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Andersen, Thom & Noel Burch
2013 Red Hollywood. New York: Cinema Guild.

Notes: DVD, 82 minutes

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ABSTRACT: This film deals with a specific period in the history of United States cinema, namely the 1940s and 1950s. This was a period that was well known for its repression and ostracism of communists (both real and imagined) in many areas of society. By presenting excerpts from films in a visual essay the filmmakers create a work of thematic analysis of socially progressive film and the repression of those films as well as their writers.

In 1995 an excellent documentary was released called *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Friedman). That film has much structurally in common with *Red Hollywood*. Both are fairly described as essay films by presenting biographical interviews with filmmakers along with film excerpts in a way that is organized into a group of themes. Whereas *The Celluloid Closet* was organized along historical time-lines, *Red Hollywood* is ordered into outline areas of crime, war, class, race, and gender.

Billy Woodberry provides narration that contextualizes and connects the individual film clips. These clips were well chosen. In a minute of dialogue or a sequence of character interaction we can see a far different set of ideas at work than those that have been normalized by mainstream cinema (especially in the era of technicolor musicals following the Red Scare).

Anderson and Burch weave excerpts of over 50 films into this work. The film version of Faulkner's novel of racist southern legal atrocities, *Intruder in the Dust* (Brown 1949), is covered significantly. Another important inclusion is *Hell's Highway* (Brown and Anderson 1932), a rare film in that it portrays a strike sympathetically. Feminist solidarity in conflict with the orchestrated disparities of class and gender roles is shown in *Marked Woman* (Bacon and Curtiz 1937). There is also the important critique of crime found in *Asphalt Jungle* (Huston 1950). Some really damning truths about the class system are laid out in excerpts from the Dalton Trumbo scripted (adapted from a play by Mary Coyle Chase) *Sorority House* (Farrow 1939).

One notable highlight would be the strike sequence from *Salt of the Earth* (Biberman 1954) in which the wives of striking Hispanic miners form the picket line when the men are forced to end their picketing due to a legal injunction against them. The belligerent New Mexico sheriffs joke how they will charge a car at the pacing, singing women and force them to scatter like pigeons. When they do this, in a tensely dramatic sequence of charging car and Spanish singing picketers, the women refuse to move. The car hits one of the women, knocking her to the ground. When the men standing to the side, not allowed to stand in the pickets, charge towards the sheriffs' men it is the picketing women who hold these men back, keeping them from launching into an attack on the strike breakers that would allow legal force to be used to put down the strike. Once these brave women have calmed the men down, they return to their picketing and song. This immensely progressive film about race, gender, and labor rights was blacklisted with extreme prejudice for being a sympathetic portrayal of Hispanic laborers as well as supremely effective didactic. In a United States film industry that was concerned that anything but the grossest and narrowest narratives supporting the cultural and capitalist nationalists was by default filthy agitprop, a piece of art like *Salt of the Earth* was just too powerful to be shown. The damning of all socially conscious social realism as agitprop explains why most social commentary in the world of McCarthy political slander was found in the writings of science fiction authors.

Another notable sequence describes the complete 180-degree turn that the United States national culture took regarding the film *Song of Russia* (Ratoff and Benedek 1944). This was a piece of WWII propaganda that was created to portray the Soviet allies positively to United States audiences. Following the war a major indictment against

the film was made, charging it with being propaganda for the Soviet Union. During the Senate hearing that condemned it and two other films, expert testimony was provided by Ayn Rand. One of her notable criticisms of *Song of Russia* was that there were people smiling, and that was unrealistic.

The legacy of HUAC and McCarthy is an embarrassment to a nation that voices pride in a tradition of free speech. The government understood that popular culture plays an essential role in defining and framing ideology. Film provided a voice that was able to move across lines of gender, race, and class because of the capitalistic system that created it. As such there is a great danger in art and the need for frightened bigots to dream up mechanisms to control it. The Red Scare was the construction of a dialectic between purely unfettered capitalism and communism. Communism was framed as everything else, no matter if it was really socialist, or just critiques of social problems, or even laborers organizing in an attempt to gain profits for themselves. On top of that, even attempts to criticize racial injustice or gender oppressions that were normalized in culture were attacked as being Red. The Red Scare robbed a generation of people of art that might have had some positive social messages. We look back and see the Red Scare as an embarrassing moment where the United States failed to keep the promises it wove into its founding myths. We need to look back and see what the Red Scare cost us in terms of our humanity. It is not embarrassment that is appropriate, but shame.

This film is a really important addition to the history of film. Though re-released in 2013, it was originally released on video in 1996. I do not know the circumstances of its distribution or availability, but the film is mostly untouched by the changes in filmmaking aesthetics or technology. The interviews look notably dated, mostly due to the clothing worn by the interviewees. In 2013 many of the filmmakers and screenwriters discussed in this film were long gone, so the archival interviews provide important primary source voices between the film excerpts and the narration.

I highly recommend this film for courses in popular culture studies, mass communications, filmmaking and screenwriting, the film as modern literature, and media theory. The role of art as a critique of the culture that created it and of its ability to cause change in the culture that consumes it is drawn together in this film. It will also send the viewer on a search for the forgotten, golden films featured in this documentary.

References cited:

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