An interview: Filmmaker Jules Dassin, witch-hunting and Hollywood's blacklists

David Walsh
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American-born film director Jules Dassin, a target of the anti-communist frenzy of the late 1940s and early 1950s, died in Athens March 31 at the age of 96. (See: "Jules Dassin, victim of the anti-communist witch-hunt, dies at 96")

Dassin is best known for a number of striking films he made for Hollywood studios from 1947-1950 (Brute Force, The Naked City, Thieves' Highway *and* Night and the City*), as well as several films he directed while in exile in Europe, especially* Rififi *(1955), made in France, and* Never on Sunday *(1960) and* Topkapi *(1964), the latter two starring Melina Mercouri.*

Reynold Humphries is a writer on cinema and author, among other works, of Fritz Lang : Genre and Representation in His American Films*, 1988, and* The American Horror Film: An Introduction*, 2002. His forthcoming book,* Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History*, will be published in September by Edinburgh University Press.*

I asked Humphries if he would reply to a number of questions via email about Dassin and the blacklists. He was kind enough to consent. Below we post the questions I asked in writing and Humphries' responses from Paris.

David Walsh: What is your opinion of Jules Dassin's films, particularly those he made in the US and Britain between 1947 and 1950?

Reynold Humphries: Of all the blacklisted directors who managed to find work in Europe, the only one whose career I know well is Joseph Losey. Jules Dassin, like John Berry and Cy Endfield, succeeded in making quite a few films after leaving Hollywood, but only *Du Rififi chez les Hommes* (1955) and *Never on Sunday* (1960) are famous. The former strikes me as uneven and certainly less remarkable and complex than his two greatest achievements prior to the blacklist (*Thieves' Highway* and, especially, *Night and the City*, made in 1949 and 1950 respectively).

The film with Melina Mercouri [*Never on Sunday*] is often badly directed, with a pretty dire performance from Dassin himself (who made the mistake of thinking he knew how to be funny), but the script is modern and radical. Dassin plays the role of the typically arrogant "liberal" who considers it his right—indeed, his duty—to impose American ideology, with its "natural" characteristics of class, sex and financial domination, on others. And the other just happens to be a working-class Greek prostitute.

It would only be fair to give much credit to script-writer and future director Richard Brooks for the progressive aspects of *Brute Force* (1947), a timely warning, less about the continuing presence of Nazi ideology (the Hume Cronyn character), than about the incipient repressive nature of post-war American society (the future Master of Ceremonies of blacklisting, Eric Johnson, formerly of the Chamber of Commerce, was already within the Hollywood gates), of which the prison is a sort of microcosm.

Although Brooks' behaviour was soon to become ambiguous, let us not forget that he worked with John Huston on *Key Largo* (1948), a most important statement about the collapse of New Deal and genuinely liberal values in favour of the corruption and gangsterism which, vanquished in the 1930s, returned in the name of anti-Communism after the war, thanks to the cowardice of liberals.

Dassin, however, is wrong to claim that the class elements were eliminated from *The Naked City* (1948). Perhaps this is due to producer Mark Hellinger's disastrous decision to impose himself as narrator, which virtually ruins the movie, but near the beginning there are scenes juxtaposing the working-class of New York and wealthy diners where Dassin worked in perfect harmony with the script of Albert Maltz, one of the most lucid and talented members of the Left.

DW: More generally, would you agree with the assessment of the work of Joseph Losey, Abe Polonsky, Jules Dassin, John Berry and Robert Rossen made my Thom Andersen, that it was characterized by 'greater psychological and social realism,' by a scepticism about the American dream and by pointed reference to the 'psychological injuries of class.' I'm especially interested in the last two points.

RH: I agree with Thom Andersen. It is precisely the dimension of class that is uppermost in Dassin's work, especially *Thieves' Highway* which deserves to be remembered much more than *The Naked City*. The fact that this "greater psychological and social realism" went unnoticed critically in Britain concerning both Dassin and Losey (at least until the 1960s) is an indication of the parlous state of so-called criticism and the whole ideology of what realism "is."

An example: writing in the mid-1960s one British critic said of *Night and the City* that it "played merry hell with London's layout." In other words, when the Richard Widmark character (and this is perhaps that late, great actor's finest achievement) moves from point A to point C without our being shown point B, Dassin is being unrealistic because, say, Piccadilly and the Embankment are not spatially contiguous!

Losey also faced this sort of inanity because his greatest work, such as *Blind Date* (*Chance Meeting*, 1959), deals with the return of the repressed of class in a context where sex and politics are paramount and interdependent. Critics simply shut out these aspects (class in particular), which prevented them from paying attention to details other than the frivolities of surface realism that Dassin and Losey refused.

The other great figure here, of course, is Robert Rossen, but Rossen the script-writer rather than Rossen the director (Polonsky wrote *Body and Soul*, 1947). Perhaps his most remarkable script is not *Marked Women* (1937, an exceptional film, as Andersen and Noël Burch rightly point out in *Red Hollywood*) or *The Sea Wolf* (1941), but that key film noir from the immediate post-war period, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946). Here, in a manner that looks ahead to *Blind Date*, Rossen foregrounds class, sex, power politics and money to show the corruption setting in at every level of society. The script even manages to place the class struggle at the centre of the film!

Marked Women and *Martha Ivers* are major statements on the "psychological injuries of class," as are the films that Losey made in the 1950s. Indeed, Losey made in 1950 what is arguably the most cogent expression of this theme, *The Prowler*. Other outstanding movies (all examples of *film noir*, the privileged means of expression until the axe

fell) are *Gun Crazy* (1949, like the Losey, written by Dalton Trumbo using a front) and Endfield's *Sound of Fury* (also 1950) which insists on the alienation (both social and psychological) caused by unemployment and poverty in that green and pleasant land, California.

But ultimately Losey was the most consistent practitioner of the "psychological injuries of class," although this was to be abandoned for a more "aesthetic" treatment. Of his later films, only *King and Country* and *The Go-Between* (an extraordinarily subtle movie) remain faithful to his Marxist vision. Rossen's adopting the role of friendly witness [before the House Un-American Activities Committee] has led to a regrettable underestimation of his exceptional writing talent.

DW: Given your knowledge of the McCarthyite witch-hunt in Hollywood, could you point to some of its *more general* and *enduring* consequences for the film industry and cultural life in the US?

RH: Let's start by stating the obvious: as from the moment you make life difficult for a director like Huston and deprive a large number of highly talented writers, directors and actors from practising their craft, you are going to witness an impoverishment of Hollywood's output. However, from this objective fact has emerged the notion—which now has all the strength of an ideology—that Hollywood during the 1950s was a place of mediocrity. This is a syllogism, pure and simple! So I shall be provocative, inasmuch as I am expressing an idea more or less proscribed on the Left: with the exception of the 1940s, the 1950s is the richest and most complex decade in the history of Hollywood and, with the benefit of the contributions of the blacklistees, would have been the greatest decade.

There are any number of reasons for this persistent and perverse down-grading of the 1950s (and not only by the Left). One is our old friend "social comment," but that tends to rope in junk made by Elia Kazan, such as *Gentleman's Agreement* and *A Face in the Crowd*, and neglect the work of Douglas Sirk, the one Marxist who was able to work quietly and subversively in his corner without being harassed. "Social comment" is another form of that "surface realism" I mentioned above, which leads critics to neglect virtually everything, especially *mise en scène*, in favour of wearing one's supposedly "liberal" heart on one's immaculate sleeve.

The problem with the 1950s, then, is that the decade was not the 1930s, a truism of startling banality. The 1940s were not the same as the 1930s either, but this doesn't seem to bother critics so much. However, there are many ways of dealing with repression, alienation, the fetishisation of money and success, and the raising of the family to the level of a faith imposed by Holy Writ. One finds critical attitudes expressed, but seldom openly because of censorship and the Cold War, in that most despised of genres, the horror movie. I would invite your readers to go and take a close look at *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and see it as a modest but subtle and intelligent reworking of *Rebel Without a Cause* (a great movie that is often dismissed, always for the wrong reasons).

Indeed, the Cold War did not throw up just paranoid movies about Reds taking over but movies that exploited, for more progressive ends, precisely those ideological elements listed above to show how conservative the 1950s were and to deconstruct this repressive conservatism (I refer you to the chapter "Nuclear and other horrors" in my book *The American Horror Film*, 2002).

Incidentally, I feel it is essential not to refer too readily to McCarthy in the context of the Hollywood witch-hunts: he never investigated Hollywood and the witch-hunts started when he was an unknown quantity. Rather his name should be evoked as the manifest tip of an iceberg, where his bullying enabled a far more dangerous person to ply his trade behind the scenes, emerging onto the stage only when he deemed it necessary: J. Edgar Hoover (on the role of the FBI, see Kenneth O'Reilly's indispensable study *Hoover and the Un-Americans. The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace*, published in 1983).

Clearly, the effects of blacklisting extend beyond the date of 1960 when Otto Preminger announced that Trumbo was writing *Exodus* for him and actor/producer Kirk Douglas stated that Trumbo had written *Spartacus*. The tragedy of blacklisting, beyond the deaths of those it destroyed and the hundreds of careers ruined (among working-class trade unionists too, a fact too often neglected, doubtless because the rank and file are less exotic: see Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes: *Hollywood's Other Blacklist—Union Struggles in the Studio System*), lies also in the fact that people could not practice their craft and were therefore unable to take advantage of the thaw in the early 1960s: they had been in enforced "retirement" for too long. This vital point was made by Trumbo who knew what he was talking about: he had worked constantly from the late 1940s on, using pseudonyms and fronts.

In other words, those whose careers were just starting in the late 1940s/early 1950s were prevented from working and were therefore unable to adapt in the 1960s to an industry that had changed so much in the intervening years.

One obvious negative result of witch-hunting in general—and here McCarthy (or rather: McCarthyism) comes into his own—was the inability of radicals to have the chance to express themselves publicly on TV or radio: Red-baiting sponsors saw to that. But I wonder (this is a working hypothesis) if current America is not worse, with the domination of Fox News, for example. The documentary *Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land*, on the way the media in the States (as opposed, say, to the BBC) presents and represents the Palestinians, is as eloquent as it is depressing. The film is a chilling reminder of how Orwell's *1984* has come to pass.

Leaving aside real, observable examples of intimidation and censorship, it might be more productive to consider the more unconscious results of what historian David Caute called "The Great Fear." A tendency in all fields and walks of life to censor oneself, to submit to the stern superego, with the imaginary father-figure and the very real State over-determining each other to impose a particular way of thinking. More recently, as Slavoj Zizek has cogently and tirelessly pointed out, the injunction to "enjoy oneself" is just another form of repression: you don't have the right *not* to enjoy what you are *commanded* to enjoy! This alienates the subject even more, placing him or her in a situation where the individual always takes precedence over the collective, the ultimately goal of the ideologues behind neo-liberal economics.

In which case, perhaps the most appalling consequence of the McCarthy era is the way right-wing Republicans and racist Democrats connived to destroy unions and, along with them, any notion of solidarity, collective action and the right to housing and welfare. Which brings us back to the questions of class in the movies of the Hollywood Left which succeeded in making statements in various forms before Hollywood caved in to reaction and repression.