Steven Ross’ "Little Caesar and the HUAC Mob: Edward G. Robinson and the Decline of Hollywood Liberalism"

Presentation, Steven J. Ross
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Respondent, Vanessa Schwartz
History Department

Respondent, Ed Asner
Actor

Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley
The Norman Lear Center, USC

A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.

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Participants

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Terry Anzur, Journalism
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Background and Summary

“Little Caesar and the HUAC Mob: Edward G. Robinson and the Decline of Hollywood Liberalism” is Chapter Three of Professor Steven Ross’ book in progress, Hollywood Left and Right: Movie Stars and Politics. This book grows out of Ross’ last project on working class directors. Like them, Ross intends to reach out to a mass audience. Despite the fact that Hollywood emerged as a center of politics and culture in the 1930s, Ross found that scholarship has focussed almost exclusively on the Hollywood Ten. This chapter tells the story of Robinson, a progressive Hollywood liberal with no apparent interest in communism, whose career fell apart when he became the target of inquiries from the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Ross argues that Robinson served as a powerful example to other left-leaning stars in Hollywood who shied away from politics in order to protect their careers. Ross believes that this is why “in an industry dominated by liberal and left stars, it was two conservatives, George Murphy and Ronald Reagan, who emerged as the first major movie-star politicians of Cold War America.”

Respondent, Professor Vanessa Schwartz, History Department

Professor Schwartz disagreed with Ross’ conclusions and made several suggestions about how he might refine his argument and narrow his area of inquiry. Schwartz argued that when Ross uses the term “politics” to talk about stars, he’s speaking more generally of “political engagement.” When Tom Hanks took the stage to introduce the “Tribute to Heroes” telethon, he took pains to deny that actors are politicians. Schwartz sees this as part of a long history of stars attempting to assert their political neutrality as artists. Schwartz argued that Ross should narrow his focus to stars, the roles they play, and the politics they develop. Looking at the personal politics of stars could yield some very interesting material, since there is a curious interplay between their fictional characters and their public personae.
Schwartz also pointed out that we cannot dismiss the fact that Hollywood is the most left-leaning capitalist industry in the country. She asked Ross to explore this further in his explanations of why right-leaning stars have gone into politics: is it because it was more effective for them to leave Hollywood to get their message out? Similarly, wasn’t it more effective for Warren Beatty to make *Reds* than to run for office?

Schwartz also questioned Ross’ analysis of Robinson’s career and its downward turn during theHUAC hearings. By the time his career began to falter, Robinson was an old man who was identified with films popular in the ‘30s. His career may have declined with or without those HUAC hearings. However, despite his advanced age, and following the HUAC crisis, Robinson got a part in one of the most important Hollywood films of all time, *The Ten Commandments*. He still seemed to have the respect of his peers and he was still well-appointed in a Beverly Hills mansion, with a world-class art collection.

**Respondent, Ed Asner, Actor**

Mr. Asner felt that the argument that an actor was “already over the hill anyway” has been well-worn in Hollywood ever since selective blacklisting began in the ‘40s. In his own career, Asner has found that the age issue comes and goes. But even liberals with power in Hollywood tend to treat vocal left-wing actors with caution. One liberal TV producer told Asner that he was no longer being considered for a part because he would be “a political liability” to a new show in development. In Hollywood, anyone with a known political agenda might be described as “overexposed.” Even a well-respected actor like Meryl Streep retreated from her ill-fated anti-alar campaign and never took the stage as an activist again. However, some actors, such as Martin Sheen, seem to be “teflon stars:” no matter how many times they are arrested or caught speaking out, they always continue to get good work.
**HUAC in Hollywood**

Professor Elinor Accampo from the History Department asked why HUAC came to Hollywood in the first place. What exactly were they afraid of? Ross explained that the FBI considered Hollywood a threat because movies are very effective propaganda tools – especially because people don’t recognize them as propaganda: after all, movies are “only entertainment.” However, the FBI was very critical of HUAC, which was run out of the House of Representatives. The Bureau felt that the investigations were shoddily done and that the whole thing was a cheap publicity stunt.

The Director of the Lear Center, Martin Kaplan, pointed out that there have been several revisionist histories of what happened during the Red Scare, from Alger Hiss to Hollywood. Evidence is still being uncovered that alternately proves or disproves the guilt of those grilled in the HUAC hearings. Kaplan asked Ross whether Hollywood played into the communist scare, and whether it’s possible to say anything about who the “good guys” and the “bad guys” really were? And whatever happened to the boundary line between the liberal left and the communists? Ross said that the hearings brought about a split in the liberal left between anti-communists like Robinson and the “ACLU cheerleaders” in Los Angeles. However, the American public was encouraged by HUAC to see two sides only: the right and the communists. This is why, according to Ross’ argument, Robinson’s case was such an important one for HUAC: it showed that nobody on the left was safe.

English Professor Leo Braudy noted that HUAC not only encouraged the elision of liberal leftists and communists, but a more general blurring of labor politics, international politics, and racial politics. Although most political activists focussed on specific issues, all of them were lumped together and tested for communist sympathies.

Cinema-TV Professor Dana Polan argued that the studios welcomed HUAC to town because they knew the hearings would serve the function of “policing” the images and activities of the stars. The studios wanted the public to think that they were cracking down on communists, and it was
a convenient way to deter union organizers. Even with a star system in place, Hollywood did not suffer from a limited labor pool: HUAC helped isolate and eliminate liabilities. As Ross pointed out later, the studio system played an important role in containing even A-list celebrities. Both Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn retreated from their political positions because of the contract system.

The Role of Television
Communication Professor Tom Hollihan drew attention to the tremendous effect television had on the political sphere at this time. In the ’50s, political advisors had to be media savvy in order to survive. The effect was far-reaching: not only were politicians taking pointers from celebrities, in terms of how to behave onscreen, but the structure of the political message changed as well. Professor Ross shared a few anecdotes supporting Hollihan’s point: actors such as Robert Montgomery and George Murphy were recruited by Eisenhower to assist him in “image management.” Also, TV played a key role in Murphy’s and Reagan’s rise in politics. Both of them were essentially B actors, so their movies tended to play on late night TV dockets, where they were exposed to a massive audience that eventually became their political constituency.

Journalism Professor Terry Anzur asked whether television was a defining factor in the HUAC hearings as well. Anzur felt that HUAC’s power to ruin careers was strengthened by the fact that the hearings were broadcast live in Los Angeles.

How Liberal is Hollywood?
Communication Professor Marita Sturken disagreed with Schwartz’s earlier characterization of Hollywood as the most liberal industry in the country. Sturken argued that we must make a distinction between Hollywood politics and Hollywood products. Eighty to ninety percent of its products are deeply conservative. Movies like Bullworth are the exception to the rule, and even television fare is not liberal.
Schwartz did not think that Hollywood output was as conservative as Sturken described it, but she did agree that movies and roles are an important part of the equation when you’re trying to evaluate the political profile of Hollywood.

Ross mentioned that Billy Baldwin, current president of the Creative Coalition – which supports the arts, the environment, and first amendment rights – has said that stars constantly tell him that their lawyers and agents advise them against writing checks to the Creative Coalition, for fear of appearing too political.

Schwartz came back to say that there would be no politics in Hollywood, let alone liberal politics, if economics were driving everything. She suggested that it was miraculous that there is as much political debate in Hollywood as there seems to be.

Hollihan disagreed. Hollywood is composed of big egos who have the power to have their voices heard. It’s no surprise that they are tempted to vocalize their personal political opinions on the public stage.

**Roles vs. Reality**

Professor Braudy suggested that Edward G. Robinson was a successful HUAC target in part because of the kinds of roles he played. Often, Robinson’s characters would encompass two contradictory personae, such as the gangster and the neat bookkeeper, or the murderer who’s also an art collector. Perhaps these duplicitous roles made Robinson seem even more suspicious to a public that often identifies actors with the roles they play.

Ross argued that Robinson went out of this way to choose progressive roles. He had a great deal of creative control over his long-running radio show, Big Town. Robinson admitted that he used his power to include strong elements of social justice in story lines. When asked how he grappled with his politics and the roles he played, Ed Asner said that he found the roles he had played extremely gratifying, and that they had heartened his politics.
Ross pointed out the tremendous effect that roles could have on political careers. Actor Robert Ryan’s political career ended quickly as soon as he realized that audiences identified him with his bad guy roles. Charlton Heston, on the other hand, will always receive media attention and respect since he portrayed Moses.

**Suggestions for the Chapter**

--provide more background on why HUAC came to Hollywood in the first place
--refine focus to movie star politics; dispense with chapter on Mayer
--integrate argument into film history
--focus on the celebrities themselves, and their personal politics, and then work outward to address how they responded to their political milieu
--create a context for Robinson in order to identify what is special about him; how is his story different from Dudley Nichols, Philip Dunne, Frederic March, Helen Gahagan, or Cliff Odets?
--look at crime films as a genre attractive to stars and writers from the political left and right (W.R. Burnett and John Huston, for instance)
--revise comments on Hiss, who was convicted of perjury, not espionage
--explore the idea of artists/actors as sensitive to the human plight: is this why they tend to lean left in their politics?

1 "Little Caesar and the HUAC Mob," p. 2.