



Stardom As Hollywood Historiography

On-screen Legend and Off-screen Practice in Robert Aldrich's The Big Knife

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The *Big Knife*, directed by Robert Aldrich and released by United Artists in 1955, was part of a cycle of quasi-film noirs from the 1950s, including *Sunset Blvd* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), that presented biting critiques of the Hollywood film industry. A screen adaptation of Clifford Odets' 1949 Broadway play and Hollywood allegory, *The Big Knife* provides an exposé of the movie business that also spotlights the industrial practices of film stardom, and, in particular, the studio star contract. The film presents this exclusive, long-term contract as a highly ambivalent tool, one that has brought stardom to the film's protagonist Charlie Castle (Jack Palance), but also left him artistically and morally bereft. Castle's reluctance to renew his contract with his studio drives the film's narrative, as does his hostile relationship with his producer Stanley Hoff, head of the fictional Hoff-Federated Pictures (played by a menacing bleached-blond Rod Steiger, rumoured to be based on Columbia studio head Harry

*1 Although Clifford Odets credited on a Columbia picture, his play *Golden Boy* was adapted for the screen by the studio in 1939. Margaret Brenman-Gibson contends that Harry Cohn's treatment of the New York playwrights Daniel Taradash and Lewis Metzler, who were hired by director Rouben Mamoulian to pen the *Golden Boy* screenplay, coupled with his then-wife actress Luise Rainer's experience under contract to MGM, motivated Odets' disdain for the movie "factory" (524).*

Cohn due to his contentious relationship with Odets)¹ (see fig. 1).

Odets' own experience in Hollywood ultimately influenced *The Big Knife's* cynical outlook on Hollywood and its star system. In 1936, he left New York to work as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, where he remained until the late 1940s (in fact, his play *The Big Knife* marked his return to New York). As *The Los Angeles Times* noted in their review of the film, Odets wrote the original story when he was "fed up" with the film industry. He poured "his loathing and indignation into a stage play of 'social significance' that played to moderate success on Broadway with John Garfield" in the Castle role (Scheuer 1).² By 1955, the playwright was back in Hollywood and "well fed" after the successful screen adaptations of two of his plays in *Clash by Night* (Fritz Lang, 1952) and *The Country Girl* (George Seaton, 1955) (1).

The *Big Knife's* emphatic and somewhat antiquated focus on the studio star contract make it a compelling example for a historiographic study of Hollywood stardom, because of the industrial context in which the film was produced. Odets based his original story on the heyday of the studio system, where binding long-term talent contracts were more commonplace, and movie moguls wielded a considerable amount of power over their productions. By the mid 1950s, Hollywood stars were no longer signing exclusive contracts with major studios as Castle does in the film. In fact, the power dynamic had shifted, with top stars often working independently on a freelance basis, earning a percentage of their film's box of-

fice profits, and/or becoming producers of their own films that were in turn distributed by the major studios. Thus, how do we account for *The Big Knife's* anachronistic depiction of the Hollywood studio system - and the long-term option contract in particular - and what does this reveal about the postwar American film industry?

Using archival documents, including the Robert Aldrich collection, the Motion Picture Producers and Directors Association Production Code Administration (PCA) files, as well as industry trades and newspaper coverage on the film, this essay juxtaposes *The Big Knife's* onscreen portrait of Hollywood to actual off-screen film industry practices of the time—mainly A-list star negotiations to make films on a freelance basis, talent-turned-producers of their own independent productions, and major studios as distributors—to underscore how the film perpetuates distorted representations of stardom and the film business that belies the postwar studio system of the 1950s, which privileged talent. To highlight the disparity between the on-screen and off-screen practices of stardom in *The Big Knife*, I first examine the film's portrayal of Charlie Castle and Hollywood culture, and then scrutinize the film's production history, talent agreements, and its reception in the press. In doing so, I illuminate an inter-textual and reflexive approach to American film historiography. *The Big Knife's* indictment of the motion picture industry runs the risk of being taken as a valid reflection of the postwar Hollywood film industry at the time. How-

² Garfield's career trajectory resonated more with the fictionalized Charlie Castle. He was under exclusive contract to Warner Bros. from 1939 until 1946, and encountered much frustration with Warners' ruthless typecasting of his persona. Aldrich surmised the film may have fared better had Garfield been cast (the actor died in 1952) (Miller and Arnold 45).



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

AND
Miss SHELLEY WINTERS
AS 'DIXIE EVANS'



FIGURE 4

ever, an investigation of the off-screen production practices and talent negotiations that precipitated the making of the film suggests a counter-narrative of Hollywood stardom grounded in archival evidence that challenges the persistent image of the exploited and victimized film star. Closer analysis of the talent contracts of the cast and their director-producer, juxtaposed with the arduous on-screen experience of Castle, provides a nuanced and revisionist understanding of postwar film stardom in Hollywood.

The sequence in *The Big Knife* when Hoff coerces Castle to renew his long-term contract with Hoff-Federated Studios illuminates not only the extreme negative connotation that the studio star contract represents in the film's narrative, but also the popular legend about the all-encompassing paternal authority that the major Hollywood studios presumably held over talent at this time. Castle feels compelled to acquiesce to Hoff's demand that he renew his contract, as the studio has covered up his crime of killing a child in a drunk driving hit and run accident. In this scene, Hoff arrives at the star's mid-century modern home and invites the actor to join him at the races later in the afternoon. However, Castle declines the invitation, explaining that he does not intend to renew his contract beyond its seven-year time duration, indicating that he prefers to end his acting career and abandon Hollywood. This request incenses the producer, who interrogates his star, and in a tirade reminds Castle of all that Hoff-Federated has done to bolster his career.

Hoff declares with pen in hand to Castle, "You're not in the bargaining position! But I can't force you to sign, can I?"³ The musical score gets louder, using a drum roll to stress the actor's decision, while Castle's ineffective agent Nat Dazinger (played by Everett Sloan) and sly Hoff-Federated associate Smiley Coy (performed by Wendell Corey) look on from the background. The scene alternates long shots in crisp deep focus, which feature the wooden panels and large windows in the room, with tight medium close-ups to Hoff and Castle, depicting the actor as a caged animal who is trapped by his producer and the oppressive Hollywood "system." The actor finally yields and signs another seven-year contract, an act that leads to further decline, and ultimately his demise.

This depiction of the star contract is entirely in keeping with the concept of star servitude that has dominated both the public imagination and the scholarly discourse on the material conditions of stardom in the studio system, especially the seven-year, long-term option contract in the 1930s-40s. This exclusive contract tended to solely benefit studio executives at the actors' expense with controlling mandates and suspension clauses. Perhaps a model for the character of Charlie Castle, the actress Bette Davis is one of the most cited instances of star oppression in Hollywood. Her famous battles with parent studio Warner Brothers for increased creative control and discretion over her career, as a result of her long-term option contract with the studio, have largely become the accepted norm for studio stardom in American cinema.⁴ This absolute affiliation with a studio could restrict a star's autonomy, and as Thomas Schatz notes, "[t]he more

effectively a studio packaged and commodified its stars, the more restrictive the studios' and the public's shared perception of a star's persona tended to be" (75). Movie stardom, understood in this context, was what Tino Balio characterizes as a "dazzling illusion to the degradations of servitude" for actors working in Hollywood during the 1930s (134). However, this was not at all the case by the 1950s. In what Denise Mann calls the "postwar talent takeover," stars began to earn a cut of their films' box office profits and expanded their roles into the producer realm, actively developing projects and distributing them through the major studios. Thus, in postwar Hollywood, the Davis example of studio stardom was obsolete.

What is particularly striking about Charlie Castle's contract saga and the film's overall depiction of the star system is that it was largely outdated by 1955. By this point, the U.S. Supreme Court had delivered its 1948 Paramount decree, which declared the vertical integration monopoly of the Big Five studios (Paramount, Warner Brothers, Fox, RKO and MGM) illegal. Consequently, these studios were compelled to divest themselves of their theatre chains. Coupled with declining box office revenues and competition from the rival medium of television, the star system - grounded in long-term studio contracts - was gradually supplanted by a freelance talent and studio-distributor model, whereby talent individually negotiated with a studio or producer on a picture-by-picture basis. Furthermore, stars with box office clout had the potential to earn a sizeable percentage of their films' distribution gross profits in these

³ In the film, Hoff offers Castle a pen to sign the contract was from "a great American, General Douglas MacArthur" and Castle keeps the pen, declaring it is his only evidence that "the war is over."

⁴ For example, see Klaprat, "The Star as Market Strategy," for an insightful analysis on Davis' career.

⁵ Stars even experienced control and agency over their careers in the 1930s. See Carman, *Independent Stardom*, for an insightful revisionist examination of studio-era stardom.

freelance deals, a practice chiefly attributed to talent agent Lew Wasserman and his client, actor James Stewart in 1951.⁵

Indeed, *The Big Knife* itself was representative of the freelance talent system that has since become standard industry practice in Hollywood. The film was producer-director Robert Aldrich's first independent production venture. Shooting quickly in nine days and on a tight budget "without sacrificing quality," his dual producer-director role was indicative of Hollywood's shift from studio produced to talent independently producing films (Pryor X5). This dynamic brought story and creative personnel to a major studio together to distribute and release the film (in this case, *The Big Knife* was distributed by the newly revamped United Artists (UA), run by lawyers-turned-producers Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin). As producer, Aldrich equally shared in any distribution gross with UA through a fifty-fifty split, and his cut would be further split should any star participate in the gross earnings (although no star appeared to earn any percentage of the box office earnings, perhaps because the film was not a substantial commercial success).⁶ *The Big Knife* also included freelance talent like Ida Lupino, cast as Castle's estranged wife Marion, herself a leader in the talent-turned-independent producer model via her company "The Filmmakers" (which she co-founded with ex husband, producer Collier Young and writer Malvin Wald in 1949) (*see fig. 2*). Nonetheless, this film disseminates several "myths" about Hollywood—star slavery contracts, inadequate weak agents, and patriarchal, dictator studio

bosses—even as the post-vertically integrated studio system, freelance talent production model was largely in place. How did the off-screen employment experience of the distinguished cast in the film compare to Castle's fictional contract in *The Big Knife*? The film's budget was \$423,000, \$260,000 of which was allotted for the actors' salaries, (the film featured a half dozen top-rated performers, including Palance, Lupino, Rod Steiger, Shelley Winters, and Jean Hagen) (Pryor X5). The film's lead star, Palance, was a freelance artist at this time. Although the actor signed a long-term contract in 1950 with Twentieth Century-Fox, he broke his contract to return to Broadway in 1951, and thus, risked what *The New York Times* noted as "professional suicide" (Schmit X5). Yet, Palance suffered no professional ramifications for his decision when he returned to Hollywood to play his immortal role of Jack Wilson in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953). He signed on to *The Big Knife* as a freelance artist, represented by the Jaffe Agency, in 1954. Behind the scenes, Palance was an empowered actor, a significant disparity from the character he plays in Aldrich's film: a victim severed by the industry knife.

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between on-screen stardom and the off-screen freelance talent negotiations that emerges from *The Big Knife* is the case of actress Shelley Winters and her contract for the film. Winters appears in only one scene - as down-on-her-luck actress, Dixie Evans - whose sole claim to fame in Hollywood is being the witness to Charlie Castle's hit and run accident (*see fig. 3*). A series of production memos in the Robert Aldrich Papers housed at the American Film Institute underscore her significant contractual agency behind the screen for her relatively small role in the film. Furthermore, Winters'

off-screen bargaining contradicts the manipulation tactics and ironclad authority of studio boss Stanley Hoff that is apparent in the film. A United Artists memo from April 28, 1955 penned by Leon Roth of UA underlines how Winters' freelance status made her exempt from any promotional campaigns or consumer goods tie-ins associated with *The Big Knife*: "Three marketing tie-ups (NO-Cal, Nebel Hosiery, Duane Jewelry) were discussed with Winters, and she informs me that as a freelance player, she doesn't do any tie-ups unless she was paid for them."

Winters also enforced the billing clause outlined by her contract, which stipulated that—in the film's credits and in any publicity—she would be billed as "Miss Shelley Winters" (*see fig. 4*). She protested UA's trade publicity advertising campaigns that did not adhere to this clause. UA claimed that their actions relative to this clause were justified, stating that "the provisions of this section shall not apply to group, listing or so-called 'teaser' advertising, publicity, or exploitation, or special advertising, etc.," and "the objections advanced by Miss Winters/her agents do not hold."⁷ But Winters and her agent Paul Kohner demurred, as the following memo penned by Robert Aldrich on July 29, 1955 attests. Aldrich wrote to UA CEOs Krim and Benjamin that "Paul Kohner was contacted, who in turn contacted Shelley Winters and a request was made that she waive a contractual obligation that she be billed as "Miss Shelley Winters," but unfortunately (at least unfortunately for her), she refused to approve this change." Consequently, Aldrich and UA had to correct the earlier advertising to be an "exact interpretation" of the actress's billing specifications. As these produc-

⁶ Aldrich explained that while film was a critical success, it was a financial disappointment chiefly because audiences could not accept Jack Palance as a movie star who could "not decide on whether to take \$5000 per week" (Miller and Arnold 45).

⁷ Memo dated August 15, 1955 letter from UA to Winikus, Robert Aldrich Papers, AFI.

tion memos insinuate, Winters' powerful bargaining position off-screen differed substantially from her marginalized starlet character.

It is also worthwhile to examine how the industry trades and contemporary reviews of the film called attention to the inconsistencies in *The Big Knife's* depiction of Hollywood in comparison to current industry practices. This began before the film went into production, with PCA head Geoffrey Shurlock offering a warning to Aldrich in a March 10, 1955 memo about the film's projected image of Hollywood:

It was our feeling in reading this screenplay that *The Big Knife* very bitterly peels the hide off our industry. The conviction naturally arises that we do ourselves a great disservice in fouling our own nest, so to speak. The indictment of our industry is so specific and so unrelieved that it has the one-dimensional effect of labeling us all "phony." Of course, if the finished picture should prove to be such an ambassador of ill will, then we would be faced with a serious public relations problem.

The major industry trades echoed these initial reservations in their reviews of the film in the fall of 1955. Although *The Big Knife* premiered at the Venice Film Festival and won its Silver Lion award, it received mixed critical reception in the United States. The Hollywood Reporter writer Jack Moffitt postulated that while "self criticism" may be "healthy," he saw "nothing salutary in accusing ourselves of crimes we're not guilty of" in the industry, that the film does not even "trouble to say that the abuses set forth are not typical", and that "[n]othing extenuating is offered" (3). Variety underscored the discrepancy in the film's portrayal of stardom as compared to the reality of Hollywood. On the matter of Castle's resistance

to signing with Hoff because it would make him a "slave," the magazine contended that this "is just as inconsistent with present relationships between big lots and the top names" (6). They also dispelled the notion that Castle's contract extended up to fourteen years: "Furthermore, there ain't no such animal, legally or professionally, as a '14-year contract'; California law limits any deal to seven annums."⁸ Hence, even at the time of the film's release, *The Big Knife's* exaggeration of a by-gone star system was deemed obsolete within the industry itself.

In contrast to the industry press, Clifford Odets was delighted with the film version of his play, and he praised *The Big Knife* in a 1955 *The New York Times* op-ed:

To me, one of the most important indications that Hollywood is finally ready to take a responsible place in the community of arts is the film of my play The Big Knife...It represents a milestone (naturally not because it is my play) in the affairs of a community that has always maintained a clannishness and secrecy about itself and which...has presented generally unified opposition to projects it considered detrimental. (X5)

Although the writer championed the film's "honest" disclosure of the film business in the face of criticism, *The Big Knife* was no longer an accurate reflection of Hollywood in the 1950s. What's more, Odets' off-screen negotiations to sell the film rights to his play show how he also benefited from the postwar changes that favored film talent. He sold

the play for \$10,000 to Aldrich, and would split the distribution profits equally with the director. Hence, it was in Odets' best interest to endorse the film and encourage box office attendance with a positive review.

James Naremore contends that self referential Hollywood noirs like *The Big Knife* "seem to reflect Hollywood's guilty conscience and its sense that an era was ending" given that these films coincide with various crises in the film business: the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and the resulting Blacklist, television's encroachment on the film audience, and the Paramount Decree (328). Although *The Big Knife's* tone may have resonated with these changes, this essay has demonstrated how the film's version of Hollywood did not at all reflect the actual postwar muscle that movie talent flexed off-screen in 1955. Furthermore, this essay has considered how *The Big Knife's* portrayal of stardom differs significantly from the star system in practice in the 1950s. Perhaps this revelation alone is not profound given that in Hollywood, sensationalism often trumps fact. Nevertheless, the production materials of *The Big Knife* historicize the American film industry as it adapted to new economic conditions and developed new production practices, which bolstered the power of top talent in postwar Hollywood, even as *The Big Knife* itself ignored these significant changes. Moreover, my analysis has suggested how film historians can marry together two methodologies - film textual analysis and archival research - to study Hollywood stardom in its various contexts. By doing so, we can gain further insight into the inter-textual discourses that are at work in Hollywood exposés such as *The Big Knife*, as well as in behind-the-scenes production practices. This particularly comes to the fore in

⁸ In the film, Hoff asks Castle to sign a seven-year contract, however, various reviews of the film at the time erroneously reported it as a fourteen-year contract.

contract negotiations between talent, agents, and producers, which shaped the film industry at specific historical moments. The array of primary and secondary sources available for *The Big Knife* act as a prism through which to analyze the narrative depiction of star contracts alongside the original negotiations of the film's production. This hybrid methodology enables scholars to contextualize Hollywood and its star system through a revisionist lens, thereby discerning film history both on and beyond the screen.

I close with a reflection from Robert Aldrich himself on the making of *The Big Knife*, in which the director considered whether the old Hollywood studio system was better or worse for filmmakers given the rise of "freelance media conglomerate Hollywood" in the 1970s:

When we made *The Big Knife*, Harry Cohn and Jack Warner were still in full flower, and

[Louis] Mayer was only recently fallen. Nobody had seen the abyss. We'd had twenty years of petty dictators running the industry during which time everybody worked and everybody got paid, maybe not enough, but they weren't on relief. Seventeen years later you wonder if the industry is really healthy in terms of creativity. Are we making more or better pictures without central control? But when everybody worked under those guys, they hated them. But, you know, you can have a certain fondness for the way Cohn and Mayer got things done. Cohn took a while to realize that I did *The Big Knife*. Halfway through the "honeymoon" period when I was signed to Columbia, he asked me, "Did you do the *Big Knife*?" I said, "Yes." Cohn said, "You son of a bitch. If I'd known that you never would have been here. (58-59)

Aldrich's remarks highlight how *The Big Knife* was released

at a transitional moment in Hollywood, in which the aging studio moguls and their vertically-integrated, monopolistic studio system was superseded by a new model, one that was led by talent agents, savvy stars-turned-producers, and studios acting as distributors to newly independent theatre chains. These postwar industry shifts are not apparent in the film's narrative representation of Hollywood, but they are revealed by the primary documents of the film's production. It is only by consulting the film, its historical context, and primary documents together that scholars can gain a multi-faceted understanding of postwar Hollywood stardom in *The Big Knife*.

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