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Austin Fisher

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Revisiting the Blacklist Western: A Reception Study of *High Noon*

ABSTRACT

This article uses newspaper archives to assess the extent to which *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) was received as a film with a political message pertaining to the Hollywood blacklist on its initial cinematic release. Various assumptions surrounding the film are interrogated by revealing that the film was overwhelmingly hailed as an instant genre classic, by examining levels of awareness around writer Carl Foreman's role, and by analyzing concordances between news coverage of the House Un-American Activities Committee and that of *High Noon*. The article thereby seeks to illuminate the fragmentary nature of political discourse in Cold War-era popular culture.

High Noon (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) has always been a peculiarly divisive film. Ever since its release on the US market in July 1952, it has been the cause of disputes among critics, filmmakers, and scholars and interpreted in a myriad of ways to serve a variety of outlooks. Geoffrey Galt Harpham exaggerates only slightly when he observes “the violent disagreements that have swirled around the film.”¹ Yet one dominant trend of interpreting *High Noon* in scholarly circles positions it as a *cause célèbre* of the Western genre's capacity to register the politics of a film's time of production. The ordeal of its screenwriter Carl Foreman at the hands of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and his intended allegory for the cowardice of contemporary Hollywood in response to the blacklist are now seemingly default prisms through which to interpret this film in the academy.

1 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “America in and at *High Noon*,” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 38, no. 2 (2018): 40.

Even within this apparently narrow frame of reference, various debates have raged since the film's initial release and continue to this day. Is this in fact a Western at all, or a political allegory and social drama dressed up in superficially Western clothes? Is *High Noon* really the fruit of Foreman's personal vision, or should the role of director Fred Zinnemann be given more prominence?² Was Foreman's intended political message even apparent to cinemagoers in 1952? The fact that these questions continue to provoke animated debate points to the broader significance of this film for how we understand the complexities of political communication during the Cold War years. Commonplace notions of 1950s United States as a conformist society responding as one to the Red Scare have been debunked by scholars investigating what Antonia Mackay calls "the multivocal nature of Cold War culture—its fractures and folds in the conformity it proscribes."³ Governmental efforts to contain the collective consciousness within what Elaine Tyler May has described as "prevailing norms of political and personal behavior" and Christian G. Appy has called "narrow boundaries of permissible thought" were continually undermined by the possibilities of transgressive or resistant cognition.⁴ This article will investigate how these complexities are manifest in the critical discourses that have surrounded *High Noon*. Assumptions that the cinemagoing public was necessarily mindful of HUAC hearings when viewing this film are rendered problematic by the diversity of interpretive strategies that were, in fact, on offer at the time of *High Noon's* release. A close analysis of these discourses therefore provides a snapshot of how such cultural-political memories have been mediated, both at the time of production and in the decades since.

To this end, I [collated and analyzed](#) 148 articles and reviews published in local newspapers across the United States between 1951 and 1956 that mention *High Noon*. By holding these articles up against the film's evolving critical terrain, I will present a broader evidence base than has previously been attempted. Moreover, by assessing the interpretive options being offered through such outlets, I seek to interrogate received wisdom about how political undercurrents were—or were not—being communicated during this period.

HIGH NOON AS A BLACKLIST ALLEGORY

The supposed political allegory in *High Noon* is surely familiar to anyone who has conducted even the most superficial amount of research into the film. Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) decides to delay his planned retirement and stay on as sheriff of Hadleyville for one more day in order to repel a recently released criminal, Frank Miller (Ian MacDonald), who is arriving

2 By assuming a director-versus-writer binary, this particular debate has tended to overlook the highly significant role of producer Stanley Kramer. I shall address this issue in detail later.

3 Antonia Alexandra Mackay, "City, Suburban and Pastoral Spaces and the Formation of Identity in Cold War America (1945–1965)" (PhD diss., Oxford Brookes University, 2013), 5.

4 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 15; and Christian G. Appy, "Introduction: Struggling for the World," in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966*, ed. Christian G. Appy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 4.



Figure 1. Will Kane (Gary Cooper) discards his tin star in *High Noon* (United Artists, 1952).

on the noon train to exact revenge for his incarceration. Kane's increasingly frantic efforts to gather a team of people who are willing to take on Miller and his thugs prove fruitless, leaving Kane to face this threat to himself and the town's hard-won civilized values alone.⁵ After the final shootout, Miller and his men lie dead in the main street, and Kane discards his tin star (see Figure 1) in disgust at the cowardice of the townsfolk, who have shown themselves unwilling to stand up and defend the sheriff and the town from tyranny when the time comes. The dominant allegorical reading of the film posits that Carl Foreman was similarly abandoned to his fate by the Hollywood establishment when HUAC arrived in town to renew its hunt for communists. Certainly, Foreman himself was disgusted by what he perceived to be a cowardly community, when his refusal to confirm or deny that he

5 I use the word "alone" cautiously to characterize commonplace readings of the film. As a number of scholars have pointed out, interpretations of *High Noon* as an individual masculine quest are in fact spurious, as Will Kane does not defeat Miller on his own but instead relies on the interventions of his wife, Amy Kane (played by Grace Kelly). See Don Graham, "The Women of *High Noon*: A Revisionist View," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 34, no. 4 (1980): 243–251; Joanna E. Rapf, "Myth, Ideology, and Feminism in *High Noon*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 75–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1990.2304_75.x; and Gwendolyn Foster, "The Women in *High Noon*: A Metanarrative of Difference," *Film Criticism* 18/19, no. 3/1 (Spring/Fall 1994): 72–81. Such readings provide valuable insights into how the film can also be interpreted as a critique of gender norms, both in the Cold War era and in the Western genre.

had been a member of the Communist Party led to him losing his associate producer credit and being blacklisted by the major studios.

The above interpretation, if taken too literally, does not quite work. Such a direct transposition of the film's plot onto the situation in the film industry lends itself to assumptions either that Foreman was a specific target of the HUAC investigation (as Kane is targeted by Miller) or that Hollywood institutions were in a position to protect him (as the town should have done for Kane), neither of which being true. The parallel has nevertheless become a standard preamble to scholarly analyses of *High Noon*. Glenn Frankel's recent book-length study of the film, for example, launches straight into a discussion of Cold War paranoia, dedicating much of its early framing material (the introduction and chapters 2, 5, and 8) to a meticulous contextualization within the history of communism in Hollywood and the interventions of HUAC.⁶ Matthew Costello introduces *High Noon* as "a landmark artifact of American popular political culture of the high Cold War."⁷ Jon Lewis argues even more emphatically for its importance as a key historical document of the blacklist era: "There is no way to talk about Hollywood and, by extension, no way to talk about Hollywood film from 1947 to 1960 without talking about the blacklist. And there is no way to talk about the blacklist, as the context and text of *High Noon* remind us, without first apprehending that the hardships of that era were at once professional and personal."⁸ Lewis also praises Phillip Drummond's "context first, text second" approach to the film, thus implicitly affirming a default reading: that "context" (whether of the film's production processes or of surrounding political discourses) is the proper way to interpret *High Noon*.⁹

Such approaches often make use of a retrospective evidence base, of sources that looked back at the time of *High Noon*'s production and release with hindsight. For example, Foreman's own claims about the film came from 1970s interviews and articles.¹⁰ Similarly, John Wayne's oft-cited dismissal of it as "the most un-American thing I've ever seen in my whole life!" was taken from a 1971 *Playboy* interview.¹¹ The extent to which *High Noon* was received as a film with contemporary political meanings in its own time is, however, not so clear cut. Indeed, it has proved to be a bone of scholarly contention. Richard Combs writes, "To read the reviews of 1952 is to be struck by how little [*High Noon*] was respected as a classic, realist or any other kind of Western. . . . Most of the positive reviews begin with the sheepish acknowledgement that this is the Western as seen umpteen times before, but

6 Glenn Frankel, *High Noon: The Hollywood Blacklist and the Making of an American Classic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

7 Matthew Costello, "Rewriting *High Noon*: Transformations in American Popular Political Culture during the Cold War," *Film & History* 33, no. 1 (2003): 30.

8 Jon Lewis, review of *High Noon*, by Phillip Drummond, *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 164–165.

9 Phillip Drummond, *High Noon* (London: BFI, 1997).

10 Carl Foreman, "High Noon Revisited," *Punch*, April 25, 1972, 448–450.

11 Costello, "Rewriting *High Noon*," 30; Manfred Weidhorn, "High Noon: Liberal Classic? Conservative Screech?," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, January 31, 2005, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/high-noon-liberal-classic-conservative-screed>; Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 144; Frankel, *High Noon*, 282; and Harpham, "America," 41.

somehow elevated, not by ambitious social commentary but by the classiness of its executions.”¹² Drummond diverges from Combs’s arguments that *High Noon* was seen to be unremarkable but supports his claim that the film’s political messages were overlooked: “In the public sphere . . . Foreman’s film, airbrushed of its politics, was already on its way to acquiring mythic status.”¹³ More recently, Frankel has argued that “almost no-one thought [that *High Noon* was a blacklist allegory] at the time,” whereas J. E. Smyth has dismissed such arguments out of hand, describing Combs’s claims as “erroneous” and stating that “it is untrue, as Phillip Drummond has argued, that ‘in the public sphere’ *High Noon* was ‘airbrushed of its politics.’”¹⁴

This debate takes on a sometimes frustrating nature when one attempts to follow the various claims that are made around the issue to their sources, to judge *High Noon*’s reception patterns for oneself, since there is often little concrete evidence offered. The most detailed existing investigation into the matter comes from Jeremy Byman, who cites forty contemporaneous reviews from newspapers and the trade press.¹⁵ Byman argues that “the red scare and the allegory” have always been center stage when discussing this film, meaning that the “brutally contentious world into which *High Noon* was born” is the logical starting point for any analysis.¹⁶ He illustrates this claim by charting a narrative whereby initial praise (from such critics as Bosley Crowther) soon gave way to a vendetta from the influential, pro-blacklist *Los Angeles Times* columnist Hedda Hopper, which poisoned the discourse and ensured that the film was denied the Best Picture Oscar in 1953. The clear implication is that critics of all ideological hues were well aware of the film’s contemporary political message. It is therefore notable that Byman does not directly quote any reviews explicitly pointing to a parallel between the film and the HUAC hearings. Rather, he indicates that such a meaning was implicitly recognized through innuendo and whispers between the trade press and industry insiders, typified by Crowther’s lament that *High Noon*’s “excellent script [from] the (Sshh!) controversial Carl Foreman” did not win the Oscar for Best Screenplay.¹⁷ This coverage does not automatically amount to widespread public knowledge of *High Noon*’s intended allegory. Nor does it mean that such references to the HUAC controversy were representative of the broader critical discourse surrounding the film. Indeed, my own evidence suggests that these references constituted a small minority.

Beyond Byman’s book, such corroborating evidence is very thin on the ground. Drummond points the reader to two editions of the *Motion Picture Herald* in a passing footnote “on the exhibition context.”¹⁸ Combs provides

12 Richard Combs, “Retrospective: *High Noon*,” in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 168.

13 Drummond, *High Noon*, 38.

14 Frankel, *High Noon*, 258; and J. E. Smyth, “The Western That Got Its Content ‘From Elsewhere’: *High Noon*, Fred Zinnemann, and Genre Cleansing,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 1 (2014): 55, 48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.593960>.

15 Jeremy Byman, *Showdown at High Noon: Witch-Hunts, Critics, and the End of the Western* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 17–28.

16 Byman, 14.

17 Byman, 26.

18 Drummond, *High Noon*, 86.

similarly scant evidence, citing recent (rather than 1950s) reviews to argue that “the allegory is just about invisible.”¹⁹ Smyth and Frankel both make more convincing claims: the former by arguing that the film’s political meaning was conspicuous due to the extensive contemporaneous news coverage given to HUAC, the prominent position of Foreman in the film’s marketing, and the reluctance of the Hollywood establishment to accept it into the Western genre’s pantheon and the latter by quoting 1950s film reviews—also cited by Byman—from Crowther, *The Nation*, and *Pravda*.²⁰ Yet neither provides a wide-ranging evidence base, instead citing a small sample of two or three articles to represent the surrounding discourse. Indeed, for the most part, when the issue of *High Noon*’s contemporary reception arises in film scholarship, assumptions prevail over evidence. Louis Giannetti argues that the film’s political allegory should not be privileged above its stylistic elements because the political messages “simply don’t seem as obvious today as they may have when the film was originally released” and goes on to state that Kane’s characterization “must have shocked contemporary audiences.”²¹ Harpham similarly speculates that the Cold War messages within *High Noon* “would have been largely unquestioned in 1952.”²²

The scarcity of concrete evidence provided in support of claims that *High Noon* was (or was not) being widely read as a HUAC allegory in 1952 can perhaps be explained when we place the film in the broader context of Cold War film criticism. Thom Andersen charts three “cycles of interpretation” in books written about the HUAC Hollywood hearings. The first of these cycles refers to polemical books published from 1948 to 1956 that were critical of the blacklist but that did not identify any such criticism within films of the period.²³ Jeff Smith applies Andersen’s categorization to analyze whether any Hollywood films were being understood as HUAC allegories at the time, arguing, “generally speaking, mainstream film reviewers of the 1950s had little or nothing to say about these subtexts.”²⁴ Smith then goes on to state that—following Andersen’s second and third cycles—only in later decades, as memoirs from blacklisted writers appeared and Hollywood institutions sought to atone for the damage done to those writers’ careers, did film criticism fully embrace interpretations of such science fiction films as *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) and Westerns such as *High Noon* or *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) as Cold War or blacklist allegories. Smith’s core argument is that such a reading of these films “did not emerge fully formed in the blacklist period. Rather, it developed over several years as a gradual process of long-

19 Combs, “Retrospective,” 169.

20 Smyth, “Western,” 48; and Frankel, *High Noon*, 258–259.

21 Louis Giannetti, “Fred Zinnemann’s ‘High Noon,’” *Film Criticism* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1976–1977): 3, 8.

22 Harpham, “America,” 63.

23 Thom Andersen, “Red Hollywood,” in *“Un-American” Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, ed. Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 225.

24 Jeff Smith, *Film Criticism, the Cold War, and the Blacklist: Reading the Hollywood Reds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 7.

term critical engagement with these texts.”²⁵ His main evidence is a thorough analysis of those subsequent critical trends, including those surrounding *High Noon*.²⁶ Once again, however, scant primary evidence is offered to illustrate the contemporaneous discourses surrounding the film’s initial release, with only four articles from newspapers and the trade press concerning Foreman’s split with producer Stanley Kramer being cited as evidence for the “very public” nature of the dispute.²⁷

It is, of course, not my intention to disparage any of these writers’ works (nor even necessarily to dispute their claims), since each of them enriches the discourse surrounding *High Noon*. The above-quoted material tends to come in the form of asides rather than integral components of core arguments. I aim instead to highlight a gap in primary research around this film’s reception patterns that this article will help resolve, which can illuminate some of the ambiguities that characterized processes of political communication within the era’s popular culture. My findings have uncovered patterns that possess notable parallels with three key claims made by Smyth, which support her argument that the film’s politics were apparent at the time: first, that the film was ostracized from the Western genre’s pantheon; second, that Foreman’s name was widely associated with the film; and third, that the film’s political meaning was clear to contemporary spectators due to the high-profile nature of the HUAC investigations.²⁸ As I shall demonstrate in the rest of this article, a closer look at each of these points in turn allows us to appreciate the ambiguities that surrounded *High Noon*’s entry into the public sphere.

As Jeff Smith explains, blacklist readings of 1950s Hollywood films were a discursive construct, born from the later growth of film studies as an academic discipline and its tendency to identify symptomatic meanings in films from the past. He explains his own methodological focus on reception patterns by seeking to ask not “*what* these Cold War-era films mean,” but instead “*how* they came to mean.”²⁹ My related aim—to excavate the early seeds of this same discursive process in one particular case study—demands a related methodology. I am certainly not claiming that my archival approach gives us access to what audiences in 1952 were actually thinking. Instead, by looking in detail at the interpretive models that surrounded the release of *High Noon* and placing these in the context of counternarratives to Cold War conformism, I seek, in the words of Barbara Klinger, to provide “a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment.”³⁰ By charting more ambiguous reception patterns than previous scholarship on this film has revealed, this article will therefore examine the fragmentary nature of

25 Smith, 1–2.

26 Smith, 197–200, 209–211.

27 Smith, 198.

28 Smyth, “Western,” 48.

29 Smith, *Film Criticism*, 17–18.

30 Barbara Klinger, “Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies,” *Screen* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/38.2.107>.

political discourse in Cold War–era popular culture, thereby interrogating accepted or assumed historical genre narratives.

Inevitably, there are methodological limitations to my endeavors. First, the 148 articles I analyze constitute a sample rather than an exhaustive database of *High Noon*'s press coverage. I have tried to avoid selection bias by using neutral search terms such as “high noon,” “high noon western,” and “high noon review,” but my findings are unavoidably guided by my subjective interpretation. Second, some of the articles I found contain remarkably similar phrases despite being written by different people, suggesting that a mixture of pseudonymous authorship, covert studio publicity material, or a degree of plagiarism may have been a factor across publications. I have kept such articles in my sample (alongside some more explicit replications distributed by such news agencies as the Associated Press), since the extent of their duplication attests to the nationwide spread of their perspectives. Third, my exclusive focus on local newspapers rather than the trade press means that I am only assessing how the discourse was representing the film to a target readership of interested filmgoers, rather than industry insiders. By identifying the dominant trends and patterns that recur across my sample, I merely aim to capture a snapshot of a particular mode of address (albeit one that has been largely overlooked).

HIGH NOON AND THE WESTERN GENRE

In 1954, Robert Warshow identified *High Noon* as the most striking example of a new tendency in the Western genre toward “social drama,” which makes the Western setting “irrelevant, a mere backdrop.” The film’s “vulgar anti-populism,” Warshow argues, “does not belong in the movie,” since it raises questions about contemporary society that do “not exist in the proper frame of the Western.”³¹ André Bazin’s contemporaneous judgment was more forgiving, but he concurred that Foreman’s story “might well have been developed in another genre . . . he treated the western as a form in need of a content.”³² That such founding luminaries not only of Western genre studies but also of the very disciplines of film and cultural studies themselves responded to *High Noon* in this way has gone a long way toward framing the film as one that was met with disdain by Western genre aficionados. It was, in the words of another founding father of film studies, Andrew Sarris, an “anti-Western.”³³ Frankel states that Sarris and Warshow both put their fingers on “what many Western lovers believe: that *High Noon* is just a barely disguised social drama using a Western setting and costumes.”³⁴

Smyth uses the film’s long-established pariah status within Western genre studies as a starting point for her examination of its “outsider” perspective, with Zinnemann’s European upbringing providing “the key to

31 Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 117, 119.

32 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 152.

33 Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 169.

34 Frankel, *High Noon*, 256.

understanding much of the critical unease surrounding *High Noon* for sixty years.”³⁵ As Smyth explains, with reference to Drummond’s description of *High Noon* as a film that “fills the form of the western with a content from elsewhere,” seminal books about the genre by Jim Kitses, John Cawelti, Philip French, and Will Wright tended to leave *High Noon* to one side, dwelling instead on the films of John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, and Budd Boetticher, who were celebrated by *Cahiers du cinéma* and the auteurist critical tradition.³⁶ It is notable, when considering the dynamics of genre canon formation, that each of these filmmakers’ names became synonymous with the Western due to their serial engagement with its mythologies over a number of years, whereas Zinnemann’s forays into the genre were sporadic. *High Noon*’s alternative categorization as a social drama or social problem film can perhaps be explained by that genre’s popular association with producer Stanley Kramer, who—as we shall see—was the dominant player in critical discourse around the film. Furthermore, this rejection of *High Noon* from the Western pantheon was not confined to critics and scholars. When Hawks made *Rio Bravo* (1959) as a direct rebuttal, he declared Zinnemann’s film to be a “violation” of the genre’s conventions due to Will Kane’s unmanly desperation for help.³⁷

The issue of whether *High Noon* should be seen either as a Western or a social drama in Western clothes was also explicitly evoked in discourses surrounding perceptions of the film as a leftist intervention into Cold War politics. When Luigi Luraschi (the head of foreign and domestic censorship at rival studio Paramount) wrote to the Central Intelligence Agency in 1953 in a bid to undermine *High Noon*’s chances of winning the Best Picture Oscar, he evoked this very issue to assert the film’s subversive character:

A writer I know who read the first screenplay refused to have anything to do with the picture, so full of messages did he find the script. . . . The plea will be made that this is just a Western and anybody finding fault with it must be a fanatic. Actually, the period is Western and one of the situations is, but the types and the basic plot are not Western but dressed in Western clothes to appear so. . . . Can’t understand how Cooper got sucked in; he’s a savvy guy, but I guess the Western cloak fooled him.³⁸

35 Smyth, “Western,” 43. Of course, many directors of Westerns at the time had European roots. John Ford was of Irish extraction, and Anthony Mann Austrian, for example. Smyth’s point about Zinnemann’s “foreignness,” however, revolves around the fact that he had grown up and developed his filmmaking sensibilities abroad before moving to the United States, unlike other more canonical filmmakers.

36 Drummond, *High Noon*, 66; Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969); John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1970); Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973); and Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

37 Giannetti, “Fred Zinnemann’s ‘High Noon,’” 4.

38 David N. Eldridge, “‘Dear Owen’: The CIA, Luigi Luraschi and Hollywood, 1953,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20, no. 2 (2000): 174–175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713669714>.

The emphasis on costume and disguise here is used to express a suspicion that communist subversion is insidiously polluting the outward manifestations of Americana. Luraschi continued, "For the average fan it will seem O.K. For the Communist and for his propaganda purposes abroad . . . it is still full of subtleties."³⁹ Such "messages" beneath the surface of a Western (the genre dubbed by Bazin the "American film *par excellence*") are here held up as an implicit sign of more profound contaminations within the United States' body politic.⁴⁰

Given the above context, it would be reasonable to expect *High Noon* to be rejected by critics on its release, its disqualification from the Western canon providing a clear sign that its political intentions were apparent. It is therefore striking that the exact opposite was the case. To cite only a few examples, reviews from the week of initial release are universally effusive, characterized by such comments as "a Western drama that is the best of its kind in several years"; "just what a Western should be"; "one of the best westerns to reach the screen in a long time"; "the finest Western since 'Stagecoach'"; "you just can't beat a good Western, and 'High Noon' is one of the very finest"; and "a new high has been reached in Western films."⁴¹ Of 148 reviews sampled, eighty directly discuss *High Noon* in the broader context of the Western genre. Of these, a majority (forty-two) hail the film as an instant genre classic (see Table 1). Considering the debates around genre identity that would come to characterize critical discourse on *High Noon*, it is particularly notable that the film is repeatedly situated alongside canonical "greats" as a film that "takes its place beside such Western classics as 'Stagecoach' and 'Red River.'"⁴² Elsewhere, we read that "you only need to refer back through 'Red River,' 'Stagecoach,' and 'The Virginian' to 'The Covered Wagon' to realize that every now and then one of the fine pictures to come along is a western. And 'High Noon' . . . is in that class."⁴³ Most striking of all is a review from October 1952 that argues for *High Noon's* status not only as a great Western but also as one that distills the genre's formula into its purest form: "I cherish two Westerns: 'Stagecoach' and 'High Noon.' . . . These were the peak of effort within a single field, they achieved a shining perfection that stamped them on memory as though with a hot iron. . . . They never strayed from their milieu, they kept within a rigid code of story-telling. . . . I suspect that 'High Noon,' less than a year old, will become as deathless a native classic as was 'Stagecoach.'"⁴⁴ Clearly, Combs's claim that "to read the

39 Eldridge, 174.

40 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 140.

41 Bosley Crowther, "'High Noon,' a Western of Rare Achievement, Is New Bill at the Mayfair Theatre," *New York Times*, July 25, 1952, 14; Jane Corby, "Suspense and Gary Cooper Make 'High Noon' Tick," *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 25, 1952, 4; Kate Cameron, "Suspense Pervades Cooper's 'High Noon,'" *New York Daily News*, July 25, 1952, 40; Harold V. Cohen, "The New Films," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 26, 1952, 5; Karl Krug, "Cooper Is Tops Again in Western," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, July 27, 1952, 6; and Henry Ward, "'High Noon' Classed Tops Among Westerns," *Pittsburgh Press*, July 28, 1952, 6.

42 "Credit July with Five Films All Better Than Just Good," *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 3, 1952, 22.

43 Bob Murphy, "'High Noon,' a Western, Is an Excellent Movie," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, August 3, 1952, 2.

44 Whitney Bolton, "Looking Sideways," *Clovis (NM) News-Journal*, October 14, 1952, 10.

Table 1: Patterns across 148 articles and reviews that mention *High Noon* in local US newspapers between 1951 and 1956 (see Appendix).

Category	Frequency
<i>High Noon</i> and the Western Genre	
Genre classic	42
Transcends genre	34
Just another Western	4
<i>High Noon's</i> Creative Genius	
Kramer key player	39
Zinnemann key player	20
Cooper key player	56
Foreman key player	16
<i>High Noon</i> and HUAC	
Concordance with "Un-American Activities," "McCarthy," "communist," "communism," or "blacklist"	63
Coincidental concordance	54
Foreman / HUAC link made	8
<i>High Noon</i> as HUAC allegory	1

reviews of 1952 is to be struck by how little [*High Noon*] was respected as a classic, realist or any other kind of Western” is highly questionable. Combs’s qualifier—that some reviews saw the film to be “the Western as seen umpteen times before”—is corroborated by only four reviews from the sample of 148 articles, when such phrases as “just another shoot-em-up” arise as jarring anomalies in the overwhelmingly affirmative critical reception surrounding this film’s place in the Western pantheon.⁴⁵ Furthermore, *High Noon’s* status as a genre classic persisted beyond this initial critical clamor, continuing unabated throughout my sample period. In July 1954—two years after its initial release—it was named “the best western to come out of Hollywood in many a year.”⁴⁶ In August 1955, it was featured in a list of “all-time western greats,” and by January 1956, it was being announced as “the standard by which all Westerns nowadays seem to be measured.”⁴⁷

This is not to say that critical responses to *High Noon* merely accepted its status as a genre classic without qualification. Indeed, thirty-four of eighty reviews that discuss the film’s place in relation to the Western’s broader continuum identify it as one whose singular achievement is to transcend the limitations of that genre, rising above the usual fare (see Table 1). These reviews tend to concur with Warshow’s and Bazin’s contemporaneous arguments that *High Noon* is a social drama dressed in Western clothes and using Western settings, albeit with a considerably more congratulatory tone. It is, the reader is variously informed, “as different from run-of-the-mill horse opera as it

45 Combs, “Retrospective,” 168; and Gynter C. Quill, “‘High Noon’ Is Good Western with Cooper,” *Waco (TX) News-Tribune*, August 7, 1952, 5.

46 Dorothy Kalil, “‘Oklahoma’ Combines Top Talent, Setting,” *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1954, 1B.

47 Dorothy R. Powers, “Stewart Wins Nod for Role,” *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), August 18, 1955, 5; and John Bustin, “Show World,” *Austin American*, January 28, 1956, 11.

could very well be . . . a suspense drama in a Western setting”; “nominally a ‘Western’ . . . a universal and timeless story”; “a high-tension suspense drama with a western setting”; and “a different type of western, [a] suspense filled drama,” that “has a western setting, but . . . is not the usual cowboy-bandits-Indians thriller.”⁴⁸ Far from being a model of fidelity to the traditions of its venerable genre, this film was “shattering some of the most precious conventions of the Western film tradition” and casting “a coldly clinical eye on the vaunted virtues of the old West and find[ing] them all dross.”⁴⁹

It is therefore clear that, far from being ostracized as a work of subversion, *High Noon* was widely and warmly embraced as a valuable contribution to its genre by critics on its initial release. At the same time, these reception patterns sowed the seeds of future debates on the film’s ambiguous and divisive relationship to the Western, which would in turn foster the myth that its release was met with widespread controversy. While many reviews framed it as a consummate Western, almost as many saw it as a work of artistic ingenuity in generic disguise. Even before auteur theory had crystallized these same debates in scholarly discourse, *High Noon* had been framed as a ready-made case study. The issue of who exactly was credited for its originality points to another revealing aspect of these reception patterns.

HIGH NOON’S CREATIVE GENIUS

When Sarris popularized auteur theory in the United States, he listed Fred Zinnemann under the heading “Less Than Meets the Eye.”⁵⁰ Directors in this category, Sarris argued, lack the all-encompassing personal signatures of the great “Pantheon Directors,” and *High Noon* was named as one of the films that “most vividly reveal the superficiality of Zinnemann’s personal commitment . . . his true vocation remains the making of antimovies for antimoviegoers.”⁵¹ As we have already seen, this film’s artistic vision has often been credited to its writer rather than its director, and this has formed a central pillar in identifying its political resonance in the context of the blacklist. When Bazin identified “great skill” in its execution, for example, he was explicitly referring to Foreman’s storytelling.⁵²

The source of *High Noon*’s creative agency has remained a commonly debated issue of the film ever since, and this is particularly evident when critical discourse has sought to question the relevance of received political-allegorical interpretations concerning the blacklist. Such sources tend to revert to a “Foreman versus Zinnemann” schema and explain that Zinnemann himself neither recognized nor approved of blacklist read-

48 Mildred Martin, “Film Saga of Rogers Is Praised,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20, 1952, 9–10; Helen Bower, “‘High Noon’ Sets a High Standard,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 2, 1952, 12; Herb Rau, “‘High Noon’ Is High Tension,” *Miami Daily News*, July 31, 1952, 12B; “Premiere of Outstanding Western Film at Coronet Increases Times Milk Fund,” *Daily Times* (Davenport, IA), August 7, 1952, 16; and Doug Kane, “Music, Tension in Movies Here,” *Argus-Leader* (Sioux Falls, SD), August 31, 1952, 22.

49 Whitney Bolton, “High Noon with Gary Cooper Registers,” *News-Press* (Fort Myers, FL), July 30, 1952, 4; and “Rare Western,” *Daily Herald* (Circleville, OH), January 12, 1953, 4.

50 Sarris, *American Cinema*, 155.

51 Sarris, 39, 169.

52 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 152.

ings of the film. For example, Giannetti's discussion of *High Noon* as a film that occupies "Zinnemann's universe" by featuring typical "Zinnemann protagonists" is based on an argument that the style (of the director) is more important than the politics (of the writer).⁵³ Alan Marcus describes Zinnemann as a neglected but "consummate auteur" and identifies *High Noon* as an exemplar of his personal vision while underlining the director's comments that "this for me was not a political film."⁵⁴ Stephen Prince also emphasizes the director's view that the blacklist reading was a "narrow point of view" and argues that *High Noon* should be seen as a blend of Foreman's bitterness and Zinnemann's experiences of fascism and appreciation of democracy's fragility.⁵⁵

It is therefore informative to read a review from *High Noon*'s week of release describing "a masterpiece of movie photography [that] bears the hallmark of Stanley Kramer's penchant for realism."⁵⁶ Indeed, as Table 1 shows, thirty-nine reviews from the sample mention producer Kramer, whereas only twenty mention Zinnemann (usually misspelled), and sixteen mention Foreman. This is to be expected when we consider the considerably more high-profile position Kramer occupied in contemporary Hollywood in comparison to his director and writer (and by far the most frequently mentioned person in these reviews is a man with an even higher profile still—the star Gary Cooper, with fifty-six mentions). It is, however, notable that on the rare occasion an individual artistic vision transcending the constraints of genre is overtly discussed, such proto-auteur theory is mostly focused on Kramer. It is he who has "managed to introduce a dramatic element of suspense into the age-old western" and "brought something new to Western dramas in his suspense thriller."⁵⁷ Elsewhere, we are told that "a lot of movie fans probably have figured that it'd take a man like Stanley Kramer to steer the weary old Western off the deeply-rutten [*sic*] path into fresh pastures," and *High Noon* accordingly "lives up to the high water mark set by this dynamic producer," giving "further evidence of his versatility and independence of formula."⁵⁸ "Like all Stanley Kramer productions," reads yet another review, "'High Noon' is a picture that 'says something.'"⁵⁹ Zinnemann receives such credit on three occasions.⁶⁰ No such auteurist adulation is afforded to Foreman,

53 Giannetti, "Fred Zinnemann's 'High Noon,'" 6.

54 Alan Marcus, "Uncovering an Auteur: Fred Zinnemann," *Film History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 49, 52.

55 Stephen Prince, "Historical Perspective and the Realist Aesthetic in *High Noon*," *Film Criticism* 18/19, no. 3/1 (Spring/Fall 1994): 63, 69–70.

56 Henry Ward, "'High Noon' Classed Tops Among Westerns," *Pittsburgh Press*, July 28, 1952, 6.

57 "Premiere of Outstanding Western Film at Coronet Increases Times Milk Fund," *Daily Times* (Davenport, IA), August 7, 1952, 16; and "Film Fare," *Tampa (FL) Times*, August 30, 1952, 8.

58 John Bustin, "'High Noon' Hits New High in Western Films," *Austin American*, August 8, 1952, 5; Jane Corby, "Suspense and Gary Cooper Make 'High Noon' Tick," *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 25, 1952, 4; and Frank C. Porter, "On the Screen," *Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 6, 1952, 42.

59 Jimmy Fidler, "Jimmy Fidler—in Hollywood," *Quad-City Times* (Davenport, IA), October 14, 1951, 38.

60 Helen Bower, "'High Noon' Sets a High Standard," *Detroit Free Press*, August 2, 1952, 12; L. B., "'High Noon,' 'New Western,' Is Packed with Suspense," *Tampa Bay (FL) Times*, September 2, 1952, 15; and Hazel Kirk, "Suspense Well Sustained in Film

who is occasionally listed as screenwriter, as one part of the collaborative endeavor of filmmaking, “one of those felicitous meetings of minds and talents that occur in a tight-knit unit.”⁶¹ One review discusses the contributions of Kramer, Zinnemann, Cooper, John W. Cunningham (writer of the original short story “The Tin Star”), Dimitri Tiomkin (composer), and Tex Ritter (singer) but contains no mention of Foreman at all.⁶²

This leads me back to Smyth’s claim that the political intentions behind *High Noon* were apparent at the time because “everyone in the industry knew of Foreman’s fate in 1951. The national newspapers covered the HUAC enquiry extensively, and despite Kramer removing him as associate producer and firing him from the company, Foreman’s name remained on the title cards as writer.”⁶³ Each of these claims is correct, but it does not necessarily follow that they point to the transparency of Foreman’s political intentions. Kramer’s name and association with the social problem film completely overshadowed the visibility of Foreman’s involvement. Furthermore, even if Foreman had been discussed as a creative force behind *High Noon* in local newspapers, it would not necessarily mean that audiences would have made the connection between his politics and any implicit messages in the film. It is therefore difficult to conclude from this evidence base that his intended messages were clear to anyone outside the film industry.

HIGH NOON AND HUAC

The final factor in my assessment of *High Noon*’s political visibility on its initial release follows on from Smyth’s argument that the HUAC inquiry was widely covered in newsprint at the time. The veracity of this claim is in little doubt. Table 1 shows that, of the sample of 148 reviews and articles that discuss *High Noon*, sixty-three appear on the same page as at least one of the terms “Un-American Activities,” “McCarthy,” “communist,” “communism,” or “blacklist.” When we consider that film reviews in local newspapers usually appeared somewhere in a publication’s inner pages, often nestled among local announcements and other entertainment notices rather than appearing next to major headlines, these bare statistics might lead one to assume that the film was indeed being discussed in relation to the political controversies of the day. Closer analysis of these sixty-three cases, however, reveals a more complex and ambiguous picture.

On April 8, 1954, the *Gazette and Daily* (York, PA) carried an editorial piece by David Wesley pointing to the dangers of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R-WI) investigations burrowing ever deeper into every facet of civil society, from General Electric to higher education and the army. Wesley bemoans the fact that cowardly bosses—“men of little principle and less courage”—are doing HUAC’s job for them by firing those suspected of communist sympathies, aided and abetted by the print media who have readily indulged

“High Noon,” *Newark Advocate*, September 8, 1952, 9.

61 Philip K. Scheuer, “Gary Hits Target on Stroke of Noon,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1952, 8.

62 Larry Lancaster, “Heralded ‘High Noon’ Now Showing at Roxy Theater,” *Orlando (FL) Evening Star*, April 20, 1953, 13.

63 Smyth, “Western,” 48.

McCarthy's "parade of hallucinations" by placing them on their front pages. The implications for American democracy, writes Wesley, are grave. As an afterthought, he then adds, "How many film-goers realized that this was just the story of Hollywood's finest recent achievement, 'High Noon'? It told of the return to a community of a known hoodlum and the pathetic efforts of the highly principled sheriff to organize the community against him. Not one would stand with him—and there were as many rationalizations as there were inhabitants. The sheriff went out alone and got his man. But who went away from the film, thinking of that community of cowards, feeling that the town has been saved?"⁶⁴ Evidently, Foreman's intended meaning was not entirely invisible, but the opening question Wesley poses here seems rhetorical—and, my sample suggests, with good reason. This article is remarkable because it is the only one out of the 148 sampled that explicitly identifies an allegorical meaning in *High Noon* pertaining to the blacklist.

This is not to say that Foreman's plight went unnoticed in discussions of this film. As we have already seen, the controversy around *High Noon* within the industry intensified when it was denied the Best Picture Oscar in March 1953. Accordingly, the sample shows that discussions of Foreman's blacklisting tended to coalesce around that same awards season. Three articles from the same day (March 11, 1953) mention the fact that Foreman appeared before the HUAC inquiry while reporting that he had been voted writer of the best 1952 American drama (*High Noon*) at the fifth annual awards dinner of the Screen Writers Guild.⁶⁵ Within a month, two further articles speculate over whether *High Noon* was denied the Oscar due to Foreman's refusal to cooperate with HUAC: "We don't like to think it, but it appears that 'High Noon' was punished because it was written by Carl Foreman, who on Sept. 24, 1951, refused to tell the House Committee on Un-American Activities all it wanted to know"; "When we consider that Carl Foreman . . . is on the Hollywood 'blacklist' . . . we shudder at the resulting effect on Hollywood production."⁶⁶ None of these articles, however, draw a direct link between the facts of Foreman's HUAC subpoena and subsequent blacklisting and the plot of *High Noon*. As Table 1 shows, only eight articles in the sample even mention these facts. Moreover, any notion that Foreman's ordeal was well known outside the industry is undercut by one article that discusses Charlie Chaplin's blacklisting, mentioning *High Noon* in an afterthought: "[James O'Neil, director of publications of the American Legion] said the author [of *High Noon*] was Carl Foreman and, turning to page 44 of the report of the House Committee On Un-American Activities [*sic*] for 1952, pointed out that the committee print accused one Carl Foreman of refusing on September 24, 1951, to affirm or deny Communist party membership. . . . O'Neil said it was agreed that the Foreman who pro-

64 David Wesley, "Food for Thought," *Gazette and Daily* (York, PA), April 8, 1954, 18.

65 James Marlow, "Wisconsin Senator Doesn't Let Critics Put Him on Defensive," *Appleton (WI) Post-Crescent*, March 11, 1953, 26; "Writers Honor Balky Colleague," *Reno (NV) Gazette-Journal*, March 11, 1953, 1; and "Quizzed Screen Writer Honored," *Visalia (CA) Times-Delta*, March 11, 1953, 8.

66 "Darkness at High Noon," *Montgomery Advertiser*, March 25, 1953, 4; and Mary E. Ferguson, "Of Oscars and Politics," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 10, 1953, 2D.

duced ‘High Noon’ and the one named in the House committee’s report were the same man.”⁶⁷ In February 1953—seven months after the film’s initial release—the back story of *High Noon*’s screenwriter is here framed as an obscure discovery, hidden away in the documentation and requiring corroboration. It does not point to a high-profile controversy.

The above cited material—nine articles—is the sum total from the sample that contains any mention of the issues surrounding the blacklist when discussing *High Noon*. Of the sixty-three articles that appear on the same page as one or more of the keywords “Un-American Activities,” “McCarthy,” “communist,” “communism,” or “blacklist,” the other fifty-four are entirely coincidental concordances, with articles about the film happening to be placed near unrelated news stories (see Table 1). A closer look at these coincidences offers a clearer indication that, contrary to Smyth’s claim, widespread newspaper coverage of HUAC did not amount to the identification of a political subtext in the film. Even when the film’s newsworthiness coincided with high-profile events surrounding the investigations, no such association was drawn. This is illustrated by briefly focusing on two particular dates.

First, on December 30, 1952, New York film critics voted *High Noon* best film and Zinnemann best director of the year. The Associated Press distributed the news to local newspapers across the United States, with the story appearing on crowded pages alongside numerous other articles. On the same day, they reported that the newly Republican-controlled Congress intended to expand Senator Joseph McCarthy’s powers in the Red Hunt.⁶⁸ A ubiquitous presence in the newspapers of that day, McCarthy had also just been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his military service in the Solomon Islands in 1943.⁶⁹ Beyond McCarthy’s prominent position, the minutiae of HUAC’s efforts appear in a number of stories on the same day. The front page of the *Logan (OH) Daily News*, for example, contains the headlines “Tighter Anti-Red Laws in Ohio Said to be Top Need” and “Four Persons Tagged Reds Deny Charges.”⁷⁰ While the latter story appears immediately above the report of *High Noon*’s accolade (Figure 2), no link is drawn between them.

A similar pattern can be observed on March 20, 1953, when newspapers across the United States expressed widespread surprise that pre-ceremony favorite *High Noon* had been denied the Best Picture Oscar the night before. We have seen that subsequent critical analysis has framed this event as a controversial, high-profile sign of the blacklist’s malign influence. It is therefore no surprise to see that, of the sixteen articles from this day that appear in the sample, twelve appeared on their newspapers’ front pages. Meanwhile, four-

67 Westbrook Pegler, “Fair Enough,” *Santa Cruz (CA) Sentinel*, February 12, 1953, 19.

68 James Marlow, “McCarthy in Position to Branch Out,” *Leavenworth (KS) Times*, December 30, 1952, 6. The same story appeared alongside similar reports of *High Noon*’s accolade on the same day in numerous newspapers, including *The Record-Argus* (Greenville, PA; 5), *Winona (MN) Republican-Herald* (6), *The News-Messenger* (Fremont, OH; 5), *Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD; 2), *Appleton (WI) Post-Crescent* (4), and *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun* (6).

69 Dan A. Kimball, “Senator McCarthy Gets War Service Medals,” *Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD), December 30, 1952, 1–2.

70 “Tighter Anti-Red Laws in Ohio Said to Be Top Need,” *Logan (OH) Daily News*, December 30, 1952, 1; and “Four Persons Tagged Reds Deny Charges,” *Logan (OH) Daily News*, December 30, 1952, 1.

Four Persons Tagged Reds Deny Charges

CINCINNATI (AP)—Members of the Ohio Un-American Activities Commission Monday heard four persons make flat denials under oath they are or have been communists.

The four had been named by Cecil D. Scott, former FBI undercover agent, several months ago as having been members of the Communist Party.

Monday's hearing wound up in turbulence as a Covington (Ky.) minister declared the commission's procedure itself was "un-American." He urged the group to allow the four accused persons to question Scott. The four named by Scott as having had Communist affiliations were:

Jerry Maxey, business agent for the Cincinnati district of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; John F. (Jack) Methard, former Hamilton County director of the CIO Political Action Committee; Ernie Waits, now a disc jockey for a Newport (Ky.) radio station, and Roscoe Dawson, former business agent for Local 265 at the AFL Hod Carriers' and Laborers' Union.

All denied flatly that they, ever were Communists and Maxey suggested to the commission either he or Scott be prosecuted for perjury in view of the variance of their statements.

The Rev. Morris Coers, pastor of the Immanuel Baptist Church of Covington and one-time Democratic member of the Indiana Legislature, was the one who called the commission's procedure "un-American."

'High Noon' Voted Best 1952 Movie

NEW YORK (AP)—"High Noon" has been selected as the Best Film of 1952 by the New York Film Critics.

The critics yesterday also made these choices:

Best Actor—Sir Ralph Richardson in the British film "Breaking Through the Sound Barrier."

Best Actress—Shirley Booth in "Come Back, Little Sheba."

Best Director—Fred Zinnemann for "High Noon."

Best Foreign Film—The French "Forbidden Games."

Figure 2. Extract from the front page of the *Logan (OH) Daily News*, December 30, 1952.

teen coincided with reports pertaining to HUAC or McCarthy. On this day, Representative Herman P. Eberharter (D-PA) expressed concerns that the HUAC investigation would soon extend to radio commentators, newspaper columnists, and editors.⁷¹ A widely reported story on the same day concerned the president of Hunter College, George N. Shuster, who requested that universities investigate McCarthy's activities so that he might be "summoned before the bar of American history."⁷² Another repeated story reported that Rutgers University suspended Associate Professor Abraham Glasser due to his refusal to answer HUAC's questions about communist affiliation.⁷³ Yet another story revealed that Representative Harold H. Velde (R-IL), chairman of HUAC, announced a delay in a planned extension of a probe to search for communists among the clergy.⁷⁴

We can therefore see that, on March 20, 1953, *High Noon* appeared on front pages nationwide in specific reference to the shock news that *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1952) had beaten it for the Best Picture Oscar. We also see that the story frequently appeared on the same page as reports concerning the reach of the HUAC investigation into civil society. Yet if *High Noon*'s Academy Awards defeat was indeed a topic of public controversy and debate regarding the blacklist, this is not in any way discernible from my sample, since not one of these news pages draws any connection between the film and the political context. Figure 3 shows the front page of the *Alton (IL) Evening Telegraph*, providing a typical snapshot of that day's headlines. The widespread, high-profile "surprise" at the Oscar decision is registered on the bottom right and appears alongside the Eberharter ("Says Congress May Investigate Press, Radio"), Glasser ("Glasser Given Suspension by Rutgers Prexy"), and Velde ("Velde 'Delays' Probe for Reds Among Clergy") stories. These surrounding discourses physically frame the *High Noon* story without drawing any links to it.

Clearly, that the Oscar surprise and the HUAC investigations were simultaneously prominent in news reports nationwide does not mean that Foreman's ordeal was being covered. Indeed, Foreman is not mentioned once in any of the March 20, 1953, articles in the sample. Such coincidences tell us more about the exigencies of newspaper layouts (with breaking news being fit into available space at short notice) than they do about either journalists or readers identifying any links between a film and its surrounding events.

71 "Probe of News Field Seen Possible," *Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD), March 20, 1953, 2; and "Press and Radio 'May Be Next' on Inquiry List," *Moberly (MO) Monitor-Index*, March 20, 1953, 1.

72 "Investigation of McCarthy Eyed," *Marshfield (WI) News-Herald*, March 20, 1953, 7. This story also appears on many news pages in the sample: for example, "College President Ready to Investigate McCarthy," *Florence (SC) Morning News*, March 20, 1953, 1; "Asks Colleges to Investigate Sen. McCarthy," *Oshkosh (WI) Northwestern*, March 20, 1953, 16; and "Turning Tables on McCarthy," *Southern Illinoisian*, March 20, 1953, 1.

73 "Rutgers Suspends Abraham Glasser," *North Adams (MA) Transcript*, March 20, 1953, 1; "Law Professor Suspended for Silence at Probe," *Terre Haute (IN) Tribune*, March 20, 1953, 1; and "Glasser Given Suspension by Rutgers Prexy," *Alton (IL) Evening Telegraph*, March 20, 1953, 1.

74 "Velde 'Delays' Probe for Reds Among Clergy," *Alton (IL) Evening Telegraph*, March 20, 1953, 1; "Velde Claims Mail Backs Clergy Probe," *Terre Haute (IN) Tribune*, March 20, 1953, 1; and "Roosevelt, Velde Deluged with Mail on Church Probe," *Hanford (CA) Sentinel*, March 20, 1953, 1.

ALTON EVENING TELEGRAPH

Member of The Associated Press. 3¢ Per Copy

Vol. CXVIII, No. 30

ALTON, ILL., FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 1953

Established January 15, 1883

Jersey Group Seeks to Join Alton's Schools

Students Now Pay Tuition To Alton (Ill.) Hill. Move Delayed

A motion was heard by members of Jersey County education in the Alton school board on the 19th. It was announced that the board of education of a Jersey County school district had proposed to join the Alton school district.

Members of the board of education of Jersey County school district No. 10, which includes the Alton school district, are now studying the proposal. It is expected that a decision will be made in the near future.

The Jersey County school board is currently reviewing the proposal. It is expected that a decision will be made in the near future.

3 Calls Keep Firemen on Jump at Noon

Winds Aloud Threat to Two Fires and Lower Central Section

The fire department was called to three fires at noon today. The first fire was at the intersection of Main and Central streets.

The fire department was called to three fires at noon today. The first fire was at the intersection of Main and Central streets.

The fire department was called to three fires at noon today. The first fire was at the intersection of Main and Central streets.

Taft Calls for Fresh Survey of Army Need

Washington - Sen. Taft (R-Ohio) called today for a fresh survey of the military needs of the United States.

The senator's proposal is part of a broader effort to re-evaluate the nation's military capabilities.

The senator's proposal is part of a broader effort to re-evaluate the nation's military capabilities.

Britain's Plan On Oil Rejected By Mossadegh

Tehran Premier Complies With Hope For Future

Tehran, Iran, March 19. - Premier Mossadegh today rejected a British proposal for a new oil agreement.

The rejection is seen as a significant step in Iran's efforts to assert its independence in the oil industry.

The rejection is seen as a significant step in Iran's efforts to assert its independence in the oil industry.

Workers Drag Allied Officials Quake Victims From Debris

Albany, N.Y. - Workers today dragged Allied officials and quake victims from the debris of a collapsed building.

The rescue operation was hampered by the extent of the damage to the structure.

The rescue operation was hampered by the extent of the damage to the structure.

Fund Pledges To Red Cross Now \$19,636

The Red Cross has received \$19,636 in pledges from the Alton community for the relief of flood victims.

The pledges were made during a recent fund-raising event held in the city.

The pledges were made during a recent fund-raising event held in the city.

UN Secretary Race Remains \$5,100 Asked In City Court

Chicago - The race for the United Nations secretary-general position remains open.

The race for the United Nations secretary-general position remains open.

The race for the United Nations secretary-general position remains open.

House Leaders Expect Delay In Tax Cut Bill

Washington - House leaders expect a delay in the passage of the tax cut bill.

The delay is expected due to concerns over the bill's impact on the economy.

The delay is expected due to concerns over the bill's impact on the economy.

Clark Says UN, French Battle

Washington - Clark says the United Nations and France are in a battle.

Clark's statement reflects his views on the current state of international relations.

Clark's statement reflects his views on the current state of international relations.

8 Pct. Increase In Union Electric Not Income of

Union Electric has announced an 8 percent increase in its earnings.

The increase is attributed to improved operational efficiency and higher sales.

The increase is attributed to improved operational efficiency and higher sales.

Glasser Given Suspension By Rutgers Prexy

South Brunswick, N.J. - Rutgers University has suspended a student named Glasser.

The suspension is the result of a violation of the university's code of conduct.

The suspension is the result of a violation of the university's code of conduct.

South Koreans Vind 'Delays' Probe For Reds Among Clergy

Washington - South Koreans have vindicated the 'delays' probe for Reds among clergy.

The probe was initiated to investigate potential communist sympathies within the clergy.

The probe was initiated to investigate potential communist sympathies within the clergy.

Says Congress May Investigate Press, Radio

Washington - A senator says Congress may investigate the press and radio.

The senator's proposal is part of a broader effort to ensure transparency in the media.

The senator's proposal is part of a broader effort to ensure transparency in the media.

'Operation Hideout' Successful Navy Brass, Enlisted Men Agree

Alton, Ill. - Navy brass and enlisted men agree that 'Operation Hideout' was successful.

The operation was a joint effort between the Navy and local law enforcement to combat crime.

The operation was a joint effort between the Navy and local law enforcement to combat crime.

Weather

Alton and nearby vicinity cloudy to cloudy with windy tonight and Saturday.

Temperature will be in the 50s and 60s.

Temperature will be in the 50s and 60s.

Spiritual Diary for Lent

Remember the words of the prophet: I shall give him silver: I shall give him gold.

I shall give him silver: I shall give him gold.

I shall give him silver: I shall give him gold.

'Greatest Show on Earth' Voted Best Motion Picture of Last Year

Albany, N.Y. - 'The Greatest Show on Earth' voted best motion picture of last year.

The film received widespread acclaim for its portrayal of the circus industry.

The film received widespread acclaim for its portrayal of the circus industry.

Figure 3. Front page of the Alton (IL) Evening Telegraph, March 20, 1953.

A COLD WAR COUNTERNARRATIVE

My findings therefore suggest that connections between *High Noon* and HUAC were almost entirely absent from critical discussion in local newspapers at the time of the film's release. From the perspective of film historiography, this corroborates Smith's claims that "generally speaking, mainstream film reviewers of the 1950s had little or nothing to say about these subtexts."⁷⁵ It also offers some insight into the broader status of HUAC's Hollywood inquiries in US national discourse. In his study of the 1947 hearings, Thomas Doherty explains that while this earlier inquiry was a high-profile media event characterized by "high decibel shouting matches and hands-on ejections from the witness table," the return of HUAC to Hollywood in 1951 was a considerably more sedate affair, which had "settled into a routine business practice."⁷⁶ Unlike in 1947, by 1951, newsreel and television cameras were mostly barred from the proceedings, which took place in a small room and were described in the pages of *Variety* as "dull, droning . . . punctuated by exchanges on legal technicalities."⁷⁷ It is therefore entirely possible that the lack of analysis linking *High Noon* to its political context reveals as much about the obscurity of the 1951 HUAC hearings as it does about the film itself. It is telling, for example, that none of the widely disseminated HUAC-related news stories cited above mention the committee's Hollywood hearings.

Doherty's work sounds a warning note to scholars of the blacklist period, who are sometimes prone to cast HUAC's visits to Hollywood (and the American public's response to them) in hyperbolic terms of fever or hysteria.⁷⁸ John J. Gladchuk, for example, describes "a 'super-patriotic' milieu that had Americans across the country 'red' with rage."⁷⁹ We have already seen how similarly broad assumptions about the public's engagement with the HUAC investigations repeatedly occur in scholarship around *High Noon*. Yet if the scholarly field of reception studies has taught us anything over the past thirty years, it is that, in the words of Janet Staiger, a historically grounded attempt to gauge audience response should seek to assess "the range of [interpretive] strategies available in particular social formations."⁸⁰ Indeed, there are numerous studies that uncover counternarratives to supposed Cold War-era conformity in the cinema of the blacklist era. Darryl Fox, for example, points to the critical and financial success of *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) to debunk notions that the public rejected films deemed "communist" by HUAC. Highlighting a Gallup poll that showed only 37 percent public approval of the 1947 Hollywood hearings (while 27 percent had no opinion on the matter at all), Fox identifies a pattern that appears to foreshadow the

75 Smith, *Film Criticism*, 7.

76 Thomas Doherty, *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 327.

77 Doherty, 328–329. As a caveat, Doherty also points out here that local TV cameras were present on September 24, 1951, the day Carl Foreman testified.

78 Doherty, 358.

79 John J. Gladchuk, *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace, 1935–1950* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132.

80 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 80–81.

later reception of *High Noon*, whereby a controversy existed largely within the industry (and saw the film being denied an Oscar) rather than among the public at large.⁸¹ Similarly, Marc P. Singer uses postwar boxing films as a means of questioning easy assumptions of public compliance with governmental coercion in the Cold War era, identifying a genre that registers unresolved tensions between individuality and conformity and suggests “a more problematic relationship among Cold War political realities, shifting American ideals of citizenship, and the transmission of values by modes such as the Hollywood motion picture.”⁸²

All of this has broader implications for how we, as film scholars, seek to position our objects of study within historical, cultural, and political contexts. Associations between a film and contemporary events or attitudes are problematic if the details of that relationship are assumed rather than interrogated. As my findings suggest, assumptions fostered by the retrospective formation of genre canons are unreliable, since there is no evidence that the critical consensus surrounding *High Noon*'s ostracism from the Western was reflected in the public sphere at the time of its release. Additionally, scholarly assumptions that the meanings ascribed to a film in contemporary public discourse were defined by that film's director or writer have proved unreliable. The specific circumstances of any given case study—such as the presence of a high-profile producer—also need to be considered when attempting to gauge that film's perceived cultural-political significance (or lack of it). Finally, a film's coincidence with a particular event or political process does not necessarily mean that the general public was drawing parallels between the film and the event or process at the time. Once again, the specificities of context should be carefully taken into consideration before any such conclusion is drawn.

Among Hollywood genres, it is the Western more than any other that has been given this solemn burden of symbolizing tensions within the contemporary American zeitgeist. Jack Nachbar's declaration that “the subject matter of Westerns has usually been the historical West after 1850, but the real emotional and ideological subject matter has invariably been the issues of the era in which the films were released” efficiently summarizes what has become the dominant scholarly approach to this genre.⁸³ The Cold War era in particular has provided fertile contextual ground for such readings, and *High Noon* is frequently held up as an exemplar of the Western's innate capacity to dramatize the ideological schisms of its time of production.⁸⁴ Such interpretations

81 Darryl Fox, “Crossfire and HUAC: Surviving the Slings and Arrows of the Committee,” *Film History* 3, no. 1 (1989): 32.

82 Marc P. Singer, “Fear of the Public Sphere: The Boxing Film in Cold War America (1947–1957),” *Film and History* 31, no. 1 (2001): 22.

83 Jack G. Nachbar, “Introduction: A Century on the Trail,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30, no. 4 (2003): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956050309602854>.

84 Three books in particular stand out for their meticulous mapping of the Western onto the ideological conflicts of Cold War America: Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); and Stanley Corbin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

can be highly rewarding, but my findings suggest that it is perilous to make assumptions about the relationship between any given film and its surrounding contexts without a careful interrogation of exactly how specific political or cultural factors manifested in particular times and places. Andrew Patrick Nelson advocates an approach to the Western genre that looks beyond received designations (such as revisionist or traditional) and asks instead what the specific function may have been of any thematic or stylistic device in any particular film, since “in doing so, we have the potential to reveal not the zeitgeist or cultural anxieties but the richness and complexity of the Western.”⁸⁵ Accordingly, *High Noon*'s function as a symbol for the blacklist—while useful for certain cultural histories—should not overshadow its other functions as an instant genre classic, a transformative work of sophistication, or a well-judged intervention into a marketplace by a shrewd producer. As we have seen, each of these is considerably closer to how the film was being discussed in the public sphere upon its initial release.

Austin Fisher is an associate professor of popular culture at Bournemouth University, the author of *Blood in the Streets: Histories of Violence in Italian Crime Cinema* (2019) and *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema* (2011), and a co-editor of Bloomsbury's Global Exploitation Cinemas book series.

85 Andrew Patrick Nelson, *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969–1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 77.