American film actor Kirk Douglas (1916–2020)

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Kirk Douglas, a major performer in American films from the late 1940s until the early 1970s, died at his home in Beverly Hills, California, on February 5 from natural causes at the age of 103. One of the leading film actors of the post-World War II era, he also played a role in helping to end the anti-communist blacklist by hiring and crediting blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo for his efforts on *Spartacus* (1960).

Douglas brought his renowned dynamism to dozens of films, including many valuable ones, among them, *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Champion* (Mark Robson, 1949), *Ace in the Hole* (Billy Wilder, 1951), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960), *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Minnelli, 1962) and *Seven Days in May* (John Frankenheimer, 1964).

The actor's career expressed some of the continued strengths of American filmmaking as it suffered through and emerged from the anti-communist McCarthyite purges, as well as the limitations imposed on—and accepted by—Hollywood as a result of the virtual criminalization of left-wing ideas in the early 1950s.

Douglas was born Issur Danielovitch in December 1916—four months prior to US entry into World War I and 11 months before the Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia—in Amsterdam, New York, a small manufacturing city in the Mohawk Valley known for its carpet-making.

In his autobiography, *The Ragman's Son* (1988), Douglas recounted his childhood on Amsterdam's "East End, the opposite side of town from the rich people on Market Hill." He, his parents and six sisters lived in a "run-down, gray clapboard house, the last house at the bottom of a sloping street, next to the factories, the railroad tracks, and the Mohawk River."

In the same memoir, Douglas wrote that he had been "born in abject poverty. My parents came here from Russia, illiterate immigrants." Douglas's parents were Jews who emigrated, his father first, to the US in 1908–1910 to escape the oppression and misery of tsarist society.

Douglas described his father, Herschel, born around 1884, as one of the "ignorant peasants" who, when conscripted into the army, "had hay tied on one sleeve, and straw on the other, so that they could tell their right hand from their left." His father was a rag picker and junkman in Amsterdam, working from a horse-cart.

His mother, born Byrna Sanglel, wrote Douglas, came "from a family of Ukrainian farmers… She wanted all her children to be born in this wonderful new land, where she thought the streets were paved with gold—literally." In Russia, Douglas's mother had seen a brother killed in the street by one of those Cossacks, "exhilarated by vodka," who "considered it a sport to gallop through the ghetto and split open a few Jewish heads."

Douglas worked at a variety of jobs from an early age, although he managed to go to college, St. Lawrence University, also in upstate New York.

He had first been encouraged by an Amsterdam high school teacher to pursue acting. After graduating from university, Douglas, like many others before and after him, moved to Greenwich Village in New York City. He entered the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, which offered him a scholarship. One of his classmates, who later helped him launch his movie career, was actress Lauren Bacall. After serving in the Navy during World War II, Douglas returned to New York and started finding work in radio and the theater.

Douglas appeared in his first film in 1946, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (directed by Lewis Milestone, from a screenplay by left-winger Robert Rossen). He began a Hollywood career at an interesting time, at the height of the *film noir* era, when American filmmaking was at one of its most realistic and critical moments. Like others of his generation (including Burt Lancaster, William Holden and Robert Mitchum), Douglas—at 30 or so—already brought to his initial performances some knowledge of life and its difficulties.

After another valuable "dark" and troubling work, *I Walk Alone* (Byron Haskin, 1948), the first of seven films in which he appeared with Lancaster, Douglas featured in the French-born Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, based on a novel by left-wing American writer Daniel Mainwaring. Douglas plays a gangster, Whit Sterling, determined to track down his former lover (Jane Greer), who shot and wounded him, and stole $40,000 of his money. Unusually, while he is menacing throughout, Douglas's character is suave and articulate, his homicidal tendencies hidden as much as possible.

The WSWS commented in 2015 that *Out of the Past* was a "morally and psychologically forceful" work. "Considering its subject matter, there is very little overt violence in the film… For his part, Whit smiles and jokes, and almost never raises his voice. He doesn't have to, his money and power automatically demand respect."

Robson's *Champion*, in which Douglas played a leading role as a boxer ruthlessly battling his way to the top, brought the actor to prominence. Douglas's Midge Kelly shamelessly betrays friends, associates and women in the course of this "story of a man who," as the film's opening proclaims, "starting from the most sordid poverty, has become World Champion."

Ace in the Hole is one of Wilder's bitterest films (and one of his few commercial failures), influenced, one would assume, by the media's foul role in generating the McCarthyite hysteria of the late 1940s and early 1950s, although it approaches the issue of deceitfully manipulating public opinion only by way of allegory.

Douglas, now a full-blown "movie star," plays a cynical, down on his luck journalist, Chuck Tatum, who stumbles upon the case of a man trapped in a New Mexico cave collapse. Tatum ("I'm a pretty good liar. I've done a lot of lying in my time.") does everything in his power to manipulate a gullible public, all too eager to be led by the nose. He conspires with a corrupt, ambitious local sheriff to see to it that the unfortunate victim is not rescued immediately ("If I just had one week of this…"), so that the story can remain on the front pages of newspapers across the country.

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In *The Bad and the Beautiful*, one of several of Douglas's films directed by Minnelli, the actor played, once again, a relatively ruthless character, a maverick Hollywood producer, Jonathan Shields, "cynical, cunning, and demonic," in the words of one commentator, based on several famous Hollywood figures. The melodrama proceeds in flashbacks. Three figures, a director, a scriptwriter and an actress, gathered in a Hollywood office essentially explain why they refuse to have anything to do with Shields, based on bitter past experience.

A common theme clearly emerges in a number of these films, associated with general postwar criticism of "the American dream" and the pursuit of achievement "at any cost." (Although, in the case of *The Bad and the Beautiful*, the Douglas character actually sacrifices others and himself in the effort, at least in part, to liberate "the creative potential of his director, scriptwriter, and leading lady," as film critic and historian Thomas Elsaesser observes.)

It is worth noting that Douglas, whose Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches story, in his own words, was so trite "as to be unbelievable," was able to recognize the problematic nature of the framework in which his own life was often presented as proof of America's unlimited opportunities.

Film historian and scholar Joseph McBride (see accompanying interview), in his short 1976 biography of Douglas, argues eloquently that "the life vein running through virtually all of his films is a spirited, anguished critique of the American success ethic."

Two processes seem to be work simultaneously, and sometimes at cross-purposes, in a number of Douglas's films: the undeniable ability (and determination) of certain people in America, including from immigrant or impoverished backgrounds, to raise themselves, economically and culturally—rooted in the powerful position and resources of US capitalism—and, on the other hand, the questionable, unstable character of the success achieved, often leading to the anguish, guilt or intense self-doubt of the central character.

One recalls film director Rainer Fassbinder's comment about the outlook of German novelist Theodor Fontane (1819–1898): "He lived in a society whose faults he recognized and could describe very precisely, but all the same a society he needed, to which he really wanted to belong. He rejected everybody and found everything alien and yet fought all his life for recognition within this society."

In a 1960 interview, cited by McBride, Douglas commented, "All your life you've been dreaming of wanting to act, to portray roles. Then what happens is that if you're successful at it, you become big business. A myriad of things that you never bargained for come into play. All of a sudden you are buffeted from every side and you're fortunate if you're a guy that has the right advice."

Of course, it is easy enough to argue that all this took place within the general acceptance by the actor and Hollywood liberalism of "American democracy," in whose political service Douglas often performed officially, including on State Department tours and other political operations. (Lancaster, who worked with European directors such as Luchino Visconti [*The Leopard, Conversation Piece*] and Bernardo Bertolucci [*1900*] in the 1960s and 1970s, and also appeared in actively oppositional works like David Miller-Dalton Trumbo's *Executive Action*, Robert Aldrich's *Twilight's Last Gleaming* and Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans*, adopted a somewhat more openly anti-establishment course.)

Here too, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the artist and the actor-public personality, with his career, financial success, endless sexual conquests and all the rest. Douglas was honest enough as an artist to paint and leave behind unflattering pictures of American society through his characterizations and the truth, in particular, of his emotions and "anguish," whatever function he may have performed as one of its loyal spokesmen during the Cold War.

The objective contradictions involved with doing serious artistic work under conditions in which entire arenas of social life had been cordoned off by anti-communism and the film industry's self-censorship perhaps find particular expression in the sometimes overwrought quality of Douglas's performances (in Minnelli's *Lust for Life* [1956] for example), as though too much had to be read into and squeezed out of too little. Critic Manny Farber, reviewing *Detective Story*, referred to the "gymnastic-minded" Douglas's "mad-dog style of acting."

McBride, in his 1976 book, noted that to segments of the film-going public, Douglas was "synonymous with the jut-jawed, strident-voiced, tirelessly pugnacious characters he usually plays on screen," characters whose "gesticulating" and "ranting" (in Farber's phrase) could be both irritating and distracting. At its best, however, his "phenomenal energy and intensity" (McBride) brought contradictory and disturbing conditions and dilemmas to life.

Douglas did have the good fortune to work with many of the most serious studio film directors in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, in addition to those already mentioned, including John M. Stahl (*The Walls of Jericho*, 1948), Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*A Letter to Three Wives*, 1949), Michael Curtiz (*Young Man with a Horn*, 1950), Raoul Walsh (*Along the Great Divide*, 1951), William Wyler (*Detective Story*, 1951), Howard Hawks (*The Big Sky*, 1952), Richard Fleischer (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, 1954, and *The Vikings*, 1958), Henry Hathaway (*The Racers*, 1955), King Vidor (*Man Without a Star*, 1955), André de Toth (*The Indian Fighter*, 1955), Robert Aldrich (*The Last Sunset*, 1961), Otto Preminger (*In Harm's Way*) and Anthony Mann (*The Heroes of Telemark*, 1965)

Douglas's most prominent years extended from 1957 to 1963, when he was one of the top 25 most successful film stars each year.

Paths of Glory, set during the slaughter of World War I, is one of Douglas's most important works. He plays a French officer, Colonel Dax, obliged to lead a suicide mission against German lines planned by the French general staff, who know that it cannot succeed. The military hierarchy is quite prepared to see the mass killing of its own men. After one unit refuses to advance into the path of the murderous German fire, General Mireau (George Macready), to deflect attention from his own role in the fiasco, decides to court-martial 100 men for cowardice, eventually reduced to three.

Dax, a lawyer in civilian life, defends the three soldiers in a proceeding that is a farce from a legal standpoint. Conviction is preordained. In his summary, Dax tells the tribunal, "The prosecution presented no witnesses. There has never been a written indictment of charges made against the defendants. And lastly, I protest against the fact that no stenographic records of this trial have been kept. The attack yesterday morning was no stain on the honor of France... and certainly no disgrace to the fighting men of this nation. But this court-martial is such a stain and such a disgrace. The case made against these men is a mockery of all human justice. Gentlemen of the court, to find these men guilty would be a crime, to haunt each of you till the day you die." The court, however, does precisely that, and three men are executed.

In one of the final scenes, General Broulard (Adolphe Menjou), a member of the general staff, informs Mireau that he will be made a scapegoat for the whole affair and subsequently offers Mireau's command to Dax. Dax-Douglas replies, "Sir, would you like me to suggest what you can do with that promotion?"

When Broulard demands an apology, Dax responds with fury, in one of Douglas's finest moments: "I apologize for not being entirely honest with you. I apologize for not revealing my true feelings. I apologize for not telling you sooner that you're a degenerate, sadistic old man. And you can go to hell before I apologize to you now or ever again!"

Stanley Kubrick (after the firing of Anthony Mann 10 days into the picture) directed *Spartacus*, the epic story of the slave revolt in ancient Rome, in the first century BCE. The film was made by Douglas's company, Byrna Productions, named after his mother. The script, as noted, was written by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, adapted from the

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1951 novel by left-wing author Howard Fast, begun in prison where Fast was serving a three-month sentence for refusing to provide names to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

There are intriguing and powerful sequences in *Spartacus*. For the creators, the slave revolt in the ancient world clearly bore parallels to the revolt of the oppressed in modern times, including the ongoing Civil Rights movement. According to McBride, Douglas pointed out that his lead character "was a complex blend of the animal and the spiritual, beginning as a brutish and brutalized sub-human and eventually finding a conscience and becoming a figure of heroic legend."

In a famous scene, after the defeat of the slave revolt, Roman officials try to locate the rebel leader by promising the survivors they will avoid "the terrible punishment of crucifixion on the single condition that you identify the body or the living person of the slave called Spartacus." Famously, each of the survivors shouts, "I'm Spartacus!"

Two Weeks in Another Town, based on a novel by Irwin Shaw, is a further examination of the film industry directed by Vincente Minnelli. Douglas is a former star, Jack Andrus, afflicted with alcoholism, who travels to Rome to play a small part in a film to be directed by his onetime mentor, Kruger (Edward G. Robinson), featuring an up-and-coming film star (played by George Hamilton). In the end, after Kruger suffers a debilitating heart attack, Andrus takes over the direction of the film and completes it successfully. Instead of gratitude, he is met with jealousy and the charge that he has attempted to undermine Kruger. An atmosphere of bitterness and disillusionment pervades the lush, quasi-decadent goings-on.

In *Seven Days in May*, set in the future, in 1974, a rogue Air Force general determines to organize a coup d'état in opposition to the US president's signing of a disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union. Lancaster plays the semi-fascist general, James Mattoon Scott, and Douglas a Marine Corps colonel, "Jiggs" Casey, while Fredric March performs as the somewhat ineffectual President Jordan Lyman.

The best-selling novel by Charles W. Bailey II and Fletcher Knebel was inspired by the activities of Gen. Edwin Walker, a fascistic figure who resigned in 1961 after it come to light he was indoctrinating troops under his command with his ultra-right political views and had described former President Harry Truman, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as Communist sympathizers. Bailey and Knebel also interviewed another extreme reactionary in the US military high command, Gen. Curtis LeMay, one of the inspirations for characters in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

In Frankenheimer's film, Casey comes to learn that Scott and the rest of the Joint Chiefs of Staff plan to stage a military takeover of the US government, removing Lyman and his cabinet. Under the plan, a secret unit will seize control of the country's radio, telephone and television networks. Lyman and Casey work to stymie Scott's plans, without, however, disclosing their existence to the American public. The film has numerous chilling and prescient aspects, and points to the cancerous and sinister growth by the early 1960s of the "military-industrial complex" and the fragility of American democracy at the height of postwar prosperity. What is its hollowed-out condition six decades later?

The final confrontation between Lancaster-Scott and Douglas-Casey goes like this, with Scott leading off:

–You're a night crawler, Colonel. A peddler. You sell information. Are you sufficiently up on your Bible to know who Judas was?… I asked you a question.

–Are you ordering me to answer, sir?

–I am.

–Yes, I know who Judas was. He was a man I worked for and admired… until he disgraced the four stars on his uniform.

A good number of Douglas's films will endure. He had the energy and intelligence, and talent, to shed light on American life in a manner that encourages criticism and independent thought.

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