The Sorrowing Boy with Green Hair: A Cinematic Allegory against War and Injustice

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Abstract

This paper discusses the film The Boy with Green Hair *(1948), directed by Joseph Losey. It focuses on the film's representation of the war orphan not only as a sorrowing child, but also as someone who has been marked as exceptional in order to raise public awareness on issues of war and racial injustice in the immediate postwar period. Among the sources used are reviews and critiques of the film at the time of its release in 1948; interviews with and memoirs of key personnel at RKO Radio Pictures, as well as Losey; and analyses of the film's changing reputation. Initially viewed by some as Communist propaganda,* The Boy with Green Hair *is now admired as a film that boldly promoted international peace at a time when the Cold War was heating up.*

Keywords

War orphan, racial injustice, sorrowing child, *The Boy With Green Hair*, Joseph Losey, RKO Radio Pictures, 1940s Hollywood, Blacklist

First released by RKO Radio Pictures in 1948, *The Boy With Green Hair* remains one of the finest examples of Hollywood's brief experimentation with films promoting progressive themes of peace and racial tolerance before the reactionary years of the Blacklist took their toll in the late 1940s and 1950s. Several of Hollywood's most prominent liberals in the postwar period were responsible for the film's distinctive voice and allegorical themes. What also distinguishes the film is the character of a war orphan who represents not only a sorrowing child, but also someone who has been marked as exceptional in order to raise public awareness on issues of war and racial injustice in the immediate postwar period. *The Boy With Green Hair* deserves greater recognition as a film that boldly promoted international peace and tolerance at a time when the Cold War was heating up.

Because the film is relatively unknown, some description of the plot seems necessary. The film opens in a police station, where several officers are interrogating a young boy whose head is completely shaven. The boy—later identified as Peter Fry (played by Dean Stockwell)—refuses to talk, so a child psychologist, Dr. Evans (played by Robert Ryan) arrives and adopts a friendlier attitude, offering the boy his hamburger and chocolate malted milk. When Evans asks, "What happened to your hair," the boy responds that it's a long story. Evans says he likes long stories—thereby triggering a flashback in the boy's mind to birthday cakes, Halloween, Christmas, and then the summer when a telegram arrives. Unaware of the telegram's contents—that his mother and father are dead—Peter moves from relative to relative, none of whom are equipped to handle a young boy. Eventually, Peter is adopted by Gramp Fry (played by Pat O'Brien), a former vaudeville entertainer and now a singing waiter, who is not anyone's actual grandfather. Unlike Peter's blood relatives, Gramp adopts a more liberal parenting attitude, telling Peter there's nothing he can't touch and no room he can't enter. Testing this attitude, Peter deliberately breaks a vase, but Gramp is unfazed and says he'd been meaning to get rid of the vase anyway. Indicating that he'll stay, Peter asks Gramp to

notify his Cousin Mary so that his mother and father will know where he is. Gramp doesn't know what to say.

Peter starts school and seems happy with his new life, until one day he joins his classmates in collecting clothes for war orphans. [The year in which the film is set is never identified, but one can assume it is contemporary, i.e., 1947 or 1948.] One of the boys tells Peter that he looks like one of the children in the war orphan posters and that Peter is a war orphan too. In disbelief, Peter calls the boy a liar, which prompts a fight. Gramp and Peter's teacher Miss Brand finally tell Peter the truth that his mother and father are dead—killed in a London air raid. They might have saved themselves, but they chose to remain and help others in need.

Meanwhile, Peter has taken a job in a grocery store, where he hears three women talking: "Just look at these headlines," says one. "War. War. War."[1] Another comments, "Columnist Robert Wilson says unless we're prepared, there's no way of avoiding a new war" Adds the third, "The scientists say we'll all be blown to bits in the next one." The conversation continues:

> "I declare, I don't know what the world is coming to. Seems like it's human nature to want to kill."
> "Well, if it's human nature to want to kill, all the more reason we should be ready, just in case the other fellow wants to start something."
> "Well, Sophie, if that's human nature we'd better change it or there won't be anything human left to change."
> "Anyway whatever it is we have to face, we'd better be ready for it."
> "We'd better be ready in our thinking too, Mary, not just with our bombs."
> "I say we ought to stop thinking about fighting each other and think some about understanding each other."
> "When everybody all over the world talks about nothing but war, what do you think we'll get? War!"
> "Well right now we'd better talk about being prepared so that we'll have time to talk about peace and understanding."
> "People say another war means the end of the world."
> "War will come, want it or not."
> "The only question is when."
> "Just in time to get more youngsters like Peter."

Most of this conversation takes place off-screen, while we see Peter filling a grocery order, but listening intently to the women with a troubled look on his face. When they mention his name, he is startled and drops a bottle of milk.

That evening at dinner, Peter asks, "Gramp, the world isn't going to be blown up and everybody killed? Is it?" Gramp says sometimes it seems that way, which is why he always keeps a touch of green with him. It "is the color of spring. It means hope and a promise of new life." Gramp reassures Peter that no matter what people say at the time, the world will keep going for a long while.

The next morning while taking a bath, Peter discovers that his hair has turned a bright green. Thinking at first that green soap is the cause, Peter tries washing out the color, but is unable to do so. Peter tells Gramp he doesn't like green hair, and wants his own color back. They visit Dr. Knudsen, who informs them there's nothing physically

1 All quotations come from the film, *The Boy With Green Hair* (produced by Stephen Ames [and Dore Schary] for RKO Radio Pictures; directed by Joseph Losey; screenplay by Ben Barzman and Alfred Lewis Levitt, based on Betsy Beaton's short story, "The Boy With Green Hair"; released November 1948).

wrong with Peter and no apparent reason why his hair should be green. Peter pouts, "I want to be like everyone else." The next day, Peter's hair is still green, but he can no longer hide it by staying indoors. As Peter and Gramp walk to school together, everyone stares, dogs bark, and we hear comments about this strange phenomenon. Peter's classmates are anxious. "You can't tell; green hair might be catching. Maybe it will rub off on you," says one. Another asks, "What's wrong with green hair?" "How'd you like to have your sister marry somebody with green hair?" is the reply with obvious reference to the issue of race. Sensing her pupils' concerns, Miss Brand goes to the front of the classroom, takes out a pad, and asks, "How many children have black hair? How many children have brown hair? Blonde? Green hair? And red hair?" She then announces the results: "Four children have black hair, eleven have brown hair, nine have blonde hair, one has green hair, and one has red hair. Are there any questions? No questions? We'll go on with our history lesson."

In voice-over (presumably the voice Dr. Evans is hearing in the police station), Peter says he knows Miss Brand was only trying to help him but she could not. Moreover, he feels sorrow that his parents had deserted him: "They didn't care about me. They just cared about saving other children. They didn't care what happened to me." Peter determines he must run away from home. "It was just no use. . . . It seemed as though there wasn't any place where a war orphan could settle down." He heads to a wooded glade, falls down sobbing, and then hears unfamiliar voices calling his name softly. Looking up, he sees the same children shown in the war orphan posters, only now they have come to life. They tell him they have been waiting for the boy with the green hair, whose hair is beautiful. "Green is the color of spring. It means hope." Green hair is "a mark of something good, like a medal. There is no one else in all the world with green hair." If people ask why he has green hair, Peter should answer, "Because I am a war orphan and my green hair is to remind you that war is very bad for children." The orphans urge him, "You must tell all the people—the Russians, Americans, Chinese, British, French, all the people all over the world—that there must not ever be another war. If enough people believe you, then there never will be another war, and there will never be any more war orphans."

Thinking back to the pessimistic conversation he overheard in the grocery store, Peter exclaims that he must communicate this message to everyone in town who has lost hope. "They think everybody has to get killed. The world doesn't have to be blown up!" What follows is a montage of Peter spreading his message of hope to the milkman, doctor, barber, grocery store proprietor, and Miss Brand. However, many of the townspeople remain anxious and want Peter to cut off his hair. For instance, the milkman complains he is losing customers because people think his milk turned Peter's hair green. When Peter returns to the glade, hoping to find the war orphans for reassurance, he encounters only some of his classmates who taunt him and threaten to cut his hair. Back home, Gramp does not believe Peter's story about the other war orphans, and admits he is unsure how to proceed—but that people have been pressuring him to do something about Peter's hair.

In voice-over, Peter explains, "Nobody believed me. Nobody listened." He tells Gramp he'll go to the barber, who cuts off all of Peter's green hair, leaving him completely bald. Back home, Gramp admits his shame at not standing up to those who wanted to cut Peter's hair. But Peter is unconvinced and runs away—which brings the story back full circle from the opening flashback to the police station with Dr. Evans. By this time, Gramp, Miss Brand, and Dr. Knudsen have all arrived at the police station. Gramp tells Peter he is now old enough to understand the final letter written by his parents, which Gramp reads aloud: "Dear Peter, your mother isn't here and I will not be for long. She

had many things to say to you. I will try to say them for both of us. We left you Peter because we had to. We had a job to do. You are old enough to know that death is a sad thing because it takes away the great gift of life. But it need not be sad if the gift of life has been well used. Don't be sad for us. It will have been worthwhile if those who did not die will not forget. If they forget, remind them. Remind them, Peter." Given this new hope and meaning, Peter with tears streaming down his face says he will save the letter. And he hopes that when his hair grows back, it will grow back green. The film ends with Peter and Gramp happily returning home, arm in arm.

If this doesn't sound like the work of a typical Hollywood film in 1948—produced by a major studio such as RKO Radio Pictures—that's exactly right. The film's unusually progressive tone with an allegorical message was in part the work of Adrian Scott (1912–1973), who served as the film's initial producer; in part the work of Dore Schary (1905–1980), head of production at RKO who shepherded all of that studio's social--message pictures in the late 1940s; and perhaps in largest part the work of Joseph Losey (1909–1984), the film's director. One recent study of Hollywood exiles from the Blacklist maintains that many of those contributing to *The Boy With Green Hair* had "impeccable left-wing pedigrees."[2]

Even so, Losey must have been an anomaly in late 1940s Hollywood. Born in Wisconsin and educated at Dartmouth College and Harvard University (with a Master's degree in English literature), Losey had actually studied filmmaking with Sergei Eisenstein, perhaps the best-known Soviet film director, and he had even directed in the Soviet Union an English-language production of *Waiting for Lefty*, the one-act play by Clifford Odets about taxi drivers going on strike. Losey had also worked for the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper, which produced Left-leaning plays about workers' rights. During World War II, Losey served in the Army Signal Corps, which helped foster his transition from stage to screen. Following the war, Losey moved to Hollywood and worked first for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer before accepting an offer from Schary at RKO to direct *The Boy With Green Hair*. As Losey explained in a series of interviews with Michel Ciment between 1976 and 1979:

> I didn't want to stay any longer at MGM, but when the end of the year [1945] came they took up my option. So I was stuck for another year, during which I did absolutely nothing. Dore Schary, who had moved from David O. Selznick to RKO, called me and said, "I've got a short story called The Boy with Green Hair which I'd like you to make, with Adrian Scott." So as soon as I got out of Metro I did it. Adrian was the white-headed boy of Hollywood at that time.[3]

The short story seen by Schary was published in the December 29, 1946, edition of *This Week*, a syndicated supplement appearing in Sunday newspapers throughout the country. The four-page story by Betsy Beaton bears only slight similarities to the film version in that seven-year-old Peter Fry wakes up one morning to find that his hair inexplicably has "turned into a bright Kelly green."[4] However, this Peter is not a war orphan; his hair has turned not just green, but has been transformed into green grass; and the small town in which he lives does not pressure him to cut it off. Rather

2 Rebecca Prime, *Hollywood Exiles in Europe: The Blacklist and Cold War Film Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 12.

3 Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (London: Methuen, 1985), 66.

4 Betsy Beaton, "The Boy With Green Hair," *This Week*, December 29, 1946, 10.

than meeting other war orphans in a wooded glade, Peter goes to an old Victorian house where he encounters "the Voice-of-Man's-Conscience" and "the Handwriting-on-the--Wall." As the Voice tells Peter, "The grownups won't listen to me, nor will they read Handwriting. We decided yesterday that perhaps we had it all wrong—it was the kids we should concentrate on." They explain why Peter has been given green hair: to remind him "not to fight," and moreover that "Every kid in the world will have green hair by tomorrow" to reinforce the global message not to fight.[5] The Voice concludes his message to Peter with a passage from Revelation 9:4, "And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth. Neither any green thing, neither any trees: but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads."[6]

According to film historian Brian Neve, who interviewed co-screenwriter Ben Barzman in 1988, Adrian Scott had written the first version of the script, based on Beaton's story. The basic premise in Barzman's words was that "of a boy who wakes up with green hair and comes to identify this with a mission to warn people 'that there must not be war.'"[7] However, Scott was soon persona non grata in Hollywood, thanks to the 1947 HUAC hearings in Hollywood. Like the ten other screenwriters, directors, and producers who testified during the week of October 27, 1947, Scott refused to answer the Committee's question, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party." The eleven pleaded the First Amendment (not the Fifth Amendment), arguing that the First Amendment guarantees their right to remain silent, as well as the right to speak. Congress, however, rejected this interpretation and voted to declare these "unfriendly witnesses" in contempt. One of the eleven witnesses, playwright Bertolt Brecht returned to Germany immediately after testifying, leaving just remaining "Hollywood Ten," all of whom served time in prison for the contempt charge.[8]

According to Losey, "The results of the hearings were that so many people informed on people that were very close to them that the morale of Hollywood was absolutely shattered. . . . *The Boy With Green Hair* had been suspended because Adrian Scott had been subpoenaed and Ben Barzman and Al Levitt, the writers, had been named."[9] Losey assumed that RKO would drop the film completely, but Schary assured him otherwise. "The reason I wanted to see you today is to tell you that we *are* going to do *The Boy With Green Hair* but of course it has to be a producer other than Adrian Scott."[10] Similarly, Schary was telling the media that the project would not be canceled. The *New York Times* reported, "The fear complex from which Hollywood is suffering, Schary declared, is being fostered by the extreme left even as it was started by the Thomas committee and the extreme right. 'The leftists,' [Schary] said, 'lied when they said we would not make *The Boy With Green Hair* (Scott's last assignment before he was dismissed from RKO). It is a pro-peace picture, and we are going to make it with no change in subject matter.'"[11]

5 Beaton, "The Boy With Green Hair," 16.

6 Beaton, "The Boy With Green Hair," 18.

7 Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 99.

8 Many sources describe the unpleasantness of these times, but among the most useful are Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) and Eric Bentley, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been: The Investigation of Show Business by the Un-American Activities Committee, 1947-1958* (New York: Random House, 1972).

9 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, 68.

10 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, 71.

11 Thomas F. Brady, "Hollywood Issues: Communist Scare Will Not Weaken Film Content, Schary Says," *New York Times,* January 25, 1948, X5.

Schary's role in the HUAC hearings and subsequent blacklisting is complicated. Many Left-leaning critics lambaste him (and other Hollywood studio executives) for giving in to the Congressional committee and for firing victims such as Adrian Scott. Schary's defenders argue that he was simply doing the best he could in an unwinnable situation. Losey's position is mixed. On the one hand, he maintains, "I had no interference [from Schary]. I had only help on that film [*The Boy With Green Hair*]. The originality and the contribution came first from Dore Schary, and a big contribution by Adrian Scott, and the writers, and then me."[12] On the other hand, Losey expressed great regret that Schary had not resisted the anti-Communist tide more strongly. "I had always the feeling, and I still have it, that if one man, as Galileo said, had stood up and said 'no'—or if one man had stood up and said 'I'm a Communist—so what? The Communist Party is not illegal and there are 90,000 people in the Communist Party,' it would have stopped the witch-hunting."[13]

In spite of all of the talent at work on the film, reviews for *The Boy With Green Hair* were mixed. It earned high praise in the trade journal, *Variety*, especially for a picture without much box-office potential: "RKO has turned out an absorbing sensitive story of tolerance and child understanding in *The Boy With Green Hair*. Pic's intelligence, artistry and taste will draw fine critical comment to offset lack of marquee pull and weight of its theme. Although pic—a modest budgeter, despite the Technicolor cost—doesn't loom as a heavy grosser, it should make back its coin. Certainly it will redound to the industry's credit; RKO, and the film industry, deserve a lot of kudos for making it."[14] Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* found the film "unusually rewarding. Its charm has a strange and moving quality far above that which the ordinary movie is able to evoke."[15]

On the other hand, *The New Yorker* took a rather jaded view of the film, noting sarcastically that "it's good to know that he [Dore Schary] doesn't approve of people going around killing each other." Faring even worse was Pat O'Brien's portrayal of Gramp, who

> is a caricature of an Irishman that even an Englishman might find implausible. He wears a woolly gray wig that bushes out over his ears, dressed like someone tailored by the Salvation Army, and speaks with a tentative brogue that he might have picked up while waiting for the lights to change on Third Avenue. Gramps [sic] is a broken-down hoofer, currently employed as a singing waiter, and the tales he tells the boy ought to push you into torpor faster than phenobarbital.[16]

Not quite so biting, but equally negative, was the review in *Time*, which called the story "a heavy-footed fantasy," which "falls short not because it has an idea but because it has one too many (it tries to preach against both war and intolerance) and because it labors so clumsily to cram its ideas into the mold of 'entertainment.'"[17]

Admittedly, the film may seem to be going in several different directions at once—which may not be surprising considering what happened at RKO while the film was being edited. In the spring of 1948, the eccentric industrialist Howard Hughes gained control of RKO, which ironically led to the studio's total collapse in less than ten years.

12 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, 81.

13 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, 71.

14 Bron., "The Boy With Green Hair," *Variety*, November 17, 1948, 13.

15 Philip K. Scheuer, "'Boy With Green Hair' Exerts Haunting Spell," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1949, 7.

16 John McCarten, "The Current Cinema: Poil d'Epinard," *New Yorker* 24, January 15, 1949, 55.

17 "The Boy With Green Hair," *Time* 53, January 10, 1949, 84.

Indeed, RKO is the only one of Hollywood's Big Five studios (i.e., the companies that controlled film production, film distribution, and film exhibition) no longer in existence.[18] According to Losey, Hughes "bought RKO as a tax liability. He wanted to run it into the ground so he could take a huge tax loss and Schary was building it up which was exactly what he didn't want. So he [Hughes] threw him [Schary] out."[19] With Schary gone, Hughes tried to reverse the film's liberal and pacifist tone. As screenwriter Ben Barzman recalled, Hughes, who after all was "a major munitions manufacturer, summoned young Dean Stockwell and Pat O'Brien. Hughes wanted Stockwell to supplement his film line, 'War is harmful to children and to all living beings,' with an additional line: 'And that's why we have the greatest army, the greatest navy and the greatest air force in the world.' Dean Stockwell thought about it but refused."[20]

This is a wonderful anecdote, but incorrect on two counts. The actual line in the film is, "My green hair is to remind you that war is very bad for children." And it is spoken, not by Peter Fry, but by one of the other war orphans. Barzman's recollection from years later seems to conflate the line with one of the signature slogans from the 1960s, "War is not healthy for children and other living things," which became the logo for the antiwar organization, Another Mother for Peace, founded in 1967.[21] In its best--known form, the slogan is set against a yellow background with a sunflower crudely drawn (as if by a child) and the words likewise rendered in a childlike script.

Whether the words in the logo were inspired by *The Boy With Green Hair* cannot be determined. But certainly the pacifist message (in both Betsy Beaton's short story and the RKO film) illustrates an understanding of childhood wisdom and childhood sorrow. The child, in the person of Peter Fry, is singled out by his green hair to "tell all the people—the Russians, Americans, Chinese, British, French, all the people all over the world—that there must not ever be another war." Moreover, the moment just before Peter is given these instructions is when he breaks down crying. In the film version, it is when he falls sobbing to the ground in the wooded glade. In the short story, it is after hearing the Voice in the old Victorian house—just before the Voice tells him why his hair has turned to green grass: "Quite suddenly he felt the urge to cry with the Voice. Once he had started crying he felt as if he could never stop, and when he stopped he felt he could never cry again. He cried not as a boy of seven cries, but as a man cannot."[22]

Images of children crying are both common and powerful. As Patricia Holland observes, tears "are the only bodily fluid that may legitimately flow in public, and the less an individual aspires to power, the less they need be restrained."[23] Accordingly, the image of a sorrowing child is one that adults (from a position of relative power) not only expect to see, but may also take some comfort from seeing. "Pictures in which tearfulness is comfortingly confined to children—and, what is more, where the tears are considered to be in the child's own interest—can only be reassuring. They keep both the pictured child and the internal childhood of the adult viewer firmly in place."[24]

18 The other members of the Big Five were Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Bros., all of which are still very much in business today.

19 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, 79.

20 David Caute, *Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 87.

21 "Another Mother for Peace." Accessed September 4, 2014. http://anothermother.org.

22 Beaton, "The Boy With Green Hair," 16.

23 Patricia Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 160.

24 Holland, *Picturing Childhood*, 160.

No one other than Peter in *The Boy With Green Hair* ever cries—and certainly none of the adults. Adrian Scott may have cried in private after he was sentenced to prison for contempt of Congress. Dore Schary may have cried in private after Howard Hughes forced him out of RKO. And Joseph Losey may have cried in private when he was blacklisted in 1951 after HUAC returned to Hollywood—forcing him into permanent exile in England, where he continued to work as a director, making such well-regarded films as *The Servant* (1963), *King and Country* (1964), *Accident* (1967), and *The Go-Between* (1971). Whatever their feelings at the time may have been, Scott, Schary, and Losey should have been very proud of their contributions to a film that offers one of the best representations of a sorrowing child amidst the aftermath of war and injustice.

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