



FILM: **TRUMBO**

FDG RATING: 3.5   
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jay Roach: *Director*  
Bryan Cranston: *Actor: Dalton Trumbo*

DATE: January 10, 2016

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **TRUMBO**

One of our ardent film critics summed it up in a single word: Labels. But the film “Trumbo” went much further to explore how the label of “communist”, affected the lives and careers of actors, directors and other entertainment professionals, who were interrogated by the House Un-American Committee in the 1940s; and blacklisted by Hollywood’s studio chiefs. The film specifically focuses on the somewhat flamboyant Dalton Trumbo, a wealthy, successful screen writer and idealistic member of the Communist party, (superbly acted by Bryan Cranston) who refused to identify other “communists”, a label that would destroy their careers. Fear that communism propaganda could be infiltrating Hollywood films plus suspicions that Hollywood was harboring soviet spys, was propelling a rampant “witch hunt”.

Providing more insight into the perception of communism at that time, why the main characters in the film were attracted to the communist political views, what were the real and imagined threats, and more examples of how black listing affected other people in the industry, would have made the film resonate deeper. But the film had a smaller scope that unfortunately resulted in a smaller emotional and intellectual impact.

Actors are often portrayed as overly dramatic personalities, and in this film the style of acting was “over the top”, which made the characters extremely entertaining. Helen Mirren fabulously portrayed Hedda Gabler, a Los Angeles Times columnist who personally crusades to get the communist sympathizers banned from the film industry. And John Goodman was great fun as the producer of low budget films who gladly employed the talented Trumbo who wrote screen plays under a pseudonym.

But throughout the film, “communism” remains a vague, undefined concept. Much like other labels throughout history and in present day, labels can instigate severe reactions depending on each person’s interpretations and misunderstandings.

Our only insight into Trumbo’s communist views comes when his daughter asks, “Dad are you a communist?” He answers, “Would you share your sandwich with someone who did not have one?” to which she dutifully replies, “Of course” and he answers, “So that makes you a communist too.” [His simplistic reply prompted the publication Counterpunch to comment: if only communists were people who just wanted to share their sandwiches the entire witch hunt against them would truly be bizarre and unjust. But what if he said, “... if you want to share your sandwich, seize the means of production, and smash the capitalist state yes, that would make you a communist.”] [The publication also noted that during the McCarthy era, alarmists like then-Senator Richard Nixon, mistakenly preached the ignorant message that Communism was the enemy of democracy, which it wasn’t, and being a Communist wasn’t illegal.] A fact that was not mentioned in the film is that Trumbo joined the Communist Party in 1943, when the US and USSR were allies.

We all liked the memorable scene when Trumbo confronts the immensely popular war hero actor, John Wayne, (an ardent anti-communist who denounces Trumbo’s criminal unpatriotism) and loudly proclaims the hypocritical fact that Wayne has never served in military much less a war.

We agreed that the opportunity to provide insight and more nuance to the characters was missed. Only Edward G. Robinson was portrayed as conflicted while everyone else seemed flat and one-dimensional. Almost as if the film was trying to simplify the story as a token apology. From Hollywood’s perspective, going into the gory details would make it impossible to tie it all up a nice package, easy to forgive.

A clear message was that we never really know how we or those around us will act when faced with dire decisions. In contrast to Trumbo’s unwavering decision which meant he was imprisoned and spent a decade as a banned screen writer, Edward G. Robinson, is persuaded to name other communists in order to continue to be employed as an actor. He explains to Trumbo that as an actor, he can’t hide behind a pseudonym.

As a period piece, it realistically captured the times, and nicely integrated live footage. The costuming, sets, and scenes were very believable. Trumbo was a master of words so hearing his one-liners and embellished conversations was an inspiration in language. Unfortunately, a weak screen play and flat characters kept us from becoming emotionally involved. For many of us, the film was informative but it skimmed the surface; we wanted the whole story. Instead, we get a Cliff notes version of this shameful episode in history.

It actually wasn't until Trumbo's speech at the end, that we experienced a deeper connection and felt the film's powerful core message. Trumbo goes out of his way to blame no one—saying “we are all to blame and thus, no one is to blame....that the blacklist was a time of evil and that no one on either side; right, left or centre, who survived it came through untouched by evil”. ...

As powerful as the end speech was, the publication *Counterpunch* notes that

It would have been more genuine if the film would have ended with Trumbo's actual words in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in Washington, D.C.:

“You have produced a capital city on the eve of its Reichstag fire. For those who remember German history in the autumn of 1932 there is the smell of smoke in this very room. This is the beginning of an American concentration camp!”

Bottom line, a few of us thoroughly enjoyed the film, while most were entertained but agreed that a film about an exceptional screenwriter deserved a stronger screen play. The resulting score was a could-of/should-have-been-better 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 is the best.



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See you at the movies!

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