

Comicosmopolitanism

Behind Television

As a critique of the complicity between politics and show business, *A Face in the Crowd*, we have seen, takes care to direct its aim away from Hollywood and the motion-picture industry of which it is a product, sending its satire to New York instead, where the interlocked worlds of television and advertising furnish a much safer target. But if this deflection spares the film's satirists the embarrassment of having to acknowledge the ongoing Hollywood blacklist in which they have both collaborated, we should note that (unlike the theater, as we shall see in the next chapter) television had a blacklist of its own. In his history of Jews in and on American television, David Zurawik, having observed that the television networks, like the Hollywood studios, were run by anxiously assimilationist Jewish executives, explains why the networks were so cooperative: "The fledgling networks were even more vulnerable than the film studios in the early 1950s, because television was so dependent on Madison Avenue. . . . In terms of programming, the advertising industry controlled prime-time television up until about the quiz show scandals of 1958, and Madison Avenue was decidedly WASP."¹ Where the cruelty of the Hollywood blacklist is often evoked by citing the death of John Garfield, the greater vulnerability of the fledgling networks hardly made their policies of blacklisting any less murderous, or any less apt to produce martyrs. Registering vulnerability's penchant for inflicting wounds of its own, Zurawik adduces the most manifestly tragic episode in the history of the television blacklist: the firing, in 1951, of the actor Philip

Loeb, co-star of the situation comedy *The Goldbergs*; followed by the cancellation of the show; followed in turn by Loeb's suicide in 1955.

Much of the value of Zurawik's account, however, consists in his demonstration of how the brutality of blacklisting extends both structurally, beyond specific practices of firing and nonhiring into a more or less conscious and systemic de-Judaizing of television content, and temporally, beyond the quiz show scandals of the late fifties into the seventies—in fact, into the nineties, where even the supposed mainstream triumph of uncloseted Jewishness in the blockbuster sitcom *Seinfeld* offers evidence of persistent Jewish self-censorship in the shadow of a normatively Christian and presumptively anti-Jewish mass audience of “American viewers.” Some writers, directors, and actors who had been blacklisted could work openly in television once again after, say, 1962; but the medium to which they were returning, Zurawik suggests, remained, and remains, sufficiently traumatized by the blacklist to keep acting as if it were still in force: to keep imposing it on itself, at the level of content if not at the level of personnel. And so it is in force, its genius consisting in having implanted itself so firmly in the mass media it had terrorized that, appearing finally to have been “broken” in the early sixties, it could pretend to put itself out of business. This chapter later looks at the work of blacklist survivors; but let us note now that, long past reports of its demise, the blacklist itself survives, all the more robustly for being presumed dead.

Like American movies, American television proves the truth of the claim—not always a malevolent one—that Jews play a dominant role in running the mass media. But perhaps even more than American movies, American television constitutes the paradox of a Jewishly dominated mass medium *without Jews*—or, to put it more cautiously, in which Jewishness, if not kept entirely out of sight, must show its face as little, or as guardedly, as possible, for fear of alienating the non-Jewish majority, whose image, in the collective unconscious of network executives, probably still resembles that of the adoring audience of Lonesome Rhodes in *A Face in the Crowd*. Blacklisting in American television, Zurawik suggests, is never just about anti-Communism, or even primarily about anti-Communism, though of course anti-Communism provides it with its alibi, as it does in the film industry as well. In what might pass for a slip, Zurawik writes, “When the House Un-American Activities Com-

mittee (HUAC) first started formally looking for Jews in the motion picture industry . . .”² “Formally,” or at any rate officially, HUAC was looking for Communists, not for Jews. In previous chapters, I have argued, however, that the hunt for “Communists” legitimated a much broader and murkier pursuit: indeed, a pursuit of “Jews,” insofar as that term stands for those entertainers and intellectuals, those Jewish, or (like Charlie Chaplin) Jewishly associated, jokers and smart alecks, whose mimetic tendencies put them dangerously at odds with the dominant national seriousness. Despite having been named in the television blacklist’s bible, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, Philip Loeb denied that he had ever been a Communist; it was enough, however, that, as a liberal member of Popular Front organizations, he could be characterized as politically “controversial,” thus giving the network and the sponsor an excuse for firing him. Meanwhile, those “controversial” politics just happened to coincide with an overt Jewishness—a holdover from radio, *The Goldbergs* featured recognizably Jewish actors playing explicitly Jewish characters—whose distinctive tone was comic, and whose distinctive accent belonged to that least American of American cities: its eccentric and exotic cultural capital, namely, New York.³

Loeb was fired, in short, for what I have called comicosmopolitanism, not for the Commiecosmopolitanism—the participation in a putative international Communist conspiracy—of which *Red Channels* accused him, and for which a nervous NBC dismissed him, after picking up *The Goldbergs* from an even more sycophantic CBS. Zurawik speculates as to the latter network’s motives for dropping the show:

Though not reported until May [1951], the decisions by General Foods and [CBS head William] Paley to cancel [*The Goldbergs*] had actually been made in early April, shortly after the conviction on March 29, 1951, of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg as spies for the Soviet Union. Their three-week trial in New York and subsequent death sentences made daily headlines across the country. To the best of my knowledge, the connection between the conviction of the Rosenbergs and the cancellation of *The Goldbergs* has never been made, but the timing is such that one cannot help but wonder if the official branding of the Rosenbergs as spies at the height of the Cold War didn’t have a direct impact on what happened to *The Goldbergs*. Both were, after all, young Jewish families with two children. Would gentile

viewers think of the Rosenbergs when they saw *The Goldbergs* on their television screens?⁴

Zurawik is right to notice a “connection between the conviction of the Rosenbergs and the cancellation of *The Goldbergs*.” But where he construes the former as the cause of the latter, I want to propose instead that *The Goldbergs* gave rise to *The Rosenbergs*, as a thesis provokes its antithesis: that the sitcom produced its own negation in the form of the sensational, long-running show constituted not just by the Rosenbergs’ three-week trial, but by the whole process culminating in their executions two years later. For the point of that show was to replace Jewish situation comedy with Jewish situation tragedy: to substitute tragic Jews for comic Jews, or, rather, to turn comic Jews *into* tragic Jews. After *The Goldbergs*, Jews could still be seen on television, but they had to be seen *as chastened*—as symbols of laughter reduced to tears. “Phil is not a symbol for us,” write Loeb’s friends Kate Mostel and (fellow actor and blacklisted) Madeline Gilford. “We remember him as one of the funniest, dearest men we ever knew, our true and funny friend. To this day we find ourselves constantly telling Phil Loeb stories.”⁵ Fired and, in effect, executed too, Philip Loeb had to be tragicized, like the Rosenbergs—he had to be, as the French might say, *suicidé*—less because gentile viewers might have seen him and his fellow cast members as Soviet spies than because he represented something even more threatening to national discipline than Communist subversion: the exemption from that discipline enjoyed by the comic actor descended from a tribe of shape-shifting wanderers, and practicing his art in the geographically extreme, polyglot show-business cosmopolis.

Loeb’s tragic fate, then, is not the consequence of the Rosenbergs’ conviction; rather, their conviction, or the *spectacle* of their conviction and its protracted denouement, stands as the logical fulfillment, the telos, of the larger cultural process that his tragicization exemplifies: a process, begun as early as the first HUAC hearings in 1947, of transforming the intolerably undisciplined, enviably un-American, in a word, comicosmopolitan, Jew into an object of pity and terror, not to say contempt. The Red Scare, as I have suggested more than once, was something of a red herring; by the same token, the blackmailing insinuation that the television networks functioned as “red channels” mainly afforded a plausible

pretext for a campaign of *ressentiment* designed to punish those public figures perceived as having it too easy. Here, as quoted in Thomas Doherty's study of television and the Cold War, is Jack O'Brian, television critic at the *New York Journal-American*, gleefully revealing Loeb's listing in *Red Channels* as "the real reason *The Goldbergs* disappeared from the Columbia Broadcasting System after a long and luxurious hiatus in that network's pink-tinged boudoir": "The Columbia Broadcasting System may deny it," O'Brian continued, "but won't most of the flagrant *Red Channels* nominees find it necessary to earn their crackers and caviar on other networks next fall?"⁶ The authors of *Red Channels* themselves—three enterprising former FBI agents, now operating a patriotic "protection" racket—refer to "the great prestige and crowd-gathering power that derives from having glamorous personalities of radio and tv as sponsors of Communist fronts and as performers or speakers at front meetings and rallies (which incidentally adds to the performers' prestige)." For all their animus against "Communism," these bloodhounds almost risk losing its scent, so distracted are they by the more intoxicating stench of "prestige," "glamour," and "power" that fills the air like the flagrant fragrance of caviar in some luxurious, pink-tinged boudoir.⁷ From the perspective of the Red-hunters, "Communism," ominously and relentlessly advertised as a clear and present danger to American democracy, was nothing so much as a happy accident: the lesser charge on which they could nonetheless convict the perpetrators of far more serious—which is to say, far more comic—crimes.

Even after *The Goldbergs* was purged of Philip Loeb, the show's fortunes declined rapidly: having fallen from CBS to NBC, it would pass from the low-rent DuMont network to the *bas-fonds* of syndication, where it would die in 1956. Its demise is often related to a larger demographic shift that students of American television observe in the early years of the medium. Thomas Doherty writes:

Like Milton Berle, whose vaudeville antics on *Texaco Star Theater* made him television's first superstar when a New York City minority owned a majority of television sets, *The Goldbergs* was destined to be ethnically anomalous as television spread across America. "There is some hinterland TV trade and audience opinion that there's too much borscht tinting TV comedians," cautioned *Variety's* veteran reporter Abel Green in

1951. “The Catskill Mt. resort-trained comics are coming into their own in vaudeo, and while the New York metropolitan area has almost 50% of the 10,000,000 TV sets in U.S. homes today, there is still a sizable audience away from a melting pot metropolis like Gotham.” The future of television lay out in the heartland, away from the Judeo-centric regions of the greater New York area. Warning against what he called “Lindy’s patois,” “dialectic boobytraps,” and “nitery asides,” Green argued that the wisecracks exchanged at Jewish delicatessens like Lindy’s in New York “don’t belong on tv.”⁸

If less luxurious than caviar, borscht of course resembles it in signifying “Russia.” But while “Russia” in turn signifies “Communism,” what makes early television comedy’s borscht tint a taint, for Green, is that this pink tinge betrays more than just an infusion of Red ideology. That ideology may provide the most convenient reason for “warning against” the stain of borscht, but *Variety*’s veteran reporter reads hinterland tastes, or distastes, as spreading well beyond mere ideological aversion, to constitute a whole system of aesthetic and erotic phobias, rooted in a racial hatred that can never be identified (much less condemned) as such, only connoted through its supposed bêtes noires, including, but by no means limited to, such elements self-evidently in need of ethnic cleansing as “Lindy’s patois,” “dialectic boobytraps,” and “nitery asides.” It is not just the red herring, in short, but the whole delicatessen that gives the heartland heartburn. Small wonder if the finicky *Volk* spits such unwholesome fare back into the “melting pot metropolis” from which, at the beginning of the 1950s, before television production more or less moves to California, most TV dinners are being served. The patois, the booby traps, and the asides, after all, are ingredients of the piquant, Jewish-tasting linguistic soup that is comicosmopolitanism.

William Paley and his counterparts at the other networks probably did not require Abel Green’s transparently encoded warnings to make the change toward blander fare, effecting a profound and constitutive split between the site and the agents of television production, on the one hand, and the content and the imagined audience of television production, on the other. A Jewish-controlled medium that put Jews in the closet, early television thereby became a technology for putting New

York City in the closet as well. The Jews who ran television were not slow to join the Jews who ran movies in enforcing the first rule of mass entertainment: never offend the palates of the dreaded (and yet revered) American Cossacks “out in the heartland.” Indeed, given “Gotham”’s image as an even more Jewish (and even less American) city than Hollywood—as what the less genteel among the anti-Semites still call “Jew York City”—the Jews of television had an even greater incentive for enforcing that rule. (George Clooney’s film, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, about Edward R. Murrow’s confrontation with Joseph McCarthy, gets everything about the period right, from the haircuts to the coffee tables to the cigarettes—everything, that is, except the thick haze of New York-Jewish anxiety about “the American people” suffusing the world of network news, and determining its every calculation, now as well as then.)⁹ With that rule firmly in mind, the big-city caterers in charge of network programming frantically revised their menus to minimize not just the local flavors of “Russia,” which is to say, of that part of Jewish “Russia” transplanted to the New York metropolitan area, but everything disgustingly *heterogeneous and unlocalizable* that this Jewish particularity seems to carry with itself.

For if Jews, prestigious pariahs, have often been associated with cosmopolitanism tout court—the institution of the blacklist and the founding of the state of Israel, roughly contemporaneous events, having gone a long way toward weakening that association—comicosmopolitanism represents Jewishness as *diffusion*. Even more stereotypically Jewish by virtue of the *comic* embedded within it, comicosmopolitanism at the same time works against stereotypicality’s hardness and boundedness. While the comicosmopolitanism of early television has a pronounced regional and ethnic marking—its authors and performers are mostly New York Jews not far removed from Eastern Europe—what makes it comicosmopolitanism, after all, is that it exceeds this marking. Lindy’s patois, dialectic booby traps, and nitery asides all figure in the distinctive showbiz vernacular of the Judeo-centric metropolis. Yet, taken together, they are not merely metropolitan but cosmopolitan as well, since, as a repertoire of codes, they represent the multiple fluencies—the conversancy with a variety of jargons and idioms and argots—that make up so much of the texture, and indeed so much of the pleasure, of everyday

life in the modern urban landscape: a space characterized, to be sure, by fiercely “protected” turfs and by all sorts of invidious stratification, but also by displacement and circulation, and by a promiscuous crossing and recrossing of boundaries. Even among themselves, the patois, the booby traps, and the asides display a notable heterogeneity: the wise-cracking lingo of the delicatessen is not the same as the comic mother lode of immigrant malapropisms, which in turn is not the same as the racy *bavardage* of nightclubland. Nor, for all their appearance of perilously inbred tribalism, do the “native speakers” of these three discourses constitute a monolithic category. The reporter for *Variety* obviously knows what he is doing when he refers to Lindy’s, dialect, the Catskills, and borscht: himself deploying a patois or two—in this case, the baroque, know-it-all patter of *Variety*-speak, plus the telegraphy with which showbiz Jews signal danger to other showbiz Jews—he says “Jewish,” of course, without saying “Jewish.” But the Jews of Lindy’s, the Jews of dialectic booby traps—epitomized by *The Goldbergs*’ matriarch, Gertrude Berg’s Molly—and the Jews of The Stork Club do not form one economically or culturally homogeneous clientele: to move among these three speech communities would already be to perform in miniature a comicosmopolitan trajectory, consisting of many minute negotiations, transfers, and translations, the deft maneuvers of that now nearly extinct human type, the inventive city-dweller who, without actually having to work in show business, is necessarily, and luxuriously, a mimetic virtuoso, and who, in the course of a day, travels in much wider and more numerous overlapping circles than those described by this very limited sample.¹⁰

No wonder the firing of Philip Loeb was not enough to save *The Goldbergs*: the politically “controversial” co-star was gone, but the comicosmopolitan irritant remained, in the unlikely person of the show’s star herself, playing that apparently antic cosmopolitan Jewish stereotype, the Jewish mother—whose dialectic booby traps (“I don’t like your latitude one bit, young lady”; “It’s late, Jake, and time to expire”; “Patience is a vulture”¹¹), although easy to laugh off as “charming” signs of the unlettered ethnic’s verbal ineptitude, at the same time register a less self-congratulatory laughter within language itself, whereby fractured English reveals standard English as already fractured, as already inhabited by its erring, Yiddishizing self-parody. It is as though, thanks to Gertrude

Berg's "Mollypropisms," the English language cracked up on discovering its own internal cracks. Inside these dialectic booby traps, a dialectic—a comicosmopolitan process of linguistic deterritorialization—may indeed be at play. Continuing the tradition of the dialect comedians favored by Karl Kraus and evoked by Adorno as avatars of mimesis, Berg practices a cosmopolitanism whose primitiveness—whose lack of cosmopolitanism's usual signs—in fact consists in the deconstructive tour de force of returning language to its gestural prehistory. Precisely because this comicosmopolitanism seems disarmingly naïve, rather than imposingly urbane, and precisely because it operates at the "innocent" level of the signifier, rather than at the "controversial" level of what passes for politics, it is difficult to locate and thus to uproot. In a case like that of *The Goldbergs*, therefore, drastic measures were called for: the excision of the "controversial" Loeb having failed to make the show palatable to the heartland, nothing short of cancellation would do.

And yet, as television programming underwent a general de-Judaizing and de-citifying—a conspicuous suburbanization and rustication both of its locales and of its general ethos, in accordance with the shifting demographics of the audience—neither Jews nor New York City simply disappeared from the picture. I am not referring merely to the survival of a certain New York–Jewish "sensibility" despite and within the apparently de-urbanized landscape, or to the fact that that landscape is itself the product of a certain New York–Jewish fantasy of "America." In the age of Lonesome Rhodes—and of all of his clones, ready to replace him just as quickly as he falls—certain televisual *images* of the comicosmopolis are still disseminated. The most iconic television show of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, has no central Jewish characters or performers, but its leading man is a Cuban American bandleader who owns and performs in a New York "nitery." A greater challenge to the thesis of an early-fifties war on comicosmopolitanism would seem to be constituted, moreover, by the most celebrated comedy-variety show of the period, *Your Show of Shows* (which mutated into *Caesar's Hour*), performed and taped not in the pseudo–New York of *I Love Lucy* and of almost all subsequent sitcoms set in New York (including *Seinfeld*) but in New York itself. Featuring a largely Jewish cast (Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, Howard Morris), written by a mostly Jewish staff (Reiner, Mel Tolkin, Mel Brooks, Lucille Kallen, and, for *Caesar's Hour*, Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart, and Woody Allen),

and expressing, however inexplicitly, a brashly literate New York–Jewish sensibility, *Your Show of Shows* would seem to bespeak comicosmopolitanism’s triumph in Cold War television, not its collapse.¹²

Two points must be made regarding this apparent triumph, however. The first is that, even during the show’s heyday, its comicosmopolitanism kept it under suspicion, if not under attack. The show’s star, Sid Caesar, claims that he himself attracted the attention of McCarthy and other witch-hunters: “They had actually come after Lucille Ball and me, but they couldn’t find anything on either of us.”¹³ HUAC did actually find something on Ball, if not on Caesar. But the committee’s failure to “find anything” in any given case should not be surprising, since the aim of the blacklisters was not necessarily to convict: indeed, harassment and intimidation, more sadistically open-ended and suspensive than mere conviction, in many ways better served the needs of state-sponsored terror. The failure to find incriminating evidence is equally unsurprising, moreover, because the blacklist, as we have seen, was less about punishing political subversives than about pursuing—that is, persecuting—cultural enemies, whose “guilt” could never be proven, only repeatedly alleged, or, more menacingly yet, obscurely intimated. In any case, although *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar’s Hour* lasted longer than other borscht-tinted television entertainments of the 1950s, Caesar and company ultimately fell afoul of the same hinterland taste that rejected *The Goldbergs* and Milton Berle. Of the cancellation of his second show, Caesar, echoing such media historians as Doherty, observes: “as the television audience was expanding outside of the big cities, audience tastes were changing and attention spans were shrinking. They didn’t understand the foreign movies we were parodying. We were writing high-class comedy and were not willing to dumb it down.”¹⁴

But the second, more important point about this apparent triumph of comicosmopolitanism amid rumors of its death is that a certain comicosmopolitanism was in fact permitted to survive, even to flourish for a while, so that it could be made an example of. Like many wars, the war on comicosmopolitanism does not always seek merely to eliminate its object: just as terror is sometimes happier dangling its victim indefinitely than nailing it with a conviction, so might the taste police prefer a prolonged and exquisitely public disciplining of the offender to a simple extermination. Instead of being destroyed, that is, the comicosmopolis

can be colonized, as Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner suggest when they remark that the “attempt to suppress the social possibilities in the new medium of television was also meant in part to show that even New York, if only under extreme duress, could be as ‘normal’ and as ‘American’ as Indiana—or at least New Jersey. And if New York could be forced into line, so could the rest of the country.”¹⁵ As we have seen, one way to treat a comic Jew was to turn him into a tragic Jew; but a subtler variation on this technique was to make comicosmopolitanism periodically banalize itself, in the name of nationalist conformism. Along with Gertrude Berg’s Mollypropisms, Caesar’s famous double-talk—his macaronic, Yiddish-sprinkled simulations of French, German, Italian, Japanese—represents the comicosmopolitanism of early television at its most prodigious: more recognizably “high-class” than Berg’s signature practice of televisual *littérature mineure*, especially when, as was frequently the case, it accompanied the parodies of foreign films and operas in which *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar’s Hour* specialized, double-talk here defied the xenophobic monolingualism and monoculturalism of the new Cold War dispensation. All the better, then, for America to see this comicosmopolitanism “forced into line,” as when, for instance, Carl Reiner, introducing a sketch about a Russian talent show, with Caesar as double-talking, balalaika-strumming host named Arthur Gorki (the Russian Arthur Godfrey), is made to sneer: “The Russians claim to have invented everything.”¹⁶ A comicosmopolitanism compelled to interrupt its cheeky Joycean boundary-crossings to mouth the ideological pieties of the day demonstrates for the entire nation the inescapability of the American consensus: if even the jokers and smart alecks in New York can condemn the imperialist arrogance of “the Russians,” there are no limits to the normalizing power of “America.” New York, for all its xenophilia, and indeed for all its own apparent status as a “foreign movie” in relation to the vast hinterland that passes for the real America, turns out to be merely an extension of that blandscape, whose antic cosmopolitan language—call it single-talk, the talk of the single-tongued “American people”—forms the remote but ever-present horizon keeping the court jesters in line.

In other words, as television comedy comes to be dominated, at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, by wise small-town sheriffs to whom no one “gets wise”—far from dying, Andy Griffith’s Lonesome

Rhodes simply hides his fangs and becomes a sitcom star—and by WASP families where father knows best, comicosmopolitanism does not altogether fade away: rather, it assumes its place in the new national order—the place of the residual formation, of the vanquished enemy—the better to display the docility it has learned. Thus, for example, Carl Reiner makes a sitcom out of his experiences as a writer for *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar's Hour*—but has to recast it as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, with the Jewish hero converted into a Midwestern Protestant, and with the private, familial, naturalistic world of suburban New Rochelle providing necessary “balance” against the public, professional, presentational world of showbiz Manhattan, where, in keeping with the quota system that is no less an open secret than the blacklist from which it derives, the writing staff of the comedy-variety show for which Van Dyke’s character works includes exactly one Jew.¹⁷ In this context, *Seinfeld*, often invoked as the apotheosis of Jewish television comedy finally liberated from the closet of gentility, or recognized and embraced for what it is after its long exile in heartland drag, emerges less as a great coming-out or coming-back than as one more instance of comicosmopolitanism disciplined.¹⁸ I would not be the first to note the systematic timidity governing *Seinfeld*’s representation of Jewishness, which continues to be subjected to the standard methods of occultation, euphemism, and containment that television has almost always applied more stringently to this one ethnicity—which we might be tempted to call “its own,” were it not that television still refuses to own it—than to any other. Nor would I be the first to comment that, for all the show’s ostensible diffusion of a “New York” sensibility into the American mainstream, its image of the cosmopolis betrays nothing so much as a suburban and adolescent fear of and disdain for the cosmopolis; one critic has traced *Seinfeld*’s “ideology of Manhattan” to “the smugly defensive posture of teenagers from some affluent Long Island town . . . in Manhattan for the first time, putting down as abnormal or stupid everything that went beyond what they knew at home.”¹⁹ *Seinfeld*’s pseudo-New York—its pale and at the same time improbably “colorful” imitation of the city, the simulacrum that it shares with almost all the situation comedies purporting to take place in the Judeo-centric metropolis—keeps the city at a prophylactic distance, revealing not only the defensive posture of the Long Island teenager but the whole hygienic machinery of American normativity, of

which that teenager is only one of millions of agents. The phenomenal success of *Seinfeld* testifies to the success of an operation dating back to the early years of television: an operation not content to stop at the mere homogenization of the cosmopolis at the level of televisual representation, but striving, even more imperially, to reduce the real New York City to a simulacrum of its televised simulacra.

Still a work in progress, the reduction has thus far proven startlingly effective and extensive, as many have observed. But while the “mall of Manhattan” is usually explained as one effect of an increasingly global economy, globalization is not the whole story here: globalization has advanced in partnership with the equally powerful, only apparently antithetical process of *provincialization*, the bad or false cosmopolitanism of the one reinforced by the franker antic cosmopolitanism of the other, the two combining not to annihilate the city, in the manner of mere barbarians, but, rather, to *occupy* it—and, once having done so, to make it pay its occupiers the tribute of imitation. So now that, concomitantly, urban life has been bullied into imitating sitcom art—now that the term “Jew York City” has an almost nostalgic ring to it, the city of shows, or at least Manhattan, too well resembling such shows of the city as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will and Grace*—it may be useful, and not merely for reasons of nostalgia, to revisit what was itself a revisiting of an already lost urban paradise: the blacklisted and whitewashed city par excellence, the city that show business abandoned the better to conquer it. I would like to turn, that is, to the 1976 film, *The Front*, one of the few films that a supposedly repentant Hollywood has made about the blacklist since it supposedly ended in the early 1960s. Like *A Face in the Crowd* and the more recent *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *The Front* addresses the politics of Cold War mass culture in the preferred way of Hollywood films: by focusing on the New York-centered television industry rather than on the Hollywood-centered film industry. As a film about television, *The Front* can shed a light on television that television cannot shed on itself. But it has an even greater advantage: if the film performs the obligatory deflection away from its *sponsor*—it was financed and distributed by Columbia Pictures—its New York setting allows it to activate the repressed comicosmopolitan energies of the city that remains its *source*, the more “foreign” of the two American show-business capitals. Unlike the pseudo- and anticomic *Face in the Crowd* and the earnestly uncomic

Good Night, and Good Luck, *The Front* deliberately brings out the comic in the comicosmopolis that the blacklisters and their heirs have never stopped forcing into line.²⁰ To recall our discussion of early Cold War cinema: *The Front* undertakes the project of thawing out the laughter that various Cold Wars have sought to keep frozen. In an interview, the film's screenwriter, Walter Bernstein—himself a blacklist survivor, like the film's director, Martin Ritt, and a number of its actors—explains how the solemn subject of blacklisting came to be treated comically:

For a long time, Marty and I had been talking about doing something about the blacklist. We wanted to do a straight dramatic story about someone who was blacklisted. We could never get anybody interested at all. It wasn't until we came up with the idea of a front and making it as a comedy that we were able to get the film done. *The Front* became my first true comedy.²¹

Like the casting of a then-hot Woody Allen as the film's protagonist, the decision to make it as a comedy at first appears to be a commercially expedient adulteration of its authentic nature—a regrettable but necessary retrofitting and Hollywoodizing of a properly dramatic story, one perhaps *too* dramatic (too intense, too political, too depressing) to be told, or at any rate sold, “straight.” Bernstein's interviewer remarks, “When I spoke to Marty, he seemed to feel the film should have been done dramatically, and that the comedy aspect was a compromise.” But Bernstein challenges this view of the comic as compromise, replying, “I don't agree with him [Ritt], really. The idea that you can't be serious in a comedy, I don't agree with.”²² Although the decision to make *The Front* as a comedy came belatedly, its belatedness, I would argue, developing Bernstein's point, reflects a delayed recognition that the blacklist was precisely about the comic—that the seriousness of blacklisting turned, in fact, on the politics of the comic. No mere sugarcoating mandated by insipid studio taste, or—what amounts to the same thing—by the studio's typically craven catering to the insipid taste of the American hinterland, the belated comicizing of the story rediscovers the comedy at its core: the un-American, comicosmopolitan impertinence, the disgustingly borscht-like bad taste, that blacklisting was designed to remove. Far from supervening, in the fashion of a *false* front (like those “fronts” for Communism that Communist-hunters were always suspecting) on an

essentially “straight dramatic story,” *The Front*’s “comedy aspect” brings to the surface and flaunts the very *affront* to mainstream taste that the blacklisters, and their sycophantic mass-cultural collaborators on both coasts, worked so hard to put down, or at least to cover up.

“It was a lot of fun during those days,” Bernstein’s friend and fellow blacklistee Abraham Polonsky reminisced, with a truth-teller’s perversity, in the course of a 1997 panel discussion of the blacklist in television.²³ Polonsky—whose comic touch we have observed in his screenplay for *Body and Soul*, as well as in his wisecrack about Elia Kazan—went on to cite, as examples of the fun, the comical misunderstandings surrounding the practice, adopted by some of the blacklistees, of continuing to write for television and films by using “fronts”: a practice that both Bernstein and Polonsky engaged in, and that indeed gives Bernstein’s autobiographical film its title, its story, and its theme. For *The Front*, set in 1952, is about a television writer, modeled on Bernstein, who suddenly finds himself blacklisted, and who can survive as a television writer only with the help of some unblacklisted person who is willing to pose, at meetings with producers, directors, network executives, and sponsors, as the author of his scripts. In the film, the Bernstein character, here called Alfred Miller, and played by Michael Murphy, employs as his front an old friend named Howard Prince, a cashier, bookie, and all-around underachiever, played by Allen. Once Howard recognizes the advantages of pocketing ten percent of what Miller earns for the scripts he now ghostwrites, he is more than happy to front for two of Miller’s friends as well: blacklisted writers who correspond to Polonsky and Arnold Manoff.

Working behind a series of fronts, Bernstein, Polonsky, and Manoff wrote most of the episodes of the legendary television series *You Are There*, before the show’s executive producer fired its producer for using blacklisted writers, and followed the industry-wide shift then in progress by moving the show to California.²⁴ Forerunners of the genre we would now call docudrama, the *You Are There* scripts focused on a series of historical figures (Galileo, Milton, Joan of Arc, Michelangelo, Freud) whose stories the three blacklisted writers, engaging in what Bernstein describes as “a kind of guerilla war against McCarthyism,” turned into allegories of resistance that, thus equipped with fronts of their own, managed to evade network censorship. “In that shameful time of

McCarthyite terror, of know-nothing attempts to deform and defile history, to kill any kind of dissent,” Bernstein recalls, “we were able to do shows about civil liberties, civil rights, artistic freedom, the Bill of Rights.”²⁵ As this characterization suggests, the dominant tone of this guerilla war was not a particularly comic one: for the most part, the *You Are There* episodes, which were introduced, by Walter Cronkite, in the pompous style of news telecasts, exemplify the strand of high-pedagogical earnestness in left-liberal entertainment, the strand recently represented by *Good Night, and Good Luck*.²⁶ Indeed, it as though, in their war against “attempts to deform and defile history,” the undercover writers of *You Are There* had identified themselves so strongly with the *straight* version of history, or perhaps with the straightness of war itself, as to renounce the very “artistic freedom” that had got them into trouble in the first place: the freedom of the comic.²⁷

Bernstein claims that he and Polonsky and Manoff “chortled over” the *You Are There* shows, but then, more plausibly, equivocates, saying, “chortle is really not the right word.”²⁸ The “fun during those days,” it seems, resided less in the work itself than in the behind-the-scenes back story of the work. And it is this comic back story—the back story of working behind fronts—that *The Front* moves to the front. Where *You Are There* sought to recount history against those who would deform and defile it, *The Front* recounts the history in back of—both behind and before—the recounting of history. The guerillas who wrote the television show tried to set the record straight; the guerilla who writes the movie about writing a television show starts out trying to “do a straight dramatic story,” but, finding that “we could never get anybody interested at all,” uncovers that story’s more interesting, and less straight, ur-story. Reinventing *The Front* as a comedy, Bernstein foregrounds that “aspect” of the blacklist story that a pious regard for history’s seriousness—a desire to do history itself as a straight dramatic story—would have kept back, in the wings of anecdote, archive, and memoir: the comedy that provoked the drama of blacklisting. Bernstein’s film, that is, backs up Polonsky’s perverse reminiscence by putting upfront the fun of the blacklisted: the fun they had during the blacklist, but also the fun that caused them to *be* blacklisted, and that blacklisting aimed precisely to render unimaginable.

Even a certain liberal “sympathy,” for instance, might refuse to countenance this fun—discerning in Polonsky’s remark a pathetically wishful rewriting of the past, as if, forty-five years later, the only way to deal with the trauma of having been blacklisted were to deny it: to insist, hysterically, on how hilarious it all was. Or, again: another “sympathetic” response might accept Polonsky’s claim, but only on the condition that the fun stay grounded in pathos, in this case that of some brave little troupers whistling past the graveyard. It is less easy, though, to patheticize a comment like the one Polonsky makes, in that same 1997 panel discussion, apropos of the blacklist victims who did not survive: those, like Philip Loeb, who were blacklisted to death. Evoking his Second World War experience in the Office of Strategic Services, Polonsky says: “But I’m used to walking around among the dead. It’s so refreshing to walk among the dead.” And then, after a pause for extra comic effect: “Don’t tell ’em it’s a joke.”²⁹ Flippant, tasteless, shocking—like Polonsky’s quip that he “wouldn’t want to be buried in the same cemetery with” Kazan—this joke is not, however, an act of dancing on graves: its fun does not result from *making fun* of the dead, from taking their deadness as grounds for celebrating one’s survival. Walking among the dead, Polonsky—who would himself die two years later—does not necessarily separate himself, or his listeners, from them. Who, after all, is not supposed to tell whom that “it’s a joke”? If it is the audience that is not supposed to tell and the dead themselves who must not be told—if there is still a possibility of telling or not telling them things—perhaps the dead are not so different from the audience, or the audience from the dead.

To a member of that “live” audience who asks Polonsky, a little earlier in the discussion, whether he is bitter about how long it has taken Hollywood to apologize for the blacklist, Polonsky, speaking for his fellow “survivors,” answers: “We feel like the Jews in France, who went to the concentration camps. They’re dead now. But they just learned that six Catholic archbishops are apologizing for not helping.”³⁰ Blurring the boundary between the living and the dead, between “we” and “they,” between the refreshed and the rotten, between gaiety and bitterness, this joke, like the one about walking among the dead, bears the disintegrating signature of the mimetic comedian, whose favorite place, as we know from our excursion into a room full of television writers in the previous

chapter, is a happy cemetery, site of the decomposition that is mimetic identification with the other. As opposed to the discipline of citizenship, which uses the threat of death to keep its subjects scared straight, not to say scared stiff, this mimetic identification becomes the ground of an undisciplined comicosmopolitanism, whereby the dissolution of the self into the other loses its power to terrorize, affording instead a luxurious escape from the regime of national rigor.

As a scene of comicosmopolitanism, in other words, the mimetic cemetery is not a graveyard one whistles *past*: more disconcertingly, it is a graveyard one whistles *in*. The fun to be had in it comes not despite the fact that it is a place of the dead, but, rather, *because* it is a place of the dead. For the fun depends upon the comicosmopolitan's surrender of the proud selfhood that keeps him intimidated and thus in line—upon his willingness, say, to die into an identification with the dead French Jews who nonetheless “feel” and “learn” as if they were alive. The comicosmopolitan “survivor” refuses the pathos of survival, and the nobility of death, tastelessly taking bitter pleasure in his resemblance to a talking corpse. Far more than just a ghoulish comedy *about* death, comicosmopolitanism is a comedy *of* death: a comedy of the dead. To be blacklisted, therefore, was to undergo a *second death*: a “tragic” death, whose repellent gravity was designed at once to punish and to conceal the transgression—from a patriotic point of view—of the comic death whose pleasure one had the bad taste to keep unhidden. *Always* a ghostwriter, Polonsky, for one, still performs his first death, more than thirty-five years after his second. The worst taste of all is that of the “survivor” who will not stop dying, for he thus reminds you why you had to kill him, or, rather, to kill him again, in the first place.

If Polonsky makes tasteless jokes about the blacklist, Bernstein makes an entire tasteless movie about it. *The Front* has the effrontery “to be a comedy rather than the dark history it really was.”³¹ Buhle and Wagner, whom I am quoting, presumably mean that the episode of the blacklist itself was really a dark history; but their conflation of history and story works against their apparent certainty about the distinction between the fictional and the real, pointing to how the comedy of *The Front* represents the dark reality of the blacklist as itself a struggle over fictions: *comic* fictions that, like the film about them, have the bad taste to mix light with dark, to make jokes out of matters of the utmost gravity. The

darkest part of the film, for example, centers on a character named Hecky Brown, an actor and comic played by Zero Mostel. Hecky, born Herschel Brownstein, is a composite of Mostel himself and Philip Loeb. Like Mostel, Hecky finds his career in ruins once he is blacklisted; one of the most powerful sequences in the film, in which Hecky is paid two hundred and fifty dollars to perform in the same Catskills Hotel where, the year before, when he was still unblacklisted, he was paid three thousand, is based on an experience of Mostel's.³² Like Loeb, Hecky is fired from the television show in which he appears, and ends up checking into a hotel where he commits suicide. Yet *The Front* refuses to do to Hecky what the blacklist did to Loeb: reduce him to a symbol of the comic Jew turned tragic. Even "darkened," or rather, especially "darkened," Hecky never ceases to be a comic figure. He stages even his suicide as a comic performance: laughing to himself, mugging in front of a mirror, sipping champagne—all before he disappears out the window. "Every little cloud has got a silver lining," he sings to Howard in his penultimate scene, where, although Howard does not know it, Hecky is saying goodbye to him—and, as we shall see, preparing a decisive mimetic connection between them. In the light, or the dark, of Hecky's suicide, the bouncy consolation in his swan song seems macabre, to be sure. But the mixing of the cheerful and the macabre is just the point. The point, in other words, is not to find the silver lining in every cloud: it is to recognize the mutual implication of the light and dark, and to tease out its comic possibilities—as Polonsky does when he makes jokes that, far from simply lordling it over the dead, derive their funniness from his mimetic identification *with* the dead.

Like those tasteless jokes of Polonsky's, Hecky's comedy is a comedy of unseemliness: a comedy based on the violation of boundaries, especially the boundary between subjects suitable for comedy and subjects unsuitable for it, between what can be brought to the front and what must be kept in back. From the beginning of the film, Hecky is in trouble with the authorities: a cloud hangs over his head because he is one of *those people*—in the racially tinged term—who refuse to keep clouds and sunshine separate. In an early scene, he meets with one of the film's villains, a Mr. Hennessy, from the "Freedom Information Service," a "clearance" racket like the one run by the authors of *Red Channels*. Hoping to escape blacklisting and to keep his job as host of the popular television show for

which Miller, fronted by Howard, writes, Hecky explains to Hennessy why he attended a May Day rally six years earlier: “I was only trying to get laid. This girl, this Communist girl—she had a big ass.” Mixing up the class struggle with the ass struggle, as Ralph Ellison’s invisible man might put it, turns out not to be the best move on Hecky’s part.³³ Hennessy, indeed, could not be more chillingly unamused: “I am not interested in your sex life, Mr. Brown.” “Hecky,” replies Hecky, trying, unsuccessfully, to ingratiate himself. Hecky’s impudent comic charm is not just not working on the deadly serious Hennessy: it is working to antagonize him further, since—more than that May Day rally, or Hecky’s subscription to the *Daily Worker*, or a petition for loyalist Spain that he signed, or money that he gave for Russian war relief—it is this charm that has landed Hecky in Hennessy’s office in the first place. A desire to charm the authorities is of course one of the prerequisites of good citizenship: what is the sycophant, after all, without his charm? But Hecky’s particular kind of charm has this fatal defect: failing to be serious in the approved patriotic way, putting its own ass upfront, where the Symbolic Father cannot miss it, this charm bespeaks the “glamorous personality”’s exemption from or resistance to the normalizing discipline of fear. This is the charm, in short, of the joker and smart aleck: charm apparently lost on much of the audience in the changed show-business environment of the early 1950s, to the point that, far from mollifying them, it seems to strike them as an insult. As long as Hecky is cracking jokes about Communism and asses, he might as well take out some crackers and caviar and rub them in Hennessy’s face.

Nor does he help his case when he reminds Hennessy, “I’m a household name,” or when he says, “My whole life has been acting”; the combination of celebrity and theatricality is not likely to appease the agents of *ressentiment* (masquerading as champions of “freedom”). Not that Hecky, obviously terrified, does not affirm his desire to do whatever it takes—short of naming names—to keep his job. But his docility is sabotaged by the mode in which he stages it. His balking at becoming an informer—an indispensable step, as we know, in the process of proving one’s Americanism—angers Hennessy less, in fact, than his general *tone*: a tone too suggestive of Lindy’s patois, dialectic booby traps, and nitery asides—of a world that thinks itself beyond the demand that Americans speak in one voice only. Instructing Hecky to write a letter



Zero Mostel in *The Front*

renouncing Communism and declaring himself its dupe, Hennessy advises him: “Sincerity is the key, Mr. Brown. Anyone can make a mistake. The man who repents sincerely—” “I repent sincerely,” Hecky interrupts, his manner not quite sincere enough. “Write me the letter, Mr. Brown. I’ll see what I can do,” Hennessy says coldly, as he turns away from Hecky and goes back to the papers on his desk. Ever the showman, Hecky tries one last gag before he leaves the room: “And I didn’t even get laid!” This time, Hennessy does not even look up to acknowledge the joke. As Hecky walks out of the office, his would-be winning grin having fallen from his face, he has the look of a condemned man. Having spent his whole life as an actor, he clearly knows when a crowd wants blood.

But while the film thus reveals Hecky’s place in the blacklist’s machinery of tragicization, it by no means collaborates in reducing him to that abject and dreary figure, the sad clown. When the producer of Hecky’s show—played by Herschel Bernardi, another of the blacklisted actors Bernstein and Ritt make a point of featuring in the film³⁴—fires Hecky, he denies the truth that Hecky suspects, which is that his letter to Hennessy has not been deemed sufficiently “sincere”; protecting the blacklist and the extortionate system around it, the producer fumblingly tells Hecky: “It’s . . . your personality is too dominant. You belong out front, like Berle. . . . In a dramatic series, you’re throwing the

whole show off balance.” Hecky may belong out front, but by the time the producer has finished covering his own and other people’s asses, Hecky is merely out. And yet, his diegetic expulsion has just the effect of putting Hecky where he “belongs”: out front in the film’s performative space. “I thought Z [Mostel] was terrific in the film—incredibly himself, and unashamedly, fantastically theatrical,” Martin Ritt recalls.³⁵ “Incredibly himself” indeed; exploding the distinction between actor and character, between history and fiction, between extradiegetic back story and diegetic show, Mostel-Hecky embodies comicosmopolitanism’s affront to “sincerity,” which cannot tolerate any contamination of reality’s seriousness, or at least its credibility, by art’s frivolity. (After Mostel himself was named in *Red Channels*, he is reported to have said, “I am a man of a thousand faces, all of them blacklisted.”³⁶) In the television show from which Hecky has been fired, he played a cabdriver-narrator named Hecky the hackie, already breaking down the wall between the inside and the outside of representation. Once removed from the frame of the dramatic series, once released from the imperatives of semi-naturalism and semi-respectability, he becomes even more dominant a figure (as Mostel himself, considered too theatrically *big* an actor for films, dominated everything in which he appeared). Professionally humiliated and financially desperate, Hecky looms even larger in the film’s closely watched milieu—its ever more intensively policed cosmopolis—than he did as a star.

Because he is unable, or unwilling, to give Hennessy the names of his Communist associates, he reluctantly accepts Hennessy’s assignment to spy—in the name of patriotism—on the suddenly successful “writer,” Howard Prince, whose political past and associations Hennessy is busy investigating. Even reduced to sycophancy, however, Hecky still fails to perform with the sincerity required of what Hennessy calls “a true patriot”: at the end of the scene in which Hecky agrees to spy on Howard, he erupts, indecorously and ill-advisedly, into spasms of almost alarmingly lugubrious laughter. If this laughter expresses the clown’s self-disgust at having become implicated in the betrayal of the comic, it keeps faith, in its very indiscretion, its very theatrical bigness, with what he is betraying. “Unashamedly, fantastically,” it evinces Hecky’s fundamental *incorrigibility*: the comic “incredibility” that keeps him from acting like a good American—which is to say, like a credible informer. Once again,

he “throws the whole show off balance.” Hennessy and his fellow black-listers would cut Hecky down to size, or fix him as a symbol of laughter congealed into pathos. In the face of this assault, Hecky puts up the front of *The Front* itself: the tastelessness that laughs when it should be keeping a straight face, that opts for comedy at the very moment when sycophantic pragmatism most calls for seriousness.

It is in the episode of Hecky’s return to the resort in the Catskills—that borscht-soaked training ground of “vaudeo” comics—that his, and the film’s, “comedy aspect” acquires its most disturbing hypersalience. Making the trip in the company of Howard, the better to spy on him, Hecky gives a bravura performance to an adoring audience at the hotel; he ends the show with an over-the-top vaudevillian number in which he sings that he will do “anything for a laugh.” The bravura character of Hecky’s performance does not lack a considerable element of hysteria, induced, no doubt, by guilt and anger over what he is doing to Howard (“anything for a laugh,” indeed), rage at the humiliating circumstances under which he is performing (and barely eking out a living), and perhaps a sort of seething, inarticulate amazement at the general horror that is taking over and devastating his world. After the show, as Hecky drinks and flirts with some of the guests, the hotel owner hands him the envelope containing his paltry fee, fifty dollars less than what the owner had said he would try to come up with—at which point a freshly humiliated Hecky stops the show again, only this time in the mode of disaster rather than of triumph. Starting out drunkenly, “playfully,” pawing at the owner’s pocket, Hecky is soon literally at his throat, until he is pulled off and thrown out of the hotel while the owner, equally enraged, snarls at him, “You’ll crawl in the gutter, you Red bastard, you Commie son of a bitch!”

That night, Howard takes Hecky back to his apartment in the city, and, as Howard makes coffee, Hecky mutters, “It’s all Brownstein’s fault. I wouldn’t be in this trouble if it wasn’t for Brownstein. . . . You can’t make a deal with him. That’s the trouble with him. He won’t listen to reason.” Then, in a renewed access of rage, Hecky screams out the window: “Brownstein! Lay off, do you hear me? Lay off, or I’ll kill you!” Yet, collaborate though he may with the prosecutors of the war against comicosmopolitanism, Hecky cannot divest himself of the unreasonable Jewish pariah at the root—and at the back—of his trouble. For

Herschel Brownstein is not just Hecky Brown's "real name," as Howard puts it. Rather, "Herschel Brownstein" is another avatar of that radical Jewish comic drive—that cosmopolitanism *sauvage*—that we have encountered elsewhere in this book (it also goes by the name of "Shimen Rishkin," for example). A name for the mimetic prehistory that "you can't make a deal with"—for the primitive, desubjectifying, theatricalizing insincerity that one must "kill," or at least put behind oneself, if one is to give a credible performance of good citizenship—"Herschel Brownstein" (characteristically breaking the diegetic frame to carry an echo of "Herschel Bernardi") is the joker and smart aleck who subverts Hecky's performance of his assigned role as a sycophant in the patriotic "drama series" captivating Americans from coast to coast. To be sure, we soon see Hecky, whom Howard has invited to spend the night at his apartment, rummaging through Howard's papers, and he seems to provide Hennessy with enough information for Howard (who has blacklisted friends, and who was a bookie, after all) to be summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the film's climactic scene. The "trouble with" the irrepressible Herschel Brownstein, though, is that, when the superficially de-Judaized Hecky Brown tries to Americanize himself further by doing some patriotic spying, Brownstein refuses to let him play the good American with anything like the sincerity and credibility that the role requires. As a spy, the Mostelian Hecky overplays to a point bordering, indeed, on the *unbelievable*. Just as he is too big for his television show, so there is always something "off-balance," something improbably bombastic and self-defeating—something *gauche*—about his espionage; whenever he asks Howard about his friends and their politics, he seems to be doing everything he can to give the game away.

So it is not surprising that Hecky never gets his job back. He informs on Howard, of course, but informing, as we know, is never just a matter of giving information: it is also, above all, a matter of tone and style, in which, as Hennessy says, "sincerity is the key." Not that the comedian is utterly lacking in conviction. In the scene just before his suicide, Hecky in fact shows up at Howard's apartment, to apologize for "that terrible night" after his show in the Catskills. What Hecky is really apologizing for—although Howard cannot know it yet, and may never know it—is having spied on Howard for Hennessy and his accomplices; his suicide

will be his attempt to complete the apology. (Here, we must note the difference between Hecky and Philip Loeb, whose suicide has been attributed in part to the fact that he “never forgave himself” for accepting a cash settlement when he was fired from *The Goldbergs*, but who did not become an informer.³⁷) Hecky’s apology, of course, does not preclude his continuing, “unashamedly, fantastically,” to clown around and make jokes. Nor, conversely—bearing out Bernstein’s claim about comedy’s compatibility with seriousness—do Hecky’s typically big histrionics prevent him from mustering enough sincerity to leave Howard with these words of advice: “Take care of yourself. The water is full of sharks.”

Howard ends up taking this advice, but in a different way from the one in which his own sycophantic tendencies would have led him. “How many times have I told you? Take care of number one,” he scolds Miller at the beginning of the film, when the latter explains to him that he has been blacklisted. At the film’s end, Howard takes care of himself—and of the left that he has now joined—by refusing to swim with the sharks. Finally called as a friendly witness before HUAC (“What does it hurt if I’m friendly?”), the once-venal front finds himself radicalized—*Brownsteined*, we might say—when the congressional sharks on the committee try to get him to name Hecky, now dead, as a Communist, as if in an exchange of treacheries. “They’re willing to make a deal,” Howard’s (or, rather, the network’s) lawyer reasons with him. “Look, they’re being very reasonable. You don’t have to give them more than one [name]. . . . If it bothers you, give them Hecky Brown. . . . He’s dead anyway. What difference does it make?” But when the committee members coach the witness by asking him repeatedly if he knows “Herschel Brownstein, also known as Hecky Brown,” Howard Prince, instead of letting them hector him into “being friendly,” responds as though he himself were being *addressed as Herschel Brownstein*—as though he had *become* the one “you can’t make a deal with,” the one who “won’t listen to reason.” One might say that H. B. had suddenly come back to “life” in the person of H. P.

Or perhaps not so suddenly. That the too-friendly frog is about to become a spectacularly uncooperative prince (true to his last name) is intimated by the brash, almost insolently improvisational style that the front unexpectedly assumes in front of HUAC, from the beginning of the hearing. It is as though Hecky’s shameless, Borscht-Belt theatricality had morphed into its younger, hipper version: a nightclub—or

niterity—performance idiom associated with such edgy stand-up comics of the fifties and early sixties as Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Woody Allen himself.³⁸ Clearly, HUAC has been planning to conduct this hearing as one more sycophantic charade, one more demonstration of its power to command good citizenship by making witnesses name names; but Howard, his manner as comically “off-balance”—as *frontal*—in its own way, as Hecky’s, has changed his mind and is refusing to perform according to the script, channeling Hecky when he was supposed to name him instead. Howard, in short, is doing exactly what Lillian Hellman’s lawyer warned her not to do: he is insulting the committee (“You’re getting them mad,” the lawyer warns him) by “acting smart-aleck.” After a suspensefully prolonged pause, during which Howard has moved his hand over his forehead (in French, his *front*) in such a way as to signal a self-transformation, the would-have-been friendly witness rises from his chair, turns to his interrogators, and says, “Fellas, I don’t recognize the right of this Committee to ask me these kind of questions. And, furthermore, you can all go fuck yourselves.”

Whereupon he walks out of the room, as the committee members are frozen in place and the soundtrack begins to play Frank Sinatra singing “Young at Heart.” The song, with its opening lines, “Fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you,” is in fact being reprised here, since it also accompanies the film’s opening montage, a pseudonostalgic evocation of early-1950s culture (with newsreel footage of McCarthy, the Rosenbergs, Marilyn Monroe, Eisenhower, the Korean War, etc.). If the film thus frames itself belatedly as an act of belated comic wish-fulfillment—not even Lionel Stander showed his rear end to the state with as much *front* (French not only for “forehead” but also for “cheek”) as *The Front*’s front displays now—“belated” does not always mean “too late.” For there is a kind of *timely belatedness*, like the belatedness of the recognition behind this film: the recognition that the question of the comic was always behind blacklisting. Howard’s carnivalesque defiance of the committee represents more than just a happy anamnesis, whereby the blacklist survivor finally recognizes what his experience was all about; it represents more, even, than a jubilant exercise in *esprit d’escalier*. Like the tasteless punch line uttered by its unlikely Prince, the entire film makes good on the promise that, after all, *fairy tales can come true*. And what makes the realization of this particular fairy tale possible, indeed,

what makes it necessary, is that, while the film obviously arrives after the fact of the 1950s blacklist that it portrays, it shows up just in time for the *long blacklist*—the war against comicosmopolitanism—that is still in force in 1976, when the film appears, and in 2007, at the time of this writing.

The Front arrives, that is, not merely to remember the comicosmopolitanism that the blacklist has forced into line, but to put it back into play. The film's most striking (and most moving) demonstration of this performative end comes *at* the end: the very end, after Howard, in the best fairy-tale way, having done what every unfriendly witness wanted to do, leaves the HUAC members immobilized in their chamber as he walks into what the film projects as a happy ending *that would not be an end*. While "Young at Heart" continues to play, we see Howard embracing his leftist princess, while a crowd of supporters cheers him on.³⁹ He is being led off to prison, presumably for contempt of congress, but he has thus become a new icon of the left, its yiddishe prince. And then, in what is effectively a punch line *after* the punch line, the hero *in* the film, or the hero in front of it, is aligned with the heroes *behind* it: Walter Bernstein, Martin Ritt, Zero Mostel, Herschel Bernardi, and two other actors in the cast, Lloyd Gough and Joshua Shelley, all of whose names now appear prominently on the screen, each name accompanied by the word "blacklisted," and by the year in which each blacklisting began. At *The Front's* end, the film puts its blacklisted, backlisted personnel in front. Advertising the rupture of the barrier between the diegetic and the extradiegetic that—especially around the destabilizing Hecky—it has been inducing all along, it identifies itself as the work not only of blacklist survivors but also of blacklist resisters: as an act of belated *but also continuing* resistance.

And yet, the final notation of the film's back story has a remarkable effect: the names and dates of the blacklisted personnel suggest a necrology, or a series of inscriptions on tombstones. As Polonsky's jokes about the dead would remind us, surviving the blacklist does not necessarily mean that one is alive—which is to say, *merely* alive. Even more tasteless than Howard's vulgar parting shot at HUAC is the way the film's closing credits underscore its strategy of resistance as comic death—and as a comic death one refuses to stop performing. The song playing over the credits tells us: "You can go to extremes / With impossible schemes / You

can laugh as your dreams / Fall apart at the seams.” The film we have been watching shows us how the falling apart of our dreams—how the falling apart of *ourselves*—might be the very *occasion* for laughter. Or, to stay in the register of popular song, we could recite the line Hecky sings to Howard when he comes to say goodbye: “Every little cloud has got a silver lining.” Hecky is unable to kill Brownstein, but he succeeds in killing himself. His suicide, we have suggested, is an attempted apology for sycophantically betraying Howard, as well as Hecky himself, and the left to which he was once drawn, if only for the asses. But Hecky’s suicide is not just an apology: killing himself, he dies into Howard, who, as we have seen, finds it in himself to become the mimetic comedian that Hecky—or, more radically, Brownstein—always was. When he moves his hand across his forehead, Howard turns into that shameless, vulgar, fantastic, incredible clown who, having informed on him, now *informs him*. Faced with HUAC’s desire, in its chairman’s words at the beginning of Howard’s hearing, to “keep America just as pure as we possibly can make it,” Howard revives Hecky’s “big ass” as “go fuck yourselves.” The dead Hecky “lives” in Howard, that is, as the dead French Jews “live” in Polonsky. What this “survival” also means, of course, is that Howard “dies” into Hecky as Polonsky “dies” into the French Jews. Out of this identification between the “living” and the “dead,” however, comes mimesis, or comicosmopolitanism: an art of dying, a comedy of disintegration. Without the falling apart of and into dreams, without the collapse of silver linings into clouds, there can be none of that undisciplined laughter that this film, against the Hennessys of its own time and ours, has the bad taste to put out front.

“Front” has one other meaning that we have yet to consider, a meaning not without pertinence to a film about the left. For a “front” can be a coalition, as in “Popular Front,” or *Front populaire*. As a title, *The Front* of course refers to Howard’s fronting for blacklisted writers. But the title also points to the front or coalition formed between Hecky and Howard, as they disintegrate into each other. Together, the two comic characters, seconded by the comic actors who play them, constitute a comicosmopolitan front against the blacklisters’ heirs: the provincializing network of forces, and force of networks, that still occupy the pocket of un-Americanism that, unless vigilantly policed, New York City threatens to become, even after 9/11 and the ostensible advent of a sophisticated,

big-city patriotism, with flags flying from every apartment house. In the coalition forged by Howard-Allen and by Hecky-Mostel, or by Hecky-Mostel-Brownstein, more than two, or even three, comic Jews are joining forces. Insofar as Hecky is himself a coalition, that is, a composite of Mostel and Philip Loeb, the latter is also a member of *The Front's* front. Loeb's membership in it honors Kate Mostel and Madeline Gilford's sense of him as "one of the funniest, dearest men we ever knew," and helps to undo not only his tragicization but the whole mortifying project of patriotic *ressentiment*, which will not rest until every clown is an object of dread.

In this front, men indeed fall apart, and, as they fall, they fall into one another. In other words, the relations of these mimetic jokers differ radically from those of collaborators. Where the point of collaboration is to harden and to magnify the self, the point of the comicosmopolitan front is to dissolve it. And in dissolving the self, this front uncovers the ways in which a certain dissolution has always already begun *within* each of its members. Consider the effect of what happens between Mostel and Allen. When the man of a thousand faces and the younger comic actor and auteur melt into each other, we remember, for example, that Allen has his own history of 1950s comicosmopolitanism, having written for *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar's Hour*.⁴⁰ Finding Mostel inscribed in Allen, we might resituate Allen's own films in relation not only to *The Front*, but also to the broad front that could be unfolded out of it, with the result that, in Allen's films too, we might begin to see comicosmopolitanism's ghosts making a stand against the hinterland, the back country, that never ceases advancing on every front.⁴¹ To go back to *The Front*, thirty years later, is to encounter a film that itself goes back, to events twenty-five years earlier. To revisit the film now, therefore, is to mark the erasure of a whole world of performance, at once real and fantastical: the world of Catskills hotels, Lindy's patois, dialectic booby traps, nitery asides. But if we go back to *The Front*, *The Front* at the same time comes back to us. It might well be described, in fact, as a *haunting* comedy: its vanished world is an ever-encroaching graveyard. Happily, Bernstein's film refreshes our sense of how refreshing it can be to walk among the dead.