

On the Waterfront (1954), directed by Elia Kazan
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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Budd Schulberg, who wrote *On the Waterfront*, Elia Kazan, who directed, and Lee J. Cobb, who plays Johnny Friendly, all informed before the HUAC about their own Communist affiliations, and gave the committee the names of others with whom they had worked in Popular Front organizations. Ostensibly about mob infiltration of the dockworkers union, *On the Waterfront* has been “read” by many critics as Schulberg’s and Kazan’s justification for informing or “naming names” before HUAC.

Arthur Miller and Elia Kazan were good friends, and worked together in the Group Theater in New York, where Miller was a playwright and Kazan was an actor and later a director. Kazan had directed Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* when it was first produced by the Group. The two parted ways over Kazan’s decision to inform before HUAC. Miller wrote *The Crucible* immediately after Kazan informed.

Schulberg has referred to this film as an “Eastern,” as opposed to a Western. What does this film have in common with Westerns? In order to answer this question, think about the requirements for the Western genre, and then apply those to this film.

Given what you have gleaned about the McCarthy period, what can you extrapolate from this film about that time? Remember that this is a Hollywood film. In what way is the situation simplified in the service of a dramatic narrative of the classic Hollywood period? In what ways do you think it present different (perhaps easier) choices from the ones faced by Hollywood workers/artists?

From the first scene, in which Terry uses the ploy of Joey’s pigeon to lure him up to the roof, the “bird” metaphor permeates the film: we see and hear about literal and figurative pigeons, hawks and canaries. Where and how do the bird images show up? How do they enrich the film?

Another symbol in the film is Joey Doyle’s jacket, which is passed from Joey to Kayo to Terry. How does the jacket visually underscore the narrative?

In the first scene between Edie and Terry, Edie drops her glove and Terry picks it up. What does he do with the glove? How does this small action (this “bit of business”) enhance this scene? (Legend has it that Marlon Brando improvised this part of the scene.)

Visually, the film works with a series of “high” and “low” locations, which accumulate significance as the film progresses. There is the rooftop where Terry and Joey have their pigeon coops. Father Barry delivers his “sermon” in the hold of the ship. What other scenes work this way? Why might the filmmakers have made these choices?

There is a lot of talk about brotherhood in this film, and “brotherhood” takes different forms. There is also the blatant use of Christian imagery, which is introduced in Father Barry’s and Edie’s first scene, where Edie confronts him over Joey’s body. How is the Christian imagery developed? Why do you think this kind of imagery appears in the film?

Bibliography:

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