

## MUCH ADO ABOUT THE HOLLYWOOD BLACKLIST?

SRCH, DANIEL, *NA ČERNÉ LISTINĚ: HOLLYWOODŠTÍ RUDÍ A HONY NA ČARODĚJNICE V AMERICKÉM FILMOVÉM PRŮMYSLU (1947-1960)*, FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA UNIVERZITY KARLOVY, PRAHA 2015, 296 PAGES.



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Before I turn to the details, let me state that the reviewed book by the young historian Daniel Srch is an extraordinary and thorough research. The author aims especially to “analyze various aspects of life of people, who were harmed by the Hollywood blacklist between the years 1947–1960” (p. 9). Thus he describes a practice from the beginning of the Cold War, during which many workers in the film industry lost their jobs based on their political affiliation, usually membership in the Communist Party. More than nine hundred footnotes and twenty-page long bibliography indicate his ability to work systematically with sources of different levels. The book published in Czech emerged from a PhD thesis and Srch can be without the slightest doubt labeled as an expert on the topic. Inasmuch as I suppose that the author would fully deserve admission to the international debate, the review will attempt to be as critical as possible; in order to mention some possible suggestions for (let’s hope that before long) English edition.

### INDOMITABLE LANGUAGE

Daniel Srch contributed to the increasing revision of the current research. It means that he criticizes the overpopulated cliché about bad guys (anti-Communists as initiators of the blacklist) and heroes or innocent victims (communists, who were blacklisted), which was enforced in particular by leftist scholars. The author carried out the revision at several levels: he especially describes the relevant context very thoroughly and from many angles. The core of the book is preceded by a clear description of the historical context of the United States as well as mode of production in the film industry.

In the first case, Srch put into the context the position and revolutionary ethos of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), so as to modify some romantic myths about innocent victims. As illustrated, CPUSA systematically supported their goals against interests of the United States, among other things by espionage (pp. 93–95). Hollywood in the classical era is convincingly portrayed as a hierarchized industry, which acted pragmatically. Associations between the studio system and long tradition of individualism in American thinking seem to be very inspirational. To make his point, the author returns to the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville from the 19th-century (pp. 64–67). Srch’s conclusion is that producers — rather surprisingly — did not oppose the blacklist immediately after the World War II: “blacklist in the context of many specifics of the American cinema represented quite logical and natural, albeit radical solution” (p. 84). The film industry

simply resisted controversies and by excluding of the Communists, among other things, the potential of film trade unions was subdued. Furthermore, Hollywood dealt with more dramatic challenges at the same time: decrease in attendance or difficult access to some foreign markets. Pragmatic decisions were incorporated into politics, which calls into a question black-and-white framework in a suitable manner.

The author has a gift for finding apt quotations of direct participants — regardless, whether by the Communists or the anti-Communists —, which clearly and concisely extend presented ideas. It is impossible to avoid noticing that the author itself wants to be as subtle and exciting as the quotations; here it seems to me, however, that he rather harms the text. I am not referring directly to the tone, although moderate journalistic style and frequent sarcasm could discourage some readers. Despite making the revision in terms of thought, Srch omitted the revision with regard to terminology and rhetoric; thus he termed the presumed bad guys as inquisitors (p. 9) and with this misleading word — even without quotation marks — Srch works until the end. A phrase witch-hunt (pp. 8–10, 12, 14, 17, 25, 26, 30, 36, 93, 149, 187, 195, 268) and references to heresy (p. 115) or crusade (p. 35) represent exhausting cliché. It seems to me unfortunate to make a revision of ideas with such inaccurate rhetoric. The author would probably say that these belong to the established terms in many books and articles; however, terminology is not valid forever and this one really deserves a revision. I am confident that a readable and brisk text might be written even without such misleading words; moreover, with this rhetoric the book moves closer to the scholars and texts, which he criticizes skilfully and efficiently.

While inquisitors remain without quotation marks, witch-hunt is going on solely with quotation marks. I do not see any point in this inconsistency, when both are analogy. An insufficient distance from emotive terminology can be found in too many quotation marks around books; also in sentences, where it might be confusing. For instance, phrases like the studio system (pp. 67, 75) or the word independent (p. 78) do not need any quotation marks. They do not refer to something objectionable, neither in political nor in filmological sense. In the sentence “in a ‘golden’ twenties” (p. 69), I almost have to ask myself, whether they were really golden or not. The same confusion arouses many quotation marks: for example “which later meant ‘suspicious’ fact” (p. 101) or “by that the general arguments for a critique of ‘big’ capital were reinforced implicitly (p. 271). Sometimes it looks that the author uses quotation marks, when he adds some form of irony or an indirect reference: “on the ‘poisoned’ atmosphere at the time” (p. 127), “for former fellow fighters” (p. 138). Other times, it seems that Srch is not absolutely sure, whether the word is suitable for the scientific work: “sort of ‘delirious’ period” (p. 270), “a gradual ‘corrosion’ of the blacklist” (p. 17), “ideological ‘flips’” (p. 89).

Unfortunately, quotation marks in scientific works sometimes serve as alibi; through them authors get rid of responsibility for their judgment or its degree. The author could avoid these difficulties: he wrote a sparkling text — note that I am using no quotation marks here, as there is no reason for them — which can manage many of these words (flips, fellow fighters, corrosion). And if some of them rather not (delirious, witch-hunt), it indicates only, that they should not be in the text at all. At the same time, I feel that Srch is restricted by his own native language; it looks that he

often thinks rather in English and the English edition would solve many stated points. The Czech language does not know the vocabulary connected with the Hollywood blacklist in detail, only in a form of pamphletic articles from the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s.

## VARIOUS ASPECTS (OF FILMS)

Srch mentions immediately in Introduction that he does not aim to cope with “detailed analysis of filmmaking of the Hollywood reds” (p. 10). On the other hand, the description of Hollywood production system is accompanied by relevant filmological literature; the bibliography is even more impressive, when you realize that Srch is not a film historian primarily. The author does not follow the story of the Communists separately; he always takes into account a broader context of the film industry and its specific rules. The interpretation becomes very complex and the described events have logic, so a reader does not lose his train of thought.

The core of the book is an observation of leftist filmmakers’s situation after losing their jobs in Hollywood. The author utilizes his erudition properly as well as the research in many archives. Srch pays attention to work of the Communists in the black market — for instance, the filmmaking right in Hollywood under pseudonyms — or their activities in exile. Everything is explained colourfully and in detail. Across the book Srch pays an extraordinary attention to demythologization of the Hollywood blacklist. He expresses it openly and aptly in the Chapter “Creation of modern myths” (pp. 248–265), in which the author reminds us of biases in significant parts of current research. The history of the Hollywood blacklist has been for a long time written mainly by the Communists themselves, their relatives or by scholars from among the New Left; thus by the people, who explained the complex problem as a straightforward battle between good and evil and celebrated the excluded filmmakers in a naive way. Although I consider this chapter crucial, what surprises me a bit is Srch’s approach to the scholars, who disrupted the dominant arguments of advocates of the New Left. Whereas leftist historians are quite rightly criticized by the author, Srch describes the conservative scholars without any critical comments. The author simply points out their refusal of dominant arguments and inclination to right-wing attitudes, after which they are put into stark contrast to the leftist historians or journalists. Paradoxically, it almost looks mythically: the research of the blacklist had remained tendentious for many years, until these authors emerged. However, their right-wing writing is not symptomless, it is *tendentious* as well — i.e. it has some intellectual and political background —, which is left out.

Srch inclines to the right-wing authors implicitly, which influences his perception and evaluation of consequences. In fact, the book is a spirited polemic with the discourse of the New Left; it reveals itself through the way how Srch emphasizes aspects, which go against the image of modest heroes on the blacklist. Some passages even end up with moralizing: “In this connection, it is necessary to remind that after a show trial Milada Horáková was executed only a few weeks before, which Hollywood reds passed unnoticed” (p. 129). Why is it necessary to remind it? I find a bit naive to

reproach to loyal Communists in the United States that they were not outraged — from their perspective — by an execution of “somebody” in Eastern Europe. Srch wrote a text at the international level and such local Czech allusion looks strangely. I also read repeatedly (pp. 74, 110, 114, 129, 130, 172, 178) that many of the Communists were quite wealthy — until their excluding from Hollywood — by means of which their hypocrisy is indicated. Srch relativizes degree of troubles of the filmmakers on the blacklist: “The difficult fifties’ simply includes many partial obstacles, but none of them were insurmountable” (p. 152). There is nothing wrong with a description of property or ideas about obstacles; after all, the author has everything well-founded. The problem is, in my opinion that similar information returns over and over, even though a reader has already understood. In other words, it is too visible from the text, how much the author wants to say just this and it becomes counterproductive. The result can be of three kinds: (a) it might be a bit boring; (b) a reader can be offended and resist to message of the book; (c) or — and it would be the worst case to me — a reader may get the wrong impression that the author aims to trivialize the blacklist and to discredit the Communist filmmakers. Srch does not have this intention at all, which is directly expressed (p. 254).

The last remark relates to filmological elements of the book. It is not entirely true that the author does not make analysis: Srch judges feature films on the Hollywood blacklist (pp. 260–265) and he especially dedicates a whole chapter to the film *Salt of the Earth* (1954), which was a collective effort of some filmmakers on the blacklist. Srch puts forward quite serious and sharp comments about the film: “The film as a whole then can be marked as too schematic, utopian, state-building or somehow prim [...] Benefit to the American cinema can be regarded as absolutely marginal” (p. 208). If these conclusions have been accompanied by a rigorous analysis, it would not have been possible to say a word; a reasonable polemic attitude should be respected. However, previous part of the chapter consists of retelling the plot and one short paragraph of undeveloped points about soundtrack and collectivist ideas. The author pays attention only to the unusual role of women in the film. I am afraid that this chapter makes the same mistake — only vice versa in terms of politics — as did some leftist historians, who are quoted by Srch (p. 208). They appreciate the film as a progressive project of bold filmmakers. It is nothing else than two sides of the same coin, because both groups reduce the film to politics.

How would the author evaluate films like *Bronenosec Potomkin* (1925) or *Triumph des Willens* (1935)? With the same approach, he could say that it represents schematic Communist propaganda, respectively tendentious record of congress of the NSDAP. Yes, it is accurate. Yet they represent something more: both films belong to milestones of the world cinema and have served as a model for next generations in terms of stylistic and narrative practices. Naturally, *Salt of the Earth* is a straightforward propaganda and empty words of quoted leftist historians about progressive project do not change anything about it. However, it seems to me naive to expect something else from loyal Communists. What is more significant, is the way how the film reaches its effect and there are many attractive questions here. No doubt, *Salt of the Earth* is unusual in the context of the film production in the United States: does the film fit into tradition of neorealism or semidocumentaries? Srch mentions both terms

without explanation, but they cannot be mixed together so easily. The first one was — not only rhetorically — atypical in the contemporary United States, while the second one became a part of conventions. What is actually representation of the New Mexico in the film? *Salt of the Earth* corresponds by no means to common Hollywood depiction of the area. Does the film resemble western or melodrama by its concept? The film was inspired by the Soviet production, but the filmmakers worked in Hollywood for a long time, where is a fundamental importance of identifiable genres; they hardly deleted that experience from their mind completely. In other words, to determine the benefit of the film — which remains beyond any doubt schematic or utopian — as marginal is premature. *Salt of the Earth* simply deserves a different perspective. If the author analyzes various aspects in the description of life of filmmakers so well, why does he reduce the film art to only one (political) aspect? Unfortunately, precisely this was done by the Communists in Hollywood as evidenced by the story of Albert Maltz (pp. 111-113).

My last remark went far beyond the original questions of the author and indicated my different approach to film art, which, of course, is not presented as the only one. With some exaggeration I might aim a similar critique at nearly all internationally respected scholars, who have written about the Hollywood blacklist, if they have attempted to analyze films. And it does not matter, whether they belong to the New Left or some conservative movement. The comparison is not accidental, because I consider the chapters about activities of the Communists in the exile as compulsory reading for serious readers on the topic around the world. Through my remarks I have by no means intended to create a negative impression on the excellent book by Daniel Srch; only to point out some questionable aspects to take them into account during the preparation of English edition. The author would certainly deserve it.

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