Beyond the Great Divide: Hollywood and Race Relations in the 1950s

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This article examines the ways in which the production of the racially charged film No Way Out *(1950) was influenced by specific sociohistorical events of the postwar period. It begins by establishing the historical context in which the film was produced and goes on to discuss how 3 major events, the nation's growing housing shortage, the increase in race riots, and the subsequent rise of suburbia, coalesced to produce a provocative yet conservative cinematic expression of racial prejudice. The article concludes by calling for additional analyses of the complex relationship between the filmmaking process and the larger social environment.*

Keywords *film history, film production, housing, race, social history, suburbia.*

The complex relationship between Hollywood's filmmaking industry and race relations in this country is a thriving area of academic inquiry. As with most areas of historical scholarship, many of the pioneers of Black film history were initially concerned with the basic need to recover, document, and celebrate the names and contributions of Hollywood's major Black stars and directors (Bogle, 1988, 1992). However, more recently, historians interested in the relationship between race and film have turned their attention to the politics of filmmaking. Specifically, increased attention is being given to the ways that forces external to the filmmaking process significantly influence the final screen product.

The development of this body of research has been greatly facilitated by the opening of the production records and personal papers of some of Hollywood's major studios and players. One of the first scholars to extensively use archival documents as a way of understanding the relationship between films and their larger social and political environment is Thomas Cripps. Cripps described his research as being concerned with the "backstory" or "the story that has already happened before the main titles begin to crawl" (Cripps, 1993a, p. 176). His pursuit of this behind-the-scenes story resulted in a compelling narrative that

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provides readers with keen insights into the ways in which various forces, primarily political, influenced the production of the first postwar race-related films. However, one of the gaps in Cripps's work, though by no means a fault, given the need for selectivity on the part of any historian, is a discussion of particular sociological events of the postwar period and how they may have figured in the creative decisions of filmmakers. It is this last issue that will be addressed in this article. Specifically, this research will demonstrate how sociological events, particularly housing concerns and the accompanying race riots, influenced the making of the postwar race-related film *No Way Out* (20th Century Fox, 1950). Before addressing this issue, brief comments concerning the historical methods employed in this research will be made.

Historical Scholarship and Filmmaking

The type of historical film scholarship employed by Cripps in his works *Slow Fade to Black* (1993b) and *Making Movies Black* (1993a) serves as a model for this research. It is an approach that may be characterized as social film history because it is predicated upon the assumption that films are representations of the larger social structure from which they are produced. That is, films "derive their images and sounds, themes and stories ultimately from their social environment" (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p. 158). More recently, O'Connor (1990) asserted that social film historians are "less concerned with capturing the surface factual information communicated by the image than . . . with decoding the socially and culturally driven judgments involved in the production and reception process" (p. 108). With this in mind, the present study employs a working hypothesis that postulates a relationship between the racial tensions of the 1950s and the production of the film *No Way Out*. Throughout the course of the research, this hypothesis was checked and refined against the evidence, especially the primary source documents (i.e., production files and memoranda). As Cripps (1993a) argued, this "paper trail" is useful in revealing "the conflicting social/political issues often integral to the production process" (p. 140).

Postwar Hollywood and Race Relations

Following World War II, Hollywood faced an uncertain future when its financial stability was undermined by a number of events. In characterizing this period, Ray (1985) noted, "of the three principal components that had produced the Classic Hollywood movie—the industry, the audience, and the situation of America—none had escaped severe alterations" (p. 131).

In 1947, Hollywood was shaken to the core when the House Committee on Un-American Activities launched hearings to explore allegations of widespread communist activities in the entertainment industry. One year later, in the landmark *Paramount* case, the Supreme Court ruled that the five major film studios had joined forces in order to monopolize the entire industry. As a result of the court's

decision, the studios were forced to divest themselves of their exhibition divisions, which led to a complete restructuring of the industry (Balio, 1990).

Major changes in the postwar moviegoing public also presented a number of new challenges for Hollywood. The single men and women who had accounted for a large percentage of box office receipts prior to the war were now marrying and starting families at an unprecedented pace. Their concerns and their money had shifted away from leisure pursuits and toward the financing and furnishing of new homes in the nation's burgeoning suburban areas (Balio, 1990). These sociological trends meant that the primary moviegoing segment of the population was now both physically and psychologically distanced from the inner-city theaters. Instead of a weekend at the movies, the new suburbanites were enjoying such activities as boating, travel, and domestic projects. Box office receipts revealed the enormous impact of these changes. Between 1946, when movie attendance was at an all-time high, and 1953, box office receipts declined by approximately 50% (Sklar, 1994). As if the aforementioned problems were not enough to financially cripple the industry, the social climate, especially race relations, was also undergoing numerous changes.

Race relations in postwar America were influenced by the intersection of two forces whose conflicting ideologies mirrored the racial anxieties of the general populace. On one side stood the liberals, who were eager to capitalize on the strides toward racial equality that had been achieved during the war, and on the other was an equally forceful contingent that wished to revert to the country's prewar segregationist policies. Cripps (1993a) described the period as one in which "No one dared guess the postwar future of American racial custom" (p. 151).

In essence, the changing economic and social climates placed Hollywood in a quandary. Among many in the industry, there was a sentiment of "playing it safe" until the downward spiral reversed itself (Cripps, 1993a). However, there were others who believed that a certain amount of risk was necessary if the studios were to produce properties that would lure moviegoers back into the theaters. To appease the two sides, studio heads played both ends against the middle. They were conservative in that they looked to past successes and formulas to emulate (Sklar, 1994). Yet this decision brought with it a certain amount of risk, because one of the most successful types of films made immediately following the war was the liberal presentation of controversial issues such as ethnic prejudice (e.g., *Crossfire*, RKO, 1947; *Gentlemen's Agreement*, 20th Century Fox, 1948). For Hollywood filmmakers, the question became one of how to further exploit the social topic of prejudice without endangering either the box office or race relations. Cripps (1993) described their work as "refining ideas that might work liberal war aims into a postwar ideology" (p. 175). The result of the studios' efforts was a cycle of postwar "problem pictures" that included *Home of the Brave* (United Artists, 1949), *Lost Boundaries* (Film Classics, 1949), *Pinky* (20th Century Fox, 1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (MGM, 1949), and finally *No Way Out* (20th Century Fox, 1950). Of these films, Manckiewicz's *No Way Out* dealt most forcefully with the issue of racial prejudice.

Critics have called *No Way Out* "one of the best of the continuing cycle, both on its merits and in its influence on the times" (Cripps, 1993a, p. 244). Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People labeled

it "Hollywood's most powerful anti-hate film" (quoted in Cripps, 1993, p. 249). Much of the impact of the film may be attributed to its emotion-charged dialogue and flirtation with racial violence. However, another point that separated *No Way Out* from its predecessors in the cycle was that it drew upon actual historical conditions, particularly the rise of suburbia and inner-city race riots, to tap into the collective fears and concerns of the postwar audience.

As World War II came to a close, the United States turned its attention once again to domestic issues. One of the primary topics on the public's agenda was a growing concern over the lack of adequate housing (Halberstam, 1993). While housing shortages had plagued the country since the Depression, what propelled the situation to the critical stage following World War II was the convergence of two factors: the influx of war veterans into the housing market, and the northern migration of large numbers of Blacks and other minorities (Abrams, 1947).

Between 1945 and 1946, 10 million veterans flooded an overburdened housing market (Wright, 1981). For approximately 2.5 million, the only viable option was to move in with relatives until the housing situation improved. At the same time, the inner cities of the North and Midwest were being racially transformed by the influx of large numbers of Southern minorities. In 1950, it was estimated that inner-city population growth for non-Whites was increasing at twice the rate as that for Whites (Jezer, 1982). The convergence of these two social events placed Blacks and Whites in direct competition for the nation's limited housing. Furthermore, it raised the possibility that Blacks and Whites would, out of necessity, find themselves living in proximity to one another. This prompted many Whites to react violently to what they perceived as a threat to their neighborhoods and families.

In city after city, Whites rose in protest against Blacks entering their neighborhoods. There were isolated incidents, such as in Louisville and Philadelphia, of Black families being verbally harassed by angry White neighbors, while in other cities the protests were more widespread and violent (Jack, 1947). In Chicago, perhaps America's most racially volatile city, 5,000 Whites marched in protest after Blacks were given leases in an emergency housing project for veterans. The city also reported 100 physical attacks on Blacks attempting to move into "white areas" (Jack, 1947). Such incidents led one housing expert to conclude, "The housing situation poses one of the most crucial questions on the racial issue since emancipation" (Abrams, 1947, p. 67).

With housing pressures mounting, government agencies were faced with decisions about not only how to provide more housing, but also how to design the new housing communities in order to eliminate racial hostilities. As to the latter, social commentators of the time noted, "The decision will depend on whether pressures to perpetuate segregation have already become too strong to be resisted" (Abrams, 1947, p. 67). Given the violence that had accompanied many early attempts to integrate the nation's neighborhoods, government leaders determined that the social pressures were too great and that the only way to resolve peacefully the country's housing problems was to return to the prewar "separate but equal" philosophy. Yet this raised another question: How could the government facilitate the establishment of a dualistic housing market in which Blacks and Whites could live separately? The answer was complex, but what was immediately clear was that

any new housing policies would have to be crafted to appeal to both home builders and consumers.

One of the first major pieces of federal housing legislation was the Housing Act of 1949, which had the goal of providing "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family." While stated in powerful language that implied racial equality, the legislation was written to invite various interpretations. The agency charged with the responsibility of interpreting and administering the Housing Act was the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which immediately "exhorted segregation and enshrined it as public policy" (Jackson, 1985, p. 213). That is, the FHA was committed to the rhetorical ideal of every American having "a decent home and suitable living environment," but that ideal would not be achieved at the expense of existing social relationships.

The FHA had a number of tools at its disposal to facilitate the development of a dualistic housing market. One of the more powerful was the restrictive covenant, written agreements entered into by the FHA, builders, and lenders, that permitted racial discrimination in order to maintain to neighborhood homogeneity, prevent racial violence, and protect property values (Wright, 1981). These covenants were outlawed in 1948 by the Supreme Court because they were "unenforceable as law and contrary to public policy." Yet the FHA and others circumvented the ruling by continuing to use racially biased verbal agreements (Wright, 1981).

The FHA also indoctrinated its employees regarding the economic and social desirability of maintaining segregated housing. Training manuals stated, "If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes" (Abrams, 1947, p. 69).

The FHA was not alone in formulating racially discriminatory policies that promoted the rise of suburbia and the decline of the inner cities. Lending institutions practiced their own form of racial discrimination through the use of redlining, whereby red lines were drawn on city maps to mark the perimeter of questionable neighborhoods or neighborhoods that were racially mixed or dominated by minorities (Haralovich, 1992). These red markers cued lenders to designate loan requests for the purchase of existing housing or for the construction of new housing in the areas as high risks and, therefore, rejectable. Because of the lack of funding support for new housing or housing improvements in the redlined areas, urban neighborhoods declined as quickly as their suburban counterparts rose.

Suburbia was as much a cultural creation as it was a geographic one, because it drew heavily upon both the values and fears of the burgeoning postwar middle class (Fishman, 1987). At the center of that middle-class value system was the nuclear family, its preservation and proliferation. As a social and economic priority, the concept of the family could be easily exploited to promote the purchasing of new homes. It was a tactic used extensively during the war by the government, builders, bankers, and countless popular culture products. In one example, between 1941 and 1946, *Ladies Home Journal* ran a series in which some of the nation's leading architects constructed "dream houses" designed for the comfort and maintenance of the postwar family (Jackson, 1985).

However, suburban communities also grew in response to the fears of the

middle class, particularly fears of interracial neighborhoods and the by-products of interracial violence and interracial sex. These were fears that could also be exploited by the designers and marketers of the new suburban communities. One means by which this was accomplished was the linking of violence, especially racial violence, with life in the city. In advertisements, suburban schools were frequently shown as having large playgrounds, gleaming facilities, and caring teachers. In contrast, inner-city schools were photographed with padlocked doors and barred windows (Jackson, 1985). Orser (1990) has described the role of these postwar racial fears in geographically separating Blacks and Whites:

> Race and racial fears have had powerful explanatory force in American society, an assertion nowhere more dramatically demonstrated than in the scale and speed of racial change that rewrote the demographic maps of American cities during the three decades following World War II. (p. 227)

In effect, there existed a "great divide" that was used to confine Blacks to the violent urban ghettos and Whites to the safe homogeneous communities of suburbia. It was in this social environment, characterized by threats of race riots and an emerging segregated housing market, that Joseph Manckiewicz's *No Way Out* was made.

No Way Out, Suburbia, and Race Riots

Shortly after World War II, writer Lesser Samuels became fascinated with the idea of telling a story that addressed the issue of hate in society. The only problem he faced was how to tell this story in a compelling, yet evenhanded, way. The ultimate solution came from Samuels's daughter. She introduced Samuels to a young Black medical intern, and, after hearing of his experiences in a predominantly White profession, Samuels felt that he had stumbled onto something. To pursue this hunch, he secured the young man's permission to follow him around for a few weeks in order to observe how he interacted with other physicians, nurses, and patients. The notes Samuels compiled from his four weeks of observations eventually became the framework for the story told in the film *No Way Out*.

The film is set in the emergency room of a metropolitan hospital where Dr. Luther Brooks (Sidney Poitier) works as an intern. As the film opens, two White, racist brothers from Beaver Canal have been brought in for minor wounds received during an attempted robbery. Carefully and methodically, Brooks carries out his examination of the two men despite the fact that they are pummeling him with racial slurs. After concluding his initial examinations, Brooks suspects that one of the brothers may be suffering from more than his readily apparent wounds. Specifically, he suspects that the man has a brain tumor. To confirm his suspicions, Brooks initiates a spinal tap during which the man dies. When word of the death reaches the surviving brother, Ray Biddle (Richard Widmark), he immediately launches into a tirade threatening violence against Brooks and the entire city. This sets the film in motion as Dr. Brooks must save not only himself and his professional

reputation, but also the Black community from the racial violence that Ray Biddle has promised.

An examination of the production records from *No Way Out* indicates that there were two primary sociological events that influenced the creative decisions of those involved with the film. First, the cultural concept of suburbia, including the discourse surrounding it, helped shape the visual construction of the separate worlds occupied by Blacks and Whites. In essence, it was a construction rooted in the actualities of the nation's emerging dualistic housing market. Second, the presence of race riots in many cities, brought about by housing shortages, structured the film's use of racial violence.

The film's visual interpretations of the separate Black and White communities reflect the larger cultural biases that were guiding the growth of the nation's segregated housing market. In both cases, what was at work was a simple dichotomy in which the desirable amenities of suburban life were juxtaposed against the undesirable nature of an inner-city existence. This dichotomy emerged following World War II as "the racial and economic polarization of large metro areas became so pronounced . . . cities became identified with fear and danger rather than glamour and pleasure" (Jackson, 1985, p. 275). In one of the early scripts, instructions from screenwriter Lesser Samuels to director Joseph Mankiewicz reflect how this dichotomy was used to construct the visual representations of the segregated neighborhoods. Samuels writes of the White community as a "middle class neighborhood . . . the sun shines brightly down on the clean, tree-lined street. . . . There is a feeling of space and freshness, a healthy wholesome atmosphere" (first draft, Continuity Script, April 15, 1949). As was typical of the larger cultural discourse, the Black neighborhood was described as "sordid, unkempt, . . . with garbage cans on the sidewalk and shouts and screams of the children playing around the bonfire in the empty lot. . . . The overall picture creates the effect that they are almost encompassed by the overhanging gloom . . ." (first draft, Continuity Script, April 15, 1949). These images clearly support the broader cultural concept of a suburbia defined as much by what it was—safe, clean, orderly, and White—as by what it was not—dangerous, dirty, disorderly, and Black.

Yet, while relying on this dichotomy to visually structure the separate worlds occupied by Blacks and Whites, it was also necessary to penetrate the dark and dangerous facade of the inner city to humanize its Black residents. In fact, this was absolutely necessary if the filmmakers were to make the central character, Luther Brooks, more sympathetic. Ultimately, this was accomplished by taking the viewer inside the home of Luther Brooks to "see how real Negroes in a metropolitan city live. I would like to see them as human beings" (D. Zanuck, personal communication to Samuels, February 1, 1949).

From the beginning, screenwriter Samuels and producer Zanuck wanted to draw upon the country's race riots not only for dramatic effect, but also as a way of adding greater social relevancy to the film. During the preproduction phase, Zanuck wrote to Samuels that he visualized "an exciting, violent story dealing with a very profound American problem" (Zanuck, personal communication, February 1, 1949). Yet, as comments from other 20th Century Fox producers started emerging, Zanuck began to rethink the film's use of race-related violence.

In December 1948 and January 1949, Zanuck asked several of his most re-

spected colleagues and writers at 20th Century Fox to advise him as to the feasibility of producing such a racially charged film as *No Way Out*. For a few, the film seemed to pose no threat of sparking further racial tensions because it called for racial tolerance at the individual, professional level, as opposed to the collective, societal level. For example, producer Julian Johnson wrote to Zanuck, "People may very well resent an insistence on an equal social arrangement for blacks and whites but I don't believe any except the most prejudiced would object to this professional claim to equal opportunity" (J. Johnson, personal communication, January 3, 1949). However, other colleagues expressed some degree of concern over the film's use of racial violence. In their opinion, the film might actually encourage more public violence, thereby frightening exhibitors and audience members away.

Colonel Jason Joy, 20th Century Fox's public relations counsel, and producer Michael Abel were especially concerned about the racial violence and how it would be received by audiences and exhibitors alike. Abel wrote to Zanuck:

> A picture based on this story, dealing as it does with racial intolerance and with the hatred and violence growing out of it, inevitably runs the danger of stirring up further racial unrest . . . the loss of at least part of the Southern market and other outlets throughout the country. (personal communication, December 31, 1948)

Later, these same concerns would surface during the film's review by the Production Code office. Specifically, in a letter to Colonel Jason Joy, Joe Breen, president of the Production Code Administration, expressed reservations about the film's "inflammatory flavor" and seemed particularly concerned with "the several scenes referring to the race riot" (personal communication, October 6, 1949).

Apparently persuaded by the arguments of those who cautioned him about the film's violence, Zanuck would later write to screenwriter Samuels:

> I worry about the race riot, no matter how we fit it into the story. . . . We already know that we will lose about 3000 accounts in the South who will not play the picture under any circumstances . . . but it would be a terrible thing if we have something in the picture which would give the so-called white cities a chance to turn us down because then the picture will be a fatal financial disaster. . . . It is fine for us to be courageous, but we must also be sensible, and not too courageous with other people's money. (personal communication February 1, 1949)

Jules Buck, a colleague of Zanuck's at 20th Century Fox, advised Zanuck that one way to negotiate the volatile issue of racial violence was to depict Whites as the aggressors. He contended that this would permit "audience sympathy . . . to be directed more wholeheartedly toward the Negroes who, in this case, must attack in order to defend" (personal communication, July 11, 1949). However, while this might have served as an effective means of generating sympathy for the Black situation among White moviegoers, there was still some doubt as to how Blacks would respond to the use of race riots. There was particular concern about the response of Black civic leaders. Cripps (1993a) argued that "black leaders . . . feared that by exposing virulent racism they risked poking a stick at a dozing beast" (p. 246).

Cripps was correct in his assessment that the film's content was such that the Black community indeed had cause for concern. Yet, in light of the promulgation of segregationist housing policies and the accompanying race riots, it is difficult to accept the argument that racism was seen as a dozing beast. Instead, it seems that the studio did not fear waking a dozing beast, but possibly escalating racial hostilities and causing undue harm to the box office. This may be why, in the end, Zanuck eliminated any direct violence between groups of Blacks and Whites, opting instead to emphasize only the buildup and discussion of a possible race riot.

The possibility of a race riot in *No Way Out* emerges after Johnny Biddle dies and word spreads into the streets that he was "murdered" by a Black doctor. The important point here is not that Johnny Biddle is dead, but that his death has been caused by a Black man who has breached the great divide, at least on a professional level. In vowing his intent to revenge his brother's death, Ray Biddle manages to reassert his dominant social position by reminding Brooks of the continued segregation of Blacks and Whites in the most personal of arenas—housing. At one point, Ray Biddle tells Brooks,

> "You ain't gonna forget it, Rastus. . . . Beaver Canal is full of Johnny's pals. Wait'll they find out how he got killed. And by what. Yea—sure hate to be livin' in Nigger Town these days. You live in Nigger Town? Sure you do. Where else?"

Ray Biddle's language resonated with the hostility of existing social conditions to such a degree that audience members could not help but be struck by the film's relevancy. Specifically, it managed to play upon the fears of the new middle-class suburbanites by depicting the inner city as simmering with racial hostilities. Moreover, it implied that racial violence would always be a by-product of any attempt at social integration.

No Way Out has been both praised and denigrated for its treatment of racial prejudice. However, in either case, supporting evidence for the commentaries has been primarily confined to discussion of the final screen images, with little attention to how those images may have been constrained or shaped by larger forces. The preceding discussion is an attempt to show the importance of moving beyond a film's imagery to take into account the influences of particular social and historical conditions. The result demonstrates how the race-related film *No Way Out* was shaped by the convergence of two primary social events: sweeping changes in the housing market, particularly the rise of suburbia, and racial violence in the inner cities. As the scholarship surrounding filmic expressions of racial issues continues to grow, more attention to historical context should be paid so that we might gain a fuller appreciation for the complex interaction between films and the cultural conditions in which they are produced.

Note

Scripts and personal memoranda referred to in the text are located in the 20th Century Fox archives of the Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and the Arts Library at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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