

13524 D'ESTE DRIVE
PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIFORNIA

April 18, 1947.

Mr. Dore Schary
RKO Studio
780 North Gower Street
Hollywood, California

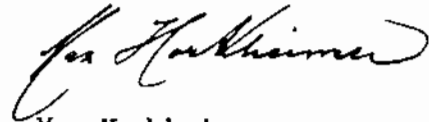
Dear Mr. Schary :

Above all I again want to express my thanks for having given me the opportunity to see "Crossfire" and having asked my opinion.

Since Wednesday night and after having told you that some lines might be changed and help carry your courageous message, I have been doing a lot of thinking and let the picture penetrate. As a result of this meditating I have to free my mind and my notes which you receive here express my concern about the psychological effect upon the simple theater-goer, particularly upon the adolescents. Although part of my life's work has been filled with the study of the socio-psychological mechanisms involved in such reactions, I am still giving you a one-man's opinion.

I simply believe that you have the exact feel for my most personal response to the fine spirit of your picture.

Sincerely yours,



Max Horkheimer

by Max Hurlbut

Notes on "Crossfire"

The plot of "Crossfire" centers around the investigation of a murder. A Jew names Samuels was found slain in his apartment. In the night when it happened, he had been in the company of various soldiers whom he had invited for some drinks after having casually met them in a bar. There is no doubt that he was slain by one or several of these soldiers. The task of the detective is to find the guilty one among them. The progress of the investigation is shown partly through the dramatization of the stories of the interrogated persons, partly by the events which happen during the hours of the investigation itself. As the questioning proceeds, Finley, the detective, an extremely able and humane character, focuses on one particular soldier, Monty, who, together with his buddy, had at a certain moment been alone with Samuels. However, he cannot find the motive for the murder. Finally, it dawns upon him. The motive, as he says, was so simple, so general, that it had slipped his mind: the hatred of Jews. There are different categories of Jew-haters, he figures, some of them do not like the Jews in their clubs or restaurants, some do not give them work, and some go as far as murder. The climax of the investigation comes when Monty's buddy is found murdered in his hide-out. A soldier from Tennessee, whom the detective with some difficulty has convinced to help him, tricks the murderer into giving himself away. The film ends with the murderer's attempted escape from the hands of the detective during which he is cornered and shot by the police.

Samuels is shown only at the beginning of the picture in the bar where he picks up the soldiers, and then in his apartment. He looks like an intellectual and is characterized as an understanding, keen and benevolent man through his attitude toward one of the soldiers who feels low. There is no doubt that he is a Jew. "Some of them are called Samuels, some have funnier names". This remark finds its immediate answer: "There are funny names in the casual lists too." The words of the murderer which have a direct bearing upon the deed, are, as far as I recall them: "No dirty Jew is going to tell me how to drink his liquor." When the detective persuades the Tennessee boy to help him, the major is present and lends his support to overcome the young man's resistance. "Who tells me that you are not a Jewish person yourself?" says the Tennesseean to the detective. The latter finally makes a rhetorical effort which may be considered to be the propagandistic core of the picture, and in which he expresses his ideas on antisemitism. He says that hatred of minorities is not new in America. There were, e.g., the Irish Catholics. The detective's own grandfather, a wonderful man, was murdered for the simple reason that he was an Irish Catholic. "In our days it is the Jews, tomorrow it may be the Quakers, or the people from Tennessee, and one day even those who wear different neckties."

The picture is superbly acted and very entertaining. It is more than that: it is based on profound psychological insight into the functioning of the mind of the antisemite. The way in which the guilty soldier behaves before murdering Samuels, the aggressive familiarity of the murderer, his bullying Samuels, his kind of homosexual rudeness and ~~satirism~~ -- all this is masterly expressed. Despite the combination of the suspense of a detective story with

a very serious social problem of our days, I do not hesitate to say that this picture is an honest and sincere attempt to enlighten the public about the destructive nature of antisemitism.

It is enlightening -- as far as the intelligent, educated, liberally minded movie-goer is concerned. However, the educational value for the masses is most doubtful. In my opinion there is danger that this picture will do more harm than good. Here are the reasons. The conscious message is certainly well-meant and even courageous. It is mainly contained in the utterances of the detective, the criminality of the murderer's actions and his bad end. However, the film sends out an unconscious message. Under this name I understand the appeal to emotions, instincts and urges; furthermore the elements of the plot which will stand out in the minds of the greater part of the audience in contrast to the rational argumentation and the moral accents and indices which the producer wanted to put on the characters and their actions. It is ^a well-known experience that what people remember of a work of art depends on sympathies and antipathies which are often in contrast with the intentions of the work's creators and even the conscious wishes of the spectators themselves. Yet, modern psychology has taught us to understand these mechanisms so well that we may safely make certain predictions.

The unconscious message in this film could easily read that there are many people who do not like the Jews and that Jew-hatred is a very natural motive for killing a man. We know that all murder stories appeal to a certain group of adolescents, but in this case there is a novelty. The picture is pioneering. Almost for the first time is it stated on the screen that there

is a thrill in killing a Jew. The association between the ideas "Jew" and "killing" is made even stronger by the fact that the murderer is good looking, that his appearance is military and that he actually is a professional soldier. From the very beginning the audience will be induced to identify themselves with him. In many respects and for many people the real hero of the film will be the murderer and not the detective. This tendency is somewhat strengthened by the fact that at the end the murderer does not confess and is not brought to trial. He is shot after being trapped by the superior number of police. He did kill his buddy and this could be considered as inexcusable from the standpoint of the heroic urges of the adolescent spectators. But it is outweighed by the fact that the buddy behaved very cowardly and miserably. Furthermore, the fact that the other soldiers finally let themselves be won over by the detective strengthens the instinctive sympathies with the murderer. Many adolescents would like to see the soldiers stick together against the cop even though one of them may be guilty.

It is the contention of the picture that Jew-hatred is a wide-spread and destructive urge. If this is true, the urge to identify with Monty will be wide-spread as well. The lines which state that some people do not like Jews or that they have funny names, etc., will stick in the minds like slogans. The rational arguments against antisemitism, e.g., the speech of the detective to the Tennessean sound apologetic and defensive. They sound like propaganda. This goes even for the insert which - in the hands of the detective - proves that Samuels was wounded in Okinawa. For the naive spectator antisemitism dominates the scene. This is the more true since Samuels himself makes but a short appearance which is certainly ^{not} made

more impressive by the fact that he looks like an intellectual. His high-brow remarks in the bar may well alienate an average audience. And then, the murderer is there and Samuels is absent -- and, psychologically, the one who is absent is at a disadvantage.

When I saw the picture I thought it could be remedied by the change of sentences and certain scenes. However, after I have given careful thought to the problem, I am convinced that the considerable dangers involved in showing this film cannot be overcome at this stage. I am the more depressed about the result of my thinking as I have the greatest respect not only for the producers and actors of this picture, but also for the veracity of its manifest content. It is an unfortunate fact that a work can be psychologically sound in itself and still be naive with respect to its psychological effect.

Max Horkheimer

Max Horkheimer, "Report on 'Crossfire,'" April 18, 1947.
Courtesy Dore Schary Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.