# The Public Health Service and Film Noir: A Look Back at Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950)

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It is a sultry summer evening in New Orleans, Louisiana. An unknown foreigner of Latin or Middle Eastern descent named Kochak is murdered in a scuffle over gambling proceeds by Blackie, one of the port city's most notorious and brutish gangsters. By the next morning, the body of the unidentified man ends up in the county morgue, where the attending coroner becomes alarmed, not at the bullet wound, but rather at the evidence of a deadly infection that ravaged the man's body before he was shot. Within minutes, Dr. Clinton Reed, a United States Public Health Service (PHS) officer, is called to the scene. Reed examines a sputum specimen from the deceased under the microscope and identifies the bacterial culprit as the highly contagious and airborne pneumonic plague. He orders the cremation of the man's remains, the sterilization of all objects with which he came in contact, and doses of serum to vaccinate and streptomycin to treat those exposed to this virulent germ. Convening an emergency meeting with the local authorities, Reed warns that they have only 48 hours to track down the killers and probable plague carriers who threaten to spark an epidemic that could reach far beyond the city of New Orleans.

Thus unfolds the drama of *Panic in the Streets* (1950), a film noir that relies on the familiar Hollywood staples of the gangster, gumshoe detective, and policeman to produce a tale that is as much about the hysteria that gripped the United States during McCarthyism as humans' instinctive fear of devastating diseases.[1] The film was directed by Elia Kazan and based on a story written by Edward and Edna Anhalt that was turned into a screenplay by Richard Murphy.[2] It was favorably reviewed in prominent newspapers and magazines, such as *Time* and *Variety*. But unlike other films of the era, *Panic in the Streets* captures the repressive political currents of the 1950s and expresses an optimistic faith in medical progress and the ability to control disease. The film's hero, Reed, played by Richard Widmark, is a public health servant whose determination to steer the correct course, against the objections and skepticism of many, saves New Orleans, and possibly the world, from a pandemic.

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## NEW ORLEANS AS A CITY OF CONTAGION

Located where the delta of the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans has long been recognized for its unique geography and climate. For centuries, this humid and swampy city has long served as an êntrepot for people, goods, and germs. Since its founding by the Frenchman Jean Baptiste La Moyne in 1718, New Orleans has been home to outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, and a variety of tropical diseases. Offering a propitious environment for the breeding of insects, most importantly, mosquitoes, New Orleans suffered repeated bouts of yellow fever, in 1796, 1853, 1854, 1855, 1858, 1867, 1878, and 1905.[3–5] The 1878 viral epidemic, which ripped through the entire Mississippi Valley, hit New Orleans especially hard with more than 13,000 cases of infection and close to 4,000 deaths reported from May through November of that year.[4] The intensity and virulence of the 1878 outbreak, which affected everyone equally regardless of race/ethnicity, class, gender, or economic standing, catalyzed a multi-pronged strategy of quarantining ships, travelers, and baggage; extensive urban disinfection (primarily with diluted solutions of carbolic acid); and the regular flushing of the sewage and gutter systems with fresh water. Local, state, and federal public health authorities worked together, although not always harmoniously, to apply techniques of urban sanitation, based largely on miasmatic theories, to New Orleans and surrounding towns.

However, without the knowledge of Carlos Finlay's 1881 postulation that yellow fever was transmitted via the *Aedes aegypti,* officials in New Orleans were unable to do much more than watch the 1878 epidemic run its natural course.[3] Despite some initial refusal to believe that the seemingly harmless mosquito could cause such destruction, the advancements in public health surveillance and containment galvanized a markedly different response to yet another yellow fever outbreak in 1905. By this time, the surveillance work spearheaded by the U.S. army doctors Walter Reed and William C. Gorgas in Cuba during the Spanish-American War (1898) provided a new model for controlling the vector of yellow fever—the mosquito—by treating breeding habitats such as water cisterns with kerosene, stringing up mosquito netting, and fumigating homes and buildings.

On repeated occasions, yellow fever swept into the Southern U.S. with a vengeance and like many other diseases that might have landed on American shores on ships, in luggage, or on the persons of travelers, it was frequently associated with foreigners. This was certainly the case in New Orleans, where, throughout the 19th century, most scourges were blamed on the numerous and diverse immigrants—from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America—who disembarked in Louisiana's premier port city in search of work, family members, or en route to inland destinations. Encounters with contagion profoundly influenced the lives of many newcomers to New Orleans, disrupting social relations as they sought to establish ties to their new country.[6,7] Moreover, associations between immigrants and illness were especially pronounced in New Orleans, where many local public health authorities resisted the adoption of modern methods of quarantine, refused to admit any diseases were endemic to the region, and instead foisted the blame on outsiders: "a brand of 'medical Know-Nothingism' emerged whereby immigrants were charged with introducing sickness into the city."[7]

Images of diseased and dangerous foreigners resonated powerfully in a city often cast as a sybaritic, racially mixed, and confused underworld teeming with gangsters, smugglers, and dirty and treacherous alleyways. Thus, it is easy to see how the nefarious characters in *Panic in the Streets* could emerge out of such colorful and menacing stereotypes. Both the heroes and the villains in the film invoke the medical, social, and cultural history of New Orleans. Blackie and his associates—Poldi, Kochack, and Fitch—are portrayed as gamblers, miscreants, and gruff outsiders of unknown origin, and are symbolically linked throughout the film to vermin and scum.[8] Dr. Clinton Reed, the PHS officer, is tied by name to the great public health pioneer Walter Reed, and to the enlightened physicians who advocated modern methods of quarantine in response to the yellow fever and cholera outbreaks at the turn of the 19th century. As a bustling port city, New Orleans is represented as an exposed edge of the American nation, like San Francisco or New York City, where pathogens—both viral and bacterial agents—might easily land and wreak havoc.

## PLAGUE AS A METAPHOR FOR COMMUNISM

If the themes of *Panic in the Streets* correspond to New Orleans as a place, the film's underlying message reflects the time period in which it was produced. The motion picture was released in August 1950, just six months after Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin set in motion the era that bears his name by announcing before the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia that he had in his hand a list of more than 200 communists working in the U.S. State Department. By the early 1950s, McCarthyism had spread into all corners of American society. A general

mood of hysteria and political repression gripped the country as Congress passed restrictive laws such as the Internal Security Act of 1950, which prohibited the entry or settlement of immigrants who either were or had been communists, and loyalty programs such as Executive Order 9835, signed by President Truman in 1947, which resulted in the ousting of hundreds of government employees who ostensibly endangered national security.[9,10]

Continuing a trend that had been well established by the early 20th century, the exclusionary immigration legislation of the 1950s frequently drew upon metaphors of foreigners as diseased and dangerous. The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, for example, connected existing associations of immigrants and illness to fears of communism and political subversion.[9] Formulated by Senator Patrick McCarran of Arizona, an ardent anti-New Dealer and a staunch conservative who shared the sentiments of McCarthy, and Congressman Francis Walter of Pennsylvania, the McCarran-Walter (or Immigration and Nationality Act) defined undesirability along an analogical continuum that can be summarized as follows:

Disease = Criminal Behavior = Poverty =
Addiction = Immoral Behavior = Communism[11]

The links between communism and disease, each of which inspired policies of containment and control, were so pervasive that when the FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, conveyed to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) the importance of the mission of identifying communists in 1947, he invoked the powerful language of disease: "Communism, in reality, is not a political party. It is a way of life—an evil and malignant way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic and like an epidemic, a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the Nation."[12]

During the early 1950s, suspicion abounded that disloyal, unpatriotic, and potentially subversive individuals had managed to infiltrate the government, the schools, the military, and the intelligence services. This logic extended into one of the hallmarks of American commercial creativity and success, Hollywood. Starting in the late 1940s, HUAC began to summon dozens of actors, screenwriters, and directors to divulge the names of colleagues with any links to the American Communist Party or other untoward political organizations.[13]

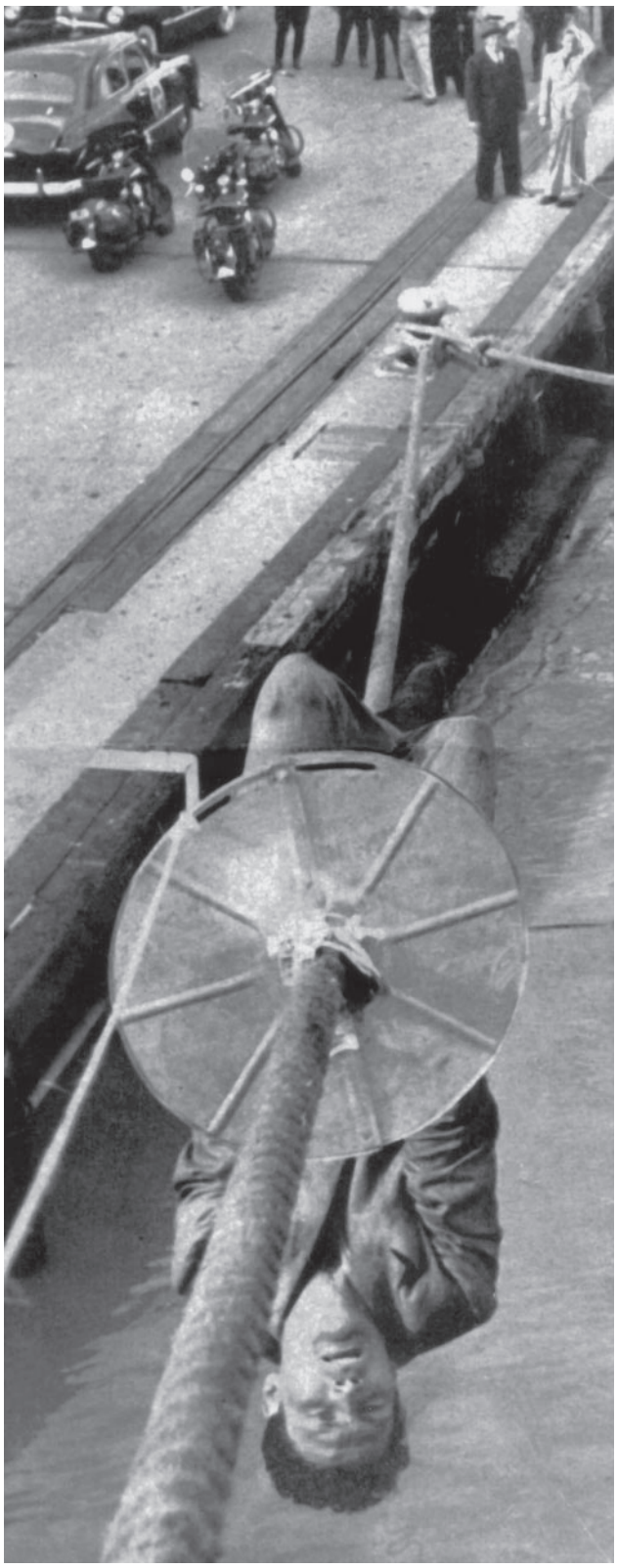
A small group, eventually known as the Hollywood Ten, refused to answer HUAC's questions, citing the First Amendment. They were followed by more than 320 others, including Aaron Copland, Burl Ives, and Lillian Hellman, who were ultimately black-listed from Hollywood. HUAC's assertions that Hollywood was swarming with communists reached hyperbolic heights. Nonetheless, during the 1930s, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal government initiated a series of innovative programs in the arts, literature, and theater, a sizable number of artists did have ties to, or flirt with, communist organizations.[14] Some embraced the hard-line policies of Leninism; many others, however, were drawn to communism during a time in which it was defined by a multiclass-based "Popular Front" strategy and offered an attractive alternative to fascism. This was the climate in 1934 when Elia Kazan, a young aspiring actor and son of Turkish immigrants, co-founded the leftist Group Theater in New York City and joined the Communist Party. After several years on and behind the stage, Kazan's enthusiasm for the excitement of this radical bohemianism waned as he witnessed the authoritarian tendencies of both the theater group and the Communist Party. By the early 1940s, he denounced all ties to communism, although he maintained friendships with many artists he worked with during those years.

By the time HUAC had launched its investigation into the role of communism in Hollywood, Kazan's reputation as an award-winning director with 20th Century Fox was almost unparalleled. Furthermore, given Kazan's personal and professional connections, it is not surprising that he was called before HUAC in 1952 and asked to name names of purported communists in Hollywood. Unlike those who took the First Amendment out of their sense of moral conviction, Kazan disappointed many of his old associates by offering information about individuals involved in the Group Theater in the 1930s. As a first-generation immigrant from a working class family whose ability to attend Williams College and Yale School of Drama enabled him to have a career inaccessible to his parents, Kazan was a firm believer in the ideals of American democracy.[15] Thus, as a vociferous anti-communist and patriotic American who was reluctant to relinquish the high status he had attained, Kazan felt he had no choice but to answer HUAC's questions. Soon after his revelations, Kazan explained his actions in the *New York Times*: "I believe that communist activities confront the people of this country with an unprecedented and exceptionally tough problem. That is, how to protect ourselves from a dangerous and alien conspiracy and still keep the free, open, healthy way of life that gives us self-respect."[16] Kazan was immediately excoriated by many of his peers as a sellout and traitor; this resentment resurged in 1999 when a heated debate erupted over his acceptance of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

## THE PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE ON THE SILVER SCREEN

When Kazan arrived to New Orleans to shoot *Panic in the Streets*, he was delighted that the locals were so willing to have their hometown serve as an urban stage set. According to Kazan, over the four months that he spent in New Orleans, the mayor endorsed the project and Kazan and his crew enjoyed unhampered access to every part of the city. Residents of New Orleans from all walks of life were used as extras and their homes, shops, and streets for scenery and props. For Kazan, being in New Orleans was liberating: *Panic in the Streets* was the "first film I purely enjoyed making."[15] He and Richard Murphy, the screenplay writer, rewrote scenes by day, improvising as they went along, and fraternized with the city's musicians by night: "in my nocturnal wanderings, I got to meet a number of the jazz musicians, chief among them Sidney Bechet."[15] *Panic in the Streets* is clearly marked by this realism and authenticity, from the scenes in the county morgue to the representations of ethnic restaurants and the wharf district. Against this gritty and unfiltered backdrop, the film's two key protagonists act out a noir drama in which Dr. Clinton Reed, the lone crusader against malfeasance, ultimately triumphs over Blackie, the smarmy murderous gangster.

In the film, once the plague *bacillus* is scientifically confirmed, Reed joins forces with municipal leaders to apprehend the dead man's killers, who have the potential to spread infection to everyone with whom they come in contact. When his authority is challenged, Reed retorts with a history and description of the lethality of plague, emphatically stating, "I'm Dr. Reed of the United States Public Health Service, and one of the jobs of my department is to keep plague out of this country."[1] Although he meets rebuke, Reed forges ahead stubbornly and proves that he is the only one who can steer the correct course, safeguard the public, and insulate New Orleans, the nation, and ultimately, the world, from a devastating and fatal epidemic. As one critic notes, "the protagonist in many noir films is the man who walks alone, who is forced to travel a path beyond the limits of the law. Reed, as portrayed by Widmark, is forced to take the law into his own hands for the sake of the society at large."[8] A uniformed PHS officer, Reed exemplifies wholesome America and the federal government in its fight against alien elements. He also embodies the knowledge and transcendence of science and medical progress over superstition and backward thinking. Throughout *Panic in the Streets*, Reed struggles to keep the New Orleans local press, which mocks him as a "two bit civil servant" from reporting the plague outbreak and thereby



Blackie trapped like a rat while trying to escape by climbing up a ship's mooring line. SOURCE: Still picture from *Panic in the Streets*.

inciting uncontrollable pandemonium.[1] He also encounters distrust of the authorities among the city's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean immigrants. In particular, the reluctance of the owners of a Greek tavern, who do not admit that they served a meal to the initial carrier of the plague, Kochak, causes the overseer's wife to lose her life. After having traced Kochak's trail back to the "Queen Nile," the ship on which he was smuggled into port, Reed again confronts resistance, this time from the ship's captain who accuses him of stirring his men to mutiny and orders him to leave. Reed, however, fluent in Cantonese, draws several of the Chinese members of the crew into conversation; they share enough information about rat infestation, Greek stowaways, and their requests for shish-kabob dinners during the voyage for the hunt to continue.

Throughout *Panic in the Streets*, Reed is depicted as an enlightened leader. In one scene, for example, he argues with municipal authorities about the need to keep the story out of the papers. When one of the mayor's associates implores Reed to warn the local community about the potential spread of disease, Reed barks back, "Community! What community? Do you think you're living in the Middle Ages? Anybody that leaves here can be in any city in the country within 10 hours. I could leave here today and I could be in Africa tomorrow. And whatever disease I had would go right with me."[1] Such strong opinions about the ease by which dangerous germs could quickly travel from one place to the next reflect the sophisticated global epidemiological understandings of disease transmission that characterized the PHS in the mid-20th century, which by that time had benefited from major medical advancements, such as antibiotics, and learned many lessons from the far-reaching health and human crises of the Depression and World War II.[17]

In the film's final scenes, Reed's steadfast detective work and medical expertise lead him and an entourage of local officials down to the city's docks. After a somewhat comical cat and mouse chase, the heinous gangster, Blackie, is cornered. Seeking an escape route, he begins to climb up a ship's mooring line and almost instantaneously finds himself trapped by a rat catcher. He loses his grip and plunges into the water below. With the plague disaster now averted, Reed, the ideal Cold War husband, returns home to the arms of his adoring, pregnant wife and admiring son.

## LOOKING BACK AT *PANIC IN THE STREETS*

Although *Panic in the Street* tells a fairly simple story of a PHS officer neutralizing a possible plague pandemic, it does so by presenting a historically charged set of symbols and stereotypes. Like many previous outbreaks of disease on American shores, the arrival of plague *bacilli* into New Orleans is attributed to thickly accented foreigners who disregard and transgress authority. The conflation of immigrants and illness is a long-standing theme in American society. During the 1950s, this association was tied directly, in the minds of J. Edgar Hoover and other national figures, to communism and political subversion. Thus, the foreigners in *Panic in the Streets* can be seen as threats not only to the public health but also to national security. Kazan's own personal journey from a member of the leftist Group Theater in the 1930s to vocal anti-communist in the 1940s most likely influenced his portrayal of Reed as an upright American individualist who shoulders the mission of the PHS, a commissioned branch of the U.S. government. Even though the appearance of a strain of pneumonic plague in New Orleans in the 1950s was highly unlikely and the film's depiction of medical procedures is overly simplistic, *Panic in the Streets* is an illuminating window into American social and cultural values during the turbulent era of McCarthyism.

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