Cinematic Contextual History of *High Noon* (1952, dire Fred Zinnemann)

**J. M. CAPARROS-LERA**

**SERGIO ALEGRE**

*Cinema must be seen as one of the ways of ideologies of our Century because it shows very well the mentality of men and women who make films. As well as painting, literature and arts, it helps us to understand our time.* (Martin A. JACKSON)

0. T.: *High Noon*. Production: Stanley Kramer Productions, Inc./United Artists (USA,1952). Producers: Stanley Kramer & Carl Foreman. Director: Fred Zinnemann. Screenplay: Carl Foreman, from the story *The Tin Star* by John W. Cunningham. Photography: Floyd Crosby. Music: Dimitri Tiomkin. Song: *Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darlin’*, by Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington; singer: Tex Ritter. Art Director: Rudolph Sternad. Editor: Elmo Williams. Cast: Gary Cooper: (Will Kane), Thomas Mitchell (Jonas Henderson), Lloyd Bridges (Harvey Pell), Katy Jurado (Helen Ramirez), Grace Kelly (Amy Kane), Otto Kruger: (Percy Metrick), Lon Chaney, Jr. (Martin Howe), Henry Morgan (Sam Fuller), Ian MacDonald (Frank Miller), Eve McVeagh (Milfred Fuller) Harry Shannon (Cooper), Lee Van Cleef (Jack Colby), Bob Wilke (James Pierce), Sheb Wooley (Ben Miller), Tom London (Sam), Larry Blake (Gillis), Jeanne Blackford (Mrs: Henderson), Guy Beach (Fred), Virginia Christine (Mrs. Simpson), Jack Elam (Charlie), Virginia Farmer (Mrs. Fletcher), Morgan Farley (Priest), Paul Dubov (Scott), Harry Harvey (Coy), Tin Graham (Sawyer), Nolan Leary (Lewis), Tom Greenway (Ezra), Dick Elliot (Kibbee), John Doucette (Trumbull). B/W -85 min. Video distributor: Universal.

The post-war American atmosphere and the never well-seen social problem cinema -especially thriller film *noir*- are the major reasons to understand why during the Forties Hollywood was purged by the self-called the most liberal and democratic government of the world.*

Truman's executive order was published in May 12, 1947. It was a declaration of total war against communism. Nine days later, the president created The Loyalty Programme for federal employees. Automatically one million and a half public workers became suspect because it was considered disloy to be member or a supporter of any organization, association, group, movement or union of people considered totalitarian by the Attorney General. Obsession with loyalty and Americanism was so strong that even the president was accused by the Attorney General of disloyalty because of Harry Dexter White affair. It was a real paranoia: «Who is investigating the man is investigating you?», asked a pamphlet. But President Harry Truman denied to declare.

So, senator Joseph McCarthy started to investigate communist influence in the intellectual community. So did the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), with J. Parnell Thomas as chair (later he was accused of misappropriating funds). Thomas, would meet a few men he had investigated in prison when he was sent there, was a congressman of New Jersey and an opponent of the New Deal. The rest of members were John McDowell (Pennsylvania), Richard D. Vail (Illinois), Karl E. Mundt (Dakota), John S. Wood (Georgia), who was the president of HUAC in 1951, and Richard Nixon (California).
The HUAC grew out of the Dies Committee, which in the thirties had accused forty artists of disloyalty. They contacted Joseph B. Mathews—a journalist of Randolph Citizen Kane Hearts—, a violent anticommunist and the real «teacher» of McCarthy in order to investigate Hollywood. In September 25, 1947, the HUAC was a front page in all newspapers when ten Hollywood people refused to declare. Known as the Hollywood Ten, the group was formed by Edward Dmytryk, Herbert J. Biberman, directors; Alvah Bessie, Lester Cole, Ring Lerner Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Dalton Trumbo, screenwriters; and Adrian Scott, producer. Only a few of them were members of the Communist Party. But in 1949 a few of them were condemned to spend one year in jail and pay $1,000 fine.

After that, a terror atmosphere grew-up—at the same time the Korean War and Red Terror of Cold War were going on—and it was shown in films: a few suspect of communist propaganda, as well as Crossfire (1947, dir. Dmytryk), Gentlemen's Agreement (1947, dir. Elia Kazan), All the King's Men (1947, dir. Robert Rossen), No Way Out (1950, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz), and The Well (1951, co-dir. Rouse and Popkin); others as indirect attacks against the moral crisis: Key Largo (1948, dir. John Huston), Criss Cross (1949, dir. Robert Siodmak), Panic in the Streets (1950, dir. Kazan), Detective Story (William Wyler, 1951), The Big Heat (1952, dir. Fritz Lang), High Noon (1952, dir. Fred Zinnemann), Johnny Guitar (1953, dir. Nicholas Ray), Pick-up on South Street (Sam Fuller, 1953) and Salt of the Earth (1953, dir. Herbert J. Biberman).

It was a real Witch Hunt in order to push a big group of artists with a critical point of view, completely different from the normal one in Hollywood, Because of McCarthyist persecution—although this Senator from Wisconsin did not play a role in the trials—a few directors denounced their own fellows and accused them of disloyalty (two of them were Edward Dmytryk and Elia Kazan, who tried to justify himself in Viva Zapata! [1952] and On the Waterfront [1954]). Others decided to live the country; a few saw how their careers were frustrated (Jules Dassin or Abraham Lincoln Polonsky); others were sent to exile: John Barry and Joseph Losey, who emigrated to Italy and later to England where he could develop, first with pseudonym, a work that would have been cut off by McCarthyism.

Altogether at least 320 people were blacklisted and one, John Garfield, died. At the same time, friendly witness as Adolphe Menjou, Robert Taylor, Walt Disney, Robert Montgomery or Gary Cooper (who declared: «...what I have heard of it (communism) I don't like because it's indecent...») were cooperate with the HUAC. Finally, although House on Un-American Activities Committee was dissolved when McCarthy died, blacklists were used for a long time. So, between 1947 and 1956 the famous HUAC called 380 people, 60 were friendly witness, 8 answered negative, 146 did not answered and 159 did not go at all.
Film still from *High Noon*. Above: Grace Kelly, Katy Jurado and Fred Zinnemann.
Even at the beginning of the Fifties, when persecution was less strong, Oscar winning films had nothing in common with real America life. Hollywood, obsessed with the anticommunism, decided to give the Academy Awards to escapist films, entertainment movies or just movies related to Hollywood: *All About Eve* (1950, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz), *An American in Paris* (1951, dir. Vincente Minnelli), *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952, dir. Cecil B. De Mille). This film was the winner against *High Noon*, perhaps the moral winner.

*High Noon* was produced by Stanley Kramer and directed by Fred Zinnemann. Carl Foreman, who had had problems with McCarthyism, was the co-producer and screenwriter, but for a lot of critics he was the real author of the film, because he controlled it directly and hid the real meaning from Zinnemann and Gary Cooper. That's why critics think *High Noon* lost its chances for Oscar and not for artistic reasons.

Ever since Zinnemann's film has been interesting to historians and critics, many different political explanations have been written about it:

(a) It has been seen as a Pro-McCarthyism film because the evil forces (in this case the bandits, seen as a communist threat) are destroyed by a single hero, who symbolizes the virtues of America middle class.

(b) Critics has seen the argument as a symbolic allegory of U.S. foreign politic during the Korean War: although he had cleaned up the city five years ago (World War II), Sheriff Kane, who wants peace, must fight again (Korea War). His quaker wife represents pacifist and isolationist America although she feels that it is important to defend her husband's ideas. In this way *High Noon* defends the idea that war is, under special circumstances, moral and inevitable.

(c) Historians Georges A. Astre and Albert P. Hoarau say: «*High Noon* shows the slow fall of the social structure. How a real situation can destroy a community's moral code. So, when Sheriff Kane overcomes fear, he can see that it is just the expression of the community fear, worried and nervous about the unknown, ready to take any dirty and unfair action if it is necessary». This interpretation is very close to Carl Foreman's ideas: «*High Noon* is more a study of community fear than a study of personal fears», and «if you think of America political atmosphera of this time, and you know if tended me quite of lot, I was very interested in this film».

(d) A group of film critics believe Fred Zinnemann and Carl Foreman took revenge on the repression they suffered -all country suffered because trials did not stop till 1956- using metaphors to represent the fear produced by McCarthy period. For example, the name Sam Fuller -famous filmmaker because of his anticommunist ideas- was given to the most afraid man in the film. Futhermore each protagonist's behavior and the anguish of Sheriff Will Kane (the name of one of HUAC members), torn between his obligation and his self-preservation instinct, are metaphor of the attitude of the vast majority of American people during that time. Fear despite a defect few how took, alone, their own moral responsibilities.

(e) Finally, *High Noon* has been recently analyzed from a point of view fairer than the political one. *High Noon* seen as a model of Kant's moral philosophy, with four basic ideas of the film. These are: Time, Autonomy / Heteronomy, Duty or the Categorical Imperative, and Visible and Invisible Church. «Through each runs the issue of appearance and reality».

Did Zinnemann think of any of these ideas when he made this film? Which of them is nearer to this original intention? Did he just think to make a psychological western with no relation at all to America political situation during the Fifties? Have critics and scholars gone too far? In order to clear up these questions, the authors directly questioned to Fred Zinnemann. Here we re-produced his first answer by letter (Cfr. original in page 42).
Now let's see what historians Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin can tell us referring to this:

«In any case, every film has value as a document, whatever its apparent nature. This is true even if it has been made in the studio, even if it is neither narrative nor representational. Through the way in which it acts on the realm of imagination, through its transposition of the imaginary, every film lays down the relationship which bind together its author, its matter and the spectator. Besides, the unspoken, the imaginary are as much history as is History, but cinema, specially the cinema of fiction, opens a royal road towards psycho-socio-historical regions never reached by the analysis of 'documents'».

«Any film is completely impregnated by the worries, movements and wills of its time (...): so if ideology is the base of an era, where problems came from, the ways you can show and develop them, each film is a part of this ideology, it is one of the ideological expressions of its time.»

Ideas very similar to Martin A. Jackson point of view quoted at the beginning.

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2 September 1988

Dear Professor Caparros-Lera,

Thank you for your very kind letter of August 5th which I read with much interest. It gives me great pleasure to answer your questions about "HIGH NOON":

1. This is the first time I have heard of the theory that the film was intended to be an allusion to the Korean War. I can assure you that this is pure speculation.

2. The second theory originated with Carl Foreman, who saw the film as an allegory on his own experience of political persecution during the McCarthy period. Of course I respected his opinion but I did not share it. To me the story is about the character and commitment to duty of a man who is under pressure and who triumphs over his own strongest fears — which is true courage. I believe it was the first time that the hero of a Western did not symbolize the myth of a superman, forever victorious, who doesn't know the meaning of fear. Also, I thought that it was a commentary on the human condition: people who can find all kinds of excuses to avoid becoming personally involved in a dangerous crisis. As you can see, the theme I was interested in had a broader meaning than a purely political angle would have had.

I hope you will find the above comments useful and I remain, with my best regards,

Sincerely yours,

Fred Zinnemann

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Dr J.M.Caparros-Lera
Av. S.A.M. Claret,91-98,1º,4a
Barcelona 08025
SPAIN
NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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Afterwards, Sergio Alegre completed this article with two interviews: the American historian Robert A. Rosenstone, Professor of the California Institute of Technology (Pasadena), and the filmmaker Fred Zinnemann in London, on April of 1995. The authors are grateful to Prof. Rosenstone and Mr. Zinnemann's contributions.


(11) At the time the neo-realism had born in Italy and Europe would take new ways with the «new waves». Vid. DOWDY, A. The Films of the Fifties. New York: Morrow Paperback,1973.


(15) A very famous star who said that he could not set an example of a communist script because he read them by night and if he did not liked he did not finish them. Cfr. KHAN, G. Op. cit., p. 56. The author of this book was one of the unfriendly witness (The first edition was in 1948 and it is a very important testimony). See also MUSCIO, G. Lista nera a Hollywood: la caccia alle Streghe nelle anni quaranta. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979; and BRION, P. «La liste noire», Dossiers du Cinéma: Films III. Brussels: Casterman, 1975.


(18) He was a liberal and independent producer who wanted to use cinema to communicate a message to people. Cfr. SADOUL, G. Dictionnaire des Cineastes. Paris: Seuil, 1965, p. 133. Kramer worked during the Forties in Columbia Pictures and was supported by United Artists which distributed the film around the world.

(19) He went to England and was accused to «buy» the Tribunal (this idea was never proved. Cfr. CEPLAIR, L.; ENGLUND, S. Op. cit., p. 397). Carl Foreman did not write until 1960. In 1962 he won, with Michael Wilson, the Best Screenplay Academy Award with The Bridge On the River Kwai (1957, dir. David Lean), but who took the Oscar was the author of the novel, Pierre Boulle, as a reprisal against the old blacklisted.


(23) This theory was originated in the Swedish critic. Cfr. GUARNER, J. L. «Solo ante el peligro», 100 películas míticas. Barcelona: Biblioteca de La Vanguardia, 1986, p.178.


(31) Idem, p. 224.
(33) We asked him a letter dated August 5, 1988 (we did not ask about the philosophical theory because it was published in September 1988). Now we contact again with Fred Zinnemann through his secretary Linda; she has facilitated the interview. A recent study on the Zinnemann's films is in Film Criticism, Vol. XVIII, No.3 (Spring 1994), and Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Fall 1994), special double issue on Fred Zinnemann. Vid. also GOLDAU, A.; PRINZLER, H. H.; SINYARD, N. Zinnemann, Berlin: Filme, 1986; and, specially, his Fred Zinnemann. An Autobiography. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1992.