

Ida Lupino and The Postwar American Film Industry
By Jordan Lisi



Ida Lupino pictured in Jean Negulesco's 1948 *Road House*.

I. Introduction

The transition years after World War II thrust the American film industry into yet another major period of upheaval. Several factors, including the 1948 court-ordered dismantling of the previously established vertical distribution model between exhibitors and the five major studios of the time¹, the postwar recommencing of the House Un-American Activities Committee Investigations and subsequent blacklisting of major Hollywood talent, writers, and crew, and the major socio-economic and geographic shifts for the Nation's workforce and filmgoing audience, all of which would culminate to result in an irreversible shift in Hollywood, effectively ending the Classical studio system for good.

One major result of this reorganization was the opportunity for independent film companies to enter direct agreements with exhibitors, thus gaining a far larger audience than any of the companies on the fringes of Hollywood before them, such as the uplift films of Oscar Micheaux's independent film company of years prior. One of the earliest independent film companies of this new era was headed by actress, writer, and director Ida Lupino—the only working woman director in America following the war until the mid-1950s. Lupino used the advantages of her time while simultaneously working against a staunch gender barrier to produce a starkly independent oeuvre which examined postwar societal and specifically women's issues with nuance as well as a deep commitment to reality, all presented with the excitement of a Classical Hollywood genre film as well as deeply influenced by the filmmakers of Italy and Germany.

In this essay I will examine the various political, economic, and social factors at play in American society after World War II which directly affected the American film industry, with a

¹ Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century Fox, RKO Pictures

specific focus on how this helped open the door for former Hollywood actress Ida Lupino to become a writer and director of socially conscious and complex films which received national exhibition and critical acclaim.

II. Ida Lupino: Origins

Ida Lupino was aware of the commodification and objectification of the female star from very early on in her life. Born as the heir to a legacy of a family of performers, Lupino was pressured by her father Stanley Lupino, “a well-known stage comedian”, into performing on stage from only seven years old (Grossman 11). By age fifteen, in 1939, Ida Lupino emigrated with her mother from England to America with “a contract in Paramount awaiting her in Hollywood” (Grossman 12). Prior to this, Lupino had starred in a few films in England including a film in which she plays a seductive teenager who has an affair with a character portrayed in the film by her godfather, “matinee idol Ivor Novello” (Grossman 13).

Paramount had initially brought Lupino to America in 1933 after noticing her in a small role as a “sweet girl” (Grossman 13) in the 1933 English film *Money for Speed* in order to audition for the role of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Upon Lupino’s audition, “one of the executives commented that she sounded more like Mae West than Lewis Carroll’s Victorian girl” (Grossman 13)—Lupino’s early maturity, forced in part upon by her by her family, stunted her early acting career in Hollywood. Grossman writes that purely “seductive” roles weren’t a fit for Lupino either, due to her formidable intellect—Lupino was “bored and insulted” by the roles she was offered, ultimately resulting in several suspension periods by Paramount (Grossman 16).

However, Lupino didn’t rest during her suspension periods, instead using this time to expand her insatiable creative intellect. During her suspensions, Lupino would hang out on movie sets, where she was well-liked by many of the directors. “She’d say, ‘Chum, I’d really like

to learn about all of this.’ So she’d sit there and watch” (Mala Powers qtd in Grossman 18).

Lupino used these suspension periods as an opportunity to learn how to direct. It was also during a suspension period when Lupino “aggressively lobbied” director William Wellman to let her audition for the upcoming *The Light That Failed* (1939)—“He hired her on the spot after her impassioned impromptu reading of the part” (Grossman 13). Lupino’s performance earned massive critical acclaim and would mark her breakout role as a Hollywood actress.

The Light That Failed was a literary adaptation of a Rudyard Kipling novel, in which Lupino plays a “destitute cockney model” (Grossman 13) who drives the artist painting her to insanity, and vice versa. Lupino followed up this psychologically complex performance with another massively-lauded and equally psychologically-thrilling role in Raoul Walsh’s 1940 picture *They Drive by Night*. Lupino would go on to star in *The Hard Way* (1943), *Pillow to Post* (1945), *Deep Valley* (1947), and *Road House* (1947), roles which display a remarkable and complex range, a credit to Lupino’s hard work in avoiding being typecast. Additionally, with each role Lupino earned critical acclaim and accolades. Lupino’s individual resistance to being commodified, typecast, and branded would hold her back from achieving the highest level of Hollywood Stardom, and Lupino often jokingly referred to herself as “the poor man’s Bette Davis” during this time. It was after *Deep Valley* that Warner Bros. would offer Lupino a seven-year contract which Lupino would notoriously decline, turning down a chance at Hollywood immortality for a new role: director.

In 1949, Lupino, her then-husband and writer/producer Collier Young, and writer Marvin Wald formed an independent film company called The Filmmakers, out of a “desire to make independent films about ordinary people traumatized in the postwar social environment” (Grossman 25). In this sense, we can place Lupino amongst contemporary postwar independent

American “semi-documentary, topical, and social problem” filmmakers Stanley Kramer, Robert Rossen and Louis de Rochemont, all of whom Lupino and Young openly referenced as influences (Grossman 16). These filmmakers would represent the very beginning of the door being opened for an independent revolution in American filmmaking. One can also understand Lupino’s independence from Hollywood as simply another one of the establishments that Lupino would rebuke in her new life as a writer and director. “Because Hollywood offered a particularly salient example of the failure of the American Dream for Lupino,” Grossman writes “it was a setting Lupino rejected, modeling her films instead after European-influenced documentary realism” (Grossman 15).

III. Postwar American Film Industry

During the war years, the United States government funded Hollywood-produced informational war films as part of an overall effort to boost American morale, as well as to document and frame the efforts of the American military. In his essay *Taking Stock at War’s End*, Roy Grundmann writes that in return for Hollywood’s service in producing these films, the government allowed Hollywood “to retain autonomy over its own affairs,” leading to “the studios’ most profitable five-year period in history” from 1941-1946 (Grundman 399).

Postwar American society was one of rampant economically-inflated consumerism, but now that the war was over, there was not enough economic stimulation to maintain the bull run. Hollywood was no exception: in 1945, there were several union strikes which raised union wages 25%, making Hollywood films much more expensive to produce, while 1946 would represent the last year of Hollywood’s spectacular five-year run before a major dip in box office profits (Grossman 26). These box office losses were in part due to the onset of the white middle-class migration to the suburbs, which caused traditional urban exhibition venues to lose

profits. These inflated production costs and already-loosening grip over the exhibition sector would not serve Hollywood well during the massive reorganization following the war.

Additionally, after Hitler's "facism had been defeated" (Grundmann 399), the United States government turned their attention back to Communism, resuming the House Un-American Activities Investigation into Hollywood as well as a legal investigation which had been opened by the Department of Justice before prior to the war, which would ultimately progress to the Supreme Court. As Hollywood's creatives, talent, and crew were being permanently blacklisted from the Industry by HUAC, the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 to break-up the established oligarchical vertical integration Studio distribution model in which studios directly owned theaters and sold their films in packages.

"The Paramount consent decrees," Therese Grisham and Julie Grossman write in their book *Ida Lupino, Director, Her Art and Resilience in Times of Transition*, "threw the Hollywood studios into crisis by 1948. The immediate response was to cut back on production and on the number of employees. Long-term contracts were eliminated, and many directors, screenwriters, and even actors became independent agents, no longer bound to work for one studio" (Grossman 43). The end of studio-owned theaters meant an end to block-booking and thus the demise of the low-budget Hollywood B-movie as well as the necessity of individual marketing for each film to each theater, causing both production and distribution prices to rise even further after the decree.

As Hollywood lost its grip on the distribution sector for the first time, it simultaneously fell into a massive talent scarcity as a result of the HUAC blacklistings as well as the cutbacks following the Paramount Decree. Facing increased labor costs against the inflated economy, a lack of talent, and a loss of hegemony over exhibition for the first time, Hollywood faced "serious competition" from "independent and foreign filmmakers" (Grossman 43), whose films

did not have to abide by union wage rules and could be purchased by exhibitors for low costs, making independent films a lower-level financial risk for investor with a potentially solid market return.

IV. Women in Postwar America

During the war, women had been federally encouraged to join the workforce and were “the most significant domestic audience during the war years” (Grundmann 400). However, as veterans returned to America, women were displaced from the workplace and asked to return to the domestic setting, “badgered into submission in the Eisenhower era 1950s, forced out of their war jobs to go back home and transform themselves into happy homemakers” (Grossman 34). Ida Lupino, while a beneficiary of many new opportunities for independent filmmakers, waged a long and hard war against sexism for her entire career, and the freedom for experimentation available to male independent filmmakers of her time simply was not granted to Lupino.

Lupino’s intricate navigation between institutional sexism in Hollywood and the preservation of her own creative vision has drawn comparisons to Dorothy Arzner before her. As a woman, Lupino had to be careful not to be too independent, or else she would be perceived as a major threat to the patriarchal film institutions of her time and her films would not be allowed to be made or shown: There are “few rewards for women who were too different” (Donna Halper qtd in Grossman 31). As it is, it was already a struggle for Lupino to get her films made (see section VI: Production Codes). Thus, we can consider Lupino to both be “exemplary” of this watershed moment in film history, but also a major independent force of nature on her own, “formidable in that she shrewdly seized new opportunities despite the gender barriers she continually encountered” (Grossman 16).

V. The Films of Ida Lupino

Lupino received her first directing opportunity after director Elmor Clifton suffered a heart attack in 1949 and was not able to direct the production of the upcoming film *Not Wanted* (1949). The film tells the story of a woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock who falls in love with an injured veteran and is filmed in a semi-documentary style, notably “replacing a typical Hollywood conclusion with an open ending” (Grossman 19), placing this film amongst other postwar social realists such as independent filmmaker Stanley Kramer or even William Wyler’s 1946 postwar drama *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

Despite not receiving billing as the director of the film, Lupino impressed executives with *Not Wanted* and was asked to direct *Never Fear* that same year. The film employs the same psychological and documentary techniques and deals with a dancer who contracts polio, a subject personal to Lupino who had contracted polio herself. In the opening credits, the titles read: “This is a true story. It is photographed where it happened,” indicating both a dedication to authentic realism influenced by Italy’s own postwar neorealist filmmaking style and also acting as a model for independent filmmakers of future generations, predating both John Cassavetes’ 1958 *Shadows* ending credit title—“the film you have just seen was an improvisation”—and the first rule of the 1990s independent filmmaking movement Dogma 95’s manifesto: “Shooting must be done on location” (Trier).

Lupino’s focus on contemporary social issues from a humanistic standpoint further draws on Italian neorealism in the notion “that individual experience belongs to a larger collective experience of suffering is intrinsic to the neorealist project” (Grossman 55). Lupino’s filmmaking style was a significant rejection of Hollywood, citing instead European influences such as Italian neorealism as well as experimenting with German Expressionist styles later on.

It was Lupino's 1950 *Outrage* that marked the first fully independent Filmmakers' production. *Outrage* is the story of a young woman in a generic postwar American town who is raped and eventually finds solace in the company of a former veteran-turned-reverend who understands her "shell-shock", or PTSD. In addition to Lupino's documentary, neorealism-influenced style, *Outrage* blends in German Expressionist sensibilities: the set design "is highly worked", shaping the subjective space of the story and exposing "the workings of the psyche" (Grossman 59). Borrowing visual cues from Fritz Lang's depiction of the serial killer in the 1931 *M* for Lupino's treatment of the rapist, *Outrage* demonstrates a remarkable blend of influences from Italian neorealism, German Expressionism, and the Classical Hollywood film noir genre.

Like the race pictures of the post-silent era and some of her Hollywood contemporaries, Lupino used genre filmmaking, specifically the noir crime drama, to convey messages about social ills while refusing to sacrifice audience engagement. Lupino drew from Hollywood in other ways, such as her "star casting, increased length, complex plot, psychological nuance, and genre hybridity" (Grundman 401), elements which were identifiable in the postwar Hollywood film and equally present in Lupino's films. Grundmann states that noir was a key facet of postwar Hollywood's examination of cultural conflicts, writing that "crime melodramas reflected very real socio-cultural conflicts, of which the upheaval in gender relations was the most prominent" (Grundmann 400). Grossman elaborates that it is "no wonder that Americans' fears and anxieties found a place in film, mirrored in film noir," after the extreme and "unprecedented agent of destabilization" in the atomic bomb of 1945 and the "instabilities of the postwar period" (Grossman 42).

In this regard, Lupino and Hollywood were synchronous in their approach to the cultural fear and anxieties of the postwar era, although it would not be inaccurate to note that Lupino's treatment was in general more thoughtful, nuanced, and envelope-pushing than her contemporary Hollywood filmmakers. Take the films of Elia Kazan, which touch on social issues—labor unions in the 1954 *On The Waterfront*—but then present a singular, often less-than-progressive solution to these complex cultural conflicts, embodied by a white male hero who is able to save the day and return society to the status quo.

Lupino's bold desire to understand complexity and bring it out into the open works is on full display in The Filmmakers' 1953 *The Bigamist*. Sharing ground once again with Fritz Lang's 1931 *M*, the film focuses on the “protagonists' trials rather than on outcomes”, examining marriage and gender roles in an “alienating, modern, society” (Grossman 100). The male protagonist, Harry Graham (Edmond O'Brien) faces emasculation “brought on by the reconfiguration of gender roles in the postwar period” (Grossman 101) shown by his marriage with his business-savvy wife Eve (Joan Fontaine), leading him to enter a second marriage with the working-class Phyllis (played by Ida Lupino) in order to fulfill a traditionally masculine gender role as a father—which he cannot achieve with Eve—and breadwinner.

The film takes place between Harry and Eve's modern San Francisco apartment and the traditional suburban house shared by the Phyllis and Harry in Los Angeles—highlighting two converging versions of the American dream—and Harry's world eventually begins to crumble around him as he fails to share time between the two wives in any meaningful way. Grossman notes that “Harry resembles nothing so much as an exhausted mother and wife when he answers the door...as the baby cries and Phyllis sleeps” (Grossman 100), illustrating Harry's failure in understanding his role as a man in a society with gender equality.

In the very beginning of the film, as Harry nods off on the couch with his notebook strewn and his collar loosened in a post-work malaise, Eve wakes him with a ringing sound from a mechanical soldier toy. The toy is an unpleasant wake-up call for Harry literally and figuratively; a reminder of the industrial advancements (the toy being mechanical) brought about by the war (the toy being a soldier) which have ultimately led to an empowered female working class (Eve possessing the toy). Later in the scene, at 00:06:50 in the film, Harry remarks in a nearly sour tone that Eve is “the perfect wife—good in the office, great around the house” underscoring Harry’s preference for what a wife should be great at. Moments later, Harry remarks that the past seems “like a long time ago”, pining for a society before the ushering in of modernity. Later in the film, Harry remarks that “it was my idea, [Eve] coming into the business” (00:21:10), going on to explain how quickly and successfully Eve “caught on”, voicing a larger sense of male societal regret for opening the door to women to enter industry during the War years.

Harry, miserable and stumbling around Los Angeles, then takes a bus tour of the homes of old Hollywood stars. The bus tour serves as a somber reminder of the past, as the Classical Studio System, which had dominated popular culture for decades, was rapidly disintegrating in the post-war years, and it is where Harry meets Ida Lupino’s Phyllis Martin. The film treats Phyllis and Harry individually with care and empathy, emphasizing their loneliness and stress in navigating the modern world. Eve is a single working woman, Grossman noting that during the war, the government encouraged “women to stay single, even giving them communal housing,” in order to preserve the traditional nuclear family for the return of veterans and the postwar years—“a step backward” (Grossman 14)—but the war is now over, and despite Phyllis’ desire to be returned to a traditionally female societal role, the best she can achieve is a poor imitation

of wartime conditions: an absent, infidelious husband. When Harry drops Eve off at her boarding house and watches her longingly as she ascends up the stairs, he dreams of a promise of a return to a retrograde American society.

Later, when Harry has returned to Eve, Eve makes a business sale while a dazed Harry pours drinks for the clients. Later, as the couple go to bed, Eve shows a lack of care towards Harry's hopelessness, choosing instead to focus on their business; illustrating how Harry and Eve's relationship has become essentially a business partnership with reversed traditional gender roles, completely emasculating the bewildered and struggling Harry. In this sense, the film doesn't ascribe moral judgement towards Harry, the bigamist, but rather tries to understand his psyche, much like Lang's treatment of the serial killer in *M* (1931).

"In keeping with the key noir theme of the inability to escape the past," Grossman writes on page 56, Harry then decides to enter a marriage with Phyllis. However, Harry doesn't find fulfillment in his traditional relationship with Phyllis either: The traditional home in which they live, "with its division of space designed for housewives sans servants—compact and accessible—becomes a clutter of toys and essential baby things that deluge Harry with the knowledge that he has only gotten himself deeper into the quagmire of his failure to free himself" (Grossman 101).

The climactic and final courtroom trial scene doesn't condemn Harry but rather leaves the door open for a larger societal change, the judge simultaneously tragically and monotonously commenting that Harry is "basically a decent man...with the best intentions", who has "lost [Eve and Phyllis] both", further noting that Bigamy is "an issue which strikes at the very roots our society" (01:17:00). The film ends with a bout of heavily emotionally-laid staring first between Harry and Phyllis—who smiles understandingly and leaves the courtroom—and then between

Harry and Eve. Eve clutches her purse and lingers in the courtroom before Harry is led away by his lawyer.

While open-ended, the ending suggests that with time and commitment to change, men might come to be able to fulfill a new role in the modern era. Phyllis and Eve don't end up hating Harry and he isn't convicted by the judge. His punishment, as the judge notes, is the world of pain he has constructed for himself, and the only escape, the film suggests, is to make a choice between Phyllis and Eve, the traditional and the modern, and assume a moral place in society as a father and husband in some context. The film seems to suggest a path with Eve's lingered presence at the end, but doesn't ignore the deep desire Harry and Phyllis still have for each other. Instead of suggesting a solution, Lupino attempts to understand the problem from a bird's eye view.

The film meditates on wartime societal conditions in the context of postwar—women estranged from their newly adulterous husbands—from a nuanced, sensitive perspective rather than pushing a single-minded message which would both bore and offend audiences. Lupino's examination of women's roles in a patriarchal society from a man's perspective was a remarkably sensitive and intelligent strategy for bringing these problems to light, although it does leave the women in the film a bit unexplored in their own way. We never learn how Eve understands her new role as a successful businesswoman in the modern world, for example, or what Phyllis really wants out of life aside from being a legitimate mother. Digression aside, the meditation upon societal ills present in Lupino's films can be ascribed to her single-minded determination "to encourage social change" (Grossman 101).

VI. The Production Codes

The Motion Picture Production Code, which reigned over Hollywood from 1934 to 1968 and was enforced by administrator Joseph Green was a set of guidelines by which American motion pictures *had* to abide. During the postwar era, the Production Code weakened and eventually evaporated as filmmakers like Lupino continued to push boundaries. However, these filmmakers faced resistance, and Lupino's navigation with the Breen office is nothing less than remarkable.

Grossman writes that Hollywood directors' correspondence with the office was channeled through "studio executives and producers", while Lupino would negotiate "with the censors herself" (Grossman 25). Lupino's focus when negotiating with the office was production-oriented: by presenting solutions to the censors' production issues, Lupino operated on an assumption that there would be a production. The 1949 *Not Wanted* was one of the most challenging films for Lupino to lobby for, and she ended up rewriting the script to solve key production issues while still conveying the film's message. The title was changed from *Bad Company* in order to shift the focus from a "main street sex problem drama" (Grossman 25) and certain explicit scenes were replaced with cutaways. Grossman writes that "Breen's effort to muffle or eliminate controversial elements of *Not Wanted* was clearly trumped by Lupino's communication strategy and material negotiations of his concerns in making the film." (Grossman 29). Lupino compromised and conceded with the office without sacrificing the messages or ideas in her film.

Lupino, "as the exceedingly rare woman in the roles she occupied", also understood in her negotiations with Breen's office that "it would be impossible to approach the [Production Code Administration] the way men did" (Grossman 23), in terms of going head-to-head with Breen using emotional displays of passion to fight for artistic integrity. Lupino's strategy was

instead one of flattery and willingness to listen and compromise. Lupino “amazed reporters by stating that the movie censors aren’t big, ugly beasts, after all, but nice, broadminded, human beings” (Grossman 26). It was through this unprecedented level of communication and willingness to compromise that “Lupino managed to defend the PCA and *Not Wanted*, and the compromises reached between the parties significantly favored production of the film” (Grossman 27).

Lupino also faced significant challenges with the 1953 *The Hitch-Hiker*, a film about husbands evading their wives and responsibilities to instead go on a road trip (predating Cassavetes’ *Husbands* by 16 years) turned serial killer thriller when they encounter a fictional rendition of the real life murderer Billy Cook, who made headlines in 1951 for a murdering spree in California. Much like Martin Scorsese of the post-code Hollywood era, Lupino received criticism which misunderstood her work as an endorsement of the behavior presented on the screen, and the censors almost did not allow it to be made until they were assured that the serial killer in the film would be unequivocally presented clearly as “the enemy of society”. The Filmmaker’s publicly clarified that they were not attempting “at any point to glorify his criminal activity” (Grossman 32).

The Hitch-Hiker also did something remarkable for the time: shooting on location in Mexico, Lupino asked the Mexican actors to speak their native language, and no English subtitles were added in post. American film critic Carrie Rickey would state that “no other director of her generation could shoot a movie on location in Mexico...and not stereotype the Mexican actors” (Rickey qtd in Grossman 24), adding to the understanding of Lupino as remarkably thoughtful and ultimately very humanistic, believing in the agency and value of all people.

VII. Conclusion

Ida Lupino was an individual force of nature who chose independence and creativity over Hollywood commodification as a result of her desire to create social change. The postwar era offered unique and unprecedented social, industrial, and cultural contexts which allowed Lupino and her production company The Filmakers to achieve national distribution and critical acclaim while making films with a social message on topics which would not be discussed by Hollywood. Despite the opportunities afforded to independent filmmakers in the postwar era, Lupino faced the daunting challenge of breaking through Hollywood's institutionalized sexism as the only working woman director in the immediate postwar era, and her persevering legacy in the face of an industry that would've rather muzzled her is a testament to her courage and determination to create meaningful films.

Ultimately, Lupino left us with a "searing critique" of "American social institutions in the context of postwar society and American consumerism" (Grossman 9), a wildly progressive and humanist oeuvre which utilized creative techniques from the European masters combined with Classical Hollywood filmmaking in order to create highly complex dramatic artifice which hoped to understand the modern world and specifically women's place in it. Her career is a testament to her single-minded determination, cleverness in navigating the Production Code, creative curiosity, ability, and vision, and sheer force of intellectual will.

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