

Conclusion

Freedom of the Screen?

The Politics of Postwar Cultural Production

[T]he Thomases and Rankins—they could not investigate the work [of the Hollywood Nineteen]; for their work would prove that they have taken the meaning of this country literally and through their talents have invested it with spirit and magnificence. The Thomases and the Rankins did not dare comment on one picture—for there was no such thing as a subversive picture.

—Adrian Scott

In their defense of "freedom of the screen," Adrian Scott and his comrades had consistently challenged HUAC and the American people to judge them *on their films*, insisting that their politics were on the screen for all to see. Now, more than a half century later, it is sometimes difficult to see what all the fuss was about. Indeed, from our next-millennial perspective *Crossfire* seems rather tame and more than a little pedantic, while Scott himself and his utterly sincere and idealistic Americanism now seem about as radical as his clean, fuzzy argyle socks.

1

Nonetheless, in 1947, Scott and *Crossfire* represented a political vision so profoundly threatening to the reactionary members of HUAC that he spent a year in prison. In the ideological struggle between HUAC and Hollywood, the older xenophobic, antiradical, antimodernist tradition of Americanism was pitted against a New Americanism, the more cosmopolitan, modernist, and pluralist popular nationalism of the war years that was broadly shared by the studio moguls, the liberal activists, and the radical dissidents in Hollywood. Indeed, since the 1930s, Hollywood films had played a key role in reshaping national attitudes toward a more inclusive construction of America and Americanism. Scott, along with hundreds of other leftist and liberal cultural workers, took great pride in his contributions to that revisioning project and was deeply committed to infusing Hollywood films with antifascist, antiracist, humanist values. This Popular Front generation of cultural workers truly loved the movies and saw them as a quintessentially American and profoundly democratic art form. Rejecting the moguls' contention that movies were simply "entertainment," they believed that movies could—and should—reflect the diversity of the body politic and represent the American values of democracy, social justice, and racial tolerance.

2

Thus, the very notion of freedom of the screen was hotly contested during the postwar investigation into subversion in Hollywood. For the members of HUAC and the Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, freedom of the screen meant, quite literally, freedom *from* such "un-American" ideas. For the Hollywood

3

radicals, however, freedom of the screen was a shorthand for the protection of American civil liberties—freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and freedom *for* the cinematic articulation of their broadly inclusive, democratic vision of America. Thus, Adrian Scott and the other Hollywood progressives clearly understood that HUAC's investigation of Hollywood was intended not simply to smear individual film radicals, but to discredit the very values that underlay their cultural politics. As Scott insisted,

Actually, the investigation did not deal with communism: it dealt rather with those ideas which correspond in a cultural field with what the Roosevelt New Deal was in a legislative field. Roosevelt and his humanitarian legislation to the Un-Americans were communist. Therefore those who supported him and that legislation were suspect.¹

In the progressives' analysis, HUAC's obsession with Communist "subversion" was simply a smokescreen that disguised a much more sinister agenda: "The purpose of the Thomas Committee is unmistakable: control of the screen, and then thought control over all media of communication—and, finally, a police state."² Though the United States obviously did not become the full-blown fascist state predicted by the radicals, the climate of fear created by the anti-Communist crusade did, without a doubt, stifle dissent and encourage a wide-ranging political and cultural conformity.

The great irony here, of course, is that Hollywood had never been a bastion of freedom. As Scott's own experiences with *Cornered* and *Crossfire* made abundantly clear, Hollywood progressives struggled constantly and often in vain to inject "radical" content into their films. Nonetheless, for Adrian Scott and the other Hollywood radicals, the real tragedy of HUAC's assault on the film industry and the resulting blacklist was the effect on film content. From their perspective, HUAC's desire to censor the film industry, to promote only values that reinforced and normalized unequal power relations in America was, indeed, "thought control:" "[J]udging from the pictures under attack like *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Farmer's Daughter*, and others, they want no rich man characterized except as friendly and lovable and kind; they want no criticism of any aspect of our society, including criticism of congressmen or senators; they want no problem pictures." This, more than anything else, fueled the radicals' resistance to HUAC. As Scott had argued in the summer of 1947, "I believe we have a job to do: to combat the controls which can lead only to more sterility in the motion picture and to more reaction generally. If we allow ourselves to be consumed by our fears, this can happen. While this marriage of reaction is going on, we've got to speak now—or we'll be forced to 'forever hold our peace.'"³

4

Indeed, the impact of the new political censorship on the films themselves was

5

felt almost immediately in Hollywood. One studio script reader told journalist Lillian Ross that the hearings had fueled a "new kind of self-censorship" in the film industry: "I now read scripts through with the eyes of the D.A.R., whereas formerly I read them through the eyes of my boss. . . . I'm all loused up. I'm scared to death, and nobody can tell me it isn't because I'm afraid of being investigated." In August 1948, *Variety* reported that "studios are continuing to drop plans for 'message' pictures like hot coals."⁴ As Scott himself wrote only a few weeks after the HUAC hearings, "It is awful tough to function with this new censorship. You couldn't even begin to consider a picture like *Crossfire* today, and this is the kind of tragedy that faces the industry. If ideas are blackballed, the industry, facing a rapidly declining box office, cannot possibly survive."⁵

Film industry leaders, however, vigorously denied that the new political climate would negatively affect Hollywood films. Indeed, Eric Johnston argued that the political and economic challenges facing postwar Hollywood would only spur the industry to "re-tool to produce better pictures at less cost." Speaking at a luncheon of the Protestant Motion Picture Council at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in early 1948, Johnston claimed that he was "personally encouraging" the industry to make more movies "dealing with the pulsing forces of life today." Arguing that it was a mistake to underestimate the intelligence of the moviegoing public or to pander to the lowest common denominator in mass entertainment, he proclaimed, "These are times which can well afford new daring and boldness and imagination—and a lot of experimentation in new areas to meet new human wants and needs. Standardization is fine in factories; it can be a curse in the world of art." Thus, Johnston dismissed the radicals' charges that Hollywood had capitulated to HUAC's demands to censor itself:

I'm constantly being asked if we have clamped down on pictures which criticize this or that American institution, tradition or profession as a result of the House committee investigation of Hollywood. It is charged that pictures of the past dealing with controversial themes couldn't be made today. It is also said that contemplated productions of this character have been abandoned. There's just no truth in that.⁶

Dore Schary, too, insisted that the Red scare would not affect film content. Responding to the "foolish" question of whether he would greenlight *Crossfire* in the current political climate, he replied "certainly." Schary blamed the "extreme left" for fostering a "fear complex" with charges that Hollywood would no longer make message films, and he insisted that "the leftists . . . lied when they said we would not make *The Boy with Green Hair*." "It is a pro-peace picture, and we are going to make it with no change in subject matter," he asserted bravely.⁷

Despite the protestations of Johnston and Schary, the film industry did back away

6

7

8

from "controversial" subject matter, if not immediately following the 1947 HUAC hearings, then certainly after HUAC's return to Hollywood in 1951. For example, though *Gentleman's Agreement* was named Best Picture at the 1947 Academy Awards, representations of anti-Semitism as a fundamental threat to American democracy and cultural pluralism disappeared from the screen in the 1950s. Of course, social problem films were not abandoned overnight. In 1949, for example, Hollywood produced a remarkable cycle of antiracist films—Stanley Kramer's *Home of the Brave*, Elia Kazan's *Pinky*, Louis de Rochemont's *Lost Boundaries*, Clarence Brown's *Intruder in the Dust*, and Joseph Mankiewicz's *No Way Out*.⁸ Nonetheless, Dorothy Jones, drawing on data from the Production Code Administration, calculated that 1947 marked the high point of the "message" movie in Hollywood. In that year, 21 percent of Hollywood films were categorized as "social problem" films; the figures fell to 16.5 percent in 1948 and 1949, and 9.5 percent in the early 1950s.⁹ With Hollywood's postwar attack on domestic social problems derailed, particularly after the second round of HUAC hearings in the early 1950s, dissent in Hollywood films merely seeped through the cracks of the Cold War consensus; it was confined largely to the 1950s cycle of "juvenile delinquency" films such as *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Blackboard Jungle*, and *The Wild One* (as well as a whole slew of B films), featuring alienated, angry youths rebelling against a conformist adult world. Film noir, too, remained a site of resistance, and blacklisted leftists, including Jules Dassin, Abe Polonsky, and Joseph Losey, were conspicuous in the ranks of the later noir masters. Though shorn of the overt antifascist politics of the 1940s noir, 1950s noir made powerful use of the visual style of noir and its narrative staples—random violence, paranoid and powerless protagonists, existential despair—to critique the politics and paranoia of the Cold War world.¹⁰

In 1955, eight years after the first round of HUAC hearings and the imposition of the blacklist, Adrian Scott published an article entitled "Blacklist: The Liberal's Straitjacket and It's [*sic*] Effect on Content."¹¹ His analysis was sparked by a stirring defense of academic freedom given to members of the Anti-Defamation League by Dore Schary, then head of production for MGM. The parallel between academic freedom and freedom of the screen was too glaring to miss, and Scott used Schary's "brave good words" to hoist him on his own petard. Relentlessly pointing out the slippage between Schary's liberal rhetoric and the reality of his collaboration with the blacklist and the "clearance" mechanisms employed by the film industry, Scott described the dilemma facing Hollywood liberals:

Two Scharys exist today: one the maker of benevolent speeches, the other the persecutor of liberal ideas; one who opposes the blacklisting of professors, another who actively engages in the blacklisting of writers; one who supports the right of educators to dissent, and one who denies employment to dissenting actors; one who urges intellectuals to be

unafraid, but one who is himself afraid.¹²

For Scott, Schary's hypocrisy was doubly damning because the "radical" ideas that had been blacklisted by the film industry were the very ideas that had animated the liberals themselves during the heyday of Popular Front filmmaking. Scott reeled off a long list of progressive films written by liberals in the 1930s and 1940s: *Dead End*, *They Won't Forget*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *The Life of Emile Zola*, *Juarez*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Citizen Kane*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *The Oxbow Incident*, *Casablanca*, *So Proudly We Hail*, and so on. He then compared them to films of the same period written by radicals (now blacklisted): *Watch on the Rhine*, *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, *Kitty Foyle*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, *Pride of the Marines*, *The House I Live In*, *Dragon Seed*, *Keeper of the Flame*, and so on. For Scott, it was abundantly clear that all of these movies reflected "some aspect of the humanist, democratic and anti-fascist values that were the life blood of American thought during the New Deal and the war against fascism." Though he noted that some of the films "contained elements of vigorous social criticism," there was "nothing alien to American interest" in any of them, whether written by a liberal or a radical. Most important, all of them were financially successful, critically acclaimed, and broadly popular among American moviegoers.¹³

10

Scott mourned the loss of this political vision in the wake of the industry's capitulation to HUAC's "thought control" agenda, and he delineated several new, troubling trends in Hollywood filmmaking: the cycle of anti-Communist films—*My Son John* and *I Married a Communist*, for example—produced to assuage HUAC (but which all bombed at the box office); the cycle of films—*Executive Suite*, *Sabrina*—glorifying the American businessman and the capitalist order; the cycle of films glorifying the military might of the United States—*Battle Cry*, *Strategic Air Command*, *An Annapolis Story*, and others; and a rise in the level of brutality depicted across the genres. Most disturbing to him, however, was that, in the vacuum created by the blacklisting of radical cultural workers, liberal filmmakers abandoned social and economic causality and wholeheartedly embraced the individualistic, psychological "solutions" of the therapeutic culture. Interestingly, Scott dismissed both *The Blackboard Jungle* (directed by Richard Brooks) and *The Wild One* (written by John Paxton)—the cutting edge of Hollywood "dissent" in the 1950s—as examples of the trend toward overly brutal, overly psychological films.¹⁴

11

For Scott, the attack on and sacrifice of the Ten and the other Hollywood radicals had been simply a means to an end: "It was the liberal who would remain employable that the Committee was after; and the ultimate objective was the elimination of the liberal's ideas from the screen." In this sense, Scott believed

12

that HUAC and the studio executives had been inordinately successful. Thus, he suggested:

By succumbing to political conformity, the liberal film-maker has accommodated himself to cultural conformity. He has been "duped" indeed—not by his erstwhile leftwing colleagues, but by his own employers, who promised him that once the industry cleaned house, once he was rid of associates who might subvert or corrupt him, he could go on to make great humanist pictures. It didn't turn out that way. The housecleaning swept out his own ideas along with the men and women with whom he had worked.¹⁵

Nonetheless, in 1955, Scott was optimistic. With the fall of Joseph McCarthy in sight, he sensed that "a clean new air is blowing across the nation." However, he was less sanguine about Hollywood's prospects, noting, "Reaction's eight years of siege and assault have immobilized the Hollywood liberal. He is still riven with fears and doubts; his allies have been dispersed, and he feels himself alone in a company town." Until liberals recognized that in blacklisting the radical filmmakers, they had betrayed and rejected their own humanist ideas and democratic heritage, Scott argued, Hollywood movies would remain irrelevant to the great majority of Americans and the industry's downward spiral would be unstoppable.¹⁶ 13

It is probably not surprising that Scott, in his desire to vindicate himself and the other blacklistees, focused exclusively on the blacklist to explain Hollywood's postwar decline. However, the film industry faced other, equally significant challenges in the late 1940s and 1950s. After an all-time high in 1946, box-office revenues—both domestic and foreign—declined precipitously. Though the box-office slump began several years before television made a significant impact, television, offering convenient "family" entertainment in one's own living room, certainly fueled the decline. Indeed, by 1953, when over 40 percent of American families owned a television set, moviegoing had dropped to half the peak rate of 1946. The film industry responded to the challenge of television with technical innovations (3-D, advanced color processes, widescreen "Cinerama" effects) and blockbuster epics (Westerns, Biblical extravaganzas, spectacular war films) that played up the advantages of the "big screen." However, the studio system itself had already begun its long, slow disintegration, which the new gimmicks did little to halt. In 1948, the Supreme Court finally ruled against the film industry in the long-running Paramount antitrust suit, forcing the studios to sell off the linchpin of the production-distribution-exhibition nexus: the movie theaters. Without this vital source of profits and leverage, the studio system of Hollywood's "Golden Age" slowly imploded.¹⁷ 14

The New Hollywood, built by independent production companies, powerful agents, 15

and multi-industry conglomerates, was a world the cultural workers of the 1930s and 1940s barely recognized. Some, like John Paxton, were nostalgic for the old days, the days when "you knew who your friends and enemies were." Paxton clearly recognized the role his friend Adrian Scott had played in shaping his own creative vision, and he mourned the loss of that singularly important collaboration: "To me, the greatest single tragedy of the blacklist business was that [Adrian Scott] was cut down in his prime (you don't have to look much further for the reason why neither Dmytryk nor I were ever again involved in films of this particular sort)."¹⁸

In that context, then, I think Scott was absolutely correct to emphasize the effects of the blacklist that deprived the film industry of hundreds of creative, committed, courageous artists. Though now we can only imagine the kinds of movies Scott and his comrades might have made had they not been banished from the industry they loved and help to shape, I believe that the loss of their talents was indeed staggering. Hollywood was a far lesser place without such people as Adrian Scott to fight for films like *Crossfire*, whatever its flaws or evasions; to insist that movies were more than mere entertainment; to demand that Hollywood live up to its responsibilities in creating and reflecting the imagined community of Americans; to hold fast to their convictions and faith in their own democratic vision of Americanism to the bitter end. Though he was not a particularly religious man, Adrian Scott did have a favorite Biblical verse—2 Timothy 4:7—which seems quite appropriate here: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."¹⁹

16

Notes

Note 1: Scott to George Bernard Shaw, August 25, 1950, in Scott Papers, AHC.

Note 2: Typescript, "Outline of Book on Hearings," n.d. [1948], in Scott Papers, 2A, AHC.

Note 3: Scott, "You Can't Do That," in *Thought Control in the U.S.A.: The Collected Proceedings*, ed. Harold J. Salemsen (Hollywood, Calif.: Progressive Citizens of America, 1947), 330.

Note 4: Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–60* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 340.

Note 5: Scott to Harry Miller, November 12, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

Note 6: Motion Picture Producers Association press release, January 27, 1948, in Kenny-Morris Papers, B14-F1, WHS.

Note 7: Thomas F. Brady, "Communist Scare Will Not Weaken Film Content, Schary Says," no publisher, n.d. [December 1947], in Scott Papers, AHC. Film historian Brian Neve, however, argues that although *The Boy with Green Hair* was ultimately released in 1949 and "essentially followed the original intentions," director Joseph Losey and writer Ben Barzman battled fiercely with the studio executives as well as the Breen Office to preserve the film's progressive antiwar message. Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 99–101.

Note 8: Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World*

War II to the Civil Rights Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 220–249. Though for the most part these films recapitulated the liberal "social conscience" emphasis on integration and the "sameness" of African Americans, *No Way Out* (starring Sidney Poitier in his first Hollywood film) is more reminiscent of *Crossfire* in its complexity and, particularly, its insistence that violence is the logical and perhaps inevitable result of racial hatred.

Note 9: Neve, *Film and Politics in America*, 84–85.

Note 10: On "dissent" in film noir, see Neve, *Film and Politics in America*, especially chapters 6 and 7, and Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 215–256. On postwar juvenile delinquency films, see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Note 11: Scott, "Blacklist: The Liberal's Straightjacket and It's [*sic*] Effect on Content," *Hollywood Review* 2:2 (September-October 1955): 1. The *Hollywood Review* was a small newspaper published sporadically during the mid-1950s by the Hollywood blacklistedees. Though its circulation was miniscule, rarely topping five hundred subscribers, the *Hollywood Review* "produced a quality of radical [film] criticism heretofore unknown (and unexpected) from the film industry." Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 413.

Note 12: Scott, "Blacklist," 1.

Note 13: *Ibid.*, 3–4.

Note 14: *Ibid.*, 5–6. I think it is quite significant that Brooks and Paxton were associated with these two films that Scott found so objectionable. On the one hand, I think it confirmed for him the terrible state of Hollywood that these men, whom he deeply respected, had produced such "evasive" social problem films. On the other hand, however, it must have been salt in Scott's wounds that these men continued to work on films that attempted to address social issues, while he was relegated to writing under the table for such television shows as *Lassie* and *Robin Hood*.

Note 15: *Ibid.*, 6.

Note 16: *Ibid.*

Note 17: Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975; rpt. 1994), 269–285; Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976; 2d rev. ed, 1985), 401–408; 422–433.

Note 18: Paxton to Kelly and Steinman, June 20, 1977, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

Note 19: Joan Scott, interview with author, April 1999.