

Side of the Angels: Dalton Trumbo, the Hollywood Trade Press, and the Blacklist

by *Tim Palmer*

Abstract: This essay recontextualizes Dalton Trumbo, HUAC, and the blacklist by analyzing Trumbo's personal archives, his writings in the Hollywood trade press, his work in the Screen Writers' Guild as editor of its official journal, The Screen Writer, and his pivotal role in the anti-HUAC debates before he was imprisoned.

I can be pretty sure that the only two people who will read my stuff with interest two decades hence will be my kids. . . . But I want them to be able to say, "Good or bad, he had something to say and he said it; he lined himself on the side of the angels at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular to do so."

Trumbo, "On Publishing a Book," *The Clipper*¹

On September 18, 1947, an official court summons was filed with the U.S. Marshall's Criminal Department in Los Angeles, obliging Dalton Trumbo to appear before a special panel of the House of Representatives.² Along with eighteen other Hollywood notables, Trumbo was subsequently called to the stand and formally investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Chaired by J. Parnell Thomas, HUAC sought to establish the influence of communist subversives in the West Coast filmmaking community. After the conclusion of the first round of hearings, on November 24, 1947, Trumbo and nine other "unfriendly witnesses" were cited for contempt of Congress. Days later, a group of film studio executives and producers issued the infamous Waldorf Statement, which declared categorically that the Hollywood Ten—as Trumbo and his associates had come to be known—would no longer find employment in the film industry.³

After all his court appeals had been rejected, Trumbo was finally jailed in the federal prison at Ashland, Kentucky, in June 1950. He emerged nine months later to find himself blacklisted and disenfranchised in Hollywood.

Trumbo's fall was all the more spectacular in light of his earlier achievements. Moving between studios in the 1930s, Trumbo published short stories and novels while writing a series of well-received screenplays, the basis for such films as *A Man to Remember* (Garson Kanin, 1938) and *Five Came Back* (John Farrow, 1939). His breakthrough project, however, was the script for *Kitty Foyle* (Sam Wood, 1940), a difficult adaptation of a popular novel for which Trumbo received an Academy

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Award nomination and Ginger Rogers, the film's star, won the award for best actress. As Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner put it in their recent survey of radical artists in Hollywood, "What made Trumbo special was his ability to take perfectly ordinary material and make something different, more emphatic, more humane."⁴ Trumbo soon became one of Hollywood's most high profile, preeminent screenwriters, eventually going on to sign a contract at MGM worth a high salary plus a cutting-edge fee of \$75,000 per script. This was certainly prestige for an artist who began his career, in the 1920s, by dropping out of college due to poverty and working as a bread wrapper in a bakery.

Although Trumbo did manage to procure screenwriting jobs after his imprisonment, it was work carried out in vastly reduced circumstances, involving pseudonymous scripts and poorly paid, often disreputable production deals.⁵ But however his professional decline is reckoned, Trumbo's postwar career demonstrates that HUAC fulfilled its objective: to ruin and marginalize those in the film industry who were suspected of ideological malpractice.

Indeed, for the writers who have detailed this period in Hollywood history, Trumbo often serves as the locus classicus of the HUAC martyr. He is typically depicted as an uncompromising crusader, a figure attacked for his ferocious intellectual convictions. Gordon Kahn's influential 1972 account of the blacklist, for example, refers to Trumbo at one point as a "veritable ring-tailed tiger."⁶ Peter Hanson, whose praise is equally stirring twenty-nine years later, characterizes him as "a fervent artist and a true American . . . [who] fought the good fight."⁷ No doubt this treatment stems from a broader tendency that Jeffrey Smith has pointed out, in which histories of the period veer toward overt dramatization: casting the friendly HUAC witnesses (especially Adolphe Menjou) as cynical villains, Thomas as an insidious and paranoid interrogator, and the Ten as hapless victims. Even Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund's *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, one of the most exhaustively researched treatments of the HUAC trials (whose narrative Smith does not criticize) cannot resist lapsing into theatrical metaphors; Jack Warner's heated testimony, for example, is headed "Act One, Scene One."⁸

Without disputing the hysterical nature of the HUAC period itself, a premise of this essay is that while a substantial secondary literature has been produced on Trumbo's case, much of it has recreated the period by privileging dramatic editorial intervention over salient historical contexts. The specifics of Trumbo's history, in addition, have typically been obscured; he is discussed, commonly, as simply being emblematic or representative of the Ten's overarching position.

Contemporary HUAC scholarship, in fact, has often drawn conclusions about Trumbo without delving rigorously into the extant primary documents. Two prominent accounts underline this historiographic treatment. Victor Navasky's *Naming Names*, a leading example, draws principally on memoirs and post-facto debates for its narrative of events. The book, moreover, is structured around overtly didactic section titles, such as "PART III: VICTIMS" and "PART IV: LESSONS." Bruce Cook's biography of Trumbo is equally reliant on a series of interviewees' long-distant memories of the era, a common methodology in histories of the blacklist.⁹ And although both Navasky and Cook cite the archives of the Wisconsin Center

for Film and Theater Research as a source, neither book contains footnotes and, crucially, neither deals with the trade press in any detail. In the published material that negotiates Trumbo's extensive legacy of primary documents, only his correspondence has received sustained analysis.¹⁰

My purpose here is to open up new ways of contextualizing Trumbo both before and during the HUAC investigations. Following Smith's pioneering work, which by way of trade documents and industrial imperatives explores Trumbo's pivotal role in the eventual end of the blacklist, we can also gauge more closely Trumbo's importance to the *advent* of HUAC: as a long-term leftist campaigner whose political agitations within the Hollywood screenwriting community increasingly involved him in professional conflicts both internal and external. To do this, I will assess Trumbo's earlier, hitherto-overlooked publications, as well as commentaries deposited in his personal archives. Such documents enable us to address a vital question that remains only hazily answered with respect to the film industry: Why Trumbo? What specific aspects of his career and reputation in the Hollywood press precipitated his disastrous involvement with Thomas's committee? To situate HUAC anew, I will consider Trumbo not only as a scenarist but also as a prolific writer for the Hollywood trade journals of the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, my focus will be on those periods when Trumbo's principal activity was working for the trade press rather than for the studios.

What this approach reveals is the extent to which, from Trumbo's earliest days as a professional commentator, he had an aggressive, controversial, and often politically inflammatory agenda. The key areas of this discourse that I will address are (1) Trumbo's contributions to the *Hollywood Spectator* and other journals between 1931 and 1935; (2) his role from 1945 to 1947 as editor of *The Screen Writer*, the official organ of the Screen Writers' Guild; and (3) the final pieces Trumbo wrote or inspired that attacked both the Screen Writers' Guild and HUAC, before he was jailed in 1950. Analysis of these neglected sources supplies vital contexts to Trumbo's professional decline following his investigation by HUAC. Indeed, Trumbo's outspoken work as a rhetorician and agitator in the trade press details more explicitly his position at the heart of the ideological disputes that raged in Hollywood as HUAC came to power.

Trumbo's Early Affiliations. Having relocated from Colorado to California in 1925, twenty-year-old Dalton Trumbo abandoned college with hopes of becoming a professional writer. Pressing financial needs, however, soon made him take a job at the Davis Perfection bakery in Los Angeles. During this unsettled period, Trumbo also began to compose and submit movie reviews to *Film Spectator*, an early West Coast cinema journal.

The incisiveness of Trumbo's criticism soon led to his recognition, and rise. So impressed was he by the young writer's talents, in fact, that in January 1931, Welford Beaton, the managing editor of *Film Spectator*, personally approached Trumbo to offer him a salaried post as associate editor of the magazine.¹¹ Trumbo accepted the position and began writing full-time, principally for Beaton but also occasionally as a freelancer for other cultural journals such as *the North American Review*. In his

spare time, Trumbo worked on his own novels; his first, *Eclipse*, was published by Dickson Books in 1935.

In 1932, the title of Beaton's journal was changed to the more regionally specific *Hollywood Spectator*. At this point, Trumbo was already a high-profile contributor, frequently receiving prominent billing on the front cover.¹² By the following year, Trumbo's name had attained even greater visibility, as his columns, showcased as featured essays, began to appear regularly toward the front of the magazine.

From the outset of Trumbo's career in print, his articles on American film and the state of the industry typically took the form of scathing attacks. Trumbo's barbed wording and style marked him as the most cutting of all of *Hollywood Spectator's* contributors; the rhetorical fluency of the young writer was undoubtedly what had drawn his managing editor's attention in the first place. By result, an irascible and defiantly uncompromising persona became apparent.

Many of his early writings centered on a dichotomy. On one hand, Trumbo expressed a fierce hostility toward Hollywood's industrial constitution, which he characterized as fundamentally corrupt. He described its upper hierarchy as consumed by an insatiable lust for dollars—a financial rapaciousness that was, moreover, endemic to U.S. big business. On the other hand, Trumbo claimed that cinema's potential as an art form remained unfulfilled. Hollywood's largely anonymous workforce, its grass roots, was where Trumbo situated the true center of filmmaking as an honest, vigorous craft.

The principal targets of Trumbo's polemics were Hollywood studio financiers and movie producers. In a 1933 piece titled "New Shirts on Showmen," for example, Trumbo condemned what he labeled Hollywood's profiteering. Nothing less than an outright conspiracy was in place, he declared, set up by motion picture executives to raise ticket prices unfairly while assuring the income of only the economic elite. Such tactics, in Trumbo's eyes, not only took advantage of the paying public but more directly compromised the position, artistic and commercial, of Hollywood's lower echelons.¹³

Even in Trumbo's best-case scenarios, studio owners were guilty of appalling mismanagement that bordered on idiocy. In one particularly portentous piece, "Thunder over Hollywood," Trumbo claimed that the moguls' inflated incomes were threatening nothing less than the foundations of the entire film profession. Corruption begat corruption, Trumbo argued, and Hollywood was nearing a brink:

As picture deficits mount to celestial heights; as movie mosques pass solemnly into receivership and bankruptcy; as Manhattan bankers grow cold at the suspicion that soon they will have to write, direct and enact pictures as well as pay the fiddler, it becomes increasingly apparent that Hollywood has gone to smash in the grand manner. . . . There are not words in the lexicon to describe the anguish which hovers over the celluloid city.¹⁴

In a subsequent article, "While Bosses Grow Fat"—which adopted the familiar communist imagery of the bloated, gloating capitalist—Trumbo developed his case further, arguing that this basic industrial inequality was leading to unfair exploitation of studio craftsmen and audiences alike.¹⁵ Underlying Trumbo's critiques, this

analytical logic persisted, dense with grave allusions and imagery, as relentless as it was pessimistic. In the *Brooklyn Eagle's Sunday Review*, Trumbo issued the Hollywood studio heads a verdict that amounted to an industrial postmortem: "One must pause to pay tribute to their early triumphs, to their late arrogance and to their present dismay. Beyond that point no man may go, for their downfall will mark the liberation of the only art medium by which the mechanical age may hope to be remembered." In *Hollywood Spectator*, Trumbo made so decisive a pledge to the masses that it was tantamount to a calling: "It is incumbent on me to speak out . . . against the West Coast Napoleons."¹⁶

Throughout this early period, Trumbo's politically charged essays positioned him as a commentator who was contemptuous of executive greed in any form, and sympathetic always to the travails of the lowly, ordinary craftsmen. Trumbo often published short industrial histories with an obvious leftist slant. In the pages of *Forum and Century*—appropriately billed as the "Magazine of Controversy"—Trumbo argued at length that it was the cynical efforts of American movie magnates to maximize revenue within their production system that had led to the ruin of writers, directors, actors, and crews. His opening address was a pugacious summation of the recent American industrial past:

It is one of the anachronisms of the current depression that the American movie magnate stands out as the only person of consequence who has gone through it without losing stature. This, of course, must be attributed to the fact that he hadn't any in the first place. Even while he wallowed in a shower of gold that seemed inexhaustible, he was credited with little more intelligence than a moderately healthy paramecium.¹⁷

The extension of such indifference was that all film laborers were merely grist for the capitalist mill, and inherently subject to the rampantly commercial instincts of the studios.

The (capitalist) "Big Business" characterized in Trumbo's overviews was, in fact, a fundamentally dangerous enterprise. Professional security and fair wages were prospects far removed from the ambitions of the cynical moguls, whose only obsession was to stockpile "bags of gold, and, through heavily veiled lids . . . [behold] with glittering eyes the profits amassed."¹⁸ But again, while Trumbo's rhetoric was flamboyant and at times indulgent, he always defended the manipulated studio hand. This motif of the vulnerable backlot artist—loyal, humble, oppressed—underpinned not only Trumbo's early writings but also his publications in the trade press in successive decades, as the professional stakes grew steadily higher.

At the same time, Trumbo's 1930s essays were not solely rebukes. In a more sympathetic vein, his writings exhorted the film industry as a whole to work toward realizing more ambitious artistic objectives based on a pared-down—and radical—mode of production. To this end, in a series of articles in *Hollywood Spectator*, Trumbo called for a common goal in Hollywood—a veritable "cinematic Renaissance." One possibility he offered was the model of the Poverty Row studios, whose efficient and proficient production methods were allegedly derived from a collective approach to creative endeavor. When costs were thus minimized, Trumbo noted, Hollywood filmmaking could pursue artistic excellence, as well as be the means for

financial profit. In addition, by drawing on the achievements of filmmakers outside Hollywood, the widely held belief that cinema was essentially debased low culture could be overhauled.¹⁹ International cinema, with the Soviets leading the field, offered ample material for Trumbo's study in this regard. In the *North American Review*, he proposed that Hollywood should look abroad for its inspiration:

There is much meat for the American director. He might profitably study Russian camera technique. . . . A little of the French grace would decorate the American scene. . . . From the Germans might be taken a lesson in cinematic honesty. Such an international stew, flavored and mixed in Hollywood's technical wonder house, could be no less successful than the native dish, and might be a marked improvement.²⁰

Thus, Hollywood's Renaissance would combine a cosmopolitan style with a group-oriented production mentality (although, unsurprisingly, Trumbo exalted the role of the scriptwriter). Such an international and—above all—collective approach would revitalize American cinema, Trumbo claimed, and as such could also inform the process of critical reception. For in a particularly contentious 1934 essay, "Independents—the Story," Trumbo concluded that in the future, when films were screened for critics, all their credits should be removed, to valorize the efforts of all those whose work is represented onscreen, rather than only the director.²¹

Of the major Hollywood studios, Trumbo singled out Warner Bros. as being most compatible with his ideals. In fact, in his regular film reviews as well as in his industrial analyses, Trumbo frequently praised Warners-produced movies for their superior content and technique. Warners was, of course, well known in the trade for its commitment to the so-called social problem film, most famously through its hits *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932), although the cycle continued into the late 1940s.²² Warner Bros. was also home to a host of high-profile leftist contract stars and directors, such as Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, John Garfield, John Huston, and William Wyler, many of whom later joined the Committee for the First Amendment, the lone official Hollywood protest group against HUAC, and most of whom featured prominently in the HUAC tribunals and fallout.²³

A leading example of Warners' material, a film that Trumbo particularly admired for its "socially-conscious" values, was the backstage musical *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933).²⁴ Central to this Cagney vehicle—which in many ways encapsulated Trumbo's attacks on Hollywood practices—is a subplot involving the film's protagonist, a workaholic musical director named Chester Kent (Cagney), who is being swindled out of his earnings by dishonest producer partners. More generally, in an article entitled "Who Can Explain the Warners?" Trumbo hailed the studio for managing to balance financial imperatives with its nurturing of film artistry. Warners, Trumbo claimed in summary, was a "magnificent crazy quilt" of stars, directors, and producers, a disparate group but one underlyingly united in a common pursuit of social content and cinematic achievement.²⁵

Most previous accounts of Trumbo's collision course with HUAC have overlooked the importance of his 1930s writings at *Hollywood Spectator* and elsewhere. As we can see, however, his articles were clearly significant in shaping Trumbo's

political ideology and his published reputation in the American film industry on the cusp of his scriptwriting career. First, the essays reveal his nascent affiliation with and sympathy toward communism, before it became a dirty word in Hollywood. Second, the essays illustrate how uncompromising Trumbo was, from his earliest days in Hollywood, in promoting art above commerce, and workers above the powers that be and financial exploitation.

Trumbo's habit of adopting an extreme, deliberately confrontational position in the trade press would continue until 1947 and beyond—and contribute to his eventual expulsion from the filmmaking industry. Trumbo refused to pull any punches in his articles, and these were, moreover, documents easily accessible years later, when the political climate in America had moved dangerously to the right.

As a corollary, another neglected but crucial aspect of Trumbo's early publications is the extent to which they engineered his first employment in Hollywood. Trumbo's case illustrates how aspiring scriptwriters could promote their credentials and compatibility with a particular studio by proclaiming them in the trade press. As revealed in a KMTR radio interview Trumbo gave to Edwin Martin on February 8, 1936, it was his repeated endorsements of Warners, along with a chance encounter with Frank Daugherty, an *ex-Hollywood Spectator* employee who was now at the studio, that led Warner's story department to approach Trumbo with an offer of script-reading and development work, giving him a foot in Hollywood's door.²⁶ This 1936 interview also confirmed the extent to which Trumbo was already a self-styled proponent of the need for what he called "group awareness" and collectivity in the process of scriptwriting. For when Martin asked whether his stint working in a bakery had honed his abilities, Trumbo not only answered in the affirmative but also asserted that a keen awareness of social milieu was vital to the art of writing: "It's one of my pet ideas that knowing people and knowing how to write are pretty closely related."²⁷

Trumbo at *The Screen Writer*. Trumbo's Hollywood career went from initial uncertainty to great prestige and celebrity. Fired by Warners less than twelve months into his seven-year contract for refusing to resign from the Screen Writers' Guild, Trumbo ran up sizable debts during a subsequent tenure at MGM, before briefly finding work at RKO and Paramount during the early 1940s.

Gradually, however, Trumbo gained professional momentum. From the mid-1930s on, Trumbo published short stories in highly regarded magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *Liberty*, and *McCall's*. His third novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, won strong reviews nationwide and an American Booksellers' Award in 1940. More of interest to Trumbo's Hollywood employers, though, was his December 1940 screen hit *Kitty Foyle*—an adaptation made for RKO that prompted MGM to reengage Trumbo's services for *Tender Comrade* (Edward Dmytryk, 1943)²⁸ and *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (LeRoy, 1944), both extremely successful projects. By 1945, Trumbo's final pre-HUAC contract, renegotiated at MGM, was a very generous deal worth \$3,000 per week. According to Cook, in fact, the position and income that Trumbo received were "at that time the best that any writer in the motion picture industry had ever had."²⁹ In 1945, not coincidentally, Trumbo was also appointed to the prestigious

Figure 1. Dalton Trumbo in an MGM publicity still (Ernest Bachrach, circa 1948). Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.



position of editor of *The Screen Writer*, the official, newly launched publication of the Screen Writers' Guild. Once an independent voice at the margins of the profession, Trumbo was now at the absolute center of power in the Hollywood screenwriting community. It is to his influence and work at *The Screen Writer*—another aspect of trade press discourse that has been largely overlooked in the writings on Trumbo and HUAC—that we now need to turn.

Stated boldly in the editorial of the June 1946 issue of *The Screen Writer*, the rationale behind the journal was to promote and champion the Hollywood scriptwriter.³⁰ Final decisions about policy and coverage rested with Trumbo, who headed the editorial committee. Collectively, though, the committee members solicited copy from among the membership of the Screen Writers' Guild and discussed submissions before approving or rejecting them. The journal's content ranged from particular case studies to articles on broad tendencies in the trade. Typical pieces included commendations and appraisals of recently completed screenplays; analyses of American scripts and scriptwriting practices in (mostly favorable) comparisons with international trends; professional news bulletins and announcements; and semi-humorous commentaries, such as a recurring set of graphs in which crudely drawn stick people lamented the uncertain job prospects for screenwriters.³¹ Throughout the journal's first year in print, though, the overall tone of its writing remained buoyant. An extended editorial written by Trumbo to celebrate *The Screen Writer's* twelve-month anniversary even went so far as to declare that "achieving recognition for screen writers and their craft has, in the main, been achieved."³²

Under Trumbo's jurisdiction and guidance—which very much reiterated the approach of his 1930s essays—*The Screen Writer* developed an obviously leftist political agenda. It was this element of increasingly overt activism that soon caused widespread and enduring controversy, a series of shockwaves that reverberated through Hollywood. The focal point here was an article that led off the July 1946 issue. The piece, by James M. Cain, suggested a bold new initiative for the Screen Writers' Guild. Trumbo prefaced Cain's prospectus with a staunch and ambitious endorsement³³:

Mr. Cain's article has been submitted to the Executive Board of the Screen Writers' Guild as a plan of action for the Guild and for the Authors' League of America as a whole. The members of the Board unanimously approved his proposals in principle and feel that they should be required reading for every writer in the country. The plan is printed here for the first time in order that the members of the Guild may join with the Board in a detailed study of it and help, with their suggestions, to make it the collective program of the organized writers of America.³⁴

Below the editorial, Cain, introduced as a “distinguished novelist and screen writer,” presented his proposal for what he called the American Authors' Authority (AAA). From his opening line—“It would be difficult to exaggerate the plight of the American writer, or of any writer whose works are sold in the United States, today”³⁵—Cain made no apologies for taking a combative tone of address. First, he decried the exploited and economically marginalized status of the modern American writer. Second, echoing precisely Trumbo's own claims a decade earlier in *Hollywood Spectator*—perhaps an indication of the editor's input or influence on Cain's final draft—Cain claimed that no less than a publishing *conspiracy* was in place, an unyielding system in which a writer was consistently denied fair access to income, credit, royalties, and exposure. To even things out, Cain argued for the immediate creation of the AAA in order to safeguard the financial livelihood of the writer. Under its aegis, every professional writer would endow all future copyrights to the AAA administration, which in turn would demand reasonable leasing rights to be paid by any publishing companies seeking printing rights.

Collectivized labor, Cain concluded, would guarantee shared prosperity. Moreover, toward the end of his fourteen-page declaration of principles, Cain made the pivotal point, printed in bold type, that the centralized AAA would defend the rights of the American author and “compel every writer in the country hoping for picture or magazine sale to send his work to the Authority for copyright before the magazines or publishers get it.” Prominent again, Trumbo intervened a second time in an editorial footnote that seconded Cain's beliefs by offering contexts for their vehemence: “This proposal is the almost spontaneous outgrowth of the unrest, the dissatisfaction with present conditions being voiced by writers of all kinds, the movements that have started, almost of their own accord.”³⁶

Besides the fact that the previous issue of *The Screen Writer* had featured a fourteen-page valorization of the Soviet film industry,³⁷ it perhaps came as no surprise in the post–World War II climate of America that Cain's essay, and Trumbo's bracketed remarks, provoked a backlash of biting anticommunist rhetoric. Ceplair

and Englund devote less than a page to the AAA debacle in their study,³⁸ but its impact on the credibility of both Trumbo and *The Screen Writer* was far more decisive than has been reckoned previously. Put simply, a national outcry ensued, prompting the journal to take the unprecedented step of reprinting the most heated diatribes against the Screen Writers' Guild—four pages' worth in its October 1946 issue, ten in November 1946, and four more in December 1946—in order to attempt a series of strong rebuttals.

As the political right closed in, John O'Connor published an attack in the *Catholic News* symptomatic of the hostilities that broke out. The piece, which was excerpted in *The Screen Writer*, used rhetorical flourishes that rivaled Trumbo's own. O'Connor claimed that "the [AAA's] implications throw the shadow of the Kremlin and the ghost of Goebbels across the typewriters and manuscripts of America." Similarly aghast, Raymond Howard, in the *New York New Leader*, complained that "obviously the AAA was set up . . . to gain a Stalinist monopoly over the literary field." The *Charlotte Observer* echoed this sentiment, calling Cain's essay "one of the baldest efforts to shackle the intellectual life of America and create a dictatorship that would make Julius Caesar look like a piker."³⁹

Trumbo and his staff initially believed that retaliation and recuperation were possible. But in retrospect, with the campaign to instigate HUAC already gathering momentum by this time, *The Screen Writer*, under Trumbo's stewardship, was destined for disaster.⁴⁰ In response to the backlash, *The Screen Writer* immediately commissioned a slew of articles that strenuously defended the Screen Writers' Guild's political convictions. Trumbo wrote another editorial, announcing that Cain's proposal had been upheld in referendum before the members of the Screen Writers' Guild, in a landslide vote of 343 in favor versus just 7 against. Trumbo also offered spirited rejoinders to the political right by impugning its integrity: "The cries of 'Red' from lick-spittle trade-papers, gossip columnists and Mr. Hearst's trained seals can be dismissed as beneath contempt. . . . The American Authors' Authority is capitalism, naked and simple."⁴¹

On September 13, 1946, Cain issued his own four-page denial of the charges to the International News Service. The essay, titled "Just What Is A.A.A.?" was then reprinted in the October 1946 issue of *The Screen Writer*. Aiming to circumvent the attacks against the Screen Writers' Guild, Cain downplayed the level of authority that the AAA would have over individual authors, and, most emphatically, rejected the notion that the AAA "concealed sinister designs on the part of leftist writers . . . [that it was] a catspaw for communism, and had been conceived in Moscow." Above all, using language that now vainly broached conciliation, Cain urged his readership that his motivations were entirely economic and in no way political—a "view of things that might make good Republicans of us all."⁴²

Beyond Cain's efforts, from November 1946 to January 1947, *The Screen Writer* published no less than eleven separate essays defending the Screen Writers' Guild from accusations of communist influence. That this battle of printed words was clearly being lost is reflected by the fact that, in April 1947, *The Screen Writer* published a sixty-four-page "Special AAA Issue" filled with fifteen more belated

refutations. This compendium was offered more than *nine months* after Cain's initial proposal had been published.

The bottom line of these AAA debates, centered in and around the pages of *The Screen Writer*, was catastrophe for Trumbo personally and for many Hollywood scriptwriters professionally. Open, published affiliation with what were widely perceived to be communist doctrines soon proved the means for rapid downfalls. To those horrified by the ideology put forth under Trumbo's editorial jurisdiction—collectivized labor endorsed defiantly by a strident majority—such material was proof positive of communist infiltration in the writing trade. Pillars of the industry, these writers were in effect setting themselves up as political scapegoats by making the discourse occurring in the Screen Writers' Guild so visible and exposed.

Histories of the 1940s have tended to rationalize why scriptwriters became targets of anticommunist forces in fairly loose terms, by referencing the (alleged) content of scripts that were written, circulated in the studios, and often filmed. But this perceived equation between Hollywood screenwriting and communism can be more directly explained by examining the trade press and the specific roles of *The Screen Writer* and Dalton Trumbo himself. As the official voice of the Screen Writers' Guild, the journal blatantly linked Hollywood scriptwriting with the vilified left. The overall importance of the AAA-Screen Writers' Guild fiasco, however, is suggested best by an unpublished note that Trumbo wrote in 1963 when he deposited his papers in the archives of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. On a copy of the cover of the July 1946 *The Screen Writer*, Trumbo circled the headline for Cain's AAA proposal and under it noted: "This volume probably did more to bring on the 1947 HUAC investigation than any other single circumstance."⁴³

Trumbo's Final Reckonings. In October 1947, J. Parnell Thomas arrived at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles along with his legal team and proceeded to carry out a series of interviews with the first batch of friendly witnesses. Notables such as Louis B. Mayer, Leo McCarey, Robert Taylor, Jack Warner, and Sam Wood took the stand, many of whom complied with HUAC's request that they name those they considered responsible for communist influence in the motion picture industry. Bolstered by their testimony, and by a list of nineteen subpoenas that had been issued in September, the HUAC sessions were convened.⁴⁴ Trumbo was one of the unfriendly witnesses, charged hazily but dangerously with political subversion.

As his personal archives testify, Trumbo planned his defense meticulously. He outlined draft upon draft of his opening statement, each version more fluent and convincing than the last. The intensive rewrites culminated in Trumbo reviving his favored rhetorical motif: the lurking, ubiquitous Hollywood conspiracy. Thus emerged Trumbo's famous conflation of the HUAC inquiry with Berlin and Nazi Germany:

Already the gentlemen of this Committee and others of like disposition have produced in this capital city a political atmosphere which is acrid with fear and repression; a community in which anti-Semitism finds safe refuge behind secret tests of loyalty; a city in which no union leader can trust his telephone; a city in which old friends hesitate to recognize one another in public places. . . . You have produced a capital city on the eve of its Reichstag fire.⁴⁵

In addition to revising his speech several times, Trumbo prepared a long and exhaustive list of potential questions that HUAC members might ask him, along with searching and thoughtful hypothetical answers.⁴⁶ All of these efforts were in vain. Like the other members of the Ten, once in the courtroom, Trumbo was abruptly denied permission to read his personal statement into the record.⁴⁷ Moreover, even though he offered the court a complete set of his Hollywood scripts to prove that they were not propagandistic, Thomas dismissed them on the grounds that, in a line that has since become notorious, there were “too many pages.”⁴⁸

Worse came later, when Emmett Lavery, then president of the Screen Writers’ Guild, appeared in person before HUAC. Lavery’s approach was not to defend the Ten but to absolve the guild of any communist leanings. Essentially, he upheld the screenwriting profession institutionally but provided no specific defense of the actual guild members standing trial. Lavery’s remarks, notably that “they [communists] do not have control of the guild, and, if they did have control of the guild I would have stayed home long ago,” seem to underline his distance—Cook suggests that Lavery was interested “purely in preserving the Screen Writers’ Guild . . . even if it meant sacrificing a few members.”⁴⁹ To Trumbo and his close associates, this was treason.

As has been widely reported, although neither Thomas nor the prosecution offered conclusive evidence, Trumbo and the Ten were cited for contempt and in effect held accountable for the charges against them. Less systematically discussed, however, is the final phase of Trumbo’s writings: the lectures and publications he wrote as his career began to unravel, immediately before his incarceration. I will now focus on the two central aspects of Trumbo’s published discourses before his fall: his public attacks on Lavery and the Screen Writers’ Guild, and Trumbo’s last, more passive role as icon in the print campaigns mounted to quash the accusations made against him.

In mid-1949, a year before his incarceration in Ashland, Trumbo wrote a forty-page pamphlet titled *The Time of the Toad*. Self-published on behalf of the Ten—although it was later reprinted in the *Daily Compass*, on June 8, 1950—the piece strongly criticized HUAC and its collaborators, a group that included, by extension, key factions of the Screen Writers’ Guild.⁵⁰ In retrospect, not only was *The Time of the Toad* arguably Trumbo’s finest rhetorical writing, it was also an important historical document, as evidenced by the memos and other materials that were written in response to the essay, and reflected the deep, unyielding divisions that HUAC had instilled in the screenwriting community. Trumbo did not go quietly.

So significant was the reaction to *The Time of the Toad*, in fact, that, as Trumbo’s private notes reveal, he actually worked extensively to adapt the essay for the stage. The drama was to have featured a troubled academic, Dr. Stephen Tilham, whose career is threatened abruptly by “Members of FBI” and “Members of the State Committee on Un-American Activities.”⁵¹ Once again, and right through to the bitter end, Trumbo’s publications were catalysts for political agitation in Hollywood.

The Time of the Toad at its outset invoked Émile Zola, a writer whose reputation was also publicly savaged, for his provocative role in the Dreyfus affair. Trumbo next worked a précis of Zola’s short story, “The Toad,” into an overarching metaphor.

He referred to Zola's protagonist, a young man who could acclimate himself to the mendacity of the press only by forcing himself to swallow a live toad.

Trumbo's rhetorical goal, a tactic akin to much of George Orwell's writing, was to use a pointed allegory in order to attack political interventions in private lives. The time of the toad, then, is when a culture's moral values have become totally corrupted, when "the nation turns in on itself in a kind of compulsive madness to deny all in its tradition that is clean."⁵² Trumbo recalled the Nazi reign of Germany as one such nadir, before declaring openly that the forces of HUAC, and widespread American complicity in its advances, represented another.

Moving onto a summary of the HUAC hearings, Trumbo next challenged those who either endorsed or failed to speak out against the tribunal. For every person who had neglected his or her constitutional responsibilities, Trumbo claimed, legions of people had fallen victim to HUAC, such as allegedly pro-communist academics who were purged from their jobs; by inference, the parallel was extended to the Screen Writers' Guild too. Trumbo did not specifically mention Lavery, but his role and actions before HUAC were implicitly condemned.

The reactions to Trumbo's jibes underlined the wide circulation of *The Time of the Toad*, as well as its considerable impact within the Screen Writers' Guild. A response from the guild's authorities was swift. In a memo dated November 1, 1949, the executive board sent a statement to all members of the guild berating Trumbo's "institutional attack," enclosing with each formal notice a copy of Lavery's counterarguments. Although Trumbo had—pointedly—not cited Lavery's name in his pamphlet, the guild president noted that it was "obviously" his conduct that had been denounced. Lavery went on to defend his reputation, charging that the "errors" in Trumbo's pamphlet "may do very real damage to the good name of the Guild."⁵³ Lavery stood firm in his position, stating that he had not broken any trade unions' secrecy pacts in testifying before HUAC. Moreover, as Lavery put it in his statement:

The truth of the matter is that, though the Congressman had subpoenaed me, he was not at all anxious to hear me, once he learned that I was eager to testify on behalf of the Guild. I did not fall into the convenient category of "friendly" or "unfriendly" witness. . . . I represented the kind of writers who felt that life in America was not necessarily a choice between two reactionary extremes: between the shouting of Congressman J. Parnell Thomas on the one hand, and the shouting of non-responsive witnesses from Hollywood on the other.⁵⁴

Lavery's interpretation of events, conflating both sides of the HUAC tribunals, and presenting the actions of the prosecution and the defense as fundamentally the same, was a highly inflammatory stance. But more antagonism followed. Lavery next tried to sidestep the political implications of his HUAC testimony completely, portraying himself—perhaps naïvely, certainly provocatively—as a neutral, even noble participant. "My willingness to testify," Lavery concluded, "made conspicuous and ambiguous the unwillingness of other screenwriters to testify."⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, Lavery's commentary touched raw nerves. A week after his memo was distributed throughout the guild, Edward Huebsch and Lester Cole

(another member of the Ten) wrote an open letter, again mailed to each guild member, in which they asserted that the executive board was out of order in publishing Lavery's personal remarks. And since the board had already voted down their complaint, Huebsch and Cole felt that they were left with no recourse but to rebel, on the record. The duo outlined their intentions to "remedy what [they] believe[d] to be violations of Guild procedure,"⁵⁶ in effect heeding Trumbo's rally for honest protest in the face of institutional vice. Attached to Cole and Huebsch's letter, mimicking the format of the official memo that Lavery had sent to guild members, came a new challenge from Trumbo himself. In a five-page letter, Trumbo now openly called Lavery a liar and indicted both his character and the board that supported his collaboration with HUAC. Point by point, Trumbo rejected Lavery's defense, building up to a call for Lavery to be replaced at the next election on the grounds of his duplicity in testifying before HUAC, abandoning the Ten to their fates, and then downplaying the ramifications of the hearings to the guild's members:

In Washington [Lavery] testified: 'My *only concern* with respect to the *whole* proceeding, Mr. Chairman, is *merely* that people might go back home and think they have been political martyrs'. . . . Lavery has informed the Guild on various occasions of his record as a screenwriter, playwright and lawyer. He therefore knows the meaning of the words he uses, and he must learn to accept responsibility for them.⁵⁷

Again allowing himself the final word, Trumbo, upon depositing his archival dossier in 1963, appended a handwritten note to this heated exchange, stating: "There was no reply. He had none, since he lied throughout and I had all the documents."⁵⁸

Conclusion. As Thomas Schatz has pointed out, the HUAC debacle was almost as ruinous for the Screen Writers' Guild as it was for the Ten themselves: "The guild emerged . . . with its reputation tattered, its authority undercut, and its organization in utter disarray."⁵⁹ What the above chain of evidence also demonstrates, however, is how much Trumbo remained a pivotal figure during this implosion, polarizing his colleagues and creating fissures both institutional and personal even after he had left *The Screen Writer* and been officially censured by HUAC.

We can also see that Trumbo's final published essays were systematic extensions of the rhetorical trajectory that he had established in his earliest writings during the 1930s. Politics notwithstanding, Trumbo chose never to abandon his self-appointed position as spokesman for oppressed artists. As evident in his 1941 essay in *The Clipper*, a quotation from which began this essay, Trumbo always envisaged his purpose as residing somehow on the "side of the angels"—at one with the underdog, embodied by the Poverty Row craftsman and Émile Zola alike, defending his honor against the machinations of corrupted authorities. Besides Trumbo's escalating profile as a highly successful scriptwriter in the 1930s and 1940s, it was his continued and outspoken efforts as a writer in the Hollywood trade press that instigated his fateful encounters with HUAC. Trumbo's long-term position as a self-styled defender of the faith inspired political controversy, professional unrest, and eventually outright excommunication.



Figure 2. Dalton Trumbo at home with his son, Christopher, photographed for the cover of *To a Friend of the Hollywood Ten*. Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.

By way of a coda, we should also note how the longstanding historical perception of Trumbo as a political martyr stemmed directly from documents that his associates issued at the time of his imprisonment. For in the final months before Trumbo was jailed, an activist organization, Wives of the Hollywood Ten, was formed by Helen Bessie, Gale Biberman, Jeanne Cole, Jean Dmytryk, Frances Lardner, Sue Lawson, Margaret Maltz, Sadie Ornitz, and Cleo Trumbo⁶⁰ to carry out a last-ditch campaign against the HUAC ruling. Self-publishing as Trumbo had before, the Wives issued a series of pamphlets, letters, and appeals aimed at attracting support and donations. To emphasize once again HUAC's threat to American morals and family values, many of the group's essays cited Trumbo's persecution as a central motif. In one typical document, "An Open Letter to the American People," the Wives protested HUAC's harshness, unconstitutionality, and invasive nature by urging public involvement in Trumbo's case. The letter concluded by imploring that "our husbands acted in the tradition of those who would protect our people and preserve our rights."⁶¹

In a follow-up booklet, this time addressed "To a Friend of the Hollywood Ten," Trumbo's team made another creative attempt to salvage his reputation in the wake of HUAC. The photograph on the front cover was one of the final published images of Trumbo before he left for prison. In the image, Trumbo and his young son, Christopher, sit contentedly in an armchair. Trumbo's arm is gently draped around the boy, who gazes up at his father with an adoring smile. The expression on Trumbo's face is benevolent, and his eyes are downcast. Clearly, we are prompted to think of this as a tender and poignant moment of intimacy—but one that has also been strategically released into general circulation, the private sphere made public. A thoughtful man is being wrenched forcibly from his home; a young boy is being orphaned. Along with the Wives' publications, this photograph reflects the historical perspective that remains dominant in accounts of Trumbo's fall: we see him as a lost political martyr, a tragic victim of circumstance, and, finally, a scapegoat for HUAC's political agenda.

Notes

I would like to thank Lisa Hinzman, Vance Kopley, Liza Palmer, the staff of the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the two anonymous *Cinema Journal* readers for their comments.

1. Dalton Trumbo, "On Publishing a Book," *The Clipper*, January 1941, 19. Trumbo's writing here already anticipates and embraces his role as victimized, martyred artist.
2. The official document can be viewed in the Dalton Trumbo Papers 1905–62, box 43, file 7, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison (hereafter DT Papers).
3. For a relatively neutral summary of the HUAC inquiry, see Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 267–80. Jon Lewis recasts the period from an economic perspective in "'We Do Not Ask You to Condone This': How the Blacklist Saved Hollywood," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (winter 2000): 3–30. A pertinent description of the aftermath of HUAC and its follow-up investigations is in John Cogley, "HUAC: The Mass Hearings," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 487–509.
4. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story behind America's Favorite Movies* (New York: New Press, 2002), 177.
5. Jeffrey Smith gives a useful account of Trumbo's career in the wake of his HUAC entanglements. See Smith, "'A Good Business Proposition': Dalton Trumbo, *Spartacus*, and the End of the Blacklist," *Velvet Light Trap* 23 (spring 1989): 78–81.
6. Gordon Kahn was managing editor of *The Screen Writer* while Trumbo worked there as editor. See Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial: The Story of the 10 Who Were Indicted* (New York: Boni & Gaer, 1972), 78–85, for his sympathetic rendering of Trumbo's testimony before Thomas and HUAC.
7. Peter Hanson, *Dalton Trumbo, Hollywood Rebel: A Critical Survey and Filmography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2001), 1. This book consists of thematic readings of Trumbo's scripts, which Hanson acclaims, suggesting that they resonate with idealism, honor, and pro-American sentiments.
8. Smith, "'A Good Business Proposition,'" 75–76, and Larry Ceplair and Steven England, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 279.
9. Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), and Bruce Cook, *Dalton Trumbo* (New York: Scribner's, 1977). Other well-known blacklist conversations are collected in Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997). There are also references to the period and its key figures in McGilligan, ed., *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood's Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
10. Helen Manfull, ed., *Additional Dialogue: Letters of Dalton Trumbo, 1942–1962* (New York: Evans & Co., 1970), contains a helpful, if partial, record of the letters Trumbo wrote during his ordeal.
11. Cook, *Dalton Trumbo*, 67–68.
12. The September 16, 1933, issue of *Hollywood Spectator* featured on its cover the title "TRUMBO," all in capitals—a clear indication of the writer's impact on the fledgling publication.
13. Dalton Trumbo, "New Shirts on Showmen," *Hollywood Spectator*, August 5, 1933, 14.
14. Dalton Trumbo, "Thunder over Hollywood," *Brooklyn Eagle's Sunday Review*, November 5, 1933, 12.
15. Dalton Trumbo, "While Bosses Grow Fat," *Hollywood Spectator*, October 28, 1933, 12.

16. Trumbo, "Thunder over Hollywood," 19, and Trumbo, "While Bosses Grow Fat," 12.
17. Dalton Trumbo, "Hollywood Pays, Proving You Can't Fool All of the People All of the Time," *Forum and Century*, February 1933, 113.
18. *Ibid.*, 114.
19. Dalton Trumbo, "Whither Independent," *Hollywood Spectator*, January 20, 1934, 9. A defining element of Trumbo's work, certainly one that made him stand out from his contemporaries, was the comprehensive range of his film references, particularly with regard to international cinema. A 1933 piece, for example, notes the merits of figures as diverse as "Comrade Vsevelod Pudovkin," F. W. Murnau, René Clair, Josef von Sternberg, and other luminaries. Trumbo, "Stepchild of the Muses," *North American Review*, December 1933, 564–66.
20. *Ibid.*, 565–66.
21. Dalton Trumbo, "Independents—the Story," *Hollywood Spectator*, February 10, 1934, 10.
22. See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 280–85.
23. See, for example, Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 307–13.
24. Dalton Trumbo, review of *Footlight Parade*, *Hollywood Spectator*, October 14, 1933, 34.
25. Dalton Trumbo, "Who Can Explain the Warners?" *Hollywood Spectator*, July 22, 1933, 11–12.
26. Cook discusses the connection with Daugherty but does not acknowledge the impact of Trumbo's published opinions on (his compatibility with) the laudable work practices at Warners. See Cook, *Dalton Trumbo*, 77.
27. KMTR interview, DT Papers, microfilm 2008, reel 1, 2.
28. Trumbo also joined the Communist Party in 1943.
29. Cook, *Dalton Trumbo*, 159.
30. Dalton Trumbo, editorial, *The Screen Writer*, June 1946, 42–43.
31. In *The Screen Writer*, October 1946, 47, for example, a chart uses a long row of grumbling stick people standing in line for a swimming pool to illustrate how between November 1, 1945, and April 30, 1946, "62.3% of screenwriters didn't even get their feet wet."
32. Dalton Trumbo, editorial, *Screen Writer*, June 1946, 43.
33. Unlike the other essays in *The Screen Writer*, editorials directly reflected "official Screen Writers' Guild policy." This position was stated on the inside front cover of every issue.
34. James M. Cain, "An American Authors' Authority," *The Screen Writer*, July 1946, 1.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 11, 14. The Screen Writers' Guild had, indeed, been campaigning intermittently to get scriptwriters greater control over their copyrights since its launch in 1933.
37. Konstantin Simonov, "The Soviet Film Industry: An Analysis," *The Screen Writer*, June 1946, 17–30.
38. Ceplair and Englund merely cite Cain's own words from his *Screen Writer* essay as their brief analysis of the AAA furor. See Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 251.
39. John O'Connor, quoted in Taylor Caldwell, "Statement on AAA," *The Screen Writer's Special Supplement on the American Authors' Authority*, October 1946, 37; Raymond Howard, quoted in "A Press Commentary," *The Screen Writer's Special Supplement on the American Authors' Authority*, October 1946, 51; and in *ibid.*, 50.

40. For Cain's very defensive reminiscences about the AAA, see McGilligan, *Backstory*, 119–20. After acknowledging that “authority” was a bad choice of title for his collective, Cain abruptly cut short his comments, telling his interviewers, “It’s a dead issue, and I don’t know why you bring the subject up” (120).
41. Dalton Trumbo, editorial insert, *The Screen Writer*, September 1946, 1.
42. James M. Cain, “Just What Is A.A.A.?” *The Screen Writer*, October 1946, 1, 4.
43. Dalton Trumbo, signed note, DT Papers, box 43, file 7.
44. Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 260. As it turned out, only eleven of the nineteen were actually interrogated during the first round of HUAC hearings, and of them Bertolt Brecht returned to Germany soon after.
45. Trumbo's extensive typewritten drafts and handwritten notes for his opening address are contained in DT Papers, file 43.
46. DT Papers, file 43. The sheer volume of Trumbo's preparations during the buildup to his trial confirm not only his rhetorical skills and flair for debate but also his ability to function creatively while under extreme pressure.
47. For an analysis of the suppressed opening statements, see Lewis, “We Do Not Ask You to Condone This,” 13–15.
48. For treatments of Trumbo and the HUAC trials, see Cook, *Dalton Trumbo*, 178–82; Kahn's rather slanted account in *Hollywood on Trial*, 78–85; and the more neutral version in Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 279–87.
49. Cook, *Dalton Trumbo*, 182.
50. The document lists the publishing company as the Hollywood Ten (a label that was accepted by the group), 1574 Crossroads of the World, Hollywood, California. The booklet also included an appeal for donations to be sent to that address. All subsequent references are to the initial pamphlet.
51. DT Papers, box 43, file 8.
52. Trumbo, *The Time of the Toad*, 5.
53. Lavery memo to the membership of the Screen Writers' Guild, “Re: Dalton Trumbo's pamphlet,” DT Papers, box 43, file 9, 1.
54. *Ibid.*, 3.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Lester Cole and Edward Huebsch, letter, November 5, 1949, in DT Papers, box 43, file 9.
57. Dalton Trumbo, “To the Membership of the Screen Writers' Guild: From Dalton Trumbo,” DT Papers, box 43, file 9.
58. DT Papers, box 43, file 9.
59. Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 313.
60. Adrian Scott was the only member of the Ten who was unmarried in 1947.
61. Wives of the Hollywood Ten, “An Open Letter to the American People,” DT Papers, box 44, file 1.