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## Documentary Realism and the Postwar Left

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*Will Straw*

*The documentary film, regarded as one of our chief warborn boons, need not be an end-of-the-war casualty, like female welders.*

Noel Meadow, *Screen Writer* (1946)

In 1943, Noel Meadow, a New York publicist and one-time tabloid journalist, bought the Stanley Theatre in Manhattan for the purpose of exhibiting wartime documentary films.<sup>1</sup> Meadow had been the press agent for the Stanley in 1942, when it broke U.S. attendance records for a Soviet film with *Guerilla Brigade*, the American release of the 1938 fiction film *Vsadniki*. Set during the First World War, *Vsadniki* was produced to glorify the Soviet Army on the eve of World War II, and its U.S. release in the midst of that war was part of the broader nurturing (and exploitation) of U.S.-Soviet solidarity. Over the next two years, and in collaboration with producers like Maurice Lev or Joseph Plunkett, Meadow assembled war-related documentary feature films out of newsreels and other available footage, showing them at the Stanley and distributing them throughout the United States. These features included compilation titles such as *One Inch from Victory* (which used enemy footage provided by the Soviets) and *What Price Italy?*<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the war, Meadow formed Noel Meadow Associates, to undertake the American distribution of films imported from Europe. The first film handled by the new company was the French fiction film *Resistance* (*Peleton d'Execution*, André Berthomieu, 1945). *Resistance* catered to an American interest in topical, war-related films but signaled as well the shift by Meadow and other independent distributors away from an exclusive interest in documentaries. The U.S. release of *Resistance* was one step in Meadow's effort to develop a broader, postwar market for European feature films in the United States, building outward from specialized cinema houses in Manhattan. Over the next decade, Meadow imported, promoted, and occasionally wrote the subtitles for such films as *Dedée* (Yves Allegret, 1948), *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (Jean Cocteau, 1948), and *El* (Luis Buñuel, 1952). His various companies, such as Omnifilms and Uniworld, distributed foreign features alongside domestically produced educational films and documentaries.<sup>3</sup>

Noel Meadow (who died in 1968) was a minor but emblematic figure in the wartime and postwar culture of the American Left. His name is absent from the available lists of those blacklisted or witch hunted, and his personal political commitments are not clear. Nevertheless, Meadow's creative and entrepreneurial activities in the 1930s and 1940s followed the key pathways of progressive American culture. In the 1930s, Meadow had co-produced a stage comedy dealing with matrimony in the new Soviet Union, and reported for American magazines on developments in Soviet dance. His writing output in the 1940s included liner notes for 78rpm albums released by the fellow-traveling Stinson record label, among them "Fighting Songs of the U.S.S.R.: Songs That Glorified the Unconquerable Red Army" and "Memphis Favorites," by the New Orleans jazz band the Memphis Five. In their combination, these albums occupy significant portions of that terrain of progressive affinities which Michael Denning has called the "cultural front."<sup>4</sup> While serving as managing editor of the New York-based trade paper *Writers' Journal*, Meadow wrote regularly for the *Screen Writer*, the journal of the Screen Writer's Guild, during the period of its most intense radicalism.<sup>5</sup>

Over several articles published in the *Screen Writer*, in 1946 and 1947, Meadow urged film exhibitors and distributors to help build theatrical markets for documentary and international films within the United States. As a film exhibitor, publicist, and commentator, Meadow expressed one of two competing visions concerning the documentary film and its place within a progressive postwar cinema. The better-known of such visions, to which I turn shortly, imagined a Hollywood commercial cinema transformed from within by the forms and ideals of the wartime documentary. For Meadow, in contrast, the postwar flourishing of the documentary was to occur outside Hollywood, within a broader pluralizing of American film culture that would serve, over time, to diminish Hollywood's centrality. Meadow's call for a new pluralism expressed both his entrepreneurial commitment to the theatrical distribution of non-Hollywood films and his faith in the newly internationalist viewing habits instilled in Americans by the experience of the war. The institutions on which a plural postwar film culture might rest, in Meadow's view, included theaters specializing in documentary films and cinema clubs for children that combined entertainment and progressive instruction. Meadow had written enthusiastically about one such organization, the New York Matinee Club, in 1946, recounting its success in screening the anti-racism film *The House I Live In* for groups of children during National Brotherhood Week.<sup>6</sup> To the regret of Meadow and others, the withering of public interest in the documentary was diagnosed soon after the war's end. In 1947, Wesley F. Pratzner, a minor producer of wartime documentary films, wrote an article for the *Public Opinion Quarterly* entitled "What Has Happened to the Documentary Film?" Pratzner quoted, at length, Noel Meadow's acknowledgment that "the documentary film, which gave such bright promise of permanence, went into comparative eclipse on V-J day."<sup>7</sup>

The other vision of a postwar role for documentary has become more deeply inscribed within our understanding of wartime and postwar progressive film culture.

This vision was expressed in the call to filmmakers to take the lessons of wartime documentary production back to Hollywood, and to make documentary the core of a moral and aesthetic transformation of mainstream, commercial filmmaking. If, in the United States, the postwar project of building audiences for documentary films quickly receded, to a cultural space occupied by specialized professionals (such as educators), the debate over how Hollywood films might incorporate documentary elements attracted high-profile public figures writing across a range of venues. Within a broad corpus of liberal and left-wing publications, from *Harper's* through the *Daily Worker*, one finds the same films serving as points of reference in an ongoing reflection upon possible new roles for the Hollywood film. The early references in this discussion were often to isolated moments of non-studio filming in mid-1940s films: to the scenes of Third Avenue bars in *The Lost Weekend* (1945), for example, or those of the abandoned aircraft field in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). As the category of the "semi-documentary" film solidified, attention came to focus more exclusively on the cycle of such films produced by Twentieth Century Fox (*House on 92nd Street*, *13 Rue Madeleine*, *Boomerang*, *Call Northside 777*, *Boomerang*, and *Iron Curtain*). Progressive responses to the Fox cycle, from the welcome promise of *House on 92nd Street* (1945) through the cold disappointment of *Iron Curtain* (1948), allow us to trace the left's growing disenchantment with the semi-documentary project.

The postwar semi-documentary is not a lost object within film studies,<sup>8</sup> but it has almost always been one of uncertain status and limited interest. Our understanding of the progressive response to postwar cinema has long been clouded by film scholarship's later enshrining of the film noir as the most vital expression of a postwar sensibility. Film noir came to be understood, conveniently, as both a conscious, programmatic intervention by politically engaged filmmakers (such as Orson Welles or Nicholas Ray) and a cluster of symptoms through which collective or individual psyches betrayed themselves. This flexibility has made film noir a key example in virtually every significant wave of theoretical development marking film studies' history as a discipline. The semi-documentary, in contrast, has been easily dismissed as merely programmatic, a set of filmmaking protocols so self-conscious as to be formulaic and gimmicky.

Likewise, film noir scholarship, from its beginnings, has grappled with the abundance of competing claims about noir's precursors or constitutive features. This has made the film noir a richer focus of polemic and ongoing research than the semi-documentary, which still inspires only the loosest of explanatory gestures. In the late 1940s, observers saw the semi-documentary in the vaguest of relationships to Italian Neo-Realism, the newsreel, the 1930s social documentary, and the wartime government instruction film. Later, more academic commentary has done little to clarify these relationships. In what follows, I examine a selection of progressive assessments of the postwar semi-documentary, by writers whose political affinities range from left-liberal through Stalinist-Communist. In these assessments, we see the promise of the semi-documentary flourish in the immediate postwar period, then wither amid the hardening of Cold War divisions.

Over three days in March 1948, the American Communist Party's *Daily Worker* ran a series of articles on Hollywood's turn to documentary—on what it called the American cinema's semi-documentary “new look.”<sup>9</sup> This lengthy appraisal of the form was published two months prior to the May 1948 release of *The Iron Curtain*, Twentieth Century Fox's semi-documentary treatment of the Igor Gouzenko case. The Gouzenko affair had erupted in late 1945, when the Canadian government announced its discovery of a Soviet spy ring engaged in stealing atomic secrets. Since 1946, the American Communist Party had been active in countering what it saw as war-mongering hysteria in the responses of the U.S. government and mainstream media to the Gouzenko case. The *Daily Worker's* campaign against *The Iron Curtain* began before the film's release. It involved appeals to readers to boycott the film and reports on efforts to block its exhibition. The paper's ultimate condemnation of the semi-documentary cycle seems inseparable from its attempts to discredit *The Iron Curtain*.

The *Worker's* earlier judgments of films within the semi-documentary cycle had been largely positive. Since the Popular Front period of the mid-to-late 1930s, and most fervently since U.S. entry into World War II, the *Daily Worker* had sought to fulfill most of the functions of the mainstream daily newspaper, expanding its sports coverage and reviewing cultural events using criteria that were not always explicitly political.<sup>10</sup> Despite the Communist Party's return to orthodoxy after 1945, the *Worker* continued to comment matter-of-factly on the entertainment value of newly released films. The tone of its movie reviews, in the years 1946–1948, was one of a genial populism that relished brisk, effective filmmaking and a lack of pretension. This sensibility allowed the paper to respond positively to *House on 92nd Street* (1945), the first film in Fox's semi-documentary cycle. The *Worker* was slightly more reserved about *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946), drawing attention, in its review, to the film's lapses into generic formula: “Despite its use of the documentary technique *13 rue Madeleine* remains only another melodramatic thriller, with a story tailored to fit James Cagney.” *Boomerang* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948) were praised for dealing with miscarriages of justice, and for their reliance on “factual material.” *T-Men* and *Kiss of Death* (both 1947), films at the margins of the postwar semi-documentary cycle, were both embraced for their refusal to render the gangster life glamorous—the former, in particular, for its avoidance of the “fancy-pants night club life” of films noirs like *I Walk Alone*. One week before it reviewed *The Iron Curtain*, *The Daily Worker* praised *The Naked City* (1948) for its lack of glamour and concern with the downtrodden, noting, in its only reservation, that “the film's reality is limited by a concern for surface effects, never probing causes.”<sup>11</sup>

What stands out most strikingly in the *Daily Worker* film reviews during this period is their slightly puritanical suspicion of glamour and melodrama. This suspicion led the newspaper to favor semi-documentaries over thrillers like Douglas Sirk's *Sleep My Love* (1948), whose studio-bound production seemed to go hand in hand with their glamorous, upper-class settings. (The *Daily Worker* reviewed the Sirk film alongside *Call Northside 777*, calling the former a “slick little chiller-diller.”)<sup>12</sup> The “toughness” of a film like *T-Men* stood, for the *Daily Worker* reviewer, as the

mark of a welcome honesty.<sup>13</sup> The highly touted capacity of these films to narrow the gap between Hollywood fiction and the documentary rendering of location, character, and event was only a secondary reason for enthusiasm. As the campaign against *The Iron Curtain* got under way, however, the *Daily Worker* came to focus more pointedly on the aesthetic and ideological premises at the heart of the semi-documentary project.

On April 10, 1947, Darryl F. Zanuck had announced production of *The Iron Curtain* as a semi-documentary film, claiming it was based on a report by J. Edgar Hoover to the House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>14</sup> The fuller source for *The Iron Curtain* was the report of a Canadian Royal Commission, though the Canadian government refused to support production of the film. Three weeks before its release, the *Daily Worker* reported at length on the efforts of the New York Arts, Sciences and Professions Council of the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) to stop Twentieth Century Fox's distribution *The Iron Curtain*.<sup>15</sup> The PCA, formed by Henry Wallace progressives disenchanted with Harry Truman's apparent betrayal of Rooseveltian ideals, condemned *Iron Curtain* as a simple capitulation by Fox to the House Un-American Activities Committee and to its call for more films critical of the Soviet Union. By March 16, 1948, the *Daily Worker's* David Platt was referring to an imminent "cycle of war-mongering films," which was to include *Portrait of an American Communist*, *I Married a Communist*, and *Vespers in Vienna*.<sup>16</sup> (The first of these was never made; the second and third were released in 1949, with *Vespers in Vienna* retitled as *Red Danube*.)

Platt's warning of this new cycle came on the same day as the first of the *Daily Worker's* three feature articles reevaluating the semi-documentary film. The author of these pieces was Herb Tank, a merchant seaman turned playwright and journalist who served for a time as the *Daily Worker's* regular film critic. The 1948 series expressed the *Worker's* growing ambivalence about the postwar semi-documentary, a form that it had initially welcomed with minor reservations. Noel Meadow, in the sentence serving as epigraph to this article, had compared the fate of the wartime documentary to that of the wartime female welder. In a highly suggestive passage, Herb Tank began his three-part assault on the semi-documentary by drawing parallels between the semi-documentary film and the lengthened skirts of postwar women's fashion: "The old Hollywood film has a new look. Unlike the new look in skirts which tend to cover up more and expose less the new screen look appears to show more and cover up less. At least it seems that way on the surface."<sup>17</sup>

Tank devoted much of this first article to a genealogy of the semi-documentary, which departed from most contemporary understandings of its history. Conventional wisdom of the time saw the semi-documentary as inspired by wartime collaboration between Hollywood and the institutions of wartime public education. Most progressive observers of the wartime documentary cherished its roots in an enlightened state apparatus that mobilized new sorts of professional expertise (such as clinical psychology) to produce carefully structured works of civic instruction. The very form of the wartime documentary, therefore, took shape in the interweaving of official, institutional voices and emerging systems of expert knowledge

(like those of psychiatry or sociology). From the beginning, Tank and the *Daily Worker* set out to revise this history, situating the documentary impulse within a longer history which was properly that of left-wing activism. In this revised account, the officially sponsored wartime documentary cycle became a mere interval within that history:

The documentary became a worldwide film movement [in the 1930s]. In America, it developed independently of Hollywood, resulting in the making of such fine films as the three Pierre Lorentz [*sic*] films *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River*, and *The Fight for Life*; van Dyke and Steiner's *The City*; Paul Strand's *The Wave*; Frontier's Films' *People of the Cumberland*s and *Native Lane*. . . .

War-time film makers pressed by war-time needs quite naturally took over the form and the film techniques developed by the socially minded film makers of the thirties.<sup>18</sup>

Tank's assertion of a fundamental continuity between the social documentary of the 1930s and the official wartime instruction films of Allied governments was hardly outlandish. The career and ideas of John Grierson bridged the two, as did many of the principles underlying practices such as Pare Lorentz's filmmaking work for the Federal Resettlement Administration in the late 1930s. Nevertheless, the *Daily Worker's* enshrining of the 1930s social documentary as definitive in the history of the form was part of a broader pulling back from the experience of the war to reassert more longstanding political continuities. Within this longer view, the wartime documentary became a temporary, imperfect expression of the progressive search for truth, rather than its most perfect achievement. Having "lent" the documentary form to the institutions of wartime instruction, the left now witnessed the betrayal and distortion of that form within Cold War propaganda films like *The Iron Curtain*. It was therefore important for the Communist left to reclaim the documentary impulse as its own.

In "More on Hollywood Documentary Style," the second article in the *Daily Worker* series, Herb Tank returned briefly to the 1930s, describing the marginalization of the social documentary by the "vast big business network of film distribution," which saw no commercial potential in the form. In the years that followed, Tank suggested, a lingering, collective hunger for "real people, real problems, real places on the screen" found at least partial satisfaction in isolated films like *The Grapes of Wrath*, or in the documentary moments of wartime films such as *Sahara*, *A Walk in the Sun*, and *The Pride of the Marines*. (These latter films, however, were compromised by their recourse to "hokum and contrived situations.") This hunger for truth survived into the postwar period, and Hollywood studios scrambled to invent the means for satisfying it. In Tank's account, the postwar semi-documentary film responded to no social necessity—nothing comparable to the wartime desperation for useful information—but to the transformed tastes of moviegoers, who now looked to films for enlightened instruction. *The House on 92nd Street* appealed to postwar audiences, Tank suggested, through "the power of

scenes that did little more than describe the methods used by the FBI to combat Nazi spies.”<sup>19</sup>

Tank singled out *Boomerang*, which told the story of a small-town miscarriage of justice, as the last of the redeemable semi-documentaries. Following its release, he argued, the form was corrupted, in part by its decline into gimmickry but, more important, by its mobilization in the service of “unrealistic themes and social distortion”: “But *Boomerang* was the last of the ‘semi-documentaries’ to deal with a social theme. The documentary method of going to the actual in order to photograph it is now being transformed in Hollywood into a new look for the same old studio contrived hokum. It is becoming a new package for old goods.”<sup>20</sup>

The last of Herb Tank’s pieces, on March 19, 1948, was entitled “Today’s Films: Holly’d On-the-Spot films conceal truth.” Here, we find a significant shift in the substance of the *Daily Worker’s* critique of the semi-documentary film. It is no longer the descent of the semi-documentary style into gimmickry that is condemned, nor the inevitable contamination of the documentary impulse by melodrama or “hokum.” (Both of these developments could leave the semi-documentary ideal itself as a positive model.) Rather, the constitutive features of the semi-documentary had rendered it a dangerous tool of deception. The various stylistic innovations that distinguished postwar Hollywood filmmaking were now in the service of an insidious propaganda:

Contact with the documentary film movement has improved the Hollywood product. On the spot shooting has made for an appearance of greater reality. So has the sharper more realistic documentary style photography so much less glossy and high-lighted than the usual Hollywood output. . . . But the real rub in the Hollywood look of realism will be the outright war-mongering films. Almost every one of the promised anti-Soviet films is being made with the new look. Exteriors for *The Iron Curtain* were filmed in Canada. Whenever possible actors not well known to movie audiences are being used so they will more likely be identified as real people. The photography is harsh and contrasty. Some parts of *The Iron Curtain* were filmed to simulate newsreels. The new look is aimed at wrapping up the biggest lies in the most realistic packages.<sup>21</sup>

This passage introduces one of the eccentric sidelines in the polemics over *The Iron Curtain*: the debate over the film’s use of unfamiliar actors in small parts. This controversy deserves extended attention, for it condenses several of the semi-documentary’s paradoxes and incoherences. The casting of non-actors in small background roles had been a widely touted feature of the semi-documentary since *The House on 92nd Street*, though its intended effect was never coherently expressed. Intended to heighten a film’s verisimilitude, the semi-documentary’s use of “real” people in small roles served, in fact, to reinforce the distinction between the films’ recognizable stars, rich in connotative resonances, and the faceless performers who peopled their backgrounds. This was already, within the studio system, one effect of the division of labor between stars, character actors, and extras, and of the long-standing recourse to typecasting in the filling in of backgrounds. In films like

*Call Northside 777* and *Boomerang*, the recognizability of performers declined with the size of their parts—as we moved into the texture of crowds or community, and sometimes saw “real” non-actors in these contexts—but this was true of most Hollywood films anyways.

Herb Tank, who elsewhere heralded *Naked City* and *House on 92nd Street* for their use of real-looking performers in small parts,<sup>22</sup> condemned *The Iron Curtain* for employing actors outside the pool of recognizable character actors and bit players. (In fact, filmographies confirm that most of those playing small parts in *The Iron Curtain* were prolific, hard-working bit players.) This, he suggested, made it more difficult for audiences to recognize the contrived, fictional character of the film. Bowsley Crowther’s two *New York Times* pieces on *The Iron Curtain*, which sharply criticized the film for being propagandistic, singled out its casting of unattractive character actors to play the roles of minor Soviets in the film.<sup>23</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck’s lengthy response to Crowther noted that “we could hardly see fit to use our handsomest character actors, but rest assured that the players we selected flattered their prototypes.”<sup>24</sup> In his separate review of *Iron Curtain*, Tank argued once again that the use of unfamiliar faces made performers “more acceptable as Soviet agents,” presumably because audiences had no prior sympathy with them. At the same time, the weaknesses of *Iron Curtain*, for Tank, had just as much to do with its typecasting of its leading performers, which exploited their familiarity and the resonances of their previous roles: “June Havoc, for example, had to make little change in her characterization of the Dragon Lady type in *Intrigue* to that of Karanova, the slinky blond spy, in *Curtain*.”<sup>25</sup>

At the end of the day, the *Daily Worker*’s condemnation of the semi-documentary project could not successfully resolve its own incoherences. If stylistic features like sharper location photography and the use of unfamiliar actors, once hailed as ways of seeking after truth, were now condemned as tools of deception, this hardly led to calls for a highly theatricalized, self-reflexive filmmaking laying bare its own devices. Ultimately, it was *The Iron Curtain*’s message which condemned the film in the newspaper’s eyes, and the campaign against it moved away from questions of style and form to the coordination of public protest against the film’s war-mongering character. On May 21, 1948, the *Daily Worker* again turned to an ostensibly independent organization—the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship—for reports on the nationwide campaign to picket screenings of *Iron Curtain*. Alongside the coalitions of “clergymen, civic leaders, YWCA officials and labor leaders” who joined in these protests, local Wallace for President Committees were prominent in the demonstrations, according to the *Worker*. David Platt’s report on these campaigns offered an unexpected comparison: “Not since the opening of the anti-Negro film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 has an American movie encountered such widespread opposition from the decent people of the country. *The Iron Curtain* is even more vicious than D. W. Griffith’s notorious lynch film because it propagandizes for a war that can lead to the total destruction of human life.”<sup>26</sup>

The release of *The Iron Curtain* constituted a milestone in the postwar unraveling of the progressive coalition that had nourished the wartime documentary and



embraced, however reservedly, the postwar semi-documentary. *The Iron Curtain* was inseparable from the broader conjuncture into which it was released, but this in no way diminishes its own, important role in forcing and revealing political fault-lines in and out of Hollywood. Milton Krims's self-justificatory account of writing *The Iron Curtain's* screenplay, in the pages of the *Screen Writer*, signaled both the change of political line at that magazine and the new sorts of political retrenchment that had settled in by late 1948:

I will close where I started—with reference to my conscience. It is not every writer who makes Pravda and a by-line article by Ilya Ehrenberg. Nor is it every picture that brings mass picketing and riots to otherwise peaceful American streets. I'm rather pleased I wrote *The Iron Curtain*. Once and for all it was proven to me that the Communist who demands for himself all the rights of free speech is unwilling to grant them to anyone else, especially his opposition. Up where I come from, everybody has a chance to say his own piece the way he sees it. And if it makes for confusion—it also makes for free men.<sup>27</sup>

Outside the *Daily Worker*—in film periodicals like *Hollywood Quarterly* or the *Screen Writer*, national magazines such as *Harper's*, *Commentary*, and *Life*, and academic journals including *American Quarterly* and *Public Opinion Quarterly*—a rich debate over the direction of postwar cinema transpired between 1945 and 1950. Within this debate, the semi-documentary was a privileged point of reference, but a set of broader themes brought unity to a diverse corpus of analyses and polemical interventions. In order of declining generality and popularity, these themes included the following: 1) the role of Hollywood films in the adaptation of the American people to life under postwar conditions; 2) the trend in certain American films of the time toward on-location filming and documentary realism; 3) the widespread use within films of psychological themes, and of psychiatrists or psychoanalysts as major narrative figures; and 4) the popularity, in postwar films, of first-person narration and the use of the “subjective” camera.

Seemingly disparate, these issues all came to turn around the cinema's status and potential as an instrument of socially useful knowledge, as what Tony Bennett and others might call a “civic technology.”<sup>28</sup> In our time, on-location shooting and first-person point-of-view shooting may divide the semi-documentary procedural from the film noir. In the immediate postwar period, both were viewed as technologically mediated tools for scientific investigation (of social environments or psychological realities, respectively).<sup>29</sup> It was an article of faith among progressive postwar thinkers that the wartime collaboration between Hollywood and the institutions of wartime public education had produced a model of civic-minded filmmaking appropriate to postwar life.<sup>30</sup> In 1945 and 1946, the liberal left still believed that enlightened expertise, mobilized and mediated by the institutions of government, might be employed within the production of fiction films. The formal dilemma posed here was that of how the films themselves might be “institutional”—that is, how they might both embody and represent the workings of enlightened postwar institutions.

Near the end of his final assault on the Hollywood postwar semi-documentary, Herb Tank noted in *The Daily Worker* that “of the three most recent Hollywood ‘documentaries,’ two of them had as their purpose the glorifying of government agencies.”<sup>31</sup> No feature of the Hollywood semi-documentary film has clouded its reputation more than its celebration of the state apparatus, from the FBI of *House on 92nd Street* through less conventionally heroic bodies like the Treasury Department (*T-Men*, 1947) and the U.S. Post Office (*Appointment with Danger*, 1951). It is easy to diagnose, in the semi-documentary film’s institutional voices and upholding of government authority, both a reterritorialization of film noir’s oneiric disorder and an ideological foundation for the militarized Cold War state.

Nevertheless, the use of institutional procedures to frame the semi-documentary had loose grounding in the faith of wartime progressives in forms of scientific knowledge. The commitment to rationalism had been one basis of the left’s antipathy to fascism; it persisted in postwar progressive suspicion of the emotionalism which marked thrillers like *The Big Sleep*, a tendency denounced by Communist cultural critic V. J. Jerome as typical of the “Brute-Cult” of mid-1940s cinema.<sup>32</sup> A rationalist project for postwar cinema imagined fiction films engaged in an ongoing transfer of knowledge between the most innovative of mid-century intellectual disciplines (like psychiatry or sociology) and the moviegoing public.<sup>33</sup> Set against this vision, however, the scope and accomplishment of the postwar semi-documentary film could well appear limited. Virtually all the semi-documentaries of the postwar period revolved around public institutions, but these were almost never the innovative institutions of wartime or postwar social science. *House on 92nd Street* and *13 Rue Madeleine* focused on the FBI and Office of Strategic Services, glorifying relatively old-fashioned sorts of undercover work. *Boomerang*, *Call Northside 777*, and *Naked City* likewise located “expertise” at the lowest, most local levels of institutionalized authority and in longstanding forms of dogged professionalism. By the late 1940s, when stories featuring contemporary federal institutions were more clearly predominant, the semi-documentary offered little more than low-budget variations on the police procedural (such as *State Department: File 649*, or *Port of New York*, both 1949).

If the institutional focus of the semi-documentary sprang in part from the faith in professionalized knowledge, it came, as well, from the earnest efforts of (mostly) progressive filmmakers to produce films that exalted collective over individual action. Writer-producer Lester Koenig (later blacklisted) was among many progressives who hailed the wartime battle film’s submersion of individual characterization within visions of group solidarity.<sup>34</sup> This dimension of the Popular Front war film is well enshrined within histories of the period, but the effort to pursue the battle film’s collectivist vision within the institutional thriller is less obvious. In the police procedural semi-documentary of the late 1940s, as Frank Krutnik has noted, “the individual serves as a necessary, but necessarily regulated, part of the system.”<sup>35</sup> The emotionally flat heroes or male couples of institutional procedurals like *Appointment with Danger* or *Union Station* (1950) may seem weak inheritors of

the battle film's dryly determined collectives, but both betrayed the mid-1940s suspicion of sentimental individualism.

In 1947, Jay Richard Kennedy wrote, in the pages of the *Screen Writer* of his work with the United States Treasury on a semi-documentary film chronicling the struggle against worldwide narcotics smuggling. *Assigned to Treasury* (released in 1948 as *To the Ends of the Earth*) was directed by Robert Stevenson, who later accepted the much-proffered assignment to direct *I Married a Communist* for RKO. Sidney Buchman, the producer of *To the Ends of the Earth*, was blacklisted in 1951, and Kennedy himself pursued a varied career which took him from the Republican Brigades in Spain to a position, in 1966, as vice-president of Frank Sinatra's business concerns. Over almost six densely argued (and pedantic) pages of "An Approach to Pictures," Kennedy described his attempts to write this film in a manner that balanced the individual-centered story of heroism with those lessons about environment and collectivity put forward by the best wartime documentaries. Remarkably, Kennedy described having undertaken a study of eighty feature films in preparation for the assignment, discovering in the process that "the prewar film technique seemed to concern itself most actively with the Great Man, the individual who bends all situation to his fabulous will."<sup>36</sup> Kennedy opposed this "technique" to that which he discovered in the documentary films made during the war:

The other technique, the wartime "documentary" like the prewar Hollywood technique referred to above, likewise taught me many important things. How to find people and events in their native habitat (among other things, by actually bringing a camera there!), the power of understatement, of matter-of-factness, the attention to small, but exciting detail which creates the illusion of reality, faith in the dramatic values implicit in the environment (dramatic situation), which prevents gilding the lily or distorting it. All of this proved invaluable.<sup>37</sup>

In his script for *Assigned to Treasury*, Kennedy claimed to have developed an approach to character that synthesized the lessons of prewar fiction and the wartime documentary. His "documentary characterization" was a "technique of unfolding character which is as dominant as the authentic factual revelation of dramatic situation and strikes the same tone and matter-of-fact spirit."<sup>38</sup> "Documentary characterization" was intended as a means of producing knowledge about character, but its realization followed the stylistic paths of understatement and diminished tone. Revealingly, Kennedy acknowledged that a key requirement of the "fact-drama" method of storytelling was its desexualization: "Among other solutions, in the middle section of *Assigned to Treasury*, the girl is totally absent. She is kept alive in the story only by her bearing upon it."<sup>39</sup> In *Assigned to Treasury*, as in the semi-documentary more generally, the puritanical resistance to melodramatic intensities seemed to reduce main characters to the institutional settings in which they worked. This flattening of character to setting could be embraced, then, as a way of producing knowledge about character, as one more technique in the post-war project of progressive instruction.<sup>40</sup>

This flatness was never total, however. At the heart of the semi-documentary was the tension between its restricted institutional frame and the rich possibilities offered by narrative worlds outside the studio backlot. This tension does not map easily onto that between right and left, as if the semi-documentary film enacted the struggle between an ascendant security state and a populist, neorealist opening onto social life. The incoherence of the semi-documentary resides in the ways in which, at least initially, it set two sorts of progressive inquiry against each other. One form of inquiry was invested in the rational procedures of the liberal state, the other in the populist exploration of urban lifeworlds. The most perceptive postwar writing on the semi-documentary worked to delineate this tension. In 1948, Siegfried Kracauer devoted one long paragraph of “Those Movies with a Message” to *Boomerang*, the most widely discussed of all the postwar semi-documentaries. *Boomerang* was, perhaps, the least institutionally centered of films within the semi-documentary cycle, but it cast the relationship of hero-individual to broader social environment in a manner typical of the others. However much *Boomerang*’s opening framed its story as that of the hero’s movement within an institutional context, the broader social world of the film opened up to swallow both. “Along with the case itself,” Kracauer wrote, “the whole social texture from which it emerges is brought to the fore.”<sup>41</sup> The following year, Parker Tyler noted how so many American films of the period, from *Citizen Kane* through *Boomerang*, had become documentary through their employment of investigative narratives that followed the deductive pathways of scientific discovery, in a movement Tyler labeled a “journalism of science.”<sup>42</sup> In *Call Northside 777*, *T-Men*, the *Naked City* and most of the semi-documentaries that followed, the institutional frame was one from which characters departed. As narratives got under way and characters followed their investigative paths into Kracauer’s “social textures,” the richness and diversity of those textures were always at odds with the solemn flatness of the institutional point of departure.

One of the last public statements by film publicist and distributor Noel Meadow took the form of a press release published by the *New York Times* in 1961:

Noel Meadow has formed Survival Pictures, a new company that will offer silent and sound films in 16 mm and 8 mm for use in fall-out shelters. The films will be approved by an advisory group of leaders in all walks of life and will be suited for the morale of underground inhabitants—when and if. Claustrophobia being the principal consideration, the pictures will be composed of outdoor subjects and travelogues, in addition to messages by world figures.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly satirical, Meadow’s announcement simultaneously targeted the absurdities of both Cold War survivalist preparation and elite-driven civic instruction. Like all of Meadow’s public interventions, this one was coy about his precise political allegiances. In its mockery of enlightened advisory groups, however, and in its vision of pacifying travelogues, it revealed how cynically the project of quasi-official documentaries (and, indeed, of novel exhibition venues) had come to be viewed, two decades after Meadow had embraced the form in the early years of World War II.

musical styles, the film casts the hard bop combo and the big band theme music in a dialectical conflict, emphasizing two counterpoised kinds of music and by extension two aspects of postwar urban life—with the freedom and artistry of hard bop defended against the sleaze and demagoguery associated with Bernstein's big band score. A similar, but reversed structure can be seen in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959, dir. Robert Wise, screenplay Abraham Polonsky). There the passion of a blues performed in a nightclub by Johnny (Sidney Poitier) is made to seem expressive of his anger at being trapped by the exploitative labor relations of the mob-controlled nightclub industry. But that diegetic performance is all but explicitly contrasted to the meditative modern jazz score composed by John Lewis, which, in its extensive use during long shots that place the film's isolated characters in stark environments that dwarf them, is implicitly aligned with a narratorial perspective whose knowledge and wisdom exceeds the limits of the characters. Coincidentally, both films focus on the dangers of bigotry and implicitly cast their anti-racist stance against what by contrast appears an outworn populism. In *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the straightened circumstances of the ex-cop Burke (James Begley) and the background of Earle Slater (Robert Ryan) among impoverished tenant farmers turns out to be less significant than Slater's resentment and racism. Similarly, in its anti-populist concern about demagoguery, *Sweet Smell* resembles *Dark Passage* and *In a Lonely Place*, films often placed in the noir canon that stand out for their absence of any intimation of class exploitation. So, too, *Anatomy of a Murder* alludes to the class backgrounds of its major characters, but prefers to see them as sources of differing cultural styles and views its implicitly working class characters as the representatives of the most robust and dangerous social forces.

#### CHAPTER 7 — DOCUMENTARY REALISM AND THE POSTWAR LEFT

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to Robert Read for research assistance.

1. Epigraph from Noel Meadow, "The Documentary Film Era," *Screen Writer* 2, no. 2 (1946): 32. Meadow, whose original name was Leon Blumenfeld, began staging his own plays at the Ninety-second Street YMHA in New York in 1926, at the age of eighteen. In the early 1930s, he wrote celebrity gossip columns for such magazines and tabloid newspapers as *Broadway Magazine*, *Hot-Cha*, *Scandal*, *Broadway Tattler*, and *Broadway Brevities*, while producing more plays and hosting radio broadcasts.
2. See, for example, "Screen News Here and in Hollywood," *New York Times*, April 20, 1942, 17; "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, September 7, 1943, 20; "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, June 10, 1944, 12.
3. On Meadow's distribution of films see the various advertisements in the *Screen Writer*, but also "News of the Screen," *New York Times*, July 24, 1946, 24; "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, September 25, 1948, 11.
4. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London: Verso, 1997).
5. This period in the history of the *Screen Writer* is described in Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 250. From 1943 to 1946, Noel Meadow was an associate editor of the New York-based trade paper *Writers Journal*, assuming the position of

managing editor in 1946. (*Writers Journal* seems to have ceased publication in 1949, shortly after a change in management which saw Meadow's name disappear from its masthead.)

6. See Noel Meadow and Harold L. Ober, "Adults Not Admitted," *Screen Writer* 2, no. 6 (1946): 21; for a fuller discussion of *The House That I Live In*, see Art Simon's chapter in this volume.

7. Wesley F. Pratzner, "What Has Happened to the Documentary Film?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1947): 397.

8. See, for example, William Lafferty, "A Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary Film in Hollywood, 1945–1948," *Velvet Light Trap* 20 (1983): 22–26; and Steven N. Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 4 (1999): 68–85.

9. The articles in the series, all by Herb Tank, are the following: "New Documentary Look in Hollywood," *Daily Worker*, March 16, 1948, 12; "Today's Films: More on Hollywood Documentary Style," *Daily Worker*, March 18, 1948, 12; "Today's Films: Holly'd On-the-Spot films conceal truth," *Daily Worker*, March 19, 1948, 12.

10. This characterization of the *Daily Worker* is based on my own observation, but see, for further confirmation and discussion, Henry D. Fetter, "The Party Line and the Color Line: The American Communist Party, the *Daily Worker*, and Jackie Robinson," *Journal of Sport History* 28, no. 3 (2003): 375–402.

11. See, in order of mention, "Cagney Spy Thriller Goes Haywire After Fine Start," *Daily Worker*, January 20, 1947, 11; "'Call Northside 777' Factual News Yarn," *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1948, 12; "'T-Men'—Tough, Exciting Movie," *Daily Worker*, January 23, 1948, 12; "'Kiss of Death' is Tough, Skilful Melodrama," *Daily Worker*, September 8, 1947, 11; "'The Naked City' Good Job, Well Done," *Daily Worker*, March 5, 1948, 12.

12. "Today's Film: 'Call Northside 777' Factual News Yarn," *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1948, 12.

13. "'T-Men'—Tough, Exciting Movie," 12.

14. "Fox to Make Film on Russian Spying," *New York Times*, April 10, 1947, 35.

15. "PCA Blasts *Iron Curtain*," *Daily Worker*, February 23, 1948, 12.

16. "Stars Speak Up for the Bill of Rights," *Daily Worker*, March 16, 1948, 12.

17. "New Documentary Look in Hollywood," 12.

18. *Ibid.*

19. "More on Hollywood Documentary Style," 12.

20. *Ibid.*

21. "Today's Films: Holly'd On-the-Spot Films Conceal Truth," 12.

22. See "'The Naked City' Good Job Well Done" and "New Documentary Look in Hollywood."

23. "'The *Iron Curtain*, Anti-Communist Film, Has Premiere Here at the Roxy Theatre," *New York Times*, May 13, 1948, 31; "'The *Iron Curtain*': New Roxy Film Poses a Question: Is It Being Raised or Lowered?" *New York Times*, May 16, 1948, X1.

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24. “Zanuck Defends ‘The *Iron Curtain*,’” *New York Times*, May 30, 1948, X5.
25. “Today’s Film: ‘*Iron Curtain*’ Drops on Roxy,” *Daily Worker*, May 13, 1948, 12.
26. “Nation-Wide Picketing of ‘*Iron Curtain*,’” *Daily Worker*, May 21, 1948, 12.
27. Milton Krims, “*Iron Curtain* Diary,” *Screen Writer* 4, no. 3 (1948): 1–15, 32.
28. Tony Bennett, “Museums, Cultural Objecthood, and the Governance of the Social,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 521–547.
29. See, for example, Parker Tyler, “Documentary Technique in Film Fiction,” *American Quarterly* 1 (1949): 99–115; and Joseph P. Brinton, J.P., “Subjective Camera or Subjective Audience?” *Hollywood Quarterly* 2 (1947): 359–366.
30. See Lester Koenig, “Back from the Wars,” *Screen Writer* 1 (1945): 23–29; Robert Shaw, “New Horizons in Hollywood,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1946): 71–77.
31. “Today’s Films: Holly’d On-the-Spot Films Conceal Truth,” 12.
32. See, among many other denunciations of the brutality of postwar cinema, John Houseman, “Today’s Hero: A Review,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 2 (1947): 161–163. Official condemnation of the postwar brute-cult may be found in V. J. Jerome, *Culture in a Changing World: A Marxist Approach* (New York: New Century Publications, 1947), especially pages 26–30. See, as well, the useful discussion of Jerome in Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
33. See, again, Shaw, “New Horizons in Hollywood.”
34. Koenig, “Back from the Wars.”
35. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 204.
36. Jay Richards Kennedy, “An Approach to Pictures,” *Screen Writer* 3, no. 1 (1947): 6.
37. “An Approach to Pictures,” 6.
38. *Ibid.*, 7.
39. *Ibid.* This recalls the possibly apocryphal statement by Columbia studio head Harry Cohn, to the effect that a documentary film was a film without women; if there was one woman in a film, it was a semi-documentary.
40. In fact, the flatness of Dick Powell’s performance in *To The Ends of the Earth* (as *Assigned to Treasury* was known upon its release) differed little from the stoic, hardboiled tone of so many of his postwar roles. The film itself offers a richly varied series of picturesque, orientaling settings, from Shanghai to Cuba and Egypt, and a set of secondary, villainous characters more typical of a Mr. Moto film than of other postwar semi-documentaries.
41. Siegfried Kracauer, “Those Movies with a Message,” *Harper’s* 196, no. 1176 (May 1948): 568.
42. Tyler, “Documentary Technique in Film Fiction,” 115.
43. “By Way of Report,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1961, X7.