



Cover:

Pat O'Neill

Untitled (shades)

1974

35 mm film mounted in glass, straight-grain Douglas fir wood frame

23 x 17 inches

Table of Contents

Anna Shechtman: *Introduction*

Daphne Brooks: *“Ain’t Got No, I Got Life”: #OscarsSoWhite & the Problem of Women Musicians on Film*

Jerome Christensen: *Pure as Jesus and Cunning as Satan*

K. Austin Collins: *Stakes Is High: On Spike Lee’s Chi-Raq*

J.D. Connor: *Making Things Right: Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*

Derek Nystrom: *Of Christians and Communists: Joel and Ethan Coen’s Hail, Caesar!*

— INTRODUCTION —
Hollywood's Self-Critique:
Five Essays on Race and Class at the Movies

Chris Rock's monologue at this year's Academy Awards — in which he called Hollywood “sorority racist” and the event itself the “White People's Choice Awards” — was deceptively consistent with the industry's own self-critique featured in many of this year's top-grossing and critically acclaimed films. Hollywood, it seems, has learned to parry generic attacks on the industry's sexism, racism, and classism with genre films that keep the system well oiled and, perhaps, the critics at bay.

The five essays featured in this collection concern films that seek absolution for the industry's consistently unsavory politics by addressing Hollywood's politically incorrect history in their stories or backstories. Indeed, these are mostly historical films that depict racial protest and class warfare from the perspective of an industry that continually finds itself on the wrong side of American history when it comes to issues of race and class.

Jerome Christensen writes about *Trumbo*, a biopic about Hollywood's most successful blacklisted screenwriter, and a film whose producers nonetheless obfuscate its own shady production history. J.D. Connor finds in the latest *Star Wars* film an attempt to redeem the franchise's whitewashed universe and its critically panned prequel trilogy. K. Austin Collins welcomes Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* — a film that bypassed the studio system for Amazon Studios — into the #blacklivesmatter movement. Derek Nystrom takes readers on a dazzling tour of the political and filmic intertexts of *Hail, Caesar!*, the Coen brothers' latest satire of Hollywood's red-baiting, blacklisting “Golden Age.” And Daphne Brooks brings together two Oscar-nominated documentaries about female singers, *Amy* and *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, densely packing the history of black women musicians on screen into a polemic of depthless wit.

These five essays are written for and by movie-lovers. When the genius of the Hollywood system delights and disappoints as publicly and systematically as it has this year, we at *LARB* have answered genius with genius, welcoming these authors whose mastery of film history, theory, and Hollywood's own self-critique is beyond reproach.

— Anna Shechtman, Assistant Editor, Film

“Ain’t Got No, I Got Life” : #OscarsSoWhite & the Problem of Women Musicians on Film

Daphne Brooks

*Then what have I got
Why am I alive anyway?
Yeah, what have I got
Nobody can take away*

— Nina Simone

An hour into Liz Garbus’s 2015 documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, the virtuosic musician and black freedom struggle activist delivers one of her trademark, wholly original rewrites of someone else’s song. In her cover versions of music from the 1967 countercultural musical *Hair*, Simone yokes together two of that show’s signature numbers, “Ain’t Got No” and “I Got Life” to build a new black anthem — one that can stand alongside her self-authored protest songs from that decade (“Mississippi Goddam,” “Four Women”). It encompasses a full range of emotions and sociopolitical messages, the emotions and messages she so masterfully translated into a vast repertoire of recordings and live performances, spanning a career of more than four decades. Sitting in at the piano with swinging pendulum earrings, a short ’fro, and a black, strapless crocheted number that reveals the smooth contours of her bare shoulders, the brownness of her body holding center stage, Simone moves with pointed contemplation through one song’s tale of desolation, alienation, and disenfranchisement (“Ain’t got no home / ain’t got no shoes / ain’t got no money / ain’t got no class”) into a different song entirely, one that is a jubilant affirmation of embodied self-possession (“Then what have I got? / Why am I alive anyway? [...] I got my arms, got my hands / I’ve got life / I’ve got my freedom”).

It is a performance that stages a Black Power call-and-response moment to ring in the “Black is Beautiful” era, and under Liz Garbus’s sharp direction, the footage is framed by archival interviews of the artist, decked out in an elegant wide-brimmed hat, articulating the crisis of a people robbed

of their history and expressing the urgent “need to promote this feeling [...] ‘Who am I? Where do I come from? Do I really like me? If I am black and beautiful [...] I don’t care who says what [...]’”

Garbus is a sophisticated storyteller and her Academy Award–nominated documentary uses performances, in part, to construct a compelling narrative about the artist who would come to be known as The High Priestess of Soul. As she told me during a visit to Yale University last spring to screen the film for my undergraduate lecture class on black women in popular music culture, Simone’s performances were crucial to the arc of the story that *What Happened, Miss Simone?* aims to tell. Culled from more than 100 hours of never-before-heard audio tapes, rare concert footage, and excerpts from the artist’s diaries and private letters, the film has been celebrated by critics and fans alike for primarily giving us “Nina Simone in her own words,” while making economic use of several key and (in the case of Simone’s abusive ex-husband Andy Stroud) controversial talking heads.

In the season of #OscarsSoWhite, which, it must be noted, repeats itself every year — at least in this middle-aged viewer’s memory since I began watching in 1978 as a *Star Wars* fangirl who’d fallen hopelessly in love with the movies — *What Happened, Miss Simone?* is an outlier work of cinema in a sea of racially homogeneous nominees. Although made by a white, third-wave feminist filmmaker who majored in semiotics at Brown, it nonetheless stars an African-American female genius musician who was raised as a classically trained child prodigy pianist in the Jim Crow South, and who would evolve into a world-renowned cosmopolitan performer recognized for her enormous originality and her unapologetic commitment to weaving black radical tradition politics into the fabric of her sound. This she did, as the film reveals, while simultaneously battling violent patriarchy on the home front. To put it in pop cultural parlance, the details of Nina Simone’s life may read to some like a dead serious, sky-high-stakes version of *Shonda Thursdays*, that roster of shows in which powerful, brilliant, extraordinarily “imperfect” women — and especially women of color — repeatedly choose their work and themselves over the lovers in their lives. Show me another nominated film like that anywhere in the nearly 100-year history of the Academy (and spare me the shaky *Lady Sings the Blues* argument).

In this second year in which social media put the Academy on blast for its chronic inclusion problems, calling attention to an all-white roll call of major category nominees and the extra sting of a white screenwriting duo and white superstar actor nominated for two films that channel the energy and passion of the Black Lives Matter movement (*Straight Out of Compton* and *Creed*, respectively), the fact that Garbus’s film is a contender should have made at least a few headlines, but it has curiously remained something of a footnote this season. (Here it might be worth noting as well the lack of discussion about *The Martian*, starring the diversity-obtuse Matt Damon — a conventional Ridley Scott adventure film, for sure, but one that ironically features an unprecedented number of men of color bucking convention in supporting roles as scientists and space explorers: Chiwetel Ejiofor, Benedict Wong, Michael Peña, and Donald Glover as the superwonk whiz kid who solves an astronomical puzzle and brings the hero home.) Yet the astonishing statistics regarding the types of black performances that are awarded Oscars — recently revealed by Brandon K. Thorp in *The New York Times* — underscore what many of us have long recognized as the severity of a situation in which complex black female cultural figures are rarely, if ever, the subject of full-length feature

films. In his insightful piece, Thorp reports:

In the history of the Oscars, 10 black women have been nominated for best actress, and nine of them played characters who are homeless or might soon become so. (The exception is Viola Davis, for the 2011 drama “The Help.”)

[...]

No black woman has ever received a best-actress nomination for portraying an executive or even a character with a college degree.

[...]

All 10 performances for which black women have received best-actress nominations involve poor or lower-income characters, and half of those are penniless mothers

[...]

Seven of the 10 best-actress nominees played characters with absent or incarcerated husbands, boyfriends, or fathers. And six of the characters suffer physical abuse, with five of them being raped.

Why *What Happened, Miss Simone?* has flown beneath the radar of the Oscar controversy has, most likely, as much to do with the fact that the documentary film category rarely garners much mainstream attention (save for those years when Michael Moore was lighting a fire under the nation’s ass) as it does with the fact that Garbus’s film has been overshadowed in that category by another bio-doc about a female musician far better known to the masses in contemporary popular culture — and one who suffered a spectacular and tragic decline still fresh in the public’s memory. Asif Kapadia’s *Amy*, about the retro-soul phenom Amy Winehouse who died in 2011, is, as we turn towards Oscar weekend, the odds-on favorite to win the prize for best documentary. The ironies involving a film about a white soul singer beating out a film about an African-American female musician dubbed by many to be one of the greatest artists of her generation clearly abound. But a win for *Amy* is also a shame because, as good as Kapadia’s film is — a real forward-reaching exercise in cinematic biography built by and out of our digital and cyberspace cultures — Garbus’s work is historic, a milestone in both the genre of music biopics (both dramatic and documentary films) and in the thriving scholarly field of what has become known to some as “Nina Simone studies” in the world of academia.

□

There are those of us who have been waiting for a Nina film for many years now, dreaming and lobbying for potential casting coups (as I did back in 2011 when I approached actor-director Forest Whitaker during his visit to Princeton and begged — literally begged him — to find a way to get a Nina biopic made with Viola Davis!). At the time, Mr. Whitaker very kindly heard me out and noted that a project was already in the works at that time with Mary J. Blige. That project, directed by Cynthia Mort, as many people now know, has grown in infamy in subsequent years as Blige dropped out before shooting began and Dominican ingénue Zoe Saldana was recast as Simone to blistering backlash, including an internet petition aimed at stopping the shoot. The

debates surrounding Saldana's casting were almost entirely limited to questions of colorism and racial authenticity politics (e.g., the question of how an Afro-Latina several shades lighter than Simone could "accurately portray" an artist for whom blackness and her own dark-skinned womanhood were central to both her music and her intersectional politics). The leaked-to-the-internet photos of Saldana blackfaced-up and donning a prosthetic wide nose, coupled with the actress's unsophisticated remarks about racial formations in American culture, only fanned the flames of outrage. For what it's worth, my beef with Saldana's casting (and Blige's, for that matter) was always primarily a question of the nature of her chops. Simone's contralto singing combined with her classical training, her avant-garde sonic experimentalism, and her commitment to agitprop performance politics demanded both an actor and a filmmaker who could summon the (Ralph) Ellisonian "lower frequencies" of Nina Simone's iconic character, a lower affective acting register, if you will. Wherever you may stand on the matter, the finished film, cursed as it may be, has yet to see the light of day, as *Mort* remains entangled in legal squabbles with her production company.

Nonetheless, Nina Simone is currently having a long overdue "moment," as NPR referred to it last fall — one which has given us, among other things, a tribute album featuring Lauryn Hill and other artists; the ubiquity of her music in soundtracks and commercials for everything from cars to network crime drama; the invocation of her sound and symbolism in the work of contemporary artists ranging from Kanye West, John Legend, and Talib Kweli to alternative musicians Feist and Peaches; and the upcoming release of yet another documentary directed by Jeff Lieberman. Meanwhile, all of the kvetching over *Mort*'s biopic, while seeming to deflect attention away from Garbus's film as it was being made, may have actually helped to clear a space for its welcome reception as fans demanded a "truer" version of Nina on film.

□

Having been nominated previously for an Oscar for her first documentary, *The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998) — an early and important contribution to new millennial prison studies and prison reform activism — Garbus is, in certain ways, an ideal figure to helm this project, since she is no stranger to examining black lives under duress or to making bold, political statements as a filmmaker. The first feature-length documentary on Simone to be released since her death at the age of 70 in 2003, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* entered into the fray on the festival circuit early last year, debuting at Sundance to a warm reception and subsequently premiering on Netflix in early summer 2015, becoming that studio's first documentary film release.

Beyond its significance as a marker of the expanding cultural relevance of that streaming juggernaut, it cannot be overemphasized what a significant contribution this film makes to representations of women in popular music culture. If one considers the pure scarcity and the uneven quality of feature films about female musicians, and women of color musicians in particular, throughout the history of modern cinema, the gravity of what Garbus's film aims to achieve is striking. Consider the precedents: the fictionalized tearjerker melodrama *A Star Is Born* (both the 1954 Judy Garland remake and the 1976 Barbra Streisand remix), the pseudobiographical jazz or rock star self-destruction epics brought to life by Diana Ross (1972's *Lady Sings the Blues*) and Bette Midler (1979's *The Rose*), the earnest tragedy-to-triumph tales of Loretta Lynn (1980's *Coal Miner's*

Daughter) and Tina Turner (1993's *What's Love Got To Do With It*), the memorial tribute tenor of J. Lo's turn as "Selena" (1997's film of the same name), and the hyperbolically fictionalized tale of The Supremes (2006's *Dreamgirls*). True, Reese Witherspoon picked up the gold in 2005 for her portrayal of country pioneer June Carter Cash ... in a film marketed as the story of "the rise" of husband Johnny. Alex Keshishian's self-consciously postmodern homage to Madonna, *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991), is arguably the most significant, metacritical big-screen examination of a pop musician, woman or man, that we have to date. And director Gina Prince-Bythewood's really fine and woefully underrecognized fictional tale *Beyond The Lights* (2014) is an equally sophisticated take on a female musician's quest for artistic integrity.

The smaller screen has had a better track record at bringing narratives of female pop musicians to fruition, while nonetheless cleaving to *Empire*-style soap conventions — especially in the new millennium and in the wake of the late 1990s *Behind the Music* phenomenon (see, for instance, network fare like 2000's *Livin' for Love: The Natalie Cole Story*, which featured the recently departed singer as herself, and campy basic cable entries like *CrazySexyCool: The TLC Story*, the truly challenged *Aaliyah: The Princess of R&B* from 2014, and the slightly more admirable *Whitney* from 2015). *Pariah* director Dee Rees's *Bessie* (2015), starring Queen Latifah as "The Empress of the Blues," marked a gigantic leap in stylishness for these sorts of films, coupling HBO highbrow production values with black feminist queer aesthetics. The nature of the professional relationship — a mentorship-turned-rivalry-turned-friendship — between two black women musicians (Mo'Nique's Ma Rainey and Latifah's Bessie) has arguably never been brought to the screen with the kind of nuance and detail that Rees summoned in this project.

Bessie arrived the same year as both *What Happened, Miss Simone?* and *Amy* and in the midst of what is arguably a new boom in women musician documentaries: Beyonce's savvy, enchanting, new media juggernaut *Life Is But A Dream* (2013); *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker* (2014), which traces the life of the Jewish blues shouter; this year's *Roberta Flack: Killing Me Softly* from Showtime; *Mavis!* from HBO; and the soon-to-be-released *Miss Sharon Jones!*, which follows the hardest-working woman in retro-soul's recovery from cancer and return to the concert circuit. Even the Queen of Soul was momentarily in on the act — apparently against her wishes — when the long-withheld footage of her pathbreaking *Amazing Grace* concert album sessions, recorded at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles in 1972 and shot by Sidney Lumet, was set to finally be shown at last year's Toronto film festival ... until the powers that be pulled the plug.

The new fascination with black women musicians in documentary has clearly gained traction in the wake of the box office and Oscar success of *20 Feet From Stardom* (2013), director Morgan Neville's feel-good, putative reparations tale of the backup singers (mostly women and mostly of color) who've supplied the vocal depth and power for rock's Jurassic luminaries. Short on feminist scholarly voices (like Maureen Mahon, who's been writing about Stones backup legend Merry Clayton for years now) and long on the loving words and music of white men (Bruce Springsteen, Sting) who benefitted from the women who sonically supported them, it is a film that reproduces the power dynamics it ostensibly sets out to unseat. The voices of critics like David Ritz, Warren Zanes, and Todd Boyd loom large, while former Ikette Claudia Lennear is

featured in a clip discussing her sexual commodification in a way that reads like lurid sexual tell-all. The sentimental arc of the comeback narrative (in the case of Darlene Love) and the striving aspirant (in the case of Judith Hill) shape the direction of the film. Nary a vocalist is asked about her technique, her style, or her influences.

□

It goes without saying, then, that what none of these works do what Garbus's film does so eloquently, and with a kind of beauty and reverence for the music, is to use Simone's live performances as critical narration and as thematic arcs in the film's trajectory. Garbus is unafraid of allowing us to live in these sometimes intense, extended scenes of Simone's performances, where her notoriously volatile (at times passionate, playful, and affectionate, and other times combative) relationship with her audience and her tremendous commitment to technical and artistic excellence are on display. These performances operate as a kind of metanarrative voice in the story of Nina Simone's ascent as a musician and the battles that she waged both publicly and privately to maintain control of her artistic autonomy, her political integrity, and her fundamental personhood as an African-American woman on the frontlines of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Take, for instance, the opening, which lingers on Simone taking the stage at the 1976 Montreux jazz festival concert and declaring both her return to performing after a long hiatus as well as her imminent departure from the jazz festival circuit ("after which I shall graduate to a higher class, I hope, and I hope you will come with me [...]"). Here we are invited to listen closely to a musician documenting the aesthetic labors of her career. After a long, deep bow and an extended pause looking out into the darkness of the audience, Simone takes her seat at the piano and refers to her first recording from 1958, announcing that she and her ensemble will "start from the beginning, which was about a little girl. Her name was Blue [...]" Simone in performance thus initiates the narrative journey on which we will now embark.

Or consider the tumultuous gravitas of her reading of "For All We Know," a clip taken from early in her career, which serves as a complement to her devoted guitarist Al Schackman's reflections on the first time he played with Nina. "It was like we had a telepathic relationship," Schackman muses, while Simone likewise offers her own observations about Schackman's talents and the necessary skills needed to keep up with her: "He has perfect pitch which means that no matter what key I'm in he's able to adapt [...] because I do that all the time. I change the key that I'm in [...]" Simone's voiceovers enable her to extemporize on her craft with precision and clarity. "What I was interested in," she observes, "was conveying an emotional message, which means using everything you've got in you [...] [S]ometimes I sound like gravel, and sometimes I sound like coffee and cream [...]" This and other potent performances of songs such as "Backlash Blues," "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" and a riveting, late-in-life rendition of "My Baby Just Cares for Me" to close the film amount to something of the sonic metalanguage of the film, the other frequency on which we hear and see an artist choosing to "reflect the [political as well as personal] times."

Garbus's careful placement of the footage in conversation with the commentary of others allows for Simone, the musician, to constantly build and rebuild what Josh Kun and Alex Vazquez might each call a "sonic place of dwelling" for herself as the voices of her loving, conflicted, and candid daughter

Lisa, family friends such as Ambassador Attallah Shabazz and Ilyasah Shabazz (the daughters of Malcolm X), European caregivers (whose role in returning her to the stage late in her career remains a source of controversy), and her morally compromised ex, Stroud, each contemplate her mental health, the price of fame, and the toll that liberation activism took on her spirit.

For many viewers and critics, the late Stroud's presence in the film, and the posthumous use of interview footage with an avowed wife beater who openly distanced himself from Black Power activism and encouraged his mate to do the same, is a nonstarter — a narrative choice that potentially re-objectifies Simone. Some detractors have critiqued the sparingly used yet nevertheless confusing and unnecessary black-and-white reenactment scenes meant to convey images of her childhood in the church. And others have pointed to the absence of crucial songs in the artist's repertoire (most notably "Four Women," Simone's intersectionality protest anthem) as a significant oversight, although Garbus has argued that copyright clearances forced her team to have to leave certain songs by the wayside. One esteemed colleague complained to me about the choice to feature veteran male critics (Stanley Crouch) and women whose memories of Simone are rooted in their childhood (the Shabazz sisters), instead of black feminist scholarly voices who have published research on Simone (full disclosure: I am one of those voices). This particular colleague was especially troubled by the emphasis on Simone's mental health issues and the frank and unvarnished descriptions of an abusive and neglectful mother made by daughter Lisa (who served as an executive producer on the film as well). "Take your issues somewhere else," my colleague put it bluntly. She wished for a film that could be first and foremost about the music, really living inside of it and taking apart the brilliance of what Simone accomplished in the recording studio and onstage each night.

Point well taken. But at the end of the day, I am swayed by the words of my students who were visibly and palpably moved by the film in class, some 18 hours after the screening. "I wish," said my student Eli, "we'd had films like this for all of the women we're exploring in this course." Her words cut to the heart of the problem in cultural representations of women musicians, a problem that scholars such as Farah Griffin, Gayle Wald, and others have done much work to address over the past two decades. Until recently, the cards have been overwhelmingly stacked against black women musicians telling their own uncompromised, amanuensis-free stories — and importantly, telling stories that place craft at the center of their life ambitions and concerns. While white female rock musicians have been cranking out compelling and sometimes infuriating memoirs of late (see Patti Smith's celebrated twin oeuvres, Kim Gordon's *Girl in a Band*, Carrie Brownstein's *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, and the unfortunate Chrissie Hynde autobiography, *Reckless*), the voices of black women musicians have historically been distorted or muted on the page. One would have to look to something like the little known yet mesmerizing 1988 oral history of legendary jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams ("Rhythm Section" in Max Jones's anthology *Talking Jazz*) to find a text about a woman and her passionate pursuit of a life in music driven primarily by the artist herself.

The reasons for this have everything to do with institutional racism and sexism, twin pillars of American culture, which are finally making their way into the popular consciousness and vocabulary. The mainstreaming of this discourse owes its thanks, in part, to a broadening new media commons

where young, progressive thinkers and grassroots activists have larger platforms on which to shape national conversations, creating the conditions for movements to take shape and pressuring white rappers to record songs about reckoning with their racial and gender entitlement. But long before the era of Macklemore's "White Privilege II," the sociopolitical and cultural structures that obscured the histories and lives of black women in the music industry were subjects few gave a damn about. That's how blues women like the badass and largely lost-to-history guitar duo Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wiley have remained egregiously neglected for more than 80 years, despite the fact that they rocked a handful of hypnotic blues tunes that rivaled the work of Charley Patton, Son House, and Skip James.

□

I said as much last fall when I gave a lecture on those two artists at UC Berkeley and then felt the full weight of history bearing down on me as I jumped in an Uber and sped over the Bay Bridge to make it into the San Francisco Contemporary Jewish Museum before closing time that day. I was there to catch the dual Amy Winehouse exhibits being shown: *A Family Portrait* and *You Know I'm No Good*. The jarring contrast between talking for an hour and a half about how much we don't know about two African-American women artists who made remarkable music but whose precarious lives were caught in the throes of Jim Crow and an exploitative culture industry, on the one hand, and the wealth of memorabilia, archival objects, and media documentation of a millennial white woman pop star, on the other, was enough to make me hyperventilate. But let's not get it twisted. Winehouse suffered enormously in her own time, in her own historical moment even as (to cue up the Macklemore) she built her short, meteoric rise on the backs of the Geeshies and Elvies, those women who supplied the blues DNA for our modern pop music lexicon.

Kapadia's *Amy* is much better at exploring the suffering Amy rather than the "white privilege" Amy in his documentary, which, especially in its first half hour or so, presents itself as something of a companion piece to *A Family Portrait* — in spite of the fact that Amy's father Mitch, speaking on behalf of the family, ultimately distanced the Winehouses from the film after they had initially given their blessing to the project. Like the exhibit, the first quarter of the documentary resituates the singer in her North London neighborhood with friends and family and sans the '60s-girl-group-gone-punk beehive, tats, and Liz Taylor Cleopatra look that quickly became her trademark when her breakthrough album *Back to Black* dropped in 2006. I've written about Winehouse elsewhere, at the height of the mania surrounding both her sound (Mark Ronson and Salaam Remi-produced retro-soul for the hip-hop generation) and her vexing iconicity (black women's vocal aesthetics all wrapped up in white socially transgressive womanhood). What was immediately so moving to me about the footage that Kapadia offers is that, as many have argued, it reminds us of the other sides of a woman whose substance abuse and increasingly inscrutable public behavior had effectively obscured them. Just as *A Family Portrait* takes us into the home of Amy's childhood and follows the archival footprint of her journey through theater school (with a display of her audition essay) into the National Youth Jazz Orchestra and onto a major label record deal, so too does the film, early on, make poignant use of home movies and digital documentation of quotidian adolescent and young adult life, as Winehouse developed her chops and pursued her career as a live musician and recording artist.

This is, hands down, what is most startling and intriguing about *Amy* and what its first 30 minutes, in a sense, do slightly more consistently than *What Happened, Miss Simone?* The former showcases a female musician's deep investment in cultivating her craft. Now, to be fair, musician biopics are often wanting in this category (does anyone recall *Ray* engaging in a detailed exploration of the ways that Charles invented a new genre of American popular music?). 2014's *Godfather of Soul* odyssey, *Get On Up!* and last year's Brian Wilson saga *Love & Mercy* are stronger-than-usual offerings in this genre, in part because of the ways that each pays attention to the drama and wonder of each artist's music and the music-making process. Unsurprisingly, women musicians' biopics and documentaries have a greater void to fill given pop music criticism's historically poor track record when it comes to examining the sonic aspirations of women artists. *Amy* immediately offers us a snapshot of an artist coming of age and growing into her music. Winehouse and her friends and family have the 21st-century middle-class privilege to document themselves in ways that no previous generation had before them, and thus it is possible to track her in her teens, so young and fresh-faced, riding in her manager's car looking wide-eyed and thoughtful and anticipatory about the future, auditioning in a cardigan and jeans and with guitar in hand for 19 Management Records, singing a version of her first single ("Stronger Than Me" off her 2003 debut album *Frank*) in a dark, intimate London club.

In those heady, early-2000s years when Winehouse was on the cover of every tabloid, few were commenting on her shrewd songwriting aesthetics — an amalgam of hip-hop swagger, big emotion, and jazz diva melodrama — but Kapadia smartly includes the lyrics to her songs in subtitle for nearly all of the performances in the film. Some of that may be due to the fact that Winehouse had notoriously perfected a sometimes indecipherable "slur" in her delivery, but the effect of being able to see the discursive bent of her narratives is to remind us of the central role that she played in producing multiple dimensions of her repertoire. Within moments of the film's opening, too, we are given a list of influences (Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Tony Bennett) who shaped her own approach to vocal performance. Like the Jewish Museum's display of her Regal guitar and her tracklist for a mixtape entitled "Songs on My Chill-Out Tape" (my favorite object in the exhibit, by far: a combination of tracks by Ella, Sinatra, Luscious Jackson, Patti Labelle, Curtis Mayfield, Pearl Jam, and others), this is a reminder of a female musician's aesthetic desires and pleasures and cultural knowledges often overlooked in gender-biased jazz and pop music criticism about women artists.

What *Amy* is not good at — in fact, what it overlooks altogether — is historicizing Winehouse's sound and the singer as a pop phenomenon. No explicit interrogation of why a North London Jewish girl would find solace in emulating a range of black women's signature vocal styles — from Billie Holiday to Lauryn Hill — is ever attempted, which is not all that surprising given the persistently present absence of recognizing black musicians' foundational and lasting impact on our mainstream pop world (see especially the 2015 Grammys telecast featuring Hozier and Annie Lennox performing "Put a Spell On You," or see the current Adelemania).

One of the pieces in the second exhibit at the SF Jewish Museum, *You Know I'm No Good*, lingers on this question in the work of artist Jennie Ottinger in her piece, which is partially derived from some of my scholarship on Winehouse (but without my participation in the production of

that work). It should be noted that my interest in this aspect of Winehouse's career — her deep indebtedness to particular and often histrionic constructions of “blackness” as sound, style, and social comportment — is fueled largely by a longing for richer, more sophisticated, and more detailed examinations of the ways in which “blackness” and “whiteness” mutually constitute each other sonically in popular music culture. If critics can move beyond pure panic and defensiveness about the “A” word — about appropriation and what's owed black folks for the unmatched cultural contributions they made to modernity (while also finally and seriously answering that question straight up) — then we might be able to say something more substantial about, for instance, the meaning of “blackness” for one white girl “of a different color.” That white girl Amy's ancestors, the Winehouses, the exhibit curators speculate, survived the pogroms, resettled in the East End to raise families who would eventually raise postwar families in the London suburbs while bringing grand- and great-grandchildren like Amy back to the old neighborhoods to “listen to vivid stories of their family's history and immigrant past.”

Yet that is not the story that Kapadia is trying to tell here, and I lamented this fact outside the theater in New Haven where my partner and I saw *Amy* on opening night last summer. I was accosted by a sister with a strong (yet unidentifiable) European-sounding accent who told me that if I “were to ever visit England” (I had) then I “would know that we don't think of race that way over there.” I had a number of qualms with her argument, but how I wished for the content of our debate to have made its way into the film.

Instead, the bulk of *Amy*'s content shares disturbing similarities with the saddest and most troubling parts of Garbus's film. Close friends and confidantes, who agreed, after some coaxing, to work with Kapadia on this project, recount with grief and regret the details of Winehouse's rapid decline. We come to discover that, like Simone, Winehouse struggled with mental health issues as well as a horrific eating disorder, which plagued her from her teens forward and into her celebrity years. Most chillingly, like Simone as well, she found herself in the throes of an abusive relationship with music video runner Blake Fielder-Civil, one that was intensely addictive, leading to marriage and an even harder run with drugs. Kapadia includes the clammy, hushed, and creepy voice of Fielder-Civil explaining away their codependencies (“I liked to sabotage myself, and I think Amy liked to sabotage herself [...]”) and making cold, judgmental allusions to his lover's sexuality (“I used to ask her why she was promiscuous and why she likes to have sex like a man [...]”) in ways that echo Stroud's haughty statements about his ex-wife (“Basically, she had no control over her emotions, and sex dominated her [...]”). Both films try to make use of personal writing (diary entries and audio interviews in the case of Simone, handwritten song lyrics in the case of Winehouse) to counter the suffocating effects of each man's narration in these moments, but both films ultimately suffer from collapsing at these junctures into a kind of invasiveness that threatens with its own form of violent reification.

Some have argued that that violence permeates *Amy*'s focus on tracking the decline of its subject in such spectacular detail. It is perhaps both a circumstance of tragedy and a question of convenience for the filmmakers that Winehouse's ascent as a global pop superstar and her descent into fatal substance abuse coincided with the birth of the iPhone and the rapid expansion and ubiquitous use of digital media to capture every aspect of celebrity life onstage and off of it. The dense accumulation

and meticulous dissemination of photographs and video clips over such a short period of time — from the release of *Back to Black* in 2006 to her death in 2011 — is a testament to the centrality of new technologies in the rapid production of fame, as well as the role that these new technologies will continue to play in reshaping our archival knowledge about pop musicians. Kapadia navigates this archive with skill and care, even if he also lets that archive run away with the story he sets out to tell. As is the case with Garbus's film, the narrative swings like Simone's *Hair* anthem between articulating the beauty of a woman who reveled in the joys of a life lived in music ("What have I got / Nobody can take it away") and the fragility of a life that fell apart in spite of the enormous power of that music.

In the end, it might be worth noting once more the poignancy of Winehouse's mixtape tracklist and its ability to call attention to the need for a fuller and deeper story of her life as well as Simone's. Nestled between the Mickey Mouse Club's "Mickey Mouse March" and Julie London's "I Should Care" lies track #9, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." One imagines a bit of footage that we don't have on a film, a clip that we can only dream of: Winehouse slipping on the headphones and swaying to the High Priestess's 1964 recording of that slow-tempo declaration of self-worth and narrative autonomy while we, the audience, try to answer a new and much-needed Bechdel test question for films about women musicians — is it about their craft or is it about something else?

□

Daphne A. Brooks is professor of African American Studies, Theater Studies, and American Studies at Yale University.

Pure as Jesus and Cunning as Satan

Jerome Christensen

Gerald Horne concludes his comprehensive, fair-minded 2001 study *Class Struggle in Hollywood 1930 – 1950* by quoting a leftist release from 1940: “One movie that Hollywood has never produced and probably never will is the story of its own unionization. Any number of producers would be placed under physicians’ care if the idea were seriously suggested.” Seventy-five years later, *Trumbo* — a notable biopic of the screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, directed by Jay Roach — ends that record of omission. But with an asterisk.

Trumbo was one of the stalwarts of the Hollywood communist left in the 1940s, a longtime member of the Screenwriters Guild (SWG), and a spokesman in 1946 and 1947 during the labor struggle between the militant Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), whose leaders had long been cozy with the studios. Herbert Sorrell led the CSU out on strike in the spring of 1946, and after six months, the strike exploded into a street fight between CSU members, replacement workers, and hired strikebreakers. Although the CSU eventually “won” the strike, in September of 1946 the studio heads colluded with IATSE to reassign CSU’s skilled craftsmen into journeymen jobs. Dogged by charges of involvement with known Communists like Trumbo, Sorrell led his members out for one last time in 1946, but after striking for 13 months, he accepted the defeat of his financially impoverished union and told them to return to work. Emboldened by this crushing victory for the studios and the passage of the pro-business Taft-Hartley Act, the anticommunist crusaders in Hollywood intensified their attacks on leftists.

I have added an asterisk, then, because the union struggle *is* in the background of *Trumbo*, but it is only referred to elliptically. Unions do not matter much in this post-union film for post-union times. It begins with a montage of posters of films that Trumbo (played to perfection by

Bryan Cranston) had scripted and awards he had won superimposed on a close-up of him at his typewriter, accompanied by the percussive fury of his two-fingered attack. The montage credits him as a screenwriter; the shot of him clacking at the keys of his machine noisily insists that he is a worker. The scene economically establishes the tension between the celebrated writer who has reaped the rewards of a well-paid occupation and the pieceworking laborer (or prisoner or slave), who is intent on meeting a deadline set for him by those who will soon attempt to destroy his livelihood and deprive him of his ability to support his family. The opening montage dissolves from Trumbo's typescript to a soundstage where it is being filmed at Metro — a noir directed by the conservative Sam Wood (John Getz) and starring Edward G. Robinson (Michael Stuhlbarg). The scene on the soundstage ends with Wood's denunciation of Trumbo as a "swimming pool Soviet," to which Trumbo equably replies, "The strike is over, Sam. You won." The enraged Wood retorts, "It's never over with you people." And it's definitely not over for Wood, whose side may have won the union battle but who remains armed and ready for war.

The violent jurisdictional struggles between the IATSE and the CSU, then, are evoked as a dim backstory in a fast-paced narrative that leaves unionization as a subject behind to feature the irreconcilable antagonism between two very different kinds of organizations. On the right is the ferociously anticommunist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), which had been formed in 1944. Led by Sam Wood, the MPA has been strengthened by the visible and vocal support of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the IATSE leader Roy Brewer, and industry executives such as Walt Disney and Jack Warner. On the left is a group of 19 employees of various studios, who, with a few exceptions, are current or former communist members of the Screen Writers Guild. Fingering by FBI plants and MPA informants, their futures are imperiled and their fates are bonded in 1947 by the subpoenas they each receive from the desk of J. Parnell Thomas (James DuMont), ambitious Republican chair of the resurrected House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), summoning them to testify regarding suspected affiliations with the Communist Party. The hearings end with contempt of Congress convictions and jail sentences for the so-called Hollywood Ten: Trumbo and nine other blacklisted screenwriters.

We are first introduced to Congressman Thomas and to the names of his Hollywood targets, as all Americans were, in a newsreel reeking with praise for the committee's patriotic mission of sterilizing the studios. With commentary provided by the gossip columnist and notorious red-baiter Hedda Hopper (Helen Mirren), the newsreel is screened before a feature at a Los Angeles theater with the Trumbo family in attendance. There is no need to wait for a Gallup poll to test the impact of Hopper's campaign. While leaving the theater with his family, Trumbo is assaulted by a Coke-wielding patriot who has been primed to recognize the commie in "our" midst.

During a subsequent strategy session of the subpoenaed witnesses at Edward G. Robinson's home, Trumbo, who has the floor (he's a man who always has the floor and rarely yields it), advises his fellow unfriendlies, "Let's not demonize people we don't really know." It's good advice that Trumbo himself forgets at the HUAC hearing, when, having been dismissed after his testimony of refusals, he shouts out that "this is the beginning of an American concentration camp — for writers." That sounds merely provocative until we get to know the zealous Thomas a little better at a news conference where he promises "to introduce legislation so in the event of a national emergency,

all Communists will be sent to internment camps.” This would seem to justify demonization, except that Thomas’s announcement is quickly followed by a whispered warning that the government has discovered that the beneficiaries of his nepotism have paid no taxes on their salaries. Very soon the once fearsome, gaveling demon will complete his transformation into a pathetic jailbird.

It’s probably fair to say that “don’t demonize” is not advice that any successful Hollywood screenwriter can afford to take fully seriously. That applies to John McNamara, the screenwriter of *Trumbo*, who, in the last stages of his composition, apparently felt the need for a serviceable villain other than John Wayne. Wayne was villainous, of course. A veteran of multiple World War films, he served as an obstreperous and super-patriotic president of the MPA. When leafleting an MPA meeting, Trumbo confronts Wayne and exposes him as a draft-deferring, celluloid warrior. But Wayne’s immunity from opprobrium is dramatized during a film screening at a Kentucky prison, where Trumbo was incarcerated for contempt of Congress. During an evening of entertainment, the hero of the 1949 *Sands of Iwo Jima* (but not the 1945 Battle of Iwo Jima) is cheered by all the inmates except Trumbo. John Wayne is John Wayne. But Hedda Hopper is not. The filmmakers of *Trumbo* apparently felt that they knew Hopper well enough to demonize her. A former second-tier actress who became Hollywood’s most powerful and reactionary gossip columnist, Hopper becomes the true villain of the movie, portrayed as an unscrupulous woman, who was, perhaps, the most brutally effective and merciless of those in the industry who collaborated with HUAC. McNamara’s choice of villain has considerable dramatic payoff. Unfortunately, though, in this man’s picture, where only two adult women have speaking parts, as if in a 1950s melodrama, Hopper, the career woman and public scourge, is aligned with evil, whereas Cleo (Diane Lane), the lovely and serenely domestic wife of Trumbo, is aglow with the feminine mystique.

As the confrontation with the Hollywood Ten witnesses approaches, Congressman Thomas appears on screen uttering the two sentences that Irving Thalberg most feared to hear, “Movies are the most powerful form of influence ever created. And they are infested with hidden traitors.” Acting on those insights, Thomas expertly propelled himself and his committee into the movies. As Otto Friedrich has observed, “To say that Thomas was a publicity seeker, which he was, misses the point that publicity is the blood of politics.” *Trumbo* takes that point and then displays how Hopper (whose presence is insignificant in the two most prominent biographies of Trumbo) deploys publicity or its threat as a murderous weapon in her column, on screen, and in person.

In *Trumbo*, the newsreel Thomas plays John the Baptist to the true savior of America’s purity, the televised Joseph McCarthy. Hopper’s sense of possibility is just as keen, for she accurately perceives that the studios’ dithering about the status of their leftist employees leaves them vulnerable to attack from the right. In her column, she promotes the heroic Congressman who bravely forced the Reds to the witness table; she shares the dais with Wayne and Brewer as a spokesman for the preservation of American ideals, even if it means destroying American lives. Perhaps most impressively, she stands toe to toe with L.B. Mayer, staggering him with threats to publicize the original Eastern European names of the Jewish studio heads, if he does not join the others in proclaiming a blacklist of known or suspected Communists.

No one in Hollywood in 1947 needed a newsreel to be convinced that Dalton Trumbo was a

Communist. He never denied it. But what made him a Communist? Carrying the party card? Agitating on behalf of the workingman and the unemployed blacks who could not find decent jobs? Standing up as a spokesman for a union disfavored by the studios and IATSE? Sympathizing with the Soviet Union despite Stalin's crimes and betrayals? Preaching Marxist Leninist doctrine? All of the above, except the Marxist part. There was plenty that was doctrinaire about Trumbo, but the doctrine was largely his own, developed in his working-class youth in Colorado and later at UCLA, where he began his trajectory toward Hollywood.

The movie makes Communism a simple matter — as, indeed, Trumbo was wont to do. On a walk with her father soon after the confrontation at the movie theater, the young Niki asks him if he is a Communist. He admits that he is. She asks if she, too, is a Communist:

TRUMBO: Let's give you the official test. Mom packs your favorite lunch ...

NIKI: Salami.

TRUMBO: ... and you see someone at school with no lunch — what do you do?

NIKI: Share?

TRUMBO: You don't tell them to get a job?

NIKI: No.

TRUMBO: Offer a loan at six percent?

NIKI: Dad.

TRUMBO: Then just ignore them.

NIKI: No.

TRUMBO: Well, well. You little Commie.

That ethical commitment to sharing what one has with those who have little or nothing may not involve the overthrow of the government, but it has serious political and economic implications, as Huey Long — who almost rode the slogan “Share our wealth” to the White House — had already shown. Like Trumbo, Long had no interest in Marx. He was a populist who made his name in Louisiana at the beginning of his career fighting Standard Oil, as Trumbo would restore his by fighting the studios.

During the opening noir scripted by Trumbo (and apparently concocted by McNamara), Robinson stands over a cringing gangland opponent in a dark alley and delivers the crucial line: “We all want the same thing, to not die young, poor, or alone.” For Trumbo, sharing is the only credible bulwark against that dreaded end, as he indicates to Arlen Hird (Louis C.K.), a struggling writer, who is reluctant to embrace the First Amendment defense that Trumbo and their lawyer have convinced the Hollywood Ten to employ. Trumbo renews his pitch behind the spacious house near the large, lovely pond that sets off his ranch. Hird protests that he can't afford to lose his livelihood. Trumbo replies, “I'll cover you.” After hearing Trumbo's offer, Hird, a struggling “Soviet” screenwriter without a swimming pool, suspiciously replies, “You talk like a radical, but you live like a rich man.” Trumbo counters that, yes, like a rich man, he is not “willing to lose it all, but [he is] willing

to risk it all.” And he concludes with a characteristically chiseled aphorism, pronouncing that he aspires to act with “the purity of Jesus [... and] the cunning of Satan.”

Hird surrenders, and Trumbo keeps his word. He does cover Hird and others by lending them money to get them through the bad times ahead. Indeed, “covering” becomes the predominant activity in which he engages after the blacklist deprives him and his colleagues of their contracted employment. He transforms his radicalism from a commitment to a statist Communism to the ingeniously entrepreneurial formation of a “black market.” He begins by seeking cover from sympathetic friends who will front with their names the scripts he writes for the studios and who will share in the proceeds — as does Ian McLellan Hunter (Alan Tudyk), who fronts the script for *Roman Holiday* and, with some embarrassment, wins the Oscar for screenwriting in Trumbo’s name. When those same friends suffer blacklisting, Trumbo adopts aliases of his own and turns his home into something of a factory where, fueled by Benzedrine and Scotch, he hammers out script after script, ruthlessly overseeing the labor of his wife and children as bookkeepers, telephone answerers, and messengers.

Trumbo also develops a relationship with the independent production company owned and operated by the King brothers, who are unapologetic purveyors of exploitation films — or “shit,” as Frank King (played with gusto by the Rabelaisian John Goodman) describes their product. He respects Trumbo as a “great writer,” but he hires him for low wages and high output. Soon Trumbo has attained a position writing and rewriting “shit” scripts that enables him to share assignments with his friends, begin to pay back his debts, and make more loans. He has organized, with diabolical canniness, a community of those who did not name names and who share in what wealth there is by covering for each other in an eccentrically populist enterprise held together by the purity of their collective loyalty.

Trumbo does not pretend that this is the best of all possible worlds. Robinson, a non-communist friend and benefactor of the Hollywood Ten, is blacklisted for that association. As an actor, whose career, he says, “is his face,” he could not be covered and could not work. To revive his career, he submits to the HUAC committee’s humiliating ritual of betrayal, admitting what its members want him to admit and naming the names that they already know. Nor can Trumbo’s cover save Hird, who loses his family to his political integrity and his life to cancer, dying young, poor, and alone. Trumbo, too, almost loses his family to his totalitarian mania and to his resentment at his own relentless labor. When, during the HUAC hearing, Congressman Thomas insists on his “Are you now or have you ever been” question, Trumbo indignantly explains his refusal to answer with the comeback that “many questions can be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ only by a moron or a slave.”

The fear of becoming a slave surfaces again in an angry response to his daughter’s intrusion on his bathroom office. McNamara has Trumbo, who is writing in the tub and bathing in self-pity, like a Marat courting the knife, angrily whine that he has become “the family slave.” No one in the family dares quarrel with that self-characterization despite their obligation to submit to Trumbo’s transformation of their home into a factory. They also slave, waiting to be posted at any hour across Los Angeles to deliver one script after another to a front or a complicit filmmaker. Tellingly, the system reaches its crisis when Niki refuses her father’s appointed errand because she insists on

attending a Civil Rights protest. She leaves, and her compliant brother cancels his date to run the errand in her stead. But the issue is not settled until Trumbo has faced the fury of his customarily acquiescent wife, who accuses him of having become a bully, whose rages are destroying the family. Her speech works, and Trumbo is shocked into an unaccustomed acquiescence.

That scene is less important for its infusion of a taste of neo-Sirkian melodrama into the late 1950s masculine world of financial desperation and round-the-clock labor than it is for the reference to Niki's destination when she quits the house. She has clearly given priority to the politics of black people over her father's economics of the black market. To his credit, the chastened Trumbo travels to her meeting and accompanies her home. He tells her how afraid he is.

TRUMBO: Afraid, that is, of scarring you, all of you ... and what if it's all for nothing? How do I live with that? So I fight. It's all I know how to do anymore, just ... rage ... at anyone in my way ... But you've never been in my way, Nikola, not once ... and never could.

NIKI: It's crazy how mad you make me, since all I ever wanted is to be just like you.

TRUMBO: You *are*. Which I wouldn't wish on anybody.

There is no discussion of the Civil Rights protest. Trumbo has no time for another cause. The film's references to this generational and racial divide are respectful of a biography in which, after HUAC, Trumbo's political activism had to be subordinated to economic survival. Yet once the perspective of Civil Rights activism is introduced, it becomes necessary to adjust one's perspective on "slavery" — not only on Trumbo's loaded usage of the term at the HUAC hearings and at home, but on the usage of slavery as a subject for the epic drama that will serve as the climax of Trumbo's career: *Spartacus*.

For the Civil Rights activists, slavery is part of an indelible heritage of repression, formally ended by the 14th Amendment but maintained by the segregation of schools, lunch counters, unions, buses, and the theaters where Hollywood motion pictures were shown. For Trumbo, slavery is a metaphor for intolerable governmental and industrial restrictions on a man's freedom to work and to obtain the credit and money that such work deserves. "Slave" is Hollywood hyperbole, particularly applicable and therefore congenial to screenwriters. Think only of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), one of the earliest films about a screenwriter, whose Joe Gillis is held captive to a former star, her former director, and his own self-loathing. The Screen Writers Guild was born out of Hollywood screenwriters' drive to acquire and regulate screen credit for their labor. But as important as credit is in Hollywood, its stature dwindles in comparison to the dominion of ownership.

Trumbo's confrontation with his wife and daughter cues the timely appearance of Kirk Douglas (Dean O'Gorman) with an offer for Trumbo to rewrite Howard Fast's jumbled screenplay for his novel *Spartacus*, the story of the legendary revolt of slaves against their Roman owners. Douglas will star in and produce the film, which is scheduled for imminent production by his own company, Bryna Productions. Soon afterward, Trumbo is visited by the charming autocrat Otto Preminger (Christian Berkel), who has somehow heard about the deal with Douglas. Preminger practically

imposes a contract for a speedy composition of a script for *Exodus*, the story of Holocaust survivors on a ship headed for Palestine, to be produced and directed by Preminger himself. Trumbo accepts Preminger's offer — conditional on his meeting his deadline for *Spartacus*. More money, more anonymous labor, with Preminger pressing, watching, often reading the pages as soon as they are removed from Trumbo's typewriter, and with Douglas waiting impatiently for his due. Although the movie does not suggest this, Trumbo doubtlessly appreciated the all but uncanny coincidence of receiving two scripts about the exoduses of victims, both led by liberal Jewish stars, at practically the same time.

It is hard to imagine that when Trumbo was writing the script of *Spartacus* and began plotting the end of the blacklist, he did not identify with the man who freed slaves from an oppressive regime. He no doubt took considerable pleasure in composing the *Spartacus* scene in which the gladiators stop using their weapons against each other and turn them against the representatives of the Roman state. There is an implicit exaltation of the Hollywood Ten when the film's hero, nearing death, transforms refusal into something like a revolutionary act. He instructs his comrade Antoninus (Tony Curtis): "When just one man says, 'No, I won't,' Rome begins to fear." That's the kind of hyperbole that got under Hird's skin. Not long before his death, Hird had cautioned Trumbo, "Don't pretend that you getting your career back is part of some great crusade." It was good advice that Douglas's commission enabled Trumbo to ignore. Writing the epic *Spartacus*, Trumbo could pretend on a grand scale and imagine succeeding in reclaiming his career, as if, indeed, obtaining screen credit for his work meant completing a great crusade. Uncharacteristically restrained, however, Trumbo continues to apply himself diligently to the formidable challenge of completing two massive screenplays for two demanding directors by firm deadlines. It is advice from his daughter that leads to Trumbo's final scheme to gain credit for his work. Niki joins her father as he sits smoking on the porch:

NIKI: Trumbo? Mind if I stick my nose in?

(She calls his attention to their hostile, snooping neighbor, pruning his bushes.)

NIKI: He knows. He sees Kirk Douglas in and out of here and Otto Preminger in his Rolls. He's an idiot, but he's not stupid. Has he called the FBI? Congress? No. Because everything they can do, they've done. That Oscar belongs to you. Get it.

TRUMBO: Good God, you're nothing like me. (Delighted.) You're worse.

"Worse" because her experience with Civil Rights activists gives her advice a new authority and urgency. Niki helps Trumbo realize that he has little to fear except losing a credit he doesn't have, and perhaps a job for which he has already been well paid. Niki has leagued herself with people, black people, who have nothing to lose because everything has already been taken from them: their freedom, their families, their chance to earn a decent living, and their self-respect. They can see no way to redeem the promise of the 14th Amendment except to risk the little they have, their lives. They must march, sit-in, and submit to being sprayed with fire hoses and beaten by billy clubs because they have no access to people in power whom they can manage or whom they can even vote out of office, for they have systematically been denied their constitutional right to vote. No one in 1959 would have learned this at the movies. Like just about everyone else, the Trumbos

watch the Civil Rights movement unfold on the television in their living room, in documentary footage that is uncredited to any writer or cameraman. Neither Trumbo nor *Trumbo* draws explicit comparison between the Hollywood blacklist and the black rights movement. But the movie has the touch to enable its viewers to observe the infiltration of race into the picture, to notice, for example, that the first man in *Spartacus* who says “no” is a black gladiator — the only black gladiator, indeed, the only black man in the film — who sacrifices his life as the good, Hollywood Negro always must, to save his white friend.

No one, including Niki, would expect Trumbo to make those connections. They would expect him to behave as he does, cannily manipulating Preminger and Douglas into a competition that convinces Douglas to concede Trumbo screen credit and seduces him to believe that his crusade has ended the blacklist. *Trumbo* does not affirm or deny that accomplishment. It does, however, show that identifying with Spartacus is a tricky deal. Trumbo’s ability to inspire that identification is memorably replayed in the scene where the Roman General Crassus (Laurence Olivier) promises to spare all the defeated slaves if only they turn over Spartacus to him. Just as the commander of the slaves is going to speak up, he is silenced by the shouts from man after man: “I am Spartacus,” a collective choice of death over the betrayal of their leader.

Any or all of us, including the screenwriter, are invited to take up the declaration and to squeeze from the chorus of identifications whatever satisfaction we can. Yet, as J. Hoberman has acutely observed, those slaves who are *named* in the movie are performers. Spartacus is a gladiator, as are his lieutenants. His sidekick, Antoninus (Tony Curtis), is a ballad singer. They are performers, as are the men who portrayed them on screen. The threat to a Rome governed by ancient, corrupt, and mostly feckless senators, who rule by legacy or by purchase, is a rebellion led by men who perform for a living. So, as the 1950s fade, is the threat to the geriatric rulers of the Hollywood studios: new men are attaining power, having acquired celebrity and wealth by performing before cameras long owned by others.

Regardless of what Trumbo thought, this is the allegory that matters in the film because it serves as the opening of a new front, strengthened by a liberation ideology in an increasingly powerful rebellion against the studios’ monopoly on film production. *Spartacus* may be a fiction crafted by writers about actors who shake the foundations of Rome, but, more importantly, it is a major performance by one star who was usurping the power of the moguls. Trumbo’s employer, Kirk Douglas, has capitalized Bryna, his production company named for his mother, by starring on the screen, not by typing on a Remington. It is a fact that Douglas plays Spartacus. It is a more important fact that he *owns Spartacus*.

It is juicily ironic that, in the end, Hopper, the demon who thought of herself as an agent of conservatism, is disclosed to be the unwitting instrument of the rebellion. For in undermining L.B. Mayer’s authority, Hopper has been a catalyst for the fragmentation of the studio system, which enables runaway productions such as *Spartacus* to flee Hollywood to Europe or Africa or even West Texas and elude studio control — to succeed where the slaves of Rome failed. Hopper gets the studios’ weaknesses right, but she misjudges who would be the beneficiaries of their fall. Newsreels had long been shadowy supplements to motion pictures, but times and technology change. By 1960

it is television that brings the Civil Rights struggle into America's living rooms, and it is television that brings the news to Hopper that her expiration date has arrived, as, alone in her apartment, she watches President Kennedy leaving a showing of *Spartacus* and stopping just long enough to say that he liked the movie. In a single sentence of praise by a charismatic leader, broadcast nationally, she instantly recognizes the destruction of her ideological apparatus, as if it were one of her floral hats wilting in the sun.

Trumbo may or may not have ended the blacklist — most of the Ten never worked in Hollywood again. *Trumbo* may or may not be the first Hollywood movie about the Hollywood unions, but it is certainly the first biopic of a screenwriter. Trumbo earned his biopic because, in *Spartacus*, he wrote the allegory of his own imagined emancipation of his brethren as an epic. Some victories are imagined, and they win Oscars. Some victories are real, however, and they win power. In the end, this movie makes the convincing case that it is only Kirk Douglas, star on the screen, boss of the screenwriter, bane of the moguls, and chief of his runaway production, who, when the lights go on, can truly say with the purity of ownership and the cunning of history, “For better or worse, I am *Spartacus*.”

□

But who claims ownership of *Trumbo*? Who can say, “I am *Trumbo*?” We know with some certainty who made the film. IMDB credits it as a coproduction of the recently formed, Los Angeles-based Groundswell Productions and the even more recently formed, New York-based ShivHans Productions. Both companies have only an attenuated genealogical connection to a major studio through Andrew Karpen, CEO of the New York-based Bleecker Street Media, which, all sources agree, is the distributor of *Trumbo*. Karpen founded Bleecker Street after he left his position as Co-CEO at Focus Features, a subsidiary of Universal Pictures. Karpen left the company when Universal decided to close Focus Features's New York office. That's probably too much information. Even so, it's not enough, because nothing on IMDB indicates who holds the copyright on *Trumbo*. Groundswell didn't know, but a contact at ShivHans said that the copyright was held by Trumbo Film, LLC. Businesslookup.com lists Trumbo Film, LLC as an inactive company with no agents or executives — no human names attached. The company was a corporation chartered in Delaware and registered as an entity in New York State. Its entity type: FOREIGN LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY. No one formerly at Trumbo Film, LLC is naming names. I cite this foreign company not because its anonymity is suspicious, but because it is peculiar — a rare example not of a runaway production but of a runaway and hidden corporate author, who, for better or worse, refuses to speak the words, “I am *Trumbo*.”

□

Jerome Christensen is a Professor of English at the University of California Irvine. His books include Romanticism at the End of History and America's Corporate Art: The Studio Authorship of Hollywood Motion Pictures.

Stakes Is High: On Spike Lee's Chi-Raq

K. Austin Collins

On December 22, 2012, in anticipation of the wide release of Quentin Tarantino's slave-era revenge Western, *Django Unchained*, which was set to drop on Christmas day, Spike Lee, an artist never known to drag his feet when enraged, took to Twitter to issue a verdict. "American Slavery Was Not A Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western," he wrote. "It Was A Holocaust." Black Twitter lit up.

Early last year, Lee began dropping hints to the press about a strange-sounding new cinematic mélange of his own: a political film premised on a mash-up of style and subject whose components were at extreme odds, far enough removed from each other to make Tarantino's fantasy of bloody reparations seem favorably low-risk. The film, purportedly a musical satire about gun violence in Chicago, was to be titled *Chi-Raq*. The title, taken alone, is a provocation. A term invented by rappers (or rather, by their record labels), "Chi-Raq" is affiliated with drill music, a Midwestern strain of trap music born in Chicago. The term has been repudiated by a wide range of Chicagoans, including rappers, activists and politicians, who, though varied and sometimes even at odds in their intentions, are working to rectify the city's reputation for violence. Thus, when the film's first trailer dropped in early November, Black Twitter, led by a chorus of prominent black Chicagoans, issued a verdict of their own.

The tweeted complaints about Lee's new project — which is now streaming online, in addition to its theatrical run — are in part borne of unsatisfied political expectations, ideas about an artist's responsibility to his subject, coupled with a keen sense of how that responsibility manifests itself aesthetically. We'd all heard — and the film's title suggestively implied — that Lee's project would

be set on the South Side of Chicago, a pressure point in an entangled set of national conversations about gun violence, police violence, and black lives. We'd heard, and again the title seemed to confirm, that the film would specifically confront gun violence among young black men, a complicated, and easily mischaracterized problem few directors but Lee could or would do justice to (albeit with a dose of his idiosyncratic flair). We'd heard that the film would deal with how the city's excess of gang shootings, which in particular plague the South and North Side's lower-class black neighborhoods, have made the everyday lives of most black Chicagoans so bleak, so fraught, that these segments of the city had — no thanks to opportunistic pundits, politicians, and rap record labels — merited a dubious comparison to America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hence: *Chi-Raq*.

To many, fair representation of this subject has eluded public discourse for too long. The stakes were high. When some of us heard that the film was a satire, it became a sticking point, ready-made for finger wagging, especially for those who hadn't yet forgiven or forgotten Lee's last satire — the abrasive, mournful, spectacularly grotesque tragicomedy *Bamboozled*, little-seen but plenty discussed. Where that film traced the uncomfortably long history of blackface to our present moment, *Chi-Raq*, co-written by Lee and the black satirist Kevin Willmott (*CSA: The Confederate States of America*), was to be based in part on the bawdy, outlandish Greek comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, dated 411 BC.

Mind you, there's precedent for this. Reimagining modern black life through ancient Greek verse is its own black literary tradition, bringing to mind a diaspora of poets including Chicago native Gwendolyn Brooks ("The Anniad") and Derek Walcott (*Omeros*), among others. Really, it's the source material itself that's proven a tough sell. Recall the premise: an Athenian woman named Lysistrata convinces women like herself, with husbands fighting on either side of the Peloponnesian War, to refuse their men sex unless they agree to peace. This has become a subject of some controversy in light of Lee's film because, reduced to plot summary alone, the political, let alone emotional depth of the play's sexual politics do not easily translate.

Lysistrata is a comedy whose implications are filled with disquieting rage. What a quick summary online can't adequately convey is that it's precisely through the play's outlandishness that we understand one of its most enduring provocations: every warlord has a mother, and so does every casualty of war. If some wars begin at birth, which is how it must feel to be born amid immense conflict, then it may take mothers ending births, and ending bloodlines, to end battles. Are men not annihilating themselves, regardless? (When a writer for the Seattle alt-weekly *The Stranger* recently claimed that the women of Lee's film and, by implication, the Aristophanes play, were "reduced to walking vaginas," I wondered if she'd considered this.)

A variation on this idea appears in this year's *Mad Max: Fury Road*: "Our babies will not be warlords." And it appears, perhaps most memorably, in *The Godfather II*, when Kay (Diane Keaton), the disillusioned wife of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), has an abortion: "I wouldn't bring another one of your sons into this world," she says.

These are all films directed by men, but *Lysistrata*'s seriousness, her potential use to Lee and others,

is affirmed by her real-world correlate, the Liberian activist and Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee, whose nonviolent mass movement for women in Liberia helped to end the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003 by, among other things, staging sporadic sex strikes to gain media attention. “Women, wake up,” was her cry. The line could have been ripped from a Spike Lee movie.

□

Chi-Raq, Lysistrata: these words title the art of war. But is the South Side a war zone? Activists have long bristled at this comparison, and for good reason. War, to Americans, implies occurrences “over there,” beyond our borders. And war is something you can get politicians to care about. The title of Lee’s film suggests that he finds the comparison valuable, nevertheless, and this determines his filmmaking, which fills the world of *Chi-Raq* with the decrepit bodies of former gangsters in wheelchairs — men who could pass as extras in Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* — as well as the constant scatter of gun shots on and off-camera. The film is breathless, urgent. Lee starts us off with a rap overture, emblazoning the screen with its lyrics (“Police siren everyday / People die everyday ...”) before issuing a call to order: “This Is An Emergency.”

That message flared up in the trailer, too, though to some it must have seemed disingenuous. Real life is this film’s incessant meta-tension. The trailer for *Chi-Raq* dropped on November 3. The day before, a Monday, was an unusually memorable day in Chicago’s recent history of violence. Tyshawn Lee, 9, was shot and killed at close range as an act of gang retaliation, and Kaylyn Pryor, 20, an aspiring model, was shot and killed only a few blocks away. Into this void, you may remember, leapt the trailer for *Chi-Raq*, with its swaggering verse and brilliant colors, to say nothing of its comedy. Dave Chappelle laments losing strippers to a sex strike in hilariously affected rhyme, and a slick, dapper Samuel L. Jackson emcees as a chorus-like figure named Dolmedes, who, like your favorite uncle at a black family reunion, slyly versifies old school phrases like “fine Nubian sister.” “Welcome to Chi-Raq,” Jackson intones. Welcome to a war film filled with music and verse, with loud gestures and outfits, militant rows of black women in camo slapping their thighs as they chant “I will deny all rights of access or entrance” and “No peace, no pussy.”

Now the film is out and we have more names on our minds: Laquan, Tamir, and many others. The constancy of black death is in part the subject of “Pray 4 My City,” the song that opens the film, written and performed by rapper and occasional actor Nick Cannon, who stars here as Demetrius, a.k.a. Chi-Raq, a.k.a. “The Long D” in his texts and sexts to his girlfriend, Lysistrata (Teyonah Parris). Demetrius is the kind of guy who quotes Biggie and Tupac during sex and flexes his muscles, maybe even his gun, to hype himself up beforehand. He is the essence of what Lee feels is the root of the community’s gang problem, the singular embodiment of the link between sex and violence, between male ego and constant war. Listen out for when he threatens to “kill the pussy,” for the uncanny lurch of that phrase when uttered in this context.

Demetrius is a South Side rapper — Chi-Raq, as I’ll call him from here on, is his stage name — and he’s also the leader of one of Englewood’s two rival gangs, the Spartans, whose color is a lush purple. The other gang in town is the Trojans (of course) who are lead by Cyclops (played by the aging, vital Wesley Snipes), an amusingly corny older gangster with zero flow and an eye patch,

apropos of his name, that is BeDazzled bright orange, after his gang's color.

The film's central conflict begins with a bit of trouble between these men. During one of Chi-Raq's club performances, as Lysistrata and the girlfriends of the other Spartans are swaying in unison to the beat, hips and colors in sync with those of Chi-Raq's gang-mates, some mild heckling from a man in the audience quickly escalates into guns drawn. The guy is a Trojan. This is one in a series of seemingly unending retaliations between the two gangs. Remember, this is a war. After the heckler is killed by one of Chi-Raq's men, the only thing left for the Trojans to do, the logic goes, is strike back. Later that night, as Chi-Raq and Lysistrata are having sex in their home, Cyclops and his men set the house on fire. The climax of this back and forth, which continues into the next day, is the accidental shooting of a bystander — a child.

This is a turning point for Lysistrata, whom we've seen eyeing her birth control with some concern while home with Chi-Raq after the club shooting. Thanks to the lively, sympathetic intelligence of Parris's performance, we sense that Lysistrata has already been thinking about having a future in a place where so few people have one. The film doesn't quite traipse into the by now overfamiliar moral crisis of the mob wife, who only realizes that she's living off the fat of her husband's unforgivable violence when she's in too deep to divorce herself from him and it. But this trope does provide some moral context: she is a woman more involved in the violence, more accountable to its victims, than she realizes.

Her awakening comes thanks to Irene (Jennifer Hudson), the mother of the dead child, who confronts Lysistrata directly, suggesting that she's just as guilty as whoever actually killed her baby girl. The film's keen concern for children and the emphasis on motherhood are perhaps where its ties to Aristophanes are strongest. On the advice of Miss Helen (Angela Bassett), a bookish older woman and, we eventually learn, a mother in her own right, Lysistrata decides to act. She reads up on Leymah Gbowee and gets to work on a new plan, a sex strike, that will ultimately involve all women (and affect all men), young and old, gay and straight, girlfriends as well as lovers on the side, strippers and other sex workers, mothers and daughters: sisters.

□

That's the gist of what gets the film going. But being a Spike Lee joint, plenty else happens, including a truly strange turn in which gangbangers and Chicago's militarized police force are subject to a grotesquely satirical send-up of war and the male ego. This portion of the film is shot and performed in the style of a musical, color-saturated adaptation of the enduring 1964 Stanley Kubrick fantasy, *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. You can see what Lee finds useful in this: if what's happening in Chicago is a war, and if war is a tool of male pride, then all involved — gangbangers and cops alike — are willing participants in an unruly, unholy farce.

You cannot imagine *Dr. Strangelove* without the images of George C. Scott symbolically fellating himself by way of sucking a thick cigar, or of Slim Pickens, as Major King Kong, riding the bomb

cowboy-style to apocalypse. Similarly, you will not be able to imagine *Chi-Raq* without the sights of PENIS ENVY emblazoned on an army tank, or without a white Confederate nostalgic named, you guessed it, Major King Kong straddling a Civil War cannon as (he thinks) he's being seduced by a camo-clad Lysistrata.

In other words, the film grows more ridiculous by the minute. Angrier, too. This is an impulse familiar to the work and style of Spike Lee (have you seen *She Hate Me?*), who has long been known to favor the wildness of unbridled critique to the clear-eyed legibility of realism. It's an impulse that has, does, and always will piss off as many people as it moves and intrigues. *Chi-Raq* is no different, even if the immediacy of what's at stake seems to demand sobriety. No film can succeed in satisfying a tangle of expectations as rich as those facing this film, but the wonder of *Chi-Raq*, what makes it a remarkable film, is that it succeeds in giving us something both askew from these demands and, crucially, in excess of them.

The film I experienced is not quite the film advertised. It is only partially true that *Chi-Raq* is a colorful, outlandish satire. In fact, tonally, the film is practically split in two, and with the help of his actors and his outstanding cinematographer Matthew Libatique (*Black Swan*, *Straight Outta Compton*), Lee manages to carve out two distinct visual and moral worlds, weaving them together. One half concerns the sex strike of Lysistrata and the lives and lifestyles of Englewood's rival gangs. It's filmed and performed with an abundance of visual and theatrical artifice befitting, among other things, rap and R&B videos, black folklore, and Kubrick. It's the stuff recognizable from the trailer. Dark and flush with color, it is captured with a camera wedded to the beat of that world's spirited musicality.

But the film's other mode is something else. Emotionally raw and brightly lit, this other half, which concerns Irene, the mother whose young child is killed in the film's enraging opening act, replaces artifice with the solemnity of high tragedy — tragedy, it should be said, that is lent an intense air of nonfiction by the presence of Hudson, whose mother, brother, and seven-year-old nephew were all gunned down in Chicago, Hudson's hometown, in 2008. The pain that reaches into the film from off-camera when Hudson is onscreen — pain given the essence of documentary, thanks to her presence — is indescribable. And it's not only her. Among the Spartans and Trojans are a few men in wheelchairs and on dialysis whose injuries are not fictions. At one point, Dolmedes marches one injured man from each gang into the frame to point out their exasperating similarities — namely, their wounds. These men are true alumni of South Side gang violence, whose wounds become as much a signature of their belonging as their gangs' colors.

Still elsewhere among the film's large nonfictional public, which grows and grows as the film wears on, are members of Purpose Over Pain (POP), a local organization run by parents who've lost their children to gun violence. (POP is tied to Saint Sabina Church, which briefly serves as a location in the film and whose Father Michael L. Pfleger inspired the character played by John Cusack.) These parents stage a real protest in the film that, intercut with the satirical grotesque of Lysistrata's sex strike, has an uncanny way of making what otherwise seem like distinct moral and aesthetic universes — one of outrage, one simply outrageous — sing in unison.

The more that Lee hops back and forth between these universes, striking a buoyant inconsistency of tone throughout his film, the more these modes begin to feel both as inseparable and as divorced as night and day. To put a finer point on it, most scenes involving Lysistrata, her fellow sex strikers and their boyfriends occur either at night or in darkened interiors — clubs and bedrooms — whereas Irene’s scenes are largely filmed outside, in stark daylight, or with that light streaming in, as during her daughter’s funeral in Saint Sabina. I’ll spare you a clever line about daylight and being “woke,” but Lee is clearly not above the idea.

What lends the film its pathos, sets its anger ablaze, and animates its most radical ideas are the moments in which Lysistrata and Irene, distinguished in the film by their separate aesthetic worlds, are collapsed into one scene and one frame. Urged on by the joyous bounce of an R&B song, Lysistrata careens into the crime scene of Irene’s daughter’s shooting and, within an instant, the film’s mood shifts. As this moment and others reconcile differing styles and moods, they also, jointly, build toward the moral and political reconciliation that closes the film. These shared scenes — Irene’s daughter’s crime scene, Cusack’s stirring jeremiad at her funeral, and the film’s astonishingly strange, vibrant climax — structure the emotional and intellectual logic of the film with as much rigor as Hester Prynne’s three trips to the scaffold.

Lee is pushing us not to take the value of these modes for granted. He is pushing us to see beyond realism as a marker of political seriousness — beyond the straight, progressive path to readily politicized sentiment that some have demanded of him. On the flip side, as in *Bamboozled*, he is pushing us to see beyond the easy smugness of all-knowing satire, so often besotted with questions its practitioners can already answer, pushing us to look toward the confounding, gut-punching discomfort of the real: unstoppable violence.

□

But is Chicago a war zone? The question remains, and the more I think about it, the more unfair the comparison seems. *Chi-Raq* has an answer for this, too. Lee opens the film with a collage, a panoply of red, white and blue guns, segregated by color and dramatically arranged into a vision of the United States of America, its contours and its conceits. If Chicago is a war zone, it isn’t alone: look at our country. The idea is pretty on the nose — have I mentioned that this is a Spike Lee film? — but its implications reach beyond the movie’s theme to encompass bigger considerations: questions of genre and form, questions of art.

This is an “art film” in as literal and pronounced a sense as can be envisioned by that term. It is a film with an intellectual logic that continually forces it off the rails of its plot into imagistic tours of Chicago, specifically the art of Chicago, arguing for Chicago *as* art by giving us a taste of its look and design, its local color, the theater of its history and substance. Again and again, *Chi-Raq* abandons its characters, opening out onto visions of the city, drifting unannounced from anti-violence murals in Englewood to sky-gazing views of glistening towers Downtown. We take a swift, lively ride on the El; we visit the statues of Michael Jordan and Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor. Everywhere he can, Lee offers up these flourishes. A house that gets firebombed early on is seen

again later, from across the street, with its windows boarded over and covered in colorful murals. An animated, seemingly life-sized advertisement for a strip joint looms, loud and suggestively pink, behind Irene as she passes out reward notices for tips on her baby girl's murderer. More: protests in which our eyes can't help but linger on the colorful picket signs, omnipresent gang tags covering Englewood in a second skin, crowded bulletin rows of posters memorializing the South Side's dead.

Chicago, as Lee sees it, is a city full of visions of itself, visions always in conflict and always, thanks to their common source, susceptible to the restorative, conciliatory power of art, as well as to art's destructive influences. That the term "Chi-Raq" originates in music is not lost on Lee, nor is it any small incident that the Chi-Raq of his film is a rapper.

What Lee's after is a way of troubling precisely those notions of representation that anger or confound us. When we debate whether the film is useful or responsible, we act out its values, we reiterate precisely the questions Lee is asking us. This is no mere thought experiment. Can satire stop a bullet? Likely not. But it can provoke those of us who haven't, and can.

□

K. Austin Collins is a PhD Candidate in English Literature at Princeton University. He writes essays on film.

Making Things Right: Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens

J.D. Connor

The first words spoken in *Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens* come from Max von Sydow's Lor San Tekka: "This will begin to make things right." He's talking about the thumb drive he's handing off that includes a map to gone-monking Luke Skywalker, but he might as well be talking about how this installment will help clear the franchise of the accumulated muck of the prequel trilogy (and, perhaps, the digitally juiced "Special Editions" of the initial films).

That sort of meta-availability is inevitable in contemporary blockbuster moviemaking, where lines in the story are just as readily PR lines for the trailer or, in this case, for fan service. At the same time, these movies are properly classically constructed, and so such moments have multiple payoffs within the movie as well. The final image of *The Force Awakens* will be of another handoff, this time young heroine Rey (Daisy Ridley) offers long-lost Luke his long-lost lightsaber. Assuming he accepts — something bound to have happened between this episode and Episode VIII, due in 2017 — she will have lured him back into teaching and will have fulfilled, ironically, the dictum of his rogue pupil Kylo Ren, "You need a teacher."

Such immanent balance exists throughout. Tool of the First Order and Dark Side wannabe, Kylo (Adam Driver) delivers his line in the midst of a clenched lightsaber standoff in Act III and follows

it with “I can teach you the ways of the Force.” He doesn’t need to; simply reminding Rey that there is such a thing as the Force is enough: she Zens out, the movie’s underlying Force-tone shifts, and the music swells. The whole scene inverts an Act I exchange between newly nonconformist Stormtrooper Finn (John Boyega) and resistance fighter Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac). Finn is helping Poe escape, and Poe is momentarily baffled:

POE: Why are you doing this?

FINN: Because it’s the right thing to do.

POE: You need a pilot.

FINN: I need a pilot.

Moments later, Poe will swagger, “I can fly anything” before speed-teaching Finn how to man a TIE fighter’s guns.

Poe and Finn steal the TIE fighter but crash it; Poe disappears; Finn hooks up with Rey and they steal the Millennium Falcon. The second theft sets up the handoff from the Poe-Finn pair to what will eventually be the Kylo-Rey pair with some rapid cross-cutting between Finn figuring out the Falcon’s guns and Rey figuring out how to pilot it. “I can do this,” they exhort themselves, each unaware the other is saying precisely the same thing.

Piloting, shooting, and self-teaching are the interactions through which the social network of the story operates. And just as the movie spins off bits of itself for marketing, it also takes fairly seriously the question of exchanges within the network of its young stars. When Kylo captures Poe, the pilot smart-mouths him: “Do I talk first or you talk first? I talk first?” (Good guys ask; bad guys insist: they are the First Order.) Slick interactions are the movie’s strong suit. In one bravura shot during the Battle on Takodana, the camera executes a complex left-to-right track and pan, shifting its attention from Finn on the ground to Poe in his X-wing back to Finn back to Poe. Finn punctuates the moment by proclaiming “That’s one hell of a pilot!” He is, or isn’t, talking about the cinematographer.

In short, *The Force Awakens* is tighter than it has been given credit for. The problem — the problem that most reviewers have had with it, the problem that its defenders have had to shunt aside — is that the resonances with earlier versions are far too strong. These are not nifty callbacks for dedicated fans or the marks of a well-told tale. This movie is, in more ways than it should be, assembled out of the pieces and parts of the earlier ones, especially the first one, the one now called *Episode IV: A New Hope*.

Critics have blamed J.J. Abrams, or George Lucas, or Disney (as Lucas and Michael Hitzlik have) for the film’s lack of novelty, but whomever they’ve singled out, the range of causes has been far too narrow, locating responsibility *within* the production narrative of *The Force Awakens*. That’s typical. For decades *Star Wars* has inspired a strangely blinkered sort of criticism that leans on the franchise’s unique success and Lucas’s unique authority to justify treating it as somehow apart from Hollywood as a whole. It has been seen as responsible for the end of The ’70s, but somehow

not the product of that ending. [1] Worse, Lucas's own cod-Jungian narrative theory has governed the understanding of the films' stories to the exclusion of changes in Hollywood storytelling over the same period.

As a result, criticisms — or defenses — of *Star Wars*'s narrative retreading are misguided, not because the film is narratively innovative, but because critics continue to regard it as far more immune to the broad tendencies in big-budget Hollywood filmmaking than it is now or ever was.

The first film was undeniably the project of an auteur, a director who got what he wanted formally, while simultaneously launching a new era of merchandise by out-negotiating 20th Century Fox. Lucas was a 1970s figure with aspirations of the same order as his mentor, Francis Ford Coppola, but unlike Coppola, Lucas actually managed to turn himself into a new-era studio. At the heart of that new studio were sound (Sprocket Systems, now Skywalker Sound) and large-scale special effects (Industrial Light & Magic).[2] Let's start with sound.

□

It might be unfair to note that the first words in the series — the first words we hear — are “Did you hear that?” C-3PO is speaking to R2-D2, but before we can wonder what we might have heard, he follows up with “They've shut down the main reactor.” It is an odd thing, for sure, since we don't know what the main reactor is, what it sounds like, or what its absence entails. Furthermore, the sounds we might recall at this point are the low rumble of the Imperial star destroyer and the laser cannons.

R2-D2 responds with a series of bleeps and bloops, which C-3PO understands and which we quickly gather. There is no language to the gliding mailbox's sounds — this is not *Star Trek* or *Lord of the Rings*. But this relationship — between a character who speaks English and a character who does not but whose noises are understandable through a combination of redundant dialogue and emotional tone — clearly fascinated Lucas, so much so that there are two versions of it at the heart of that first film: one, between C-3PO (or various humans) and R2-D2; the other, between Han Solo and Chewbacca.

The smooth translatability between the hairy wookiee, the human, and the droid is the initial trilogy's utopia, the social equivalent of its handwaving around the problem of faster-than-light travel. Jabba the Hutt will get subtitles, because he is a negotiator/gangster, and gambits require syntax. But R2-D2 and Chewy are there to spark indignation, and that does not. “I am fluent in over six million forms of communication,” C-3PO says, but the payoff of that ability is not properly linguistic. Rather, what we get from it is the chance to listen to sound designer Ben Burtt construct cinema's biggest sonic sandbox.

Lucas's strategy of relying on quasi-languages for comedy ran aground in the second trilogy, when he passed out ethnic accents to the butts of his jokes. Watto the trader has a Times-Square-Lebanese greasiness; members of the trade council are saddled with off-the-rack World War II-era Japanese

accents; and, most notoriously, the Gungans epitomized by Jar Jar Binks display the full range of racist midcentury black dialects. When Lucas went back and reedited the opening installments so they would line up with the universe as it had evolved, *Return of the Jedi* now included a nameless Gungan yipping for joy, “We-sa free!”

When Lucas went back through the older films to create the Special Editions, he claimed it was because his vision had always been hampered by the limits of filmmaking technology at the time. That might have been true, but the films were almost always better for it. Worse, the digital effects that seemed state-of-the-art when he dropped them in now look dated — the edges of the composited elements stand out, and the behaviors of the digital surfaces, especially stone and fur, seem unnatural. That he couldn’t foresee or didn’t care that the baseline look of digital cinema would continue to evolve is one more sign that Lucas had lost it.

The decision to set the initial Star Wars films in a grungy, lived-in universe remains brilliant. However digital that world had become, there was still a necessary materiality to the place, and it was still spitting out garbage. R2-D2 is always jacking into various computer ports — there is Force but no wi-fi here. That analog insistence extends to the films themselves. They were technical marvels but they were basically analog marvels overseen by a man who had more of a sense of what digital cinema might promise than anyone else.

Eventually digitization would transform editing, particularly by allowing all sorts of alternative versions, and CGI would make it possible to generate images that never existed in front of a camera. But in the late 1970s, only a few aspects of filmmaking had begun to take the digital turn. Computer controls allowed cameras to precisely duplicate complex moves, which made special effects compositing more consistent and more dynamic even when the cameras were still shooting models. The plans for the Death Star appear onscreen in some of the earliest wireframe CGI in mainstream film. Yet sound went digital even before cinematography, editing, special effects, and animation. And unlike the much-heralded End of Film, there was roughly zero public handwringing about it.[3]

In *Return of the Jedi*, C-3PO is telling “the story so far” to the Ewoks, mixing together another faux-language with enough proper nouns that we can follow along. What makes the scene particularly nifty is that alongside the proper names we hear key sound effects — the lightsaber’s *gzhzhzh*, Vader’s breathing, the Death Star’s explosion — and we hear them in the slightly muffled way that we hear an old tape playing back. C-3PO cannot give his audience a perfect digital copy, but that isn’t the point. The point is that the storytelling here draws on a uniquely recognizable sound library via an instant, nonlinear retrieval system. The translator’s utopia has as its complement a utopia of storage and recall. That utopia, not unimaginative nostalgia, underpins *The Force Awakens*.

□

Alongside sound, what made the first *Star Wars* compelling was a mastery of on-screen scale, a

particular parallax of human-sized motions against things geological, or galactic. That's the other half of why the opening shot of the star destroyer worked, and it's why the very long shot of Luke's speeder zipping left to right is so memorable. *Star Wars* shared this facility with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, where scale shows up as a joke Richard Dreyfuss tells as he tries to take a picture of the shark and an unintended joke that Roy Scheider tells twice (the one about needing a bigger boat). Abrams understood that commitment and put it to exceptionally good use in his Spielbergian *Super 8*.

Abrams repeats those scalar effects in *The Force Awakens*, combining them into the lovely shot of Rey speeding across the sand, wrecked destroyer in the background, wrecked X-wing foreground. She is our scalar emissary, dropping into the destroyer's vast abandoned hulk, fishing for tradable spare parts, more completely alone than Luke was (of *course* she is orphaned). When she later wanders through her *WALL•E*-like dwelling, we see the same mechanic background, now humanized by an abandoned yarn doll, now domesticated by the presence of some bachelorette-pad hotplate cookery. As she plops down on the sand to eat her jiffy-pop bread and gruel, a crane shot gives us a view of her leaning against the foot of a dead AT-AT walker, and we realize that both her work and her home are set against the remnants of the Empire. Here, scale and character are baked into Rick Carter and Darren Gilford's production design. [4]

Scalar replication brings us back to the initial problem: that *The Force Awakens* is, for its detractors, a 1:1 scale model of *A New Hope*. It seems to clone Episode IV, with a (self-consciously) cruddy climactic space battle and a limited number of quasi-mathematical transformations operating to cross up the gender and ethnic makeup of the major characters. (Forty years on, the franchise has begun to catch up with Samuel Delany's criticism.)

The worst defense of this sort of repetition is the invocation of myth; the second worst is Lucas's own invocation of poetry. Within the film, the emissary of that way of thinking is, surprisingly, Han Solo. In *The Force Awakens*, his favorite word is always: "Same thing I always do: talk my way out of it." "Women always figure out the truth. Always." "How do we blow it up? There's always a way to do that." (Leia is his partner in continuity: "As much as we fought, I always hated it when you left." "That's why I did it.")

But despite decades of follow-on Joseph Campbell-derived screenwriting, the initial installments didn't work because they were driven by some eternal masterplot. At the level of plot, *Star Wars* was acceptable not because it made sense but because its components were fungible. Like the 1930s serial space operas it emulated, *Star Wars* delivered, regularly, and then moved on.

The narration of the first film was a space opera pastiche from its opening crawl and retro wipes between scenes to its gee-whiz dialogue and hyperlegible bad guys. At the same time, though, its insta-library of self-justifying sounds and images depended upon human performance, not nostalgia, for their success. A video of Burtt wielding a shotgun mic like a lightsaber in order to conjure the attack and decay of a particular stroke affects the presence of some high-Method Foley artistry [skip to 8:15]:

Forty years later, though, the appeal of the 1930s is negligible. *The Force Awakens* only weakly gestures toward the first film's wipes. And it has not been obvious what compensating novelty might redeem its wink-wink-nudge-nudge retro appeal from being a withered pastiche of a pastiche.

Why, in the 1970s, were Lucas and so many of his contemporaries interested in an ersatz 1930s? Fredric Jameson argued that it was because the 1930s looked like the last possible opening for revolution. Add to that the not-entirely-compatible fascination with the glory days of the studio system and the emergence of technolibertarianism, and you have enough tension to get the project up and running.

But whatever drove nostalgia for the 1930s, where is a storyteller of the 2010s supposed to look for inspiration? Perhaps to the 1970s themselves, but decades as frameworks work against the scalar effects that Abrams and his designers want to achieve. Decades are occupiable and occupied: for example, the 1950s by *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the 1960s by *Mad Men*, the 1980s by *The Americans*, the 1990s by *Dope*, a whole stew by *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Instead of simulating a temporal zone of action, many of today's biggest movies draw from a reservoir of narrative components, fascinated by the very possibilities of arrangement, exchange, and interaction. By self-consciously foregrounding storytelling elements — scenes, characters, lines, props, images, sounds, etc. — these movies prove sufficiently reassuring to funders and fans to get a greenlight while still cultivating sufficient after-action discussion to retain enough audience mindshare to bridge the gap between installments. From the 1970s to now, the systematicity at work at the industry's highest levels has morphed, placing at its center, or very near its center, a morphology no longer Proppian but componential. Innovation in this context consists not in the elements themselves, wherever they are cadged from, but in the combination of unexpected occurrence and surprising competence. Only afterward we will see just how the pieces were rearranged.

The summer of 2015 was dominated by just such a *nachträglich* movie, *Jurassic World*, a franchise installment 14 years delayed from its predecessor, *Jurassic Park III*. In *Jurassic World*, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in 2012's *Prometheus*, in 2011's *The Thing*, we have a new industrial solution to the question of whether a movie is a sequel or a reboot — whether it exists *within* the narrative continuity established by the earlier films or whether it is in the process of purging that story-world of undesirable elements. *Jurassic World's* story is assembled through a process of replication and mutation out of the fundamental base-pairs of by-the-numbers Hollywood screenwriting. Take the bug out of the amber, sequence the DNA of its prey, supplement that with some cuttlefish genes, and you have a designer dino, *Indominus Rex*. Take the plot out of *Jurassic Park*, scramble its elements, update its product placements, and you're off, having made the most successful movie ever directed by someone other than James Cameron.

Whether confident or cowed, the deferred-action movie depends on the structural preeminence of sound and production design to make sense of its place in the franchise. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is as conscious of its own posteriority as *Jurassic World*, but it is far more confident in its ability to transcend that franchise obligation through sheer experience. Like these movies, *The Force*

Awakens took apart the earlier models and scattered the blocks on the table. Unlike them, when the moviemakers went to put the thing back together, they not only reused most of the pieces, they even reassembled them in very nearly the same order. It can seem like the same story, more or less — and it feels better or worse, depending. But at every switchpoint the alternatives have been considered and these elements have been chosen.

Those elements build worlds, and world-building, done right, has enormous downstream consequences. Tactile and sonic objects make movies “toyetic,” as anyone who has visited the toy section of a big-box retailer this holiday could tell you. (I took a loop around a mid-market mall between my opening day screenings, and 12 stores had Classic *Star Wars* or *Force Awakens* merch in the front window.) Compelling, open-ended design spaces can be readily ported into theme park rides or entire lands (*Star Wars* is getting its own version of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter). Narratives with scalar capacity can spin-off alternate plots, accumulating an entire universe.

□

Today, Disney is the single most important overseer of narrative universes. Most prominent is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which Disney bought and augmented earlier this century. But it also has homegrown universes — one centered on Mickey, the other on Princesses. The Mickey-centric universe is a topologically odd thing, intercalated with the others either through the conceit of a coherent “backstage” where all Disney characters can interact when they are not performing in their own, properly fictional universes (*House of Mouse*) or through the “Toy Box” mode of the Disney Infinity videogame. The Princess universe — which is emerging from the biggest licensed brand franchise in the world (roughly \$5 billion a year) — was initially simply a unified approach to a “play pattern” among young girls but is slowly becoming a narrative in which the princesses interact. Like *Star Wars*, it has a dark side, featuring the progeny of various Disney villains. More, doubtless, is to come.

Neither the Princesses nor the Mickey universe has particularly difficult continuity problems to solve. Marvel does, and it keeps temporarily solving them and then undoing its solutions with comic series like Ultimate Marvel. Still, there is friction between the comic continuities and the cinematic continuity. [5]

Star Wars's continuity problems were similarly thorny. The commitment to the canon was legendary, and the accumulated stories in novels, comics, television, and on and on had elevated the keeper of the universe bible, Leland Chee, to something like the mock-high-priest of the place. Such complex canons can turn off casual fans. In the wake of its purchase of Lucasfilm, Disney held off on deciding what to do about the mountain of prior *Star Wars* materials until this past summer when the entire “Expanded Universe” — everything outside the movies — was declared non-canon. The Wookieepedia — the online repository of *Star Wars* lore — now featured two tabs for most important entries, “Canon” and “Legend,” where all the Expanded Universe stories were stored, waiting to be recalled, rebooted, retold into the canon. As at Marvel, a Lucasfilm Story Group will now attempt to bring order to the narrative universe.

If that sounds like Disney has First Order aspirations, it surely does. But just as surely, it knows that unless the movies are fun, they are not going to become the gargantuan hits in Asia they need to be going forward. There is work to do. At the same time *The Force Awakens* was torching box office records in the United States and Europe, it only opened in second in Japan and third in India. (It hasn't opened in China as of this writing, but Disney has pulled out all the stops in this new market for the franchise.)

Back in 2002, Jonathan Last, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, got some traction arguing that the Empire were the good guys (Alderaan deserved it, etc.). Lost in the morass of neocon bullshit was his summary dismissal of the expanded universe. "It's always been my view that the comic books and novels largely serve to clean up Lucas's narrative and philosophical messes." That isn't wrong, but making messes and cleaning them up is one of the particular charms of this universe.

At the narrative level, messes look like continuity problems, and there are ways of dealing with those. Comics readers are as used to the practice of "retconning" — retroactively justifying a narrative innovation or inconsistency — as moviegoers are to rebooting. The Expanded Universe purge amounts to something like disconning — breaking the hold of the continuity altogether. The next *Star Wars* movie (*Rogue One*), due later in 2016, will be something of a prequel, but it may be an example of slipconning — as when one *Bourne* film takes place inside or alongside another. Figuring out what is worth keeping and what requires purging is part of the fun.

Fans have been cleaning up and remaking *Star Wars* almost from the get-go, and one of the reasons that the excision of the Expanded Universe was felt so strongly was that it came awfully close to discounting fans' extensions of franchise. *The Force Awakens* is a salve to those fans not because it restores the Expanded Universe, but because it plays to the sort of maker culture that inspired fan-versions of the earlier films. That tinker's fascination unites Anakin, Luke, and Lucas; it carries over into the new movie in Rey's scavenging — she gets yelled at for slacking off when she's brushing up her gleanings — and Finn's prior job in the sanitation department on Starkiller Base. The former pays off in a joke about the Millennium Falcon being garbage, but, as it's their only escape option, "Garbage will do." The latter pays off in a joke about Finn throwing Captain Phasma, his former Stormtrooper boss, into a garbage chute.

Should we toss the whole thing? Nearly all the criticism of *The Force Awakens*, smart and otherwise, notes the overwhelming parallels with the first film. I've tried to explain that without explaining it away. But only the best criticism that I've seen takes up a second problem: the need to avoid watching (or listening) closely. Here's Lili Loofbourow: "*Star Wars* is shallow and silly and campy and fun, and a dozen other synonyms that suggest we shouldn't think about it too hard." Here's Aaron Bady: "Everything that puts you in the moment, when you're watching it, falls apart as soon as you turn your brain back on." And, finally, here is Abigail Nussbaum: "The original *Star Wars* films are fractally awful. The closer you examine them, the more apparently fatal flaws you notice." Each of them will go on to note exactly what is morally or narratively or otherwise insupportable in the movies, and, by extension, in the *Star Wars* universe as a whole. And each of them will also find something to hold on to, but something that reads as much like an admission of critical weakness as a recognition of aesthetic success.

I hope it's obvious by now that isn't my approach. Instead of noting the fatal flaws and cordoning off their import, I would rather ask whether the movie, at its best, can bear our attention.

The best thing about *The Force Awakens* should be the moment when Kylo Ren is using the Force to summon Luke and Anakin's snowbound lightsaber. When it finally dislodges and hurtles past his face to Rey's outstretched hand, the scene wants to be a display of unexpected power. But nothing has led us to expect that the lightsaber is actually heading for Kylo here — he's already been bested by Rey in a straight-up Force contest, and we know the weapon has a thing for her — so it seems less a shocking turn of events than another joke at Kylo's expense. As an assemblage of prefab parts, the movie aspires to that same unexpected display but most of the time Abrams resorts to jokes (solid, to be sure) to excuse everyone's feelings of familiarity.

No, the best thing about *The Force Awakens* is BB-8. The droid sounds metallically hollow and yet inside its smooth surface are untold mysteries. These emerge unexpectedly from panels that slide or pop or hinge open in a process we might call facetization. There is a lighter that does double duty as a thumb's up; there's an electric prod that shocks Finn; there are guy-wires that can stop the poor thing from rolling endlessly about the Falcon as the ship pirouettes through the sky; and there is the drawer in which that thumb drive can be stored. Somehow, though, that drawer also allows BB-8 to read the data on the drive to project it holographically. It thus mediates the analog and the digital, real enough to promise an actual world, digital enough to escape our real world's constraints. To watch BB-8 leave a smoothed track in the sand or gingerly doink its way down a set of stairs is to feel the pull of a very particular materiality, one that everywhere suggests an almost endless chain of concepts.

As a soccer ball, BB-8 is an emblem of the beautiful game's globalized universality and hence of an ideal *Star Wars* universe. As a dog, it is an emblem of fidelity and obligation for Poe, Rey, Finn, and R2-D2, and hence of an ideal relationship with fans. As a sphere, it is the analogue of the wireframe animation of the Death Star and the hologram of Starkiller Base. Compared with the real Death Star it is infinitesimal, but compared with the projection, the droid appears to be a nearly 1:1 materialization. That inversion extends to its hemispheric head, which echoes and inverts the satellite dish indentation behind the Death Star's superlaser. It is small but large enough to be awkward when Finn lowers it below the deck of the Falcon; it is small but not the smallest of the movie's spheres. Aboard the Falcon, Finn finds and tosses aside Luke's old Training Remote, that ball that would zap him as he practiced with his lightsaber. It is the droid they are looking for, hence the object of both nostalgia and suspense.

If we aren't paying close attention to *The Force Awakens*, BB-8 will be cute. Paying attention, we realize that it is the material emblem of the revitalized *Star Wars* universe, the ways that universe, like a bubble, must balance internal and external pressures, the ways it tucks innumerable aspects of earlier films into itself and rolls onward in the service of Disney's long-term profitability. BB-8 is an example of making things right — not in the sense of restoring order to the Force or apologizing for past Special Editions — but in the sense of making a movie that knows what it's about.

□

Notes

[1] For an exception, see Benjamin Hufbauer's piece in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/politics-behind-original-star-wars>

[2] For audience reactions, and more, see Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe* (New York: Basic), 2014; for the digital turns see Michael Rubin, *DroidMaker: George Lucas and the Digital Revolution*, (Gainesville, FL: Triad), 2005.

[3] See William Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (Austin, TX: U Texas P) 2007.

[4] Lev Grossman's preview in *Time* ("A New Hope: How J.J. Abrams Brought Back *Star Wars* Using Puppets, Greebles and Yak Hair," [12/14/15, 56ff] is particularly sensitive to the role of production design in *Star Wars*'s success.

[5] It hasn't been published yet, but for a nuanced account of the Marvel phenomenon, see Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny, and Andy Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2016.

□

J.D. Connor is, for the moment, Assistant Professor of Film & Media Studies and History of Art at Yale.

Of Christians and Communists: Joel and Ethan Coen's Hail, Caesar!

Derek Nystrom

The Coen brothers have a thing about left-wing writers. As many critics have already noted, it's hard to watch the newest film by Joel and Ethan Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, without comparing it to 1991's *Barton Fink*. Despite their marked differences in approach and tone, both films are about movie-making during Hollywood's Golden Age. They share plot elements both large — the two films revolve around a studio named Capitol Pictures, a fictional amalgamation of the classical era's Big Five — and small — *Fink*'s titular writer is assigned a wrestling picture starring Wallace Beery, a once-famous but now all-but-forgotten early Hollywood actor whose name graces a conference room in *Caesar*. And sure enough, both movies are also about writers who seek to promulgate left-wing ideals through filmmaking: Barton (John Turturro) is a Clifford Odets-style playwright who wants to tell stories about “the common man,” while Baird Whitlock (George Clooney), the lead actor in *Caesar*'s film-within-a-film (which is also called *Hail, Caesar!*) is kidnapped by a group of Communist Party-aligned writers who hope to use Hollywood to “accelerate the dialectic” to hasten capitalism's demise.

Given the influence of Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) on the Coen brothers' oeuvre — their first collaboration with Clooney, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), derives its title from the (unmade) film-within-a-film in Sturges's classic — it's worth noting that *Sullivan* was also about

a filmmaker (a director, this time) who wants to present “a true canvas of the suffering of humanity” during the Great Depression. In that film, of course, the director comes to realize that what the downtrodden want most (it appears) is not social critique but simple, light-hearted entertainment. Seeming to take their cue from Sturges, both *Fink* and *Caesar* can be read as similarly dismissive of the ambitions of politically committed filmmakers: Barton is so wrapped up in his own aesthetic theories that he does not even listen to the common man he purports to represent, while *Caesar*’s Communists are lampooned as kvetchers who seem more motivated by resentment at their low compensation in the studio system than by the world-historical tasks of Marxism.

I want to argue, though, that while *Caesar*, like *Fink*, can be read as a sustained reworking of *Sullivan*’s formal and thematic structures, the Coens’ latest work ends up offering a surprisingly complex — and, in comparison to *Fink*, more hopeful — understanding of the political possibilities of cinema. I know, I know: such a claim seems implausible if not directly counterintuitive, given not just the antic silliness of *Caesar* but also the fact that the Coens are frequently tagged as cynics if not outright misanthropes. But I would suggest that *Hail, Caesar!* amounts to a cinematic argument that the personal motivations of the Coens — or of any film worker — are entirely beside the point to a film’s political value.

But first, *Sullivan’s Travels*: as you may recall, the titular character, a successful director of escapist movies (titles include *Hey, Hey, in the Hayloft* and *Ants in Your Plants of 1939*), decides that the only way he can make a socially relevant film about poverty and suffering is to experience it himself. Dressing up as a hobo, he tries to leave behind his privileged life to experience the “real” world. For the first half of the film, the joke is that he finds it basically impossible to get out of Hollywood, both literally and figuratively: his attempts to leave the city repeatedly end with his return, in episodes that play out through a series of clichéd, generic situations from lowbrow filmmaking (car chases, slapstick comedy, and so on). Even when Sullivan manages finally to join the dispossessed, we still find ourselves in cinematically constituted worlds: his time riding the rails echoes William A. Wellman’s 1933 film *Wild Boys of the Road* (right down to his tomboyish companion, billed only as The Girl, played by Veronica Lake), while his later accidental incarceration in a southern prison borrows liberally from Mervyn LeRoy’s *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). Sullivan discovers the importance of entertainment near the film’s end, when he and his fellow prisoners watch a screening of a Disney cartoon. After seeing the delight this cartoon produces in the audience, Sullivan rededicates himself (once he has been freed) to the kinds of films he previously tried to disavow.

Fink, I would suggest, plays out the darker possibilities of *Sullivan*, while *Caesar* operates according to its more comedic impulses. If Sullivan is beaten and robbed by one of the homeless men he meets during his travels, Barton discovers that the “common man” who lives next door to him, Charlie Meadows (John Goodman), is actually a serial killer named Karl Mundt. And although *Fink*’s final act involves a few surreal events that prevent any assured claims as to “what really happened,” the film strongly implies that Meadows/Mundt has not only killed the writer couple that Barton had befriended, but also his extended (Jewish) family back in New York. In doing so, *Fink* suggests that, by refusing to listen to the common man, Barton is unable to see the potential threats that he poses — a reading reinforced by the fact that, in one of the Easter egg details that the Coens are fond of,

Karl Mundt is the name of a real-life U.S. congressman who helped block efforts to accept Jewish refugees during World War II, and who served on the House Un-American Activities Committee during its investigation of Hollywood. Like Sullivan, then, Barton ends the film disillusioned with his previously held cultural politics. But where Sullivan returns to Hollywood as a willing and eager worker in its dream factory, Barton finds himself trapped in artistic purgatory: his socially conscious version of a wrestling picture is rejected by the studio, which nonetheless insists that he is still under contract, even as they refuse to produce anything he will write. *Sullivan's* comedic depiction of a film worker's inability to escape Hollywood becomes *Fink's* tragic conclusion.

In comparison to *Fink's* fever-dream intensity and art cinema-style ambiguity, *Hail, Caesar!* appears as an inconsequential lark: tragedy repeated as farce. We don't even encounter any anguished left-wing writers until roughly the middle of the film; instead, we follow the busy schedule of Eddie Mannix (James Brolin), a studio "fixer" (his official title is "Head of Physical Production") whose job it is to ensure a smoothly rolling assembly line of film production while also protecting the studio's stars from any bad publicity. (Brolin's character shares the name of a real-life fixer who worked at MGM for 40 years.) Mannix serves as the narrative conceit that enables the Coens to offer a series of pastiches of classical-era film genres, which in turn provide the bulk of the film's light pleasures. Gentle parodies are offered of Esther Williams-style water ballet, George Cukoresque drawing room comedy, singing cowboy Westerns, Gene Kelly musicals, and of course big-budget, CinemaScope-wide, biblical epics that tended to have subtitles like *A Tale of the Christ* (the subtitle of both *Ben-Hur* [1959] and the *Hail, Caesar!* within *Hail, Caesar!*). In this way, *Caesar* adopts *Sullivan's* procedure of treating each of its narrative episodes in a different generic style, but it literalizes this strategy, showing the audience not just different styles but also snapshots of entirely different films.

That said, it is worth inquiring more closely as to why the biblical epic is installed at the center (such as it is) of *Caesar's* narrative action. Interestingly, it is one of the few Golden Age genres not to have been critically resuscitated in recent film studies (even Esther Williams films have been recuperated in such works as Amy Herzog's *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same*). Surely part of its appeal to the Coens is its current low cultural standing, as well as how damn ridiculous the things look: since Baird is kidnapped during a break in shooting, he is forced to spend the entire movie walking around in his Roman soldier costume, which neatly robs Clooney of any genuine movie star glamour that might disrupt the doofiness of his not-too-bright character. The biblical epic also enables the film's second-funniest sequence, [i] which is Mannix's meeting with a group of religious leaders (two priests, a minister, and a rabbi — see, it already sounds like the first line of a joke!) on the appropriate representation of "the Godhead" in *Hail, Caesar!* As the Coens are fond of generating narrative rhymes in their films, the theological mysteries discussed amongst the religious authorities (e.g., the simultaneous division between and unity of God and Christ) are cleverly echoed later in the doctrinal paradoxes articulated by the Communist "study group" members who kidnap Baird (as they explain the simultaneous division between and unity of humanity under capitalism). The similarities drawn between the representatives of Judeo-Christian values and of Marxist subversion underline the fact that both groups are concerned with the ideological content of Hollywood film: Mannix is eager to reassure the men of faith that *Hail, Caesar!* will respect their views, while the Communists explain to Baird that they routinely smuggle *their* views into the subtexts of the films they write. [ii]

Baird proves surprisingly open to joining the Communist cause, which, it should be noted, is perhaps the film's most implausible note. Since the film takes place in 1951, some three years after the studios' Waldorf Statement announcing that they would employ no known Communist Party member in the industry, no actor of Baird's fame would be so foolish as to sign a Party membership card (as Baird does). Still, the fact that his conversion in the film we are watching matches, via another narrative rhyme, his character's conversion in the film-within-a-film — his Roman tribune becomes a follower of Jesus — gets us closer, I would argue, to why the Coens have their fictional Communists abduct the star of a biblical epic, rather than, say, singing cowboy Hobie Doyle (Aiden Ehrenreich, who is as great as everyone says).

As Jeff Smith has argued, many 1950s blockbuster films about ancient Rome have been subsequently read as allegories of the Hollywood blacklist specifically, and of the persecution of political dissidents during the period more generally. [iii] Smith focuses on 1953's *The Robe* — the first film released in CinemaScope — which, like *Caesar's* film-within-a-film, is about a Roman soldier (played by Richard Burton) who converts to Christianity. The film offers a healthy amount of textual encouragement to read it as a Red Scare allegory, such as the scene in which the Roman emperor Tiberius tells the protagonist, "I want names, Tribune, names of all the disciples, of every man and woman who subscribe to this treason." Smith notes that a number of critics have argued that the anti-McCarthyite subtext of *The Robe* is due to the efforts of its writers: Albert Maltz, a member of the Hollywood Ten, wrote an early, uncredited draft of the screenplay, which was then completed by Philip Dunne, who helped found the Committee for the First Amendment, a group of film and culture industry workers who protested the HUAC hearings. Such readings, Smith writes, "suggest that one of those persons silenced by HUAC had nonetheless found a disguised way to critique government repression," which is evidence of how "the radical left tweaked the collective noses of Hollywood by using its norms and conventions of representation" to articulate its political resistance. Which is to say, more or less, the screenwriting practice declared by Baird's Communist captors.

There's only one problem with this explanation of *The Robe's* subtext: it doesn't hold up if you look at the film's actual production history. Smith carefully recounts how some of the details from *The Robe* that critics have cited as evidence of its anti-blacklist meanings actually come from the Lloyd Douglas novel on which the screenplay was based — a novel written in 1942, years before the HUAC investigation of Hollywood and the Waldorf Statement. Maltz's screenplay, which added the "naming names" subplot, also predates these events. Dunne's finished script, meanwhile, actually removed many of the possible allusions to the blacklist, while producer Darryl Zanuck — no one's idea of a Red subversive — at one point recommended including a story element that "sought to blame the persecution of Christians on a bureaucratic government committee rather than a power-mad, dictatorial emperor," a change that, as Smith points out, would have emphasized the relation between the film's events and those surrounding the blacklist (this proposed change was not realized in the final version of the film). Thus, Smith concludes, claims for *The Robe's* allegorical subtext cannot be grounded in a quasi-conspiratorial effort by left-wing film workers to smuggle in political commentary; instead, this allegorical reading is more plausibly derived from the relation of the finished film's textual materials to the social and historical context of its 1953 release.

In other words, the history of *The Robe's* production and reception demonstrates that it doesn't

matter who is responsible for a given textual element, nor does it matter what their motivations were — a film's political signification operates largely independently from these factors. I would submit that this is more or less the punch line to *Hail, Caesar!* as well. After Baird returns to the studio and (again, implausibly) explains to Mannix his newfound belief in the Marxist theory of history and its related critique of the culture industry's role in generating false consciousness, Mannix angrily slaps him around while telling him that he needs to return to the set of *Hail, Caesar!* in order to shoot that film's climactic scene, in which Baird's Roman soldier testifies to his newfound faith in Christ. "You're going to believe everything you say!" Mannix angrily instructs Baird. And sure enough, in the filming of said scene, Baird delivers his lines with surprising conviction: after playing Baird as a second-rate ham for most of the film, Clooney breaks out his own genuine acting chops here to make this scene work. In fact, his performance is so compelling that various workers on the set stop what they are doing to watch Baird's speech, visibly moved by its rhetorical power.

But there's something funny about Baird's monologue — it sounds as if it were informed as much by socialist ideology as by religious piety: "This man was giving water to all. He saw no Roman. He saw no slave. He saw only men — weak men and gave succor. He saw suffering which he sought to ease." (Christ's status as a radical egalitarian is also tied to his alignment with an oppressed diaspora: "God of this far-flung tribe.") This implied association of early Christianity's primitive communitarianism with modern-day socialist liberation reminds us that such associations were very much a concern of right-wing thinkers during the period in which *Caesar* is set. Smith notes that W. Cleon Skousen's 1958 anti-communist best-seller *The Naked Communist* included an early chapter entitled "Did Early Christians Practice Communism?" (The answer, as you'd imagine, turns out to be "no.") Moreover, after having seen Baird so readily persuaded by his Communist captors earlier in the film, one could be forgiven for asking — as his speech builds in intensity, with Baird testifying to a "truth beyond the truth that we can see" — is Baird actually sneaking in some Communist content of his own?

Before answering this question, it is worth comparing this climactic scene of an audience swept up in a cinematic performance to the analogous scene in *Sullivan's Travels*. In that film, remember, the titular director finds new inspiration in his chosen profession after he sees his fellow prisoners — and the all-black congregation that has invited them to their church — explode in hysterical laughter as they watch a Disney cartoon. While most commentators have read this scene as Sturges's comment on the superiority of "mere entertainment" to politically motivated filmmaking, Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin suggest that it also makes available a much more sinister account of the culture industry. [iv] They note that the cartoon's slapstick violence can also serve as "a reminder of the violence to which Sullivan, other prisoners, and free blacks are routinely subjected. When the inmates guffaw at Pluto stuck in flypaper they are recognizing their own confinement." If the prisoners and other oppressed viewers see their own situation on-screen within *Sullivan*, Moran and Rogin argue, those of us in the audience of *Sullivan* see "our faces, reflected back in the disturbing, needy laughter of the prisoners." The film thus suggests that "the horror of our own lives, our own need for fantasy, is what generates our collective plots."

At the end of *Sullivan*, then, we see an audience transported by a scene of light entertainment, which, upon closer examination, implies the compensatory ideological function of such entertainment. At

the end of *Caesar*, in contrast, we see an audience captivated not by light entertainment, but by a “message picture” — one whose message can be read as in alignment with dominant beliefs but could also be understood to be in pointed opposition to them. All we know for sure is that the performer articulating these possible messages doesn’t really mean any of them. For Baird messes up the end of the speech. Describing “a truth beyond this world — a truth that we could see if we had but ...”, he is unable to remember the final word of the line: “faith.” But even as it sets Baird’s unexpectedly stirring monologue free of any authorial or performative intention, the final scene of the *Hail, Caesar!* within *Hail, Caesar!* nonetheless depicts *and* enacts the power of cinema to affect its audiences. While the Coens may have a great deal of fun mocking those who seek to impose authorial meaning on any film, they also allow us (for Clooney’s speech works on us, too, at least momentarily) to be swept up by cinema’s persuasive force. And though we don’t know whether the assembled film workers are responding to Christian belief or to the politics of the oppressed, the film’s location of this ambiguity in the similarly polysemous intertext of the blacklist-era biblical epic, I would suggest, keeps both of these ideological possibilities very much in play. *Hail, Caesar!* argues that filmmakers might be fooling themselves to believe that they can get audiences to think as they want them to think, but that doesn’t mean that film doesn’t move audiences to think.

But did the Coen brothers mean to signify all this? *Hail, Caesar!* teaches us to say, who cares?

□

Notes

[i] The funniest scene, of course, is that in which the Cukoresque director, Laurence Laurenz (Ralph Fiennes), tries to instruct Hobie Doyle (Aiden Ehrenreich) how to say “Would that it were so simple.”

[ii] In fact, the Communist cell is linked to closeted gay actor Burt Gurney (Channing Tatum), who attempts to smear Baird by telling gossip columnist Thora Thacker (Tilda Swinton) about the latter actor’s past same-sex relations. By depicting Communist writers as secretly inserting subversive messages into mainstream fare, and by linking homosexuality with the Red menace as the twin threats to Cold War America, the film does seem to play “the fears of its era at face value: That Tinseltown is a Sodom and Gomorrah of vice and anti-American subtexts, and that Soviet submarines lurk in American waters, signaled by leftist study groups,” as Ignatiy Vishnevetsky argued in his review of the film (“The Coens Swipe at Religion, Counterculture, and Hollywood in *Hail, Caesar!*” *Onion A. V. Club*, Feb. 4, 2016 (accessed Feb. 12, 2016)).

Still, as I argue, the film ultimately asks us to discard any concern with the intentionality of filmmakers, malevolent or otherwise.

[iii] Jeff Smith, “Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Christian? The Strange History of *The Robe* and Political Allegory,” “*Un-American*” *Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, eds. Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP,

2007), 19 – 38.

[iv] Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin, “‘What’s the Matter with Capra?’: *Sullivan’s Travels* and the Popular Front,” *Representations* 71 (Summer 2000), 106-134.

□

*Derek Nystrom teaches film and cultural studies at McGill University, where he is Associate Professor of English. He is the author of *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (Oxford UP, 2009).*