

British colonial officials' fears about the bad influence of some films often combined with beliefs that films could be used for propagandistic purposes. Officials in England and India hoped to use film to maintain order and sustain the loyalty of Indian subjects. Early British-made documentary films about India presented imperial achievements, official visits, aristocrats' hunting expeditions, and military parades as spectacular displays intended to legitimate imperial rule. On the other hand, Indian-made mythological films suited the goal of nationalists to assert the superiority of Indian culture.⁸⁰

In this early era of film, elite reaction, west, east, and south was to fear the effects of movies and movie-going on the lower orders, whether working classes in Europe, or low-income natives in European colonies and dependencies. Once Hollywood attained success exporting its films world-wide, elites in these societies responded with alarm to the popularity of this foreign culture among the same lower orders. Government responses thus linked the two issues of disturbance to stratification hierarchies and cultural invasion. This made problematic the desire for modern technology and industrial development on the one hand and upholding traditional culture and values on the others. These strains would continue as major issues for post-colonial nations after independence, as we will see in ensuing chapters.

3

The Hollywood Studio Era, 1910s-1940s

In 1926, William Seabury, General Counsel to the Motion Picture Board of Trade and the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry, quoted Thomas Edison saying, "whoever controls the motion picture industry controls the most powerful medium of influence over the people."⁸¹ In this era film was *the* screen medium in America, a highly organized, vertically integrated oligopoly, with annual ticket sales in the billions. The basic characteristics of the industry, including its relocation in Hollywood, began to emerge by the mid 1910s. The mature economic and cultural formation, the Hollywood studio system, would remain dominant and essentially unchanged for three decades, until the US government dismantled the vertical integration and television arrived after World War II.⁸²

A handful of Hollywood studios had centralized control of film production, distribution and exhibition. They shaped what films were made, how much each was promoted and distributed, and in what circumstances each was viewed. They even colonized other entertainments, such as the Broadway theater and recorded music industries, to feed its maul. Most important, the concentration of Hollywood decision-making and routinization of production resulted in a uniformity in style of Hollywood films from the 1920s to the 1960s. Noting this, French auteur François Truffaut said, "We love the American cinema because the films all resemble each other."⁸³ Such consistency and repetition did much to naturalize underlying viewpoints, values and beliefs encoded in these films, making them a greater influence on American screen culture and on American culture generally than they otherwise may have been.

At the same time, Hollywood succeeded in containing the controversy and criticism that had constituted a national discourse before this consolidation. Movie-going became a normal part of American everyday life. Audiences were uncontroversial and only sporadically surfaced in public discourse. This was demonstrated by the mild reception to the thirteen-volume Payne Fund Studies published in 1933, probably still the largest single research effort to document the effects of film on child audiences.⁴ Consequently, there is less readily visible historical documentation of audiences in these years, since it is mostly buried in memoirs and business papers rather than reported in daily newspapers.

Place and situation played their part in creating an industry screen culture. Its location and concentration in L. A. – paralleling concentration of other industries, such as auto in Detroit, steel in Pittsburgh, clothes and publishing in New York – contributed to a distinctive culture among the Hollywood community whose influence would become nationwide through its films. Places of exhibition were controlled to a significant degree by Hollywood, from the architecture to films exhibited, as well as prices, policies, and management of audiences within those theaters. Once established, it became good business for Hollywood to make uncontroversial films featuring studio-manufactured movie stars that were stereotypes of mainstream American values and beliefs and that avoided questions about power and inequality in America and other sensitive issues.

What was Hollywood?

Hollywood in its heyday was: a geographic, cultural, and mythical place; a vertically integrated oligopoly of film production; an efficient production system based on a detailed division of labor and decision-making centralized at the top; a distinct 'classical' film style; films that predominantly reinforced the status quo, and were consistently non-controversial – except for highly profitable sex and violence; and an audience experience delivered and shaped by the spectator position framed in the films and by the theater environment in which the films were viewed. These features were not planned and introduced systematically, but arose from an accretion of incremental decisions that addressed immediate pressures and problems of the business. Taken together however, they produced a monolithic film culture that at its peak, presented a fairly consistent message to four billion American viewers each year, making it a powerful force in shaping culture.

We will review several factors composing the Hollywood studio system, including its location, industry concentration and integration, the production process, marketing and distribution. It was the product of these, the films that led to the *nom de plume*, the classical Hollywood cinema, consistent in style and general content through these decades.

Making Hollywood

Film-making in the US at first was concentrated in the largest cities at the time, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Los Angeles was a smaller city, ranked seventeenth in population in the US, smaller than Buffalo, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Newark NJ in 1910. The move to Hollywood was not to serve a Western market. It had begun just as feature film and outdoor action series were gaining popularity, and in the midst of the industrial struggle between manufacturers licensed by the Motion Picture Patent Company (MPPC) and the Independents opposed to it.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the rapid growth of nickelodeons in the 1900s had required a huge expansion in film production, pressing existing companies to build studios and increase output, and attracting new entrepreneurs into film-making. One way which companies accomplished this was to multiply their film units. Previously, each manufacturer relied mostly upon a single director who led a team of personnel that ground out new films day after day. To increase production, companies established multiple units of this sort, the director-unit system of production, beginning in 1908, often with each unit specializing in a particular genre. For example, in 1911 independent Biograph had units led by D. W. Griffith, Frank Powell, and Mack Sennett.⁵

The established genre of short comedies was quite popular among nickelodeon audiences. But manufacturers needed something to supplement this without incurring great expense building new studios. Outdoor filming fitted this need. However, the centers of film production around New York and Chicago had limited days of sunshine and clement weather for filming. In winter when natural light diminished in the northern cities, companies sent director units to the southwest to continue filming. In 1911, *Moving Picture World* cited the advantages of southern California over other locations: good weather, a variety of exteriors, a good labor supply compared to other west locations, a growing number of other film firms located there along with the development of specialized services for film-making, and good train services to other parts of the nation. By 1915 Los Angeles was the

principal American film production center, and by 1922 it accounted for 84 percent of all US film, making Hollywood synonymous with film.⁶ Among the first new products was the western film. By 1911, six film manufacturers had year-round units stationed in southern California, all specializing in westerns. Essanay alone had made fifty-two one-reel stories during the 1909/10 season. Cowboy films were well-suited to taking advantage of the outdoor landscapes in the Los Angeles basin. Westerns also were relatively inexpensive and quick to produce: outdoor filming required no scenery, and traveling troupes could hire local entertainers and cowboys at modest wages. Westerns also constituted a uniquely American genre to compete against European film imports for the American market.⁷

The western derived from and built upon dime novels and *Wild West* traveling shows already familiar to audiences. This, combined with the spectacle of western vistas and sensationalist stories, helped to make the genre very popular. Westerns developed as character studies focusing on an individual cowboy and his exploits in film after film, and with the leading actors promoted as stars. At first, these westerns featured sensational figures such as the outlaw James gang that had captured the imagination of the American public, renegades who “fought the system” as heroes, which no doubt added to their appeal to working-class audiences.⁸

More generally, Los Angeles geography was projected through Hollywood’s films and publicity of the time. The landscape appeared – and continues to appear – in many films, not only westerns, but even in films fictionally located in places with entirely different landscape. The purported lavish and leisure lives of Hollywood personae became a part of the myth of Los Angeles easy living. This mythical construction was captured in a quote, “Here all life is better than anywhere else in the universe,” a paradise in the desert. In this mythical construction, L. A. was reduced to Hollywood, and Hollywood culture became L. A.’s.⁹

From the era of the MPPC to that of the Hollywood studios, there was a turnover of the dominant companies. Its formation in 1909 led many excluded companies (the ‘Independents’) to join together in 1910 to form a competing distribution company, Motion Picture Distribution and Sales. These two factions formed a duopoly that dominated distribution, but also were engaged in legal battles about licenses for motion picture patents. However, this was short lived. Longer narrative feature films of four or more reels became the norm by the mid 1910s, bringing a change in distribution from film exchanges renting short films priced by the *foot* to producers doing their own distribution and renting by the *film*. This induced a market turnover, where

the two alliances began to dissolve, and the number of production companies specializing in feature films rose, while those who continued to concentrate on the older, short films for nickelodeons, declined.¹⁰

This enticed exhibitors and distributors, who had the money, to merge with film manufacturers, who had the future, to begin forming the vertically integrated studio system. Several Independents, including some studios in Southern California that had succeeded with cowboy films, merged in 1912 and formed the Universal Film Manufacturing Company to produce feature films. Famous Players-Lasky absorbed a film distribution company, Paramount, and eventually acquired control of three hundred first-run movie palaces in many large cities across the nation. Warner Brothers, Fox, and MGM each began with nickelodeons and film exchanges and in the 1910s and early 1920s acquired production companies. Through the 1920s, consolidation continued, so that by the early 1930s, five vertically integrated companies with production studios in and around Hollywood, constituted a powerful oligopoly that controlled the American industry from production to exhibition.¹¹

Longer feature films required greater investment. Without ready access to capital, the film companies could not produce a steady stream of new films, nor expand their real estate empire of movie theaters. Film companies began to forge ties with major banking firms: Paramount with Kuhn Loeb; Fox with Prudential Insurance and other New York investors; MGM-Loews backed by DuPont; Warner Brothers by Goldman Sachs; RKO with Merrill Lynch. By the early 1930s almost all of the founders of the major studios no longer controlled their studios, often supplanted by financiers.¹²

During the 1930s and 1940s, the peak decades for movie-going in the US, the five controlled the “vast majority of first-run movie theaters in the 92 largest cities” with populations over 100,000. This ended in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the federal government forced divestment of their theater chains. Yet their power within the industry still continued.¹³

Industry concentration developed along with the industrialization of production. Just as other corporate industries at the time transformed work, Hollywood transformed film production from an artisanal process in 1910 into a detailed division of labor by 1920, concentrating major decision-making in the hands of higher-level executives and routinizing other decisions through formulaic application of rules and procedures. The demand for a steady flow of feature films to America’s thousands of theaters provided substantial incentives for studios to increase speed and efficiency and lower the cost of production. Production could not be reduced entirely to an assembly line

process, since each film is a unique product. But much of the work could be standardized, even in writing where the development of genre formulae could reduce the necessity of invention and creativity and replace it with the tried and true.

The major studios' 'central producer system' moved most decision-making from the director of a unit to specialized departments, with the producer coordinating all the work from planning and budgeting to production and post-production. The director was freed of much preparatory and other work, but stripped of much decision-making, was no longer in charge of his own team of workers, and instead concentrated on supervising the performance before the camera. For each film, the producer selected a team of contract employees (writer, director, cameraman, cast) from their respective departments to work with the director. Scripts were broken down into a pre-planned order of shooting of scenes, determining for each the set to be built, the wardrobe, minor casting, an estimated time and cost to shoot. Experts in specialist departments would design and construct sets and prepare wardrobe and makeup, before the scheduled date of shooting. Film processing, editing, and other post-production was also specialized. While all this varied from company to company, the general trend was to shift control from a director and his team to a producer and toward specialists with equipment and materials that could quickly design and produce what was needed with little supervision. In this way the skill gained from one film could be used to improve the quality and efficiency of the next.¹⁴

This all contributed inevitably to standardization of style and centralization of decision-making. Studio executives and their bankers decided what movies to make. Message was constrained by a desire to avoid controversial topics and remain safely in the mainstream, in the hope of assuaging moral entrepreneurs and politicians. At the same time, they allowed some leeway for sex and violence to boost ticket sales.

Making the Classic Hollywood Film

The oligopoly and organization of production led to a recognizable common film style.¹⁵ Style refers to the techniques of narrative form and filming that are used to tell the story. Content or message refers not only to the story and characters, but how characters, their actions, events, and things express particular values, norms, and beliefs. Style or form and content are not separable, but rather integral to each other in complex and subtle ways. For example, narrative form tells a story from a particular point of view, which inevitably is freighted

with value judgments. It also requires closure, and choosing a particular closure involves taking a normative position on the events, characters, and their actions.¹⁶

The classical style arose along with long feature films, the consolidation of the major studios, and the rationalization of production in the 1910s and 1920s. An overarching formula for Hollywood films became so established that it pre-determined how any story would be transformed into film. Visual, aural, and linguistic information conveyed through the camera and editing helped the viewer to follow the story. Narrowing the logic of the film and delimiting interpretation, characters were presented with a few consistent traits that also cues the story direction. Use of conventional and widely known stereotypes – and the culture embedded in them – added this purpose, e.g. in the form of the familiar personae of stars and character actors typecast in these films.¹⁷ The goal was more effective story-telling, enabling audiences to follow the story more easily, but it also made it easier to voluntarily suspend disbelief and thus skepticism or criticism. The darkened theater and its policing by ushers further reduced distracting sights and sounds and focused individuals on the film story and its characters.¹⁸

I am not suggesting that audiences, as a result, became involuntarily 'spellbound.' The studio created ripe conditions, but audience absorption is still volitional. After all, it was a common audience purpose to relax and just enjoy the movie. Moreover, people can choose to interpret or read films differently. Openness of a text to variant readings is of course a relative matter. The classical style necessarily had a degree of openness to reach broad and diverse audiences. Unfortunately, the concept of variant readings has been used to refer to *individual* interpretations of media messages. However, readings are socially and culturally important only when they are widely shared, *collective* interpretations. Moreover, cultural impact is significant only when a similar interpretive viewpoint is applied by many people to many movies, not only to a single movie. In other words, effective resistant readings need to be pervasive and persistent, just as with preferred reading representations.¹⁹

The classical style is based on individual character motives as the predictable driving forces in the story. But motives and their goals must have specific substance. As Bordwell et al. explain, most goal-oriented Hollywood protagonists are "a reflection of the ideology of American individualism and enterprise." In particular, American westerns presented a heroic, independent 'rugged individualist,' such as the Lone Ranger, or John Wayne and Clint Eastwood characters.²⁰ Individualism was at the heart of the most common goal of characters

that appeared across genres, that of heterosexual romance, which approves individual choice of a mate rather than family match-making. Its appeal transcended many differences among Americans, providing a common, uncontroversial identification with the characters. Individualism is also part of the larger positioning in American films of the viewer as an American. Such films were considered a tool for Americanization of immigrants, or to promote American views abroad, representing the ideal American through simple and concrete stories.²¹

Yet another way in which film text projects a point of view is through the subject position implicit in the film. A story is always told from a point of view; classical film-making techniques do this literally by selecting the position of and the focus of the camera, and by editing and sequencing those frames. Film differs from live performance in this aspect. With live entertainment, audience members can choose what to look at and when – this or that actor, a stray cat strolling across the stage. With film, the camera and editing chooses what audiences can look at. Yet it does not draw attention to itself, but rather presents, “a solid fictional world which has simply been filmed for our benefit.”²²

Feminist film studies demonstrated how subject position may be an ideological tool, framing a male point of view through the filming and editing of the classical Hollywood film. But one may well find subject positions similarly representing the viewpoints of other dominant parties. What makes a subject position a matter of discursive power is control not only of what audiences see, but more broadly, *how* they see it, what valuations are made and what conclusions drawn. The story, the scripted words, the scene, the editing, as well as the camera, define the characters as well as a subject position through which to view the characters, a dual creation. As with other techniques, pointing the camera and editing film must have a substantive purpose, which links it to content. That is, the viewer is presented with a particular definition of a character from a particular subject position. For example, the western genre famously was created from the point of view of the white cowboy, and rarely from that of the native-American Indian, presenting a dilemma for native American audiences, to accept the white view and negate their own experience. Similar circumstances arise for African-American audiences watching a film with a white perspective, or gay viewers watching a heterosexual romance, and so on. It is not that subject position cannot be subverted, but that it is a presumption of the film that must be overcome.²³

Finally, we must reiterate that film characterization and spectator subject positions are notable, not because they are found in one or another movie, but because they are typical of Hollywood films in

general and align with other discourses and other institutional settings, e.g. concerning race and gender, education and the psychology of intelligence and persuasion, business and economic growth, that promoted similar points of view in this era. The same beliefs and values repeated across many films seen by many people over decades, helped to naturalize those values and beliefs and reaffirm them in the broader culture. Uniformity of film content arose from converging forces: the centralization of power within major Hollywood studios, the insularity of the Hollywood community, and the external political pressures upon Hollywood from other powerful organizations, such as Congressional committees, religious organizations, and reform groups.²⁴

Marketing the Film

A film economist for the industry in 1931 stated, “... the real boss of studio picture production is the sales department ... so many westerns, so many rough-stuff melodramas, so many comedies.” Decisions about what movies to make were shaped more by box office receipts than aesthetics or morality. Some genres targeted audiences of particular regions, gender, or class. An assumption in the industry during the 1920s and 1930s was that film profits depended on appealing to women, who it was believed were the most avid movie-goers. Consequently, a large portion of films in the 1920s were melodramas and romances – often written by women or adapted from popular fiction by women. Product placement in films and the plush decoration of movie palaces targeted women.

The big studios’ priorities for other demographics are indicated in their sequencing release of films. The studios distributed their films through a process known as zone-run-clearance by which movies featuring the big stars were released sequentially from first- to fifth-run theaters, from metropolitan downtown theaters to neighborhood and small-town ones. Distribution divisions defined their task as delivering the right movies to the right theaters at the right time. The major studios also used their power to exclude independent films from exhibition, reducing audience access to movies that may have offered an alternative voice in the ‘marketplace of ideas.’

Not all movies were first-run fare. To ensure these movies paid for themselves, studios used their power to enforce block booking in which exhibitors could not choose specific movies to lease. As a consequence, independent exhibitors in small towns invariably at the end of these runs, persistently complained that their customers were not served well by Hollywood, and regularly sought less sophisticated, less racy, less modern films. These small-time theater owners and their

local constituency tended to ally themselves with conservative crusades for censoring and monitoring Hollywood.²⁵

Movie-star publicity was an important channel of marketing for major studios. American movie companies began creating 'movie stars' around the same time that film production was first being rationalized. The star enabled producers to differentiate their product, so that their film was not just another film by an impersonal studio, but a Mary Pickford film, for example. It also encouraged moviegoers' brand loyalty, to go to *any* Mary Pickford film. Publicity also generated more avid movie-going by fostering an apparent intimacy and para-social relationship with the star. This was premised again on the industry view that frequent moviegoers were primarily women and girls.

Stars were created by turning actors into celebrities. This was often instigated and sustained by the movie companies, conducted through the trade press, fan magazines and newspapers. The publicity projected an appealing off-screen persona that mirrored the typecast characters played by the actor in film after film. More broadly, the star system was an important apparatus in the production of screen culture. Stars were embodiments of archetypes that distilled norms, values, and beliefs of mainstream culture, e.g. about masculinity or patriotism. They also promoted consumerism: Publicity about the 'private' lives of stars accented the pleasures of consumption.

The problem for the movie industry was to control the discourse. If the press reported star behavior inconsistent with the persona the whole edifice risked collapse. The consolidation of the industry enabled major studios to wield power over stars, restricting even off-screen behavior, and over the press to prevent bad publicity. The movie press, dependent on industry sources, became accomplices in the process.²⁶

Hollywood studios tried to avoid controversy and appease critics, even while testing boundaries of decency with violent and sexually suggestive scenes. From the nickelodeon days the movie business had been criticized by a wide range of moral entrepreneurs. Underlying their concerns typically was the crowd psychology assumption that lower-status groups (lower classes, 'inferior' races and immigrants, women and children) were vulnerable to the 'dangerous' influences of the movies. Invariably these concerns led to calls for film censorship of one sort or another. In the 1920s, a few highly publicized Hollywood scandals and risqué films led to a renewal of censorship initiatives. The big Hollywood studios moved to pre-empt this with the Motion Picture Production Code.²⁷

The Production Code was complemented by another studio strategy to appear respectable and responsible, matinees. The most persistent

criticism of film focused on children. Most critics and reformers were opposed not to movies *per se* but to the wrong movies with the wrong message for children. Matinees specifically for children separated children from inappropriate adult fare. Saturday matinees were at first instituted by local reform groups in the 1910s. While programs often did not appeal to adolescents, it did seem to work for younger children. Film serials delighted children during Saturday matinee programs at neighborhood theaters. The Hays Office launched its own national program in 1922, under the auspices of a board of national civic and religious organizations. The Office had compiled a year's inventory of mostly old films sometimes re-edited for children and provided them as a package to theater managers. The strategy preempted free exhibitions by churches, schools, and civic organizations, returning child audiences and their pocket change to the industry revenue stream.²⁸

In 1929 Disney Studio adopted the matinee and billed it as a club for children, meeting each Saturday at a local theater. Disney built these clubs around their Mickey Mouse character with a club creed, club yell, club song, and a program of a Mickey Mouse cartoon, a feature film, and often contests and a stage show with local children performing. Loew's and Warner Brothers theater circuits soon introduced their own children's clubs. Hollywood studios gained local support by including promotion of local businesses. They posed as good corporate citizens helping to enculture the next generation of young citizens, while also promoting the consumption of goods of their own and others for a profit.²⁹

'The Product': A Normative Message

Unlike the nickelodeon era in the US when many independent exhibitors attempted to attract a large, mostly urban, working-class clientele with films that might appeal to their point of view, the consolidation of the Hollywood studio system by the 1920s, meant that a small film community determined what millions of people would see. As we have seen, they controlled not only production, but distribution and exhibition as well, guaranteeing the major studios' films the largest audiences and independent films only limited engagements in small theaters. Even in neighborhood theaters the studios standardized management policies, homogenizing the movie-going experience.³⁰ Thus, rather than representing the diverse views and experiences of American people, Hollywood films collectively promoted consistent, persistent images and censored other views. Hollywood's goal of avoiding controversy translated into films that mostly reproduced and reinforced

mainstream American values and beliefs. This also meant producing generally favorable representations of those who held these mainstream values.

This is not to say that Hollywood films were entirely homogeneous. Each film treated its story in its own way. The uniformity in message was not in the specific story told, but in elements, such as character types and the valuations given them, stereotypes and tropes familiar to American audiences and already naturalized from mainstream culture, that were incorporated in movie after movie. What made Hollywood's product important was its power to reinforce these already naturalized elements of the culture, if for no other reason than these familiar elements made films easier for audiences to understand. If an aspect of a scene contradicts audience expectations, then that aspect distracts attention from the progress of the narrative. Avoiding such problems leads to reinforcing the status quo, for example, of men over women, white over black, 'mental' over manual workers.³¹

There were films that diverged from the norm. Second-tier studios who were frozen out of first and second-run theaters controlled by the Big Five, specialized in genres for smaller niche markets at independent theaters. Republic Films revived serials in the 1930s for juveniles.³² Major studio script-writers and directors pushed against commerce for their artistic freedom, their complaints frequent enough to become a cliché. But their successes in this conflict were despite, rather than because of, the industry structure, and typically reached only smaller audiences for modest box office returns.

Hollywood film became a significant voice in American culture and opinion. At its peak in the 1940s the industry sold about four billion tickets a year to a population of about 140 million, or nearly 30 tickets a year for every man, woman and child, far more than any other cultural form of the time, except radio. Thus Hollywood was a cultural presence in American lives. Its films mostly presented an image of America as mainstream and affluent upper-middle class. Other values or groups were mostly absent, relegated to roles supporting the mainstream viewpoint. Hollywood films commonly divided the world into good (white, capitalism, upper-middle-class men, and cowboys) and bad (minorities, socialism, working class, rebellious women, Indians). In such a world, violence was integral to the struggle between good and evil, used by both sides, and thus integral to the narrative. The overall effect was to value one group and way of life and to de-value all others, much as many of the major figures in the industry had erased their own immigrant backgrounds and changed their names in order to assimilate to the mainstream culture.³³

A case in point is the representation of class in films of this era. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the nickelodeon era, when the industry was newborn and serving a large working-class clientele, films more frequently presented stories sympathetic to or from the point of view of working-class audiences. Even as films began to shift to feature length, there were still significant working-class messages in films.³⁴

However, as increasingly grand theaters began to displace the storefront nickelodeon, and exhibitors increasingly sought a higher-class clientele, more 'sophisticated' feature films changed the message. By the 1920s the films and the movie palaces both projected ideas that wealth is good and fell silent about the inequities and exclusions of race, gender, and class. Historian Lary May observed, "In the teens and twenties producers dignified the moral revolution within the standards of the Anglo-Saxon middle class," stating that "more than 60 percent of the characters had roots in small towns and rural areas as well as the milieu of the older professions and small propertied middle class," rather than the industrial working class.³⁵

In the 1930s, even while the Depression pushed conservative studio executives to produce films sympathetic to the plight of the common man, the films offered only individualistic solutions: to bear up and be good, not engage in collective actions such as strikes, protests, and political campaigns. The term itself, the common man, blurred class lines. Characters may have been 'plain folks' and 'men of the street,' but often not working class. Frank Capra wanted his movies to combat individual despair, not class exploitation. *One More Spring* (1935) featured an unemployed musician, an antique dealer, a chorus girl, and a banker. Other Capra's heroes included a journalist and a small-town banker who loaned money to small businessmen. The heroes tended more to be business people in small towns rather than blue-collar workers in factories and construction. Small business conservatism ran through these stories. A protagonist in *You can't take it with you* (1938) says, "I don't owe the government a cent." John Ford's oeuvre often featured family farmers and a nostalgia for a Jeffersonian rural life of individualism overcoming strife, in which spiritual satisfaction rather than victory over oppression is the goal. These films focused on personal relationships more than class relations between owners or bosses and workers. Even the sympathetic films avoided or opposed collective actions, and their heroes were elevated for their individualist principles, not for their part in social change. Workers often were depicted as basically good people mis-guided by agitators.³⁶

Moreover, films addressing class issues of the Depression were 'poor performers' at the profitable first-run palaces that established

a film's reputation and longer-run success.³⁷ Audiences at these theaters tended to be more affluent and thus less likely to identify with working-class problems. But more important, many in the audience at movie palaces were having a special night out and thus less likely to want to think about problems, more inclined to a screwball comedy than *Grapes of Wrath*.

Movie Palaces and Neighborhood Houses

By the 1920s, going to the movies had settled in as a widespread social and cultural practice. It served singles and young couples for cheap entertainment or date nights, parents for a night out without the kids and, on Saturdays, day-care for a dime to give parents a reprieve from parenting. The movie theater was a place where Hollywood and audiences' cultures met. The industry spoke in this era through the Hollywood-controlled theater and its management as well as through the films. Audiences, to varying degrees, paid attention to the film and abided by the house policies for audience behavior.

During the mid to late 1910s, some prosperous exhibitors converted closed vaudeville and drama theaters and constructed purpose-built movie theaters, advertising them as 'palaces' offering not just respectability, but luxury for higher ticket prices. By the 1920s, the metropolitan picture palace was well established. As Hollywood studios consolidated, these movie palaces were the first to show the most sought-after pictures featuring big-name stars. Theater chains, like Paramount, who were buying and building such theaters, aggressively advertised the movie palace experience. In the press, they completely overshadowed the thousands of unremarkable, smaller, and humbler theaters in metropolitan areas and in the many small cities and towns of the nation's hinterlands. In most cities they were concentrated in the downtown, although in larger cities, such as New York and Chicago, with more than one heavily trafficked shopping district, some movie palaces were also built on main streets of middle-class neighborhoods.³⁸

For most people, going to these theaters with higher admission prices was a special, formal night out, for which they dressed up, arrived on time and behaved themselves. From what little documentation describes about movie palace audiences, they were relatively sedate and well behaved. They appear to have required only light managing, as the building itself seems to have conveyed an ambience that cued 'proper' behavior. A *New Yorker* cartoon captured this, with a child asking the parent in the lobby, "Does God live here?" Audiences were likely more inclined to arrive on time and to watch

quietly and intently, more voyeuristic than participative. There were also plentiful ushers, from street to seat, to offer help, provide direction and occasionally enforce rules. The surroundings were not what most people were accustomed to – which was the point of their lavish interiors – so people were unlikely to behave as they might in a neighborhood house.³⁹

But movie palaces, while receiving most publicity and representing a large share of box office receipts, accounted for a lesser share of attendance and represented only a small portion of all movie houses. In the US in the 1920s there were about a thousand picture palaces with seating capacity over 1,500 in fan-shaped auditoriums and elaborate décor, which accounted for eight percent of all US movie theaters. Another estimate put their numbers at five percent of all movie houses.⁴⁰

Smaller, less lavish theaters were more typical in outlying and less prosperous neighborhoods of big cities and in smaller cities and towns. The hierarchical distribution system did not deliver movies to later-run theaters in urban neighborhoods and smaller cities and towns sometimes for weeks. But they had other advantages: Their modest architecture (\$45,000 in 1929 for an 800 seat theatre, \$1.2 million for the new 3,200 seat Paramount downtown), low prices (10–15 cents), plus the local independent owner, often a fellow townsperson, contributed to a more neighborly, relaxed atmosphere. Consequently theaters in working-class neighborhoods were well attended in the 1920s by a clientele that could less afford and was disinclined to attend the downtown theaters.⁴¹

Compatible with the informality was a common practice of arriving at the movie house not at the scheduled start of the show, but rather on the schedule of the household from which parents had to extract themselves, then staying for the next showing to see the first part of the show, and leaving when they reached the point in the film at which they first arrived, saying, "This is where we came in." Such practice of beginning anywhere in the film and seeing the end before the beginning, combined with a regular coming and going during the screening, of course disrupted classical Hollywood narratives as well as audience absorption. This was routine for parents whose busy schedules did not afford them the opportunity to arrive on time. It also applied to children who walked to neighborhood theaters on their own and were unlikely to plan by the clock – unless it was the regular Saturday children's matinee. It applied less to dating teens and twenties but, even among them, a Saturday night date was the primary event; the movies were a good enough, yet inexpensive, choice for working-class dating. *Going* to the movies was the cultural practice; often the movie was secondary in these theaters. The characterization

of movie audiences as 'spell-bound in darkness' simply did not describe American audiences in many circumstances.⁴²

Small-town populations were less able to support specialized theaters, either in terms of types of entertainment or in terms of clientele. Consequently, even well into the movie-going era, theaters in smaller towns were likely to welcome any type of entertainment that might fill seats. These theaters were often locally owned and of little interest to the major chains. Instead of orienting their business to the national companies and attempting to emulate big city entertainment, they typically oriented their entertainment and policies to the local community that they served. For example, central and eastern Kentucky theater owners in the 1930s accommodated meetings and benefits of local groups, staged performances by local musicians, showed locally made newsreels, and chose movies from regional booking agents suited to the local taste, such as Will Rogers and western movies, and some times even scheduled tours by Hollywood western stars, such as Gene Autry.⁴³

Entire towns and urban neighborhoods patronized the one theater — or in some cases two, segregated voluntarily or involuntarily on the basis of race or class. Either way, audiences tended to have a common identity as town folk or neighbors.⁴⁴ These local theaters had a screen culture somewhat reminiscent of nickelodeons, reflecting the local community rather than being imposed upon it from outside. Neighborhood audiences may have felt it was their theater. Consequently, these audiences sometimes required more active management. Ushers more vigorously enforced theater policies, especially with children and teens. Programs also included various participative activities to busy the audiences and keep them out of trouble.

One such activity in the 1920s was a community sing that seemed an equitable compromise between audience autonomy and theater management.⁴⁵ Community singing was not welcome in the posher movie palaces. But they were popular elsewhere: many people participated with enthusiasm, creating a feeling of togetherness. At the same time, management was orchestrating the activity, choosing the songs, the organist setting the pace, drowning out conversation and other activities among audience members. Community sings, however, died with the introduction of film sound: Most musicians lost their jobs, including the organists who had led the singing.⁴⁶

Film exhibition was transformed by two economic blows in the 1930s, the Depression and the arrival of sound. In the early 1930s attendance dropped. *Variety* suggested audiences were discontented, that "going to theater was no longer routine ... people go because there is something specific they want to see." *Motion Picture Herald*

wrote that people threw things at the screen in protest. Movie palaces cut costs and prices to become more affordable, and neighborhood houses became rundown. Attendance began to improve by 1934 and rose thereafter until 1948.⁴⁷

Audiences at 'lower order cinemas' had different film preferences than those at first-run palaces. The top stars were popular at first-run theaters as well as at lower rung cinemas, perhaps due to the publicity derived from successful openings. But tastes differed about many movies and stars. In big Eastern cities Chaplin and costume dramas, biopics and adaptations from stage did better; Will Rogers and Shirley Temple, westerns, and melodramas were not popular there. The reverse was true in small towns and other regions of the country. But other factors than the feature film affected attendance in lower-rung venues: weather, competing entertainments such as a circus, or other parts of the playbill such as a second feature, live entertainment, newsreel, short films, raffles, and give-aways. Letters to the *Motion Picture Herald* in the mid to late 1930s confirm these small-town preferences and effects on attendance.⁴⁸

The coming of sound was a boon for the Hollywood-owned theater chains, giving them another advantage over smaller regional chains and independent theaters. The big studios obtained financing from Wall Street investors to install sound equipment in their theaters. But small owners and theaters were hard pressed to afford renovation for sound. Between 1928 before sound and 1935 after silent films disappeared, about a third of all theaters, overwhelmingly smaller ones, closed.⁴⁹

Sound seems to have brought some change to patrons' behavior. Talking movies required audiences to listen, which in turn required a reduction in other sounds, such as live musical accompaniment and chattering audiences. With silent movies, audiences depended upon reading inter-titles to understand the action, and these were sometimes read to others by audience members. With sound, audiences had to hear the dialog that now included a good deal more detail. Sound furthered the 'spellbound in darkness' effect, adding another sense to be attended to, and discouraging social activity in favor of individual concentration on the film. While not universally silencing all audience members, to some degree it led to new norms of behavior, often enforced by audiences themselves.⁵⁰

Despite the centralized power of the major Hollywood studios, their rationalized production and standardized film style, and their control of exhibition, American film culture remained diverse, ranging from downtown palace to neighborhood house, from big city to small

town, and across regions; from one class to another, and from one race to another, as *de jure* and *de facto* segregation assured that black and white theater experiences were separate and distinct. As will be evident throughout this history, corporate forces of concentration repeatedly confronted forces of diversification, producing a veneer of national commonality over a plethora of local screen cultures. All groups were familiar with the names and stories from Hollywood and maybe accommodated those values, but each maintained their own preferences and shaped their own experience.

4

Global Hollywood, 1920s–1950s

In Europe by the end of World War I, narrative fiction films were well established as movie theater entertainment and audience habits too had settled in, along with a variety of regulations for censorship, theaters and their audiences. Cinema-going had become part of everyday life. However, European nations were confronted with the Hollywood juggernaut holding economic marketplace advantages on the one hand, and with European mass audiences often attending American films more than domestic films on the other hand. Political, economic, and cultural elites reacted strongly to this dilemma. European elites' fear of 'Americanization' became entwined with concerns about controlling their homeland working classes. As film scholars Richard Maltby and Ruth Vasey noted, the popularity of American films "... concentrated as it was, among women and the working class ... was, for bourgeois nationalism, a further threat ..."¹ This was paralleled by a similar fear about colonial native audiences' apparent attractions to American movies. Regardless of the degree to which mass audiences actually preferred American films, the fears built upon stereotypes of the masses and drove national and colonial film policies.

After World War II, the same dilemma confronted newly independent post-colonial governments trying to construct national identity and unity, and to extricate themselves from century-long cultural ties to their former colonial rulers. At the same time, American films and goods were arriving and gaining widespread popularity. In this circumstance, the masses' attraction to American culture both doubled and halved the difficulties. Consequently, screen cultures, films, and audiences were nodes of political discourse and hot debate, in contrast to the US, where movie-going had become uncontroversial.