

The Hollywood Left: Robert Rossen and Postwar Hollywood

• Brian Neve

In his important essay on the Hollywood Left, Thom Andersen asks whether there is anything either politically or aesthetically distinctive about the work of the writers and directors associated with the Communist Party, in the thirties and forties. Andersen partly answers his question by proposing the notion of *film gris* as a hybrid form of *film noir* and as a distinctive creation of left-wing filmmakers in the period 1947 to 1951.¹ Although more recent research has greatly increased knowledge of the film work of the Hollywood left, there is still much work to be done in exploring Andersen's original question.² Robert Rossen is interesting as a case, in part because of his long association with Warner Bros., from 1936 to 1944, and his membership of the Communist Party from 1937 to approximately 1947. Rossen is also one of the directors associated with the notion of *film gris*, although his role in *Body and Soul* (1947) has often been seen as secondary to that of writer Abraham Polonsky. As a contracted screenwriter Rossen's particular interest in social themes had a synergy with the broad and generic concerns of the Warners studio in the Popular Front period of the late thirties and then in the war years. This article relates the themes and motifs of Rossen's work at Warners to the period at the end of the war and in the late forties, when he took advantage of a rise in independent production and began directing.

The 'Thirties'

Rossen's early thirties New York work exhibits an early concern with anti-fascism, and with the economic context of life. His unsuccessful 1935 Broadway comedy *The Body Beautiful* dealt humorously with a 'burlesque dancer' so

'innocent of mind' – in critic Brooks Atkinson's words – that she saw her nude dancing as spiritual rather than commercial or pornographic. Realist and idealistic strands recur in Rossen's work, deriving in part from his Jewish immigrant family background and hard childhood on the streets of New York's East Side. He worked his way through NYU but also passed time in poolrooms and did some prize fighting. *Corner Pocket*, an unfinished 1936 play, dealt with the frustrations and hopes of young men frequenting a New York pool hall. It was in that year that Mervyn LeRoy's admiration for *The Body Beautiful* led directly to Rossen, newly married, signing a contract with Warner Bros.³

Three themes recur in the ten film credits that Rossen attained before leaving the studio in 1944: class and the experiences of proletarian lives; social and other constructions of the 'gangster' and racketeer; and anti-fascism. Rossen's first assignment and credit at Warners, *Marked Woman* (1937) had its origins in the campaigns against organised crime and racketeering of New York prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey. Charley Lucania (Lucky Luciano) was notorious for his narcotics and gambling interests, but had been convicted and sentenced, by the New York State Supreme Court on June 7 1936, for 'compulsory prostitution'. For Warners, in turning this story into film, speed was of the essence, and line producer Lou Edelmann had to reassure head of production Hal Wallis that 'the boy knows what it's about'. Working with transcripts of the trial and interviews with key witnesses, Rossen and Abem Finkel contributed two distinctively left wing motifs; first, the class and gender solidarity of the women who were used and abused as part of the rackets. Second, and related to the first motif, the economic

context of life and work in Depression America. We learn from the outline treatment that the women are 'all living in the same apartment for economic reasons', while at work the women are shown early on as part of the 'goods and chattels' on display, as Luciano (Vanning in the film) takes over a gambling and drinking joint.⁴

The first treatment was called 'Five Women', and the 'solidarity' of the women 'victims' remained as a key motif in the film even after Bette Davis returned to the studio after suspension to be assigned to the leading role. At the film's conclusion the Dewey character (Humphrey Bogart), having secured the conviction by persuading the women to testify, is tipped for higher office, while the women link arms and walk off into the mist – their future uncertain. Wallis saw a version in January 1937, the previews were in February and the film was released in April. To Jack Warner 'Anyone having anything to do with this picture deserves tremendous commendation'. The Communist *Daily Worker* was also happy; their reviewer feeling that there was no happy ending, and that 'as far as the girls are concerned theirs is a hopeless future'.⁵

Later in 1937 Rossen worked on another Dewey case in which the prosecutor had secured a conviction of racketeers exploiting the New York produce market. Again, court transcripts were used as the key source, and Rossen worked on this occasion with fellow leftist Leonardo Bercovici, who he had known in New York. Rossen and Bercovici had been writing a play in New York, and it was Rossen who urged him to come to Hollywood and helped secure work at Warners. Before *Racket Busters* (1938) they worked on an unmade script called *Who Asked to Be Born*, for the Dead End Kids.⁶ The B-picture *Racket Busters* recounts the efforts of racketeers to take over a truckers' association, and of the Dewey figure to convince the truckers to testify. Instead of hostesses/prostitutes, here the working class figures are members of the association. Throughout the film the issue of cooperating with the prosecutor in the public interest is related to a parallel story of the struggle to maintain solidarity in the truckers'

association. Pop, the long time leader of the association, is a revered figure, while the 'common man' character, Denny (George Brent) is finally persuaded to testify by his wife. (Indeed he only joins the mob because of concerns for the welfare of his pregnant wife). The principle of testifying is throughout shadowed by that of sticking up for the principle of labour solidarity against that of self-interest, associated with involvement with the racketeers. The last line of the film, at the inevitable trial, is from Denny, and it contains some verbal echo of the ending of *Marked Woman*. Denny remarks: 'You know Nora, I've leaned one thing from Pop and all this business: people like us, we've only got one out, and that is to stick together'. The *New York Times* review noted that 'the Warners have contributed a realistic invocation to solidarity and a popular front', while the *Daily Worker's* David Platt, writing during the war years about Warners as the '100% pro-New Deal studio', recalled *Racket Busters* as 'strongly pro-union'.⁷

Rossen's treatment for *Dust Be My Destiny* (1939) addresses a national issue in a way that was not the case in the source material, an unpublished novel by Jerome Odum. This was the first of four films on which Rossen worked which starred John Garfield, an iconic in the blacklist story and in Andersen's notion of *film gris*. Joe Bell (to be played by Garfield) is a fugitive from justice, convinced that people like him will never get a fair trial, or a break. Tempted into crime by circumstances, he is finally found innocent at a trial that the treatment makes, as in *They Won't Forget* (1937), a national event. A top attorney takes on the case and a supportive newspaperman argues that it was not one 'boy' on trial but 'a million boys all over the country'. Yet Hal Wallis took advice from Mark Hellinger who wanted it turned into a 'heart warming story', and following Wallis's instructions line producer Lou Edelman ordered that:

We take out all of the migratory scenes and sociological references. This is the story of two people – not a group. It is an individual problem – not a national one. Consequently, we do not give the trial national significance.

Edelman wanted instead a flavour of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and the finished film softens and sentimentalises the story.⁸ The *Daily Worker* recommended the latest of the Warners crime films 'for its acting, its production and, with reservations, for its social point of view', but saw the conclusion as a 'melodramatic escape from reality'. In the *New York Times* future John Ford screenwriter Frank S. Nugent was cynical about what he saw as the formula of an 'interminable line of melodramas about the fate-dogged boys from the wrong side of the railroad tracks'.¹³ The conclusion here is less that Rossen's social intentions were marginalised but that the writer provided a vital social element to an entertainment that may have been 'harmless', in Richard Maltby's term, but which attracted audiences in part because it engaged with elements of their Depression lives.⁹

Rossen's other two thirties credits at Warners were *They Won't Forget* (1937) and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939). The first was broadly faithful to a Ward Greene novel, *Death in the Deep South*, which itself loosely followed the 1915 Leo Frank case, in which a Jew was accused of murdering a fourteen-year old girl, and then lynched. In the film the victim is a Northerner rather than a Jew, although in both novel and film the first suspect, a black janitor, is brutally treated. The film opened in July 1937, during a period of liberal concern at a renewed wave of lynching in the South, and with contemporary reviewers commenting on its relevance to the Scottsboro case. Rossen's precise role, working with Aben Kandel, is not easy to determine, although he was likely to have worked closely with director Mervyn LeRoy, who brought him to Warners and originally had him on personal contract. Several characteristic Rossen motifs – the ambitious and cynical DA (Claude Rains), and the role of town notables in stirring up the local mob – do not appear in the novel. Rossen also worked during the latter part of the protracted production process of *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh, 1939), a film developed from Mark Hellinger's crude and rambling treatment of Prohibition life and times, *The World Moves On*. It is again difficult to separate out individual contributions,

and the final script was credited to Rossen together with the writing team of Jerry Wald and Richard Macauley. But Rossen's political sense fitted perfectly with the pro-New Deal element of the gangster film and the sense that the Eddie Bartlett character (James Cagney), the doomed would-be 'bit shot', was primarily a victim of circumstance and environment.

Fascism and War

Three of Rossen's remaining four films under his Warners contract were directly or indirectly related to the rise of fascism in Europe. His best known script in this period is his adaptation of Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, for the relatively high budget, 'quality' production, directed by Michael Curtiz and released in 1941. An early Rossen version began with a the voice of the Van Weyden character (Alexander Knox), looking back forty years to the events to be recounted, and seeing the 'struggle for human dignity' as the link between those events and 'this whole modern scene'. Edward G. Robinson said of his role, as the despotic captain Wolf Larsen, that he was 'a Nazi in everything but name'.¹⁰ A woman character is introduced into the story (to be played by Ida Lupino) and extra scenes were written, in part at Lupino's urging, for the two social fugitives aboard the 'Ghost', played by her and John Garfield. Their struggle is presented as one for the dignity and survival of Depression 'nobodies': Leach (Garfield) is on the run from the police in San Francisco, and the struggle of Leach and Ruth displaces the novel's emphasis on a Hobbesian war of all against all. Visual effects, including a studio tank and various lighting and fog effects enhance the sense that this is Wolf Larsen's enclosed world, from which there seems no escape. After the revolt against Larsen has failed Leach tells his fellow shipmates that the captain 'needs you to break your backs for him; maybe someday you'll get wise to that'. The production brought together figures who would later suffer during the blacklist era: Rossen, Garfield, Knox and Howard da Silva were blacklisted and Edward G. Robinson and cinematographer James Wong Howe were greylisted in the late forties or fifties.

Out of the Fog (Anatole Litvak, 1941), for which Rossen was again teamed with Jerry Wald and Richard Macauley, was an adaptation of Irwin Shaw's 1939 Group Theatre fable. Like *The Sea Wolf* it also features working class 'nobodies', Depression figures who strive for a better life and who stand up to symbols of fascist power. John Garfield plays Goff, a 'tinpot Dillinger' who terrorises a Brooklyn pier where two ageing men, played by Thomas Mitchell and John Qualen, struggle to fulfil their dream in life, to buy a new fishing boat. The men devise a plan to fight back by murdering the gangster figure, and although neither can go through with their plan the Goff character overbalances into the sea and drowns. The Production Code would not have allowed the two men to go unpunished, had they actually taken the law into their own hands.¹¹ It is a happy ending, of sorts, as long as you don't believe that the evils associated with the Garfield character are systematic and don't disappear with his death. Rossen struggles to give this petty tyrant a social background. To Goff, a 'bum off the break rods', 'the superior people make the inferior people work for them, that's the law of nature. If there is any trouble you beat them up a couple of times and then there is no more trouble. Then you have peace'.

The same year Rossen authored the screenplay of *Blues in the Night* (Anatole Litvak, 1941), a film that failed to fulfil the studio's considerable commercial expectations. It deals with an itinerant group of jazz musicians who travel Depression America, and whose free form music becomes a symbol of authentic working class culture and the music of the people, in contrast to the industrialised and commercialised music of the big bands. There seems to be a kind of wish-fulfilment from Rossen about the future prospect of more collaborative, independent filmmaking, more insulated from the Hollywood culture industries. There are striking montages (by Don Siegel), but the bulk of the film provides a melodrama based on sexual jealousies at a roadhouse run by an ex-criminal. The women are simply coded: the character played by Warners standby Pricilla Lane remains part of the jazz group, while the Kay Grant figure (Betty Field) is

a prototype femme fatale, upsetting the unity of the group by luring its brightest, most sensitive and vulnerable (and foolish) member temporarily away. When he returns to resume playing the blues, Kay Grant provokes a melodramatic conclusion in which she is killed in a car crash amid thunder and lightning. The film ends with a highly romantic and sentimental view of both jazz and the Depression, as the reunited group, free of racketeers, big bands and preying women, jam happily into the night while riding a freight-train box-car.

Pearl Harbor changed the Hollywood agenda, and Communists were particularly in demand for pictures dealing with aspects of the war experience and that of European resistance movements. Rossen became chairman (until 1944) of the Hollywood Writers Mobilisation, a quasi-governmental body set up on December 8, 1941 by the Screen Writers Guild to co-ordinate the contribution of writers to the war effort. Most wartime scripts were vetted by the Office of War Information, a process that broadened the New Deal influence over film.¹² Rossen's final Warners project was to adapt a novel dealing with defiant Norwegian resistance to Nazi occupation; to director Lewis Milestone the moral of *Edge of Darkness* (1943) was "united we stand, divided we fall". David Platt in the *Daily Worker* found the film to be 'powerful propaganda for a second front', a policy that Rossen had urged the Hollywood Writers Mobilisation to support in 1942. To writer Paul Trivers, writing in 1944 in the Communist Party's cultural periodical *New Masses*, Rossen's changes to the novel's story helped 'audiences recognise there is no escaping the struggle today, that there is no personal life apart from the struggle'.¹³

The radical screenwriter entered the patriotic mainstream, and Rossen was now a \$1,500 a week writer, relative to his \$200 a week status on joining the studio.¹⁴ Yet memos record a number of discontinued projects, including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which Rossen began writing but which John Huston finished as writer-director after the war. He was spending much time on his role at the Mobilisation, and he later complained

of being pushed by the Party into being a 'functionary'. He also invested considerable time researching and writing an original treatment of what was intended as an original home front story. Rossen spoke at the 1943 Writers Congress of the hopes for the postwar world, and the shift from stories of disillusionment – *Out of the Fog* was referred to specifically – to stories in which ordinary people are standing up for themselves. Rossen's treatment, called *Marked Children*, or *Blood of the Lamb*, is interesting in terms of its mix of motifs from thirties crime drama with a sociological interest in the lives of working people in a war plant adjoining a navel base. Rossen's treatment deals with a 14 year old girl who runs away from her grandparents to look for her mother in the war plant.¹⁵ She falls into 'bad company', and joins a 'new family' with a sailor and a war widow. There are links with the social concerns of *Dust Be My Destiny* as well as the more hard boiled elements that were characteristic of his work on *Blues in the Night*. The idea drew on the contemporary attention given to youth crime and the Zoot-suit riots, and Rossen consulted the Youth Corrective Authority in California on the youth delinquency problem. Yet the prospects for such a project seeing the light of day were limited, given Hollywood's virtual abandonment of the social problem picture in 1942. The OWI and the Office of Censorship were likely to oppose such projects, with the latter likely to oppose the distribution abroad of any film showing internal American weaknesses and divisions that the enemy might exploit as propaganda.¹⁶

Postwar and PostWarners: Rossen as Writer-Director

In 1943 the leftist writer John Bright, then at Warners, was introduced to President Roosevelt, who told him of the great contribution that the Warners studio had made to the Democratic Party. Yet by 1947 Roosevelt was no more and the political culture had shifted with the beginnings of the Cold War and the Republican sweep at the 1946 Congressional elections. At two sets of hearings in 1947 Jack Warner blamed

a host of leftist writers who he claimed to have fired, including Rossen, for attempting to inject Communist propaganda into scripts. At the time when *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (directed by Lewis Milestone) was being shot at Paramount (in October 1945) Rossen joined pickets at Warners, protesting at the 'outrageous violence perpetrated by hired thugs and police at your studio today'.¹⁷ In 1947 Rossen and Milestone were both named amongst nineteen unfriendly witnesses to be called to the Washington hearings, although neither were called to testify.

Rossen made only two more films purely as a writer, both under a contract with his old Warner Bros. head of production Hal Wallis, who had set up an independent production company in partnership with Joseph Hazen at Paramount. Rossen's relationship with Wallis was quickly to break down when the writer left first for Enterprise and then Columbia Pictures. But, after a brief 'polish job' on *The Searching Wind* (1946), he did write one significant film as part of the Wallis contract, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), from a short story by John Patrick. This was Rossen's third film as writer with Milestone; after *Edge of Darkness* he had worked closely with the director in adapting Harry Brown's novel for *A Walk in the Sun* (1946). Much later, after Rossen had named names in desperation in 1953, Milestone, who was himself grey listed in the early fifties, was one of the few members of the 'old gang', in his words, to stay friends with him.¹⁸

To Milestone it was Rossen's 'bright idea' to use the Patrick idea as a prologue and then to write a new script based on events that followed some fifteen years later.¹⁹ In Rossen's script, although not in the completed film, the gap in time is given political significance by the use of posters for Hoover in 1928, after the prologue, and for Roosevelt in 1944, when the boy, now a man, returns to his home town. Rossen's work on the film reveals something of the way he used and transformed the old Warners motifs into the evolving visual and verbal rhetoric that the French would term *film noir*. Script and film contain some familiar Rossen elements, including

pool halls, bus stations and freight yards. The prologue reveals the social and psychological origins of the political and economic power of postwar Iverstown, the subject of the bulk of the film. The three main characters are introduced as children: Martha Ivers, unhappily living with her aunt; the local boy Sam Masterton, with whom Martha tries to escape; and Walter O'Neill, whose interests his father is trying to advance with Mrs Ivers. Immediately there are issues of class, and also melodrama, as – amidst thunder and lightning – the young Martha strikes her aunt with a cane, and the old woman falls to her death. Sam Masterton, who was apparently a witness to the murder, leaves town.

The rest of the film is set in 1944, when the adult Sam Masterton (Van Heflin), a sometime gambler and war veteran, finds himself back in Iverstown when, accidentally, he drives off the road. 'The road curved – but I didn't', he says, suggesting Rossen's mix, and *noir's* mix, of social determinism and individual agency. There he discovers the 'strange love', the human relations corrupted by greed and ownership, of the title. (Rossen's script was originally called 'Love Lies Bleeding').²⁰ Martha Ivers (Barbara Stanwyck), a wealthy industrialist employing 30,000 workers, is married to Walter O'Neill (Kirk Douglas), who is running for re-election as the town's District Attorney. The truth of the aunt's death has been covered up, and indeed an innocent man has been prosecuted by Walter and executed for the crime. The extent of Sam's knowledge of the circumstances of the sixteen year-old crime remains unclear, creating doubt over his role and motives. He is nonetheless the 'investigator' of the *film noir* form, unravelling – for whatever reason – the personal and social corruption in the town just as we suppose he has fought fascism in Europe. He is no idealist, like the Frank McCloud character in the later *Key Largo* (1948), but he does have a war record 'few can equal', and the corruption that he discovers also has wider social implications. Iverstown is presented as a company town where everyone is party to the deceit and false values on which power rests. The garage owner who Sam meets tells him that Walter is a 'sure bet' ('No odds – no takers') for

re-election as DA, and will also some day run for President. (Walter's secretary answers Sam's polite enquiry about how the campaign is going that morning with the remark that the 'election is going good every morning'). Sam's motives are at first ambiguous, but his class position is underscored by his relationship while in the town with a young woman on parole, Toni Maracek (Lizabeth Scott), someone who is, like Sam, from the wrong side of the tracks. There are echoes here of Rossen's wartime interest in dislocated families. Milestone remembers Wallis interfering, for example by insisting on additional close ups of Lizabeth Scott, and there were also adjustments to take care of the objections of the Breen office, which was concerned with the indication of 'elements of illicit sex' that were 'treated without proper compensating moral values'. Breen also insisted that it be made clear that Toni Maracek was not a prostitute and that Sam definitely intended to marry her at the end.²¹ Yet in the film Sam and Toni have adjoining hotel rooms, indicating a postwar pushing at Production Code rules.

Later work described by Andersen as *film gris*, such as director Joseph Losey and writer Dalton Trumbo's *The Prowler* (1951), represents a critique of the false values of postwar America, and while the Rossen's script is dated September 1945, there is something of the same feeling. Showing off her wealth and power Martha tells Sam how she has had a tree replanted outside her window. Sam's response, and Rossen's, is 'What nature could do if she had money'. In lines cut from the film the Walter character tells his wife and partner in crime that: 'You are my father's estate. His gift to me. He brought me up to believe that it's a son's duty to protect his inheritance'. He refers later (and in the film) to the 'power and the riches that you'd learned to love so much, and that I'd learned to love too'. The film presents public life as a front, thinly disguising the determining material forces. The distortion of personality, the 'strange love', is matched by an equal distortion of social organisation. To Manny Farber the film was a 'jolting, sour, engrossing work', showing modern life as a jungle. The Motion Picture Alliance for

the Preservation of American Ideals, without analysing the film, was quick to pave the way for the House Committee 'investigations' by referring to it as containing 'sizeable doses of Communist propaganda'.²²

The dialogue at the climax of the film also recalls the discussion by future Hollywood Ten member Adrian Scott, at this time, about a film project – what would become *Crossfire* (1947) – on 'personal fascism'.²³ Finally Sam confronts Martha with the facts of her two murders, of her aunt, and of the man falsely convicted of killing her. The exchange recalls both Wolf Larson's 'fascist' perspective in *The Sea Wolf*, and also the balance, even more explicit in *All the King's Men*, between public benefits that are gained at the expense of corruption:

Martha: What were their lives compared to mine? What was she?

Sam: A human being.

Martha: A mean vicious, hateful old woman who did nothing for anyone. Look what I've done with what she left me – I've given to charity, built schools, hospitals – I've given thousands of people work – What was he?

Sam: Another human being.

Of course, the lines also hint at another issue of the costs and benefits of authoritarian or totalitarian power that might have been on Rossen's mind as he pondered – and he said he did at this time (the time of the Duclos letter) – the implications of his Communist membership.²⁴ Sam has exposed light and air to the 'contract' between Martha and Walter, and after he leaves them they play out their last moments, with Walter giving us a final analysis from Rossen that runs counter to classical Hollywood's, and Joe Brown's, focus on individual villains:

Walter: Don't cry. It's not your fault.

Martha: (Sobbing) It isn't, is it, Walter?

Walter: No, nor mine, nor my father's, nor your Aunt's. It's not anyone's fault – it's just the way things are – it's what people want and how hard they want it and how hard it is for them to get it.

Rossen worked on one further script for Hal Wallis, *Desert Fury* (Lewis Allen, 1947), a rather

hysterical Technicolor thriller. There is plenty of deviant sexual behaviour for its time, and another contractual relationship, this time between two men, one of them threatened by the attentions his (ostensible business) partner is paying to a woman. (There is also a scene of scolding coffee being poured down someone's neck, six years before the similar scene in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*).

The same year – which saw an unprecedented upsurge in independent production – Rossen wrote a script for Columbia Pictures and its star, Dick Powell. Powell was an interesting figure in this period; he was at one point strongly interested in appearing in *Crossfire*, in his efforts to rebrand himself from crooner to serious actor, and he successfully lobbied for Rossen to be allowed to direct the picture *Johnny O'Clock* (1947). Rossen's first directing credit is a modest studio based crime melodrama that exhibits, in the phase used by Bertrand Tavernier, 'directorial grace'.²⁵ As with *Desert Fury* there is a contractual relationship between brain and muscle, but Rossen's work here plays on the broader social resonance of gambling, rather as Abraham Polonsky did in *Body and Soul* (which Rossen directed from Polonsky's script) and most of all in *Force of Evil*. A casino is central to *Desert Fury* and *Johnny O'Clock*, while an exchange between Walter and Sam in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* also plays on the connection between gambling and American life in the postwar, and post-Roosevelt, era:

Walter: Well, perhaps this is where I should remark that all life is a gamble.

Sam: You don't need to bother. I know it. Some win, some don't.

In *Johnny O'Clock* the relationship is between the casino owner, Johnny O'Clock, (Powell) and a powerful 'business associate', Guido Marchettis (Thomas Gomez), who heads a shadowy outfit also based around gambling. When a further partner, a corrupt cop, murders a gambler, Marchettis's corrupt business empire comes under investigation by a wry, world-weary detective (not unlike the Finlay character in *Crossfire*), Kotch (Lee J. Cobb). The clock conceit



• Dick Powell in *Johnny O'Clock*.

recurs in plot, dialogue, musical score and in the studio sets: a large clock looms over the pavement outside the hotel where O'Clock lives. O'Clock is a cold, calculating man, literally a cog in the Marchettis machine, although he thinks himself independent and invulnerable, a man in

on a 'sure bet' compared to the 'suckers' who frequent his casino. (One is reminded of Orson Welles as Harry Lime in *The Third Man* (1949), as he looks down from the Ferris Wheel at the expendable 'dots', the 'suckers', below). For Rossen there is perhaps some element of self-

disgust here, in terms of his own role in Hollywood's mass entertainment mission, its own 'sure bet'; Marxist screenwriters had to admit, in Polonsky's iconic phrase, that everything was 'addition and subtraction' and that the rest, including much of their dialogue, was 'conversation'. O'Clock's lack of apparent feeling for the world may or may not be related to the fact that he is crucially (like Sam Masterton in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*) a war veteran. To Marchettis, talking of his relationship with O'Clock – near to its end – there was 'nothing between us but cash'. With Kotch closing in, O'Clock's first impulse is to run and hide, but finally, pressured by a good woman, he drops the pose and re-enters society, joining up with Kotch's implicit social ideals. With O'Clock injured by a shot from the detective, he needs physical support, so that the three characters, in the last shot of the film, are linked arm in arm, a reluctant if affirmative alliance, facing an uncertain postwar future.

The modest success of *Johnny O'Clock* led to an approach by Roberts Productions, including John Garfield, to direct Abraham Polonsky's script of *Body and Soul* for the new Enterprise Studios. A few years earlier Rossen had expressed an interest in making a boxing film with Budd Schulberg, who was writing the expose that would be published as *The Harder They Fall*, in 1947.²⁶ To Polonsky Rossen was chosen in part because he was in the Party, and those involved with the Roberts company made sure that he made no changes to the script during filming. The film's editor Robert Parrish has provided an account of the filming of the climactic fight, which shifts the film stylistically from a studio treatment that recalls the Warner Bros tradition (including montages), although with distinctive crane shots.²⁷ James Wong Howe's wild shots from inside of the ring, sometimes out of focus, give the fight a much more visceral, brutal feel. Furthermore, much has been made of Polonsky's and Rossen's disagreement over the ending. According to Parrish, Rossen had suggested the use of Ernest Hemingway's story 'Fifty Grand' at the end. But the director later favoured a final scene, following the defiant victory of Davis

(Garfield) in the ring, in which the boxer dies a squalid death at the hands of Roberts's minions. Polonsky wanted the film to end before with the Davis victory, and with the couple being 'swallowed up' by the neighbourhood; he later recalled that Rossen was 'more driven to a kind of tragic melodrama than I am'.²⁸ Both versions were shot, but Rossen accepted that Polonsky's affirmative ending was most in keeping with the tone of the story as a Depression fable of the streets. Yet in terms of the importance of 'happy endings' to conventional Hollywood practice one could make a case for Rossen's initial ending and relate it to the downbeat endings of several of his earlier films at Warners. The film's assistant director, Robert Aldrich, always supported what he felt was the 'proper' ending, of the death of a hero who is aware that 'the probabilities are that he'll lose'.²⁹

Rossen elicits fine performances, in particular from Garfield and from Canada Lee as the dignified black boxer; the staccato playing between Davis and his mother (Anne Revere) in the scene with the charity worker has particular impact. The success of the film opened doors for Polonsky (who went on to direct *Force of Evil*) and for Rossen, who soon after formed his own company and signed a contract with Columbia Pictures that gave him considerable autonomy over every alternate film that he made at the studio.³⁰ Rossen's powerful contract at Columbia was perhaps one of the factors that scared industry conservatives such as William Wilkerson, founder and publisher of the *Hollywood Reporter*, into believing that New York 'intellectuals', with their notions of 'life as a struggle', were threatening the 'pure entertainment' tradition in Hollywood.³¹ Rossen talked to Arthur Miller about a film version of his play, *All My Sons*, but finally agreed to write, direct and produce a film of Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer prize winning 1946 novel, *All the King's Men*, the rights of which had been purchased by Columbia's New York office.³² Yet before he could go ahead he was required, in the light of events in Washington, to write a letter to Harry Cohn, stating that he was no longer in the Party. Just as *All the King's Men*

(1949) attempted to visualise the rise of an American version of European fascism, so Rossen was able to translate a number of elements from the much admired low budget Italian films seen in America just after the war. The bulk of the filming took place in Stockton California, with interiors as well as exteriors being shot on real locations. Non-professionals were used extensively, and much of the shooting took place in available light.

In terms of the theme of the film, it is interesting that the year before Rossen had worked in a supervisory capacity with writer and Hollywood Ten member Alvah Bessie on the scripting of *Ruthless* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1948), although neither was credited. Ulmer's film uses a biopic structure to recount the central character's lifelong pursuit of wealth and corporate success, at the expense of human relationships. On his death a character remarks, in the last line of the film, that 'He wasn't a man, he was a way of life'. Ulmer's film shares something of the structure and even the politics of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), and Rossen's film was also to nod towards Welles with the giant portraits of Willie Stark at rallies and the 'March of Time' sequence, the latter an invention of Rossen.

Rossen, consulting Warren throughout, filmed scenes covering the bulk of the novel, and then cut around a full hour of the material, in particular scenes dealing with the personal relationships, following unsuccessful previews. (Rossen even makes a personal appearance as a newspaperman, speaking the first line of the film). Parrish argues that Rossen used *The Roaring Twenties* as a model in preparing the final version, and this influence can be seen not only in terms of the major use of montages but also in relation to the motifs of the gangster genre.³³ Stark's death recalls the final scene in *The Roaring Twenties*, and also the fate of another over-reaching figure of 1949 film, Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in *White Heat*. Jarrett's last line is 'Made it ma, Top of the World', while Stark's is 'Could have been the whole world, Willie Stark'. It is also interesting that the French writers Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton

cited the film in their seminal 1955 work on film noir, noting its debt to films on crime. Certainly Anne Stanton becomes something of a femme fatale in Rossen's version, symbolising the way that Stark, as he becomes successful, is corrupted by the old aristocratic order at Burden's landing.³⁴

The detachment from the political events provided by the character of Jack Burden (John Ireland) was arguably attractive to Rossen. Burden, a character 'too rich to work', is a fellow traveller who is dissatisfied by the remoteness of the upper class world of Burden's Landing to the lives of ordinary people. The Stark campaigns connect this scion of the defeated Southern aristocracy to history and to change.

Stark becomes a hero to the people from whence he came, just as Charley Davis is a hero to the people of his Lower East Side community. He makes deals with oil companies and buys off the upper class community. Burden's speech to Anne Stanton at the end of the film, after Stark's death, in which he suddenly calls on her to help him make people see Willie Stark as Adam Stanton saw him, seems uncharacteristic of Burden and an effort to give the film a neat concluding message. It also suggests Burden's final surrender to the old order, an element that was not likely to appeal to Rossen's old Party colleagues. Edward Dmytryk and Ring Lardner Jr. later reported a Los Angeles meeting of the Hollywood Ten at which various Party luminaries, including John Howard Lawson – who had apparently advised Rossen against making *All the King's Men* – heavily criticised the film. Both remembered this meeting – presumably late in 1949 – as the moment when Rossen finally cut all connections with the Party.³⁵

With its jack-boots and searchlights, Rossen's film makes reference to fascism while also raising the dilemma of Rousseauque democracy that political scientists were beginning to see at this time as at the heart of totalitarianism. Stark tells the crowd: 'Remember its not I who have won, but you. Your will is my strength, and your need is my justice'. Yet this 'general will' leads not only to progressive change but also to dictatorship and corruption. To Paul Rotha at the time the

'basic weakness – and danger – of the film is that little attempt is made to show how the real machinery of democratic action in the hands of people educated in democratic ways of action could have worked'. The 'hicks' support Stark, just as the 'suckers' kept Johnny O'Clock in business. There seems no alternative to Willie Stark. Yet the seductiveness of power, and its mechanics, have rarely been better shown, particularly in the performance of Mercedes McCambridge as Sadie Burke. (Her role was enlarged in the cutting room, following the popularity of her character at previews).

At the time the *Hollywood Reporter* saw the film as 'an arresting celluloid study of the effect of a demagogue on the mass mind'.³⁶ Yet – one is reminded of the line about Martha Ivers' public contribution in *The Strange Love in Martha Ivers* – the real benefits to the previously ignored working people, in terms of new hospitals and roads, are manifest in the film as part of this American dictator's contract with his electorate. Rossen's film associates Penn Warren's notion of original sin mainly with the Stark character, so that the novelist's sense of the partial complicity of the people in the corruption is undermined. Instead the director emphasises Stark's control over the popular media in order to maintain something of the affirmative, Popular Front notion of 'the people'. Rossen's crowds do not constitute a mob, and when ordinary people can see behind the media image, and see Stark up close – as Robert Hale, the father of the girl killed in Stark's son's drunken car accident, does in an extended scene invented for the film – they reject him.³⁷

Rossen directed *The Brave Bulls* (1951) in Mexico in the spring of 1950, but was then blacklisted; his next film was *Mambo* in 1955. He was to appear twice before the House Committee during its second wave of hearings, beginning in 1951. In that year he testified that he was no longer a Communist. Unable to get his passport renewed he appeared the second time as a co-operative witness, providing – or more precisely confirming – the names of 53 Communists.³⁸ Only with *The Hustler* (1961) did Rossen return to critical and commercial success, and to a variation on his earlier themes. It is in the transitional

period of the late forties that Rossen's work indicates some of the ways in which the Hollywood Left took advantage of postwar conditions to articulate a tougher and meaner perspective on the distortions of American business and political structures than had previously been possible, or would be possible in the fifties. On his premature death in 1966 he was preparing a film which would have again dealt with the relationship between notions of American reality and myth; 'Cocoa Beach' was to relate the hopes and struggles of transients in a local community to the nearby Cape Canaveral, symbol of America's imperial reach.

Notes

- 1 T. Andersen, 'Red Hollywood', in S. Ferguson and B. Groseclose (eds), *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1985), pp. 182–191.
- 2 See P. Buhle and D. Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight, The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950–2002* (London, Palgrave 2003); P. Bulhe and D. Wagner, *Radical Hollywood* (New York, New Press, 2002); P. McGilligan and P. Buhle, *Tender Comrades, A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York, St. Martins Press, 1997); D. Georgakas, 'The Hollywood Reds: Fifty Years After', *American Communist History*, 2: 1 (2003); B. Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London, Routledge, 1992). For other perspectives on the Hollywood left see A. Eckstein, 'The Hollywood Ten in history and memory', *Film History*, 16: 4 (2004), 424–36; R. Radosh and A. Radosh, *Red Star Over Hollywood, The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left* (San Francisco, Encounter Books, 2005).
- 3 On Rossen see A. Casty, *The Films of Robert Rossen* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1969); Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*, November 1, 1935.
- 4 Outline treatment, October 3, 1936, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Television Research, Madison, Wisconsin (subsequently, UA/Wisconsin). Edelman to Wallis, July 23, 1936, Warner Bros. collection, University of Southern California (subsequently, WB/USC); B. Neve, 'The Screenwriter and the Social Problem Film, 1936–38: the Case of Robert Rossen at Warner Brothers', *Film & History*, 14: 1 (1984), 2–13.
- 5 Warner to Wallis, February 22, 1937, WB/USC; *Daily Worker*, April 14, 1937, 7.
- 6 P. McGilligan and P. Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, p. 33.
- 7 *New York Times*, August 11, 1938, 13; *Daily Worker*, June 2, 1943, 7.
- 8 Mark Hellinger memo, July 15, 1958, Edelman to

- Hall Wallis, August 3, 1938, WB/USC.
- 9 *New York Times*, October 7, 1939; undated clipping, *Daily Worker*, UAW/Wisconsin; Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment, Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ., Scarecrow Press, 1983).
 - 10 E. G. Robinson, with L. Spiegelgass, *All My Yesterdays: An Autobiography* (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1973), p. 218; first Rossen draft screenplay, September 17, 1940, WB/Wisconsin; for the final screenplay see R. Fumento and T. Williams, *Jack London's The Sea Wolf, a Screenplay by Robert Rossen* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1998).
 - 11 Joseph I. Breen to Jack Warner, December 19, 1940, WB/USC.
 - 12 C. R. Koppes, G. D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War, How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York, Free Press, 1987), pp. 82–112.
 - 13 *Daily Worker*, 12 April 1943, 7; N. L. Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers Wars* (New York, Knopf, 1982), pp. 189; Trivers, 'Hollywood Writers Move Up', *New Masses*, 48 (14 September 1943), 20.
 - 14 Contract information, Robert Rossen, Warner Bros. collection, Princeton University Library.
 - 15 Rossen testimony, May 7, 1953, *Hearing before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives*, 83rd Congress, First Session, Washington, 1953, 1490; Rossen, 'An Approach to Character, 1943', *Proceedings of Writers Congress, sponsored by Hollywood Writers Mobilisation and University of California*, Berkeley, 1944, 61–67; Rossen, 'The Blood of the Lamb', October 19, 1943, WB/Wisconsin.
 - 16 Rossen, 'New Characters for the Screen', *New Masses*, 50 (18 January 1944), 18–19; Karl Holton to H. Lissauer, Warners Research Department, July 17, 1943, WB/Wisconsin; Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, pp. 131–32.
 - 17 Bright in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, p. 153; Warner's testimony, *Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives*, Washington DC, October 20, 1947, WB/USC; Telegram to Jack and Harry Warner, signed by Milestone, Rossen, Dalton Trumbo, John Howard Lawson, John Garfield, John Wexley et al, 8 October 1945, WB/USC.
 - 18 Lewis Milestone collection, AMPAS.
 - 19 Lewis Milestone collection, AMPAS.
 - 20 Rossen, 'Love Lies Bleeding', 21 September 1945, Kirk Douglas collection, Wisconsin.
 - 21 Production Code Administration file on *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, Motion Picture Association of America collection, AMPAS.
 - 22 Farber, quoted in Casty, *The Films of Robert Rossen*, 11; MPAPAI reference to *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* in Harold J. Salemsom, ed., *Conference on the Subject of Thought Control in the US*, 9–13 July 1947, 309.
 - 23 Adrian Scott memo on 'The Brick Foxhole', reproduced in Appendix 5, L. Ceplair and S. Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood, Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), pp. 451–4.
 - 24 Rossen testimony, May 7, 1953, on the letter from Jacques Duclos that signalled the postwar change in Communist Party strategy, directed from Moscow, 1489–90; A. Bessie, *Inquisition in Eden* (Berlin, 1967), p. 63.
 - 25 Tavernier introduction to film, BBC2, February 6, 1988.
 - 26 Schulberg interview with BN, October 13, 2004.
 - 27 Abraham Polonsky interview with BN, August 20, 1988; R. Parrish, *Growing Up in Hollywood* (London, Bodley Head, 1980), pp. 192–95.
 - 28 P. Valenti, in J. Schultheiss (ed.), *Abraham Polonsky's Body and Soul: The Critical Edition* (Northridge, California State University, Northridge, 2002), p. 307.
 - 29 R. Sklar, *City Boys, Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, NJ., Princeton University Press, 1992), 186; E. L. Miller Jr., and E. T. Arnold, eds., *Robert Aldrich Interviews* (Jackson, University Press Mississippi, 2004), p. 97.
 - 30 Details of contract, *Film Index*, 11 (1971), 115.
 - 31 *Hollywood Reporter*, 2 December 1947, cited in Joseph Foster, 'Entertainment only', *New Masses*, 66 (1948), 21–22.
 - 32 Richard Collins, testimony, *Hearings*, April 12, 1951, Washington, 240; M. Gottfried, *Arthur Miller, His Life and Work* (Cambridge MA, Da Capo, 2003), p. 111; B. F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row, Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures* (Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p. 169.
 - 33 Parrish, *Growing Up in Hollywood*, pp. 200–06.
 - 34 R. Borde and E. Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941–1953* (San Francisco, City Lights, 2002), pp. 116–17; P. Dubuisson Castille, 'Red Scare and Film Noir: The Hollywood Adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's 'All the King's Men'', *Southern Quarterly*, 33: 2–3 (1995), 173.
 - 35 E. Dmytryk, *I't's a Hell of a Life But Not a Bad Living* (New York, New York Times Books, 1978), p. 115; R. Lardner Jr., in Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers Wars*, 170.
 - 36 *Hollywood Reporter*, November 4, 1949, and Rotha, 'Storm in a tea cup', *Public Opinion*, April 28, 1950, in microfiche for *All the King's Men*, BFI, London.
 - 37 M. Augspurger, 'Heading West: All the King's Men and Robert Rossen's Search for the Ideal', *Southern Quarterly*, 39:3 (2001), 62–64.
 - 38 Rossen testimony, May 7, 1953, 1454–99; Endfield, interview with BN, December 19, 1989, on Rossen's passport.