

Archives and auteurs: filmmakers and their archives

University of Stirling, September 2-4, 2009

Archives, process and discourse: Elia Kazan, *Baby Doll*, and 'independent'
American filmmaking, 1955-63.

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In some ways Elia Kazan seems an unlikely figure to discuss in terms of the notion of American Independent Cinema. He is not known for his engagement with the most popular Hollywood genres, but with a New York theatrical tradition. The blacklist literature has also framed him as a Cold War liberal – ultimately *with* rather than against the establishment despite the filmic rebellion of Brando and Dean. Yet I've tried to reassess this placing, as has Denise Mann, in her recent book, *Hollywood Independents: the Postwar Talent Takeover* (2008). In particular she examines *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) as a reflexive film that criticises the fifties culture industry in television and advertising while also acknowledging that Kazan and Schulberg are both in one sense part of it. The partnership of post-studio era studio and independent production company was becoming the dominant arrangement for the financing, production and distribution of films at this time. By 1956, when half the films distributed by the studios were independent in this sense, Warner Bros advanced over \$25 million to independent producers, compared to \$1.5 million in 1946. This paper uses archive sources (in particular the Kazan collection at the Wesleyan University Cinema Archives at Middletown, and the Warner Bros. archive at USC) to explore issues of discourse and process in the making Kazan's 'independent' (or 'semi-independent') films, in particular *Baby Doll* (1956), the first of his Newtown productions.

Kazan had grown up close to the view – common in the Group Theatre - that 'going to Hollywood' was in some sense a selling out, if not a kind of death. Kazan's letters are littered with references to the remoteness and artificiality of Los Angeles life and to the 'wax fruit' look of Hollywood actors, in comparison to the urgency and vibrancy of living in New York City. Yet

Kazan, perhaps because of his immigrant background, generally resisted a high/low culture perspective; in 1948 he told *Cue* magazine: 'I like pictures'; 'I don't partake of the general snobbish attitude' (17/4/48, p. 15). Later he wrote to Paul Osborn (April 19, 1954) while working for the first time as his own producer, at Warner Bros.: 'Do I sound like Hollywood has gotten me a little?'. Kazan drew on the studio's technical resources, its influence with the Breen office, and its marketing and publicity machine, while also trying to maximise his artistic autonomy. As he explains in his autobiography, his impulse to achieve greater autonomy was in constant tension with his desire for the 'power, equipment and prestige of a major studio...'

Kazan's most notorious clash with the studios had come with the complicity of Warner Bros. in the cutting by the Legion of Decency, beyond the agreed Production Code version, of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). The *Hollywood Reporter* felt that this film would need 'specialised selling and exploitation', including long runs in the 'classic and art houses', although Kazan felt that the combination of sex and sensibility would have a broad appeal, and was proved right. Around the time of the eventual opening of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) Kazan wrote to his friend, the composer of the film's score Alex North, explaining that he was fed up with the 'manufacturing process in relation to pictures' and that his experiences had fed his 'determination again for the nth time to go out and make some pictures independently'.

This impatience with the studios was further enhanced by their universal rejection of his and Budd Schulberg's pitch for *On the Waterfront* in 1953, prior to the intervention of independent producer Sam Spiegel. Kazan's first New York based project was a critical and commercial success, facilitating the director's move to activate his own company, and allowing him to gather, mainly from television, a regular East Coast crew. An early recruit was New

York production designer Richard Sylbert. In *On the Waterfront* Kazan referred to the way in which his work with cinematographer Boris Kaufman introduced him to a more artistic discourse. The Polish born Kaufman was the brother of Dziga Vertov and the key collaborator on Jean Vigo thirties work. Kazan remembered that 'we'd try to talk as artists, not as men paid to manufacture entertainment, and not as technicians with mechanical problems'. (90) Kaufman also worked with Kazan on *Baby Doll* and *Splendour in the Grass* (1961).

Newtown Productions, named after the estate that Kazan had purchased in Newtown Connecticut, was chartered on April 12, 1950 as a vehicle to produce and present plays and motion pictures. It had an office on Broadway, in New York, and its three directors were Kazan, his wife Molly Day Thatcher Kazan and his lawyer William (Bill) Fitelson. For Kazan issues of creative autonomy seemed preeminent. In a letter of November 1955 to Budd Schulberg, with whom he was simultaneously working on the screenplay for a second Newtown production, *A Face in the Crowd*, the director argued that 'I didn't start this fucking company to hurry or be hurried' (November 7, 1955). One of Kazan's friends, the playwright and screenwriter Robert Ardrey, referred to what he saw as the director's desire to 'make available to the screen the writing of first class people', although he also pointed out that it was not an easy matter to combine 'the creative freedom that a director must have with the creative freedom that an author must have'. This was illustrated in tensions between writer Budd Schulberg and Kazan during the making of *A Face in the Crowd* (1957).

Shooting on *Baby Doll* took place on location in Mississippi from November 1955 to the end of January 1956, when the company flew to New York, where most of the interiors were filmed at the recently refurbished Warner Bros.

studio in Brooklyn. PCA Vice President Jack Vizzard was struck by what he called the 'spirit of self-assertion of the new independents', and saw a political subtext about the effort of 'trashy whites' to sustain the status quo. In effect the film was a chamber piece for three main characters, all recruited (with little Hollywood experience) from the Actors Studio. In an era of increasing agency influence on casting, the Actors Studio – which Kazan constantly urged Jack Warner to support – was an important source of theatre trained acting talent.

Arthur Knight's comment, in reviewing *Baby Doll*, that it 'makes no effort to reward the good and punish the wicked', can be taken as a broader reflection of the weakened enforcement of the Code, and as a comment on its contrast with the traditions of Old Hollywood. The *Motion Picture Herald* characterised the film less as 'entertainment' than as part of a 'school of picture-making' associated with foreign producers. Long time *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther compared the film unfavourably with Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), but the fact that he made the comparison at all is perhaps most significant. For all Kazan's showmanship – pushing the reluctant studio into new forms of exploitation and marketing, such as the 60ft New York billboard poster of Carroll Baker - *Baby Doll* represented an emerging art cinema practice, with no Hollywood stars, ambivalent characters and an ambiguous conclusion.

The paradox of Kazan's creation of Newtown in New York was that while it separated him physically from the studio, and allowed him to build or rebuild traditions of medium budget filmmaking in New York - with generous production schedules allowing time for rehearsal – it seemed to increase the importance of Jack Warner's own commitment to the project, and of Kazan's own rhetorical skills in pitching to Warner. The Newtown contract gave first cut to the director unless two previews indicated to the financing

studio that changes were required; the production company was also responsible for obtaining a seal for the version to be presented to Warners for release. In terms of promotion, Kazan wrote to Jack Warner in November 1955, while preparing his first Newtown production, *Baby Doll*: 'After all, you are going to sell the picture, I'm only going to make it' (November 9, 1955). Kazan reluctantly allowed the Warner labs to process the film (while having his own man supervise the studio's work) in order to secure Warner's support both in terms of the Production Code and the studio's selling of the picture.

The tension of the studio-independent 'partnership' is caught, for example, in this letter from the Hotel Greenville, Mississippi to Jack Warner in November 1955. At this time no agreement on a seal seemed on the horizon. Much of the letter is concerned to try and stiffen Warner's resolve to resist those within the studio who – not for the last time – were sceptical about the commercial prospects of the new venture, and to support the director in his standoff with the Production Code Administration.

In general, Jack, it seems to me that with fewer and fewer people leaving their TV sets and their homes after supper, we must, we **MUST** strike out for exceptional subject matters and really unusual treatments of these subject matters. In one sentence we are now obligated, **AS A MATTER OF SELF PRESERVATION**, to put on the screen of Motion Picture Theatres ONLY what they cannot and will never see on their TV screens at home. Our industry now is in a desperate situation, and we must be bold and fight for our lives. TV is improving fast, and getting bolder every day. The wide screen gimmick cannot keep our head above water much longer. We've got to

break our own taboos and strike out for increasingly unusual and daring material. Either that or just quit and sign up with the TV guys.

While related in some ways to the trend towards the art film in America – the 1950s saw a growth in first run art film houses (there were 80 in 1950 but 450 in 1963) the film also had a political dimension that was seen at the time, reflecting the Old South at the moment before the changes of the civil rights movement (at the very time that Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat on the bus in Montgomery, in the neighbouring state of Alabama. (See also the case of the murder of Emmett Till). The black characters represent a powerful chorus, commenting on the pathetic authority of the central white character, Karl Malden). At the time Kazan and Tennessee Williams discussed the influence of the French playwright and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol, in terms of tone. Kazan wanted both to see the film as a black comedy, a theatrical notion far from normal Hollywood marketing practice, and to prompt Warners to stress its crossing of sexual boundaries, a notion ironically closer to the notion of independent cinema as ‘exploitation’. The film certainly offended patrons in the South. One protestor expressed herself: ‘This is the type of film we would expect to be shown in the cheaper theatres of less reputation’.

As with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Production Code judgement cut no ice with the Legion of Decency, which felt that the Code office was failing to enforce the Code. The Code still presumed a Hollywood product designed for a mass, family audience, while Kazan and others looked to adult themes to stem the post-war decline in audiences. In November 1956, a month before the film's New York opening, the Legion of Decency gave the film a 'C' (Condemned) classification. As is well known, the outcome of this was the

speech by Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, exhorting Catholics not to see the film 'under pain of sin'. The positive Time notice did not help much either, calling it 'possibly the dirtiest American made motion picture'. There still debate about whether the controversy helped the film (by giving it massive publicity) or hindered it (in terms of fewer bookings in the South and some Catholic non-attendance).

In immediate commercial terms the Newtown venture was unsuccessful – *Baby Doll* was slow to cover its costs and *A Face in the Crowd* had been a disaster. Kazan had made *Wild River* (1960) on location in Tennessee under his original contract with Twentieth Century-Fox, but this too was a failure at the time, despite its eventual critical recognition. By 1960, making *Splendour in the Grass*, Kazan reported that 'the pressures on me from Warner Bros. have been onerous and constant'. He made an unsuccessful appeal to the cinematographers union, for example, to obtain permission to use Ellsworth Fredericks as part of his East Coast crew on *Splendour in the Grass*. Kazan wanted to keep his 'tiny office' in New York open, and argued that he had 'brought about a revival of big picture making in the East'. His request was declined, however, and there were other pressures to use studio facilities. The exteriors were filmed on Staten Island, Long Island and in upstate New York, while the bulk of the film was shot at the Bronx's Filmways Studios, from May to August, 1960.

The film finally secured a Production Code seal in March 1961, but as with *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Baby Doll*, the Legion of Decency intervened, threatening to give the film a 'C', or Condemned, Classification. The Legion objected to the 'visual eroticism' of the film. In May 1961 Kazan warned the studio not to further tamper with the film contrary to their contract and threatened that if they did so he would go to the courts and to the public and

‘sue for millions of dollars’. Throughout the negotiations Kazan argued that he could have earned a million dollars in salary in that time, instead of his fee of \$125,000. He continued: ‘But I preferred \$125,000 in order to make a fine work independently and without interference.’

Despite these frictions this film was in commercial terms a more successful example of what might be seen as ‘semi-independent’ filmmaking. The controversy and the adultness of the production became a selling point, along with its direct appeal – unlike the earlier Newtown films - to the increasingly crucial younger audience. A full page ad in the *New York Times*, referring to the pre-release showings, proclaimed: ‘A Controversial New Motion Picture has caused an Event Unparalleled in Theatre History’. Kazan felt that the new audience ‘caught on to it’ at the special showings. To Clifford Odets, however, Kazan wrote that the studio had been ‘low on it’, that they had not backed the picture with real effort, and that they ‘would have cut a couple of hundred feet if I hadn’t been there, teeth bared’.

Kazan’s vision of adult entertainment, representing complex and nuanced behaviour, and some political comment, represented a genuine effort to safeguard his own, and his writer’s, artistic autonomy. For Warner Bros. the expectation was that the director of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront* would sooner or later hit the jackpot. Kazan’s most ambitious independent production, *America America* (1963) – reluctantly backed by Warners - was similarly unsuccessful at the box office. Working from his own family history and his own screenplay Kazan made explicit comparison between his semi-autobiographical protagonist, a young man set on leaving Anatolia and reaching America, and himself as a would be independent artist. The temptations of family life in Constantinople are compared to Kazan’s deliverance from the fate of being a career contract director in

Hollywood. A note in the script suggests the parallel that Kazan intended concerning his own journey towards independence: 'Stavros (you) goes to America, as you went into the world of ART'.

A Warners executive referred to it having 'staying power' only in 'art houses or theatres that run special attractions'. (April 13, 1964). Kazan commented: 'I'm disappointed, and certainly, Warner Brothers is'. 'Maybe it just isn't a picture for general release. Maybe, like some other of my pictures, it should get art-house treatment. *Baby Doll* should have'. (Kazan, in Bob Thomas article, March 14, 1964, WUCA).

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21/8/09