



REDCAT

THOM ANDERSEN AND NOËL BURCH
RED HOLLYWOOD

JANUARY 27, 2014 8:30 PM

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

CaLARTS

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Mon Jan 27 | 8:30 PM

Jack H. Skirball Series

Revival Screening

1996–2013, digital video, 114 min.

Eighteen years after its original release, Thom Andersen and Noël Burch's insightful essay film—now remastered and re-edited—still offers a radically different perspective on a key period of American film history. "The victims of the Hollywood blacklist have been canonized as martyrs, but their work in Hollywood is still largely denigrated or ignored. *Red Hollywood* considers this work to demonstrate how the Communists of Hollywood were sometimes able to express their ideas in the films they wrote and directed," Andersen and Burch stated in 1996. The video draws on extensive original research, interviews with some of the blacklisted artists, and clips from 53 films that span numerous genres and raise questions about war, race relations, class solidarity, women's labor and the studio system itself.

In person: Thom Andersen

"Socially committed filmmaking doesn't get any better than this."

— Kenneth Turan, *The Los Angeles Times*

"A highly illuminating, groundbreaking, and entertaining video documentary that defies a major taboo in most mainstream writing about current movies."

—Jonathan Rosenbaum

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud

PROGRAM

"*Red Hollywood* (1995) offers some invaluable clues about how we might start reconstructing our view of Hollywood movies made since the birth of talkies. A two-hour video, it received its world premiere at the Locarno film festival. Canon formation in the usual sense is not the work's stated agenda; we aren't being offered a list of undiscovered masterpieces. But there's no question that we're presented with a good many movies of substantial interest that we've never been asked to consider before. *Red Hollywood* includes clips from 53 films, only a few more than a dozen of which (including Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* and Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil*) are well known; the others are mainly Hollywood movies being discussed for the first time. In other words we're presented, quite deliberately, with a new film history that explicitly asks us to rethink the past of Hollywood cinema and, implicitly, its present and future.

In 1985, Thom Andersen published a groundbreaking essay entitled 'Red Hollywood'. One of the many benefits I reaped from it was the discovery of two major Hollywood filmmakers blacklisted and hounded into European exile, Cy Endfield and John Berry — both former employees of Orson Welles, and both figures of formidable talent as well as political intelligence. Then Andersen and Burch expanded Andersen's essay into a book published in France, *Les communistes de Hollywood: autre chose que des martyrs* (loosely translated, 'The Hollywood Communists — Something Other Than Martyrs'). Their video represents a further development and recasting of many of the book's arguments; it includes interviews with several blacklisted writers and directors as well as dozens of film clips.

For the past four decades the received wisdom about the blacklisted communist writers, directors, and actors of Hollywood — who were asked to inform on their colleagues' political affiliations and, when they refused, systematically drummed out of the industry — is that they became martyrs even though the social and political value of their work, and often its aesthetic value, was negligible. Billy Wilder's celebrated quip (cited in *Red Hollywood*) about the notorious Hollywood Ten — 'Of the

ten, two had talent, the others were just unfriendly' — has tended to discourage further reflection or investigation. One of the first items on this video's agenda is to reveal the glib inadequacy of that remark.

More implicit and more radical is the way *Red Hollywood*, simply by broaching the question of political content in Hollywood movies at all, defies a major taboo in most mainstream writing about current movies. For starters, it asks us to reconsider the role played in movies by screenwriters, whose marginalization is by now so thoroughly entrenched in most film discourse that reviewers rarely think to challenge it. *Red Hollywood* has even more formidable Augean stables to clean out when it comes to communist thinking, given the hysterical anticommunist mythologies that have predominated in our culture. The notion that communist ideology is unyielding and monolithic is challenged by the disagreements here among the communists profiled and interviewed. That same diversity implicitly raises the question of what makes an individual a communist: is it party membership (as in Berry's case), activism (as in Endfield's), both, or neither?

Divided into seven key sections — 'myths', 'war', 'class', 'sexes', 'hate', 'crime', and 'death' — *Red Hollywood* covers a lot of territory in two hours but its streamlined pacing makes it fun and easy to watch. In 'myths', for instance, we pass from John Wayne sneering at commies testifying in *Big Jim McLain* (1952) — whimsically intercut with real-life commie John Howard Lawson defying the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947 — to Ayn Rand's demented testimony before the same committee about *Song of Russia* (1943) to a more historically balanced recent commentary from former communist screenwriter Paul Jarrico about the same movie.

Among other high points in the 'war' section are a clip from the only Hollywood film that dealt directly with the Spanish civil war, the 1938 *Blockade* (written by Lawson); a glimpse of how Ring Lardner Jr. — a former communist isolationist interviewed here — managed while cowriting *Woman of the Year* (1942) to undercut Katharine Hepburn's internationalism with wisecracks and sneers from Spencer Tracy during a party scene; the evocative opening sequence of the 1941 comedy *Tom, Dick and Harry* (written by Jarrico); the communist rhetoric contained even in a number in the 1943 MGM musical *Thousands Cheer*, scripted by Jarrico and Richard Collins; and screenwriter Alfred Levitt's discussion of the antiwar aspects of Joseph Losey's first feature, *The Boy With Green Hair* (1948).

In 'class' we not only breeze through clips from films written between 1932 and 1951 by such communists as Robert Rossen, Lester Cole, Nathanael West, Samuel Ornitz, Robert Tasker, Lawson, Hugo Butler, Abraham Polonsky, Millard Lampell, and Sidney Buchman, we also learn, among other things, that the 1932 *Hell's Highway* (written by Ornitz and Tasker) was the only Hollywood film of the 30s to treat a strike sympathetically. This section begins with the commentary 'In the 30s, class solidarity was still an ideal. The homeless were not yet the excluded'. Four sections later, during 'death', the defeat of class solidarity is poignantly, powerfully illustrated in a passage of dialogue from John Garfield's last film, released in 1951, *He Ran All the Way*, directed by Berry and written by Butler, Guy Endore, and Dalton Trumbo.

Under 'sexes', after an extended kinky clip from the 1934 *Success at Any Price*, we get pungent scenes from two of the features showing at the Film Center: a dazzling, creepy surrealist dream sequence satirizing capitalist ambitions from *Tom, Dick and Harry* and a scene showing feminist solidarity among prostitutes in *Marked Woman* (1937), a gritty and uncompromising Warner Brothers crime movie featuring Bette Davis and Humphrey Bogart. Sandwiched in between these clips is some juicy Trumbo dialogue from an obscure 1939 item called *Sorority House*. And at the end of 'hate', which deals with Hollywood's handling of race prejudice during the 40s, we pass provocatively from a corrosive communist critique by one V.J. Jerome of Ben Maddow's 1949 adaptation of *Intruder in the Dust* (as well as William Faulkner's source novel) to Jarrico's dismissive critique of Jerome's criticism.

Some of the most suggestive formulations appear in the 'crime' section. 'The crime movie had often been a privileged genre for social commentary, from both left and right', we hear over a clip from *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). 'The right portrayed crime as a symptom of social disintegration, the left presented it as a form of capitalist accumulation'. Elsewhere, as the commentary addresses the 'Hollywood left's...sophisticated critique of criminal economy and the class relations it produced', it's noted that 'a crime thriller might show how a safe is cracked but not how it is filled. That required a move from the workplace to the back rooms where the financiers and takeover artists did their work'.

This leads beautifully into a clip from Polonsky's extraordinary *Force of Evil* (1948), followed by its writer-director asserting today, 'All films about crime are about capitalism, because capitalism is about crime. I mean 'quote unquote,' morally speaking. At least that's what I used to think; now I'm convinced'."

– Jonathan Rosenbaum, *The Chicago Reader*, August 9, 1996.

Over a 45-year career that has combined filmmaking, criticism, and teaching, **Thom Andersen** has completed a handful of carefully crafted documentaries that demonstrate an exquisite regard for both intellectual and aesthetic rigor. Comprised primarily of found images and video clips, unified by voiceover, *Edward Muybridge, Zoopraxographer* (1974), *Red Hollywood*, and *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) analyze the production of images and their theoretical, social, and political consequences... *Get Out of the Car* (2010) is a direct response to *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. However, it also returns him to his unself-conscious roots. This is Andersen's other side, last heard from in the '60s with *Melting* (1964–65, a time lapse shot of an ice cream sundae), the 'deliberately unpronounceable' – (1966–67, with Malcolm Brodwick, a sensory exploration of rock and roll subculture in Los Angeles) and *Olivia's Place* (1966/74, a portrait of a Santa Monica coffee shop and its patrons). These short 16mm films reveal an artist with an original take on film as document, who is energized by popular music and an idiosyncratic sense of humor. In 2012, Andersen completed *Reconversão*, described as "... an elegiac quest into the essence of [Portuguese architect] Eduardo Souto de Moura's work." In the last couple of years, Andersen, who teaches at the California Institute of the Arts, has worked on remastering and re-editing his two most famous works, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and *Red Hollywood*. (adapted from articles published in *Cinema Scope* and *The Celluloid Liberation Front*)

Born in the USA (San Francisco) in 1932, **Noël Burch** has been living in France since 1951. He graduated from the Institut Des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC) in 1954. While primarily known for his theoretical writings, he has always positioned himself as a filmmaker and has directed over twenty titles, mostly documentaries.

Burch has been publishing since the 1960s. Among his numerous publications are his first and best known book *Theory of Film Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1973) and *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley, 1979), which remains the most robust history of Japanese cinema written by a Westerner.

From 1967 to 1972, he collaborated with Janine Bazin and André S. Labarthe for the celebrated series, *Cinéastes de Notre Temps*, and directed seven programs which are considered to have renewed the "film-maker portrait" in the heroic years of French public television. It was during that same period that Burch was co-founder and director of the Institut de Formation Cinématographique, an alternative film school associating theory and practice. His latest "essay-film," *The Forgotten Space* (2010), co-directed with Allan Sekula (1951–2013) won the Orizzonti Award at the Venice International Film Festival.

UPCOMING FILM/VIDEO PROGRAMS AT REDCAT WINTER/SPRING 2014

Mon Feb 10:

Far From Beijing: The State of Independent Chinese Cinema – J.P. Sniadecki, Xu Ruotao, Huang Xiang, Zhu Rikun

Mon Feb 17:

Jean Painlevé: *The Vampire, the Seahorse and the Octopus in Love*

Mon Apr 7:

Body and Flesh The Tactile Cinema of Luther Price

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