sound of Fury*], *He Ran All the Way*, *The Lawless*, *The Boy with Green Hair*, movies that had critical things to say about American society, about bigotry or big business, or that dealt with working class issues.

DW: To begin having compassionate and realistic portrayals of African Americans, even in small roles, there needed to be Communist Party supporters or other left-wing writers and directors, or sometimes European

exiles. Otherwise black actors played maids and servants, or worse.

MA: Many of these films were independently made, and that cycle of films pretty much came to an end as the result of what HUAC did in the late 1940s, once a lot of people started getting blacklisted and others became frightened. The movies that were made immediately after World War II could not have been made after 1951. The culture was affected because the studios were reluctant to deal with social issues as directly as these earlier films had.

Now the issues had to be introduced in a more subterranean manner, through many excellent Westerns, for example, and through other genres. There were potent films in the 1950s that blacklistedees worked on, in some cases, but they had to be more cautious.

DW: I dislike the term *film noir*. I prefer "American neo-realism." One could add many other titles, including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Key Largo*, *Caught*, *Out of the Past*, *The Stranger*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *They Live by Night*, *He Walked by Night*, *Raw Deal*, *Gun Crazy*, *Brute Force*, Otto Preminger's films of the time, Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*, for that matter. There are many interesting and radical works during this period.

The realistic view of life and relations is quite intense and intriguing. All taking place, of course, within the limits of the Production Code and so forth.

MA: The fate of a film like Edgar G. Ulmer's *Ruthless* is interesting, because it did undergo partial censorship. There are various versions of the film. The producer got cold feet after the HUAC hearings. This is a film about a "ruthless," brutal businessman, and the final line is, "He wasn't a man, he was a way of life."

The actress Betsy Blair, who was blacklisted, once commented she felt the films that came out after the blacklist were less concerned with what caused human beings to behave in a certain way, in other words, with the social causation of human behavior.

There were films in the 1950s that made allusions to HUAC, like *High Noon* and *Silver Lode*. There's a film, *Gun the Man Down*, written by Burt Kennedy (most famous later for his films with Budd Boetticher), which came out in 1956, where one of the villains is named Rankin, presumably "in honor" of the Mississippi congressman, the racist, anti-semitic Rep. John Rankin of HUAC. But there was caution and discretion.

DW: What similarities do you see between the McCarthyite purges and the present sexual misconduct witch hunt?

MA: I remember director Abraham Polonsky, who was blacklisted and who was very committed to the Communist Party, once commenting, speaking of that era, that "the worst" were the liberals, in terms of how they responded and capitulated. I'm getting a sense of what he means by observing what's taking place now. As I say, these attacks are coming from liberal or "left" areas. More so than in the 1950s.

It's very chilling to observe, the immediacy of careers coming to an end. It also brings to mind Stalinism and the airbrushing of commissars who had been liquidated, the fact that someone like actor James Franco can be digitally removed from a *Vanity Fair* cover, that Kevin Spacey can simply be cut out of and replaced in an entire feature film, *All the Money in the World*. This is unprecedented. It certainly goes beyond what even was going on in the 1950s during the Hollywood Red Scare.

DW: In terms of the Spacey situation, you have found no evidence of anything like that being done in the 1940s or 1950s?

MA: I searched and searched. Of course, actors are always getting replaced in films. We've had cases in which a film was nearing completion and the producer says, you know, we just need to get a different actor and reshoot all their scenes. Even in recent films. But those were not, to my knowledge, politically based decisions, those were just decisions, right or wrong, made by the creative team.

During the blacklist period, I could find no case where someone was cut out of a movie entirely and replaced with someone else because they had

not cooperated with HUAC. What tended to happen was that during the production, let's say, an actor received a subpoena and he or she made it clear that he or she was not going to cooperate. The studio's attitude was, 'All right, we'll finish this damn picture, but forget about any jobs after this.' So the person was allowed to appear, they might get credit, but after that, unless they cooperated, their career was finished. In terms of refilming an entire role, I was not able to find such an example.

If there was a film with a politically sensitive theme, and the producer became nervous, they simply would not give it a good release, it would effectively be buried. They might not release it to their best theaters, for example. After a first run, it might simply be thrown into the vaults. This is the world, after all, before television, video, etc. Of course, this is what happened to the pro-Soviet, pro-Stalinist films that the studios made between 1943 and 1945, movies like *Mission to Moscow*, *Song of Russia*, *Counter-Attack*. Those were simply taken out of release permanently and unavailable for half a century or more.

Now, there is the case of Charlie Chaplin, when all the political heat was exerted on him and he was forced to leave the country essentially. He became persona non grata. We were certainly not going to be seeing the earlier Chaplin films shown as regularly during the 1950s. So that was a form of retroactive punishment. There was a major revival of his work in 1972-73.

DW: We made the point in that "Scoundrel Time Returns" article that the relative openness on sexual matters in American filmmaking that emerged in the 1960s was in part a response to the straitjacket of the McCarthy period.

MA: I agree. There was the influence of European film. There was the breakdown of the Production Code in the 1960s. It was a license for directors and producers to be more explicit. I definitely think there was a reaction to the puritanical values that had dominated.

Although the 1950s was a contradictory period. There was a good deal of sexual provocation in the films, but they had to be more discreet about it. Let's say, the '60s took the '50s to the next level, and clearly there was a rebellion against the constraints that were put on filmmakers in general.

DW: Reading about the history of the film industry's Production Code, and the man in charge, Joseph Breen, one is again astonished that anything of substance and subversiveness was made in Hollywood. There was an attempt to suffocate any critical or independent thought, or realism about the world.

MA: Yes. In addition to the Breen Office, there were in many places state and local censorship boards. Then there were the right-wing pressure groups—very vigilant groups!—like the Legion of Decency and the American Legion, etc. It is remarkable that significant and hard-hitting films came out nonetheless. Under certain dictatorships it may have been easier. In the US, there was a bewildering assortment of perverse, bureaucratic censors and red tape.

The Breen Office supervising the Production Code in Hollywood did not simply pay attention to sex and violence. It was about political content as well. Breen was very concerned with how big business and religion and the police, and the country in general, were being portrayed. It was an oppressive situation.

DW: As a final point, you expressed earlier, and with some degree of passion, your astonishment at the cowardice and hypocrisy we are witnessing in Hollywood and the media generally at the moment. People obviously feel that if they open their mouths, once again, their careers will be over.

MA: Today, of course, you are dealing with the incredible immediacy of these attacks, through social media and the Internet, so now you have people weighing in and discrediting actors and others within a matter of seconds. There is this fear, if one speaks out, of a career coming to an end. We see how easily this can be done.

That was also the motivating factor in the 1940s and 1950s. Individuals capitulated because they were looking after their careers, although many at the time, director Elia Kazan being the most notorious example, justified their capitulation and their cooperation with HUAC on the grounds they had they suddenly woken up to the evils of the Soviet Union.

However, the men they were confessing to were not admirable citizens. They were anti-Semites and racists, and often fascist sympathizers. It makes a mockery of that argument.

DW: Yes, we made that point at the time of Kazan's special Academy Award in 1999, that he and the others had entrusted the cause of "human freedom" to Allen Dulles, the CIA, J. Edgar Hoover, the American military and company.

It's a shameful time again.

MA: Informing or making a deal was a central part of the process at the time.

DW: Making confessions and doing similar things is part of the process now. There is immense pressure being put on prominent figures, as there was in the 1950s, to chime in and denounce the accused. Silence is not possible. You have to be publicly in support of #MeToo, denounce the appropriate people, or your career is at risk.

MA: At the time, there was a wonderfully named lawyer, Martin Gang, and he would coach you on how to appear before HUAC, what to say, how to talk about yourself. You had to explain that you had been very young when you participated in left-wing circles, Russia was an ally at the time, you didn't know what you were doing, and you were so sorry, etc. You had to do a complete mea culpa. "I was a dupe, or a dope," as they used to say. Then you had to give them names. The problem arose with people who were prepared to talk about themselves, but not give names of others. That was the critical issue, the acid test. You could be cited for contempt and threatened with a jail sentence.

DW: All of this is happening again, in somewhat different form, and no one has apparently learned anything in Hollywood.



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