

**A POLITICAL  
COMPANION  
TO AMERICAN  
FILM**



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# Trumbo, James Dalton

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**A**uthors sometimes become famous in genres they do not pursue or prefer. Dalton Trumbo did not initially intend to be a screenwriter. He started his writing career in the Thirties as a journalist and in 1935 published *Eclipse*, his first novel. It was a modest success. A year later, his *Washington Jitters*, a satire of political bureaucracy, also got fair reviews.

His antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939) received the dual honor of a National Book Award and serialization in *The Daily Worker*. For Trumbo, the path was clear—he was going to be a novelist. Even after the failure of his last complete novel, *The Remarkable Andrew* (1940), he never abandoned the form. He wrote screenplays to support his “serious writing,” and soon became the highest paid writer in Hollywood’s history. Had his lucrative career not been held up by the blacklist, he might have been free to pursue his goal.

Trumbo was seldom secretive about his political activities. While a member of the Communist Party and on the council of the Screen Writers Guild, he edited the radical magazine, *The Screen Writer*. He wrote speeches for liberal candidates in California, like Will Rogers, Jr. When the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) summoned him in 1947, he refused to give names of other suspected communists. Along with other members of the Hollywood Ten, HUAC cited him for contempt of Congress and sentenced him to ten months in a federal prison. In 1953, he maintained that HUAC attacked Hollywood “to destroy trade unions, to paralyze antifascist political action, and to remove progressive content from films.”

Although the Committee couldn’t find any communist doctrine in Trumbo’s films,

it may have sensed their content. *Kitty Foyle*’s eponymous working-class heroine painfully discovers the fallacy of marrying across class lines. She is fresh to her superiors and the upper-class women she waits on, and angrily confronts her brahmin in-laws. Despite its occasional swipes at the rich, *Kitty Foyle* (1940) was no further left than other New Deal-era films, like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *Our Daily Bread* (1934). Trumbo’s wartime films *Tender Comrade* (1943), *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944) extol collective action and steer away from the racial stereotypes of many war films of that era. Ironically, the same U.S. government that had commended the latter two films for their “patriotism” seriously listened to testimonies of people like Lela Rogers, Ginger’s mother. She claimed that in *Tender Comrade* her daughter had been given “communist” lines like “Share and share alike. That’s democracy.”

During the blacklist years, Trumbo wrote B-movie scripts, seldom receiving more than five percent of his former fees. In one eighteen-month period, he produced twelve scripts for producers such as the King brothers and developed a reputation for quick turnarounds and free rewrites. He wrote under many pseudonyms, such as Sally Stubblefield, Les Crutchfield, and Arnold Schulman, and often doctored scripts that other writers

had written. In 1956, the year that the Academy barred blacklisted artists from receiving awards, his screenplay for *The Brave One* won the Academy Award under the pseudonym Robert Rich.

In 1949, Trumbo knew that he was facing hard times, so he tried to make money at "serious writing." He had his black comic play, *The Biggest Thief in Town*, produced. It received bad reviews and closed after a short run in Boston and Philadelphia, although British audiences liked it enough to give it a two-year run. He returned to scriptwriting, believing it "hack work" he had to endure to support his family. Even after he'd broken the blacklist with *Exodus* (1960) and *Spartacus* (1960), he never changed his opinion.

Was it really hack work? Unfortunately, much of it was. *The Sandpiper* (1965), *The Last Sunset* (1961), and even *The Brave One* (1956) are forgettable, if not downright awful films, and Trumbo knew it. After hustling for thirteen years, he seemed organically incapable of turning down a script offer. But even some of his flawed films—*Exodus*, for example—contain scenes that are still effective today.

When Otto Preminger asked him to write the screenplay, Trumbo readily agreed. It didn't matter that some members of the left criticized Leon Uris's novel for its Zionist politics; Trumbo felt his accreditation in the film could possibly break the blacklist. He was right.

Even though the film's pace is sluggish and its casting often ludicrous, the screenplay has several powerful scenes that show Trumbo's skill with characterization. A hardened Jewish terrorist cracks when his commander forces him to confess his humiliating job at Auschwitz. The young woman, Karen, finds her catatonic father in a hospital in a silent, brilliantly restrained scene. When the British bar the Jews from leaving Cyprus, the refugees take a stand, and the resulting confrontation is more effective than the superficial action scenes that end the film.

Not surprisingly, Trumbo's best post-

blacklist films portray a rebellious individual struggling (and losing) against a hostile social system, as in *Spartacus*, *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), *The Fixer* (1968), and *Papillon* (1973). But in other films, he seemed out of sync with his audience's needs. His political screenplays lack subtlety and are often clotted with exposition. In the JFK assassination film, *Executive Action* (1973), the characters break up the narrative to expound conspiracy theories. *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971), which he wrote and directed, was a box office and critical failure because its powerful antiwar message never quite balanced its unrelieved gloom. It could have used humor or ironic distance (which the book also lacked) or even the raw energy of his World War II films.

When Trumbo did use irony, he often applied it heavy-handedly. In a scene from *Exodus*, the Jewish commando Ari, disguised as a British officer, baits an anti-Semitic British officer. "These Jews," he says, standing nose-to-nose with him, "You can smell them a mile away."

While Trumbo's sense of humor failed him (or was curbed) in many of his films, his letters, pamphlets, and novels are rife with acid wit, even shameless sarcasm. Sometimes he used these literary tools to persuade or shame political opponents, but more often he just used them to entertain. His satiric novel, *Washington Jitters*, is about a sign painter whom a journalist mistakes for a powerful federal bureaucrat. Passing ingenuously through a web of confused assumptions, subterfuge, and misapprehensions, he becomes a feared and revered figure, much like Chance Gardiner in Jerzy Kosinski's novel, *Being There*. It doesn't matter that the politicians are caricatures, or that the novel's ending is anticlimatic—its absurd discussions and plot twists effectively deflate official pomposity and intellectual pretension.

The letters published in *Additional Dialogue: Letters of Dalton Trumbo, 1942–1962* are as acerbic as *The Letters of Sean O'Casey*, and perceptive as those in *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters*

and Commentary. *Additional Dialogue* shows how he used wily humor and hyperbole to survive during the blacklist. To stave off creditors, he complained vociferously about product quality, and referred to the phone company as "the thuggery." He wrote exuberant, Rabelaisian letters to his children, advising them about sex. In 1958, he outlined a wild scheme to Albert Maltz to expose the identity of Robert Rich on national TV (it never happened). When asked by the editor of *The Nation* for a list of topics for an article, he supplied thirty ideas, several of which are witty aphorisms that stand on their own.

17. Again: the acquiescent American.

His marvelous and meek acceptance of shoddy workmanship, bad telephone service, involved tax forms, community drives, official pomposity, absurd laws, stop lights at three in the morning on silent and deserted street corners. There are practically no acts of rebellion.

The correspondence exhibits his many facets, perhaps more incisively than any autobiography might have. Trumbo never wrote literary criticism, but a letter to fellow blacklisted Ring Lardner, Jr. about his novel *The Ecstasy of Owen Muir* shows he knew its rules: "The involvement of passion in the process is extremely important. Without passion, which is to say anger, you are likely to present the author with your findings in a humble and apologetic fashion." The letters also reveal contradictory sides to his personality. When approached by director Herbert Biberman to write an independent script in 1951 (presumably *Salt of the Earth*), he declined for monetary reasons. "I am...not interested in pamphlets, speeches, or progressive motion pictures. I cannot...hypothecate even a month for any project that does not contain the prospect of an immediate and substantial sum." He could not stick to this resolution. Five years later, he wrote *The Devil in the Book*, a pamphlet supporting the fourteen California Smith Act defendants.

Trumbo never stopped writing what he considered legitimate fiction. He spent his last sixteen years working on the curious

novel *The Night of the Aurochs* (published posthumously), a psychological study of an unrepentant Nazi named Grieben. It survives today as ten complete chapters, a synopsis, and scattered notes—an eloquent, confused fragment that tells as much about Trumbo's style of work as his changing beliefs on evil. Grieben reminisces about his youth in Germany and his evolution from a Nazi sympathizer to a commandant at Auschwitz. The opening chapters poignantly show his sexual awakenings and attitude toward women. Trumbo's notes reveal plans to show how German mysticism, not political economy, fashioned men like Grieben and gave birth to the "irrational" anti-Semitic Nazi state. His friend Michael Wilson was so impressed with the work, he wrote:

I wish some way could be found to prevent you from taking on more film work until you have finished the novel. It would be folly to rely on your own character for this essential discipline, because the mere jingling of coins triggers a conditioned reflex in your arthritic write [*sic*] hand.

Despite Trumbo's strengths and weaknesses as a screenwriter, he should be commended for refusing to cooperate with the witch hunters, while colleagues like Elia Kazan and Edward Dmytryk caved in to them to preserve their careers. Trumbo paid dearly for his courageous stand throughout the Fifties and probably realized it prohibited him from writing the masterpiece for which history would remember him. Although he was proud of *Johnny Got His Gun* and a handful of competent screenplays, his letters imply he felt unfulfilled, as if he'd been denied the mantle of a Hemingway or Dos Passos. He never realized that in revealing himself through these intense, quirky letters, he'd written an eloquent testimony, if not the masterpiece itself.—Peter Bates

#### RECOMMENDED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cook, Bruce. *Dalton Trumbo*. NY: Scribner, 1977.