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I.B. TAURIS

DOUG DIBBERN

HOLLYWOOD RIOTS

VIOLENT CROWDS AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN AMERICAN FILM

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I.B. TAURIS

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Brian Neve, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Bath

'Supported by superb scholarship and new research, Dibbern uniquely focuses on the creative alliances between progressive filmmakers. Based on newsworthy topics, the films made by these men reveal the material conditions of racial and social inequality. Providing a needle sharp analysis of their movies, he gives us a compelling account of filmmaking during Hollywood's darkest hour.'

Professor Peter Stanfield, Head of School of Arts, University of Kent

'Doug Dibbern's *Hollywood Riots* makes an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the Hollywood left well beyond the famous blacklisted ten. Combining American political and Hollywood history with expert close reading of important, non-canonical films, Dibbern has produced an exemplary study of a crucial period in American film.'

Art Simon, Professor of Film Studies, Montclair State University

*For my parents,
John Dibbern
and
Sharon Hilde Dibbern*

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General Editor's Introduction

One of the most shameful eras of Hollywood history was the period in the late 1940s and the 1950s when the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), backed by a hysterical conservative press, initiated a witch-hunt against liberals, radicals and communists. Its baleful influence resulted in the hounding of many of the most creative people in Hollywood out of the film industry. Initially, however, progressives in the industry fought back and in this fascinating and revealing book Doug Dibbern rediscovers a cycle of films which combined social realism with the indictment of racial and class prejudice and the resultant violent persecution.

Dibbern carefully establishes the contexts, political, social and economic, within which the films were produced and explains the tensions and anxieties besetting postwar American society which found their most extreme manifestations in race riots and lynchings. A propitious combination of circumstances created a favourable climate for the production of low-budget films on controversial themes. These circumstances included the perceived audience demand for serious adult pictures which had seen big-budget studio films about racial prejudice (*Gentleman's Agreement*, *Pinky*, *Crossfire*) achieve financial and critical success, the vogue for semi-documentary location shooting, and the increase in independent film production facilitated by changes in the tax system and the compulsory separation by law of the big studios and their cinema circuits.

In the second half of the book, Dibbern focuses his attention on four films which, as he rightly says, have been unjustly forgotten and deserve re-evaluation: Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (1950), Cy Endfield's *Underworld Story* (1950) and *The Sound of Fury* (1950) and Russell Rouse and Leo Popkin's *The Well* (1951). He traces the circumstances of production of each film and their critical and box office reception. He also provides superbly argued analyses of the style, content, messages and values of the films. He notes that they all share the same starting point (a false

accusation against a member of a minority group – Mexican, black, unemployed white working class) and thereafter the stoking up of rumour and prejudice by a sensationalizing popular press which leads ultimately to mob violence. The importance of these films as social commentaries is reinforced by the fact that they are all based on actual events: the anti-Mexican Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles in 1943, the 1933 San José lynching of two white men accused of murder and the media frenzy surrounding the attempts to rescue a little girl, Kathy Fiscus, trapped in a well in 1948. The press hysteria, the mob violence and the persecution of the innocent became a metaphor for what was happening in the film industry.

The progressive moment in film-making was a brief one. The cycle was terminated by the disappointing box office returns of the four films examined by Dibbern, the decline in independent production and the final and draconian imposition of the black list terminating the Hollywood careers of many of those involved in the films. However, Doug Dibbern in his consistently absorbing, meticulously researched and vividly readable account has done film history a service by bring back into the light a film cycle which has long languished in the ranks of the forgotten.

Jeffrey Richards

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Introduction: Political Filmmaking in the Shadow of the Blacklist

At the end of the 1940s, Hollywood's most tumultuous political era, a disparate group of liberal filmmakers, unaware of each other, produced a series of movies about the relationship between journalism and mob violence, a cycle of films that manifested the anxieties of the Hollywood left that felt besieged by the conservative politics that were coming to dominate Los Angeles, the film community, and the nation. During the Popular Front era in the 1930s, liberals and Communists had joined forces to fight for the New Deal and against the international spread of fascism; but with an emerging Cold War consensus that now saw communism as the nation's primary enemy, liberals were turning on their erstwhile radical friends and the era of Popular Front collaboration was coming to an end. Unable to make movies about the issues most dear to them – such as the persecution of Communists and the labour struggles in the film industry – liberal filmmakers latched on to acceptable topics like racism and the economic plight of the postwar working class. These progressives were influenced chiefly by a series of political events in Los Angeles that were defined by mass conflict and mob violence. They thought that institutional forces such as the Hollywood studios and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) were acting illegally, and that Los Angeles's rabidly conservative press was aiding their efforts by spreading lies and inciting violence.¹ Their films thus portrayed minority and working class victims attacked by lawless mobs that were incited by yellow journalism.

The movies about mob violence and the press were released at the tail end of perhaps the most important period in Hollywood's political history, the years 1947 to 1951. Many leftists had been active – both politically and artistically – in the film industry since the 1930s, and politically-engaged movies with a realist aesthetic reached their efflorescence in the years immediately after the war, garnering acclaim with the critics and raking in profits at the box office. But the end of World War II

ushered in an anti-communist Red Scare that found its locus in Hollywood. In 1940, Congress had passed the Smith Act, which made it illegal to advocate the overthrow of the government, and in October 1947, HUAC convened its first hearings on the influence of communism in the film industry, calling on groups of “friendly” and “unfriendly” witnesses to testify. When the first ten unfriendly witnesses refused to answer whether they were now or had ever been members of the Communist Party, Congress voted them contempt citations and they were sentenced to prison. In December, Hollywood executives signed an agreement at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York promising not to employ Communists, officially blacklisting the men who had become known as the Hollywood Ten. But this was just the beginning of the persecution of radicals in the film industry. There were hundreds of others in Hollywood who would have had to answer yes to the Committee’s most notorious question. The studios, however, didn’t initially fire anyone else for his or her political beliefs. Over the next four years, though, most people in Hollywood suspected that it was only a matter of time before Washington got around to investigating the film community’s remaining radicals and urging the studios to fire them. But over those years, many progressives were still making movies with a social message and a realist aesthetic. When HUAC did finally return to Hollywood in 1951, the studios acquiesced and agreed to fire any alleged Communist who refused to name names of other purported radicals – about two hundred more people – thus bringing an end to one of the most vibrant periods for progressive filmmaking in Hollywood’s history.

Many historians have already written about the politics of Hollywood during the blacklist era, but most have written about politics proper rather than about political filmmaking.² These writers have focused on the HUAC investigations and hearings, the Hollywood Ten, and the ideological debates in the talent guilds, which were also intimately connected to the issue of communism. These earlier histories stress the politics of Washington and HUAC’s investigations of the studios’ personnel. These books tend to make the testimony and imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten their dramatic focus, which inevitably necessitates that they make moral judgments of the investigators, the Communists, and those who named names. Those who do write about political filmmaking, therefore, tend to study the Hollywood Ten – and to a lesser extent, other Communist screenwriters who were blacklisted later – and they tend to dismiss their work as disappointingly apolitical.³

Scholars such as Larry Ceplair, Steven Englund, and Thom Andersen altered the terms of this historical debate by arguing that Hollywood progressives had created an impressive body of work during the years that they were being persecuted. Andersen’s seminal essay “Red Hollywood” traces the shifting ideologies of blacklist historians, from those who were critical of Communist screenwriters in the 1950s to revisionist historians the early 1980s, who championed Hollywood Communists as the “shock troops” of progressive forces in the film industry.⁴ In defending the progressives’ artistic enterprise, Andersen defined a film genre

that he called *film gris* produced by Communists and their fellow travellers.⁵ He borrows the name from film noir, of course, but says that his cycle of films “may be distinguished from the earlier noir by its greater psychological and social realism” and that its specific adjective derives from the fact that “these films are often drab and depressing.”⁶ These movies aren’t about hardboiled detectives, but about working class characters trapped by society; and in their pessimistic endings, the filmmakers “were creating presumptive allegories of their own impending fates.”⁷ Though I don’t intend to write the history that Andersen had envisioned with this influential article, his approach remains the closest to my own. In this book, I designate a cycle of movies that I believe are the most significant body of political films released during this tumultuous period. I devote the second half of the book to in-depth analyses of four of the most significant films in the cycle: *The Lawless* (1950), *The Underworld Story* (1950), *The Sound of Fury* (1950) and *The Well* (1951). These movies, released at the tail end of the government’s investigation of Communists in the film industry, depict angry crowds attacking minority victims because this was how progressives saw the political culture in America at the time. It was a political era of mass organizations rather than of charismatic leaders. Virtually every political debate in Hollywood and in America during the 1940s was fought not between individuals, but between collective entities – groups like HUAC, the Screen Writer’s Guild, the Committee for the First Amendment, and the Sleepy Lagoon Defence Committee, to name just a few. And the movies that liberals made at the end of the decade portray right-wing newspapers and conservative rumormongers as the instigators of violence because liberals felt that Los Angeles’s reactionary daily newspapers had incited violence in almost every major political battle that they had been involved with.

My focus on collaborative groups in the political arena may have influenced my understanding of the movies as well. The biggest difference between my approach and Andersen’s – and perhaps the reason that my list of significant progressive films is different from his – may be that he initiated his investigations from an auteurist perspective, whereas I began mine by studying the political content of the films.⁸ I don’t intend to lodge an attack on the auteur theory itself. Certainly, the majority of the most artistically significant films that Hollywood has produced have been the product of a strong director with a unique artistic vision. That being said, I approach each of the films that I write about in the second half of this book as a collaborative effort between directors and screenwriters – and in some cases, producers as well. The precise nature of each man’s contribution can only be gleaned by a careful study of the production history of the film in question as well as an aesthetic analysis of the final product in comparison with those artists’ other work. I think it’s especially important to determine each artist’s contribution when examining a film’s political content. It is the screenplay – not the quality of its execution – that is most often responsible for a film’s political attitudes in classical Hollywood. In most of the movies that I will be discussing, the screenplay

was completed before the director was hired and the director did little to alter the script. Thus, in many respects, I believe that screenwriters like Daniel Mainwaring and Jo Pagano played a more important role in shaping the ideological vision of the movies I will discuss – such as *The Lawless* and *The Sound of Fury* – than did their more well-known directors, Joseph Losey and Cy Endfield.

Because many of the existing histories of political filmmaking in the blacklist period have focused on the films of the Hollywood Ten, on conservative movies of the anti-communist cycle, and on the cycle of big-budget studio films that began to explore racial themes after the war, it's no wonder that scholars have seen political filmmaking during this period as often compromised.⁹ But one does not have to assume that these topics are the only options worth considering. If one does examine political filmmaking during this period, but takes a different approach, looking at a different type of filmmaker, investigating different political subjects and different political geographies, one can discover a body of political filmmaking that had remained out of focus in previous histories.

In this book, then, my ultimate interest is in movies themselves rather than in the political activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities or the machinations of the talent union boards. In addition, I study the works of progressive filmmakers other than just the Hollywood Ten. I use the word “progressive” throughout this book to refer to an array of figures on the left of the political spectrum, including hardline Fosterite Communists like John Howard Lawson, more moderate Browderite Communists like Abraham Polonsky, liberal non-communists like John Huston, and liberal anti-communists like Elia Kazan. But, because I have chosen films based on their political content rather than on the men who directed them, the majority of filmmakers I discuss were not particularly engaged in the political activities in Los Angeles at the time. On the one hand, I write about directors like Joseph Losey and Cy Endfield, men who had once been Party members but who had since drifted from their youthful allegiances. On the other hand, I write about politically inactive liberal men who had never considered becoming a Communist, screenwriters like Daniel Mainwaring, Lesser Samuels, and Jo Pagano – men who held liberal beliefs for the time and who made liberal films, but who did not participate much in the political life of Hollywood. It is this last group of filmmakers whose politics have been studied the least, but who, ironically, probably comprised the largest number of people on the progressive spectrum in Hollywood. It's not a coincidence that these two groups of overlooked artists often collaborated: Joseph Losey and Daniel Mainwaring worked together on *The Lawless*, for instance, while Cy Endfield and Jo Pagano joined forces to make *The Sound of Fury*. While their political inactivity may initially seem a counterargument to my claim that their movies were influenced by political activity in Los Angeles during the 1940s, it is precisely their disengagement from politics proper that constitutes the major cause of the ideological disillusionment in their films. Both of these types of filmmakers shared a progressive outlook and a commitment