

[Review of the book *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds and Trade Unionists*]

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## Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950

### Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds and Trade Unionists

By Gerald Horne. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001. \$22.95.

Consider the following speech delivered to a combined meeting of three of the big industry guilds in 1946: “Every one of us here realizes that the one hope for progress and a liberal outlook in America and social gains and social welfare depends on organized labor. Right here in this room for the first time is the one thing that the employers have feared most in Hollywood . . . here is all of labor shoulder to shoulder and side by side exactly the way it should be.”

The rhetoric is familiar enough, and with one year remaining between the meeting and the blacklist, it’s no real surprise that a spirit of optimism prevails. The identity of the speaker, though, is something of a surprise. It’s Ronald Reagan, SAG (Screen Actors Guild) officer, union man, democrat, liberal. Those, alas, were different times.

Proudly standing “shoulder to shoulder and side by side” with his fellow industry guild members as late as 1946, Reagan was anxious to take a leadership role, standing up for working men and women in Hollywood. But just over a year later, cannily appreciating the winds of change, Reagan would alter his tune. It is precisely those winds of change that concern Gerald Horne in *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds and Trade Unionists*, a comprehensive history of organized labor’s emergence and eventual decline into irrelevance in Hollywood in the years leading up to and immediately following the Second World War.

The story Horne tells involves a fascinating cast of characters—players from a variety of celebrity subcultures all with a stake in a struggle for power, prestige, and cash. This struggle made for strange bedfellows. Horne asks us to consider a number of interesting relationships, for example: Columbia studio chief Harry Cohn and Mafiosi Johnny Roselli and Longy Zwillman, Richard Nixon and gangster Mickey Cohen, actor Gary Cooper and Nazi Albert Goering. In doing so, he highlights the competing interests and ideologies in play in the years leading up to the blacklist. At its best, the book plays out like a James Ellroy novel with proper footnotes.

Horne does well to explain the complex relationships and alliances that were at the time regarded with seriousness and consequence. Sorting out today, over fifty years after the fact, what certain players did or said provides something of a political scorecard of who at this crucial moment in Hollywood history either did or did not “do the right thing.” For example, Rosalind Russell, Robert Montgomery, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, Susan Hayward, Charles Laughton, Mickey Rooney, Red Skelton, Clark Gable, and Basil Rathbone crossed picket lines in 1945. Do we—should we—now look at these actors and wonder at the price they were

willing to pay, the friends and colleagues they were willing to cross, to be stars? John Garfield, Gene Kelly, Edward G. Robinson, Rex Ingram, Joan Crawford, Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and D.W. Griffith honored the strikers and refused to cross picket lines. The names are important. That’s why I repeat them here.

Notable and notorious Hollywood leftists like Dalton Trumbo and John Howard Lawson actively supported striking guild members to the bitter end. Like Reagan, they too gauged the winds of change and staked out a political position. Reagan, who sided with management, had as much of a career as his acting ability could get for him and of course later became president of the United States. Trumbo and Lawson went to jail and upon release found themselves blacklisted out of the industry. Trumbo and Lawson’s eventual adversary in Washington, DC, HUAC attorney Robert Stripling, was (while Reagan was still standing up for the guilds and Trumbo and Lawson were still getting paid to write scripts) taking sides as well, affiliating himself with the pro-Nazi Bund. Horne reminds us, making history in the 40s in Hollywood and elsewhere in the U.S., was all about relationships and affiliations.

As promised in the book’s subtitle, Horne is keenly interested in the “uncanny parallel between the decline of CSU [the Conference of Studio Unions] and the reassertion of mob influence in the entertainment industry.” Horne argues that the Communist Party did not, as was so often alleged at the time, control the CSU. There were plenty of Reds in the film industry, many or even most of them Jews, but actual CP influence over the unions was over-estimated and overstated. Jewish control over the industry was similarly exaggerated, but it nonetheless provided a significant motive for federal inquiry into the movie business.

Horne details how the mob ran CSU’s principal rival at the time, IATSE (the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) and explores how studio executives engaged the mob to help them sort out and control the industry workforce. It was a deal made with the devil of course, the result of which was a whole lot of violence, mayhem, and red baiting, all to the individual worker’s disadvantage.

Given the high drama of the times, it is ironic that the story at the heart of this book—the struggle between the CSU and IATSE which led to so much acrimony and bloodshed—was in and of itself not all that complex. It was from the start a jurisdictional dispute. Horne does his best to dramatize the CSU/IATSE conflict. But there’s no way for him to change the story’s anti-climactic and predictable arc. Historians find history. They don’t get to make it.

One figure in particular emerges as the book’s (flawed) hero: Herb Sorrell, the legendary union activist who ran the CSU. Sorrell was a complex man, a dedicated and fearless union activist, but in the end a lousy strategist whose bull-headedness may well have cost his comrades in the end. Sorrell steadfastly fought state and federal congressional committees, the mob, and studio executives in Hollywood—the moneyed players in New York, Las Vegas, and elsewhere who controlled the studios. He was a painter and a former

boxer—a tough guy in a blue collar with the sleeves rolled up past the elbow. His failure to prevail with the pro-worker CSU over the pro-management IATSE really wasn't all that surprising. The guys with the money and connections won because they always do.

In *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950*, Horne makes creative use of a wealth of primary sources: a close examination of 77 collections at 36 different sites. His use of these sources won't be to everyone's taste; he draws conclusions from personal papers and memoirs that I bet got his publisher's attorney's attention. The conclusions he draws may also put off some historians who like their history served cold and objective. Horne hardly conceals his sympathies for organized labor and his disdain for the tactics used to suppress the guild movement in Hollywood. But as he and other historians of the era have made clear—Victor Navasky and Michael Demming come immediately to mind—it is difficult and maybe even disingenuous to pretend to be objective when writing about Hollywood during the Red Scare.

The risk of tipping his hand ideologically or of alienating more conservative historians seems to me well worth taking. Horne endeavors to name names and take sides to remind us of an era in which the naming of names and the taking of sides could get a person into a whole lot of trouble. And unlike HUAC, the MPAA, the FBI, and the studio brass in the late 40s, all of whom drew conclusions based on affiliations, memberships, even over-heard conversations, Horne can back up his findings with careful and extensive research.

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## Creatures of Darkness

Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir

By Gene D. Phillips. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. \$27.50.

Although Phillips insists that *Creatures of Darkness* is not a biography of Raymond Chandler, he has provided as much biographical information as one would want in a book devoted to two aspects of Chandler's film legacy: the screen adaptations of his fiction and the films for which he received screenplay credit. Except for *Playback*, which Chandler planned as a screenplay and then recast as a novel, all of his major fiction reached the big screen, often in several versions. *Farewell, My Lovely* was filmed three times, only once under its original title in 1975 with Robert Mitchum as Philip Marlowe, giving a performance as jowly as his appearance. The classic version is *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), preceded by the entertaining but forgettable *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942). *The Big Sleep* was filmed twice—in 1946, with Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe, looking like a disillusioned knight trapped in the seedy Camelot; and

in 1978, with Robert Mitchum again as the shamus, looking like an Arthurian reject who belonged in a seedy Camelot. It is difficult to assess Robert Montgomery's Marlowe in *Lady in the Lake* (1946), since the character is more of a presence than a person. Montgomery, who also directed, turned Chandler's novel into a study in subjective camera, so that the entire action is presented from Marlowe's point of view, with Marlowe visible only on a few occasions, notably when his reflection appears in a mirror and at the end. Gimmickry or creative camera? Phillips goes to neither extreme, although he makes a good case for Montgomery's direction, at the same time reminding us that two years before Hitchcock filmed *Rope* (1948) in eight roughly ten-minute takes, Montgomery was also experimenting with long takes that may have been less intricate but were nonetheless fluid.

If some of Phillips' plot analyses seem overly detailed, it is because the narratives themselves are so complex, and the logical connections often so tenuous, that exegesis is the only recourse. The first time I saw the 1946 *Big Sleep*, I became completely lost when the action abruptly shifted to a pier as a car was being hauled out of the water. Whose car, I wondered? After a few more viewings, I discovered it was Owen Taylor's. And who was he? Oh, yes: the Sternwood chauffeur. But who killed Taylor? That's postdoctoral work, at which Phillips excels. Of every account I have ever read about the identity of Taylor's killer, his is the most plausible, particularly since Chandler himself left the matter unresolved. Phillips has shown that the district attorney's speech in the William Faulkner-Leigh Brackett 1944 script provides the answer. However, since the speech never reached the screen, critics and viewers alike have regarded Taylor's "unsolved" murder as one more loose end in a film with so many. Yet according to Phillips, who places the original 1945 cut and the 1946 release version within the context of the Faulkner-Brackett script, *The Big Sleep* would have been less mystifying (but perhaps not as much fun) if the loose ends had been tied up instead of clipped off.

The second half of *Creatures of Darkness* focuses on Chandler the screenwriter. Chandler may have taken a dim view of screenwriting, yet he coauthored the script of what is arguably the greatest example of film noir in American cinema, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Although he shared screenplay credit with Billy Wilder, who claims to have "taught" the neophyte screenwriter how to create a movie script, it's his voice one hears in the dialogue, particularly in the verbal duel between Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) as each tries to top the other's double entendre. Of course, Wilder also knew how to turn a phrase, so perhaps we are hearing a duet, rather than an aria. Still, Barbara Stanwyck, long after she retired from the screen, called *Double Indemnity* the finest script she had ever read (italics mine), which implies that Wilder's tutorials bore fruit.

The only other significant film with which Chandler's name is associated as screenwriter is Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), based on Patricia Highsmith's novel of the same name. Since Hitchcock thought visually (for example,