

A Black and White Response to the Red Scare

Deconstructing the Message Behind Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*

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The House of Un-American activities Committee (HUAC) was formed in the wake of the red scare in 1940, and was reinvigorated after the war in 1947. Its desire to seek out any potential communist insurgents in the country is probably best remembered in Hollywood because, as the committee soon found out, it “could generate enormous publicity by using Hollywood as the target of their investigations” (American cinema, American Culture, 284). Those who were found to have communist tendencies were blacklisted, often unable to find work in Hollywood for the next 10 years. The blacklist was easily facilitated by various Hollywood organizations and individuals, partly because of the fear of being named, but also because of the competitive nature of the film industry.

Powerful studio executives such as Walt Disney “used the opportunity to name and defame union organizers who had challenged them” (American cinema, American culture, 180). HUAC was further “fueled by the anti-Semitism of prominent politicians and social commentators” (America on Film, 70). The fear of being blacklisted became so great that “Hollywood moguls met together and agreed not to hire anyone who was under even the slightest suspicion of being a communist” (America on Film, 181). Certain large unions such as IATSE (international association of theatrical stage employees), also encouraged the investigations so as to keep rebellious workers in check.

Famously, the few people in the industry who refused to answer any of the committee's questions, and instead exercise their first amendment rights were called the Hollywood 10. Most were imprisoned because of their desire to exercise their American freedoms.

Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* was a direct response to HUAC and the Hollywood Ten, justifying his own involvement in the trials as a "friendly" who named names for the blacklist. Here Marlon Brando plays the character of Terri Malloy, the hero so manly that it is not enough to testify on the stand, but he has to have a physical confrontation as well. The film offers what it thinks is a socially responsible solution to communism: that if only one man stands up the rest will follow. Yet Kazan seems to miss the irony of the last image of the film, where a bloodied and beaten Malloy marched toward his capitalist boss. *On the Waterfront* is a story in which structures of authority are portrayed as corrupt, where there is a survival of the fittest mentality, and where the ultimate power rests with the people. Terri Malloy is our typical hero stereotype: the sacrificial lamb who suffers on behalf of the group to redeem the group.

The film is shot in black and white, an idealized vision of life where the good and evil are as easy to see as black and white. Here there is a distance from the image, and thus a greater focus on the story, in this case the personal story of the director as an anti-communist who had to rat out his friends for the sake of a higher moral ideal. Here Malloy, and Kazan, are depicted as humanitarians who sacrifice their family to do what is right. John Belton sums it up when he says that "the message of the film was clear; it's not only okay to inform, but those who do are the real heroes" (American cinema, American Culture, 298).