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THE BIG TOMORROW

Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way

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From Larry May, The Big Tomorrow

Prologue: Nothing Is More American

Nothing is more American than Hollywood. All agree on that. Yet what does it mean to be "American" in the twentieth century? To believe current politicians and commentators, the question is up for grabs. Over the last twenty years our elections and everyday life have been dominated by pundits automatically assuming that the mass media are somehow deeply involved in defining what it means to be a citizen, a good wife and mother, a model minority. During every election, politicians from Ronald Reagan to Bob Dole, from Dan Quayle to Bill Clinton, debate on the stump the merits of rap music, black "gangsta" films, and television shows that focus on sex and unmarried pregnancies such as the famous episode of *Murphy Brown.* Before the 1996 election Bob Dole told conservative Republicans, "We have reached the point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation" with "nightmares of depravity."[1] Critics from both the left and right assert that in the past Hollywood promoted traditional values, in sharp contrast to the present. Yet if this were the case, why did guardians of official culture from the twenties through the fifties often launch militant censorship crusades, perceiving many Hollywood films as a threat to family values and Americanism itself? What is not at all clear is why the mass media should evoke such controversy. How does the nation's popular culture become enmeshed in debates over the meaning of good citizenship in terms of sex, race, and class? Clearly, all the fury is not simply about "entertainment." Something else is going on, something that connects Hollywood to political power, cultural authority, and the very meaning of national identity.[2]

The Big Tomorrow argues that the film industry from the thirties to the sixties already played an important role in reshaping nationalism and public life. When Franklin Roosevelt became president, the country was largely an isolationist nation rooted in values of an Anglo-Saxon America that had marginalized women, ethnic minorities, and people of color from public life. The next four decades witnessed the

rise of the United States to world leadership and redefined the nation to include women and minorities as full participants. And yet by the 1950s, evidence of discontent emerged from women and minorities, reflecting a national promise that was unfulfilled. Most scholars associate the transformation from an exclusive, homogeneous society to a more tolerant and inclusive one with the 1960s. But *The Big Tomorrow* demonstrates that the transformation began in the 1930s, and that the 1950s represented a return to a more intolerant and monolithic national culture, spurred by World War II and the Cold War. The makers of film noir and youth culture movies reflected the tension and anxiety generated by this turnaround and created the outlines of a distinct postwar culture.

By exploring the relation of politics to struggles over popular values, this study reveals how the modern film industry has been a major institution for shaping nationalism. Over the last decade the issue of nationalism—that is, the values, norms, and beliefs that mold a diverse people into a nation—has occupied scholars in a variety of fields. Yet it has not been studied in the context of the film industry. Led by Benedict Anderson, scholars have shown that the print media and the popular arts can provide the basis upon which a people "imagine" their common identity. In the United States prior to the thirties the country in many ways was "insufficiently imagined." That is, it excluded from positive representation the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, racial minorities, and the modern culture of the cities. In the thirties, popular films began to validate these groups and experiences. While racism and sexism persisted, of course, the subtle shift in portrayals of minorities and women signaled the displacement of the older ethos of Anglo-Saxon nationhood in favor of a new Americanism rooted in ethnic pluralism, abundance, and modern life.[3]

It was also not accidental that I first became aware of the magnitude of this transformation for our understanding of modern American culture and civic values when I started to investigate the roots of a unique development that baffled the rest of the world: Why was it that a former movie star, Ronald Reagan, had become president of the United States? Why did he gain success by reviving the Cold War and containing the counterculture and the politics of the sixties? I also thought that I knew the general outlines of the answer. In writing my first book, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*, I found that the Anglo-Saxon middle class at the turn of the century mounted fierce "Progressive" politics to at once "break up" the trusts and save Victorian family life. Yet by the twenties, politicians and the motion picture industry validated both a new corporate order and a new consumer culture focused on the home. Here the vision of the frontier—the central myth of the nation—was to be found in "Hollywood," where freedom could be pursued in leisure and a moral revolution based on European standards of high art and white superiority.[4] When I looked at Ronald Reagan's rise, I assumed my research would show how Hollywood was aligned with business and political interests from the thirties to the sixties and that Ronald Reagan was a prodigy of that inheritance.

Yet once I began my research, these preconceptions began to crumble and a planned book focusing on Ronald Reagan dissolved into something much larger and more important than I could have anticipated. My reassessment began as I gained permission to enter the archives and files of the Screen Actors Guild where Reagan had first entered politics as president of the actors' union in the forties. Instead of finding a Guild geared simply to protecting actors' job security and advancing the craft, I found many letters, magazine articles, minutes, and speeches detailing the involvement of the actors in the political movements of the New Deal. I found reviews of the social impact of the "realistic" films in which Guild members performed. Crammed into the files were dozens of fliers and announcements of meetings where actors supported President Roosevelt, formed alliances with workers, and backed the efforts of Mexican farm laborers to organize in the San Joaquin Valley. At the same time, the "stars" used their celebrity status to promote Labor Day parades and the inclusion of women and minorities in public life.

From there I found that an early Guild member and the most popular star of the 1930s was Will Rogers, a Cherokee Indian who promoted on the radio and on screen a "republican" creed hostile to monopoly capitalism and class inequality. According to Rogers and many other Guild leaders and moviemakers, the dream of abundance that in the twenties had been framed in aristocratic trappings had now become linked to the American democratic promise.[5] Drawing on a creed that had dominated American life for over a century, moviemakers imagined America as a place where citizens engaged in self-governing and created a New World republic free of aristocracy and capitalist power. In the past, the promoters of abolitionism, Black Reconstruction, unionization, and populist movements had evoked that republican promise to demand control of their work and civic life. By the late nineteenth century, the older republican creed had become permeated with racism and hostility to the city. But many moviemakers modern-

ized the vision of a producers' democracy to forge a New Deal culture and politics. Although they were not fully freed from the racist assumptions of their day, they opened the possibility for a more inclusive vision of pluralism and popularly based abundance for the nation.[6]

Thomas Hart Benton, the noted regionalist painter of the 1930s, captured this spirit in his painting *Hollywood*, which graces the cover of this book. A staunch supporter of the New Deal, Benton believed in the values of a producers' democracy and used his art to promote that promise. His painting depicts Hollywood not simply as a fantasy but as a place built by common workers who brought their skills together to make a collective work of art. In keeping with much of the work-centered art of the thirties, Benton's *Hollywood* takes the viewer behind the scenes to show how the image is created. Benton fuses a traditional realistic narrative to modernist forms and techniques. The painting shows multiple aspects of the moviemaking process, including makeup for the players, lighting for the sets, and the rolling cameras themselves. At the center stands a scantily-clad starlet, typical of Hollywood sex symbols. Yet her pose also evokes the image of Athena, goddess of liberty and wisdom, associated with republican ideals. The background includes a tower of smoke and fire, found in many Benton paintings, suggesting heat, light, creation, and destruction. This vision of a worker republic prevailed in the Screen Actors Guild as well as in many of the major films of the thirties.[7]

World War II and the Cold War brought a profound shift to this vision of American democracy. The call for wartime unity and postwar anticommunism generated a new politics in the movie industry as well as new types of films. Now the Guild and its stars aligned with conservative businessmen and politicians to create a new vision grounded in liberal capitalism and private consumerism. As I began to realize that a major change in American values emerged in the 1940s, I began to question everything I thought I knew about the contours of twentieth-century American culture.

Ever since the pioneering work of Warren Susman, historians have seen the vast importance of studying popular art as a measure of the values and sentiments informing society. Susman argued in two enormously influential essays that the sounds and images that permeated the mass media in the Depression promoted the values of small-town, Anglo-Saxon America. As such, the mass media provided a vision of security amid hard times and took the fans' attention away from labor-capital strife and gender and racial conflicts. Since that time, most film and cultural historians have echoed that argument.[8] Drawing on lit-

erary and cultural theories associated with Frankfurt School sociologists, French semiologists, and Gramscian concepts of hegemony, scholars argue that the mass media from the thirties through the fifties promoted a uniform narrative.[9] Besides reinforcing the power of the studios, moviemakers from the thirties through the fifties advanced the norms of white racism, liberal individualism, and futuristic dreams of consumerism that fortified conservative values and interests. Recently Lawrence Levine has argued effectively that although audiences in the thirties actively reinterpreted the mass media to suit their own purposes, the overall content of the Hollywood product remained conservative.[10]

What made this argument so convincing is that it appeared that popular art operated on the same tracks as the conservative impulses of New Deal politics. Whether the story has been told by New Left, liberal, or conservative historians, the New Deal is understood as saving rather than altering the capitalist system.[11] Yet as my research into the Screen Actors Guild records unfolded, I began to question these assumptions. As I thought about this puzzle, my investigation took a new turn when I recalled memories that I once had dismissed as having no bearing on my scholarship. During my youth in Los Angeles, my mother, like her mother before her, aspired to be a movie actress. In pursuit of that ambition, Norma moved in the fifties to New York City, hoping to gain experience on the Broadway stage. When I arrived in Manhattan in 1954 to join her, she had begun a long relationship with one of the most famous black stage and film comics of the day, James Cross. As the dancer, singer, and humorist of a well-known comedy duo, "Stump and Stumpy," he performed in both white and black nightclubs from Atlantic City to Las Vegas. I grew up in a world where whites and blacks interacted in a common public arena, where people like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Frank Sinatra, Joe E. Lewis, and Larry Storch were part of the community, and where virtually everyone had left-wing sympathies. As a young man, I became friends with Jerry Epstein, one of Charles Chaplin's closest associates. Jerry told me how Chaplin, America's most beloved clown, was driven from the country as an alleged communist because he supported radical politics and made films critical of established institutions. Jerry recounted how he had to go to the bank to remove Chaplin's money because they feared it would be confiscated by the state or by congressional committees.[12]

The materials I found in the Hollywood archives made me realize that my experiences in the fifties were not unique. The convergence

of my research and my memories brought home the fact that anticommunism had succeeded all too well in making us forget that a non-Marxist republican radicalism was a powerful force in America before World War II. Fortunately, as I began to question the inherited wisdom, several books appeared that supported my interpretations. Work by the new labor and social historians, particularly Gary Gerstle, Lizabeth Cohen, and Alan Brinkley, revealed that the mass unions and populist movements of the thirties emerged as a result of their capacity to create cross-cultural coalitions.[13] At the same time, intellectual and cultural historians began to alter our understanding of the artists and writers of the era. They demonstrated that in the thirties there existed a competitive civic sphere in which regionalist painters, swing musicians, progressive historians, and popular artists expressed criticism of social injustice, capitalism, and racial exclusion. Michael Denning has recently argued that this creativity was linked to politics via the efforts of communists to create alliances with all progressive groups in the antifascist Popular Front, which formed after 1935.[14] Unlike Denning, who credits the rise of a new pluralistic nationalism to the Popular Front, I found that long before the Communist Party came to Hollywood, moviemakers popularized an inclusive republican creed hostile to exclusion and inequality. In this regard the artists of the Popular Front may have given depth to that radical élan, but they were not the initiators.

To illustrate the wide-ranging interplay between audience demand and the values informing the Hollywood product, this study is also guided by a different methodology from what currently guides cultural or film history. With the help of several research assistants, I have developed a systematic survey to trace the changing values among competing film narratives. To chart that conversion, a sample of film plots was drawn from the film industry's major trade journal, the *Motion Picture Herald.* Geared primarily to theater owners, it offered exhibitors a number of services, including weekly plot summaries of recent releases. These plot synopses included films geared for first-run distribution, called "A" films, and those exhibited as second or double features, called "B" films. We have selected for examination the plot summaries of the first and last films released in each month in even-numbered years from the teens to the fifties. By analyzing the plot formulas, it was possible to see how attitudes toward family life, gender and sexuality, cultural authority, wealth, big business, and race shifted in dialogue with the changing face of politics and power from the Depression to the Cold War.[15]

As I rummaged around in the film archives gathering all this material, I came across an intriguing document that seemed to encapsulate the themes of this book and prompted the title, *The Big Tomorrow.* In exploring the career of John Huston, I found that he made an independent film in 1949 about a revolution in Cuba that brought whites and minorities together in a common cause. Despite an epilogue quoting Thomas Jefferson that in the past as in the present "revolution against tyrants is obedience to God," critics condemned *We Were Strangers* as un-American. With the Cold War at high tide, the film soon faltered at the box office and disappeared. Yet an admirer wrote to Huston that the production should have been titled "The Big Tomorrow." For some characters in the film, the revolution succeeded, while for still others, it created tragedy and loss. As I explored the contours of the film industry, I began to realize that this title captured the essence of my story. "The Big Tomorrow" evokes a postwar future that represented triumph for some and defeat for others. As in Huston's film *We Were Strangers,* many artists and civic leaders in the 1930s promoted a vision of America that was inclusive of minorities and hostile to monopoly capitalism. Yet their great expectations were defeated by events. With the withering away of their civic idealism under the impact of anticommunism, they used their art to promote cultural innovations that set the stage for the upheavals of the 1960s.

Chapter 2

The Recreation of America: Hybrid Moviemakers and the Multicultural Republic

> American popular culture is the only culture that has been created and accepted by a multiethnic population. Within its own boundaries the U.S. is already a world culture. To the extent that popular culture has been exported from anywhere it has come to America in the physical embodiment of the immigrant masses. . . . American films created a whole new artistic expression that imitated nothing which had existed in previous artistic achievements.
>
> —Shuichi Kato, one of Japan's leading social critics, July 1987

> The thirties, though they had their own load of sentimentality, were the hardest headed period of American movies, and their plainness of style, with its absence of "cultural overtones," has never got its due aesthetically.
>
> —Pauline Kael, *The Citizen Kane Book*, 1971

Will Rogers often remarked that he neither was self-made nor acted alone: He participated in a wide upheaval in American culture. Yet how did that upheaval inform moviemaking as a whole in the New Deal era? One way to answer that question is to listen to the recollections of another famed artist who came to prominence in the thirties: Orson Welles, the boy wonder and creator of the work that has been acknowledged as the greatest film ever made in the United States, *Citizen Kane* (1941). As he looked back, Welles proudly traced his ancestry to a family whose members fought in the Civil War. Committed to making a republic free of slavery and aristocracy, they hoped to create a democracy where the people controlled their work and participated in civic affairs. By the twentieth century his grandparents backed Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to master big business and order industrial society.

Yet the reform-minded Progressives disdained alignments with immigrants and racial minorities. Instead, they aligned themselves with corporate leaders to pass immigrant restriction and the new southern

segregation laws. Welles believed that out of their efforts to save Anglo-Saxon civilization, they became trapped in what they had disdained: the corporate order. Out of that impasse Welles's relatives began to emulate the status symbols of the rich and European high art. Soon his aunts got into the "imitation place business" and decorated their lavish homes with historical styles of a bygone time, a process that had the great advantage of elevating white western culture above the vernacular arts of immigrant workers and minorities.

Young Welles, however, matured at a time when many intellectuals and artists launched a quest for an alternative. Describing his childhood as a "lost paradise," he evoked the imagery of the Edenic West that lay at the heart of the nineteenth-century republic, a vision undermined by the new era of industrialism and his family's emulation of the wealthy. To recover that dream Welles turned to radio and movies as a modern form of "education . . . to dramatize the art of imparting knowledge" so that "people will listen to what I have to say politically." Breaking away from the elevated white culture of his ancestors, he joined the Federal Theatre Arts Projects to produce a "Harlemized and gangsterized" version of *Macbeth*. Late in the Depression he gained control over his work in the Hollywood studios to create a "cinema" that "should always be the discovery of something . . . revealing the sort of vertigo, unceasing lack of stability, that melange of movement and tension that is our universe." The result yielded *Citizen Kane*, a film that Welles saw as a tragedy about our big "business plutocrats . . . who believed that money had automatically conferred stature to a man. Kane is a man who truly belongs to his time."

Welles, like Will Rogers, combined moviemaking with promotion of radical politics. Working as a newsman, he wrote that in the modern world citizens had renewed the faith that "America . . . is an adventure . . . a new world that for the races of man was a new place, a new beginning." Only now we must realize that "race hate is a disease." Racism formerly had aligned whites with those big business "marauders" who had "greed for all things possessed by the people." These forces together led to the "oppression of the Indians, Blacks, Hispanics and Asians." But Welles retained faith that the New Deal of President Roosevelt and the battle against fascism in World War II made it possible that "America can write her name across the centuries . . . if we the people—brown and black and white and red—rise to the great occasions of our brotherhood." Carrying that élan into politics, he backed the "wonderfully encouraging" rise of unions, the New Deal, civil rights, and the Popular Front. But when conservatives called him a

"communist," Welles noted that "the idea of interdependency antedates Karl Marx." Evoking the American radical ethos—the "splendour of our republic"—he explained that

> I believe—and this has very much to do with my notion of freedom—I believe I owe the very profit I make to the people I make it from. . . . If this is radicalism . . . it comes automatically to most of us in show business, it being generally agreed that any public man owes his position to the public. . . . A free man owes to the world's slaves all that he can do for them . . . free them.[1]

Welles's effort to modernize republican traditions at odds with monopoly capitalism and inequality suggests that Will Rogers was not alone. No doubt backward-looking images and demeaning racial prejudice informed moviemaking and politics.[2] Nonetheless, views that assert that a monolithic, Anglo-Saxon Americanism pervaded popular art and politics cannot account for Welles's view that the film capital provided a site for creating a new discourse of nationality and public life. Yet why did this occur and what implications did it have for moviemaking and politics? How was it possible that the young Welles saw that Hollywood moviemaking provided a site for modernizing the "splendour of our republic"?[3]

The Margins Talk Back

To answer these questions, it is important to realize that unlike earlier forms of mass amusements, the film industry provided the means for immigrants to alter the American values that had been promoted by elite tastemakers for over a hundred years. In the teens, small studios aligned with labor unions created films promoting labor-capital conflict, and the industry as a whole allowed non-Anglo-Saxons to alter the contours of traditional American myths and symbols.[4] No doubt the most visible example of that transformation was the rise of Hollywood, where outsiders appeared to dominate the production of movie images. In reaction, state leaders spurred film producers to enact censorship that eliminated overt images of class conflict and defiance of moral codes. The result was that moviemakers contained the moral revolution within standards promoted by the rich. Still, even as this legitimated a new mass consumer culture, moralists were also alarmed that "no American born actors or directors have a prominent part" in Hollywood studios. It was pointed out that the "majority of American movie picture producers are of foreign birth" and over 425 foreign-born directors and players "comprise the leaders of the profession."[5]

No doubt the most visible example of this trend were the founders of the film studios that dominated the scene. Generally, these producers represented first- and second-generation immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Seven of the eight founders of the studios descended from either Jewish immigrants or their children. Coming from outside the old forms of power, they exemplified what Max Weber aptly called "pariah capitalists." That is, they seized chances in marginal trades shunned by members of the host society. It was these marginal endeavors that served them well as producers. At a time when movies generated a revolution in morals that was feared by defenders of the old order, the Jews had experience in Europe and the United States with marginal trades, ranging from clothing to furs and jewels, where the key to success was the tapping of consumer tastes.[6] Commenting on the way these skills overlapped with catering to audience tastes, the screenwriter Dudley Nichols told readers:

> Do not think for a moment that these skillful men who run the production machines do not have their great abilities and worries and perplexities. They have probably the most abominable task in modern industry: they must attempt to produce a standard product where the elements of production are human ideas and feelings and personalities, those most fluid, intangible, nonstandard, inconsistent things. They must envy the motor car manufacturer who can design ten standard models each year and then watch over the blueprints and the office records. Or steel industrialists with their tangible goods.[7]

The Jews were so successful because they supplanted the original Anglo-Saxon producers and hundreds of independents by making films that catered to audiences' ambivalent approach to the new urban culture of the twenties. A clue to their success was supplied by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen. Asking why Jews were so often at the center of twentieth-century innovations, he argued that Jews were marginal in a cultural sense. For innovators, however, that was an asset rather than a liability. Never fully integrated into the host society, they possessed a dual consciousness. Ostracized by the host society, they had lived as outsiders. As such they could question the norms promoted by the official tastemakers.[8] In the United States as in Europe the Jews also emerged as middlemen and women adroit at devising means of communicating and selling across groups. Having experience on the margins, they could be critical of all closed systems of national blood purity, while advancing visions of a more open life. To the early studio founder Carl Laemmle and the producer Sam Spiegel, the mov-

ies provided a way to forge a multicultural public, for as Laemmle observed, "Regardless of creed, color, race or nationality, everyone in the universe understands the stories that are told by Universal pictures."[9]

While Jewish immigrants possessed traditions that made it possible for them to innovate with cultural forms, they also possessed a tradition that placed them at odds with the restrained work ethic and family life promoted by the Anglo-Saxon middle class. Like other ethnic and racial minorities, the Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe possessed a rich life of festivals permeated with humor, exuberant music, and dances. Within their communities there was no concept of the protected, pure woman who remained outside the economy and shunned sexual pleasure. The Jewish immigrants did not sanction premarital sex, but eroticism within marriage was encouraged. When couples found that they were incompatible, divorce was permitted. Unlike the gender divisions of Victorian culture, Jewish women played a major role within the economy. Within Jewish life the enjoyment of material goods—when one could afford it—was not a sin but a part of life's pleasures.[10]

During the twenties, Jewish producers' status as marginal businessmen and cultural brokers made it possible for them to cater to the moral revolution associated with the rise of mass art. The key to their success lay in generating films that sanctioned the new consumer culture and the revolution in morals within the highbrow "foreign" models of aristocracy. Yet they also constantly pushed at the limits. Our own plot samples derived from the industry's major trade journal revealed the contours of that duality. In the teens and twenties producers dignified the moral revolution within the standards of the Anglo-Saxon middle class. More than 60 percent of the characters had roots in small towns and rural areas as well as the milieu of the older professional and small propertied middle classes (see appendix 2, figs. 3, 31). The trend found its best illustration in the films of Cecil B. De Mille. Whether in *The Affairs of Anatol* (1921) or *The Ten Commandments* (1923), the lures of the new urban culture endangered the protagonists, symbolized by their fall into the hands of Asian femme fatales or the decadence of mass amusements and the excesses of affluence. The main characters find salvation only by redeeming the moral revolution and consumer desires with refined norms (appendix 2, fig. 12).[11]

The advent of the Depression, however, collapsed the old barriers and allowed the lures of mass culture to move from the private to the public domain, altering both in the process. It began when producers

found that audiences now had a mind of their own. Watching that change unfold, a *Variety* reporter noted that "general conditions no longer make theatre patronizing a matter of after dinner routine. The patrons go to pictures these days because there's something specific they want to see. Every thing else gets the go-by."[12] Searching for an explanation for this shift, reporters found that the patrons no longer admired studio formulas derived from "high brow standards." Young people who "cared not a hoot about tradition" showed their displeasure at one local theater by throwing objects at the screen until the projectionist showed a film that they approved. Observers told film producers that the "imitation of successful pictures was passe," for "times were eliminating class distinctions so far as the industry is concerned."[13]

This elimination of "class distinctions" manifests a major realignment of cultural authority. No longer could high art contain the revolution in morals and visions of cross-cultural communication in a realm separate from public life. In the new "catch as catch can" atmosphere, a critic saw that "the industry is finally admitting that its only collateral is the barometer of motion picture mindedness."[14] Those who continued in the old ways got the message as the once invincible studios lost profits and filed for bankruptcy, while firms that tapped the "new audience" generated an upheaval in the structure of Hollywood. Suddenly the assumption that large studios could monopolize production, ward off newcomers, and generate predictable profits gave way before audiences who had a mind of their own.

A classic example of the transformation unfolding in the wake of the "new audience" is the career of William Fox. Early in the Depression Fox provided the socialist author Upton Sinclair with an in-depth interview. Like other Jewish film producers, Fox's parents came to this country to escape pogroms in eastern Europe. Fox had joined the Socialist Party in New York City to attain higher wages and a new world for the workers. Seeing opportunity in the marginal world of mass entertainment that was shunned by official culture, he entered the world of movies "when it was little above the crude burlesque stage, which was alright for men, but not for an audience made up of men and women too." Soon he grew inspired by the "idea of putting entertainment and relaxation within the reach of all." To legitimize the new entertainment, Fox surrounded movies with wealthy status symbols and style.

The advent of the Crash sent Fox's company into bankruptcy and forced him to rethink the contours of his product. At his nadir, he

contemplated a way to merge his early socialist values with moviemaking. Ruminating out loud, he told Sinclair that "I distinctly remember, capital claiming that labor was destroying the nation by its attempts to reduce hours and gain higher wages . . . which should be the aim of this great republic." Formerly his movies and lavish theater palaces had spurred the worker to "discover all the modern conveniences we have in this nation. . . . Once he has that he feels he is in heaven."[15] After his bankruptcy, a disaster he blamed on bankers and his inability to gauge shifts in audience taste, Fox saw that in the future producers had to find profits by creating films that combined consumption with reformist themes—a process that led Fox Studios to experiment and succeed with the Will Rogers formula film.

Fox, however, was not alone. From the late twenties to early thirties several fresh companies—Warner Brothers, Disney, Columbia, Radio Corporation of America—moved from marginal status to that of majors. Unlike the established firms, they were not encumbered either with heavily mortgaged movie houses or silent stars with expensive contracts.[16] Capitalizing on the new sound technology, they hired journalists and writers from New York City, spurring a major turnover in industry personnel. It also appears that they aimed their products more to the vernacular tastes of the lower classes. Illustrating that market segmentation, pollsters found that stars contracted to studios that dominated production in the past—for example, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount—appealed to audiences centered in the upper-income groups. But the newer firms, such as Warner Brothers, featured stars that appealed predominately to lower-income audiences.[17]

To top it off, the major studios' monopolistic control was also challenged by the rise of independent studios, which found their markets among marginal groups. Where in the twenties, fifty-one small firms catered primarily to rural markets, the ranks of the independents rose to ninety-two between 1929 and 1934. These new firms turned over more than 90 percent in every five-year period, but the number of films the small firms made almost equaled that of the majors in any year. In 1932, 1936, and 1938, their film production actually surpassed that of all the majors combined (appendix 2, figs. 5, 6, 7).[18] The independents also had a competitive advantage since they had no high-priced theaters or stars nor did they have to submit their product to the industrywide censorship boards, since the large firms excluded most small independents from the Hays Commission and its censorship panel.

The creation of a competitive product by the smaller companies also supplied thousands of independent theaters with films that appealed

to their patrons' desire for productions featuring both stories and stars derived from the stage. Reporters saw that as the "indies" expanded, the major studios "recognized against their will that stage talent in its various departments is now essential . . . and that is the reason the independent producer is in such a good spot. . . . Independent theatres are hungry for good pictures." The "indies" also catered to the vast expansion in the new decade of over a thousand German, Yiddish, Spanish, and black theaters. In contrast to the audiences for mainstream studio products, these patrons wanted films in foreign languages or productions that dealt with their social and class interests. With directors like Oscar Micheaux and Edgar Ulmer making independent black as well as Yiddish-language films, trade reporters observed that the "exhibition of foreign language talkers, in their native tongue, has crystallized as an important part of the film business."[19]

Just as the independents and innovative studios catered to a "new audience" arising outside mainstream institutions, they also created a symbiotic interchange with the large studios in making a different type of film. Increasingly, artists who made it in the world of the "indies" took their inspirations to the larger studios. Central to that alteration was the creation of a new type of production, the "talkie" film that interjected into the national civic sphere the voice and views of formerly silenced groups. In some ways the disruption created by sound seems unlikely, since scholars have taught us, as Warren Susman explained, that "sound helped mold uniform national responses; it helped create or reinforce uniform national values and beliefs in a way that no previous medium had been able to do." As Susman observed, a standardized film could mold language and promote the tastes of the educated. Yet this was far more the case in the twenties than the thirties. In the silent era dialogue and plots emerged with written subtitles composed in accord with the standards of official tastemakers.[20]

The advent of sound, however, generated films that officials saw as capable of reversing the basis of cultural authority from the top to the lower classes. Nowhere was that fear more evident than in moralists' comments concerning *The Jazz Singer* in 1927–28.[21] In contrast to other early feature-length talkies, where heroes spoke in highbrow "Broadway English," this Warner Brothers' film focused on what one critic saw as the "low group tastes of the masses of people, reproducing for them their own language with appropriate profane, suggestive and . . . obscene decorations that have delighted the 'groundlings' from Shakespeare's time."[22]

The story featured the famed vaudeville performer Al Jolson as Jakie

Rabinowitz, a Jewish boy who sings and dances to music derived from African-American jazz. His father—a cantor in the synagogue—despises his son's "nigger music" and wants him to take his place as cantor. The father has assimilated in part to Anglo-Saxon Americanism, symbolized by a Thomas Cole painting, of the Hudson River school, that hangs prominently in the family living room. Unwilling to reject his black-inspired music and wishing to become "American" in his own way, Jakie leaves home and performs in lowbrow nightclubs. For over three-quarters of the film Jakie defies racial norms by singing and dancing to African-American songs without a black mask, yet this rebellion is eventually contained. To please his dying father, Jakie sings the traditional Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Shortly thereafter he gains success on the Broadway stage; conforming to conventional standards, he sings in blackface and succeeds by succumbing to the highbrow standards of the wealthy.[23]

Nonetheless, the film generated an enormous controversy that centered on the power of talking films to undermine normative racial and class conventions. The author of the play, Samson Raphaelson, wrote that Jakie turned to black music to explore the dynamic and "vital chaos of America's soul. I find no more adequate language than jazz. . . . It is a prayer, distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Matthew Arnold said of the Jew, 'lost between two worlds: one dead, the other powerless to be born.'" Many feared what that power might mean. D. W. Griffith, the director whose *Birth of a Nation* linked racial superiority to the redemption of Anglo-Saxon America, refused to make the film because of its "racial themes." Furthermore, Jakie's story failed to draw audiences in small towns and rural areas populated by Anglo-Saxons.[24] In the city, moral guardians condemned the film's focus on "degenerate, black young Hebrews" whose celebration of "jazz" served as the means to undermine the "immortal decencies of human life." In sharp contrast, black journalists noted that in Harlem "sobs were heard all over the theatre" because of Jolson's "sympathetic portrayal of Negro life," while the *Amsterdam News* observed that "every colored performer is proud" of Al Jolson for making "one of the greatest films ever produced." Trying to explain why the first "talkie" succeeded among immigrant and working-class audiences, a trade reporter noted that when Jolson spoke, urban audiences responded

> as though to wine. It was an epochal moment. They could not get over it—he had spoken to them from the screen! It was a little strange too; for there had been much Vitaphone speech before, in

> many of the shorts. But this coming from a picture that the crowd was interested in, a picture which swayed their emotions, that they for a moment were *living* with the players, struck deeply home.[25]

Once the Depression hit, the power of talkies to strike "deeply home" continued as producers created films that utilized sound to create characters who challenged inherited visions of art and civilization. An indication of that change was described by a writer of Jewish-American stock, who noted that when he first came to Hollywood in the twenties he had to conform to studio rules. But with the advent of sound, "producers let us have our head [saying] 'I didn't hire you to write what other people write. . . . I want you to write what you really feel like writing.'" His response was to make talkies that rejected the "bloody revolting English of the Broadway stage," drawing instead on the dialects of the "street" to formulate a "literate dialogue for ordinary people." Similarly, W. R. Burnett, a newspaperman and son of an Ohio politician, recalled that when he wrote the gangster novel and then script for *Little Caesar,* he discarded "literary English . . . I dumped all that out. I just threw it away. It was a revolt in the name of a language based on the way the American people spoke." Another writer saw that the key to success was to write dialogue that evoked the way real people spoke, giving it the "Woolworth touch." Furthermore, Edna Ferber, the writer of novels and plays that became the films *Cimarron* (1931), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), and *Showboat* (1936), regarded her work as part of an intellectual revolt against the educated who looked to Europe for models of emulation. Her motto was that

> it's time we stop imitating. It's time we denied this libel that we're crude, unformed and undeveloped. Let us write in the American fashion about America. Let's paint in the American fashion from American subjects. . . . Why do we imitate when we can create?[26]

It was not accidental that the emphasis of sound to evoke the vernacular speech of the people also brought to the fore moviemakers who drew on their immigrant pasts to reshape the nation's myths. Film industry personnel turned over by more than half from 1929 to 1935.[27] In this context, directors such as John Ford (Irish Catholic), William Wyler (Alsatian Jew), Busby Berkeley (eastern European Jew), Frank Capra (Italian American), Mervyn LeRoy (eastern European Jew), Edgar Ulmer (German Jew), William Dieterle (German Jew), and Lewis Milestone (Russian Jew) moved from a marginal status in the world of the silent film to the center of the world of the talkies. The success of their films not only allowed them to gain control over pro-

duction in the studios, but they worked with set companies of actors, crew members, and even writers. Scenarists ranging from Dudley Nichols to Ben Hecht, Robert Riskin to Lester Cole, John Huston to W. R. Burnett and Billy Wilder accordingly found freedom in working with one major director. On the way they carried into movies the public views they developed in the tabloid press, the ethnic stage, and the avant-garde world of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.[28]

The Return of the Repressed

So what were the themes of the new talking films? To answer this question it is necessary to realize that trade reporters clearly saw that "subjects which would have been a failure in the past were successes today." Current writers and directors saw the key to success was "less art for more box office." By returning to the industry's roots in the lowbrow "nickelodeon" élan, the new films were, as one producer noted, "cut from the cloth the times provide." The success of one of the new upstarts, Warner Brothers, lay in providing films that were "timely, topical, but not typical."[29]

Along with the shift to "realism" there also occurred a major transformation in cultural authority. From the twenties to the thirties our plot samples showed that the number of characters who dealt with a world out of control increased from 10 to over 50 percent. Businessmen cast as villains similarly rose from 5 to over 20 percent, while the rich portrayed as morally evil or a social danger accelerated the most of all, from 5 to over 60 percent from 1929 to 1940 (see appendix 2, figs. 1, 2, 22). If this revealed that filmmakers had become more critical of established values, protagonists who met death and defeat increased from zero to over 10 percent through the early thirties (appendix 2, fig. 21).

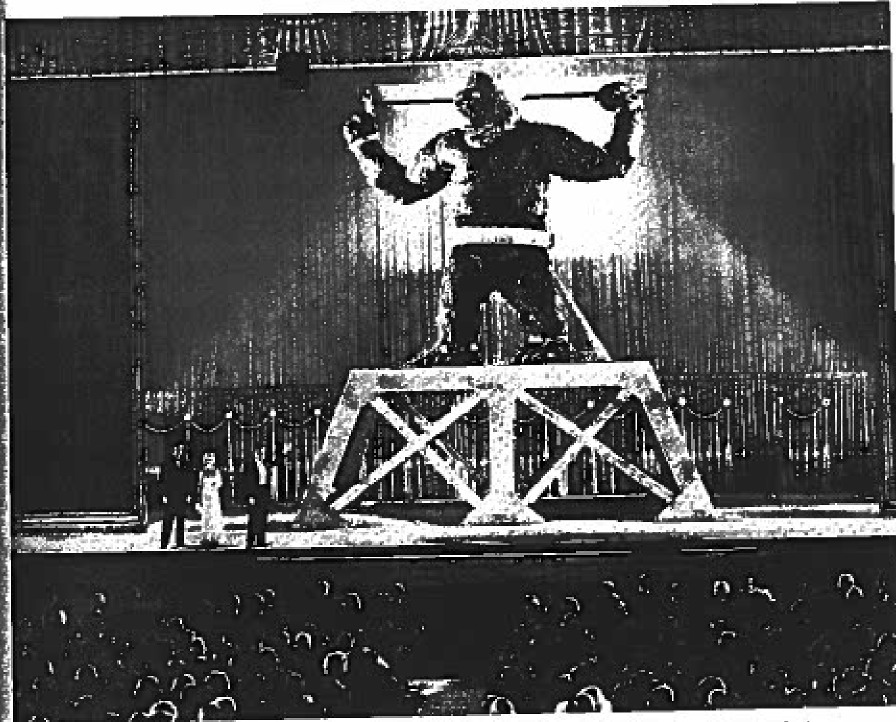
This alteration in authority had two major themes: the way in which adherence to mainstream values of success and the home created the disasters of the age, and the eruption from below of characters who rebelled against their former status and position as racialized and gendered inferiors. These two themes—the fall of the old order and the rise of marginal characters—ran parallel to each other. One theme revolved around the way patriotism and individualism created not progress but war and economic chaos. *Cavalcade* (1933), for example, won the Academy Award for best picture by charting the history of a British family. Emblematic of the glories of Anglo-Saxon civilization, the central characters raise children who advance the English empire around

the world, but all their sons are killed in World War I. In the aftermath the couple sit in their home as the viewers see workers in revolt, punctuated by the heroine's statement that "something has gone out of us." The scene cuts to a nightclub where a young woman, the offspring of the working classes, sings the "Twentieth Century Blues" to Duke Ellington's black jazz band, evoking a new world where mass art carries themes of vitality and tragedy.

The traditions of the older generation also reveal that patriotism is a sham in the Academy-Award-winning best picture of 1930, *All Quiet on the Western Front.* Directed by Lewis Milestone, a young immigrant Jew from Russia, this adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's antiwar novel focused on German youth who believed in the patriotic call to war in 1914. But as Milestone noted, the aim was to have "new ideas . . . build up in the consciousness" of the audience. Reversing normal narrative strategies, he took the youth into battle at the start of the film; the action "wanes emotionally," but "ideas wax intellectually." That is, the youth realize that rich financiers and their patriotic leaders have created death, leaving the new generation angry and antagonistic toward their elders' civilization.[30]

Characters in some of the most popular films of the early thirties learn that their personal success and individualism have created not progress, but decline. In *Little Caesar* (1930), *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *An American Tragedy* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933), or *King Kong* (1933), the story focuses on self-made men whose pursuit of gain generates the "lost paradise" of the national promise. Cast as the heroes of the age—soldiers, inventors, explorers, bankers, businessmen, and journalists—these heroes' values lead to destruction. In the *The Invisible Man* and *Frankenstein*, inventors' quests to master nature disrupt the bonds between man and the earth. Commenting on Dr. Frankenstein, a trade reporter saw that "his experiments carry him along until he is obsessed with the unholy desire to create life in his own image. But he fails to reckon with God." Similarly, the white explorers in *King Kong* (reminiscent of slave traders in the nineteenth century) take a giant ape from his jungle home. When they display Kong in chains to New York City audiences, the ape breaks his chains and flees. As the director focuses audience sympathy on the victimized ape, he dies at the top of the Empire State Building.[31]

What made these films so "realistic" was that they collapsed the boundaries between popular drama and the stories of chaos and disruption that permeated the newspapers. In order to link these fictions



The great ape in *King Kong* (1933), transported from Africa and chained like a crucified Christ before the altar of commercial spectacle in New York City. Here the monster, victimized and exploited by scientists and businessmen, is more sympathetic than his captors. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

with public events, the new talking films often opened with a panoramic shot of an urban skyline, usually that of New York City. Derived from magazines and advertisements, the skyline image grounded the story less in the myths of the old agrarian countryside than in the modern world of "today." Repeatedly newspaper headlines drove the plot forward and served to root the characters' private lives in historical events and the news, a practice similar to the innovations pioneered by John Dos Passos in his 1936 novel, *The Big Money*.

Trade critics noted that the new icons and stories made moviemaking a form of journalistic muckraking and exposé, a practice that collapsed the barriers between the newspapers' public sphere and the entertainment provided by the movies. Commenting on why films of this journalistic "ilk" and "topicality" had gained popularity, one trade critic noted these works took the viewers "behind the newspaper head-

lines, behind the scenes of industry and politics." Film productions such as *Washington Show* (1932) revealed the "grip" of "'big business' . . . on the government of this country" and the "ways in which it makes its power work to insure the accomplishment of its own purposes and the defeat of the will of the people." Screenwriter Dudley Nichols noted that "for good or ill" mass entertainment matched the Greek stage of antiquity. Now artists sought to

> deepen our understanding of ourselves and society so that movie making was a tremendous educative force. What we see enacted we unconsciously relate to our immediate problems and draw practical conclusions. . . . Our exposure to the theatre is either helping us to resolve our own conflicts and the conflicts of society by making us understand them, or it is engendering more conflicts.[32]

Intimately linked to this effort to "resolve our own conflicts . . . by making us understand them," the new films also interjected into the public domain formerly silenced groups and repressed wishes. Moralists criticized these new films and called for censorship, but nothing could thwart the popularity in the early Depression years of gangsters, ribald ethnic comics, and fallen women. In the past, the middle class saw criminals as the exemplars of racial minorities and deviants who disrupted modern life. But the Italian or Irish criminal in *Scarface* (1932), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Little Caesar* reversed the formula.[33] As one critic noted, the treatment of crime as "picture material has now changed radically." Formerly the "criminal characters were infected with desires for coin and for bloody spoils," but the hoodlum featured in the talking films "thirsts primarily for power." W. R. Burnett, the author of *Little Caesar*, explained that the reason why his work was a "smack in the face . . . was the fact that it was the world seen completely through the eyes of a gangster. . . . It had never been done before then. You had crime stories but always seen through the eyes of society. The criminal was just some son-of-a-bitch who'd killed somebody and then they got 'em. I treated them as human beings. Well, what else are they?" Burnett observed that in contrast to the moral deviant of the past, the modern gangster was a sympathetic "Gutter Macbeth."

The distinctiveness of the cinematic gangster thus was his capacity to shift the audience's moral viewpoint. That is, he met defeat because he was the victim of official leaders and institutions' false values. At first he rebelled due to the discrimination and exploitation confronted by immigrant workers. As Burnett saw it, if you have "this type of

society, you will get this type of man." Ethnic youths facing poverty and a world that excludes them turn to crime to gain money and power. Reinventing themselves with new clothes, cars, and "fast" women, much as Rico Bandello becomes famous in all the newspapers as "Little Caesar," they utilize consumer goods to serve their own purposes. Yet the attainment of the American dream also means that they emulate the laissez-faire capitalist ethos of the robber barons of industry, a flaw that leads to their downfall. To Edward G. Robinson, the son of Jewish immigrants and the star of *Little Caesar*, these films were a modern Americanized version of a

> Greek tragedy. Inherent in it was the drama of the humblest, the most despised, seeking to break his way out of the anonymity of ignorance, toward a goal in which he would be not one of many men, but a man on his own. I even spilled out some of my own longings that were parallel. While Rico's goals were immoral and anti-social, we had this in common . . . somehow we would be different, above, higher.[34]

The urge to be "different, above, higher," and a "man on his own" identified the gangster not only with revolt against class exploitation but with revolt against the stereotypes that linked the racially marked outsider with passivity before the forces of history dominated by the Anglo-Saxons. The Fu Manchu film series, for example, featured an Asian businessman whose family was destroyed in the Boxer Rebellion. To seek revenge on white colonists, he reinvents himself as an Asiatic gangster. Along similar lines, *The Emperor Jones* (1933) featured a poor southern black who rejects his subordinate status. Derived from a play by Eugene O'Neill, the film featured the black activist Paul Robeson as Brutus Jones. Initially Brutus lives in the segregated South and sings in the local church, but, like many other blacks, he moves North for freedom from segregation. On the way the soundtrack punctuates his travels with the black blues songs "Let Me Fly," "The St. Louis Blues," and "I'm Travelling." Brutus finds employment as a Pullman porter, where a white businessman teaches him how to exploit and cheat others. After killing a man, Brutus works on a chain gang, only to escape to a Caribbean island. There he overthrows rulers who have exploited and degraded him. But as he transforms his identity and gains power over both whites and blacks, he emulates the gangster tactics of whites. When his black subjects revolt, Brutus dies in a jungle dreaming of his youth in an organic African-American community. Noting the larger message of the film, DuBose Heyward commented that in altering O'Neill's play for the screen,

Rico Bandello, played by Edward G. Robinson, the poor Italian making good as *Little Caesar* (1930). Crime provides the money to buy fine suits and thereby transform the self. The composition, as directed by Mervyn LeRoy, exemplifies the popularization of cubistic techniques, with multiple focal points of interest, and a vision of modern life as a series of surfaces that ask the audience to choose between viewpoints. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

> I added the character of the earlier Jones, as I had imagined it, and by throwing this character into contact with the disintegrating power of our white civilization, I broke Jones down from the rather simple Southern Negro to the shrewd, grafting Negro of the play. I enjoyed making him a black counterpart to our own big business pirate.[35]

Films featuring the rebellious outsider shattered stereotypes in what many saw as truly the most sacred realm of all—that of gender. The gangster rebel was in fact often accompanied by his female counterpart, the fallen woman. By the early thirties films like *Rain* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Anna Christie* (1930), *Ann Vickers* (1933), *Back Street* (1932), *Of Human Bondage* (1934), *Red Dust* (1932), and *Dinner at Eight* (1933) were condemned and criticized by moral guardians for undermining the female identity as mother and wife. Trying to account for the popularity of the fallen woman genre, a reporter in *Variety* explained, "Audiences' unexpected

Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones* (1933). Jones, a formerly subservient black, has become the ruler of a Caribbean island, turning the tables on his oppressor, the white man to the right. Like the white ethnic gangster, Jones transforms himself and beats western rules and businessmen at their own game, signaling the entry of blacks into the public arena. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

refusal to accept talking pap, their sudden discrimination, wrought an upheaval in the ranks of the silent goddesses. Routed by their helplessness before the mike, little by little they began to disappear, leaving only the girls who kept their brains hidden . . . to move to the center stage." Increasingly "flappers" of the twenties—heroines who linked sex to "girlishness"—gave way to females who exuded "some intelligence behind the performance. Contrary to earlier trends, The Great God Public, formerly considered a Puritan censor, voiced its approval with admission fees that fully endorsed heroines of easy virtue." The result:

> No longer does the beautiful but dumb girl intrigue when it comes to placing the admission price on the line. There has got to be some intelligence behind the personal performance because now they talk.[36]

Each woman of "easy virtue" used sex and glamour either to manipulate men or cross official racial and gender barriers. Instead of uplifting consumer pleasure in the private domain, the heroines entered public life where they took delight in the clothes, cars, and penthouses of

the city. Unlike the foreign "vamps," these were American women who sold their bodies to gain material success. In the 1932 film *Call Her Savage,* the white heroine, played by Clara Bow, grows discontent with Anglo-Saxon men and marries an Indian. Similarly, the devoted wife in *Blonde Venus,* played by Marlene Dietrich, leaves her husband and sings hot blues songs like "Hot Voodoo" in nightclubs. Fleeing her husband, she lives with blacks in vice districts, wears a man's suit, and earns her own money. In sum, she has taken on masculine qualities and crossed racial barriers in order to reconstruct the coordinates of female identity.[37]

The assault on convention also gained popular currency in ribald comedy that gave voice to the humor and language of working-class minorities. Here again the innovation on traditional forms was all-pervasive. Over and over the films of W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and Mae West broke from the forms that had pervaded earlier vaudeville and popular entertainments. It had once been necessary for comedians to perform under a minstrel mask. Not only did this degrade blacks, but it linked rebellion against official work, sex, and class roles with African Americans. In a society where work required repression of instincts, a minstrel show allowed whites to put on a black mask and express whites' repressed desires for play and for crossing sexual boundaries. Yet at all times the performer identified the disruptive desires with nonwhites. At the end, the white performer took off the burnt cork and emerged as a dignified Caucasian family and working man. Black minstrelsy thus allowed whites to release their hidden desires without guilt and to degrade nonwhites.[38]

Yet the importance of comedy in the early talking films was that it allowed ethnic comics to validate the desires of whites, once linked to blacks alone, for a different self and society. As these comics shed the minstrel mask, the challenge to racial stereotypes happened on two clear levels. This is exemplified by the rise to success of the black comic Stepin Fetchit. On some levels Fetchit seems to perpetuate the old minstrel stereotype without alteration, yet it is also important to realize that Fetchit was not a white, but a black artist who utilized the old imagery to suit his own purposes. In so doing he was also well prepared. Fetchit honed his art on the black vaudeville stage where his comic style showed black audiences how to exploit demeaning stereotypes to manipulate the oppressor. Symbolic of that subversive style, he told reporters in a slow drawl that his real name derived from Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Haitian revolutionary. Once in the film capital, he established a black utopia called "Harlemwood" where blacks would

Marlene Dietrich as the fallen woman in Josef von Sternberg's ***Blonde Venus*** (1932). Dietrich embodies the capacity of the fallen woman to transgress barriers. Not only does she live in a black neighborhood but she takes on masculine power, symbolized by wearing a man's suit. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

never have to work for whites. Likewise he hired box seats at the Hollywood Bowl for friends to enjoy the art of black composers and to demonstrate to whites that blacks appreciated high art. Transferred onto the screen, this subversive mode meant that in films like *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), Fetchit assumed at first the image of the lazy black but

then at the end led a parade to advance the New Deal government hated by the characters who speak for big businessmen.[39]

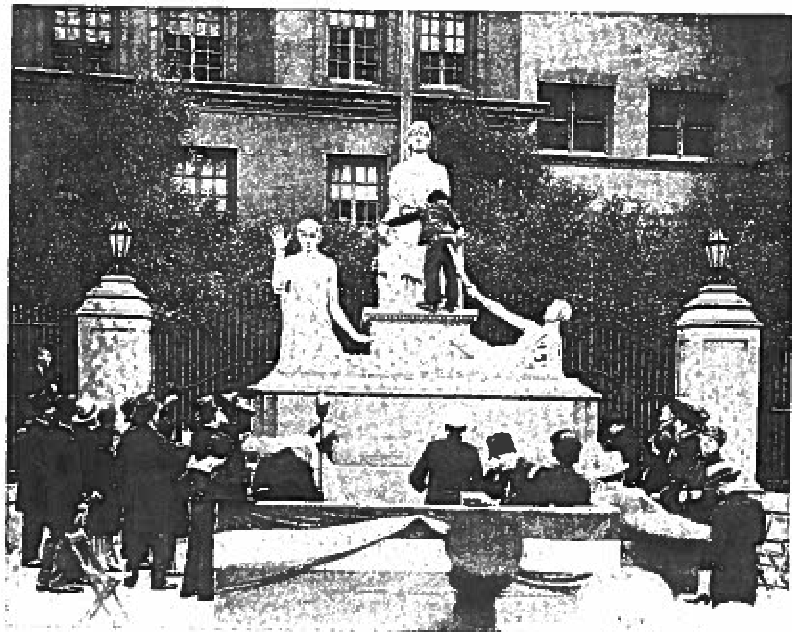
The undermining of minstrel stereotypes was not confined to blacks. The most famed comics of the early thirties, the Marx Brothers, Will Rogers, W. C. Fields, Charles Chaplin, and Mae West, came to the

Stepin Fetchit in *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934). In the final scene of a musical that celebrates the coming of the New Deal, Fetchit assumes the aura of the leader of the Pullman Car Porters, who announces a new day. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

movies from the urban vaudeville stage.[40] Where in the past vaudeville comics used the black mask to distance the humor that subverted established values, these new comics presented that rebellious stance as part of the white self. Over and over Fields gloried in the cliche of the dumb and lazy Irishman's proclivity to drink and use wordplay to overturn convention. The Marx Brothers similarly exuded the aura of the cliched stingy Jew or the foolish Italian, only to turn the image against their oppressors. Accordingly, Fields in *The Bank Dick* (1940) and the Marx Brothers in *A Night at the Opera* (1935) humorously attacked the pretensions of the rich and status symbols. In a similar vein Mae West celebrated the image of the fallen woman who was not ashamed of her desire for plenty of sex. *I'm No Angel* (1933) portrayed her as "more savage than the savages," a woman who reversed roles by telling a young lady that "marriage is nothing more than contracted prostitution. I believe in a single standard for men and women."[41]

Just beneath the surface of this comic mode can also be found a critique of the old consumer culture. Nowhere was that more evident than in the work of Charles Chaplin. In *City Lights* (1931), for example, Chaplin began his story at the unveiling of a patriotic monument. Chaplin's tramp sleeps at the base and catches his pants on the sword held by one of the classic figures of freedom. Once the police eject the tramp, the scene suggests that public life and "liberty" are the preserve of the rich and their middle-class followers. Moving down the road, the tramp saves a banker who wants to commit suicide because life, so the viewer assumes, is meaningless. Soon the tramp and the rich man share the promise of equality in a night of cabaret hopping. Though they live the promise of democracy in amusements, the daylight world sees realities of power descend. Once the sun comes up, the rich man rejects the tramp as an inferior. The final indignity now occurs: In their nightly frolics, the rich man had given the tramp money to pay for a blind girl's operation, but when the banker awakens he has the tramp jailed for stealing. Years later the tramp returns to encounter the girl whose sight has been restored. To disabuse her of the notion that a rich man saved her, he touches her hands. As she recognizes the truth, their eyes meet and she "sees" at last where true virtue lies: among the poor rather than the rich bankers and industrialists.[42]

Fundamental to these converging trends—the rise of the social problem, gangster, fallen woman, and ribald comic films—is a major transformation in mass art. This shift generated renewed cries for stiffer censorship guidelines than those promoted by the official industry regulatory body, the Hays Commission. During the twenties, pro-



Charles Chaplin portrays the tramp evicted from civic rituals in *City Lights* (1931). This opening scene reveals that the rituals of Americanism exclude the poor, dramatizing that the ideals of democracy remain reserved for those with middle-class status. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

ducers and ethnic artists had promoted a consumer ethos that preserved Victorian standards and Anglo-Saxon civilization. The Crash saw audiences rejecting the formulas of the twenties. In that vacuum, new producers and independents made sound films that realigned authority from the top to the bottom of society. Increasingly, artists of immigrant stock inverted racial and ethnic stereotypes to give voice to subordinate groups. But that strategy also yielded a sharp and ambivalent duality at the core of the early talking films. On the positive side, rebellious gangsters and fallen women made it possible for marginalized characters to take images that had been rejected by officials and reshape them for their own ends. No longer were they passive recipients of cultural imagery, but men and women of passion who reinvented their identities as modern men and women of desire and instinct. The negative side of this strategy was that it left the established opinion makers with the full power of description. The rebels might wear a pejorative slur with pride, but they still remained caught in the constructions of their oppressors. Since they were unable to alter

established social roles, at the end of the film the outsiders adapted to conventional family values, "hit the road," met death, or were incarcerated.

One might think that such endings satisfied the censors, but there was far more to it. It is worth noting that in recalling the process of writing scripts, John Huston claimed that in the thirties and forties "no picture of mine was ever really damaged by the censors in any form. There was usually a way around them."[43] Yet the ethic that rebels and bandits had to pay for their sins was not simply a formula imposed by external censors. Folk songs, for example, emerged out of a long tradition of oral culture that existed outside the control of moral guardians and commercial pressures. Over and over popular songs such as "Tom Dooley" and "Stagger Lee" and "Frankie and Johnny" evoked the glamour of men and women whose defiance of social convention led to defeat and destruction. These widely held beliefs emanated less from official leaders than the popular consciousness of the people themselves. The problem was that in defining modernity, the quest was conducted in the guise of inappropriate inherited forms. That is, all moviemakers had inherited the strictures of the Victorian artistic canon that defined that a dramatic hero was to be Anglo-Saxon, while criminals, clowns, and fallen women exhibited the qualities of lasciviousness and disorder. It followed that to bring outsiders' desires into the center one had to reimagine an artistic language for what did not exist: a self and nationality that brought artistic and social opposites into an interpenetrating whole altering each other.[44]

The Art of Interpenetrating Opposites

To open the possibility of an alternative public life and culture, filmmakers and audiences had to reimagine the canon and bring together all that Victorians tore apart. Gradually films that collapsed the Victorian hierarchy altered the ideal self and national identity—a trend that set the stage for a new star system and film formula. One of the most significant trendsetters appeared in the form of the Academy-Award-winning film for 1931, *Cimarron*, based on Edna Ferber's novel. In a society in which nationality came to focus on the image of the "West," it was not accidental that the film charted a contest between two competing visions of the frontier for the modern era. The first vision of the frontier was promoted by the family of the heroine Sabra. Believers in Anglo-Saxon superiority, they resist her romance and marriage with Yancey Cravet, a man with a "cimarron" or dark complexion that sug-

gests he is an Indian. Yet the two marry and move to Oklahoma, where Yancey, who owns a newspaper and embodies the second vision of the frontier, defends the rights of fallen women, Jews, a poor black, and Indians.

At first Sabra condemns her husband's actions, enforcing the code of racial purity and Victorian norms of her past. However, when Yancey leaves for another frontier adventure, his wife undergoes a conversion. Taking over Yancey's newspaper, she defends Indians from capitalists and exploiters. Due to her efforts, she becomes a senator from Oklahoma. Combining masculine with feminine traits, she blesses her own white son's marriage to an Indian. At the end, set in 1929, Sabra appears at a banquet in Washington, D.C., attended by officials from across the land. There she introduces to the guests her mixed-blood grandchildren. Her speech suggests that marriage across the races, coupled with the capacity of women to reinvent themselves, provides a vision of reform and nationality for the twentieth century.[45] Edna Ferber—the daughter of Jewish immigrants in the Midwest—explained that films like *Cimarron* undermined Anglo-Saxon visions to reveal the truth about the nation and its peoples. That is, the

> United States seems to be the Jews among the nations. It is resourceful, adaptable, maligned, envied and feared . . . its peoples are travellers and wanderers by nature, moving, shifting, restless.[46]

Once the image of a dynamic democratic republic gained success in *Cimarron*, it also paved the way for films that celebrated the reshaping of cultural authorities from the top to the bottom of society. One of the most important alterations could be found in the meanings given to the consumer culture. The Academy-Award-winning film of 1932, *Grand Hotel*, for example, unfolded in the modern city of Berlin. Initially the camera takes the viewers into a modernist hotel. As the camera sweeps up the lobby, it stops at a nightclub named the "Café American," where jazz music can be heard. Inside the lobby we meet characters who speak for the ideological conflicts of the day. Baron von Preysing has gained success as a manufacturer and buys aristocratic symbols to advance his prestige. Preysing clearly exploits Mr. Kringelein, a poor clerk who has saved up his meager "slave wages," and a secretary who supplements meager wages by serving as her employer's mistress.

Just as a society rooted in liberal capitalism evokes the ethos of consumerism and its wealthy status symbols in order to solidify the new order, Kringelein and the secretary are initially awed by the power and

social prestige of industrialists. But they both learn from an aristocrat, a member of a dying class embodying grace and generosity, that they must resist the greedy ways of the monopolists. Learning to laugh and use humor to undermine the wealthy, the duo refuse Preysing's offer of more money to cover up a murder that he has committed. Instead the two outsiders learn to cooperate to have the industrialist jailed. With their new confidence they learn from the aristocrat how to win at gambling. In the end, the liberated clerk and mistress now leave the Grand Hotel as masters of their fate. On the way they show that collective action can realize dreams of freedom, a more egalitarian-based abundance, and modern sexual relations.[47]

By shedding their psychic dependence on the wealthy, these new heroes and heroines embody the ethos of interpenetrating opposites in that they combine the shrewdness of the fallen woman, the comic, and the gangster with the heroic citizen. That conversion narrative in other films also provides a model for overcoming the cultural barriers that prevent the population from cooperating in order to advance their common interests. Take the most successful commercial film of 1933, *42nd Street*. The music incarnates the show-within-a-show musical, which takes viewers backstage to watch artists and commoners work to create a new culture that earns success and public approval. The narrative of fall and rebirth also echoes one of the most pervasive themes of the Depression era, providing a model of redemption amid hard times.

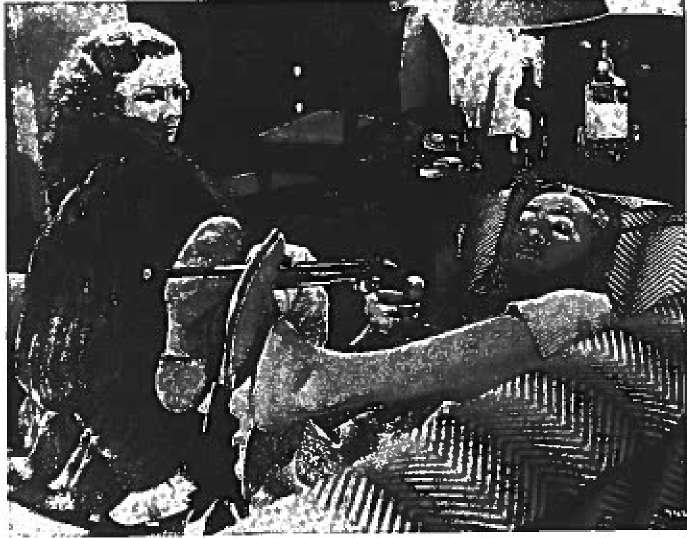
The means to renewal centers on the symbol of "42nd Street" as the embodiment of the dreams of mass culture. The film opens as the camera glides over New York City, moving down to the main thoroughfare of Manhattan that links the world of the wealthy East Side with the world of the working class on the West Side. The bonds holding both worlds together exist in the appeal of the new mass art and consumerism. Yet as the story opens we meet Julian Marsh, a showman who symbolizes the contradictions that have led to the Depression. He has speculated and lost on the stock market. Though in poor physical health, Marsh decides to make a new type of "show." Initially he encourages a female star to sell her body to a monopoly capitalist who will finance the new endeavor. Meanwhile, the chorus girls sell *their* bodies, and a cast composed of diverse ethnic comics and dancers cannot get along. Emblematic of the whole, the selfish star breaks her leg, and the financier threatens to withdraw his money.

Yet in response to this fall from grace, the characters are reborn by recreating the basis of American culture itself. The disaster spurs

Marsh to turn to outsiders for assistance. So he asks a new dancer, Peggy Sawyer (played by Ruby Keeler), to replace the stricken star. That choice is not accidental. At a time when cultural wars pitted rural areas against the modern city, Peggy comes from a small western town but combines the ethos of the frontier with urban wisdom. Having learned from the fallen women, the ethnic comics, and gangsters how to "make it" in the city, she becomes a composite heroine who inspires the divided group to cooperate. Incarnating a new spirit of interpenetrating opposites, she engages in vernacular dance and jazz derived not from the upper orders but from the "street." At the end the diverse cast sings "42nd Street" while the camera pans down the avenue. As the audience voices its approval, we see that on the street all races and ethnic groups dance and mingle. In the foreground the heroine tap-dances, and a skyline filled with towering buildings evokes the city culture. Now Peggy sings to the audience:

> Take your dancing feet down to 42nd Street
> Where the underworld meets the elite
> Little nifties from the fifties, innocent and sweet
> Shady ladies from the eighties who are indiscreet
> They're side by side and glorified
> On naughty, bawdy 42nd Street[48]

The protagonists of the show-within-a-show musical have done the impossible. Instead of undermining society, a moral revolution and a popular art engendered by blacks and the lower classes provide a new cross-cultural exchange. By the mid-forties that fusion bred formula films in which the hybrid heroes and heroines gave birth to a new man and woman. Take the case of the "Thin Man" series. Derived from a famed detective novel by Dashiell Hammett, the series focused on a playboy citizen and his urbane wife. Unlike the older detective Sherlock Holmes, Nick Charles has little interest in remaining aloof from nightclubs, ribald comedy, and gangsters. On the contrary, Nick and his beautiful young wife Nora are "comedians of no mean ability." Nick stylizes himself as a gigolo who is an "amusing drunk, a smart wisecracker" but "a very devoted husband and detective." Nick and Nora enjoy what her wealthy relatives disdain—drink and nightclubs—and together they exude an identity that defies older gender roles. As the heroine enters public life to master criminals, and the hero lives off his spouse's earnings, the writers who forged their dialogue decided "all of our characters were homosexuals." Similarly critics saw that the "Thin Man" films, by mixing male and female traits, "amal-



Myrna Loy and William Powell portray Nora and Nick Charles in *The Thin Man* (1934). After a night on the town, the married detectives playfully plot their next move. Nick wields a town gun, and liquor bottles from the previous night remind the audience that the couple enjoys liquor and city life. But Nick and Nora also advance family and civic values by taking aim on corrupt businessmen and politicians. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

gamated two modes" of art that were formerly apart with the result that

> seldom do pictures so effectively combine so many different forms of entertainment normally appealing to so many different classes of patrons. . . . basically it's straight hokum that grabs the masses. Paradoxically it's a smart sophisticated production for the class crowd. Here's mystery and melodrama with all the thrill and suspense of the hollowed penny dreadfuls; comedy in which there is a laugh in almost every line of dialogue, action and situations. . . . The mystery is solved by a retired detective who drinks and plays around with his wealthy wife and a dog that can't be bothered by detecting.[49]

Other hybrid characters break down cultural barriers that had thwarted cooperation among groups from different regions. The "Hardy Family" films showed that the new culture would not undermine but renew home and public life. Each film in the series focuses on Judge Hardy and his family in Idaho. Symbolic of the western small-town myth, the judge incarnates the ethos of the virtuous citizen.

Whether fighting monopolists aligned to corrupt politicians at home or in Washington, D.C., the judge cooperates with youthful offspring who embody the élan of the modern age, especially his son Andy, played by Mickey Rooney. Together adults as well as adolescents cooperate to reform and renew the community.[50]

Each of these fresh narratives features a story of fall and rebirth that generates an alternative mode of perceiving the self and society. Whether we consider the Thin Man or Hardy Family series, the Rogers formula films, the show-within-a-show musicals, or *Cimarron,* these films show the main characters initially adhering to the values promoted by the wealthy and established leaders. Yet they soon find that the old faith has led to disaster in the forms of poverty and public chaos. To explain social disorder, the wealthy villains blame crime and disorder on the poor or aliens. Yet as the hero or other main characters learn the truth, they undergo a conversion experience. Overcoming the fall, they are reborn by cooperating with former outsiders to save traditional family and communal life. Their efforts yield a just society and a more inclusive and better tomorrow.

Directors complemented the conversion story with a visual style that emphasized that the world, like the self, was not fixed or static but in metamorphosis. To convey visual forms that evoked these sensations in the audience, the major directors of the day—Busby Berkeley, Lewis Milestone, King Vidor, Edmund Goulding, Frank Capra, John Ford, and Orson Welles—developed an art form that restructured the inherited studio practices of the twenties. King Vidor explained that he wanted to "get away from all those old ways of doing things. . . . When I arrived in Hollywood, there was a sort of unreality about a film, a falseness. The acting was overdone. The make-ups were overdone. . . . Acting had no connection with reality."[51] To him the films of Cecil B. De Mille and D. W. Griffith conveyed a static Victorian worldview. The camera remained outside the frame, and subtitles written in accord with proper English interpreted the action in accord with the views of official tastemakers. Films constructed around such rules told the viewer that the story conveyed eternal morals. Since there existed only one truth for the audiences, the composition emphasized one focal point, while makeup and lighting ensured that the blonde hero or heroine embodied the ideals of civilization that would eventually triumph over the villains. Within this visual universe villains possessed dark complexions and clothes, linking them to the outsiders in an Anglo-Saxon world.[52]

In reworking these cinematic practices, directors incorporated into

the movies some of the central principles associated with modernism, in which the world was seen not as something known but something to be discovered and reinvented. To shatter the older viewpoints, the directors often had their players shed makeup that demarcated the white characters from the dark villains. Frank Capra noted that by photographing a player devoid of makeup the audience saw the "secret beauty" contained in the lowly and despised.[53] Capra and others also used a mobile camera to enter inside the frame to create a story where the characters engaged in a process of discovery rather than reinforcing known truths. One of the earliest examples of that ethos arose in Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front.* At the start the viewer sees a large door that looks exactly like a proscenium arch in the theater. If this suggested that the audience was to sit on the outside and watch eternal illusions unfold on the screen, its expectations were undermined as the door opens and the camera moves inside, down the halls, and up stairs to start the search for the truth beneath "illusions" promoted by the official leaders of Kaiser Germany.[54]

The viewers encountered a world where they looked beneath the surface to see the interconnection among apparently isolated events and material things. A society where white and black, men and women, work and play were seen as diametrically opposed gave way to an interdependency. To convey that relational view directors like John Ford often moved the camera from one object to another, avoiding cuts that divided characters and objects from each other. Ford similarly transferred into movies some of the principles of modern art, particularly multiple spaces and scenes photographed within a flat picture plane that suggested that the world was less a transparent set of truths than a work of art made by human effort. His designers conveyed this holistic view with compositions where several spaces overlapped in one multiple image. Unlike in the past, no single focal point or authority figure dominated. Busby Berkeley's musical numbers in *42nd Street,* for example, often have dancers interacting in concentric and asymmetrical circles and layers. The visual effect provided a communal dynamism where change and movement brought things together in a mutual reinforcement of renewal and vitality. Working in a similar vein, Welles and Capra used overlapping dialogue from one scene to the next to reveal their connectedness. Edmund Goulding, the director of *Grand Hotel,* often used a moving camera to focus on one character seated in the foreground, another in a middle ground, and still another in the background. As the parts interacted, the viewers saw action unfolding on several layers at once. In Goulding's own description:

> I tried to make the camera as much like a human being as possible. . . . It sees and hears of its own accord. This is the manner in which we introduce the various centrals in the story. We stealthily happen upon them in the life of the cosmopolitan hotel in which the story unfolds.[55]

The total effect of these innovations—the multiple views, the moving camera, the overlapping dialogue, the elimination of makeup—made it possible for the audience to become active rather than passive spectators. Critics saw that in many ways this placed into popular currency the principles of cubism, for the director asked the viewers to experience the world from many different perspectives—only here the subject matter focused on living characters making choices in the modern world. The directors of thirties films utilized montage principles similar to those of cubism as well. Scenes in a Will Rogers film directed by John Ford or Busby Berkeley's dance scenes in *42nd Street* showed several objects at once in simultaneous images. To Frank Capra, having all parts of the set "equally lighted in the back, middle and foreground" meant that all the characters "get equal billing." Orson Welles similarly observed that in *Citizen Kane* "I find it marvellous that the public may choose with its eyes what it wants to see in a shot." William Wyler, in turn, noted that by creating scenes with multiple layers, one "shot" made it possible

> to have background and foreground action. . . . I can have action and reaction in the same shot, without having to cut back and forth from the individual cuts of the characters. This makes for smooth continuity, an almost effortless flow of the scene, for much more interesting composition in each shot and lets the spectator look from one to the other character at his own will, do his own cutting.[56]

At the same time the moving camera, the multiple layers, and minimal makeup undermined fixity, it promoted an aesthetic rooted in discovery and reinvention. Several forms and icons furthered that dynamic vision. One of the most common was for directors to use mirrors and windows to reflect the main characters' images. Standing before a mirror, gangsters in *Little Caesar* or *The Emperor Jones* put on new modern clothes, signaling their capacity to reinvent their self-presentation. Or the camera might follow characters on trips where they learn from fresh experiences and new people, or the camera could enter behind the scenes to find out how men really made and produced the material world. The new investigative style, noted one critic in describing *42nd Street*, allowed one to understand that "the most exciting

point of the play, and . . . continuously exciting, is that the spectator is taken into the theatre where he watches the construction—and the attendant heartaches and headaches of a musical comedy. That building of a play keeps the tune talkie alive." Noting the way these new techniques altered cinematic aesthetics from the late twenties to the thirties, Lewis Milestone observed that

> before the film had been like the stage. . . . the camera was in the position of the audience and photographed everything from the same position. We learned how to use the camera from the point of view of the actor. We built our sets differently. We could not just move on one wall, but all of them. We could shoot from any one position and follow the actor around.[57]

Composite Personalities and Interdependent Publics

If the camera followed the actor around in multiple spaces to convey imagery of movement and change, the most prominent films also gave rise to a new, hybrid personality that restored the star system shaken by the Depression. Grounded in a world of change and flux, these new personalities combined formerly dualistic opposites: the comic fool and the dramatic hero. Where the hero had embodied the values of the Anglo-Saxon citizen and the fool the impulses of rebellious youth or minorities, now these opposites fused. Commenting on the reason why this new mode fit audience taste in the Depression, the director Frank Capra explained that comedy was an essential, for the "man in the street has had so many dogmas crammed down his throat that he is prepared to revolt against current underestimation of his intelligence. He's fed up." According to Capra, current politics, Prohibition, patriotism, big business, and high-powered advertising were all subjects "ripe for ridicule." Comedy also allowed one to imagine not just "what exists" but "the way things should be." Norman Krasna, a writer who was a "big fella for the underdog," noted that comic heroes allowed one a "protest against the existing system and it's all in the framework of comedy." Still another writer, Alan Scott, saw that his goal was to make an "American" character and art that "combined all that anyone knew of the stage, burlesque, black comedy routines—refurbished for legitimate actors and actresses."[58]

Central to the style of characters who brought these influences together was that they exuded an aura of what the critic Gilbert Seldes called the "metropolitan type." Unlike in the past, "the influence of the gangster film has worked through the whole business of making

pictures, so that in nearly every picture the adult and intelligent observer catches a glimpse of its factual rudeness; in nearly every one there is a character who drastically or sourly says what human beings really think, or mocks at heroics, or deflates pretensions." This shift in style gave birth to stars like William Powell. When he arrived in Hollywood, his dark, swarthy looks decreed that producers cast him as a gangster. Yet by the thirties these same swarthy looks made Powell an ideal hero for the role of Nick Charles in *The Thin Man*. Along similar lines, the most popular male star of the day was Clark Gable. Initially Gable's dark features meant that he played gangsters, one appropriately named "Blackie" in *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934). Yet two years later trade reporters observed that a "cinema upstart stole the crown that rested on the heads of established knockouts." Becoming the top male player of the era, Gable carried the aura of a "patent-leather-haired, swarthy-skinned, glint-eyed racketeer." Only now he brought that élan to a comic hero in Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), to the dark, romantic gunrunner in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and to the rebellious officer in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935). At the same time, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, James Garfield, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, and Edward G. Robinson incarnated what Robert Sklar has called the ethos of "city boys," who merged their tough-guy gangster style with roles as citizens who served a public good.[59]

A similar combination of opposites characterized the major female stars as well. Myrna Loy, who played Nick Charles's wife Nora in the "Thin Man" series, noted that prior to the thirties she "played orientals"—characters who in those days were invariably "wicked ladies"—in films like the Fu Manchu series because "I with my slanty eyes and my sense of humour—which was unforgivable in a woman—seemed to fit into the category of 'doubtful ladies.'"[60] Loy, however, gained greater success as the "dream wife of a million men" by combining the aura of "doubtful ladies" with the dignity of Nora Charles, a good wife, mother, and public citizen. Other female stars followed suit as Joan Crawford, Carole Lombard, and Bette Davis combined the aura of the "bad girl" with the spunk of the empowered woman. Furthermore, Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* and Claudette Colbert in *Imitation of Life* (1934) shed the refined image of protected sweetheart in favor of the shrewd businesswomen who beat men at their own game. Summarizing these trends, Carole Lombard wrote that she "lived by a man's code."[61]

The ethos of interpenetrating opposites also permeated genres and formula films associated with traditional American myths. The major

cowboy stars after Will Rogers's death were Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Both incorporated the values of a rugged cowboy with the expressiveness of the urban singer of swing ballads. Along the same lines, the major child players of the era, Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin, incorporated youthful spontaneity with the adult wisdom to help save rather than undermine family life. *Little Miss Broadway* (1938), for example, features Shirley as a young girl who confronts bankers and staid rich matrons when they attempt to evict poor showmen from their homes. In response she mobilizes diverse peoples to overcome the power of these corrupt businessmen and society matrons. Walt Disney's cartoon characters, as Steven Watts has shown, combined animal traits with human sentiments and beliefs. The Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, saw that Disney's cartoon characters were popular because they evoked a vision of wholeness to counter the deep fragmentations of the modern world. In this vein he noted:

> For those . . . whose lives are divided up into little squares like a chess board . . . that divide up the soul's feelings, thoughts . . . Disney's films blaze with color. Like the patterns in the clothes of people who have been deprived of the colours in nature. That's why the imagination in them is limitless, for Disney's films are a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and greyness.[62]

The political message flowing from these innovations was also not too hard to find. By incorporating into the self the desires of outsiders, whether they be gangsters, fallen women, ribald comics, or cartoon animals, the new citizen carried into the civic sphere the capacity to cooperate with outsiders to reinvent oneself and society. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the populist trilogy of Frank Capra, an artist deeply committed to the ideal of the composite personality and film formula. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941), Capra and writers like Robert Riskin created conversion narratives that focused on competing views of cultural authority. Traditional authority resided in the official leaders and the monopoly capitalists who were his villains. The villains' view of life was complete and closed to new ideas. They manipulate the mass media to gain power over the people and turn to force and power—embodied in their assistants—to impose on the central hero demands to do their bidding.

Typically the environment of the rich reflects the imposition of the power of aristocratic lords and monopolists on the dreams of the old republic. As such the rich threaten to destroy the democracy and im-

Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). A corrupt businessman, played by Edward Arnold, teaches a new senator, played by James Stewart, how to serve the interests of monopoly capitalists. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

pose the values of the "Old World" on citizens dedicated to the public good. The Capra hero thus embodies the ethos of the producers' democracy that is in danger, while the Capra heroine initially works as a reporter or political aide for the rich. Once the hero and heroine meet, they engage in humor, song, and urban nightlife. Slowly they shed their psychic dependency and find in each other what they lack to make themselves complete. Armed with a code that combines both tough realism and idealism, they undergo a conversion experience. Modernizing republican ideals, they align with the lower classes to launch a collective battle for justice as well as a more holistic life. Watching this contest unfold in *Meet John Doe,* a critic saw that

> the text—and it is all entertainment, not screen editorial—is right down the broad highway of human concern. And through the compelling human equation runs a patriotic strain which relies on no flag waving, no stilted eloquence, but is all the more stirring because it leaps from the heart of almost inarticulate folk to confront injustice, oppression, and selfish aggrandizement everywhere around the world.[63]

Importantly Capra and others evoked the myths of American traditions, but did so as a means to critique and alter the present. With names like Jefferson Smith and Long John Willoughby, Capra's heroes embodied the recovery of the traditional republic and democratic community. Much as in the Will Rogers vehicles, the vision of the past in films of this period suggests an alternative American ethos. Take *Stagecoach,* made in 1939 by John Ford. The western charts the journey of a stagecoach across the Southwest. Inside the coach are an outlaw, a fallen woman, a southern gambler, a drunken Irishman, a refined Victorian "lady," and a banker who evokes the image of Herbert Hoover and the corrupt financiers of the day. Under the threat of Indian attack, they expel the banker and learn how to forge a public life where opposites cooperate. Similarly, Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) showed how rich capitalists exploit poor miners. In response the commoners form a union to advance their class interests. The Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein observed that Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) portrayed a Lincoln who came directly from the "womb of popular and national spirit," of the "progressive tradition of America" that is struggling to restore "harmony" to a fragmented world. Even apparently escapist films turned to an alternative past as a model for public life and republican renewal. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for example, originated as a populist novel depicting the farmers' uprising in the 1890s. Transferred into the Great Depression, the novel generated a film that charted the actions of a young girl, Dorothy, and fanciful characters who learn through doing that they are not inferior, and that they can trust their resources to achieve common goals and success through collective effort.[64]

Within these productions, the music often reinforced the theme that American folk culture and modern culture operated on the same tracks. During the thirties, for example, swing bands played at intermissions in urban theaters. An audience could see bands like Benny Goodman's that featured white and black musicians performing together, then see a main feature like *How Green Was My Valley* and *Young Mr. Lincoln* that featured the songs of workers and the folk, a process that would inspire Eisenstein to note that Ford's Lincoln was "half Rabelais and half Michelangelo." Similarly, Paul Robeson sang "Old Man River" in *Showboat* (1936), and the Caucasian heroine did a "sand dance" accompanied by blacks playing music on the Mississippi River. Together these images gave dignity to the music of slaves and

suggested that America was rooted in cross-cultural exchange. To immigrants who had been discriminated against, and seen as not "yet white" by official leaders, the effect of talking films was evident. In the twenties minorities had reinterpreted the silent films to suit their own interests.[65] In the thirties there was a much closer relation between working-class spectators and what appeared on the screen. Commenting on that shift, the *Jewish Daily Forward* noted that though silent films encouraged immigrants to model themselves on "Anglo-Saxon austerity," sound films encouraged working-class immigrants to learn that "an accent instead of impoverishing a personality, lends interest to it . . . [making] accents . . . into an asset."[66]

The advent of sound film generated a competitive discourse of pluralism as the heart of the national tradition. Yet what about nonwhites? Were they included as well? There is no doubt that many films perpetuated racial stereotypes. While negative images continued, it was also true that in the thirties the racism permeating mainstream culture began to decline and formerly ostracized groups and characters gained dignity. Classic examples of the more complicated portrayal of racial minorities are the Charlie Chan films. Though the series perpetuated many traditional white stereotypes of Asians, the central character, played by Warner Oland, a Finnish actor with Asian features, often turned these views upside down. In the twenties Oland had played the evil Asian gangster, Fu Manchu.[67] Yet as that genre faded in the early thirties, he gained success as the detective Charlie Chan who combined gangster qualities with that of the dedicated detective who served the public good.

Throughout Chan reversed many of the conventional stereotypes that whites had used to subordinate and demean Asians. To begin with, he was a family man with a wife and three sons, all played by Asians. He also appealed to urban whites as well as what reporters called the "oriental trade" at home and in the Far East. At a time when whites forbade Asian immigrants to attain citizenship, and states on the West Coast forbade the Japanese to hold land, Chan was the skilled "urbane oriental who took delight in unravelling the most complicated crime mysteries." A critic said of *Charlie Chan at the Race Track* (1936) that Chan may have "the help of Inspector Fifer of the Scotland Yard and Inspector Flannery of New York. But as far as helping they're a couple of stooges . . . baffled by foolish facts which cannot fool Chan." Moreover, Chan emerged as a "witty philosopher" and hero who also delighted in modern consumer goods such as flashy cars, good wine, and nightclubs. Like Nick Charles, Charlie Chan was "full of wise-

Charlie Chan in Paris (1935). Charlie Chan, the dignified Asian detective, demonstrates that nonwhite races can be wiser than European Americans. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

cracks." He solved crimes that "baffled others," the result being that the Charlie Chan films celebrated Asians as skilled men and women who aided whites and the victims of crime.[68]

A similar alteration informed the portrayal of blacks as well. Though a self-directed detective failed to emerge in the guise of an African American in mainstream Hollywood films, a more inclusive vision of blacks did receive representation. No doubt films like *Gone with the Wind* continued to perpetuate demeaning images. A sample of plot descriptions, gathered by Thomas Cripps from trade journals, shows that during the 1920s black performers were cast in the traditional role of servants in 80 percent of all films; however, during the thirties that number fell to 40 percent.[69] Similarly, our plot samples show that racial minorities cast in favorable roles rose from 4 to about 15 percent from the twenties to late thirties (appendix 2, fig. 19).

Black journalists also perceived that a more dignified black portrayal of African Americans graced the Hollywood screen. Even though they wanted to see blacks in more positive roles, they praised players like Paul Robeson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Rex Ingram, Lena Horne, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers, who now attained major billing and success in Hollywood films.[70] Rex Ingram told a re-

Rex Ingram as "De Lawd" in *The Green Pastures* (1936). This film gave a sympathetic and dignified presentation of black spirituality and faith. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

porter that things indeed had changed. Where in the twenties Hollywood producers cast him as either a "Nubian slave" or a subordinate servant, he now found more positive roles, playing God himself in films like *The Green Pastures* (1936).[71] Similarly, in the adaptation of Edna Ferber's *Showboat*, Paul Robeson sang "Ol' Man River" to give voice to the reality of blacks' exploitation by whites. As Robeson sang "we tote that bale, get a little drunk and land in jail," the lyrics and montage reveal that African Americans have made the South rich but remain racially oppressed.[72]

If major films portrayed minorities in a more positive light, some of the most prominent also challenged the foundation of white superiority: the enforcement in a majority of states of miscegenation laws that outlawed intermarriage between whites and racial minorities. In many ways these select films resemble the beginnings of what literary scholars and students of new nationalities call "foundational myths." That is, stories that focus on unions of lovers of different regions and races

often provide models for overcoming divisions that thwart the making of new "imaginary communities." *Cimarron*, for example, portrayed lovers whose romance and marriage created new bonds across the races, foreshadowing the birth of a multicultural America.[73]

This was not an isolated occurrence. *Showboat* as well as Will Rogers's *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (1935) challenged miscegenation codes. The Academy-Award-winning film of 1935, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, continued that trend by focusing on the adventures of a British ship manned by a tyrannical captain who disdains nonwhites, whom he exploits with shrewd business practices. But when the crew meets South Sea islanders who believe in cooperation and love across the races, the white subordinates revolt and intermarry with the nonwhite islanders, all of whom were played by Polynesian actresses. *Juarez* (1939) told the story of a mixed-blood Indian who defeats an army of French imperialists. Not only does Juarez find inspiration in the ideals of Abraham Lincoln, but to make a republic he foresees that land has to be redistributed so citizens can attain both political and economic independence. Similarly, Frank Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) depicted a white woman who falls in love with an Asian. The star of the film, Barbara Stanwyck, recalled that "the women's clubs came out very strongly against it, because the white woman was in love with a yellow man and kissed his hand. So what! I was so shocked by the reaction. I accepted it and believed in it, and loved it."[74]

By the end of the decade films that evoked the élan of the composite protagonist gave visibility to the possibility of a more pluralistic and just republic. Our plot samples reveal that this was not an isolated occurrence. As criticism of business and the rich ranged from 25 to 60 percent in plot samples, characters who engaged in a conversion narrative that shifted loyalty from the upper to lower classes occurred in over 25 percent of all plots (appendix 2, fig. 8). Similarly, the lures of mass culture—nightclubs, dance halls, jazz, the new woman, and "youth"—altered as well. In the twenties, mass art was seen as dangerous in well over 50 percent of all films, implying that the characters' desire for a new life should incorporate the status symbols of the wealthy (appendix 2, fig. 23). But fears of mass art—with its links to the expressive culture of blacks and immigrants—receded to almost zero in the thirties. In sharp contrast, the lures of mass art emerged as a force for personal and social renewal. With that change, protagonists linked to the old middle class dropped to less than 40 percent, and a new man and woman came clearly into prominence (appendix 2, fig. 3). Rooted in the new "trades of the city," the new man and woman

Love and marriage occurring between the races in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935). The first mate Christian, played by Clark Gable, and an island woman, played by a Polynesian actress, Movita, marry—a prime example of the breakdown of racial barriers in some of the major films of the thirties. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

appeared as urban singers, dancers, comics, radio announcers, sportsmen and women, pilots, and nightclub performers. Along with this shift the new man and woman were disproportionately found in films in which the heroes engaged in social reform, a category that fluctuated from a low of 10 percent to about 25 percent of film plots from the mid-twenties to the late thirties (appendix 2, fig. 4).

"Our Collective Unconscious" or the Audience Takes Command

By the late thirties it was clear that moviemakers were not adapting, as Neal Gabler has told us, to every "old bromide" of society. Instead, major films and Jewish producers displaced an Anglo-Saxon Americanism with an alternative, pluralistic vision. As is so often the case in the study of the popular arts, the question arises: How did the audi-

ences respond to these themes? What was the relation between film content and audience belief and public values? Though a definitive answer is impossible, one thing is clear. Producers' awareness of audience demand spurred them to make productions dramatically different from the formulas of the twenties and to give directors and performers such as Frank Capra, Will Rogers, John Ford, and Orson Welles control over their work in the studios.

The audience had become less of a passive "crowd" than a "public" that made their own choices. A telling testimony to that shift informed the recollections of the screenwriter Lester Cole. Early in the thirties, Cole participated in creating Hollywood guilds that drew on a republican critique of capitalism to mobilize unions. Meanwhile, Cole and his friend Nathanael West—soon to be the famed writer of *The Day of the Locust* (1939)—created scripts based on current news. One featured a lawyer who sides with striking workers. In *The President's Mystery* (1936) Cole recalled that he combined love with "mystery, romance and a generous dash of Roosevelt propaganda." At first Republic studios refused to release the film because it was too radical. Yet when President Roosevelt won reelection in 1936, the producers released it to the tune of great profits. Summarizing the lessons learned from these events, Cole saw that

> certain producers began to see profit in film topics other than sheer escape and inane fantasy. Even though the ideas expressed and social realities depicted caused them some extreme uneasiness, the magnetism of the new fields of profits conquered such misgivings. To show poverty, joblessness and hunger not only awakened the consciousness of millions who saw themselves represented realistically on the screen, but aroused their consciousness and stimulated what was most dreaded by the producers who made the films—a sense of dignity of the common man and woman, their courage and their strength to fight back.[75]

Besides the convergence between market demand and the making of more socially conscious films, popular values did take a leftward swing. As our plot samples recorded hostility to the old order and to business coupled with reformist themes, pollsters found that over 63 percent of the public expressed great fears of unemployment and wished for more security in their lives. At the same time over 65 percent felt that big businessmen and elites had too much power, and that sharp inequalities of wealth were undemocratic. They had not, however, lost faith in the possibility of progressive reform. When asked what class they came from, 88 percent responded they emanated from

the solid middle class. When asked about their hopes for the country, the majority had faith in the glories of American democracy and a tomorrow where technology and science created abundance. Most thought that Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal offered hope for realizing these goals, a faith that was strongest among those under thirty-five years of age and those situated in the middle and working classes—the groups most drawn to the movies.[76]

At the grassroots it appeared that moviemakers' capacity to give form to these beliefs had an impact on political attitudes. The novelist John Clellon Holmes recalled that movies provided him and his friends with "our collective unconscious. I for one still associate certain films with the dawning of certain ideas." Sound made Hollywood films a "universal part of puberty" that generated a "heightening of psychological involvement so pervasive that the gulf between the audience and the image was all but obliterated." In his neighborhood "an entire generation went to the movies two or three times a week." Holmes recalled that it would be "difficult to calculate the number of hours that people of my age spent talking about movies in those years." When he saw *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930, or went to a Marx Brothers or W. C. Fields comedy, he learned that the "pompous" world of adults was a fraud, but he went back home "renewed by the knowledge that the bores could be foiled by cagey irrationality." By watching films like *Meet John Doe*, Holmes also learned that big business could be a fraud. In fact, when he became involved in "party politics," the memory of this Capra production "and others like it" had an "influence on my decisions and aversions which is incalculable." Movies during the thirties thus provided "a continuation of our schooling by another means," teaching that war and big business constituted the "siren call of the devil."[77]

Just as it appeared that many in the audience altered their political values watching major films, so the critics and the artists themselves saw moviemaking as part of creating an alternative public life. A writer in Tennessee observed after watching *All Quiet on the Western Front* that "this is the first time that those who fought the war with only bonds and thrift stamps have ever been shown what the real thing is." The real thing inspired veterans in Los Angeles to charge the screen to aid the hero under siege. Lewis Milestone, the director, noted, "that's how close we came to the truth of the thing." In San Francisco the film sparked a critic to note that the same work "should run until every man, woman and child . . . has seen it, then shown periodically to the maturing generations." So powerfully did the theme strike home that

the main actor, Lew Ayres, wrote to Milestone that almost "everyone in the large cast . . . were deeply impressed by their involvement in a significant work . . . that had overtones of a critique upon worldwide nationalism and imperialism." In fact, "my own youthful involvement in a project of this kind was bound to have a formative effect." It led to a conversion to pacifism, a commitment that continued into World War II.[78]

At this point one can also see why Orson Welles recalled that Hollywood provided a site to advance a shift in symbols, racial norms, and politics that would renew the "democratic republic." Public opinion polls, memoirs, audience response, and alterations in narratives showed that even before the New Deal came to power in 1933, many moviemakers created a language for what did not yet exist: a pluralistic producers' democracy rooted in hostility to what President Roosevelt called the new "money changers" and "feudal lords" of industry. Indicative of that political drift, progressive civic associations created a series of film study guides that provided questions to stimulate students to see the civic implications of each story. The guide for John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* observed that the film "shows admirably the beginnings of the labour movement." Another pamphlet noted that *Fury* (1936), a film about lynching, focused on a white victim. But the story nevertheless helped to promote the national antilynching legislation to protect African Americans. Still another focused on a Hardy Family production that featured the judge protecting an ostracized citizen. To have students think about the story's larger implications, the writer asked, "What if the man had been a Negro, or foreign born? . . . Can you think of any instance where your standing in the community is likely to affect the quality of justice which will be meted out?"[79]

Besides the study guides and their encouragement of discussion about the "quality of justice" meted out in the community, Hollywood producers directly combined the élan of the new art with social reform. Such a merger surfaced in the organization of Hollywood unions as well as Will Rogers's radio programs. In public rituals that impulse came inescapably into view with the Roosevelt victory in 1932. The southern California organizers of Roosevelt's campaign came from the Warner Brothers studio. Once Roosevelt won the presidency, Jack Warner organized a streamlined train to participate in the inaugural of the "New Deal Chief." Accordingly, the "42nd Street Special" stopped in major cities to announce the arrival of the "Better Times Special" linking the film *42nd Street* with a "New Deal in entertainment." Citizens groups and Mayor Curley met the train and its stars

Warner Brothers' "42nd Street Special" on the way to President Roosevelt's first inaugural. (Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

in Boston, while reporters interviewed the stars, taking care to feature players from the local area. On several occasions, newsmen observed with surprise that the actresses dressed like "men" and enjoyed performing the roles of the "bad girls" in order to let loose their "inhibitions." The actors similarly enjoyed playing gangster roles rather than the "colorless" leading men. Along the way commentators saw that the train embodied the spirit of an alternative public, rising from the

ashes of hard times. If we "needed," explained one observer, "to be sold on ourselves" the train with its silver Pullman cars and modern interiors did the trick. The Hollywood stars captured the attention of fans precisely because in days of deflated hopes,

> we Americans must find some hat rack to which we can hang our national affection. At this moment celebrities are the number one vote getter. To be sure we haven't much choice. What with Big Business hiding its naughty face in the drawer and society turning out to be a boring lead-headed princess, there is nothing left for us to idealize except the clan of pretty boys and girls who live on the rhinestone shore of Hollywood.[80]

The heart of the matter lay beyond the lure of the "rhinestone shore of Hollywood." With official institutions in disarray, the train and the film signaled the incorporation of politics and the popular arts into remaking the nation. At a time when established institutions continued to exclude racial minorities and women, a new mass culture arose that evoked dreams of a more inclusive and modern culture. In response moviemakers who themselves were often minorities, immigrants, or the children of immigrants rejected European status symbols and turned to the lower classes and vernacular arts for inspiration for a new public life. On the screen, films evoked the vision of a modernized republic, rooted in citizen action, pluralism, and dreams of contemporary morals and abundance. While the process of cultural and social reform had only begun, there was no doubt that feature films now brought to the fore composite heroes and heroines who combined instinctual vitality with the art of interpenetrating opposites. Exactly how this affected theaters and audiences at the grassroots is the subject of our next chapter.

Epilogue
Reimagining Postwar America

The goal of this study has been to build upon, but also advance, the work of my fellow cultural and film historians. Throughout I have found that we need to understand the popular arts generally, and the movies in particular, as a new institution that altered the boundaries of public life and national identity. To grasp the meaning of our current battles over culture and media images, we have to see that moviemaking has been part of a competitive civic sphere where artists and audiences engaged in a contested terrain. Prior to the Depression, the United States possessed what Benedict Anderson has called a nationalism that was "incompletely imagined."[1] That is, the builders of modern nations had to dismantle the old rulers' house and replace it with a better one, using the materials that their masters utilized. In the most ethnically and racially divided society in the western world, Americanism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revolved around concepts of a republican producers' democracy where citizens controlled their work and engaged in governing. The ideal of citizens capable of exercising control over their property in opposition to monopoly capital rested on white Anglo-Saxon norms from which the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and nonwhites were excluded. Until the advent of mass culture broke down these divisions, Anglo-Saxon opinion makers used the republican creed or liberal capitalist ideologies to exclude minorities, who were so divided among themselves as to pose virtually no threat to the rise of the new corporate order in the twenties.[2]

The movies contributed to making an art and public space that allowed the divided and excluded groups, particularly the new immigrants, to begin to express themselves through the voices and imaginations of artists who used the mechanism of the market to appeal to the taste of such groups. However, the eruption of new cultural and political styles from the bottom, particularly the rise of filmmakers catering to the class consciousness of workers, spurred the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie and corporate leaders to regain control over public symbols. In

the aftermath ambitious showmen of Jewish stock made Hollywood in the twenties a place where a more consolidated industry unfolded, and film stars showed that in leisure one could find release from the routinization of work and a stratified class order. The answer was to uplift mass amusements and the home with the historicist symbols of high art derived from European aristocrats and the wealthy. At the grassroots, racial and ethnic groups could reinterpret mass-produced images to suit their own desires. But at the point of production, Hollywood films tended to serve the interests of corporate leaders, making a consumer culture that preserved rather than undermined their cultural authority.

The coming of the Great Depression, however, delegitimized the wealthy and the Hollywood dreams the upstart Jewish producers had done so much to promote. It soon became obvious to many that to make the wheels of industry run, purchasing power had to be spread among the masses.[3] The film industry became a primary institution for creating an alternative Americanism that justified the people's right to abundance to counter a corrupt capitalism. This alteration in values began as audiences rejected the highbrow film and theater styles of the wealthy. In response, moviemakers created sound films that accomplished two remarkable goals. First, they provided a mechanism where the dialects and vernacular arts of the lower class moved from local communities to gain a hearing in the national civic sphere. Second, stars like Will Rogers and productions featuring heroes like Nick Charles collapsed the barriers between the vernacular and high arts, comedy and drama, that informed the Victorian artistic canon. Well before the New Deal came to power, sound films thus created composite characters who did what seemed impossible: They made a public sphere that allowed artists and their audiences to reimagine the boundaries between the margins and the center.

Together, these findings suggest that we have to revise the analysis and theories of the functioning of the film industry that have guided scholars' previous formulations. Assuming that the American Way permeating the postwar era informed the twentieth century as a whole, film and cultural historians, ranging from Neal Gabler and Michael Rogin to Robert Sklar and Warren Susman, have taught us that the popular arts from the thirties to the fifties promoted the ideals of liberal capitalism and classlessness.[4] In his famed explorations of Depression-era popular art, Susman argued that the movies and radio forged a consumer culture rooted in the ethos of Anglo-Saxon individualism and backward-looking myths and symbols. Neal Gabler similarly observed in his study of Jewish film producers that studio owners assimilated to a "shadow America, one which idealized every old glorifying bromide about the country" and "colonized the American imagination." Michael Rogin incorporated that view into scholarship dealing with race, pointing out that Jewish moviemakers and other immigrants perpetuated stereotypes that allowed them to assimilate to a static nationality rooted in white superiority.

So when postwar scholars asked what impact the movies had, the answer was that corporate leaders and deluded audiences promoted a false consciousness that took spectators' attention away from issues of class inequality and cultural experimentation. The same analysis has informed the work of the most prominent school of film historians. To these scholars the singular "genius" of the Hollywood system revolved around producers' capacity to infuse plots and movie genres with uniform narratives and visual styles for five decades.[5] The most cited example for this reading has been *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson. Using a theoretical paradigm derived from Karl Marx, they argue that the modes of production determine the ideological content of a universal type of story. They state in their introduction that "we cannot presuppose that the periods used to write political or social history will demarcate the history of an art. That is, there is no immediate compulsion to define a 'cinema of the 1930's' as drastically different from that of 'the 1940's,' or to distinguish pre–World War II Hollywood style from postwar Hollywood style." To prove this hypothesis, they viewed over a hundred films covering a fifty-year period, which they admit is "not strictly a random sample," and from that material concluded that "from 1917 on, the classical model became dominant, in that since that moment American fiction films employed fundamentally similar narrative, temporal, and spatial systems." Within these systems existed a universal film type that unfolded in a linear fashion, focused on self-contained characters, evoked a transparent visual style, and ended with clear closures of all narrative problems that affirmed heterosexual love and the values of liberal individualism.[6]

The importance of this analysis cannot be denied. It alerted film scholars that the type of production system can determine the formal properties of mass art. It also taught us that studios, artists, and businessmen all tried to standardize their product to garner predictable profits and to infuse films with ideological content. Along similar lines it is also true that racist imagery, themes of liberal individualism, and

backward-looking symbols appeared in major films. The problem with this analysis, however, is that its ahistorical methodology cannot account for the power of audiences at key historical moments to disrupt the production system and compel studios to alter their films in response to market demand. If the large studios consistently dominated production, then why did the studios lose audiences, and new companies come to prominence, in the thirties and fifties? And if the studio system universally created films that advanced a classic narrative and backward-looking and racist symbols, how did Will Rogers, gangster, and fallen women films arise to challenge racial and sexual stereotypes, to promote not individualistic, but communal and public, solutions to social and personal problems confronted by the characters? And why did Eric Johnston evoke anticommunist rhetoric in the forties to destroy Depression-era film formulas, blacklist artists, and censor films, if moviemakers already popularized a uniform American Way to preserve the status quo?

Given these unresolved issues, it is not accidental that recently these views have been challenged by scholars examining the power of moviemakers to create films that resist dominant images of power and authority. Steven Ross has clearly demonstrated that prior to the rise of Hollywood, small producers made silent films permeated with themes of class conflict. Jonathan Munby has shown that gangster films from the thirties to the forties served as a vehicle to critique unjust class and race relations. Dana Polan has revealed in a fine study of World War II films that popular narratives exhibited less a seamless classical style than images of disruption. Criticizing those who believe that a monolithic Hollywood style pervaded the era, Polan tells us that we "need to theorize the possibility of slippage between the discourse and its actualization in specific historical moments." Finally, Fredric Jameson drew on postmodern literary theory to explain that to gather audiences producers must ensure that even the most "degraded forms" of mass art appeal to "our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now and as we feel in our bones it ought to be lived." And despite their different points of view, feminist scholars have shown that cinematic representations of gender can embody tensions and contradictions that are left unresolved by normative prescriptions of femininity promoted by the classical style or normative values promoted in the narrative.[7]

The effect of these examinations of Hollywood moviemaking has created a dualistic view of the way mass art functions in modern America. One school uncritically assumes that because the Hollywood

production system has been dominated by large corporations that needed a predictable film narrative, a uniform and unchanging American Way has permeated filmmaking. Rooted in codes of "whiteness" and liberal capitalism, these classic narratives reinforced repressive racist norms and conservative interests. A more recent group of scholars acknowledges that corporate leaders try to use mass-produced sounds and images to mystify power relations, but that popular artists and audiences can generate modes of resistance. While these two approaches have informed parts of this study, I have shown that the boundaries between the center and the margins are not static but open and fluid. At key historical moments modes of resistance can alter public culture and American dreams.

In so doing, I see my evidence reinforcing the views of the Marxist social philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, and current scholars who draw on their insights, such as George Lipsitz, Lawrence Levine, and Stuart Hall, who see that popular art and culture compose part of a dialogic and contested terrain in which ideas emanating from the past and present and expectations for the future operate in a conversation with each other.[8] Both Gramsci and Bakhtin demonstrate that artists and groups maintain collective memories of cultural and political struggles that never completely die. In the context of the United States, one can see that it was the collective memory of a republican producers' democracy that spurred union, populist, abolition, and women suffrage crusades in the nineteenth century. But as the republican creed seemingly disappeared under the impact of racial and cultural divisions and the rise of the new corporate order, the delegitimization crisis of the Depression saw radicals revive that "American" tradition at the grassroots as well as in the popular arts.

Our plot samples derived from the major trade journals demonstrate the broad outlines of this contested and shifting terrain. In the twenties hostility to big business was small. The most common plot device centered on the effort of members of the Anglo-Saxon "old middle class"—professionals and businessmen—to save themselves from the dangers of "too much moral revolution" associated with the lures of the new woman and nonwhite races. If this encouraged protagonists to elevate their desires with the status symbols identified with the wealthy, this plot device reinforced the cultural authority of the new corporate order. During the Depression, however, characters aligned to big business and old-style professionals underwent a conversion. They shed the values of the wealthy and emerged as composite heroes who combined the forbidden qualities of gangsters, fallen women, and

minorities with the virtues of the good republican citizen. Out of these interpenetrating opposites emerged a revival of middle-class life as modern protagonists—dancers and singers, radio performers and showmen, airplane pilots and comics—combined cultural and political reform. Shedding the codes of highbrow art and Victorian sexual roles, the new protagonists cooperated with the lower classes to create a new community rooted in reciprocal relations among the classes and a civic arena that began to include the new woman and minorities.

Implicit in this shift in public culture was a battle over the meaning of Americanism between Anglo-Saxon proponents of liberal individualism and hybrid protagonists of a populist republican ideal. The uniqueness of that battle was that it was not confined to the screen alone. As the new sound films expanded markets into the countryside, the South, and small towns, theater owners provided a public arena where diverse groups reinvented the contours of public space. Designers shed the lavish cathedral-style movie house modeled on the tastes of the rich in favor of an "American" streamlined theater, complete with egalitarian seating, modernist aesthetic forms, and murals that portrayed the common producers rebuilding their society. Within these theaters viewers made a Cherokee Indian, Will Rogers, the major film star of the day. Drawing on collective Cherokee memories of a pluralistic republic, Rogers promoted calls to reshape wealth and power to realize dreams of affluence and a more just community. In Hollywood itself, a similar élan drove Rogers and others to create a Hollywood labor movement. Drawing on modern republican images, the guilds made the film capital the most unionized industry in the country, bringing together workers, women, and minorities in a common effort.

The coming of World War II and the Cold War, however, generated a major transformation in national identity that has had lasting impact to this day: It displaced the modern republican ideology in favor of a homogeneous American Way rooted in liberal capitalism and universal, classless values. It was here rather than in the thirties that the liberal consensus that scholars see permeating twentieth-century moviemaking was born. And it did not happen by accident, for it mirrored the impact of wartime political demands on the industry. Best articulated by the leader of the producers' association, Eric Johnston, the function of wartime Hollywood lay in creating a mass culture that reinforced instead of challenged official institutions. Johnston saw that the making of class harmony would realize economic growth and overcome the fears of economic depression and national security that haunted modern life.

As Johnston, big businessmen, conservative union leaders, and proponents of an older national identity saw it, the task of the future was to root out the subversive "nightmare of class conflict" that informed working-class and middle-class life in the thirties. With filmmakers voluntarily acquiescing in the World War II consensus, our plot surveys show that unlike in the thirties, the main characters dramatized a top-down conversion narrative in which they joined hierarchical military organizations and patriotic businesses. A sharp decline occurred as well in the portrayal of big business and the rich as villains. Instead, the central characters discard republican values and class antagonism and envisage the internal enemy as villains who adhere to the disruptive class and cultural loyalties of the past. The result is the uncontested linkage of Americanism in these narratives not with men and women who operate as citizens in an autonomous civic sphere or who control their own work; rather the approved characters serve in official patriotic institutions as organization men dedicated to winning the war at home and abroad.

If World War II rather than the Depression era saw the rise of the consensus ideology in the popular arts that legitimized the corporate order, it also spurred a major change in the meaning of democracy. Previously republican dreams of freedom were focused on control over work and public life. But now that state goals and big business demanded unity, the quest for personal freedom and for a realm of stability focused on private life and mass abundance. This dichotomy bred an expression of alienation and disruption coupled with the faith that a domesticated consumer culture could supply the means to overcome the "anxiety" that attended the crisis in American identity. Symbolic of that process were the enormously popular "road films" of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope in which Crosby portrayed the heroic protagonist who identified with the pursuit of success. But because success in large organizations stifled the instincts and control over work, Crosby's double, Bob Hope, made fun of those who took their adult responsibilities too seriously. Hope expressed the deep anger against the new organization, but unlike his counterparts in the thirties, he was the heroic clown who focused play and dreams of freedom on the consumer home. The result was that America was no longer personified by "Uncle Sam" but by "Uncle Sugar," who linked victory with attaining a "Shangri La" of delights with white pin-ups on the "home" front.

Hope and Crosby also set the tone for a new female ideal of the "pin-up" who embodied the patriotic vision proposed by Uncle Sugar. This meant that through the war stars like June Allyson, Betty Grable,

and Rita Hayworth incarnated on the screen the ideal pin-up whom the soldiers desired. To do their patriotic duty, heroines continued to work as the empowered women who had informed the thirties, but now they found their identity in a new category, that of "patriotic domesticity," where women sought employment but not for reasons of professional advancement or self-expression. To support the dream of the suburban home as a place to recover freedom and intimacy, women, like the men, would have to undergo a conversion experience. The heroine in Bing Crosby's *Holiday Inn* turns away from a career and divisive sexual identities. Shedding her previous lowbrow desires, she whitens her appearance to create the ideal female for a man who wishes to retreat from a meaningless work world. Indicative of that trend, the pin-up Rita Hayworth "whitened" her appearance and behavior. Shedding the image of the dark, Spanish female, she emerged as the ideal of a "classless" Caucasian girl who moved from a pluralistic public life toward a new identity as sexually attractive wife and mother. The result was that as public life became more pluralistic, the dream of suburban bliss focused on the ideals of white beauty and classlessness.

Taken together, these trends—the creation of a classless norm, the shedding of divisive sex and racial identities, the turn to the home for freedom—set the tone for postwar culture as well. It is possible that the displacement of republican ideals would have ended after World War II, if the demands for unity and authority had not once again been reinstated in response to the Cold War. As articulated by Eric Johnston, the new Cold War against the Soviet Union was not simply a negative doctrine. Rather he saw that the creation of domestic unity would restore cooperation between capital and labor and generate the politics of economic growth and prosperity. Yet because the Cold War happened in a time of peace, the anticommunist crusaders could not count on voluntary acquiescence. So to sanction their hegemony and a new historical bloc of groups, the new Hollywood leaders turned to the state, in the form of the House Un-American Activities Committee, to contain radical unions, blacklist artists, and impose censorship within the film capital.

Yet the contradictions embedded in the alteration of national identity soon became apparent. Once the anticommunist crusade institutionalized the cultural and political paradigm of consensus, moviemakers gave birth to the striking duality that came to inform postwar American culture as a whole. Our plot calculations show that the major studios created an unprecedented number of war, biblical, and western films where the heroes and heroines no longer operated as citi-

zens in an autonomous civic sphere. Rather, the new postwar American heroes, best exemplified by John Wayne, were officials, military officers, and experts operating in professional and state organizations. Here disorder no longer stems from big business or corrupt institutions, but from below in the form of enemy aliens, lower-class delinquents, and psychotic deviants who fail to conform to updated Victorian sexual roles and hierarchical organizations. That Manichaean battle to destroy the subversive enemy corresponded to a striking rise in films where violence comes to the center. The ensuing battle demanded death or containment of adversaries rather than altering the society in order to accommodate competing views within a monolithic civic sphere.

The Manichaean struggle to construct a classless Americanism also bred a series of plots aimed at purifying the self of forbidden memories. Generally belonging to the new genre of "film noir," these films revealed that the desires of the modern republican creed were now anathema. Reflective of a battle permeated with images of personal guilt, the number of characters portrayed as nonconformist antiheroes and rebellious women rises dramatically. These female "vamps" are erotic women who reject the traditional ideal of wife and mother, while the alienated, subversive men dislike the rich and modern work. If in the past, these values would have made the protagonists heroes, they now force them to inhabit the criminal world of the night. At the same time minorities also come to embody this split. Nonwhites who put aside divisive traditions of race and class interests were portrayed positively in increasing numbers of films. But villains in the western and war films increasingly took the form of nonwhite Indians, Japanese, Chinese, and later the North Vietnamese. All in all, this suggests that the rise of deviant men and women protagonists expressed the "dark" desires forced to the margins of the self and society. In these narratives officials then destroy the outsiders or use force and science, particularly the field of psychology, to compel the outsiders to adapt.

Even as these dramas constructed the sharp duality resting at the core of the postwar American Way, dissent did not die. In fact, the counterpoint to the new liberal consensus reemerged in the striking popularity of the left-wing film noir and youth films that revived the critical edge to mass art. This alternative was possible because of the continuing power of the market and audience demand. Ironically, as the once-powerful film studios lost audiences and the Hollywood "system" dissolved, the remnants of the Hollywood left retained relative autonomy. They turned to independent firms or gained autonomy in

large studios willing to experiment with innovations in narrative and film style in order to recover profits. Exemplifying the capacity of collective memory to survive repression, Billy Wilder and John Huston symbolized the move from political to cultural radicalism that informed the postwar trajectory of beat poets, abstract expressionist painters, bebop musicians, playwrights, and novelists. Their film noir productions drew on modernist techniques to evoke admiration for the antiheroes and vamps who rebelled. Wilder's *Double Indemnity* and Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* asked viewers to identify with outlaws' resistance to corrupt capitalism and revived Victorian family life.

To many viewers, this mode of resistance provided an artistic continuity between the innovations of the thirties and the confining atmosphere of the postwar period. Nowhere was that more evident than when the "beat" novelist John Clellon Holmes wrote in the mid-sixties about the impact of moviegoing on the mind of his generation for the readers of *Harper's* magazine. In the thirties he recalled that players like the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and Jean Harlow liberated the American psyche from repressive sexual and class roles. Holmes also saw movies providing a political education, warning against the dangers of big business and war. Frank Capra's fat capitalist in *Meet John Doe* symbolized for Holmes the "desperate lust for power" that bred modern totalitarians, while at the same time *All Quiet on the Western Front* taught that all wars were frauds. Once he joined the Army in World War II, he regarded Humphrey Bogart as the new existential knight, for "Bogey" remained, like Holmes, "suspicious of sentiment, verbosity and cheap idealism that came from our leaders." In this context, Holmes joined postwar beat writers' efforts to keep alive the cultural if not political side of thirties' dreams. Recalling how moviemakers influenced his politics in the thirties and postwar alienation, he told readers:

> It has been said that if you would understand the mind of my generation you must start with World War II. The war seems a likely enough starting place, and yet in a subtler sense everyone who is now between the ages of thirty-odd and forty-odd had already a common experience by the time they entered the armed services. It was the experience of moviegoing in the 1930's and early forties and it gave us a common fantasy life from which we are still dragging up the baggage that obsessed us.[9]

At a time when films from the thirties provided the "fantasy life" that still "obsessed" Holmes and his colleagues, remnants of the Hollywood left found in the rebellious youth stars a vehicle to bring their quest for an alternative to Cold War culture into the light of day. By tapping a new audience composed of an unprecedented number of adolescents, these filmmakers—those who resisted as well as cooperated with the anticommunist investigations of Hollywood—found a way to challenge the monolithic civic sphere. They adapted the voices of resistance to create characters who found a new freedom in exploring the boundaries of instinct that subverted the personal if not political prescriptions of official norms. Their films, featuring James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe, recovered the capacity of mass art to serve as a counterculture to official values. Whether it emerged in *Rebel Without a Cause, The Wild One, Some Like It Hot,* or *The Misfits,* that counterculture celebrated the capacity of youth to renew a vernacular art rooted in the promise of the hybrid protagonists. As these characters merged images linked to white and black culture, drama and comedy, and male and female, each restored the vitality of a composite personality capable of reinventing itself. In essence, Brando, Dean, and Monroe were cultural radicals who reshaped the dichotomy between work and play that had split apart under the shadow of war.

The youth stars were thus the start of something new but also reflected the move from political to cultural radicalism of the writers and directors of their best films. Yet the youth stars also remained trapped in the highly individualistic nature of that rebellion. Increasingly manufacturers capitalized on their appeal by mediating the personas of Dean, Brando, and Monroe through a perspective that labeled them as emblematic of childlike or "adolescent" impulses that had to be controlled or shed with the advent of "adult" responsibility. Yet this quality sold products, since it appealed to linkage of the consumer culture and leisure with adolescent rebellion removed from the adult realm of responsibility in the daylight world of work and politics. Along these lines *Entertainment Weekly* reported in 1993 that a mammoth commercial "machinery spews out Marilyn tee shirts, collectors' plates, calendars, clocks, ash trays, address books, shower curtains and hundreds of other items worth over 30 million in sales *every* year." The tragedy of Monroe's suicide and Dean's death contributed to the impulse to keep this rebellious spirit apart from public life by allowing one to dismiss their work as either self-destructive or lacking seriousness. The result was that mass art created by the remnants of the Hollywood left generated resisting images. But in the hands of advertisers the youth rebels also advanced the interests of big business in search of markets.[10]

The recovery of utopian expectations flowing from the thirties to the fifties could not be contained indefinitely. On the contrary, they reemerged directly into the political arena of the sixties. The stimulus emerged from the civil rights movement led by African Americans, who had been excluded from the consensus. Not only did the civil rights movement revitalize public life, but it spurred social criticism and reform of mainstream middle-class life. Once the political movements of the sixties spread, often admirers of Dean, Brando, and Monroe looked to them as models of dissent against prescribed gender and racial roles. The prominent feminist Gloria Steinem combined the editorship of *Ms.* with writing a serious biography of Marilyn Monroe. Steinem titled the first chapter of *Norma Jean* "The Woman Who Will Not Die" and linked Monroe's life to the quest for female liberation. In addition, the rock singer Madonna, though recognizing the limits of Monroe's dependency, portrayed her in song and on stage as a model for women like herself who refused to remain subordinate and confine their sexuality to the privatized home.

The male youth rebels also had a similar influence. Brando participated in the civil rights, antiwar, and American Indian movements of the sixties and seventies. In explaining the roots of the radical beliefs of the sixties, Tom Hayden, one of the founders of Students for a Democratic Society, recalled that he "was a college editor, very influenced by the Beat Generation. My thing was to hitchhike all over the country. I was always very divided between what now you would call a radical and what then didn't have a name . . . it was mainly like trying to mimic the life of James Dean or something like that."[11] Little wonder that John Huston, speaking in the sixties from his self-imposed exile in Ireland from Cold War politics praised Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) as a recovery of forgotten memories. As Huston saw it, the film linked the sentiments expressed in his work to the new art and political experimentation of the sixties, for it was, as he explained, simply

> an extraordinary work, steeped in the unknown and adventure. . . . An adventurer is somebody who begins by leaving behind his house and who then abandons all conventions and rules to seek something for its intrinsic values. . . . This search then becomes their reason for being. . . . *Bonnie and Clyde* fit in to that category: They had taken a funny way, a strange way, all those murders, robberies, assassinations—but they were succeeding in creating their own world. They were recreating their own life![12]

It was also not accidental that when Huston expressed the continuity between the spirit of the thirties and that of the sixties that those

who had cut their spurs in containing that élan should also operate on a larger scale. For when the politics of economic growth and anticommunism faltered under the impact of civil rights and the war in Vietnam, the promoters of a counterculture politics celebrated the arts of collective resistance and individualism. Yet the loss of a republican tradition with which to criticize capitalism and activate political skills to solve common problems was an Achilles' heel.

The challenge to Cold War policies and racial and sexual roles institutionalized in the Cold War stimulated Ronald Reagan to leave Hollywood to defend the liberal consensus he had done so much to build. Along the way the former Actors Guild leader turned away from the party of Roosevelt to the Republicans to revitalize the ideology of traditional family values, economic growth, and anticommunism. Indicative of how much Reagan saw this battle in terms of his memories of the anticommunist crusade of the forties, a young reporter interviewed Reagan as he ran for the presidency in 1980. Afterwards the journalist wrote that it was simply remarkable that

> Reagan, with no prompting from me, in what seems in fact to be a compulsive non-sequitur, had resurrected events that took place some thirty years earlier, his wounds still raw and his hatred of the enemy unyielding. Most curious of all is that his view of the Soviet menace today is so deeply colored by events that took place in Hollywood more than a generation ago, as if today's Soviet government were simply the Hollywood communists projected on a larger screen.[13]

Strong testimony indeed to the way that the rise of the making of Cold War America in Hollywood between 1930 and 1960 influenced events well into the 1980s. And if the cultural wars of our own day—the desire of conservatives to restore the ideal home and polity of the fifties as the national norm—are any indication, the residue of the battle over the content of the media and culture continues to influence our current politics and may engage the American people well into the new millennium.

Appendix 1
Sampling Methods and Research Data

The battle over the contours of Americanism gained visibility throughout the nation and informed a major trend in moviemaking. Where this was most in evidence was in the broad shift in values informing the plot samples evaluated in this study. Generally I have assumed that audience gratification is gained psychologically by identification with main characters. In the context of this study, this provides ways to define the boundaries of public life and national identity—who is to be included or excluded within these boundaries. Since viewers identify with a particular character, protagonists exemplify ideological positions and debates. By ideology I mean a worldview that allows one to organize facts into a set of beliefs that guide one's view of the past, present, and future. Though we cannot gauge other aspects of moviemaking—subplots, stylistic devices, performances—a longitudinal study allows us to assess how ideological values are modified in relation to new social conditions from the New Deal years through the Cold War years.

These conclusions were derived by my research assistants and me from a systematic sampling technique that draws on hundreds of film plots. The primary source was the *Motion Picture Herald* (*MPH*)—the film industry's major trade journal of the period studied. *MPH* offered exhibitors (i.e., theater managers) a variety of services, one of which was weekly digests of recent film releases in the form of plot synopses. These film-plot synopses served as the basis for our sample and its broad categories. To ensure consistent coverage of the time period, film synopses were drawn from every even-numbered year, and two film plots per month were collated. That is, we applied twenty-four films per year to the sample's categories.

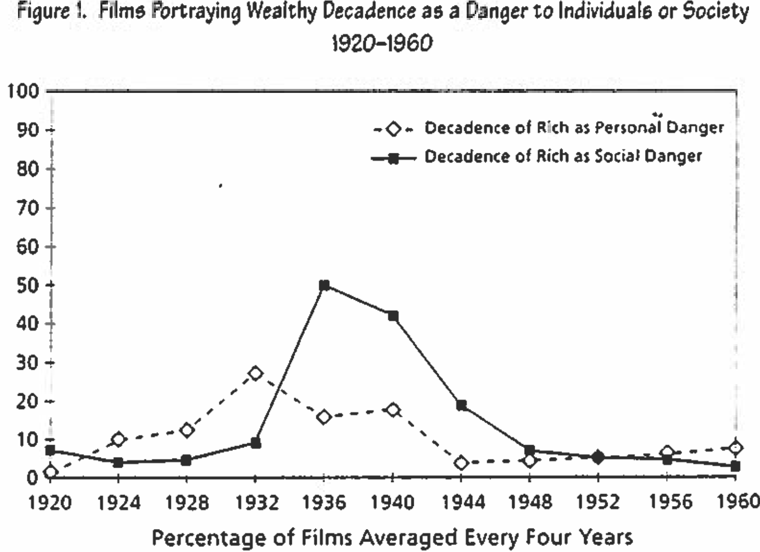
To ensure that both A- and B-class films—films geared for first-run feature exhibition and films made for double bills, respectively—were included in the sample, we used the following methods: We chose the first film review of every month and also the last film reviewed in the penultimate week of every month. This ensured that there was consis-

tent spacing of the product over time and that both A and B films would be represented. Each synopsis was then submitted to evaluation according to a list of categories that covered various aspects of the narrative. Every time a prime feature of the plot under scrutiny filled any of our categories, this was noted. We then collated categories gathered for each year and put them in a "totals" chart. They were compared with others in the sample across time. This material was then converted into percentages that appear in visual form on our figures in appendix 2. Lastly, each figure has been calculated on four-year intervals in order to clearly discern long-term alterations over time.

Appendix 2

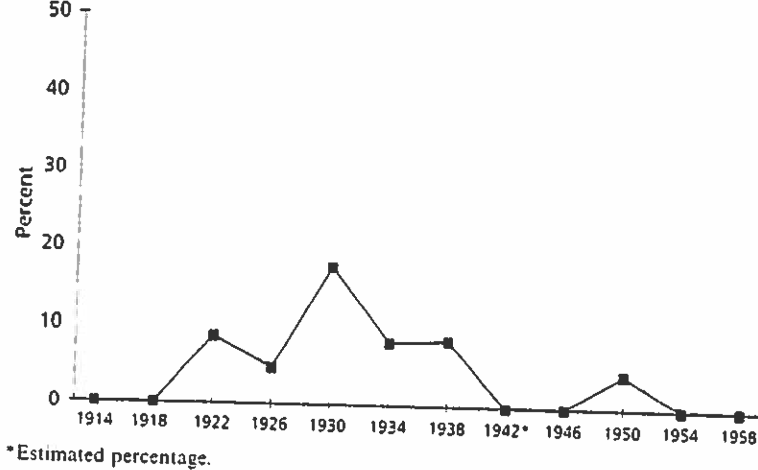
Trends in Film Plots and the Changing Face of American Ideology

Figure 1. Films Portraying Wealthy Decadence as a Danger to Individuals or Society 1920–1960



These are plots where the central protagonists perceive that the lifestyle of the rich endangers themselves or society. Typically in these narratives, the rich will commit crimes, but then blame them on the poor or the hero or heroine. This theme of the dangers of the decadent rich emerges in Will Rogers, "Thin Man," and Frank Capra films.

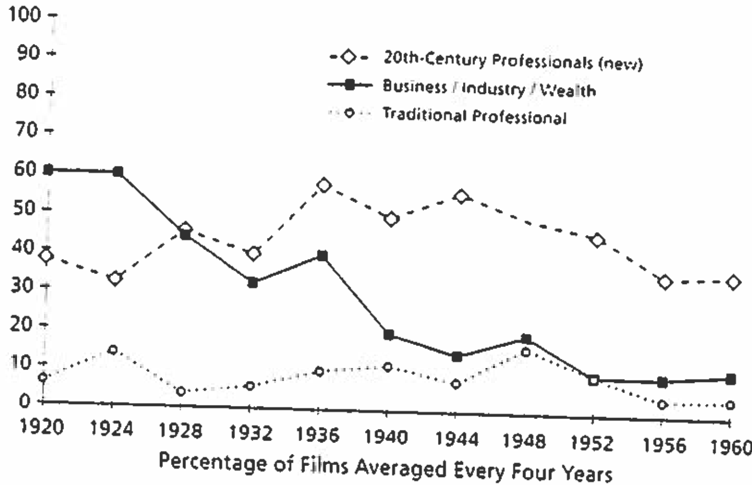
Figure 2. Films Featuring Big Business Villains
1914–1958



*Estimated percentage.

The category of big business villain appears when local bankers, manufacturers, or merchants falsely accuse the hero of a crime, threaten to foreclose on a mortgage, or align with a corrupt politician to advance their interests against the public good.

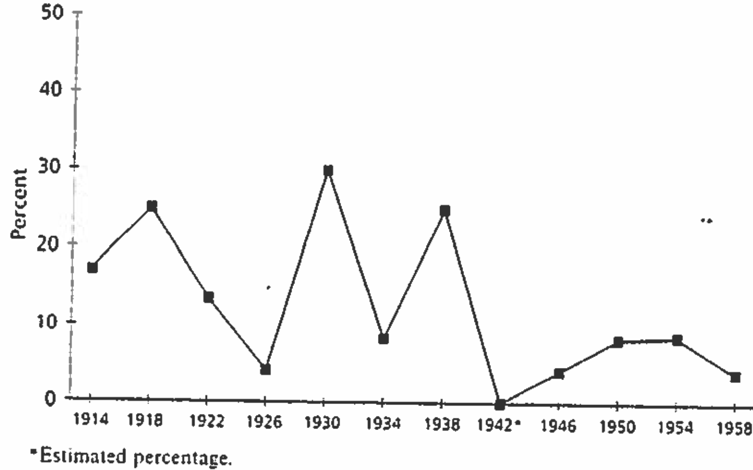
Figure 3. Alterations in the Occupations of the Protagonists
1920–1960



We calculated this category by simply noting which class or group heroes or heroines found themselves situated in. By th...

ern, twentieth-century professional would be manifest in a Will Rogers film or in the "Thin Man" or "Hardy Family" series.

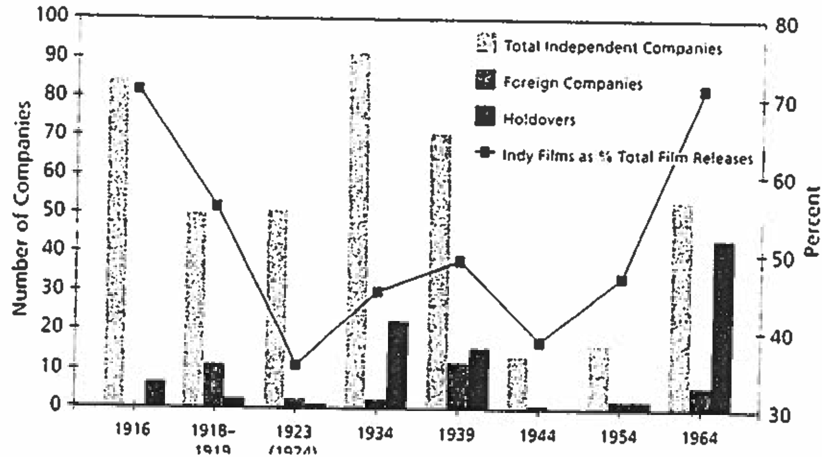
Figure 4. Films Featuring Progressive Reform of Society
1914–1958



*Estimated percentage.

These are films in which the actions of the hero or heroine are clearly linked to public activities that serve to reform society, overcome prejudice, or achieve justice.

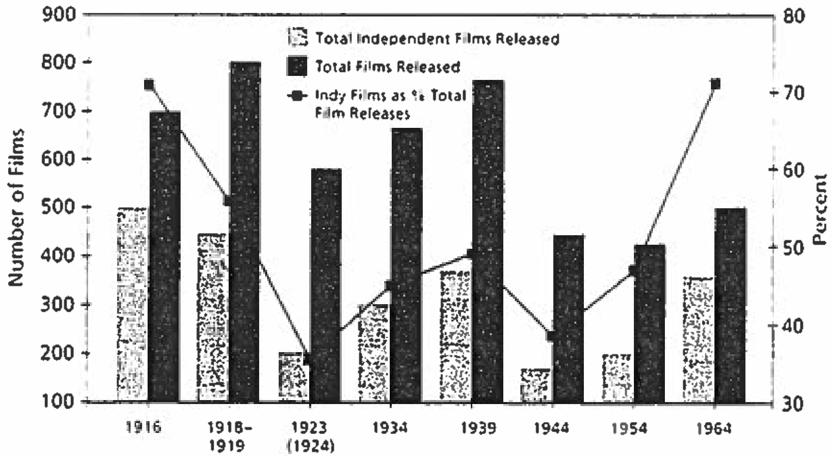
Figure 5. Independent Companies, Holdovers, and Films Released
Total Indy Companies, Foreign Indy Companies, Holdovers,
& Indy Films as % Total Film Releases, 1916–1964



This figure illustrates the number of independent companies in film production, as well as the number of foreign companies importing films to the United States. Holdovers represent the companies from the previous four years that were still in business. Generally the figure shows that turnover was rapid and consistent. The line graph illustrates the overall percentage of films released by an independent company or producer.

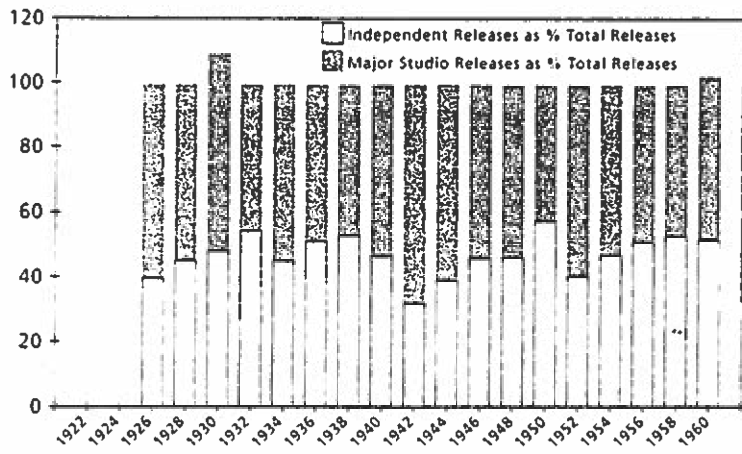
The number of companies was calculated by counting the independents listed in the section entitled "Independents" in *Film Daily Yearbook*. The number of films produced yearly, as well as the number produced by the majors, was derived from Joel Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (New York: Crown, 1988), p. 280. His figures are drawn from a survey of the major trade journals.

Figure 6. Total Independent Films Compared to Total Films Released
Total Indy Films, Total Films, & Indy Films as % of Total Films, 1916–1964



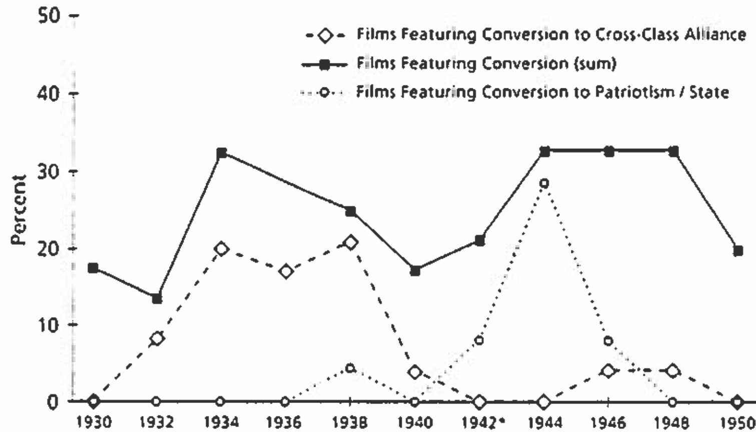
This figure compares the number of films produced by the majors with the number of films produced by the independents. Sources are listed above in figure 5.

Figure 7. Independents versus Majors: A Detailed Look
Percentage of Total Films Released In United States, 1922–1960



This more precise chart allows us to see that in some years the number of films made by independents exceeded that of the majors as a percentage of total releases. The sources are listed in figure 5.

Figure 8. Conversion Narratives
1930–1950



*Estimated percentages (only 75 percent of the sample available for tabulation).

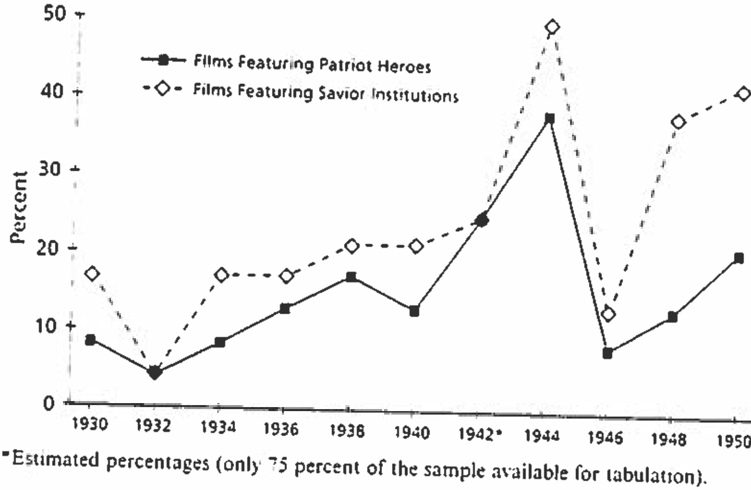
These films feature a character who changes loyalty from a key person, community, or nation to another entity. There are three kinds of conversions: individual, group, and object lesson. The latter takes the form

of a rereading of history. Here, the implication is that if the conversion had in fact taken place, then "we"—the audience—would not have the problems we have today.

In the thirties, narratives of cross-class alliance dominate. In such films, characters renounce their loyalty to the upper class and align with the common people. Such conversions often involve the marriage of a hero or heroine to a character of the opposite class, suggesting a shift in cultural authority and alignment. Examples of this can be found in the Will Rogers films.

Narratives of conversion to the patriotic state occur during World War II, with repercussions into the Cold War era. They involve conversions from an alliance with an oppositional group to an alliance with institutions that represent national interests and patriotism. Examples of this occur in *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944) and *Air Force* (1943).

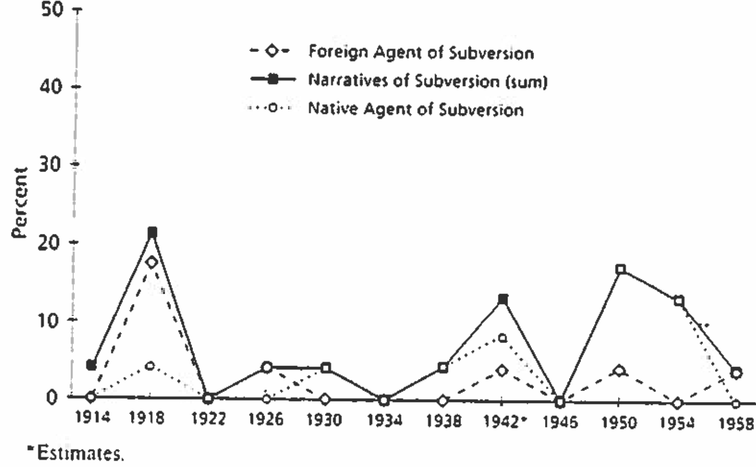
Figure 9. Patriot Heroes and Savior Institutions 1930–1950



*Estimated percentages (only 75 percent of the sample available for tabulation).

These films feature characters whose individual interests converge with those of state institutions, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation or the armed services, dedicated to protecting the nation from foreign or domestic enemies. Since such characters give their loyalty to institutions that "save" the people, we have also called these entities "savior" institutions.

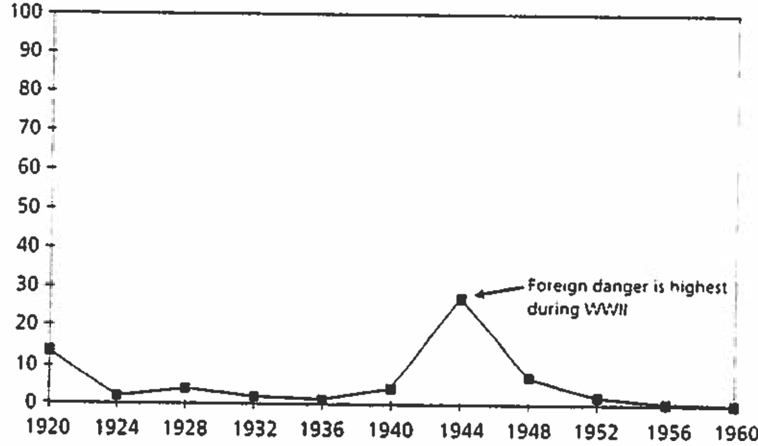
Figure 10. Films Featuring a Narrative of Subversion 1914–1958



*Estimates.

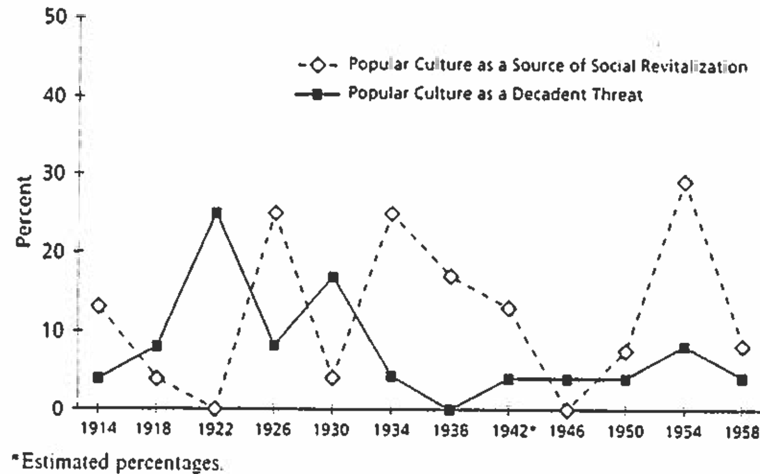
These plots feature an agent who intends harm to the social order, the state, or the dominant ideology of unity identified with the national interest. Subversion can involve deception or adherence to an ideology that runs counter to patriotism, such as fascism in *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) or communism as in *The Fearmakers* (1958) or *My Son John* (1952). A foreign agent of subversion is someone who resides outside the United States; a native agent resides inside the country.

Figure 11. Films Portraying Foreign Elements as a Danger to Hero/Heroine 1920–1960



These are films in which, say, the Germans or the Japanese are seen as a threat, such as in war films.

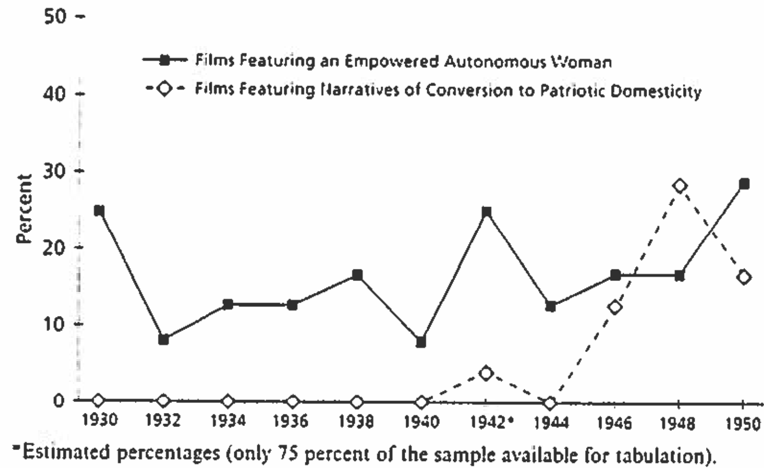
Figure 12. Films Featuring Popular Culture
1914–1958



*Estimated percentages.

Here the characters perceive that the institutions and values associated with the "new" popular culture—nightclubs, popular dance, the new woman, "youth," cross-cultural exchange, jazz, or rock and roll—are either a threat or a means to social renewal.

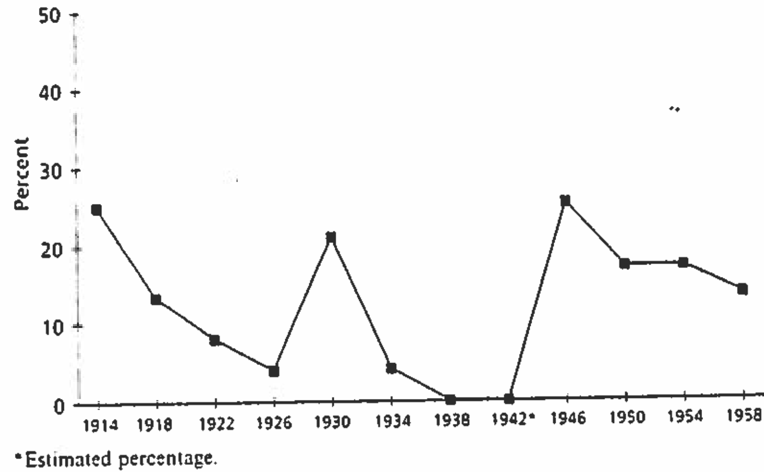
Figure 13. Empowered Woman and Conversion to Patriotic Domesticity
1930–1950



*Estimated percentages (only 75 percent of the sample available for tabulation).

A female lead who participates in public life is an "empowered woman." She competes with males. The ideal of patriotic domesticity informs the actions of women in films like *Since You Went Away* (1944) or *Hollywood Canteen* (1944). Here, the woman works, but her identity is found in supporting the home to which her husband or lover—who serves a patriotic cause in a savior institution—looks to find freedom.

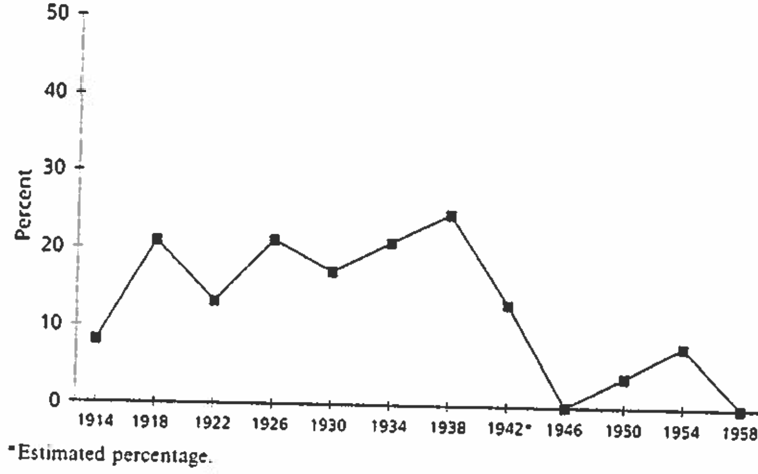
Figure 14. Films Featuring Female Occupation as Wife Only
1914–1958



*Estimated percentage.

In these films the heroine has no career outside of being a wife or mother.

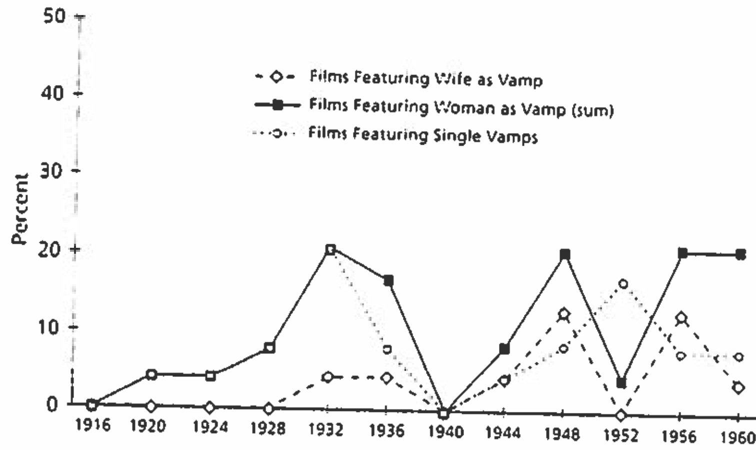
Figure 15. Films Featuring Marriage/Romance Across Class Lines
1914–1958



*Estimated percentage.

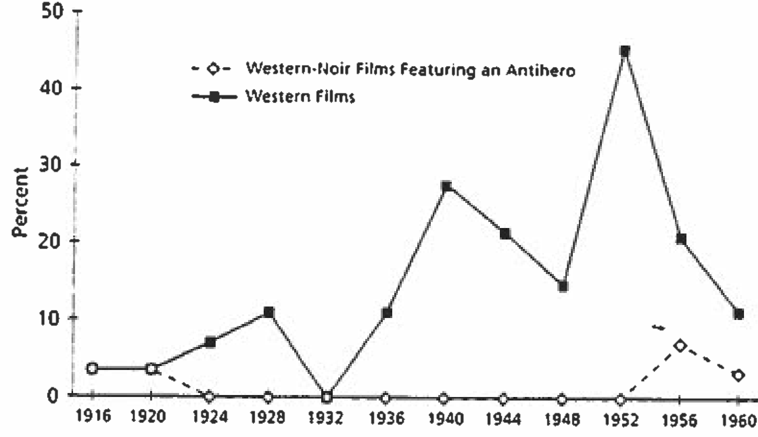
These are films in which we could clearly note that lovers came from different classes. Their romance and marriage often promises to create reciprocity across social divisions.

Figure 16. Films Featuring Vamps, Organized by Their Marital Status
1916–1960



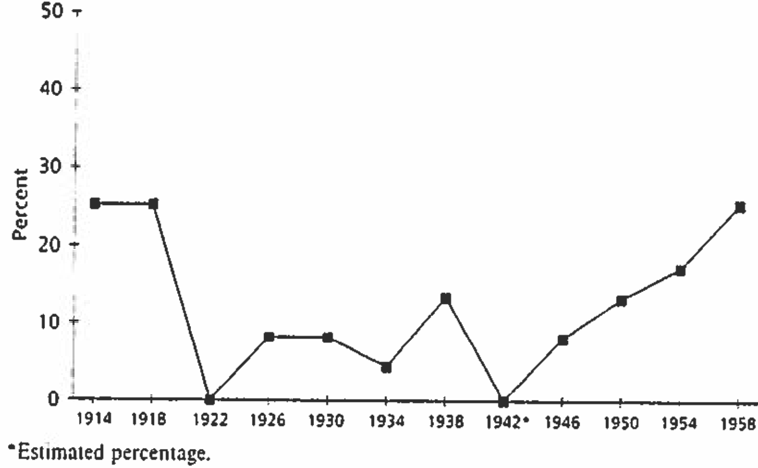
This category features a sexually empowered woman who has the power to seduce and manipulate men to her advantage, creating a threat to the social order.

Figure 17. Western and Western-Noir Films
1916–1960



These are films taking place in the American frontier. Western noir, which appears in the fifties, indicates a film where the central character is alienated from the ideals of the West and masculinity, as in *The Misfits* (1961).

Figure 18. Films Ending in Violence
1914–1958

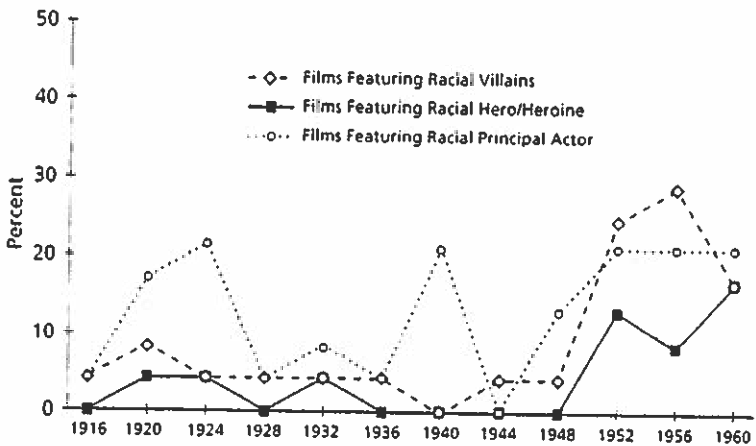


*Estimated percentage.

The central plot tension involves the clash of two individuals, groups, or countries. The resolution to that problem lies in the violent destruc-

tion of the adversary. Most war, biblical, and western films illustrate this theme, but so do film noir and crime and spy films.

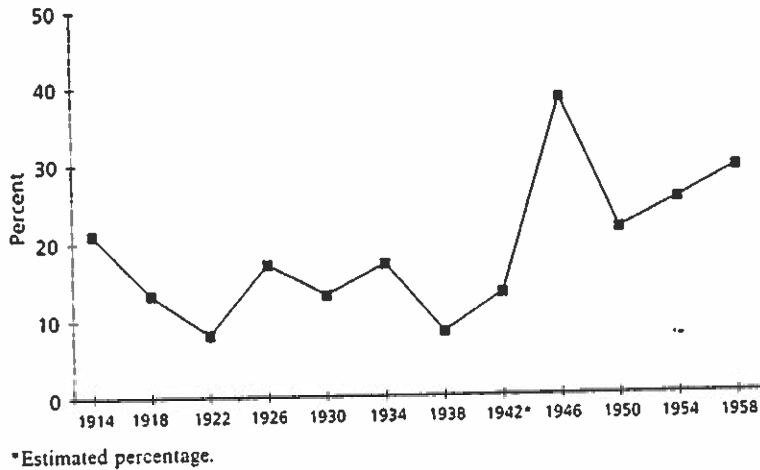
Figure 19. Films Featuring Racial Heroes/Heroines, Villains, and Principal Actors 1916–1960



These are films that feature clearly identified racial minorities as either heroes or heroines, villains, or principal actors.

It is interesting to note that the category of villain in the Depression was class-based—represented by the rich and big business. But in the forties and fifties, usually the villain is racially rather than class-marked. See and compare with figures 1 and 2.

Figure 20. Films Featuring Antiheroes 1914–1958

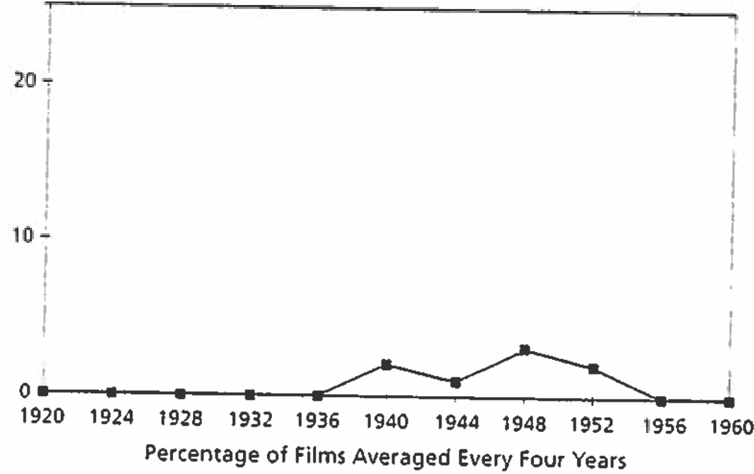


*Estimated percentage.

This category indicates a male lead who can be weak or strong, but whose ethical motives are also ambivalent. His confusion is often highlighted against an empowered, seductive woman. The antihero is often deluded into the idea that he can master a situation, only to find himself a pawn in someone else's game. Often his masculinity is under duress, as his male agency becomes intertwined with sex.

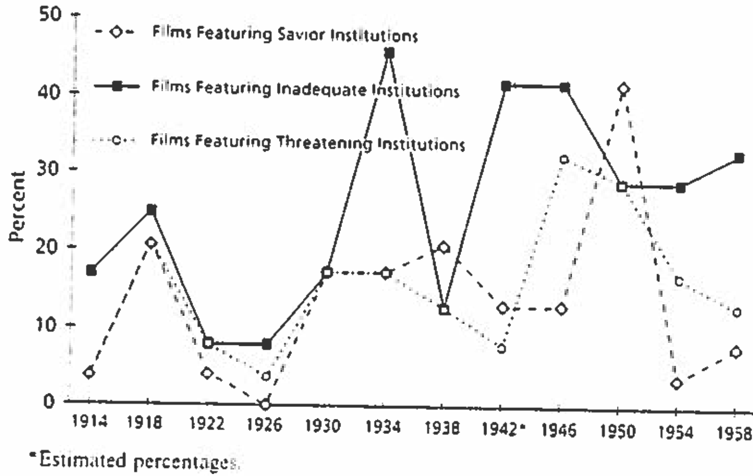
At the same time the antihero can be more virtuous than the guardians of official institutions, as in *High Sierra* (1941).

Figure 21. Noir Endings
1920–1960



These are films in which a happy ending is not realized. In most cases the central character, often the antihero, is defeated or meets an unhappy end. This corresponds to a world out of control that the characters cannot master.

Figure 22. Films Featuring Institutions
1914–1958



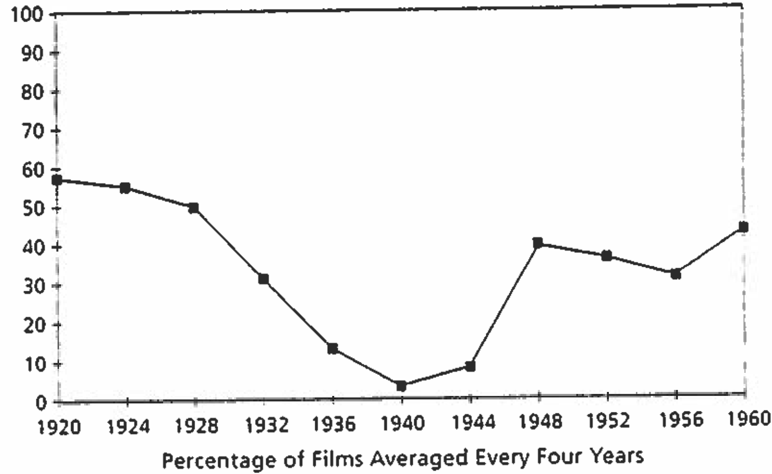
*Estimated percentages.

Inadequate Institutions (world out of control). This category bears a correlation to the rise of antiheroes, noir endings, and reform agents. The inadequate institutions correspond to plots where the main characters have a fatalistic view of authority and official institutions.

Threatening Institutions. This category covers films where legitimate authority actively prosecutes innocent or morally good individuals. Classic examples occur in war films, which pit the evil enemy institutions against good domestic ones. Both, in this case, are legitimate, but they threaten the protagonists.

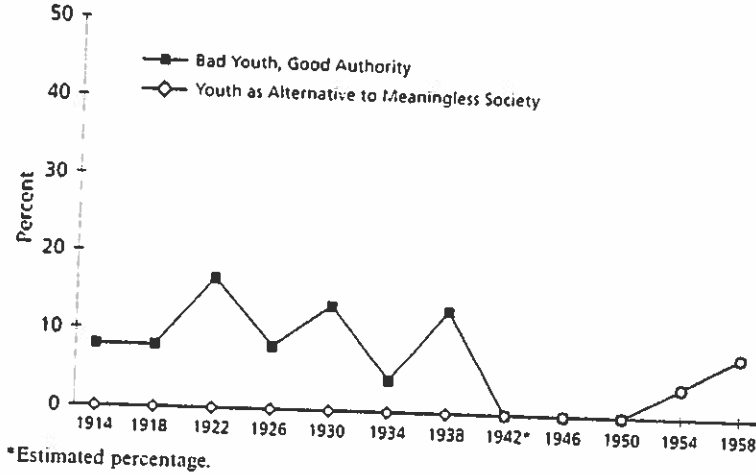
Savior Institutions. Savior institutions are powerful and gain their legitimacy by their capacity to advance national goals and patriotism.

Figure 23. Films Where Main Character Is Endangered by Personal Weakness
1920–1960



Weak character traits are associated normally with the dangers presented by the new woman, nightclubs, Chinatown, dance halls, jazz, and modern morals. Since in the thirties, the new, modern culture is Americanized, the danger falls dramatically. Yet with the arrival of film noir, pessimism and vamp characters appear once again.

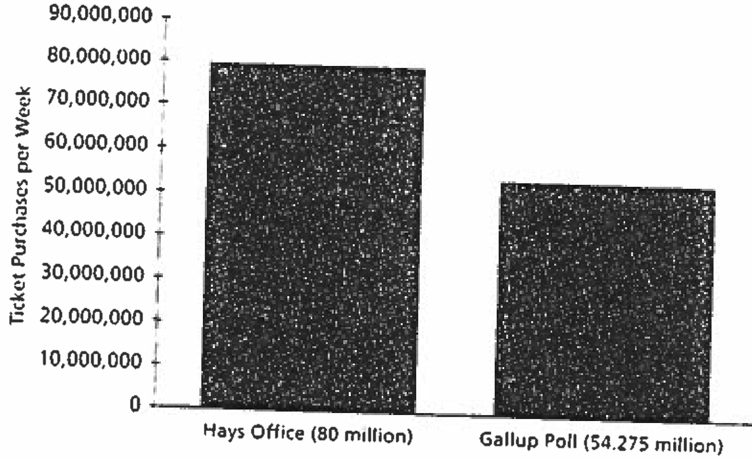
Figure 24. Films Featuring Youth
1914–1958



*Estimated percentage.

This category measures those films that focus solely on the problems of youth. In the thirties, they are redeemed by adults and adapt to a reformed society. By the fifties, however, such as in James Dean's films, they are seen as an alternative to the adult world.

Figure 25. Two Estimates of the Average Number of Tickets Purchased Weekly in 1940

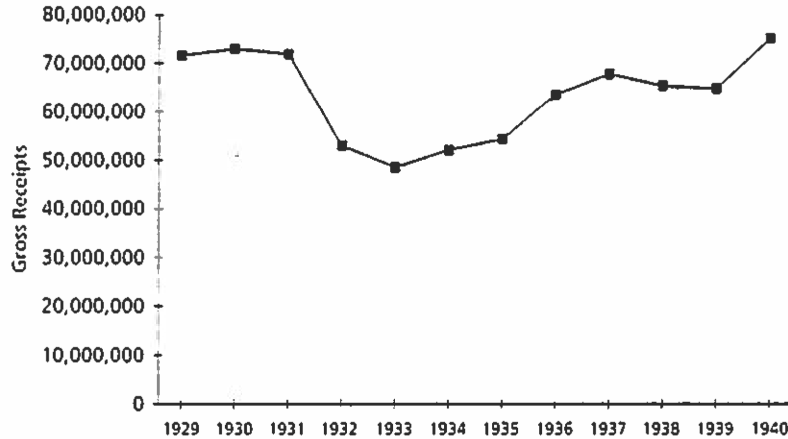


This comparison demonstrates that the Hays Office overestimated the weekly audience by about 25 million filmgoers. A contemporary Gallup Poll accurately estimated the audience to be 54.275 million weekly.

This independent evidence corresponded exactly to our calculations cited in figure 27, leading to the firm conclusion that our revised figures more accurately reflect rising weekly patronage.

SOURCE: This was compiled from data supplied by the American Institute of Public Opinion, *Increasing Profits with Audience Research* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1940), p. 140.

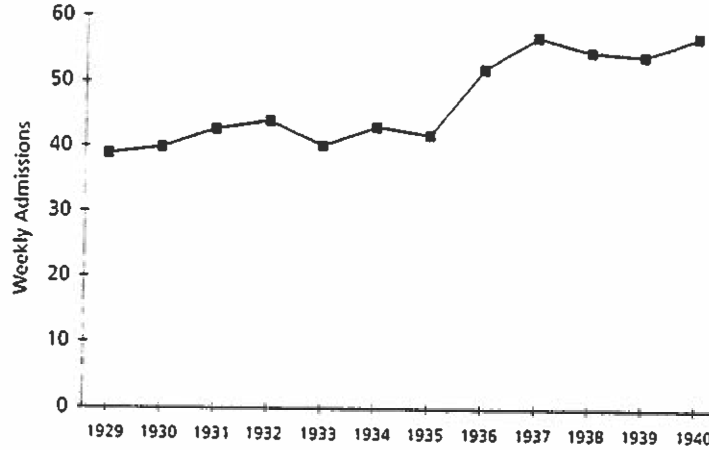
Figure 26. Gross Receipts in Motion Picture Industry
1929–1940



This figure demonstrates that receipts in the film industry during the thirties surpassed the total amount accrued in the last year of prosperity in 1929. In addition, given that deflation was about one quarter over the decade, the real income of the film industry rose rather than declined in the thirties.

SOURCES: Gross receipts are derived from the U.S. Department of Commerce, *Survey of Current Business*, June 1944, p. 151; *National Income Supplement to Current Business*, 1959, pp. 206–208; *Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*, Series H 506.

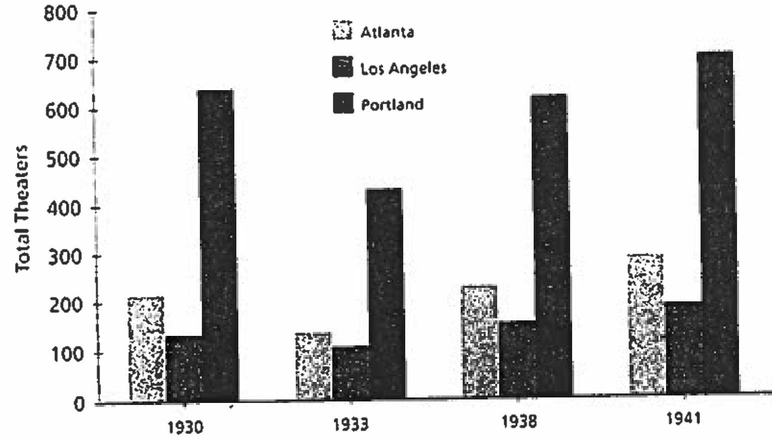
Figure 27. Weekly Admissions to Movies in the United States
1929–1940



This figure reveals that admissions did not decline, as statistics derived from the Hays Office claim. Rather, admissions rose by almost a third from 1929 to 1940, increasing from 40 million to almost 60 million filmgoers, and revealing that in the thirties a new mass culture spread to the people in all regions.

SOURCES: Average ticket prices are derived from *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures,* 1934; "Box Office Receipts," *Motion Picture Herald,* January and June of each year from 1931–1938; for 1940–1945, see Michael Conant, *Monopoly and the Motion Picture Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). The average prices for each year were added to total receipts (see figure 26) to get attendance.

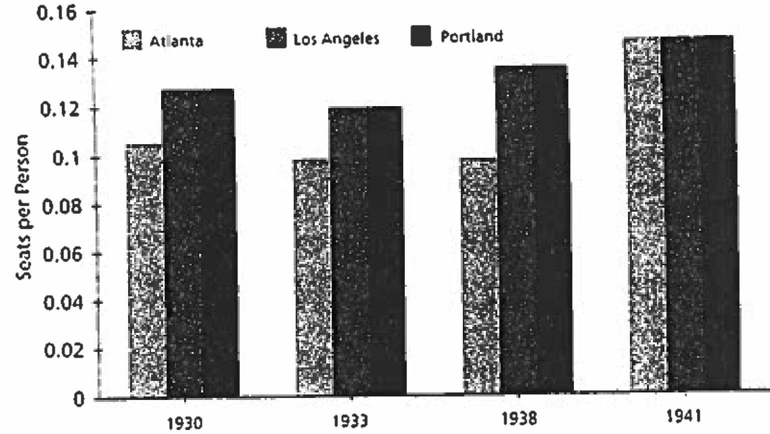
Figure 28. Theater Expansion in Three Major Regional Cities
1930–1941



This figure shows that the number of theaters expanded dramatically in the thirties. When coupled with the spread of radio in the same decade, this figure reveals that it was in the thirties that a "mass" American culture spread across regions and classes.

SOURCES: "Theater Listing, Outstate, Non-Metro, 1930–1941," *Film Daily Yearbook, 1930, 1933, 1938, 1941*

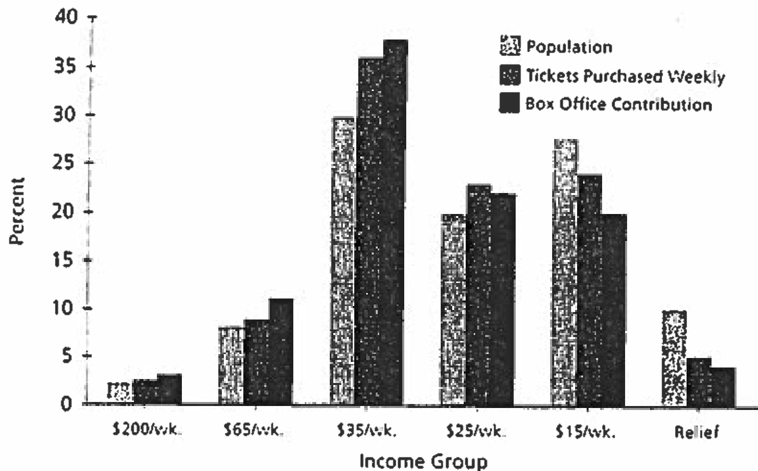
Figure 29. Audience Expansion in Three Major Regional Cities
1930–1941



This figure illustrates how in three representative regional cities, one in the South, one in the West, and one in the Northwest, the number of seats per person gradually increased during the Depression era.

SOURCE: From "Theater Listing" section of *Film Daily Yearbook, 1930, 1933, 1938, 1941,* we calculated the number of seats in each city and divided the total by the population statistics recorded in *Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present.*

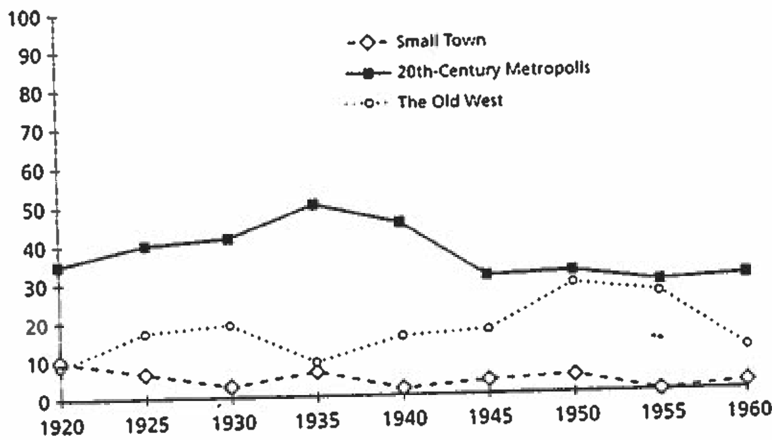
Figure 30. Weekly Box-Office Contributions by Income Groups, 1940



This figure demonstrates that the typical theatergoer in 1940 had a family income of $28 per week. No less than 88 percent of all tickets purchased in the United States that year were purchased by persons whose family income was lower than $50 per week.

SOURCES: American Institute of Public Opinion, *Increasing Profits with Audience Research* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1940), p. 145.

Figure 31. Location of Film Plot 1920–1960



This category measures the locations that provide the setting for the film narrative.