

Un-American: Dmytryk, Rossellini and *Christ in Concrete*

- Erica Sheen



- Title card of the British release of *Christ in Concrete* aka *Give Us This Day*.

Richard Maltby began his influential account of the relation between Hollywood and the House Un-American Activities Committee with an assertion of its centrality to our understanding of the relation between American film and politics. 'No adequate history of the Cold War in America can be written without reference to the blacklist and other agencies of cultural repression that were generated by those encounters', he claimed. 'But those events are now well documented, and their history has been written more than once. What remains to be said?'

His answer to his own question identifies what he describes as 'the mutually supportive melodramas Hollywood and the Committee wove around their encounter in 1947': 'the interaction between the Committee and Hollywood is above all an interaction on the level of rhetorical style and political aesthetics.'² He follows this analysis with an account of the 'generic evolution' that articulated this interaction across the years between the Committee's establishment during the years of the New Deal to 1947, the year it first turned its

sights on Hollywood: the spy and private eye thriller; the semi-documentary *policier* drama; political melodrama; *film noir*. His essay exemplified an approach that has continued to dominate discussions of Hollywood and HUAC. To put it another way, the questions we ask of this period of Hollywood history have to a considerable extent been dictated by HUAC itself: questions about the presence of Communists in the American film industry, and of Communist 'content' in their films. From that perspective, it is perhaps surprising that film scholarship has been so 'friendly' in its response. According to Dan Georgakas, recent work has 'renewed and reshaped the old arguments'. It has confirmed the fact that 'the Hollywood Reds were well-entrenched in the studio system and many were highly regarded by the studio bosses'. But it has not made as much headway with the question of content: 'what remains at issue is to what degree their political views were reflected in the Hollywood films on which they worked.'³ For Georgakas, as for Maltby, then, there is a remainder, something structural but resistant to the very terms of our enquiry. It should not, I think, be surprising that this is the case. Focusing our understanding of Hollywood and HUAC on questions of presence and content is to apply paradigms of authorship and genre which were critical by-products of the cultural transformation to which HUAC contributed, and will as a result have limited critical purchase on its causes.⁴ What might break this critical impasse would be the discovery of something outside the circle; something not easily, or at least not yet, assimilated into its cycle of repetitions. Such a remainder can be found in a film which is arguably one of the most important productions of the period: Edward Dmytryk's 'lost' film of

Italian/American author Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete* (1949).

The facts of Dmytryk's involvement with HUAC are well documented, and I do not intend to repeat them here. Nor do I intend to offer a textual reading of the film itself, or seek to situate its ideas in relation either to other films by Dmytryk or to films by anyone else, since to do so would simply re-inscribe it within the hermeneutic circle of authorship and genre. *Christ in Concrete* was made in England after Dmytryk's conviction for contempt of court and before his imprisonment in 1950 and subsequent decision to testify to HUAC in 1951. It thus occupies an extremely distinctive position in the ideological struggle that would come to be identified as the Cold War, and it is that position which I will be seeking to characterise in this discussion. Since the title was considered blasphemous by its English distributors, it was released initially as *Give Us This Day* and then, in the US, as *Salt to the Devil*.⁵ It was presented to critical acclaim at the Venice Festival in August 1950 while Dmytryk himself was in prison, but then suppressed by the American Legion on its release in the US. As Dmytryk describes it,

Give Us This Day had opened to exceptional reviews, but on the following day, the theatres were visited by Legionnaires who informed the managers that continuation of the run would bring a boycott not only of my film but of all others for the foreseeable future. Exhibitors are no smarter than the next man, but they are no dumber either. With a few exceptions, they closed shop, and in effect, my film never saw the light of day in the United States.⁶

This implies that the film's non-presence in subsequent film history was the direct result of this suppression, but that is not in fact the case. After its theatrical release, the copyright unusually reverted to the novelist, so there was no one within the film industry with a financial interest in reviving the film. As a consequence, when di Donato tried to negotiate a TV release in the late 1960s, he found that there was no American copy available. I will pursue the implications of this situation at a later stage, but note here two points. First, its emergence now as

a DVD has been instigated by the di Donato family as current rights holders, and it is their perspective that is presented in this production, frequently at Dmytryk's expense. Second, the film constitutes a quite special case of what is a fairly standard situation for films of that period, and that is that it owes its survival to TV – in this case, *Italian TV*. According to the British Film Institute's on-line biography of Dmytryk, the film is 'rarely shown, except for a yearly screening on Italian television', a revealing if accidental racism that goes some way towards establishing the terms of my argument. It is the film's Italian connection – its address to the Italian/American culture of di Donato's novel, to the emerging aesthetic of Italian neo-realism, and to Italian-American international relations in 1947–48 – that helps us see how it might change the frames of reference we use to discuss the relation between American film and politics; in particular, how it challenges Maltby's assertion that Hollywood politics are 'different in kind from those practised in Washington'.⁷

In what is currently one of the few available critical discussions of the film, Peter Bondanella refers to *Christ in Concrete* as 'one of the first Hollywood representations of Italian Americans that reflects the influence of Italian cinema – specifically, the postwar neo-realist film.' But he insists that it is closer to *film noir* than to neo-realism because it uses a flashback structure: 'all more typical of American *film noir* under the influence of German Expressionism'. He draws attention to the fact that the opening of the film was re-edited for Italian audiences, and refers to this procedure as a kind of censorship: 'the Italian print *suppressed* the initial opening scenes of the work, transforming the picture into a more clearly chronological movie'.⁸ In his insistence on a generically American identity, Bondanella might be said to pursue the agenda of Americanisation to which HUAC was implicitly committed. Of course, in an American context, the procedure to which Bondanella refers is a standard feature of distribution, and has been applied with little critical compunction to films travelling in the opposite direction. From this perspective, the Italian re-editing of Dmytryk's



• Edward Dmytryk, centre, on the set of *Christ in Concrete*. On his left is publicity director, John Ware, on his right is Lea Padovanni who plays Annunziata.

film is a somewhat uncanny inversion of Roberto Rossellini's difficulties with the distribution of his film *Stromboli* (1949) in America, where RKO insisted on the insertion of a voice over explaining what was considered to be an 'ambiguous' ending. *Stromboli* was made and released at exactly the same time as *Christ in Concrete*, and exhibited at the Venice Festival in the same year. I describe the relation between the two as 'uncanny' – unhomely – because I shall argue that these two films are held together in a process of mirroring which helps us understand that what was at stake in the confrontation between Hollywood and HUAC was not merely questions of presence and meaning, but a conception of filmmaking as a form of constitutional participation in the political process.

Christ in Concrete and *Stromboli* – though here we should note its full title *Stromboli terra*

di Dio, land of God - examine the two sides of the central contemporary question for the Italian/American community: America's claim to the status of 'terrestrial paradise' for the post war immigrant.⁹ In Rossellini's film, Karin, a European woman (not Italian, but married to an Italian) tries to make a home with her fisherman husband on the volcanic island of Stromboli, but is unable to overcome her alienation as a stranger and seeks in desperation to escape to America. In Dmytryk's film, an Italian woman agrees to come to America to marry an Italian/American bricklayer husband on the condition that he provides her with a house. If *Stromboli* – however we read its ending – suggests that Italians must reconcile themselves to Italy, *terra di dio*, its culture and its values, *Christ in Concrete* shows what awaits them if they leave their homes in search of the terrestrial paradise. The story of the failure of Geremio and

Annunziata's marriage and of Geremio's terrible death – buried alive in concrete when the construction he is working on collapses – is that of immigrants building the American dream with their very hands, but destroyed by the terms on which they have to make the money they need to afford it.

Writing a report of the 1950 Venice Festival published in *The Hollywood Quarterly* in 1951, the young Italian critic Tullio Kezich discussed both films. To begin, he recorded the fact that the International Grand Prize was awarded to Andre Cayatte's *Justice est faite*, but then pointed out that

everyone admits that even though many noteworthy films were shown at Venice in 1950, none was so far ahead of the others as to unqualifiedly deserve top honors. In awarding the Grand Prize, the judges, including critics and well-known personalities of the Italian cultural world, had to arrive at a compromise which, like all compromises, did not completely satisfy anybody. And it is perhaps significant to note that the Italian motion picture critics awarded their 1950 annual prize to a film that was not in the competition: Edward Dmytryk's *Give Us This Day*.¹⁰

This innuendo – 'it is perhaps significant' – is fraught with the pressure of what it does not say. At the time of the Festival, Dmytryk was in prison; by the time the review appeared, he had recanted and testified to HUAC. Both Kezich's position as a commentator on this 'significance', and *The Hollywood Quarterly's* as the medium through which it is communicated, are themselves significant. *The Hollywood Quarterly* describes Kezich as 'at twenty three one of Italy's more perceptive movie critics [. . .] also writing a book on the American "western"', thus placing him in a very particular, and very complex, historical position of reception. Stephen Gundle records that 'when in 1954 Giuseppe Turrone went in pursuit of the [Italian] filmgoing public for the magazine *Rassegna del film* he met a twenty-three year old student enrolled with the PCI who admitted preferring westerns and adventure films to Visconti's *La terra trema* [. . .], which was "too intellectual and difficult"'.¹¹ I do

not mean to imply that Tullio Kezich was a communist, though the very question is born of a Cold War-induced misrecognition of the meaning of political affiliation. In 1950, to make such an identification would simply be to align the young writer with the ideas of a legitimate political party that had until 1948 been heading for a resounding popular victory; a party that remained at the heart of Italian cultural life throughout the 1950s and beyond; the party that most publicly advanced the cause of contemporary cinema. In fact, *The Hollywood Quarterly* represented a similar position of reception within the American industry. First published in 1946 as a collaboration between UCLA and the Hollywood Writers Mobilization, a radical group under the leadership of John Howard Lawson, its aims were identified in a programmatic statement in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, which asserted as an 'insistent fact' 'the idea that movies are essentially a medium of communication, with a high degree of universality' and identified the 'common objectives of the arts and sciences as related to radio, motion picture and television' as 'to provide a professional recognition of their full possibilities as powerful tools of communication'.¹² In 1946, only a year before the HUAC hearings began, no one in Hollywood had qualms about being associated with such a programme. Only the year before, Walt Disney had published a piece in *Public Opinion Quarterly* arguing the educative potential of 'Mickey as Professor'. The question of universality was perceived to have implications above all for the generic formulae that dominated and limited the industry's communicative potential, both at home and abroad and whose cultural and economic value was now seriously under question. As writer Robert Shaw put it,

The industry worries about the foreign market [England, France, Russia, Czechoslovakia and Latin America]. Will the people of those countries, tempered in so many of them by the grim realities of war, pay at the box office to see an endless parade of slick glamour pictures, a monotonous repetition of the Cinderella boy-meets-girl formula? Will

Americans continue to see such pictures at the present rate. . . ? In a recent symposium on 1946 trends in film making, a majority said the best hope of the film industry is for better stories, fresher material, a more honest and perhaps more documentary approach to the issues confronting common men and women.¹³

In support of such a position Shaw records that Harry Warner of Warner Brothers at a recent Nobel anniversary dinner 'spoke for his industry in saying that the motion picture, as the nearest approach to an international language, "is faced with the responsibility of helping to create the conditions of international good will that are the essential foundations of world peace."¹⁴

This position echoes unmistakably the critical register associated with Italian neo-realism; thus Rossellini, speaking against an entertainment cinema that is not 'at least partially capable of attaining the truth', asserted that 'to give anything its true value means to have understood its authentic and universal meaning'.¹⁵ By 1950, however, critics were already beginning to see Rossellini as someone who had turned his back on this political commitment. Later in his review, Kezich turns his attention to *Stromboli*, which he describes as *not* one of Italian cinema's 'best works'. After recording the difference between the Italian and American versions, he concedes that it is 'worth seeing for a magnificent Ingrid Bergman', but concludes that 'unlike [. . .] *Città Aperta* [*sic*] and *Paisà*, it contains no valid message of universal appeal.'¹⁶ His comments anticipate the terms of subsequent discussions of Rossellini's politics, but in the context of the reading I am seeking to develop here, they help us situate the crisis in relations between Italy and the terrestrial paradise between 1947 and 1949 as the precise context for the return to Italy and Italian values presented in Rossellini's film, and for the departure from America and American values in Dmytryk's.

Within a year of the founding of *The Hollywood Quarterly*, the international language of film had become unreadable. In May 1947, only a year after Harry Warner 'spoke for his

industry', his brother Jack did the same, but to very different effect. As Richard Maltby records, Warner testified to HUAC in secret session confirming the covert presence of communist propaganda in film: 'some of these lines have innuendos and double meanings, and things like that, and you have to take eight or ten Harvard law courses to find out what they mean'.¹⁷ The association of a sophisticated textual hermeneutic with communist infiltration is important. Jon Lewis' comment on this – 'the logical extension of such an argument – that the mass audience would be unable to recognise such subtle political content and were thus unlikely to be poisoned by such propaganda – never seemed to cross their minds' – is sensible, but misses the point.¹⁸ A feature of this moment in the public understanding of a culture of cinema radically reconfigured both by HUAC and by the breakdown of vertical integration is the emergence of a model of textual interpretation (with its associated apparatus of authorship and genre) that would contrast definitively with the utopian ideal of communication and universality that had burgeoned before the assault of HUAC. In fact, it is arguable that Jack should have referred to Yale, not Harvard, and to English Literature, not law. From the early 1940s onwards, Yale's Faculty of English, with its commitment to the New Critical discipline of 'close reading', had been producing the core personnel of the OSS (Office of Strategic Operations) which would emerge from the early years of the Cold War, in particular from its experience of covert operations in Italy, as the basis of the modern CIA. Robin Winks and William Epstein have shown the association between particular acts of scholarly production – CID (Central Information Division) chief Wilmarth Lewis' formidable footnoting system for the 48-volume edition of the letters of Horace Walpole for Yale University Press – and the very concept of 'intelligence' as a mode of practical political agency.¹⁹ As Lewis' historical methods conceded to the more fashionable influences of I.A. Richards and William Empson, the emphasis moved away from the minute delineation of historical context to techniques of textual

interrogation dedicated to the exposure of hidden meanings and ambiguity. At the heart of this culture of 'intelligence' was James Jesus Angleton, child of a notably international American family (Mexican mother; childhood in Milan), who followed education at a British public school with English at Yale, became a devotee of New Criticism, published a student journal devoted to literary modernism, and invited William Empson to come to the campus to speak. Angleton followed Yale with Harvard Law School, so he may well be the particular close reader Warner had in mind.

If the affinity between literary close reading and Cold War political hermeneutics has been noted, its relevance for the post-war reception of film as text has not. My aim here is to suggest the ways in which a particular film, positioned at the intersection of the institutional, industrial, economic, political and international frames of reference that began to take shape within the two or three year period following the end of hostilities in Europe, can help us close-read the 'significance' that emerges from this intersection. We might perhaps have perceived the potential for this hermeneutic activity in what has been taken to be the crucial determinant in Dmytryk's position as a member of the Hollywood Ten: the fact that he was the only director amongst a group of screenwriters. Jack Warner observed that it was the 'intellectual' writers who were the most avid supporters of communism.²⁰ The implications of this hermeneutic of suspicion manifest themselves in the curiously contradictory discourse of exposure that pervades Dmytryk's later account of his HUAC experiences, a discourse that reflects crucially on the way we understand the transfer of intelligence from page to screen. On one hand, Dmytryk comments on the fact, that as a director, he was disadvantaged by HUAC in a way that writers were not, precisely because a director is visible, and writers could work under cover. On the other, he asserts that he alone saw that the Ten's HUAC performance in September 1947 was 'suicidal': 'the rest of the crew basked in the bright spotlight of what they considered a victory [. . .] If that seems perverse, even dim-

witted, behaviour for a bunch of intelligent writers you must understand that communism rules by revelation.²¹ The hermeneutic tension between covert operation and revelation – and the resulting need for us constantly to read between Dmytryk's own lines – becomes particularly articulate as a way of approaching the problem of meaning that pervades an understanding of *Christ in Concrete*.

I suggested earlier that the film occupies an extremely distinctive position in the ideological struggle that would come to be identified as the Cold War. It is in fact the sole occupant of a somewhat Borgesian category;²² it is the only film made by the only director within a group consisting otherwise exclusively of writers, after the first wave of HUAC interrogations and before the second, in a situation in which, as Dalton Trumbo pointed out, no one in 1947 knew what the penalty would be but everyone in 1951 did.²³ It thus constitutes a highly particular articulation of the subtext of HUAC's political agenda. David Kalat of All Day Entertainment simplifies the film into 'an unmistakable gesture of provocation and defiance': because 'no effort was made to conceal the participation of any of its most controversial names', he sees it as 'a middle finger aimed straight at HUAC'.²⁴ Predictably, Dmytryk's memoir presents the situation very differently. It is certainly true that he does not conceal the fact that he chose to work with blacklisted colleagues Ben Barzman and Sam Wanamaker, though he does suggest that he did so because they were, for obvious reasons, available. But he does conceal – or at least fails to reveal – the relation he thereby entered into with Pietro di Donato and Roberto Rossellini. He records that he was approached by Rod Geiger and asked if he would like to direct the film. Providing us with an excellent opportunity to observe the emergence of the post-vertical integration producer, Dmytryk first describes Geiger somewhat dismissively as an opportunistic 'wildcat', but subsequently and with admiration as an 'independent' producer, a 'true entrepreneur' and a 'peerless promoter'. According to Dmytryk, Geiger had worked for an American distributor of foreign films before the war. Then, as a member of the Signal Corps, he

worked in public relations for the US army in Italy (designing VD posters for toilets), and in this capacity was able to help Rossellini get hold of army film stock to make *Roma città aperta*. Aided by Rossellini's grateful recognition in a co-producer credit, he followed this success by funding and distributing *Paisà*, and was now looking to develop his career as a producer. As Dmytryk describes it:

He bought a sprawling first novel written by a Brooklyn bricklayer, Pietro di Donato, and hired a New York playwright to transform it into a screenplay. Then he came to Hollywood. He reached me through a friend, and I called on him in his suite at the Hollywood Plaza Hotel. I had never heard of Geiger, and wildcat producers were a glut in Hollywood; I entertained no false hopes.

I had read di Donato's short story "Christ in Concrete" many years before when it had appeared in the original Esquire magazine. It had been a prize winner, and it would make a great sequence, but a sequence doesn't make a picture, and a short story blown up into a novel is often a disaster. Geiger however had no qualms.²⁵

There are some curious gaps here. Is it likely that someone with Dmytryk's interests didn't know who had produced and distributed Rossellini's films? Is it likely that he didn't know that the production originally began with Rossellini as director, and proceeded quite a long way on that basis?²⁶ Is it likely he didn't know that Pietro di Donato was something more than just a 'Brooklyn bricklayer'?

Di Donato was recognised as an Italian-American radical. In 1927, he had participated in the rally in New York's Union Square on the night of the execution of the anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and joined the Communist Party immediately afterwards. First published in 1939, his 'proletarian' novel *Christ in Concrete* stood as a benchmark for the beleaguered tradition of Italian/American radicalism in the difficult years that followed. Recent scholarship has described the Italian/American communist community as 'a piece of the Italian American experience that has been gouged out and hidden away', and has

identified the political machinery by which it was systematically 'eradicated'.²⁷ In 1950, the year of the suppression both of Dmytryk's film and of Rossellini's 'Il Miracolo', that community received its death blow in the strategically manipulated overthrow of one of its few remaining great public figures: congressman Vito Marcantonio, a man of 'extraordinary status within Italian Harlem and enormous popularity throughout New York's Little Italies and to some extent among the larger population of Italian Americans throughout the United States', was systematically ousted by an electoral alliance between the Democratic, Republican and Liberal parties.²⁸

As the immediate context for a film of Di Donato's novel, the suppression of Italian-American radicalism must be seen as the domestic counterpart to international events which coincided precisely with the period of the film's production. From this perspective, Dmytryk's film emerges as something more articulate than an erect middle finger: a direct address to an international situation that only a year or two before had so confidently been identified as the basis of a concept of film as an universal language. In 1947, as HUAC rolled into action in Hollywood, the US government initiated a policy of direct intervention in Italian domestic politics with the express purpose of preventing the imminent success of the electoral alliance between the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) and PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano) in the 1948 parliamentary elections. Establishing an alliance with the DC (Democrazia Cristiana), whose own interests in exploiting the economic potential of the American preoccupation with communism made it a willing partner,²⁹ Washington embarked on a programme of 'psychological' warfare against Italy under the leadership of James Jesus Angleton.³⁰ Under pressure to prove its 'American' credentials, the Italian/American community was encouraged to draw the attention of relatives in Italy to the need to resist communism if they wished to continue to receive the benefits of their association with the terrestrial paradise. A mass letter-writing campaign, orchestrated by the

distribution of postage-paid sample letters, argued the evils of communist domination, but also threatened the loss of American aid. Shortwave radio broadcasts featuring American politicians recited the horrors of life under communist dictatorship; the Voice of America presented appeals from representative figures of both the Hollywood and Italian/American communities, including Frank Sinatra, an active member of leftist organisations until a savage media campaign forced him to renounce his radical affiliations and join the campaign against Italian communism.³¹

Washington's vision of a Europe in 1947–48 was thus as much an endgame strategy within its own domestic programme of Americanisation as an opening gambit in a new phase of globalisation. Geir Lundestad has urged the importance of a perspective on the Cold War that approaches it not as a 'bipolar clash'³² but stresses 'other powers', variation of circumstance and 'local actors'.³³ My aim here is to identify the production of *Christ in Concrete* – its earliest stages with Rossellini, its completion by Dmytryk, its suppression and even its subsequent disappearance – on precisely those terms, as a 'local actor' in this complex dynamic. What the anticommunist campaigns, both at home and abroad, achieved in these early years was the suppression, not so much of a Soviet-led programme of communist infiltration, as of the *possibility* of a radicalism that was not yet in any real sense dominated by the Soviet Union, a radicalism that had the potential to respond, as Gramsci had responded in Italy, to the varied social and economic conditions of postwar Europe, even of postwar America. Indeed, the rhetoric of bipolar clash was the means by which this suppression was achieved, more than the end to which it was directed. If we look back at Robert Shaw's vision of Hollywood's 'new horizons', or the 'significance' that hovers somewhere in the air between Los Angeles and Venice in Tullio Kezich's review, we can sense the extent to which such a conception of filmmaking, or at least of its potential, was shared in Hollywood, and the extent to which Hollywood had begun to imagine the idea of an

international, or rather trans-national, film community as the place where this potential could become, in Lukàcsian terms, *concrete*.

When Bernardo Bertolucci describes the culture of film that would emerge from the mutual address of Hollywood and European 'art' cinema in the 1950s and 1960s as 'a densely populated mid-Atlantic bar or rallying place',³⁴ his metaphor makes it clear that we have to think of this address not merely in terms of quotas, co-productions and box office, but also as a form of shared social space. Steve Neale has identified 'art' as 'the space in which an indigenous cinema can develop and make its critical and economic mark',³⁵ but for a few brief years, that space was not yet, and perhaps more significantly, not *necessarily*, oppositionally structured. The crucial first two or three years in the development of what we now refer to as art cinema was thus founded not just on forms of economic interdependence between industries, but also on shared political ideals between two communities – even, one might say, *within* what those two communities themselves could imagine as at least potentially a single community.

Notwithstanding his recognition of the negative impact of the industrial aspect of the American system of production, Roberto Rossellini's account of his early dealings with Hollywood is shot through with a sense of that potential, and a sense that his 'return' to Italy was born of personal and political necessities that closed it down. Statements such as 'I believe cinema is a new art and has the potential for making new discoveries'³⁶ align him with a Gramscian vision of the regenerative social role of cinema, but they also gloss his recognition that America offered opportunities for the realisation of that potential that were inhibited by Alcide de Gasperi's DC; as he put it, 'it is too easy to forget that on the other side of the Atlantic there is a public composed of connoisseurs, of specialists, which is extremely important. That public comes to see films which have something new to say'.³⁷ He refers to the 'concrete offers' he received from David Selznick in 1945–46, and to his perception of the

potential such offers had to open up for him a 'career' – 'had my goal been a "career"''. Explaining why he chose to stay in Italy rather than accept these offers, he pointed out that 'in Italy there is hardly enough work already and I was afraid of betraying my friends and the people who usually worked with me.'³⁸ And here – in a mirror image of Edward Dmytryk's very different experience of friendship and betrayal – we can see the basis of the decision to withdraw from *Christ in Concrete*; the decision that led paradoxically to his collaboration with Ingrid Bergman and the anti-communist Howard Hughes' post-Dore Scharj RKO on *Stromboli* just as Dmytryk began work on *Christ in Concrete* in Methodist J. Arthur Rank's Denham studios with a bunch of communist activists. This is a mirror image of Wellesian complexity; a mirror image that deep-focuses the personal, professional, industrial and institutional contradictions of the address between America and Italy, politics and cinema, and of the individual acts of film-making that carry its hidden and double meanings. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has described the kind of cinema Rossellini sought to achieve as an 'other' cinema: 'what held it together was not a shared aesthetic but the political will to create an "other" cinema for Italy in the immediate postwar context.'³⁹ I do not mean to suggest that this 'other' cinema was in any simple sense an historically possible cinema in America. But it was inextricably embedded within it, and has remained there despite HUAC.

The assault on Hollywood, encapsulated here in the production history of *Christ in Concrete*, led to one of those curious paradoxes of liberty and oppression that periodically articulate the distinctive American concept of freedom. In January 1951 Rossellini's film 'Il Miracolo' (1948), part of the *Ways of Love* trilogy, was banned from performance in New York at the instigation of City Commissioner Edward McCaffrey. When distributor Joseph Burstyn obtained an injunction against the ban, the New York Board of Regents revoked the film's license. In the debate that followed, McCaffrey's accusation of blasphemy revealed inevitable political overtones. Despite the film's sympathetic

reception at the Vatican, Cardinal Spellman of New York denounced it as a communist plot aimed at 'dividing religion against religion': 'Divide and conquer is the technique of the greatest enemy of civilisation, atheistic communism.'⁴⁰ Burstyn appealed the decision, the Supreme Court revoked the ban, and film was finally brought under the protection of the First Amendment. It is truly ironic that the constitutional protection denied to Dmytryk was now effectively granted to Rossellini. Curiously, commentary on *Burstyn v. Wilson* has not sought to pursue this juxtaposition. Thus Ellen Draper sees the case as symptomatic of a 'deep disagreement about the proper role of film in society', but does not associate that disagreement in any way with HUAC. Indeed, she systematically sets aside precisely the kind of questions about that disagreement that I have sought to raise in this discussion:

Except for [Powdermaker's] *Hollywood the Dream Factory* (1951) and John Howard Lawson's Marxist tract *Film in the Battle of Ideas*, I can find no American books considering the nature of film, let alone film censorship from this period. [. . .] During the fifties . . . the public discussion of movie censorship took place almost exclusively in periodicals and newspapers: the very arena of the discussion in 1950s indicates the factionalism, uncertainty and inconclusiveness of the debate about movie censorship.⁴¹

For Draper, the fact that *Burstyn v. Wilson* limited its decision to the particular circumstances of a particular film means that it failed to define film as a 'medium'. But that, I would argue, is precisely what it did. In extending to the individual film a protection that had hitherto been refused to the filmmaker, it positioned it as an ambiguous text to be closely read rather than an act of political freedom of speech. It thus instituted the rehabilitation of un-American filmmaking as a profitable business for the American film industry, and with it a formalist conception of art cinema that remains fundamental even in contemporary film scholarship. In 1956, *Variety* published foreign-film box office receipts for the first time.⁴² The



- Geremio (Sam Wanamaker) is buried alive in concrete.

same year, *The Yale Law Journal* presented an anonymous exposure of the way committee interrogations use 'vague authorising resolutions' to allow 'the members of a committee or its staff to select individuals of one political stripe for public humiliation'. In an examination of the authorising resolution for the House Un-American Activities Committee, we learn that "the word 'un-American' is nowhere defined".⁴³ The conversion of 'atheistic communism' to 'foreign grosses' is a way of providing such a definition, albeit one that clearly demonstrates the extent to which to define is to assimilate. I suggested earlier that *Christ in Concrete's* disappearance from film history owed less to the actions of the American Legion than to the fact there was no-one in the industry, like Joseph Burstyn, with a financial interest in ensuring that audiences had the opportunity to see it. But to say this would simply overlook the fact that the unusual conditions applying to the rights to *Christ in Concrete* are themselves a direct expression of Dmytryk's exclusion from participation in the political process of filmmaking. Rossellini's films became canonical texts in the institution of art cinema; *Christ in Concrete* remains caught in the limbo of Un-America.

Notes

- 1 R. Maltby, 'Made for Each Other: The Melodrama of Hollywood and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1947' in Philip Davies and Brian Neve (eds), *Cinema, Politics and Society in America* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1981), p.

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- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 77.
- 3 D. Georgakas, 'The Hollywood Reds: 50 Years Later', *American Communist History*, 2:1 (2003), 63.
- 4 See J. Lewis "'We do not ask you to condone this": How the blacklist saved Hollywood', *Cinema Journal*, 39:2 (2000), 5, for the argument that HUAC was 'a first step' in the transformation of the industry from the entrepreneurial studio mode of production characterized by a high degree of relative creative autonomy into a corporatist conglomerate system subject to increasingly interventionist political pressure.
- 5 I refer to it throughout this discussion as *Christ in Concrete* because that is the title under which it has been made available on DVD.
- 6 E. Dmytryk, *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 154.
- 7 Maltby, 'Made for each other', p. 76
- 8 P. Bondanella, *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys and Sopranos* (New York, Continuum 2004), pp. 29–34.
- 9 H. K. Smith used the phrase 'terrestrial paradise' to describe the status of postwar America as a destination for Italian immigrants in *The State of Europe* (New York, Knopf, 1949), pp. 198–219.
- 10 T. Kezich, 'The Venice Festival 1950', *The Hollywood Quarterly*, 5: 4 (1951), 373.
- 11 S. Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture 1943–1991* (Durham NC, Duke University Press 2001), p. 66.
- 12 R. Shaw, 'New Horizons in Hollywood', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 10: 1 (1946), 72, 75.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 R. Rossellini, 'A Few Words about Neo-Realism' in David Overbey (ed. and trans.), *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism* (London, Talisman Books 1978), p. 89.
- 16 Kezich, 'Venice Festival', 377.
- 17 Maltby, 'Made for each other', pp. 81–82.
- 18 Lewis, "'We do not ask. . .'", p. 5.
- 19 R. W. Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in America's Secret War 1939–1961* (CT, Yale University Press, 1996); W. H. Epstein, 'Counter-Intelligence: Cold-War Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Studies', *ELH* 57: 1 (1990).
- 20 Maltby, 'Made for each other', p. 81.
- 21 Dmytryk, *Odd Man Out*, p. 92.
- 22 The reference here is to the famous 'passage in Borges' with which Michel Foucault begins *Les Mots et les Choses*.
- 23 'All the people who took the First and Fifth Amendments after us knew something we had not known, namely that they would not work for years.' Dalton Trumbo in Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, Viking 1980), p. 393.

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- 24 Accompanying notes, *Christ in Concrete* (All Day Entertainment 2004).
- 25 Dmytryk, *Odd Man Out*, pp. 97–98.
- 26 In their conversation in the ‘additional features’ on the All Day Entertainment DVD, Pietro di Donato’s son Peter and film scholar Bill Wasserzeiher suggest that Visconti had also been considered, but documentation shows that the negotiations with Rossellini reached the option stage. Di Donato worked as the principle translator for the English language release of *Rome Open City*.
- 27 G. Meyer, ‘Italian Americans and the American Communist Party’ in P. Cannistraro and G. Meyer (eds), *The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism: Politics, Labor, and Culture* (Westport, Praeger 2003), p. 220.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 29 For an account of the strategic interests served by this partnership see Kaeten Mistry, ‘The partnership between the Democrazia Cristiana and the United States 1947–8’, *49th Parallel: An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies*, 14 (2004).
- 30 See M. Del Pero, ‘The United States and “Psychological Warfare” in Italy 1948–1955’, *The Journal of American History*, 87: 4 (2001). For a full account of the activities involved see W. Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (Montreal, Black Rose 1998), especially Chapter 2.
- 31 P. V. Cannistraro and G. Meyer, ‘Introduction’, in Cannistraro and Meyer, *The Lost World*, pp. 25–26.
- 32 The phrase is del Pero’s, ‘The United States’, 1.
- 33 G. Lundestad, ‘How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War’ in Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Rewriting the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London, Portland, Cass Series, Cold War History 1, 2000), p. 72.
- 34 E. Ungari with Donald Ranvaud, *Bertolucci by Bertolucci* (London, Plexus 1982), p. 21.
- 35 S. Neale, ‘Art Cinema as Institution’, *Screen* 22: 1 (1981), 14.
- 36 Overbey, *Springtime*, p.100.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 102.
- 39 G. Nowell-Smith, ‘North and South, East and West: Rossellini and Politics’ in D. Forgacs, S. Lutton and G. Nowell-Smith (eds), *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real* (BFI, 2000), p. 9.
- 40 E. Draper, ‘“Controversy has probably forever destroyed the context”: *The Miracle* and Movie Censorship in America in the Fifties’, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 25 (1990), 72. Rossellini also records these attacks in Overbey, *Springtime*, p. 109.
- 41 Draper, ‘Controversy’, 70.
- 42 T. H. Guback, *The International Film Industry* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1969), cited in *ibid.*, 76.
- 43 ‘Legislative Inquiry into Political Activity: First Amendment Immunity from Committee Interrogation’, *The Yale Law Journal*, 65: 8 (1956), 1182–1183.