

Research Paper

A Film Capable of Great Change: Salt of the Earth Through the Lens of Cinema Semiotics

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, the film *Salt of the Earth* by Herbert J. Biberman is examined through the lens of cinema semiotics. The paper aims to discuss the specifics of how the film utilized cinematic language to express Hollywood blacklisted activists' ideals during the time of the Second Red Scare and HUAC's heavy censorship on the Hollywood industry. Activism is explored through script analysis, cultural influence, and camera angles. Interested in how the film is altered attempting to bypass the censorship of HUAC, two techniques are noted: deletion from the original script and active disruption utilizing a romantic relationship line to tone down the activist aspect of the film. Additionally, the aftermath of the release of the film is discussed. The conclusion that the film is both a failure and success of activism is reached in the end.

KEYWORDS: *Salt of the Earth*, Cinema Semiotics, Second Red Scare, HUAC, Hollywood Blacklists, Activism, Herbert J. Biberman, McCarthyism, IUMMSW

Received 07 Oct., 2026; Revised 16 Oct., 2026; Accepted 18 Oct., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.
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I. INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Shots of Esperanza getting involved in a fight during the strike after her husband Roman was prohibited from doing so (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).

A crowd of men with a baby in hand, a fight, a pistol, a woman holding a shoe: these details come from *Salt of the Earth*, a film which premiered in the chaotic year of 1954. The corresponding screenplay describes this scene vividly:

Esperanza can't stand it any longer. She hands the baby to Ramón and is gone before he realizes her intent... Luz Morales is climbing Vance's back, clinging to his arms. Another woman clutches at his gun hand, trying to prevent him from drawing his pistol. Esperanza comes running up. She stops for a second, slips off her right shoe. Vance knocks the other woman down, pulls his revolver from his holster. Esperanza whacks him over the wrist with her shoe, knocking the weapon out of his hand (Wilson, n.d.).

This series of shots marks a pivotal moment in the film. Esperanza, the female lead, physically abandons traditional homemaker roles and advances towards activism (Weinberg, 2010). Despite the rise of feminist movements, this depiction of women—which reverses gender roles and shows women participating in strikes—was unusual at the time of the film's production. However, *Salt of the Earth*, having received intense criticism and having faced significant censorship, was more than an avant-garde advertisement for feminism and inequality (Balthaser, 2008).

Following World War II, America was rife with insecurity and uncertainty. Such fear peaked as socialist ideals rapidly spread, materializing in the rise of McCarthyist ideologies of “un-American” activities and the persecution of suspected communists (McCarthyism, 2022). By deeming people foreign radicals, arresting left-wing politicians, and creating the Hollywood Blacklist, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was one of the most influential enforcers of McCarthyism (Eckstein, 2004). However, anti-communist activity threatened to diminish American collectivism. *Salt of the Earth*, having discussed the “dystopian” aspects of American society, was heavily targeted by the HUAC prohibition (Pfaelzer, 1999).

The film was based on a true historical strike led by Mexican American miners, members of the IUMMSW union, and their wives. Under the Empire Zinc Company, the conditions these miners faced had deteriorated due to the expulsion of IUMMSW from the CIO, an anti-communist union (Young, 2004).

Exceptional in its focus on marginalized groups and controversial themes, *Salt of the Earth* reflected on broader themes of American social disunity and discrimination (Balthaser, 2008). Yet, how exactly did *Salt of the Earth* represent the goals of American activists under HUAC suppression? Furthermore, to what extent did the banning of the film hamper the progression of its activism?

To answer such questions, it is necessary to examine the film's artistic choices closely, reflect on the significance of these choices, and contrast the film's original goal with its public reception. *Salt of the Earth*, created by marginalized activists with meticulous cinematic elements, including language, iconic signs, and camera perspective, aimed to promote labor and feminist activism but was severely hampered by HUAC's prohibition.

II. A SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

The director of the film, Herbert J. Biberman, chose to narrate the story through a “narrow” lens, reflecting the major shifts in the strike through changes in the relationship between Esperanza and her husband, Ramón, who was also a union leader.

The film's overall plot can be summarized in a few stages. The story begins with male union members trying to negotiate for better working conditions and wages. They are concerned because their safety is not guaranteed in the mines when they work alone. The company refuses to respond until one miner is seriously injured while working alone. This marks the first turning point in the movie: all the miners refuse to work, initiating the strike. However, as time passes, violence increases, and the union is unable to sustain its funds and resources. The strike is put down (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). Here, a second turning point occurs: the women propose entering the strike through a picket line. By law, they are not part of the union and thus cannot be punished (Young, 2004). It is worth noting that, throughout this process, as Esperanza wishes to join the strike, tension is growing in her relationship with her husband. Tear gas is used, and the women are collectively taken to jail. But they remain resilient. In response, the company desperately enacts eviction, hoping this will intimidate the union. The film ends with Esperanza and Ramón acknowledging each other's importance (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).

III. FILM LANGUAGE AND ACTIVISM

The study of film language has often been intertwined with the study of American culture, as it not only presents a historical narrative but also serves as an independent piece of “history” that carries its own biases and perspectives (Sobchack, 1980). The illusion of reality that a film creates may make it seem like a historical record; however, it is important to note that the film is a composition of ordered historical events that

the director assembled to form the story of “history.” Thus, even the “content” of the films may reflect the creator's interpretation of the significance of specific scenes and events (Lotman, 1976).

Additionally, a film is a series of “coded signs” that function as a “language.” Language systems are significant as they serve as the basic tools for people to communicate and sympathize with one another. Yet, as a “universal” tool, language can also be extraordinarily exclusive, as it requires a certain degree of cultural background to be understood (Turner, 2006).

3.1 Verbal Language and Isolation

Throughout the film, Spanish insertions served as a form of audience segmentation, reflecting a divided America and the hardships faced by minority groups. The film begins with a language system familiar to most Americans, which contrasts with the later shift. Despite the story being centered on an experience peculiar to most non-Mexican Americans, the film opens with Esperanza narrating in English, introducing a story “that has no beginning (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).” This serves as a confirmation to non-Mexican American audiences that this film, at least in its verbal language, is expected, thereby reinforcing a sense of ownership and connection to the story. Such behavior in film language is called an anticipated pattern that is obtained through previous film experiences (Lotman, 1976). However, such a sense of familiarity is soon juxtaposed with intrusions of Spanish lines when the mine workers openly vocalize their anger and unwillingness to return to work (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). As the first mini-climax of the film, this narrative shatters the expectations of audiences unfamiliar with this new language system. Such unfamiliarity, accompanied by discomfort and curiosity, replicates the insecurities of immigrants who, fearful of being ostracized, feel the urge to adapt (Powell, 2019). Additionally, the company representative serves as a direct resonance to non-Mexican American audiences when he asks, “What are they saying (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954)?” An audience that doesn’t understand the workers’ speech will be aligned with the “villains,” thereby emphasizing the segregation and tensions between the two groups. Verbal language is not the only film language system; a combination of cultures and symbolic signs can also serve as one (Turner, 2006).

3.2 Iconic Cultural Language and Unity

Unlike verbal languages, the presence of iconic signs in films is much more universal, thus fostering a sense of community (Turner, 2006). The film is filled with certain Mexican traditions that, through shared signs, can be understood even without a background in Mexican culture. In a particular scene, a group of men and women surround Esperanza’s house and begin singing in Spanish (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). This action, which may seem like a mysterious ritual, is soon understood as a celebration of Esperanza’s birthday. People swarmed into her house, kissing her on the cheek and dancing happily together. Through iconic signs, the director emphasizes the similarities among human beings, presenting a striking contrast to the earlier sense of separation. Through the manipulation of language and signs, the film highlights an underlying struggle in American society while presenting a vision of the coexistence of difference and unity.

3.3 Power of Camera Angles

The discrepancy between the power granted by the camera and the power held by the film's more “vulnerable” characters illustrates the strength of marginalized activists. As the “eyes” of the audience, the camera's angle provides the perspective from which the audience views the film. It also reveals power dynamics through the relation of the camera and the subject (Turner, 2006). During the scene where the sheriffs confront the crowds when evicting furniture from a worker’s house, the camera occupies the sheriff’s perspective, looking down at the crowd (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). This angle conveys the sheriff’s overpowering strength. Yet, the following shots show the crowd intimidating the sheriff, who eventually escapes (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). This variation, an almost contradictory depiction of power, symbolizes the activists’ hope of revolting against those who seem to be empowered.



Figure 2. Women in jail, chanting their needs to the police (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).

Furthermore, in the scene where a group of picketing women is jailed, the same discrepancy in the presentation of strength occurs. The camera operates from the perspective of the police who stare at the crowd of women behind the bars. However, although the physical location and the camera angle give evidence of the guards' power, only the women have a voice in this scene. From behind bars, they continually voice their demands (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). Examining these two scenes together reveals a theme: the unity and resilience of the vulnerable can overthrow the privileged. This form of activism, despite being less noticeable and unspoken, conveys the message of ameliorating the current society through the repetition of ideas in motion.

IV. ATTEMPTS TO PASS THE "EVALUATION" OF HUAC

Although the film was created as a HUAC-targeted enemy from conception to release, certain elements of the film resemble attempts to soften its sensitive content related to revolutionary ideals.

4.1 Original Plan Versus the Production

Comparing the original story to the film's final presentation, alterations were made, indicating the director's effort to subdue its controversy. Differences between the screenplay and the final product reflect an avoidance of a direct relationship with socialist movements. Before the women at the picket line are sent to jail, they repeatedly sing. The song, written in the screenplay, is supposed to be Ralph Chaplin's "Solidarity Forever" (Wilson, n.d.).¹ Examine the chorus of the song below:

All the world that's owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.
We have laid the wide foundations; built it skyward stone by stone.
It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own.
While the union makes us strong ("Solidarity Forever," n.d.).

This song advances the idea that men who work should own what they build. This theme aligns with the socialist belief that the working class should overthrow the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and take control of the means of production. However, the song that appears in the film is Mavis Staples' "We Shall Not Be Moved" (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).² Its lyrics are as follows:

The union is behind us,
We shall not be moved.

Just like a tree that's planted by the water,

We shall not be moved ("We Shall Not Be Moved," n.d.).

Compared to the former, the lyrics in this song are much more abstract and less direct. They could be generalized into collectivism and praise of resilience and determination. There is a great discrepancy between the degree of socialist emphasis in the two songs. Hence, the conscious choice to replace the former with the latter indicates a desire to avoid censored content.



Figure 3. Women at the picket line push the police car (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954).

The differences between the historical strike and the cinematic representation of it could serve as a sign of the film's moderating effect. The radical representation of feminism was softened in the production. In the scene of the women's picket line, a group of sheriffs attempts to drive their car, aiming to break up the crowd. In the film, the women, wearing dresses and traditional clothing, force the sheriffs out of their car and push it back and forth (*Salt of the Earth*, 1954). If such a depiction were already an exception to the mainstream, what happened in reality would be "unacceptable." During the real strike, women were not only pushing cars, but they were also standing and jumping on top of them, dressed in "masculine" attire (Weinberg, 2010). Despite being true, the director did not include such scenes in the film. This indicates the desire to preserve a more subdued form.

4.2 "Disruption" to the Plot

In film composition, a plot possesses four significant parts. Using the analogy of writing an essay, the individual shots are "words" that carry no more significance than the object itself. A series of shots in order is a "sentence" with correct grammar. These "sentences" compose a "paragraph," which is a critical scene. Finally, the "paragraphs" come together, forming the "essay" or plot (Lotman, 1976).

The romantic relationship of Esperanza and Ramón "disrupts" the continuity of strike-relevant plots, blurring the definition of this film as "pro-labor propaganda." If the plot of the film, centered on the strike and its activism, is an "essay," the love and conflict stories of Esperanza and Ramón are "sentences," inserted where they don't belong, making the "essay's" logic hard to follow. As *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther commented after viewing the film at its opening, "the real dramatic crux of the picture...is the issue of whether the women shall have equality of expression (Crowther, 1954)." Watching the film, Crowther picked up on the themes of feminist activism yet lost track of other inequalities—such as racism and labor disparities that were key to connecting the film to communist propaganda. Such an interpretation occurred for a reason: the inserted

passages between strike events often involve disputes between Esperanza and Ramón over women's right to express themselves like men. Therefore, by incorporating an aspect that does not focus solely on the strike itself, the film reduces the level of attention paid to union movements. Such action would not be needed if the director simply envisioned the film from a blunt, activist point of view, without considering sensitivity or censorship. Thus, the final goal of producing this film was to voice the inequalities faced by minority groups through forms that, without significantly altering their meanings, would increase the likelihood of its projection without HUAC interference.

V. *SALT OF THE EARTH*: A “FAILED” ACTIVIST ACTIVITY

Despite the effort and resistance invested in the film, *Salt of the Earth*, whose creators already experienced severe harassment and threats during the shooting of the film, was only projected in thirteen American theaters (out of over 13,000 movie theaters in the U.S. at the time) (Weinberg, 2010). Eventually, it was recognized as the only official HUAC-banned film in U.S. history (Klindo, 2022).

5.1 The “Lost Generation” of Actors

The careers of the few professional actors among the numerous non-professionals involved in the film were significantly impacted after production. Aside from Rosaura Revueltas, a famous Mexican actress who played Esperanza, the rest of the cast has little to no documented biography online. Revueltas, the lead actress, was in fact forcibly deported back to Mexico before the production could finish; she filmed the rest of the film there (Riambau et al., 1992). Surprisingly, even after her return to Mexico, Revueltas was not welcomed by her people, who believed she was simply chasing fame. Following this film, Revueltas made only a few collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, mockingly claiming that directors avoided her “as if [she] had AIDs (Riambau et al., 1992).” However, claiming that she knew about the risk before she accepted the role, Revueltas was not resentful. She believed the film would “make history (Riambau et al., 1992).”

5.2 A Certain Degree of “Success”?

Although it was prohibited in America, the film attracted large audiences in Mexico and other socialist countries. However, these achievements did not meet the movie's initial goal. As Revueltas admitted during her interview, the film became the privilege of intellectuals and those in power. She noted that it was played at the “national anthem, which is reserved only for the President of the Republic (Riambau et al., 1992).” In the end, despite its popularity, the film's analysis became the subject of discussion among liberal and progressive politicians, about whom, as the famous critic Pauline Kael mockingly claimed, “depression social-consciousness is their exposed nerve (Kael, 1954).”

Additionally, the film's projection did not reach the working class in America or Mexico. In America, where the film's topic was most relevant, it was shown only at prestigious universities (Riambau et al., 1992). In Mexico, although the film is not simply about the specific strike, the situation and class conflict were largely different. Thus, *Salt of the Earth* was not generalizable enough to embody the struggle of the Mexican working class (Riambau et al., 1992).

VI. CONCLUSION

The impact of *Salt of the Earth*, which sought to advocate for labor and feminist movements through cinematic symbolism, was extinguished under HUAC's restrictive regulations. Despite the director's attempt to incorporate workers' experience in a moderated form of activism, Biberman did not succeed in avoiding suppression. In an America that came out of WWII feeling a sense of need for isolationism and outward establishment of strength, any portrayal of weaknesses was deemed “anti-American and, through bias, pro-Communist,” as a critic from the magazine *The Table* wrote in a May 1954 publication (Mooring, 1954). Nationalists worried that the film's spread would only paint America in a negative light, weakening its position in the international community (Kael, 1954). Although such sentiment understandably evolved in the context of war and turmoil, it was undeniable that the fear of disunity undermined efforts to excavate deeper social inequalities that required attention and amelioration. Ultimately, *Salt of the Earth* left a remarkable mark on the history of recorded film, reflecting class struggle, racism, and feminist visions. The work, now uncensored, was widely featured and cited as a pioneer in the field by modern-day feminist and activist movements. Perhaps Esperanza was right as she said, “then I knew we had won something they could never take away—something I could leave to our children—and they, the salt of the earth, would inherit it (Wilson, n.d.).

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