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"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era

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"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era.

Edited by Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0813541983

The changes between sociopolitical situations and different political factions can easily manifest themselves through the history of a popular mass medium. *"Un-American" Hollywood* effectively conveys that those on the continuously changing American Left were involved with creating films of true significance in the Hollywood system. The text contains much analysis of the events surrounding the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the post-war blacklisting of figures in Hollywood accused of supporting communism. The book also dedicates time to discussion of the era of the Popular Front and how liberals and communists worked together before moving far apart during the post-war era. There is a chapter pertaining to the 1960s and 1970s regarding the differences between the "old" and "new" waves of left-wing politics and how one of the "Hollywood Ten" of the first wave of blacklists was a link, of sorts, to the older generation of leftists. It is depicted how blacklisting occurred during a strong shift towards right-wing politics in American society.

The edited volume avoids strictly focusing on screenwriters in regard to the HUAC trials. One example is how the ninth chapter focused on producer named Adrian Scott. There are chapters by multiple scholars, yet the volume arguably leans towards the methodology of social history. It helps through being able to help one to see the contexts between different films and creators in relation to politics and socioeconomic situations. It helps convey the message of the wealth of contributions of individual filmmakers to Hollywood better than a methodology such as political history could.

There is an introduction by all four editors. It is followed by thirteen chapters that analyze diverse subjects pertaining to left-wing politics in Hollywood -largely during the 1940s- and an essential older text titled “Red Hollywood” by Thom Andersen. It is followed by an afterword to “Red Hollywood” written by Andersen. “Red Hollywood” is listed as the fourteenth chapter: it is framed as demonstrating how little progress there has been in the field of study, in regard to the talent of those who were blacklisted. The afterword includes an evaluation of more modern texts in the field of the HUAC blacklisting. Each of the four editors wrote one chapter, and the ten other listed chapters were written by a variety of authors. The chapters take diverse approaches towards discussing their respective subject matter. For example, chapter three, “‘A Living Part of the Class Struggle’: Diego Rivera’s *The Flower Carrier* and the Hollywood Left,” by Frank Krutnik, shows how a painting associated with a leftist painter was used differently in three Hollywood films.

Certain chapters may have strongly overlapping subject matter. One can also find information throughout the volume that might not necessarily be directly tied to the information in other sections of the book, but reveals more dimensions of the very broad subject of the careers of those who were blacklisted. Arguably the chapter that reflects this the most in its subject matter is, “Swashbuckling, Sapphire, and Salt: Un-American Contributions to TV Costume Adventure Series in the 1950s,” by Steve Neale. The reader gets a very nuanced understanding of the book’s argument on Hollywood talent through commonalities and differences between the work of different authors. Some parts of the book have more critiques of scholarly work than others, but it is striking how someone with a mild-to-moderate interest in the field can feel as though they are spectators of conversations between experts.

In his afterword to “Red Hollywood,” Andersen depicts the ending of an American version of neorealist cinema as being the most profound loss of the post-war HUAC activity. Among those harmed by the blacklisting were those who really drove the growth of neorealism in American cinema. It was shown earlier in the book that then-new Italian films such as *Rome, Open City* significantly influenced immediate post-war American cinema. A future area of research could be the extent of the involvement of blacklisted filmmakers in mainstream or experimental cinema in another country. The volume depicts a situation where it was not unheard of for the filmmakers it examines to move from the United States.

There is one main area of concern regarding the volume. It is fairly accessible if one has some degree of knowledge of Hollywood history – such as if one is familiar with Humphrey Bogart’s work. Yet, significant context can be missed if one does not look up content such as names of production companies, while reading the book. Otherwise, it is a very strong introduction to the different nuances of a broad yet somewhat obscure topic. The introduction states that: “While there are clearly great differences between the cultures of the early Cold War era and the contemporary war on terror, they both reveal intense, politically charged battles over what Americanism means and who it is for.” (18). Much has changed since 2007, but this continues to be a struggle in an increasingly politically polarized social climate.

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About the author:

Natalie Jarosz is an undergraduate student with a History major and a French minor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She graduates in the spring of 2020. Her plans are to enter a Modern History or Holocaust Studies graduate program in Europe. As a historian, her academic interests include Film History, Historiography, Cold War History, History of Science, Holocaust History, and LGBT Studies.