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"The Moral Importance of  
Entertainment"

Hollywood, Censorship, and  
Depression America  
1933 to 1941

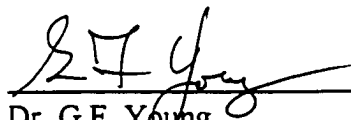
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of the Master of Arts (History)  
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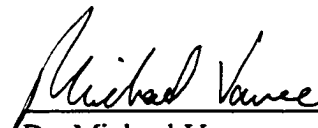
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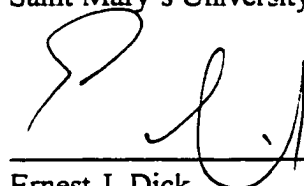
  
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# "The MORAL IMPORTANCE of Entertainment"

Hollywood, Censorship, and  
Depression America  
1933 to 1941

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## Abstract

Hollywood was the most powerful media centre in Depression America. It was from this town that American films were created. It was also from this town that many of America's beliefs about itself were created. This thesis will investigate the power of Hollywood in Depression America. It will look towards an understanding of the powers which guided Hollywood filmmakers in the creation of their productions, as well as an understanding of the effects which these productions had on the nation. Filmmakers of this period were accused of being both cultural stewards and ruthless businessmen. Hollywood will be examined in both of these roles in order to understand the foundations of this duality and to offer a possible third role which filmmakers were attempting to fill. The thesis will also investigate who the perceived audience for Hollywood films were and how the films reflected this audience. By understanding who these films were directed towards, it will define in many ways what this audience believed about themselves, their neighbours and their nation. The effect that the Motion Picture Production Code had on the films of the Depression and how movies adapted to the changing market will also be a focus.

## Acknowledgements

Without the assistance of my friends, family, and project supervisors this work could never have been completed. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all very much for their love, patience and guidance. A special thanks is due to my Mother and Father, who gave their unending assistance, financial and otherwise, throughout this endeavour. Special thanks also to Dr. G. Young, my advisor, Dr. M. Vance, who gave me the inspiration to work in this area, Mr. E. Dick, for giving advice and assistance, and to the Saint Mary's University Department of History, for allowing me to write about my passion, films. Thank you as well to my fellow academics, both students and graduates, who gave me guidance in this project, especially to Glen and Heather, the two Masters. Also, thank you to my computer friends, Craig and Ken, who gave this thesis its multimedia aspects. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Tracy for her patience, understanding, and support, without you this could not have been done.

Gregory Canning



## Technical Notes

The CD ROM that is included with this thesis contains the film clips referenced to throughout the thesis. The video clips can be viewed on any IBM compatible computer with Windows 95 or higher. The quality of the clips will depend on the power of the graphics card in the computer as well as the speed of the processor and the amount of RAM available. The clips are saved in the .MOV format, which means that they can be viewed by both the Microsoft Windows Media Player and the QuickTime Movie Viewer. It is recommended that the movie viewer be set to the smallest screen size so as to allow for the smoothest play back of the clips. Included with the CD is a copy of Apple Computer's QuickTime Video Player 4. The instillation instructions are in the file "Install QuickTime 4".

# "The MORAL IMPORTANCE of Entertainment"

## Hollywood, Censorship, and Depression America

### 1933 to 1941<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

The opening quotation, "The Moral Importance of Entertainment," in the above title, is taken from the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, a document which provided the frame around which many films of the 1930s were constructed. It was not only a code which told motion picture producers what not to produce, it also guided them in their roles as developers of American morals. America, at the time of the Depression, was beginning to redefine the moral leadership of the nation and as a consequence, Hollywood was increasingly viewed as a significant leader in national moral education. This perception ascribed a good deal of power to motion picture entertainment and this thesis will examine the basis of that power while also attempting to assess audience reaction to Hollywood productions. The thesis will examine those who controlled the images coming from Hollywood as well as those who comprised the audiences of these films.

Since it is one of the most thorough studies on Hollywood during the 1930s, any serious study of the subject should begin with Thomas Cripps's 1997 work *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*. In this work, Cripps outlines what effect Hollywood's films had on

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix I, p.122.

society prior to the rise of television in America. He uses his background in studying blacks in Hollywood and society to create a valuable book on what audiences, black or white, may have felt while watching Hollywood's films. Cripps also looks at immigrants, Jews and other minorities in America, investigating what effect cinema had on them and what effect they had on cinema. He notes that though Hollywood was the largest producer of films in America, these minority groups also made films. By noting this and outlining the types of films produced, Cripps reminds historians that Hollywood was not alone in film production in America. Cripps also looks at Hollywood as a business, taking the reader from the beginnings of film making in America in the early Twentieth Century, through the years of the Hollywood studio system to the near collapse of this system in the 1950s. It is the breadth of Cripps's analysis, which makes his study so valuable. For example, he argues that films did carry messages, but how these messages were received by audiences depended on their social position.<sup>2</sup> Audiences were not homogeneous masses, as Hollywood may have wished them to be. Cripps points out that class, race and religion all had parts to play in how a movie was viewed by the audience, as did the venue in which the films were seen.

This thesis will attempt to build on Cripps's work, particularly his point that the films were only a portion of the equation, the audience and the film makers being the rest of it. Like Cripps, this thesis will also examine the importance of both the filmmakers and their audiences in order to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship. As a starting point, the first chapter of this thesis will examine the traditional heads of Hollywood, the moguls, in an effort to assess their importance in shaping this relationship.

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.52.

The moguls are important to Depression films not only because it was their input which helped shape the films of Hollywood, but because they played a pivotal role in the business side of Hollywood. In demonstrating this point, this thesis follows the work of Tino Balio, whose *Grand design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* provides a detailed examination of the structure of the motion picture business. Indeed, Balio notes that Hollywood was essentially a business, and this fact affected the character of the movies which were released, as well as the way in which Hollywood reacted to its audience. This thesis will investigate the specific consequences of this business mentality on both the films and the Motion Picture Production Code. A good many studies have implied that an understanding of the moguls leads to an understanding of the studios and their film styles. For example, one of the most recent works, Suncha Jacobovici's documentary, *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream* (which was based on Neal Gabler's 1988 book, *An Empire of Their Own: How Jews Invented Hollywood*), argues that the moguls, who were mostly of Eastern European Jewish heritage, inserted their religious and cultural ideas into their films. This argument will be investigated in Chapter One, along with Jacobovici's secondary argument, that the entrepreneurial backgrounds of the moguls also had a large impact on film making.

Despite their clear business mentality the moguls who controlled Hollywood, also wanted to be seen as entertainers, or even artists. They wanted Americans to look at their films as distractions, as entertainment, a theme which is repeated over and over again in the Production Code.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Hollywood wanted to be seen as "all-American" (to use the college football term) and the moguls, who controlled production, made films with very pro-American themes. The movies

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<sup>3</sup>See Appendix I, p.118-129.

of the 1930s rarely attacked the government, nor did they attack the “American way of life” (as Hollywood interpreted it). They were attempting to follow the middle line in American politics, never leaning too far to the “left,” never leaning too far to the “right.” This thesis will attempt to uncover the motives behind Hollywood’s dual purpose of entertainment and patriotism as well as the audience reactions to such constructions.

One vocal group made their response known through the Production Code. The Code was created by the Motion Picture Production and Distribution Association (MPPDA) in 1930, but was not implemented until 1934, under mounting public pressure. This thesis will look at who was behind this public pressure and what elements of American society they represented. It will also investigate the motives behind the various groups who saw to the administration and adoption of this Code. In doing so it will follow the lead of authors Leonard J. Leff, and Jerold L. Simmons, in their *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code From the 1920s to the 1960s*.<sup>4</sup> The two authors use six films to look at the effects of the Motion Picture Production Code on American film. Following the development of the Code from the 1920s until its final form in the 1960s, Leff and Simmons offer many examples of how this document shaped American films for almost 50 years.

A detailed discussion of the films of the Depression era Hollywood, will be another focus of of this thesis. Film was (and still is) a reflective art, displaying to the audience a view of itself on the screen. The view offered was distorted though, and these distortions will be a theme of this thesis. Especially during the 1930s, American filmmakers have argued that their films were not couriers of

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<sup>4</sup>The value of this work is in its detailed description of the forces which shaped the Code, and the biographies of the major players in its creation.

messages.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that Hollywood could set trends in unessential, but profitable areas, such as fashion, furnishings and make-up; however, officially, it would not challenge the way their audience felt about its government, international relations, race relations or gender relations. This claim, that Hollywood was either unwilling or unable to challenge directly the audience with taboo topics, will be studied closely in the thesis.

One method of qualifying Hollywood's claim to have avoided messages is to see how issues such as gender and race were unconsciously represented in their motion pictures. Because of film's reflective nature, it becomes a useful tool in understanding how the audience of a film saw themselves. Howard Good's work, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies*, offers one approach to the study of race and gender in film history. Good looks at the use of female journalists in 1930s and 1940s film to discover how women were viewed both on and off of the screen in America. By focussing on the Torchy Blane film series, a B-movie series featuring a blond female reporter, Good challenges the ways in which Hollywood portrayed women and the ways in which women watched Hollywood. He uses the image of Torchy to argue that these films were not reflections of a real society but of a dreamed one in which women were employed in fulfilling careers. Good notes that while the number of women employed in the United States decreased in the 1930s the number of women playing employed women on the screens increased.<sup>6</sup> He also points to the rise of such stars as Torchy Blane's Glenda Farrell as examples of how Americans could believe that

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<sup>5</sup>For documentation on this famous Hollywood quote see Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.6.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), p.49.

America still worked. Good argues that these images were used to convince the nation that everything would be fine, “all setbacks would be temporary; hard work and perseverance would someday pay off; and America, despite evictions and breadlines and bankruptcies, was still the land of opportunity.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to Good, many others have often found films as a useful source for study of gender. The compilation of works edited by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thurmin titles *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, is one of the very few books exclusively dedicated to the study of men in films.<sup>8</sup> Other works, such as Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The treatment of Women in the Movies*, and Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*, look at women both in film and in the audience. The findings of these studies will be employed in chapters Three, Four and Five, which examine the implicit and overt messages placed in Hollywood films and what effect, if any, they had on their audiences.

The dates chosen for study in this thesis, 1933 and 1941, were selected as useful reference points rather than particular milestones. Nineteen thirty-three was been chosen as the start date because that year saw the inception of the Motion Picture Production Code, although it was not officially adopted in Hollywood until 1934. Nineteen thirty-three is also the year in which Hollywood began to rebound from the Depression. The box office returns of that year began to rebound to their pre-1929 high, signalling to many in Hollywood that the audience was returning to theatres. Nineteen forty-one has been chosen for much simpler reasons. It was in this year that the United States

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.26.

<sup>8</sup>Joan Mellen’s, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* is another work on masculinity, however, it does not focus on the Depression era.

officially entered the Second World War. Hollywood was employed by the government to help in the war effort, something which filmmakers were more than happy to do.

Overall, it is hoped that this thesis will give a more complete perspective on the motives behind the production of the films of the 1930s. We will focus on Hollywood, but it will be made clear that the California studios were only where the films were made. Many of the decisions concerning their content, production and distribution were made elsewhere in America. The thesis will argue that though the moguls were in charge of film production, they were limited in what they could put onto the screens. Films were not produced in a vacuum, and it is this larger world which will be a focus of this work. It is also hoped that the readers will receive a fuller understanding of the audience's input into film content. Ultimately, this thesis' central claim is that the audience was not passive in their viewing of films, but helped to shape what finally appeared on screen. For this reason, Hollywood films are valuable social documents for the historian seeking to understand the United States during the Depression.



## Chapter 1

### The Movie Moguls and the Hollywood System

**B**etween 1933 and 1941 Hollywood created what many believe are some of the most time honoured films in the history of American cinema. Hollywood was the centre of the American film industry. In this Los Angeles, California, suburb the “dreams of the nation” were dramatized in film for the consumption of the masses. When looking at these movies, it is important to understand who was creating the images which inhabited the screens of the nation. The studio heads of Hollywood, or “moguls,” as they were termed by those in the business, were unofficially in charge of film production. Because the studios were owned by companies in New York, officially they were controlled by men in New York. However, in reality this was rarely the case. California was the real power behind the American film business. This chapter will outline the personalities of the moguls, investigating what their motives were when they created their films. It will look at the role which marketing and distribution played in creating the dominance of Hollywood in the American film industry. Also, this chapter will show why Hollywood was able to dominate over other forms of mass entertainment to become one of the most influential and valuable modes of entertainment. Beginning with the moguls and ending with the movies and their audience, this chapter will outline the beliefs which led Hollywood through the Depression.

Though the moguls were forced to work within conventions, such as those laid out in the

Production Code of 1930<sup>1</sup>, or those placed on them by the men in New York, they were still the final word in what was put into production on their lots. In a real sense, the moguls oversaw every major film that was made in Hollywood during the 1930s. Although those who controlled the money on Wall Street were officially in charge of the studios, they were too geographically distant to impact any real change in specific films. It was not who owned the film lots that mattered; it was who managed the lots. This job was entrusted to the moguls. Those studio executives in New York were able to make known their displeasure and fears when they, or the censors, believed that a film was too controversial, but they were unable to react to the minute details of individual films as the moguls could. Or at least this was the legend which was developed by Hollywood.

The original moguls have been (and in many ways, still are) viewed as the founding fathers of Hollywood. They were held in the same regard by many in Hollywood as the American fathers of the Constitution. The legend constructed around the creation of this movie village is that it was their ingenuity which built the motion picture industry into an American institution. By 1933 the moguls included Jack Warner at Warner Brothers<sup>2</sup>, Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Carl Laemmle, President of Universal Films, Paramount's Adolph Zukor, Harry Cohn at Columbia and Darrel F. Zanuck, who moved from Warners to Twentieth Century-Fox in 1935.<sup>3</sup> Almost all of the moguls started their movie careers as theatre owners, working their way up to the

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter II.

<sup>2</sup>Of the four Warner Brothers, Albert, Sam (who died in 1928), Harry and Jack, only Jack could truly be considered a mogul. "Jack Warner was the most powerful of the four, running the studio under tight, economical politics." Cobbett S. Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York, Facts on File, inc., 1980), p.81.

<sup>3</sup>Though Zanuck was vice-president, in charge of production, under company president Joseph M. Schenck, he was acknowledged to have been the final word in film production on the lot. Also, Zanuck was the youngest of the studio executives, only thirty in 1933, and was considered among of the new generation of Hollywood moguls.

positions of power in the film industry.<sup>4</sup> Before films, many of them had been in sales, making names for themselves through their ingenuity and talent. "Laemmle was a clothier; Goldwyn was a gloves salesman; Adolph Zukor, in furs; Louis Selznick in the diamond business. [Consequently] they approached the motion picture industry, . . . not from an engineering point of view, not from technology or machinery, but from how they [could] distribute a product."<sup>5</sup> This understanding of how to sell a product and how the market system worked explains why these men were able to succeed in the film industry. The artists and inventors who began the movie business in upper-class New York society were not the type of men who could build an industry. It took businessmen who understood sales to make movies work.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note that the moguls were almost all from the same 500 mile radius in Eastern Europe, and all, with the exception of Zanuck, were Jewish (Zanuck was the only gentile among this group).

Harry Warner who, with three of his brothers, brought sound to the motion picture, was born in Poland. Also from Poland was Samuel Goldwyn, born Goldfish. Although Goldwyn never ran a major studio, he was perhaps the biggest and best known of the independent Hollywood producers. Universal founder, Carl Laemmle, came from a small town in Germany. Louis B. Mayer, who gave us the glory years of the MGM Studio was born in a Russian Jewish village. William Fox [founder of Fox Inc., which merged into Twentieth Century-Fox] and Paramount's Adolph Zukor were both born in Hungary.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Andrew Sarris, *"You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet": American Talking Film History and Memory, 1927-1949* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.18.

<sup>5</sup>Simcha Jacobovici, *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream* (Toronto: Ontario Ltd., 1997), time index (ti.), 11:50.

<sup>6</sup>See clip *Hollywoodism* 1.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., ti., 3:20.

This common origin for the moguls provides the basis for the argument that their films could be seen as originating from this single point, from an Eastern European Jewish sensibility. This is the argument which guides Simcha Jacobovici's documentary, *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream* (which was based on Neal Gabler's 1988 book, *An Empire of Their Own: How Jews Invented Hollywood*). Jacobovici, and the many historians and critics he sites, believe that this is the reason so many films appear to take Jewish themes.

Although the belief that Jewish themes were present shall not be the focus of this thesis, it is important to note the present day belief that these themes exists in almost all films, especially those of the thirties. It is argued in Jacobovici's documentary that these films were about Jewish ideas, even though they did not state this outwardly. "Seldom making movies that were overtly about Jewish concerns or characters, the early moguls instead turned out such films as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, movies that depicted America as a land of boundless promise where the little guy will always triumph against injustice. 'Judaism equals Hollywoodism equals Americanism,' goes the narration."<sup>8</sup>

One of the problems with this theory is that the moguls were not the only men involved in the production of films. Many men and women had their hands in producing any given film. And more than a few films were made without the help of the moguls. Frank Capra, one of the most powerful directors of the thirties, was able to make his films with virtually no interference from Columbia Pictures president, Harry Cohn.<sup>9</sup> Capra's films were famous for their focus on the downtrodden

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<sup>8</sup>Joyce Millman, "Let My People Go (To the Movies)". *Salon: Media Circus* (March 19, 1998 ), [www.salonmagazine.com/media/1998/03/19media.html](http://www.salonmagazine.com/media/1998/03/19media.html).

<sup>9</sup>James Purdy and Peter Roffman, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the 1950s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.1. Capra was responsible for *Mr. Smith*

individual triumphing against injustice, a Jewish theme according to Jacobovici. The documentary even lists Capra's film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* as a shining example of Jewish themes.<sup>10</sup> This was a product of Capra's individual beliefs; however, he was not a Jew. Although the screenwriter, Sidney Buchman may have been Jewish, it was Capra who shaped the film into its powerful, and controversial form.<sup>11</sup> Capra was a man who had felt the pain of being poor, he understood what unemployed people were feeling and he translated that onto the screen. He begins his autobiography by relating to this understanding:

I hated being poor. Hated being a peasant. Hated being a scrounging newskid trapped in the sleazy Sicilian ghetto of Los Angeles. I wanted out. A quick out. I looked for a device, a handle, a pole to catapult myself across the tracks from my scurvy habitat of nobodies to the affluent world of somebodies.<sup>12</sup>

The moguls were also from this economic background. They too were once poor, they too had wanted out of the ghetto, except for them the ghetto was named the *shtetl*. The Jewish themes that are seen in films can also be viewed as themes of the poor, of the ghetto.

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*Goes to Washington*, noted above as one of the films which exemplified the Jewish themes in Hollywood films.

<sup>10</sup>*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was the tale of Jefferson Smith, the idealistic, naive young senator, recently appointed as an interim senator to the American Senate, replacing a recently deceased senator until the next election. Unknown to Smith, he was chosen by the State Governor and a media magnate to be a "yes man" to the elder senator Joseph Paine, from the same state and to aid these men in creating a bill for a useless dam disguised as a boys camp. When, with the aid of his loving veteran secretary, Smith discovers the plan, he spends 23 hours on the senate floor attempting to convince his fellow senators of the corruption which he has witnessed. His performance convinces Paine of his corrupt ways and he attempts suicide. After failing in this endeavour, Paine admits his corruption to the senate and spares Smith's reputation giving this film a perfect "Capraesque" miracle in the end. Microsoft, *Cinemanía '95* (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), *CineBooks' Motion Picture Guide Review, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

<sup>11</sup>The American senate was, for the most part appalled by Capra's vision of American politics. It was even reported that Columbia Studios was offered two million dollars to shelve the film by the other studios because they feared the censorship which would come as a result of such a powerful film. Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Frank Capra, *The Name Above The Title: An Autobiography* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), p.xi.

There is yet another reason for films focussing on the lone hero fighting against injustice. It made for easy filming and marketing. Thomas Cripps points this out in his 1998 work, *Hollywood's High Noon*:

Lone heroes allowed moviemakers to narrow their focus to courtrooms, submarine passageways, cadres of contentious officers, and such, thereby cutting costs while simultaneously tracing the trajectory of the loner, crusader, or winner to a pleasing denouement founded on familiar formulas. Formulas made for predictability, which made for ease of exploitation by the sales department.<sup>13</sup>

These formulas were the *Hollywood style*. Though it is true that there were many hands involved in the creation of a film, and that each of these hands had a part in creating a film's style, during this period, it must be asserted that the moguls were the leaders in creating the *Hollywood style*. These men made the important decisions which created this style. This can be said not so much because they were Jews, and this formula smacked of Jewishness, but because from a marketing and production view it makes more sense to create films on a formula. The lone hero was easier for audiences to relate to, and this was what moguls were trying to do. They were not attempting to inform the world about the plight of their people, in fact they hid their Jewishness from the world.<sup>14</sup> What the moguls were trying to do was make pictures that would make money, and the more money the better. The values that they inserted into films may have had personal meanings, but they also had popular appeal. This is why Hollywood is not just a place in Southern California, "rather, it implies a whole style of film, a particular approach to film narrative, a peculiar set of cultural and social

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<sup>13</sup>Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.153.

<sup>14</sup>This is a fact which Jacobovici comments on throughout his documentary. However, he does not draw any links between this and a lack of Jewish themes. Instead, he uses this to argue that the Jewish themes were occurring on an unconscious level.

values.”<sup>15</sup>

Audiences expected a certain style from Hollywood, and more specifically, from the individual studios. The studios were known for their individual styles, their variations on the *Hollywood style*. In the popular media of the Depression, it was the moguls who were seen as being in control of the styles of their studios. And, though it goes against the new interpretations of the Hollywood studios, many documents still point to the moguls control over the styles of their studios. Some historians rightly believe that it was not simply the power of the mogul that created the style of a studio. James Purdy and Peter Roffman, in their 1981 work *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the 1950s* believed that their are:

... an infrastructure was set up in each studio to supply all the necessary ingredients for an evening at the movies. A composer here, a set designer there, could go a long way in imposing a particular motif on a studio. It is in the nature of sociological criticism to disregard these motifs as extraneous ornamentation, but it is out of this ornamentation that the stylistic nuances of Hollywood movies began to emerge.<sup>16</sup>

Though it is true that the moguls were not the only men who were able to assert their personal influences into the films, they were the final word in the style of a film. The moguls were known for their “hands-on” work in their studios; they approved the music, the set design and the stories of many of the films produced on their lots, especially the “A” pictures. It was not possible for them to know all the details of every film produced on their lots. However, they were able to influence the direction of the films, the style of them. And it was this tone that was the style of a studio.

Louis B. Mayer, president of MGM, was one of the most famous of the moguls for his control over the movie lot. MGM was known as the prestige studio. They produced the big budget films,

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<sup>15</sup>Purdy and Roffman, p.1.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.19.

films with a style that was set MGM apart from the other studios. They were also responsible for some of the biggest hits of the thirties. *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *The Good Earth* (1937), and *Gone With The Wind* (1939) were all top box-office draws of the decade and all were created under the close supervision of Mayer. MGM was also responsible for the “classic” film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Though this film was not the great box-office draw which we are today led to believe, it is still important because it has become one of the most popular films in history. Television made this film a classic.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note these films because they are regarded today as “classics”, and Mayer’s personality, as much as the production itself, made these films what they were. He is credited with much of the production values which set MGM apart.

Mr. Mayer was very persuasive. It's about the only word I can use. He'd stand there and watch what was going on and say, 'Wait a minute, stop that. That's not the way to do it. I'll show you how it should be done.' They never knew when he was going to walk in on them. They were very leery of him, the directors, because they never knew when Louis would walk down there and say, 'that's not the way I want it.' He was a perfectionist. He knew what he wanted and money was no object. At Metro Goldwyn-Mayer, price was nothing. It was to be the best.”<sup>18</sup>

Mayer was not the only man at MGM who believed that his studio had to look the best. Irving Thalberg, who was in charge of the writing staff was also influential in the creation of a style at MGM. His “close supervision of writers” allowed him to insert the polished gloss which made MGM appear “classy” to audiences.<sup>19</sup> He was also the force behind the making of many of the great stage adaptations for which MGM was famous. Thalberg was a new style of Hollywood mogul. He

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<sup>17</sup>Sarris, p.64.

<sup>18</sup>*Hollywoodism*, ti., 0:49:37, quoted from Irene Mayer Holt.

<sup>19</sup>Sarris, p.24.



was younger than the others, thirty-four in 1933, and with this youth came different experience. Born at the turn of the century in the United States, Thalberg had no memories of the *shtetl*, nor of vaudeville, the peep show or the nickelodeon, he did not share the same history as the older moguls. He and those movie executives that grew up with him were opportunists. They made films that made money, pure and simple. When the protests rose from the Legion of Decency and the government, Thalberg, and those like him, were more willing than most to align their films to the tune of the popular voice. These men understood that if sex and violence were taboo, then a change was in order. Thalberg “had no difficulty in turning away, in giving in [his] own self interest, from divisive and controversial topics and giving new energy to old-fashioned themes.”<sup>20</sup> He believed that the literary and historical classics would be safe topics for the Depression crowds. Prior to his untimely death in 1936, Thalberg had successfully produced *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and had both *The Good Earth* (1937) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1937) under production at MGM. All of these films were popular with the public, proving that his belief in the classics was correct.

Mayer was not the only mogul who inserted a personal style into his studio. All of the major studios were led by charismatic men who inserted their own styles into their movies. No studio was able to meet the consistently expensive look of the MGM films, but that also was not the dream of all of the moguls. Paramount Pictures displayed a desire to create films with the same expensive feel to them, however these were not the main stay of the studio. This was not because Paramount’s Adolph Zukor was less persuasive than Mayer, nor because he lacked the talent behind the scenes. Zukor wanted to make films with the same care, the same gloss as Mayer, however, Paramount was

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<sup>20</sup>Sklar, p.175.

unable to do so. This was one of the unfortunate studios which was forced into bankruptcy in 1933. Though Paramount was the studio which gave audiences Mae West, the best of the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, it created little else which is remembered. There were few top ten pictures and fewer Academy Award winners, even though Paramount produced an average of 59 movies a year, well ahead of the closest rival, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, which produced an average of 54 movies a year.<sup>21</sup> During the “silent days”, before 1929, Paramount was one of the most powerful studios, with strong links to the great UFA studio in Germany, giving it a strong hold over the international film market.

However, the depression hit Paramount harder than other studios because, among other things, of a lack of strong leadership.<sup>22</sup> Zukor, who arrived on the scene in 1935 following the restructuring of 1933, was unable to build the power which Mayer had. The prestige pictures of Josef von Sternberg, Cecil B. De Mille and Ernst Lubitsch were only minor productions, and were unable to support the studio. It was the low cost/low brow pictures by Mae West and the Marx Brothers in the early thirties and the ‘road’ pictures of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope later in the decade which allowed the studio to survive.

20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox was another studio hit hard by the depression. Prior to the 1935 merger of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pictures and Fox Films the company did not even exist. Fox Films was a large company, and in 1929 it was poised to take over MGM, which would have made it the largest film producer in Hollywood. However, the federal government intervened and William Fox, founder of Fox Films was forced to leave his company after the 1929 Crash. Sidney Kent, the new studio president merged

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<sup>21</sup>Cobbett S. Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: Facts on Film Inc., 1980), p.83.

<sup>22</sup>Sarris, p.25.

the studio with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pictures, lead by Darryl Zanuck and Joseph Schenck. The new studio, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox became much like the other major studios, even with the American born gentile, Zanuck, at the helm. The major difference between Zanuck's studio and those of the other moguls was Zanuck's choice of American composer John Phillip Sousa for many of his soundtracks over the great composers of Europe. However, little else can be recalled about this studio in the thirties because of a court ruling which prevented the block sale of pre-1948 Fox films to television.<sup>23</sup> What is remembered about Fox is that it was a directors' studio, with top of the line equipment and management that was willing to allow the director to direct.<sup>24</sup>

Warner Brothers Pictures was also one of the top studios of the thirties. Prior to the commercial use of recorded dialogue in films, Warners was a minor studio, with few "silent films" of note.<sup>25</sup> However, this was the studio which introduced recorded sound to the public, and this head start propelled the studio to the rank of major studio by the early thirties. The spin which the Warner Brothers placed on their films was one of frugality. Warners' films were famous for their 'gritty' feel and their ability to entertain. "Movie for movie, Warners was the most reliable source of entertainment through the thirties . . . , even though it was the clearly the most budget-conscious of them all."<sup>26</sup> The studio was also known for its alignment with the Roosevelt government. No other studio placed as many blue eagles, the symbol of the NRA, one of the most popular segments of the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.27.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.28.

<sup>25</sup>It is important to note here that films were never silent. Prior to 1927 and the release of *Jazz Singer* (1927), films were alive with sound. The organ player or orchestra which played along with the "silent" film is only one example of how the motion picture was always related to sound.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.26.

New Deal, on the screen as the Warners. Depression was a consistent theme at this studio. It was used as the back drop for two of Warners' most popular musicals of the early thirties, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933) and *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), displaying to the audience a Depression America without depression. Many were unemployed or on the verge of unemployment in these films, but no one was hungry. The dirt and grime of Warners was only a surface gloss, just like the polish of MGM. Underneath, the core was just the same as MGM, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) or Paramount, conformist and complacent.

Warner Brothers Studios appeared to be unique in Hollywood, as it was a family business – there were actual Warner brothers. Universal, however, was another family run studio. Since founding the studio in 1912, Carl Laemmle and his son Carl Laemmle Jr. ran the studio. During the early thirties Universal led Hollywood in the creation of horror films. *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Freaks* (1932) were labelled as the beginning of horror films in the sound era. With classic horror actors like Lon Chaney, Boris Kaloff and Bela Lugosi and the director James Whale (who directed *Frankenstein* [1931], *The Invisible Man* [1933] and *The Bride of Frankenstein* [1935]) this was the beginning of a long string of horror films. Also, with the release of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and *Show Boat* (1936) (another Whale film) Universal displayed its ability to create dramatic masterpieces on a grand scale with emotion and class. However, in 1936 the Laemmle's lost control of their studio to Cheever Cowdin and Nate Blumberg, who directed the studio into a new era of low-budget comedies starring Abbott and Costello and Francis the Talking Mule. Though the studio did create the occasional box office hit, like *Destry Rides Again* (1939), it never regained the style of its early films.

Columbia Pictures was another studio with a mogul at the head who had a vision for his

studio. Harry Cohn, studio head at Columbia Pictures was known for his domineering leadership style. He needed to be involved in every film produced on his lot, and many asserted that his taste was lacking.<sup>27</sup> Columbia was also known as the studio where the “majors” sent their problem stars. Studios were able to lend actors out to other studios as part of their contract. And if an actor misbehaved, they could be punished by being sent to Columbia.<sup>28</sup> However, Columbia was also the studio where Frank Capra made his most memorable films. Because Columbia was a minor studio in Hollywood and because Cohn wielded so much control, he was able to allow the select few directors and actors loose to create productions which were nearly impossible to complete in the larger studios. Capra was given free reign over his productions at Columbia and was hence able to make a film like *It Happened One Night*. MGM, Universal and Paramount put too much capital into films to allow this type of control and the Warners were too cheap to allow this, Cohn was the only mogul who could let a director control the product. This gave Columbia the ability to create *sleepers*, films that displayed that certain something that touched audiences.

*It Happened One Night* (1933), Frank Capra’s “bus-trip” film, was one of Columbia’s *sleepers*. It began its theatre run with little fanfare: “It opened quietly with no great beating of drums or bating of breath.”<sup>29</sup> However, within a month of playing on the nation’s screens, the movie became popular, and within two months it became a hit. *It Happened One Night* swept the Academy Awards of 1933 and made Frank Capra a famous director. Cohn allowed this film to be made in a way that

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.29.

<sup>28</sup>When Clarke Gable first arrived on the lot, loaned out (against his will) from MGM, to star in *It Happened One Night* (1933), he is quoted as saying, “I always *wanted* to see Siberia, but damn me - I never thought it would *smell* like this, Blech-h-h!” Capra, p.165.

<sup>29</sup>Capra, p.159.

no other mogul would have allowed. It was made with no interference from the studio. Capra was given this ability and the studio was rewarded for it. Cohn learned from this experience and throughout the thirties and into the forties directors and actors who found themselves at Columbia pitched their pet projects to Cohn in hopes that they could do for the studio (and for themselves) what Capra had done.

RKO was in many ways the same type of studio as Columbia. It was a minor studio which had no real sense of style on the whole; however, it was able to create the rare picture which turned into an “immortal classic”. *King Kong* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (1941) were both made there. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were able to dance there, Katherine Hepburn was able to display herself “in her feminist glory” there, and Alfred Hitchcock began his historic American career at this studio.<sup>30</sup> RKO was plagued by a lack of leadership however, depriving it of a unified vision of what the studio stood for. It did not have a Mayer or Warner who could guide the studio to create its own tone. This was due mainly to financial problems at RKO. The company was forced into receivership in 1934 with its main backer, RCA, selling most of its holdings to Floyd Oldum, who was instrumental in revitalizing the company in the mid-thirties. RKO was also the distributor of some of the greatest Hollywood filmmakers who were without a studio. Walt Disney, David O. Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn all were distributed from RKO, because of its position as a minor studio with a collection of theatres. Larger studios could not have contemplated these moves, however, because the output of RKO was so low, releasing independent producer’s films was advantageous so as to fill their theatres.

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<sup>30</sup>Sarris, p.28.

United Artists was the only studio of consequence in Hollywood not established by the traditional studio businessmen. In 1919 D.W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford established this studio to “finance and distribute movies independently of the Hollywood studio system in the hopes of creating quality films.”<sup>31</sup> Though United Artists was considered a studio of note in Hollywood, it had no lot and no theatres. It relied on renting land and distributing their films through the other studios. United Artists was also different because of its belief in distributing foreign films in America. Though many historians fail to mention this studio because of its minor status, it did hold an important position in Hollywood.

Due to its minor status United Artists was able to release films slowly, and because of its status as a quality studio, its films were regarded at a higher intellectual level than those of other studios. Releasing only an average of 19 films a year, its volume was significantly less than any other studio, however, of those 19 films, at least one every year from 1934 to 1941 entered into the top grossing films of year, even though the studio never posted a profit. Charlie Chaplin was perhaps the studio's greatest asset. His films were the most anticipated of any year, and were also the most controversial. Because there was no studio boss to answer to, Chaplin and others who worked for United Artists were able to create films that were politically driven. The fact that he was able to poke fun at industrialization in *Modern Times* (1936), or at the Nazi Regime in *The Great Dictator* (1941) proved that his was a unique position in Hollywood. No other personality in the film business was able to create such controversial productions successfully. Other film producers may have been able to create such projects, but none could do it with the success of Chaplin.

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<sup>31</sup>Steinberg, p.79.

Hollywood was dominated by these eight studios. They were able to control the production of films in America. They also controlled distribution in the nation. Control over distribution was the greatest advantage which the studios possessed. Following the economic troubles of the early thirties, the Hollywood studios were forced to reorganise the ways in which they displayed their product. Prior to 1933, all major studios in Hollywood owned large theatre chains, giving them the ability to maintain a fixed venue for their films. When ticket sales lagged however, the studios found that these theatres were one of the main reasons for their susceptibility to the economic troubles. The theatres not only had mortgages which were due, they also had fixed operating costs, such as property tax, staffing and stocking (mainly popcorn, the only bumper crop of the Depression). This meant that those studios which acquired huge theatre chains in the early and late 1920s were forced to sell parts of them in the early thirties. The one studio which weathered the depression with the least amount of disruption was MGM. In part, this was because Loew's Inc., the parent company of MGM, did not believe in purchasing large theatre chains. Instead, MGM owned only a small number (125) of first-run houses.<sup>32</sup> The other studios followed MGM's lead in their phases of rebuilding. All of the Big Five studios – MGM, Warners, RKO, Paramount and 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – retained their first-run houses following their individual troubles, allowing them to maintain control over the exhibition of their films.

The power of these first-run houses must not be underestimated. First-run theatres were the prestige movie houses, built to resemble opera houses or Broadway theatres, they were designed to hold huge crowds, numbering in the thousands. These were the film houses that offered the most

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<sup>32</sup>Tino Balio, *Grand design: Hollywood as a modern business enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 17.



comfortable seats, air conditioning, and central urban locations. They also charged the most money for the privilege of seeing the films on the first run. The first-run houses, or “deluxers,” as the industry insiders called them, were in key locations, over four hundred in the largest cities in the United States, with populations exceeding 50,000. Thirty-five percent of the population of the country lived in these cities which were situated mostly on the East coast or in California.<sup>33</sup> The control of these theatres had major consequences for Hollywood. “All other Hollywood film companies had to accede to the dictates of the Big Five in order to place films in vital first-run sites, a necessity if profits were ever to be made.”<sup>34</sup> However, first-run theatres were not the only theatres in town. It was nearly impossible for Americans to live in a city, town, or county without a theatre, be it a first-run palace with rustling of usher’s uniforms and air conditioning or a fifth or sixth-run house, with the sound of the projector in the air and the heat of the summer coming through the doors. Those theatres which were lower in status, the neighbourhood, small town and rural theatres were mostly independently owned. Small businesses, usually family owned, controlled the majority of theatres in the United States. However, they had little power.

The system of runs for films was something which was refined over the twenties and thirties. The Hollywood studios, under the guidance of the Big Five and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)<sup>35</sup> had divided the nation into thirty markets, which were then sub-

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.26.

<sup>34</sup>Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures, A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p.66.

<sup>35</sup>The MPPDA was the organisation of studios and distributors that was responsible for overseeing the entire motion picture industry. It was staffed by men picked by the studios and basically was designed as a self-regulating mechanism for Hollywood. It was also the organisation which was in charge of enforcing censorship for the movies. For more information on the MPPDA see Chapter II.

divided into zones. Theatres in these zones were then classified into runs. Films would travel from the first-run theatres down to the second, third and so on until it reached the end of its run in seventh or eighth-run theatres. The amount of runs a film had depended on the size of the zone. In a large zone, films could run though eight times or more, in smaller zones, there might only be five or six. At each successive run a film became less and less profitable, while the admission price was forced down lower and lower. The rock bottom price hovered around ten cents a show. Since the MPPDA decided where zones were located and how long a film took to get from first to second and so-on (called "clearance" by insiders), the studios were able to keep some films in distribution in a single zone for up to a year. Clearance periods were designed to allow the higher priced theatres the ability to charge higher amounts for new films. "Since the value of a motion picture to an exhibitor depended on its novelty, the granting of excessive clearance to prior-run houses had the effect of increasing their drawing power and keeping patronage in subsequent-run houses at the low level."<sup>36</sup>

Added to this system of zones, which was created by the studios and enforced on the independent theatres, was the system of block booking. Block booking was a system unique to the business world. "This is the only industry in the world," stated a congressional investigative committee on the industry, "in which the buyer, having no idea what he is buying, underwrites blindly all of the product offered to him."<sup>37</sup> What block booking meant was that a studio would offer to independent exhibitors the entire year's run of pictures in one block. If a theatre wanted to stock MGM pictures, for example, they would have to purchase a block of films, often consisting of the entire MGM catalogue for that year. They could not pick only those that they believed would be

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<sup>36</sup>Balio, p.20.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.19-20.

profitable. Often, the exhibitors had no idea what many of the films they were buying were about. They only knew that it was an MGM, or Paramount film. They received the titles and a story synopsis at a later date, if they were lucky. The main complaint which was given by the independent exhibitors was not about this system though. They understood that they had to fill their theatre for 365 days a year, often with double bills, so they were happy to take as many films as they could get. The complaint which was heard most often was that the theatres owned by the studios did not get the same treatment.<sup>38</sup> An MGM theatre could pick the films it wanted to show without buying the entire block, and not just from MGM, but from Warners, Paramount, Columbia, and so on. The studios created a different set of rules for themselves when it came to distribution.

This system of control over which films the audience could see, made Hollywood the envy of the world. No where else could the film industry, or any industry, dictate to the audience what they could and could not see. Other nations were forced to display Hollywood films, due mostly to public demand. However, they could not distribute their own films in America. Hollywood argued that they were giving the audiences what they wanted. They provided quality and quantity entertainment, filling theatres 365 days a year with pictures that the audience could not stay away from. Many studios produced at least one new film every week. However, the audience had no choice in the films it saw. With the exception on United Artists, studios were extremely reluctant to promote foreign films, nor did many studios distribute independent productions. By controlling all of the first-run theatres, non-Hollywood films had little, or no chance of being successful without the cooperation of a Hollywood studio, preferably a major studio.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

Audiences were not given a choice as to the films they could see. It was either Hollywood or the occasional British film. By monopolizing the exhibition of films, Hollywood made it impossible for alternate styles of film to become popular. "Audiences could only popularize the films that played in the theaters and those theaters played only Hollywood movies."<sup>39</sup> It is true that Hollywood films were not the only types of films being produced in America. Blacks, Jews, immigrant groups, and others, had their own movie industries. However, these were extremely minor on a national or even a regional scale. A black movie house would show the occasional black film, but the mainstay of the theatre was still Hollywood. Also, the number of "Negro theatres" was so few, about one for every twenty-one thousand blacks, that it was insignificant to Hollywood.<sup>40</sup> The studios in Hollywood were in complete control of the film industry in America.

Nothing could compete with the quality of a Hollywood picture either. Production values, talent, and writing all combined to make even the B movies, according to one contemporary, "show a verve, pace, and vitality, a crisp professionalism . . ."<sup>41</sup> The *Hollywood style* was the only game in town, and Hollywood played it well. The studios understood that their audience was quite sophisticated, and even though they were the only producers of films, they had continually to strive to maintain their power over the audience. The studios were trying to make as much money as they could, and the only way they knew to do this was to create polished products.

The popularity of American films was not due entirely to the production values, the stars or the stories, however. Hollywood controlled the market, making other films marginal. This makes

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<sup>39</sup>Roffman Purdy, pp.8-9.

<sup>40</sup>Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1939), p.9.

<sup>41</sup>Roger Dooly, as quoted in Cripps, p.68

it difficult to argue that the popularity of a film was a subscription by the audience to a certain view point. Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy argue that it is impossible to measure an audience's response to a film through its box-office receipts because of the monopoly of Hollywood.<sup>42</sup> This argument may work for films that were only marginally successful. However, those films that made it to the top ten list for their year or for the decade obviously had something which attracted the audience. For a film to make the top ten list of a year means that the audience had to see it multiple times, and encouraged friends to see it. The film had to be enjoyed. To argue that movie-going was a desire simply to go out of the house is valid. However, for the audience to see a movie multiple times, to make it one of the most popular films of the year, it must speak to the audience on some level.

It must also be remembered that in the thirties there were precious few diversions for the mind. People went to the movies not so much as a conscious choice, but as a social habit. Hollywood films were top in America because there were no other forms of entertainment to match them. In the early thirties Hollywood became slightly concerned by the flourishing of sports such as miniature golf and baseball. Nevertheless nothing could compete with Hollywood on an equal footing. Films were simply too powerful a medium for anything, including radio, to compete with. Though radio was popular in the thirties and radio shows were powerful in their own way, they could not generate the huge following which Hollywood could.

Movies were the most exciting form of mass culture. Although many more people listened to the radio, the experience of watching a movie was more intense. Watching and listening in the dark with strangers, all eyes focussed on the bright screen's compelling images, was simultaneously communal and isolating. The viewer's reactions were reinforced by the laughter or gasps of others, while he could also thrill to the depiction of private fantasies. Visually freer and more accessible than what was

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<sup>42</sup>Roffman and Purdy, p.8-9.

called “legitimate” theater, the talking movies arrived just in time to lighten the lives of depression America.<sup>43</sup>

Movies were not simply another form of entertainment to the audience. It was able to watch its own dreams come true on the screen. Movies offered people the ability to leave their surroundings, and to enter into new surroundings, different, but familiar. The radio was not able to do this because it was missing the visual element. Live theatre failed this test also because it could not reach the masses. Only films could be seen by the entire nation.

The Hollywood style was not entirely seen on the screens. It was not only the production values and pace of the films which made them part of this style. The immigrant background of the moguls, the impact of industrialisation in the production of films, and the role of marketing and distribution all combined to make a style of film which was admired by the audience. It was the business side of Hollywood which made it the major force in American entertainment. The moguls were businessmen, something which aided them in creating their empires. They used the principles of mass production and monopolistic distribution and marketing to make Hollywood the dominate film making centre in the world. Hollywood’s innovations in the film business created a style of film which found an audience with a majority of Americans.

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<sup>43</sup>Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p.159.

## Chapter II

### Censorship and the Movies

Hollywood films from the thirties are famous for their escapist attitudes. Few films appeared to deal with the realities of the average Americans. The studios were constantly asserting that their films were entertainment, not public service announcements. Those in charge of movie-making were adamant that their films were pure entertainment and carried no propaganda style messages. However, if this were so, then there would have been no need to create a document regarding the contents of films. The Production Code administrators, the studios, and the advertisers all believed that film was a powerful medium for messages, however, they constantly asserted that they did not send messages. This chapter will attempt to look at what messages the Production Code was censoring from the audience. While looking at the Code and its implementation, this chapter will also investigate who was behind the creating of the Code, as well as the make up of the groups which led the protests to enforce the censorship of Hollywood. Filmmakers were not only influenced by the Code, and these various influence will also be looked at. As well, the audience shall be looked at in this chapter. Hollywood appeared to speaking to a particular audience. It will be the goal of this chapter to discover who this was and what influence this had on films made in Hollywood.

As discussed in Chapter One, the system of production in Hollywood was controlled by the production heads: Louis B. Mayer, at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Jack Warner at Warner Brother's Studios, Harry Cohn at Columbia Studios, Adolph Zukor at Paramount Pictures, and

Darrel F. Zanuck at 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox. These men, the Hollywood moguls, were very nearly in complete control of the pictures that were produced on their lots. They approved the cast, the production crew, the writer and director, and they controlled the final print. This system was by no means absolute, however, and variations on the theme did occur. Frank Capra films, as mentioned above, were popular enough that while he worked at Columbia he rarely had to look to Cohn for permission on casting or scripts. A few actors and directors were likewise successful in creating their own product, provided, of course, that their last picture made money. However, these were the exceptions, not the rule.

Though it is true that the moguls were in charge of the films produced on their lots, they were not, for the most part, in charge of the money which fuelled their lots. In the years between 1929 and 1933 the Hollywood studios became victims of the Depression. Though it is true that studios were among the last American industries to feel the pinch of the Depression, it cannot be said that they emerged unscathed, as is the popular myth. Nineteen thirty-one saw the beginning of suffering on the Hollywood lots. "RKO saw a 1930 surplus of 3.3 million turn into a 5.6 million deficit in 1931; Fox suffered a loss of 5.5 million after a 9.2 million profit the year before; Warner Brothers went from profits of 17.2 million in 1929 and 7.0 million in 1930 to a loss of 7.9 million."<sup>1</sup> However, notwithstanding the negative numbers of 1931, 1932 and 1933 turned out to be the worst years for Hollywood. As ticket sales lagged to an all-time low (forty per-cent of 1931 receipts), a decade of success caught up with many Hollywood studios.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression American and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p xx-xxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxii.



During the 1920s the film business like many other sectors of the American economy prospered. And with prosperous times comes growth. It was not simply good economic times which spurred the growth of Hollywood, however. The introduction of a pre-recorded dialogue and soundtrack to popular films in 1927 caused a huge increase in ticket sales. So much so that it launched the minor studio Warner Brothers to the rank of a major studio in one short year.<sup>3</sup> The larger studios in Hollywood or the studios with the best financial backing began to absorb smaller ones, with the help of some cash from investors in New York. By the 1929, this meant that only four major studios, together with two or three smaller studios were left in California. The investment firms were more like silent partners in Hollywood during the 1920s. They were not interested in meddling with a profit making venture. As long as films continued to generate returns on their investments, they were content to allow Hollywood freedom to create whatever films it wished.<sup>4</sup>

The film production industry, during the 1920s, also became the film distribution and projection industry. Beginning in 1919 the Hollywood studios which could afford it (mainly the 'Big Four': Loews, Inc. [better known as MGM], Fox, Paramount, and Warners [although Warners did not really begin buying theatres until 1928]) began purchasing theatres around the nation to secure permanent venues for their products. By the turn of the decade, nearly all first run and many second run theatres were owned directly by the Big Four. Though this did create a guaranteed exhibition space for the studios' films, it also tied the studio to the fixed costs of maintaining theatres, as well as the expense of converting them to sound, following the 1927 release of *The Jazz Singer* by Warner

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), p.152.

<sup>4</sup>Leonard J. Leff, and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1991), p.11.

Brothers. When ticket sales lagged, studios were forced to absorb the cost of exhibiting the films as well as the cost of producing the films, which also became more expensive with the conversion to sound. No studio was left unscathed by the Depression. RKO and Paramount both went into receivership, Fox was absorbed by the much smaller Twentieth Century Pictures, and the other major studios were forced to relinquish some, if not all control of finances to backers in New York.

By 1937, two major financial institutions were in almost complete control of the finances of the film industry. The Morgans, in the guise of a few Wall Street banking firms, and the Rockefellers bank, Chase National, temporarily took control of several studios through either receivership or trusteeship. When the immediate crisis of the depression was over in Hollywood, these two financial institutions still controlled much of the stock in those studios, allowing them to influence decisions.<sup>5</sup> Also, by the mid-thirties, Fox and Warner Brothers, which controlled the patents over sound films, were both forced by the federal government to turn the patents over to non-Hollywood communication companies like Radio Corporation of America (through RCA-Photophone Company) and American Telephone and Telegraph (through Western Electric). These two companies were linked heavily with the Rockefeller and Morgan families, respectively.<sup>6</sup> To some observers, this centralization of power caused fear. What would prevent the Morgans or the Rockefellers from producing self-serving pictures that touted the company line or their personal views on American democracy and freedom?

These fears can be justified, if they are specifically looked for in many of the films. It could be argued that were Hollywood not under the thumb of Wall Street, it may have been able to create

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<sup>5</sup>Sklar, p.164.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.162.

socially meaningful films. However, the Rockefellers and Morgans were not looking to proclaim their message, nor were they looking to control Hollywood. They were searching for what all capitalists were searching for: a money making venture. Movies were one of America's fastest growing industries, and it is no surprise that money interests wanted to share in its prosperity. It is also not surprising that the communications industry wanted a share of one of the most popular and powerful means of modern communication. Wall Street had no interest in creating anything but popular movies that created minimal protest from the nation. These were what made money, and that was what the Morgans and Rockefellers were interested in, just as much as that was the interest of the Hollywood studios.

This is why, in the frightened atmosphere which followed the October 1929 crash, investors were looking for a more secure investment, and when film ticket sales began to dip, they became alarmed. Wall Street allowed Hollywood to continue with its risque themes as long as the box-office would support them. However, by 1932-33, when the box-office receipts began to fall, it looked as if audiences had reached their limits for these themes. Along with this fear, investors were also hearing the voices of protestors who worried about the moral standards in Hollywood. The publication of the Payne Fund studies<sup>7</sup> and of Henry James Forman's *Our Movie Made Children* (1933) gave new ammunition to the battered censorship war. The self-proclaimed moral leaders of the nation, including Catholic Church leaders, Progressive reformers, various women's groups and all levels of government used these documents to let all know their concerns over the morality of Hollywood films (and over Hollywood itself). These groups were almost exclusively made up of

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<sup>7</sup>The Payne Fund studies regarding movie content and morality, behaviour attitudes, emotions and health in juveniles, was published in 1930. The conclusions it reached were not specific either for or against the movies, however there was enough negative evidence to excite the enemies of Hollywood. Leff, and Simmons, p.37.

members of the upper and the “white collar” middle classes, and originated from the large cities on the east coast (though Chicago was the centre of the Catholic Church’s movement).<sup>8</sup> A very few of the investors, along with the theatre managers and distributors began to pressure the filmmakers to censor themselves before more drastic measures were taken. In April 1930, a full two years before the major drop in attendance, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America’s (MPPDA) “Motion Picture Production Code” was adopted by the studio presidents on the East Coast.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of the Production Code followed years of negotiation by the studios. It was also not the first attempt at a national code for films. The MPPDA, which was founded in 1922, and led from New York, had created a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” in 1927 in an attempt to reflect national tastes and morals. This list was meant to be used by filmmakers as a guide to taste, not as a censorship guide, and was, for the most part, entirely ignored.<sup>10</sup> Filmmakers resented any attempt by New York financiers to control their “art”, though they still did understand the need for a national censorship guide.

The reasons for the creation of a national, self-imposed censorship board were many. Studios were not only frightened of offending potential audiences and the loss of revenue which would follow, they were also frustrated by the cuts which local censorship boards made on their films. Before the creation of the Production Code, American films were greeted in at least six states by different censorship boards, none of which could agree on what was immoral, obscene, or otherwise objectionable. Also, over 60 percent of the nation’s film-going audiences were in states or

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<sup>8</sup>Tbid.

<sup>9</sup>See Appendix 1.

<sup>10</sup>Leff and Simmons, p.7-8.

municipalities with censorship boards. With the coming of sound in 1927, the cost which these censorship boards inflicted upon the studios reached in excess of three million dollars a year.<sup>11</sup>

“Cutting has often resulted in the ruin of a picture to an extent where grosses on these pictures, in the six censorship states, have been negligible. A recent case was Harry Langdon’s *The Chaser*, from which five or six sequences were cut spoiling the entire continuity.”<sup>12</sup>

The Production Code was designed to prevent any organised criticism of movies by creating a moral standard in movies which was designed to satisfy most of the protesters. However, the debate over censorship in Hollywood was not simply over the morals of movies. The debate was over who was to control the morals of the nation. Local governments and religious groups believed that Hollywood, and more specifically, the Hollywood Jews, presented a direct challenge to their role as “moral stewards.”<sup>13</sup> The man who was placed at the head of the MPPDA and the Production Code was intended to deflect this vision of the Jewish Hollywood that was not interested in the morals of the nation. William Hays, former Postmaster General of the United States, ex-Republican National Chairman and elder of the Presbyterian Church, was hired in 1922 to guide Hollywood away from immorality. By 1929 Hays saw that the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” list, which he had put in place, was not working, and, under threats from Washington, arranged for a new code to be written.<sup>14</sup>

The Production Code of 1930 was developed by many hands, few of whom were actual

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.6-8.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.7, as quoted from *Variety*.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.72.

<sup>14</sup>Leff and Simmons, p.4-14. The threat from Washington was a senator from Iowa, Smith W. Brookhart, who “introduced a Bill to place the movie industry under the direct control of the Federal Trade Commission.” Ibid., p. 8.

producers of movies. One of the principal writers of the Hays Code, as the Production Code was soon named, was Martin Quigley, publisher of the *Motion Picture Herald*, one of two major Hollywood trade papers (the other paper was *Variety*). Quigley was a powerful man in the movie business; it was his paper that the financiers in New York read. Unfortunately, it was *Variety* which was read by the movie makers in Hollywood. Quigley's paper was seen by many as the whistle blower on Hollywood's moral transgressions, which made him a popular man in New York, but not in Hollywood.<sup>15</sup> Quigley also held the ears of those in control of the Catholic Church in America, making him not only popular to the East Coast studio presidents, but also valuable.

The Production Code was a political document, just as the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" was, and it was treated the same way in Hollywood. Though the Production Code was written in 1930, it was not until 1933 that was adopted, and not till 1934 that it was truly enforced in Hollywood. During those four years it was business as usual for Hollywood. Movies showed no noticeable changes during these years because filmmakers saw no real need to change their films, nor did the money interests in New York. People were still coming to the theatres. It was not until 1933, and the dramatic drop in attendance, that filmmakers chose to enforce the Production Code. Even with all the debates over film content, money was still the main focus of filmmakers and their backers. With the drop in attendance, and the threats of nationwide boycotts of films, those involved in the movie business were forced to make changes, and by 1934 the Code was in full effect.

It was the Catholic Church which caused Hollywood to rethink its moral stance in 1933. The Catholic Church hierarchy was not the first religious group to take on Hollywood, however their

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.9.

success stemmed from something that all other groups appeared to lack—"unity of ideology and organization."<sup>16</sup> Under the name The Legion of Decency, the Catholic Church leadership circulated pledge forms throughout the Catholic dioceses, collecting a reported eleven million signatures in only ten weeks in 1933 and 1934. These pledges asked signers to boycott films which the Catholic Church felt were vulgar in any way. The signatories were not simply Catholics who felt compelled to react to a request coming from the Church hierarchy, prominent Protestant and Jewish organizations signed up as well, proving that it was not purely a Catholic movement alone.<sup>17</sup>

The Catholics were not the only threat to American films. International pressures were also bearing down on Hollywood. International ticket sales were an important part of a film's income, and protecting this became as important to film producers as protecting the national market. In the Production Code it was provided that "[t]he just rights, history, and feelings of any nation are entitled to most careful consideration and respectful treatment."<sup>18</sup> This section of the Code stemmed from the cries of international representatives in Hollywood. Almost every nation in which Hollywood films were shown had a representative in Hollywood to make sure that their concerns were voiced.

After the enforcement of the Code Hollywood attempted to appease any local as well as international protest regarding the contents of films. Many believe still that it was American interests which forced married couples to sleep in separate beds. However, it was in fact an effort to appease

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<sup>16</sup> Sklar, p.173.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix I, p.129.

the objections of the British Board of Film Censors.<sup>19</sup> It was not until the anti-Semitism in Germany became undeniably noticeable to everyone in the late thirties that the studios began to stop accommodating George Gyssling, the German consul in Los Angeles, even though Germany was an extremely minor market.<sup>20</sup> What frightened the studio's most was the bad press which international threats would cause. If the Chinese did not like a film, they might be able to convince the Italians, or the Russians, or the Japanese also to boycott, causing Hollywood not to just lose one market, but to lose two or perhaps three or more potential audiences for a film. The financial risk was too large.

In 1922, Hollywood learned a valuable lesson in the treatment of other nations. The Mexican government, angry over the amount of Mexican villains in westerns placed an embargo on all films of the offending film companies. To Hollywood in the days of "silent films", this was a major blow. Mexico was a significant market. To promote a solution to the crisis, the newly formed MPPDA resolved to "do everything possible to prevent the production of any new motion picture which present the Mexican character in derogatory or objectionable manner."<sup>21</sup> This was not the solution to the Mexican problem, nor did it end international pressures on Hollywood. What this did, however, was provide precedent for Hollywood's foreign policy. Concession in representation was now the norm for Hollywood's international policy.<sup>22</sup> From 1922 until the enforcement of the Production code in late 1934 Hollywood used this incident as blueprint for all interactions with

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<sup>19</sup>Tino Balio *Grand design: Hollywood as a modern business enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), p.38.

<sup>20</sup>Cripps, p.87.

<sup>21</sup>Ruth Vasy, "Foreign Parts: Hollywood's Global Distribution and the Representation of Ethnicity," *American Quarterly*, Volume 44, Number 4 (December 1992), p.618.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p.618-19.



international pressure groups.

The Production Code was another example of Hollywood's ability to adapt to pressure, be it international or local. By 1934, it became necessary for the MPPDA to take steps towards strict enforcement of the Code. New York needed a man on the West Coast who could deal directly with the studios and the moguls, pressuring them to obey the Code and the MPPDA. Joseph Breen, a self-made public relations man, was made Assistant to the President of the MPPDA, the West Coast boss of the association and enforcer of the Production Code. "Joseph Ignatius Breen 'spoke Hollywood.' Tough and brash and larger than life, he was 'just dumb enough,' one associate recalled, and could see clear through the tinsel of the Tinseltown moguls."<sup>23</sup> Breen was sent in to prevent Hollywood from creating another immoral picture, like the Mae West films. He was also hired to appease the many enemies of Hollywood. Breen was loved by the Catholic Church and respected by many others, he was the new order in Hollywood. "The Code was the Word, the gospel according to Breen."<sup>24</sup>

Mae West was the symbol of all that was wrong with Hollywood. In 1933 Paramount Pictures premiered Mae West in her first film, *She Done Him Wrong*, a sexually charged comedy which was greeted by huge ticket sales and equally huge protests from both censors and moralists. This was an unofficial screen adaptation of her popular stage play, *Diamond Lil*. Unofficial because the MPPDA had placed strong objections to any film production of the play.<sup>25</sup> She played a "bawdy,

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<sup>23</sup>Leff and Simmons, p.33.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.57.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.23.

lusty woman who sailed through life with a quip and a smile and no guilt," her specialty.<sup>26</sup> However, it was not only the content of the film which upset the MPPDA, it was the fact that the film had ever been made. Many studios were interested in making a film of the popular *Diamond Lil* character; Warner Brothers had even attempted to develop a script without success. No one was willing to attract the kind of attention which Mae West brought. However, Paramount was desperate, they needed a hit. *She Done Him Wrong* was destined to be a hit and all in Hollywood knew it. Those who watched the morals of movies were also not only upset about the content of the film. They saw this film as the beginning of the end. They saw the loose morals, loose women, and sexual innuendos as only the first in what was sure to be a long line of films with the same basic themes. The problem was not that this film had been made, it was that this film was successful, and when Hollywood struck on a successful formula, it continued in the same vein until something better came along.

Protest grew as production began on another Mae West film. When *I'm no Angel* opened in 1934, and with plans afoot for a third Mae West picture, those in the MPPDA knew it was time for action. Throughout the nation calls were made for boycotts of Paramount and Hollywood. The Catholics were threatening to pressure the new federal government into formal action.<sup>27</sup> The Legion of Decency collected its signatures. Joseph Breen was the MPPDA's answer to Mae West, and the Catholic threat. All scripts were now required to pass through the MPPDA to meet Production Code approval. Breen was given the power to fine those who refused to comply with the Code. Also, films that did not meet with MPPDA approval would not be shown in any theatre in the United States. All

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<sup>26</sup>Microsoft, *Cinemanía '95* (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), *CineBooks' Motion Picture Guide Review, She Done Him Wrong*.

<sup>27</sup>Leff and Simmons, p.51.

films required the approval of Breen and his office before they were sent out to audiences.

The Production Code, from its inception, had been about politics. It concerned preventing American films from becoming subject to outside censorship, preventing films from generating organised protests. The enforcement of the Code was about money. Filmmakers allowed Breen and his assistants to enforce the Code because they saw that attendance was dropping and they feared for their jobs. Though Mae West's films were popular and they did draw crowds, they also drew bad publicity. Bad publicity has the power to last longer than profit. Filmmakers were forced into accepting censorship because they believed that the nation had reached its limits. However the Production Code did not mean an end to films, nor did it mean an end to socially or politically relevant films, as some of its detractors believed.<sup>28</sup>

The story of the Production Code, and its creation helps to inform viewers of 1930s films on the stylistic and thematic choices made by filmmakers in this era. The Production Code, more than any other document, shaped the ways in which filmmakers dealt with the world around them. Films did not become static in their subjects with the introduction of the Hays Code. Adaption was now the norm, "new within the limits of convention," writes Thomas Cripps, "By this I mean that each new movie was bound by conventions but was free to move within them and even to press against them in ways mutually agreeable to budgeteers in search of the risk-free product and moviegoers who knew what they liked."<sup>29</sup> The Code was also flexible. Though it was not Breen who officially had the final decision on most films (for he had to report to men in New York, namely William Hays) on occasion there were pictures which passed even though they were controversial in some way.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.12.

<sup>29</sup>Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon*, p.107.

Although films like *Scarface: Shame of the Nation* (1932)<sup>30</sup> or *She Done Him Wrong* were not made, films with right or left wing political views were, as were films that dealt with the Depression in a new way. Breen was able to let a film through the Code if he thought it was worthy in some way.

The early-thirties films like *Little Caesar* (1930)<sup>31</sup>, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930)<sup>32</sup>, *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932)<sup>33</sup>, and *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933)<sup>34</sup> all deal with the middle-class moods of the Depression in different ways, and all with an “energy” which is not recaptured until the end of the decade. Once the Hays Code was enforced (for these films were all made before the Code was in effect) films with this much “energy” could not be produced. Each violated the Code, be it for violence or for subject matter, mostly involving criminals in a glorious light. However this did not mean that the Depression became a taboo subject in Hollywood, the Code, and the audience, simply forced filmmakers into dealing with the Depression in a different

<sup>30</sup>*Scarface* is known as one of the most raw and harsh of the gangster films of the 1930s. Produced before the implementation of the Production Code, it was delayed a full year because of problems with censors. *Cinemania '95*, *CineBooks*, *Scarface* (1932).

<sup>31</sup>Much like *Scarface*, *Little Caesar* too was a gangster film in which the criminals were glorified. *Ibid*, *Little Caesar* (1930).

<sup>32</sup>*All Quiet on the Western Front* was the film version of the controversial novel of the same name. The novel and the film focussed on the experiences of one German troop in the trenches during the First World War. The story was controversial because of its pacifist message.

<sup>33</sup>This is the story of a veteran who is wrongly convicted of a crime and sentenced to work on a chain gang. He escapes from the physical and emotional terror of the gang and becomes a marginal success only to fall again back to the chain gang because of his jealous wife (whom he was blackmailed into marrying) turns him in after he admits to her that he wants a divorce because he has fallen in love with another woman. He returns to the chain gang where he is reduced again to the level of a subhuman. Again he escapes, this time to a darker future. The film ends with the lead character, played by Paul Muni, standing in the shadows of an alley. He faces his love, who had just parked her car, to tell her that he is ok but cannot stay, they are still chasing him. When she asks him how he lives, he hisses from the shadows, “I steal!”. *Ibid*, *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932).

<sup>34</sup>*Gabriel Over the White House* is a fantasy in which the president becomes a “superpresident” when a world depression and the threat of a world war force him to take extraordinary measures. It is by far Hollywood’s most fantastic solution to the threats of the depression. When the president resolves the problems of the world, he retires, leaving the nation a better place. *Ibid*, *Leonard Maltin Review*, *Gabriel Over the White House*.

manner.

Hays was the head of the MPPDA and all decisions were funnelled through him officially, however, it was Breen who held the real power, due mostly to his geographic location. The British trade paper *Film Weekly* called Hays “a mere Hindenberg,” labelling Breen as “the Hitler of Hollywood,” insinuating that it was Breen who really controlled the MPPDA, while Hays was in place as a mere figurehead.<sup>35</sup> Being in Hollywood not only meant that Breen was the first to see the movies, but also that he was involved with them from the beginning to the end. This meant that filmmakers were in constant contact with Breen, and not only could he influence them, but they too could influence his decisions. They were able to bargain with Breen to create films that pressed the boundaries of the Production Code. Hays, on the other hand, was influenced by “the Manhattan distributors and theater owners, the locus of power within the industry,” who were more cautious and less forgiving.<sup>36</sup>

The money interests in New York were worried about the types of films that could come out of Hollywood, especially in a time of economic turmoil. The Depression fostered a fear of political films from Hollywood. Political films covered a broad spectrum of films. This did not simply mean films with political motives or plots, but also topical films, films that dealt with reality. Although political films did not frighten many in Hollywood, in New York they saw political films as the beginnings of trouble. It was best not to give the population ideas of revolution. If a film was deemed to go against the grain of the nation, it might garner an unfavourable response from any number of protest groups. This is one of the reasons why many of those (both historians and journalists) looking

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<sup>35</sup>As quoted in Leff and Simmons, p.57.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.65.

back at films in the 1930s see them as escapist, and complain that the films did not deal with the Depression.

Hollywood appeared escapist because this is what it felt that the audience wanted. In the early thirties studios produced films with anger, which dealt with the Depression in an active way. After the backlash against movies in 1933 and 1934, the studios were forced to rethink their approach to the Depression. They no longer believed that the American audience wanted to see real life on the screen. The assertion was that Americans were not interested in seeing breadlines, that they needed to escape their every day existence. Whether or not this assertion on the part of Hollywood was correct, this was how it dealt with the crisis. It avoided the pain of the Depression as much as possible. Audiences were not seeing the real life of the Depression, instead they were offered an escapist dream of middle-class life in a perfect world.

By not showing the Depression, Hollywood was not asserting that it did not exist. What it was doing was attempting to identify with its audience and give the movie goers what they wanted. The average audience for a Hollywood film was middle class whites, aged 14-45.

The man [the Hollywood producer] cares most greatly to please, the man whose tastes and prejudices he pays most deferential attention, is the citizen with an average income of more than \$1500 a year who lives in a city with a population somewhere above '50,000.' He, within those wide boundaries, is the movies' average man. From his pockets comes more than half the industries revenue.<sup>37</sup>

Assuming that the average audience was male is perhaps the greatest failing of many histories of Hollywood. As Margaret Thorp correctly pointed out in her 1939 work, *America at the Movies*, the most sought after audience of filmmakers was the adult female.<sup>38</sup> Women were in control of the

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<sup>37</sup>Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1939), p.4-5.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

purchasing power of the nation, according to studies carried out in the late twenties and early thirties. Women were in charge of 80 to 90 percent of all family purchases. "They bought 48 percent of drugs, 96 percent of dry goods, 87 percent of raw products, [and] 98 percent of automobiles."<sup>39</sup> These statistics are not so important when only the movies are in question, however movies were not the only concern in Hollywood.

American movies, beginning in the twenties, were not simply for entertainment of the masses. Many Hollywood films were also filled with product tie-ins. By placing commercially available products like clothing, make-up, washing machines, refrigerators, automobiles and the like into movies, manufacturers received an immense amount of exposure for their products. And not only were manufacturers gaining, studios also received benefits from the system. Companies paid studios to place their products in movie star's hands, and, if the movie seemed worth it, paid for some of the film's advertising. This not only brought direct revenue into a studio, but also reduced the cost of the prop and art departments. "Add to all this a star system dominated by women - at MGM Shearer, Loy, Harlow, Garbo, Russell, Crawford, Goddard, Lombard, Turner, Lamarr; at Warner's Davis, Francis, Stenwyck, Young, Chatterton, and so on - hundreds of women stars and starlets available to the studio publicity, sales tie-in departments as - to use the favoured phrase - merchandizing assets."<sup>40</sup>

With all of these interests involved in Hollywood it is no wonder that they were unable to display an accurate depiction of the Depression. A film with a Depression theme, where all of the

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<sup>39</sup>John Belton, *Movies and Mass Culture*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996). p.99.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

characters were poor with few personal items would simply not produce the same amount of income for a studio. This, however, was not the chief concern of studios. The fear of political backlash was one of the greatest fears of Hollywood. It is no wonder that Hollywood walked in the middle of the political spectrum. Studios did not want to anger any portion of the potential viewing audience, least of all that immensely important middle class American. Class conflict, racial tensions, political unrest, all of these topics were taboo in Hollywood. Movies embraced an “Americanist” liberalism which allowed them to avoid offending the majority of their audience.<sup>41</sup>

“Americanist” liberalism is a term which Thomas Cripps used in his 1998 work, *Hollywood's High Noon*, to describe the style of politics which was imbedded in almost all of the films which were produced in Hollywood. Movies were attempting to display to the public a politics of the centre: the “basic moral, social and economic tenets of traditional American culture.”<sup>42</sup> This was necessary to the nation because of the Depression. What Hollywood’s moguls and film producers believed America needed and what the audience received, was an affirmation of traditional, long-held beliefs: that hard work would pay off, that individuals were in charge of their own destiny, and that simple good neighbourliness would see America through the crisis. The audience had to know that America would be alright, and that there was hope in their world.

Hollywood was famous for their affirmation during the thirties that the films it created had no message. Traditionally, the argument has been that Hollywood was not interested in sending messages over the screens because this was not their job. Their job was to entertain, nothing more,

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<sup>41</sup>Cripps, p.141.

<sup>42</sup>Richard Sklar as quoted in Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982) p.xvi.



nothing less. Also, it was believed that films with messages did not sell. Propaganda films which promoted a specific way of life were not popular, according to those who produced the films (the same argument was used in Nazi Germany). However, the Production Code, the studios, the investors, and the advertisers all had certain political views that were placed in films. The Code states in its supporting preamble:

- I. Theatrical motion pictures, that is, pictures intended for the theatre as distinct from pictures intended for churches, schools, lecture halls, educational movements, social reform movements, etc., are primarily to be regarded as ENTERTAINMENT.

Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings. But it has always recognized that entertainment can be a character either HELPFUL or HARMFUL to the human race, and in consequence has clearly distinguished between:

- A. Entertainment which tends to improve the race, or at least to re-create and rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life; and
- B. Entertainment which tends to degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living.

Hence the MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.

*So correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation.*<sup>43</sup>

Entertainment in the Code is not simply entertainment. The writers of the Code, and the supporters of it recognised that films were not simple pleasures. They were in fact documents which could uplift

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<sup>43</sup>Appendix 1, p.122.

humans, improve society and “re-create or re-build human beings exhausted with the realities of life.”<sup>44</sup> Film has power, and its creators knew this. However, it was to their advantage not to say it aloud. Even the Nazis, masters of the propaganda art, understood that propaganda did not sell unless it was packaged as entertainment. The Production Code enforced the fact that Hollywood was not merely entertaining the nation, it was offering it a form of propaganda, where they promoted a single way of life to the nation.

The American middle-class values of “home, motherhood, and community, puritan love and work ethic” were at the centre of Hollywood films.<sup>45</sup> The good and evil boundaries were clearly marked so that the audience could easily identify who the villain was and who would be the hero. Heroes fought for American values, fought with honour and valour, and if necessary died for their convictions. The villain was the person (or organisation) who fought against these “American” values, searching for ways to capitalize from or destroy the hero.

Frank Capra is known for being among the greatest in setting clear these boundaries between good and evil. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941), the so-called populist trilogy, Capra defines the American populist values and creates the perfect heroes to defend them. They are pure, innocent men of classic American middle-class beliefs. They believe in goodness and respect everyone. The villains are rich and power-hungry corporate men (usually media moguls) who wish to enlarge their hold on the world through the populist hero. The films themselves looked at America in a different way. Capra appears to model

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.6.

the themes of his films on a Jeffersonian model of America, while modelling the heroes on Abraham Lincoln. The Jeffersonian model was one of small, pre-urban areas, where life revolved around the land. Capra adapted this by removing the agrarian economic qualities of Jefferson and inserting small town beliefs.

Capra was not the only filmmaker to use Jeffersonian beliefs or the image of Lincoln. The retreat into a version of the past was a key focus of Depression films. The populist film theories all harkened back to a supposed simpler age. Historian John Belton, in his work *Movies and Mass Culture* described the populist ideology which was imposed from Hollywood as:

[looking] back with nostalgia to the “lost Eden” of preindustrial agrarian America, to the nation of shopkeepers, artisans, farmers, and small towns that existed “before the development of industrialism and the commercialization of agriculture.” As a reform movement, populism’s response to industrialization and mass culture was reactionary rather than revolutionary. “America [did] not need a revolution,” writes George McKenna, “for the simple reason that it [had] already had one. What it [did] need [was] a restoration.”<sup>46</sup>

It is argued by Belton and other authors, like P.H. Melling, that these populist ideas were not a response to the Depression. These ideas developed first in American films in the “classical period”, between 1896 and 1917 and continue in them today.<sup>47</sup> What was different about the Depression films and their use of the populist ideology was that many saw that retreating back to the land and agrarianism was not the solution. Due to the huge amount of farm bankruptcies and the drought in the mid-west, America was disillusioned by the agrarian paradise which was central to Jeffersonian beliefs. Instead it focussed on the past, retreating into nostalgia for security. And Hollywood was

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<sup>46</sup>Belton, p.5.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.3–4, and Philip Davies, and Brian Neve, eds., *Cinema, Politics and Society in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p.24.

right there with Americans, looking into the past for film ideas. This is not to mean that historical dramas were the main staple of the American cinema during the Depression. What a retreat into nostalgia means in this instance is a retreat into the ideas of an idealised past. A past where “everyone loved his neighbour and where Good triumphed over evil.”<sup>48</sup>

The Depression caused American filmmakers and their investors to re-evaluate their role in society. They were no longer able to hide themselves under the title of guardians of popular entertainment. Movies were recognised as one of the most powerful mediums of communication, and with this came responsibilities. The Code’s supporters, the capital interests and the pressure groups were not incompatible. In fact, these groups were both looking for the same final product, a film industry which produced a product that carried their message of a middle-class American life. Prior to the introduction of the Production Code, Hollywood was able to produce films without messages, films that catered to the desires of what it perceived to be its audience. The Code changed this. Films were now bound to act responsibly, to contain redeeming qualities. Prior to the Code films were not necessarily all violent and immoral; however, they could be. The Depression forced Hollywood to become wary of controversy and to create films which promoted a prosperous, free, and clean America. This was a form of propaganda. The groups which forced Hollywood to conform to their wishes only wanted to reinforce their version of America. The Production Code allowed the screens to be dominated by middle-class messages, giving little or no voice to competing interests.

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<sup>48</sup>Jeffery Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973), p.231.

## Chapter III

### Hollywood, Escapism and the Outside World

The Production Code and the studio system were among the most important factors in making the Hollywood films of the thirties. However, Hollywood did not exist in a vacuum, though many times it appeared to. Situations outside of the dreamland in Southern California were destined to influence filmmakers and their films. The Depression, labour movements, the changing federal government, and international climates affected the films created. However, the most powerful influence for a Hollywood film was the intended audience. Those who were believed to be the audiences helped to shape the films. In the case of Hollywood, this audience was the white middle-class. This chapter will look into what influence this audience had on the films, not only in the subject matter, but also in class and race relations. It will investigate what influence the audience had in establishing norms in Hollywood films, as well as looking at what role film had in shaping its audience. This chapter will also look into what influence the national and international political and social climates had on films.

The films that come out of the Depression, especially those created after the implementation of the Production Code, rarely dealt directly with the pain of the economic climate in the United States. Hollywood was not interested in displaying the pain and suffering of the world because it believed that audiences had seen enough of this in real life. They came to the movies to escape their lives, to enter into a dream world where happy endings were the norm and the bad guys were easy to pick out of a crowd. The movies were believed to be an escape from reality, if only for 90 minutes.

However, what was this the reality from which the audience was escaping?

The Depression was not only an era of bread lines and Hoovervilles. Twenty-four percent of the work force was unemployed at the depths of the Depression in 1932-33. These statistics are staggering, especially when it is taken into account that these figures could not have been entirely accurate. Many more were underemployed, living marginally, watching every penny. Walker Evans' photographs, John Steinbeck's novels and the government-produced documentaries created images of men, women and children, scraping out an existence on charity and government handouts. This 24 percent is what people think of today when they think of the Depression. The other side of this picture though, the side which is rarely mentioned, is the 76 percent who were employed, and many of these people were living well despite the Depression.<sup>1</sup> These were the audiences who saw the movies. This is not to argue that the unemployed and underemployed did not go to the movies. Indeed they did, much to the surprise of many who have discussed the Depression. They were most definitely a portion of the 40 percent of adults who went to the movies at least once a week.<sup>2</sup> However, Hollywood was an industry which catered to the largest, most vocal group. This group was the employed middle-class of America. These men and women made up the largest part of the American film-going audience.<sup>3</sup>

In Andrew Sarris's work *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet*, he argues that these middle-class workers survived the Depression with little or no direct damage. He also argues that, of the 76

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, *"You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet": American Talking Film History and Memory, 1927-1949* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.15.

<sup>2</sup>Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p.160. This statistic is from a 1936 pole.

<sup>3</sup>See Chapter II for a through examination of the audience and its middle-class origins.

percent of people employed in America, a considerable number of them “derived a certain satisfaction from the plight of the 24 percent.”<sup>4</sup> Though this may have been true from his personal perspective as “a child of the dispossessed 24 percent,” it may not be entirely factual. The middle class did not survive the Depression with little, or no direct ill effects. In fact, the Depression constituted a direct, and in many ways intangible attack on Americans of all classes. All were witness to the plight of the unemployed and though they themselves were not joining them in the bread lines and soup kitchens, they understood the fear and pain in these people’s eyes. They knew that the Depression was not simply a down-turn in the economy of the nation; it was a direct assault on the national dream. For those who survived the Depression, the American dream that hard work equalled success came into doubt. Capitalism, that most sacred of all middle-class American beliefs was seemingly under attack. However, the middle class did not see it this way. It was not an attack on the capitalism upon which the nation was built, but the capitalists.<sup>5</sup> This is why there was no major attacks on American governmental institutions like the presidency. Many Americans did not believe that their national government was failing, only that the national economy was in trouble.

The employed of the nation were not ignorant of the ravages of the Depression, however. They saw the images created by the news media and the government. They were frightened by the Crash of 1929 and the economic turmoil that followed. Those who were surviving the Depression with gainful employment understood that their lives were uncomfortably close to the lives of the unemployed. The people of America, employed or not, were shaken by the crash of the economy. The unemployment statistics did not reflect the number of workers who were forced to work with

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<sup>4</sup>Sarris, p.15.

<sup>5</sup>Baritz, p.118.

reduced pay, of those skilled workers who took the place of the unskilled workers (who were fired first).

Hollywood was not ignorant of these reports on the nation's economy. It understood that Americans were hurt by the Depression. The studios were also frightened by the instability of not just the economy but also of the perceived instability of the American public. Because of this insecurity, they assumed that the nation was uninterested in paying theatre admissions to see films that portrayed their nation as being in turmoil; they could see this for themselves in the streets. They recoiled from viewing anything that was too close to reality, or at least this was the view in Hollywood. Americans were not given many opportunities to see real life on the screen because the studios were unwilling to show it.

The logic behind Hollywood's not showing the Depression was simple. Edward Campbell, in his 1981 work, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* states that:

The people in the decade beginning with the Great Crash of 1929 experienced terrific shocks to past perceptions of cultural stability, including long-held beliefs that hard work and continued industrial growth would bring eventual success. Moral was abysmal and frustrations severe. Movies did much to recognize the disheartened attitude and bolstered the public's sagging spirits. The productions had to appeal to both the audience's ideal and its problems. To do so was to support a faith in eventual recovery and in the immutability of at least the viewer's ambitions if not his job. . . . It was important that the Depression be considered as only an interruption.<sup>6</sup>

According to Hollywood, and many present day observers, America in the 1930s was not ready yet to see the Depression in their entertainment. Andrew Sarris argues that it is not until following the Second World War that American cinema could look seriously at the Depression. Audiences prior

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<sup>6</sup>Edward Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), p.73-4.



to this did not want to see the nation in trouble, just as they did not want to see violence or sex on the screen. Although Hollywood assumed that all of this was true, the audience did not always agree.

Sex and violence always sold tickets to movies. Even when sex was banned from the screens, it still proved to be one of the biggest draws for films. For proof, one must only look at the large number of blond, well-built starlets who populated the B-movie world, like Glenda Farrell, the star of the Torchy Blane films.<sup>7</sup> Even 'A' pictures like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933)<sup>8</sup> or *The Women* (1939) used large female casts in revealing or fashionable outfits to draw crowds. Violence too was a huge draw. Films like *King Kong* (1933)<sup>9</sup>, *Captain Blood* (1935)<sup>10</sup>, or *Gunga Din* (1939)<sup>11</sup> used violence to sell tickets. Even the title *Captain Blood* was designed to bring in audiences with the idea of violence on their minds. However, even though violence and sex were still used to attract audiences, the Depression was not used. The studios may have believed that the Depression was not a topic which

<sup>7</sup>Torchy Blane was the lead character of a series of nine Warner Brothers 'B' films released between 1937 to 1939. Blane was an investigative reporter who always seemed to get into trouble, only to be saved by her boyfriend, the tough Irish cop. Farrell starred in the first four films and films six through eight. Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), p.1.

<sup>8</sup>*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is one of Hollywood's famous musical films which took place behind the scenes at a Broadway play. The musical is a last hurrah for a veteran director; it is also a last ditch effort to remain employed by many of the cast members. The play is a huge success, despite the last minute replacement of the lead actress by a nobody.

<sup>9</sup>*King Kong* is the immortal story of the primal ape being captured from his island jungle, lured out by the beautiful Ann Darrow (Faye Wray). He is taken to the city only to be paraded in front of a crowd of reporters. Kong goes mad, takes Darrow, and climbs to the top of the Empire State Building. He is killed by biplanes as they attempt to subdue the primal ape.

<sup>10</sup>[Errol] Flynn's first swashbuckler, based on Rafael Sabatini's novel, scores a broadside. He plays Irish physician Peter Blood who is forced to become a pirate, teaming for short spell with French cutthroat Rathbone, but paying more attention to proper young lady De Havilland. Vivid combination of exciting sea battles, fencing duels, and tempestuous romance provides Flynn with a literally star-making vehicle." Microsoft, *Cinemania '95* (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994). *Leonard Maltin Review, Captain Blood*.

<sup>11</sup>*Gunga Din* is the story of British soldiers in India fighting a mysterious Indian cult which is out to destroy the British. Starring such powerful male actors as Cary Grant, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and Victor McLaglen, *Gunga Din* was almost guaranteed to be successful.

the American public would flock to. Or were they may simply have been too frightened to take the chance in offering the audience a view of the depression.

The film industry in America consistently asserted that it was in the business of making films which pleased the public. If the public wanted violence, that was what they got. The same went with sex. However, when the public outcry from the churches and reform groups began to speak louder than the box-office receipts, the barriers went up, and the public was only allowed to see as much as those with the loudest voices would allow. The same was true when the Depression was the subject. Only in this instance those with the loudest voices were not the audiences or even the moral watchers from religious groups. The audiences never really showed any fear of viewing the Depression. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)<sup>12</sup> was a huge box-office draw, as was *Modern Times* (1936) *The Good Earth* (1937)<sup>13</sup>, and *Meet John Doe* (1941), all of which used the Depression and its consequences as a major focus of the plot. Those who feared the Depression were the money interests in New York, who were warned of the dangers of these types of films from the exhibitors.

Those involved in the distribution and exhibition of films that had lived through the lean years of the early thirties were frightened of any product which could be deemed risky.

Filmmaker Richard de Rochemont called the average exhibitor a coward. He “wanted to hear only laughter—and none of that ‘political’ laughter either—and applause. A ‘boo’ would send him quavering to the booth to see what was being protested, three

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<sup>12</sup>*Grapes of Wrath* is the film adaptation of John Steinbeck’s powerful novel about the “Okies” and their flight from the dust bowl of the American mid-west. It chronicles the trek of the Joad family from Okalahoma to the promise land of California. Unlike the book, the film ends with some hope for the future.

<sup>13</sup>Although *The Good Earth* was a film about the plight of farmers in China during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an obvious parallel to 1930s American farmers and society as a whole.

complaints from patrons would make him talk of pulling out the reel."<sup>14</sup>

These fears were not as irrational as Richard de Rochemont suggests, however. Theatres were in a savage business which left no room for error. Already independent theatres were given no choice as to the films which they ran. Block booking made it nearly impossible for exhibitors to choose films which would appeal to their customers. The films which they were given were not screened by them for offending themes. Since the nationalisation of film censorship through the Production Code, local censors had lost their power, giving way to a national censure on morals. If a film drew protest over its content from locals who did not agree with the national morals, a theatre could lose revenue, and a loss in revenue to many small theatres could lead to losing the business. Also, after the amount of support from the middle-class which the Legion of Decency had garnered when it protested sex and violence, the financial backers of the studios worried that a film with a political or social message would arouse a similar level of protest, renewing the calls for tougher censorship of the movies.

Escapism was one of the 'safe' routes which Hollywood could go. This is the route, however, which has caused Hollywood the most problems from historians and critics of American film. By choosing to remain distant from the 'real' problems of the era, by displaying fantastic stories with unbelievably happy endings, with sparkling clean streets, cities and people, Hollywood has been accused of avoiding the problems of the nation and allowing the nation to avoid them as well. The Depression was never displayed accurately on the screen, even in such films as *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the Depression was prominently in the foreground, showed none of the starvation and hopelessness. It is doubtful that filmmakers could have placed the Depression in a prominent place

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<sup>14</sup>Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code From the 1920s to the 1960s* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1991), p.65.

on the screen. Not because film as a medium, could not display the realism of the Depression. Film was able to convey these images quite well. Realism, however, was not a profitable risk.

The choice to remain distant from reality was one grounded in an assumption of what the American public wanted to see. The studios assumed that the nation did not need to be depressed in the theatre; what they needed was to be entertained. This was the purpose of escapism. It was not to avoid the problems of reality specifically. It was to entertain the people, and if avoiding reality did this, then that was the way Hollywood would go. Studios produced what the audience wanted to see, Hollywood, after all, was a business, and businesses need to produce a product which the buying public wanted. "American and international audiences expected Hollywood sheen."<sup>15</sup> However, the studios also understood that social dramas and films which called for national unrest would be popular. They knew that a film which called for a revolution of some kind, preferably violent, would make money, if not because of the subject matter then because of the controversy which it could create. They refused to produce these types of films because the studios understood who their audience was and feared them. The audience of a film was not only the person who purchased the ticket. The special interests also held the attention of those in charge of film production. It was the Legion of Decency, the money lenders in New York and the politicians in Washington that held the attention of those in charge of film production along with the audience.

Hollywood was not unable to produce socially relevant films. As union troubles came to Hollywood in the mid-thirties, so to did an increase in social-problem films. Films such as *Black Fury* (1935) and *Black Legion* (1936) were famous for their realistic looks on labour in America, the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.65.

former film for its pro-organised labour views, and the latter for dealing with racism and hate in American industries. However, when these films were released, censors and opponents to Hollywood cried foul. They feared the backlash of these types of films, just as they feared the “threats to national mores” which came from the Mae West films.<sup>16</sup> Escapism was not only profitable for Hollywood, it was the path of least resistance. It was really not the audiences of America which were to be pleased by a film. The censors and the special interest groups were simply more powerful than the average film-goer because they carried influence. A film which offended any major group could end up as the target of a boycott, leading to a loss in profits. Anything which threatened profits was avoided, especially following the box-office drought of the early thirties.

The motion picture industry was very cautious about appealing to their audiences. However, when films were in production the audience was not the chief concern of the producers. The audience bought the tickets to a film, but the censors allowed the film to be made. Hollywood could please the audience, but only within the framework of the Production Code. Escapism was the easiest way to avoid the anger of Joseph Breen and behind him the influential moral and money powers of the nation. Breen wanted to see socially relevant films, but he also wanted to avoid controversy. Luckily, escapism was a popular means of avoiding controversy.

Escapism in the films, as defined by historians, was an inability to “deal with pressing political or social issues in an honest and truthful fashion.”<sup>17</sup> However, movies were not the only portion of mass communication which provided the public with an escape. Some of the Depression’s most popular books, plays, and radio dramas also displayed this inability to deal with the present. *Gone*

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.77.

*With the Wind* (1939)<sup>18</sup> was not only the most popular film of the decade, it was also one of the best selling books. The American public was searching for an escape. However, escapism was not only a means to avoid the present; it was also an “expression of relief.”<sup>19</sup>

The ‘screwball’ comedy was one of the most popular examples of this expression of relief. These were the most escapist of films, concerning the falling in love of two completely different people, often of differing classes. Since these films never really attempted to deal with socially relevant topics, critics attacked them for their lack of realism. In the 1957 picture book *The Movies*, the summation of the section on “Screwball Comedy” argues that these films:

... featured something new to movies—the private fun a man and a woman could have in a private world of their own making. A new image of courtship and marriage began to appear, with man and wife no longer expecting ecstatic bliss, but treating daily experiences as a crazy adventure sufficient to what sense could be found in the great world outside, where economic crisis and the threat of approaching war barred all the conventional roads to achievement and happiness? It is hard to describe today what these films meant to a depression-bred generation, and it is not surprising that the “screwball comedies,” as they came to be called, usually ended in slapstick or violence. They mirrored a world of frustration.<sup>20</sup>

The frustration was not necessarily the result of the economic pressures of the Depression. Andrew Sarris, argues this frustration was the result of the heavy censorship of the Depression era films. The

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<sup>18</sup>*Gone With the Wind* is arguably one of the most popular films of the thirties. It concerns the rise and fall of the American South as told through the story of Scarlett O’Hara, the headstrong female lead. The film follows O’Hara through her trials of love and war, watching her transform from the childish girl chasing boys on the plantation to a powerful and strong business woman in the post war South. The true power of the film is in its assertion that land is the most important love as it is the only thing that lasts. *Gone With the Wind* has proven to be one of the most powerful films of the Depression with its powerful attachment to the land and its final message that “After all, tomorrow is another day!”

<sup>19</sup>Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1977) p.96.

<sup>20</sup>As quoted in Andrew Sarris, *You Ain’t Heard Nothin’ Yet: The American Talking Film History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.94.

“economic crisis” and the “approaching war” was not mentioned in any of the films labelled as screwball comedies. These were themes which meant to be left to other, more serious genre, or other mediums. It was the elimination of sex from the sex comedies of the twenties and early thirties that required that directors and writers find something else for these beautiful people to do. Comedy and slapstick were the among the few options left. These were, Sarris argues, substitutes for sex.<sup>21</sup>

The most famous of the screwball genre is *It Happened One Night* (1934), Frank Capra’s first commercially successful film, which launched him on the road to success. Staring Claudia Colbert and Clark Gable, this film concerned the runaway heiress Colbert, and the unemployed reporter, Gable. The two meet on a bus as she flees from a loveless marriage and he from his job as a reporter. They fall in love as the two flee across the country, though, not without a few good laughs. The comedy in this film comes from the constant role reversal. Colbert is not always the picture of helpless beauty, and Gable is not always “supermanly.” “Each possesses qualities that should by convention belong to the other.”<sup>22</sup> This was the power of Capra’s screwball comedy. He could create an America where all class differences were irrelevant (or at least not noticeable), where all were equal when the walls of money and society were destroyed.

Frank Capra’s film was the first of a line of similar films which questioned a portion of the American class structure in the same irreverent manner. The screwball comedy was a successful

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<sup>21</sup>Comedy was not the only response to the loss of sex as a subject in films. The large number of dance films produced during the thirties may also have had their root in the Production Code. Just as slapstick was a release of frustrations, so to, perhaps, was dance. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers are arguably the most famous dance team to come from Hollywood. Their seductive dances may also have been a response to the “need to discover a language of motion and gesture” that could allow them to avoid the topic of sex. Sarris., p.95.

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Kendall. *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930's* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1990), p.46.

genre in American films during the thirties, and the reasons for this were many. If Sarris is correct, and these films were simply the result of censorship, that their frustration was because of the lack of sex, the audiences had to be attracted to some other quality. The first and foremost quality which attracted audiences to *It Happened One Night* and similar films, was the comedy. When the film premiered in Berlin, in October 1935, it opened to

. . . great accolades and took other big cities by storm. Spectators in Hamburg, known for their reserve, burst out in spontaneous applause, moving the *Hamburger Tageblatt* to call the film "as invigorating as champagne," "as refreshing as a morning bath." . . . The director, it was said, imbued the spectacle "with an effervescent vitality, so that you have no time to reflect, you are pulled along by one humorous scene after another and in the end are so out of breath and excited that all you can do is clap loudly."<sup>23</sup>

American audiences greeted the film with an equal amount of enthusiasm. The humour expressed by this and the other screwball comedies was a form of relief to audiences. They recognised that these films were escapism and revelled in this.

According to historian Andrew Bergman, the Screwball comedies also breached a divide in white American classes.<sup>24</sup> These films strove to "unite all classes as one," to breach the "rural-urban divide."<sup>25</sup> They used comic techniques to pull together the fractured fabrics of white American society. He rejects the idea proposed by other historians, that "the 'screwball' quality is taken as a kind of veneer, a desperate cover for Depression-bred alienation."<sup>26</sup> Instead he asserts that these films

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<sup>23</sup>Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Harvard, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.110.

<sup>24</sup>Blacks were not included in the class divides in the screwball comedy. Like most film styles, the screwball comedy featured a distinct lack of black characters, instead featuring almost exclusively white casts.

<sup>25</sup>Andrew Bergman, *Were in the Money: Depression American and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p.133.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.



were unifying American groups. He believes that the early thirties comedies (before the Production Code was enforced) were “explosive,” a quality which allowed them to attack society and its problems. However, after the Code was in place, comedy becomes “implosive,” offering solutions and unity to white American society.<sup>27</sup> What Bergman fails to take note of is the fact that the Code and the political and social climate also helped shape these themes. The screwball comedy was more a product of the attack on Hollywood’s morals than an attempt to unite America. If audiences came away with the belief that this was so, then Hollywood was happy, however, filmmakers were not attempting to “pull things together,” they were attempting to sell tickets in an era of intense control.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless the problem remains of what the audience took away from these films. Bergman may be correct: audiences may have seen the unity on the screen and became motivated by it. They also may have seen Clark Gable and Claudia Colbert fall in love, against all odds, and dreamed that the same could happen to them. To assert that these films carried with them sub-texts on American society is possible. But to assert that these themes were read by audiences is difficult to assess. The screwball comedy was just one of many film genres, and it is difficult to assert that these films, and no others, offered audiences unifying visions. It is important to look at all popular genres of films to understand what American audiences were looking for in films.

The historical romance was another of the more popular genres of the thirties. The retreat into the idealised past was a popular pastime among cultural producers during times of stress in America. As noted in the previous chapter, the idealised past was usually an agrarian past, where people made their living off of the land and economic problems were hard to find. However, there

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.134.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

was also, in Hollywood, a search for an alternate idealised past. Early urban America was another topic favoured by Hollywood. This was a past that some audience members might even be able to remember. Chicago before the fire of 1871 was the setting for *In Old Chicago* (1938); *San Francisco* (1936) uses 1906 San Francisco as a backdrop. The western too was popular historical genres of the thirties. Though *Stagecoach* (1939) marked the reintroduction of this American movie staple to the A movie circuit, westerns were among the most popular B movies and serials.<sup>29</sup> Pre-Civil War America, especially stories of the South, also figured high among Hollywood films. *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Littlest Rebel* (1936) and *Jezebel* (1938) were the among the most popular films of pre-World War Two Hollywood. And films with comparably marginal success, like *Dixiana* (1930), *Mississippi* (1935) and *So Red the Rose* (1935), proved to Hollywood that the 'Old South' was not a subject to be avoided.

The success of these historical films was based on the belief that all was well in the world before the mechanized age of the twentieth century. Life in these films seemed less complicated. There was order to the nation, everyone knew their place in it, especially when the Old South was the subject of films. This is not to say that the majority of Americans desired a return to slavery conditions. What they desired was a return to the simple times of the pre-industrial, pre-urban past, "in which the old ideals were still possible and still practised, where everyone loved [or at least knew] his neighbour and where Good triumphed over Evil. . ."<sup>30</sup> Southern America was simply the easiest

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<sup>29</sup>Though B movies and serials were not huge money makers, they were watched by millions of Americans, usually children, giving them a different position in the memories of audiences. For more information on these films and their influence see Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Movie Making and Society Before Television* (The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, Maryland, 1998).

<sup>30</sup>Jeffery Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973), p.231.

way to access this past because of the pre-existing beliefs which the public held about it, which Edward Campbell outlines in his work, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*.

By World War II the cinematic South had emerged as a pristine society, secure in its class and economic system. In fact, the Confederacy's failure and the accompanying destruction of the plantation system served to keep the regions image intact, relieved from any exposure to economic blight. Responding to such films as *So Red The Rose*, the South took pride in those remaining vestiges of its uniqueness—its class, racial, and agrarian consciousness. Audiences could marvel at a culture so reliant on the land and the seasons rather than on the city and business trends.<sup>31</sup>

The Southern image appeared to different areas of the nation in different ways. In the South, this was a look back at the glorious past before the fall. The south was romanticised because there was no gentle decline of order. There was no collapse of the society. The Southern antebellum world was crushed by the North, giving it the appearance of a martyred society. This martyrdom was what appealed to southern audiences as well as many in other areas of the nation. Audiences appeared to want to believe that were it not for the Civil War, Southern society, and all it represented, could have survived. Few acknowledged that slavery was a integral aspect of the Old South, and many in the audience and in Hollywood may have believed that with time it would have passed way.

The glory of the Hollywood South to audiences outside of the southern states was the order of society. Gentlemen knew how to be gentlemen, women were ladies, and blacks were separate. This appealed to a society in which an increasing amount of middle-class men were becoming unable to provide for their families and occasionally women were taking the place of some men as the bread winners.<sup>32</sup> Hollywood capitalised on these themes by creating films where the sexes, classes and colours were separated, operating in what many perceived to be traditional roles. Unlike the

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<sup>31</sup>Campbell, p.76.

<sup>32</sup>Baritz, p.115.

screwball comedies, which called all classes together and mixed up gender roles, these films restored order to the world by retreating to a past where the order was enforced.

The racial themes of these films cannot be denied. Films which were set in the Old South were the most powerful statements regarding the popular perceptions of blacks in America because these films contained the most exposure for black actors in Hollywood films. Frank Capra, the great humanist filmmaker, rarely placed blacks in his films, and when he did, he followed the mould set by films like *Dixiana* (1930) or later by *Gone With the Wind* (1939). In these films, blacks were given the roles which were, according to Hollywood, historically accurate. They were the happy slaves, and devoted servants, and on occasion, brutal savages.<sup>33</sup> Blacks appeared always to be mentally inferior to white slave owners and it was only in the rarest of occasions that there was a free black on the streets. Even in historical dramas which took place in the post-civil war south, blacks continued to play these roles. Hattie McDaniel, who was awarded the first Academy Award to a black for her portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone With the Wind* stated that: "The only choice permitted us is either to be servants for seven dollars a week or portray them for seven hundred dollars a week."<sup>34</sup>

Hollywood was not ignorant of the fact that they were stereotyping blacks in these roles. McDaniel made her statements well known as did other black actors. However, the studios and the MPPDA were not interested in instigating the disruption which would be created if blacks were portrayed in a disparaging manner. When Lionel Barrymore in *Carolina* (1934) uttered the word "nigger," blacks in Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, Baltimore and New York displayed their

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<sup>33</sup>Good., p.109-110.

<sup>34</sup>As quoted in Good, p.110.

anger by throwing bricks at movie screens.<sup>35</sup> The studios knew that they were misrepresenting blacks on the screens, but Hollywood was not in the business of creating trail blazing interracial films at this time. Society did not appear to be ready for this. The marginally popular 1939 film *Way Down South* was written by two well known blacks, Clarence Muse and Langston Hughes, and it contained the same roles for black actors as *Gone With the Wind*. “Regardless of insight or talent, while on the payroll, one wrote what the studio wanted, i.e., what was popular.”<sup>36</sup>

Hollywood walked a fine line in these movies. They did not want to anger or frighten whites by displaying blacks in too positive a role. Conversely, they did not want to anger blacks, or more specifically, the whites who were sympathetic to the blacks, by displaying them as lazy or ignorant. However, they were bound by tradition and history to portray black characters in a certain manner. Studios would argue that it was history which they were bound to, but it was not so much ‘real’ history as it was cinematic tradition. In *Gone With the Wind* the blacks appear to have a good life as slaves, a theme which is echoed in other similar films.

In the fields, the blacks plow unsupervised by any white. In fact, the slave Big Sam claimed “Ah’s de foahman” and “de one dat sez when it’s quittin’ time at Tara.” Like its many forebears, the scene upheld the myth that the Negroes were not only well treated but had important responsibilities. Viewers discovered later in the movie how grateful and attached to the system the black was when in Atlanta Big Sam proudly tells Scarlett that he and his fellows were to dig trenches for the Confederates, “to help ‘em win de war.”<sup>37</sup>

This role was not meant to insult blacks. David Selznick, the producer of *Gone With the Wind*, did not want to offend blacks as seen in the note he gave to his writers on the film to insure that “the

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<sup>35</sup>Leff and Simmons, p.95.

<sup>36</sup>Campbell, p.114.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.128-9. See clip *Gone With the Wind* 1

Negro comes out on the right side of the ledger. . . ”<sup>38</sup> Indeed *Gone With the Wind* was not meant to antagonise any of the *major* groups in America or abroad. What the role of blacks in this film displays is that Selznick and other producers in America were attempting to show blacks and whites together in the best light possible. Making Big Sam the “foahman” on Tara provided the producers with the ability to say that they gave blacks a responsible role in the films while also arguing that whites were not as tyrannical as some historians would say they were.

Historical dramas were not popular just because they could portray blacks in disparaging roles. Nor did they make money because of their historical accuracies. These films made people feel good. They allowed people to believe in the future. The audience could watch people survive situations worse than their own, watch beautiful people overcome familiar obstacles in a familiar, but at the same time alien environment. However, the romantic plots of these films were their greatest draws. These films were romances at heart. Behind the history, the slaves and the south, historical films were romantic escape. The success of these films “provided hard commercial evidence that the money was in romance, not realism.”<sup>39</sup> People were not paying for a history lesson, just as they were not paying to be lectured on how to treat blacks. Audiences responded to the Old South as a theme which they could identify with because of the romantic ingredients, and they were familiar with the plot devices offered. Campbell notes that audiences found these films harmless because the themes in them had been repeated so often that “they became perfectly believable and acceptable.”<sup>40</sup> Films were still echoing the “virulent racism” of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and audiences were still attending

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted in Cripps, p.50.

<sup>39</sup> Campbell, p.84.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.116.

them because there was a lacking of any organized protests, like those organized by the Legion of Decency. If blacks and their supporters did protest, they were not loud enough to effect any major changes in Hollywood. They lacked the economic clout for Hollywood and its backers to take real notice. Because of the minimal protest elicited by these films, and the apparent innocence of their romantic story lines, the Hollywood versions of the Old South had become accepted assumptions, “all the more unshakeable because of their facile presentation in escapist films.”<sup>41</sup>

Escapism relied on romance as Hollywood’s greatest tool for entertaining the masses. Women responded to romantic plots, and women were the most important audience for Hollywood. The screwball comedy was a romantic comedy, with the main goal of the characters to find and capture their true loves. Historical films were simply romantic tales placed in a historical setting. The musicals as well were simple romantic tales with dancing and music inserted to entertain the audience and occupy the lovers. Romance was inserted into almost every film which Hollywood produced. The studios could make powerful statements by placing love as the main plot device. *A Star is Born* (1937) was an honest glimpse at the Hollywood star system; however, its main power was in reaffirming a wife’s love for her husband. True love, not how to become a star in Hollywood, was the main plot of this film. Though the main female character, Esther Blodgett, (renamed Vicki Lester in a telling scene about Hollywood’s ability to transform stars) and her rise to stardom is the main focus of the plot, her marriage to failing actor Norman Maine (also not his real name) is arguably the most powerful portion of the film. Though the statements on Hollywood and its power are many and very important, Vicki and Norman’s love is the main focus.

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.117.

Romance was the main focus of escapist films, as it was of socially relevant pictures. *A Star is Born*, however, was not simply a romance, nor was it only an exposé of Hollywood's star system. This film was also an affirmation of the American dream. If the Depression was a direct assault on the American belief system, Hollywood spent the Depression attempting to reassure the middle-class nation that everything would be alright. This was the message which Hollywood proclaimed across the screen in many of the films of the thirties, be they dramas, comedies or crime films. Even in Charlie Chaplin's classic comedy *Modern Times* (1936), where modern industrial life is the enemy of the "Little Tramp's" happiness, the final message is that all will be fine. Even though Chaplin ends his film without a job or a home, two things which Americans hold dear, especially those in the embattled middle class, the final message is that everything will be fine. "Buck up - never say die. We'll get along."<sup>42</sup> These are Chaplin's words to his love when she exclaims despair at their situation. These words are read<sup>43</sup> while the tune "Smile," written by Chaplin, is heard on the sound track.<sup>44</sup> Chaplin's film is famous for its attack on the modern life, on the drudgery of mechanized labour and the lack of emotion in the modern work place.

Comedy, however, was not perceived to be the most powerful vehicle for these messages. This role was given to drama by those in Hollywood. Whether they were period pieces like *Gone With the Wind*, or *The Good Earth* (1937) or contemporary films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) or *Meet John Doe* (1941) the message was unmistakably powerful. Though the nation was under siege, everything would work out, if only people would rekindle their belief in the goodness

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<sup>42</sup>*Modern Times* (United Artists, 1935), ti.1:30:19.

<sup>43</sup>Chaplin's film is a "silent" picture, one of the last so called silent films produced in Hollywood.

<sup>44</sup>See clip *Modern Times* 1.



of Americans. It was in these films that Hollywood offered solutions to current problems. *The Grapes of Wrath*, often considered one of Hollywood's most powerful attacks on the Depression, offers a solution as simple good neighbourliness, as experienced by Pa when he enters a truck stop to purchase bread for the family.<sup>45</sup> After leaving the truck stop with the loaf of ten cent bread and two five cent candies, which he purchased for a penny, the waitress is confronted by two truck drivers who question her about her kindness. The drivers at first appear to be harsh towards the "Okies" and the waitress's kindness, but as they leave they place their change on the cash register to make up for the shortage which result from her kind act. The message in this scene is that everyone needs to take an interest in the health of the nation. It also insinuates that the government need not interfere with the economy, if only Americans would help each other. *The Grapes of Wrath* was one of Hollywood's most controversial films taken from a book. The film lacks the power and despair of John Steinbeck's novel. The book ends with the birth of a baby in a dark barn on a rainy night without a resolution to the Joad family problems, where as the film ends with the family on the road towards their next day's work. The film balks at the social criticism which is found in the novel, instead offering the audience the belief that if the nation works together, helping their fellow Americans, they can get out of the Depression.

This message of hope is also found in the vast majority of Frank Capra's films. *Meet John Doe*, the last of Capra's humanist films on the pain of the Depression, bases its entire plot on the idea that an ordinary man can be the nation's saviour. In a famous speech by the title character, John Willoughby, the main theme of the movie is spelled out clearly.

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<sup>45</sup>See clip. *Grapes of Wrath* 1.

To most of you, your neighbour is a stranger, a guy with a barking dog and a fence around him. Now you can't be a stranger to any guy who's on your own team. So tear down the fence that separates you. You'll tear down a lot of hate and prejudices. I know a lot of you are saying to yourself: 'He's asking for a miracle.' Well, you're wrong. It's no miracle. I see it happen once every year at Christmas time. Why can't that spirit last the whole year round? Gosh, if it ever did, we'd develop such a strength that no human force could stand against us.<sup>46</sup>

This speech not only argues that Americans can beat the Depression by standing together as friends and neighbours, it also states that America can defeat its enemies by simply defeating its internal enemies of "hate and prejudice."<sup>47</sup> This film was not only attacking the Depression though. Capra saw that in 1940, when the film was in production, that the pro-Nazi element in America was growing in strength. He used this film to warn the nation of the dangers of this threat, as well as to offer them the Hollywood solution to the Depression.<sup>48</sup>

Movies of the Depression were attempting to offer solutions for the nation. Whether it were good neighbourliness or touting the virtues of the New Deal, Hollywood was determined to offer its assistance to realigning the nation's economic and social order. The New Deal was perhaps the most powerful of all American responses to the Depression. President Roosevelt was elected and remained in power through the Depression on the belief that this was the policy which would heal the nation. However, the New Deal was something which was difficult to label. It could be classified either as national policy, or as national feeling, a problem which Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy look to in their 1981 work *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the*

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<sup>46</sup>Microsoft, *Cinemania '95* (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), *CineBooks' Motion Picture Guide Review, Meet John Doe*.

<sup>47</sup>Capra was not only attempting to make a statement about the Depression, he was also attacking pro-Nazi groups in America. Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), p.297.

<sup>48</sup>Microsoft, *CineBooks' Motion Picture Guide Review, Meet John Doe*.

*Depression to the Fifties:*

Since the New Deal was more a matter of mood than policies, Hollywood, by simply promoting confidence, could appear New Dealish without endorsing any of its programs. For the rest of the decade the movies offered the familiar reassurances of the pre-FDR film—stay calm and the system will right itself—but those platitudes now sounded viable because they seemed to echo the government.<sup>49</sup>

According to these authors, Hollywood was able to echo the sentiments of the liberal federal government while remaining conservative at heart. They argue that the populist sentiment, which was at the heart of many Hollywood films, was basically placing the blame and responsibility of mass unemployment on the unemployed. The government was rarely the hero in these films, it was “either the love of a good woman or the beneficence of a socially conscious philanthropist/good neighbour would help get the unemployed victim back on his feet again . . .”<sup>50</sup> The government was not responsible for the unemployed, nor could it be expected to aid them. It was the individual’s responsibility to find aid, be it from neighbours or strangers.

In *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), the only salvation for the Dead End Kids that the priest, played by Pat O’Brien, can think of is basketball. By placing these boys in a local basketball league, the priest hopes to win the hearts of these boys from his boyhood friend turned gangster, played by James Cagney. By placing these troubled boys in sports, Hollywood appeared to be sanctioning a 1936 study which argued that “if children had opportunities . . . of using their pent-up energies in playgrounds and in other wholesome ways, they would not insist on committing acts that jeopardize

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<sup>49</sup>Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.91.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.91-2

the public.”<sup>51</sup> *Angels with Dirty Faces* uses basketball to keep the children off of the street, but this could only be a temporary solution. They lived in the slums, and, as the movie stated, they had little or no opportunity for advancement. Their only role models were the social worker, the priest or the gangster, none of which could give them an acceptable escape from the gutter. Hollywood’s answer to this was to insert the dream of the rich man. This hero comes to Drina, the social worker/love interest, in a dream to whisk her away from the ghetto. There was great detail in the set design and realism of this film. However, when the movie is pressed for a way to escape the misery of the gutter, dreams of benevolent rich men who carried people away was the proffered solution.<sup>52</sup>

This idea of the rich individual pulling the poor out of their position was diametrically opposed to the spirit of the federal government’s New Deal policies. The New Deal was based on a series of laws which prompted American business and individuals to work with the federal “alphabet” agencies (so named because of the amount of abbreviated titles) to promote industry and the economy. It included legislation for mortgage relief, unemployment relief, contained a pro-union stance (which went directly against the Hollywood studios who were battling to keep unions off of their lots) and make-work projects, all of which were designed to help individuals and families survive the Depression.<sup>53</sup> However, the New Deal was more than the sum of its policies. FDR’s persona and stage presence was as much a part of the New Deal as was the NRA. The New Deal was not simply government policy, it was confidence, both in the sound of Roosevelt’s voice and in his actions.

Hollywood’s Depression was aided not by federal assistance but by public benevolence and

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<sup>51</sup>*Social Determinants in Juvenile Delinquency*, as quoted in Bergman, p.152.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p.161-2.

<sup>53</sup>R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p.806-810.

good neighbourliness, a belief which was supported by the Roosevelt government. However, by giving assurances that good neighbours would help the down trodden, that the kindness of strangers would lead the nation back into prosperity, and that everything would work out in the end, the movies appeared to be following the doctrine of the New Deal. Since Roosevelt and his personality were as much a part of the New Deal as the legislation he enacted, it was possible for Hollywood to act against the New Deal's policies while remaining true to its spirit. As Roffman and Purdy argue, "the aura around the New Deal helped make the movies appear socially progressive even as they clung to their basic conservatism."<sup>54</sup> Hollywood was at heart a city like any other in America. There was no overriding political belief which all in the city held. Above all, movie studios believed in money, and money could not be had by preaching one particular political view to the entire nation.

Hollywood was able to subsume so many separate political views because of the amount of money which was made by films.<sup>55</sup> Filmmakers did not want to risk producing the films that might excite the nation in a political way. The pro-union film *Black Fury* (1935) made a modest profit; however, it did not compare to *Gone With the Wind* or even *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938). Hollywood made its profits from encouraging the public to forget their troubles. And the public was not scrambling to see the Depression on the screen either. In Philip Davies and Brian Neve's volume *Cinema, Politics and Society in America*, contributor P.H. Melling states that "[the] idea of discovering a simple escape route, a way of evading the problems of living in a static community was

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<sup>54</sup>Roffman and Purdy, p.91-2.

<sup>55</sup>Leff and Simons, p.77.

a favourite preoccupation with Americans in the 1930s.”<sup>56</sup> Promises of a new life, escape from the mundane existence of life was a common theme given by Hollywood and all other means of mass communication.<sup>57</sup> This was not only because the produced of mass culture were frightened of failure, it was also because the consumers desired it.

As James Rorty confirmed, in the preface of *Where Life is Better*, some Americans remained resistant not just to politics but to any serious consideration of the problems facing them: “I encountered in 15,000 miles of travels nothing that disgusted and appalled me so much as this American addiction to make-believe. Apparently, not even empty bellies can cure it.”<sup>58</sup>

Americans appeared to want to avoid the problems of the day, and the popular media was more than willing to assist them.

Hollywood of the Depression appeared in all genres to be unable to truthfully attack the problems which faced all Americans. Instead, it offered the middle-class belief that everything would be alright if the nation only learned to help one another. The majority of whites were middle-class, giving Hollywood the opportunity to argue that they were speaking to the majority. However, it was the minorities who were truly suffering in the Depression. Because the blacks were socially and economically marginalised by the white middle-class majority, they were also marginalised by Hollywood. The same could be said for those poor whites who were not included in the middle-class arrangement. Minorities were not only suffering in the streets of America, they were also suffering

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<sup>56</sup>Philip Davies and Brian Neve, Eds., *Cinema, Politics and Society in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981)p.26.

<sup>57</sup>“First on the non-fiction list in 1933 and second in 1934 was *Life Begins at Forty*, with its promises of a ‘second start.’ A favourite 1937 work was another self-help manual, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, echoing again Hoover’s insistence that through self-reliance alone the individual could overcome the Depression.” Mellen, p.96.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p.27.

on the screens. Rarely were blacks or poor whites portrayed at all on the screens, and if they were they were seen through the eyes of the majority.

## Chapter IV

### Women, Movies and the Depression

The American film industry relied heavily on women. Not only has it been asserted that they made up the majority of the film audience, they also made up the majority of the stars that filled the screens.<sup>1</sup> Though men were very important to films, as audience members, as stars, and as crews, it was women that Hollywood really wanted, both to star on the screen and to pay for the tickets. They held the purse strings in many middle-class families, controlling the purchases of household items both large and small.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless Hollywood, like many American institutions of this era, was male dominated. All major decisions on films, from writing to production to lighting to camera positions was made by men. This was not a unique situation in America, nor the rest of the world. What was unique about Hollywood was the large number of women who earned their livings there. Some of the highest paid stars in film were women. However, there were no female moguls, there were no female directors, and there were no female producers. Women were excluded from the upper echelons of this billion dollar industry which was, in large part, built on their bodies.

Women were the main attraction to many of the films produced in the thirties. *Gone With the Wind* (1939) created huge amounts of publicity by “searching” for the actress who would play

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1939), p.4-5. In this pioneering work on film studies, Thorp asserts that women were the main customers of most films during this time period.

<sup>2</sup>See above, p.49-50.



Scarlett O'Hara. Shirley Temple, a symbol for America's search for a vanished past, an innocence which the Depression had crushed, was the number one box-office star from 1935 to 1938.<sup>3</sup> Many Americans flocked to hear Greta Garbo's first words spoken on the screen in the 1930 MGM picture *Anna Christine* and expressed deep sorrow at her decision to leave public life in 1941.<sup>4</sup> The Production Code of 1930 was enacted as a direct result to Mae West's films and the depiction of women in film.<sup>5</sup> Women were not merely movie stars either. They were icons, role models for millions, they were the "ultimate embodiments of feminine beauty."<sup>6</sup> Women were used to sell everything from the movies to appliances to clothing. People were "encouraged to copy their appearance."<sup>7</sup> Women, and the image of women was a chief concern of the men in Hollywood and New York, those power centres of film.

Mae West was perhaps the most liberated of film's women in the thirties. She not only wrote her own films, she was hired because of the Broadway shows which she had directed, written and starred in.

West skirted the delicate sensibilities of Hollywood censors with sexual innuendo and double entendre and her witty observations were as widely quoted as Ben Franklin bromides: "It's better to be looked over than overlooked"; "I used to be Snow White but it drifted," etc. Although she cultivated the image of the "tough broad," West always conveyed a curious Victorian innocence coupled with a winking, self-effacing

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<sup>3</sup>Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression American and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 72. Cobett S. Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 1980), p. 57.

<sup>4</sup>Microsoft, *Microsoft's Cinemania '95*, (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), Greta Garbo biography.

<sup>5</sup>See Appendix I.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies*, (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

amusement at her own preposterous creation. Her popularity reached such peaks that sailors were inspired to name their inflatable life jackets after her overemphasized 43-inch “assets,” ensuring West a place, like no other actress to date, in Webster’s Dictionary.<sup>8</sup>

West’s ability to combine undeniable sexuality with the image of the “tough broad” and the illusion of a “heart of gold” shocked censors and morals watchers in America. This was both because of the subject matter of her films and because of the attack which she made on the image of the American woman. Mae West was perceived as a threat to the morals of women across the nation because of her attack on “civilized society.”<sup>9</sup>

What frightened morals watchers most however, was Mae West’s popularity. In a review of one of her Broadway show, *Constant Sinner*, Joseph Wood Krutch concluded with this commentary on the audience:

It is difficult to imagine just where its members come from, but I have a theory. All the little boys who, in the early days of the movies, used to emit loud “smacks” when the hero kissed the heroine, must have grown up and gathered at the Royale just for the sake of being children again.<sup>10</sup>

West’s films were undeniably popular, making her, and her stage persona, a valuable commodity to Hollywood. Hollywood studios were desperate for income at the time she first arrived in California. *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) rescued Paramount Pictures from being swallowed by MGM in those dangerous days after the stock market crash, or more specifically, Hollywood’s crash. Those who watched Hollywood’s morals feared what this might do for the status of women in Hollywood. If

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<sup>8</sup>Microsoft. Mae West biography.

<sup>9</sup>Leonard J. Leff, and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code From the 1920s to the 1960s*, (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1991), p19.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Mae West was able to pack houses with this lurid film, then other studios could do the same, and if this happened, women throughout the nation would suffer.

This theory, which was in many ways the basis for censoring all American films, assumes something which appeared to run throughout Hollywood. Middle-class women may have been a majority of the film-going audience, but, they were not the *perceived* audience of a film. Art critic John Berger stated that “women are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of women is designed to flatter him.” He went on to comment that this “unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity.”<sup>11</sup> Berger was discussing European nude oil paintings when he made these comments, but they apply equally well to films.<sup>12</sup> Hollywood may have known that the average audience for a film was female, however, it often did not act in this fashion. The male audience was the target of many films produced by Hollywood. This was because of a complicated relation which women have with images of their own sex. Berger stated in his influential 1972 work, *Ways of Seeing*, that:

*Men act and Women appear. . . Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relationships between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>As quoted in Good, p.13.

<sup>12</sup>Credit for applying these words to film is given to Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which can be found in her 1989 work, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press), p.19. Ibid., p.13, n.4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.16.

It was not just that women were able to watch the screen and “see themselves being looked at,” they could also attempt to copy the look shown to them. The cycle ended with women attempting to become what they saw on the screen.<sup>14</sup> If women were able to view the films produced in Hollywood without protest, then it was because they were accepting the images portrayed.

The images these middle-class women were accepting were not entirely realistic. This was to be expected, however. People did not go to the movies to see exact copies of themselves on the screens. They wanted to leave their ordinary existence and enter into a fantasy world, but nothing too fanciful. Audiences wanted illusion but at the same time they wanted realism too. They needed to understand that they were in a different world, but that this different world was not all that different. There were similarities that could be drawn between the film world and the real world, be it clothing displayed on the screens that they could buy in the stores, or the aspirations and dreams of the heroines. This was the power of movies. They could draw you from your life, take you to worlds and situations slightly beyond your imagination, and yet never take you too far from home. Women were given different characters to relate to, with roles that were only just beyond their reach.

One way in which the screen gave women a different role than that of reality was in the realm of female employment. During the Depression women were entering the workforce in noticeable numbers because they were cheaper to employ than men and hence more likely to get a job. “Women, frequently forced into the labor market by the unemployment of their fathers or husbands, often had better chances for employment than men, and were jobless for shorter periods.”<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.22.

<sup>15</sup>Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p.115.

percentage of married women in the workforce rose during the thirties, from 11.7 at the opening of the decade to 15.3 by 1939.<sup>16</sup> However, these increases were not in professional positions, as they had been in the teens and twenties. Of the 15.3 percent of women who were employed, only 12.3 percent were in the positions considered “professional” (i.e. law, medicine, or higher education). By 1940 it could be safely said that only one woman in ten was in a position which was considered professional.<sup>17</sup> This was mainly due to a drop in the number of women who were entering the nation’s universities and colleges. Enrolment for women dropped from a high of nearly 44 percent in 1929 to a low of 40.2 in 1939.<sup>18</sup> The majority of those women employed, worked jobs considered traditional; clerical, sales, manufacturing, and domestic services.

These working women were portrayed in films, though, in Hollywood women did not work in factories, or fields (unless, of course, they were wives of farmers), nor were these working women married. The film *A Star is Born* (1937) displayed to audiences what could happen to a man when his wife became the main bread winner in his home. Even though this film relates the tale of a women’s rise to the top of the movie business, it also offers a glimpse into the world of American families where the wife is the only adult employed. In this telling scene (clip *A Star is Born* 2) where the studio head, Oliver Niles, is telling the star Norman Maine that his career is over while his new wife’s career is just beginning, the pain on the actor’s face is obvious. In later scenes he attempts to

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<sup>16</sup>Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920 - 1941* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p.401.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

cook and keep house, but fails and falls into a life of drinking and embarrassing his wife in public.<sup>19</sup> Norman goes on to commit suicide in this film both because he realises that his life without a career is useless and because he cannot live with the shame of having a wife who is more successful. His suicide comes following his wife informing him that she would leave Hollywood and the movies to save him and his pride. He cannot live with the pain of knowing that she gave up her dreams to support him, that he has been displaced as the head of the home.

This film displays one of the ways in which people could relate to Hollywood stories. It is not the surface of the film, the gloss of the rise to fame and the drama of the Hollywood life that audiences could identify with. It was the story of the women overtaking the man in the role of breadwinner, which was never displayed as a positive image. This was a theme that people in America were familiar with. Because of the increased amount of women in the workforce, and also the increased amount of married women being employed, opinion polls were commissioned to gauge the public's response. Not surprisingly, "three-quarters of the women and eighty percent of the men did not approve of employment for a married woman whose husband was capable of supporting her, for fear that she would displace a man and because, of course, her place was in the home."<sup>20</sup> The government too reacted to the increasing amount of married women entering the workforce by enacting laws to limit the amount of federal jobs available to women. Many states followed suit, preventing married women—called "undeserving parasites" by one state official—from public jobs.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>In a now famous scene, Maine interrupts his wife's acceptance speech at the Oscar ceremonies to beg for a job from an uncaring audience. What makes this scene important is not only the content, but it is perhaps the first time that Hollywood dramatised its most famous advertisement, the Academy Awards.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Parrish, p.401.

Hollywood displayed this fear in *A Star is Born*, while creating one of the most memorable films of the decade.

The topic of women in the work place was not confined to *A Star is Born*, though. Women worked a variety of positions in Hollywood films—"detectives, spies, con artists, secretaries, stenographers, chorus girls, and especially reporters."<sup>22</sup> They were not confined to the role of Hollywood starlets, actresses-to-be and chorus girls, though these were the most common roles for women. Howard Good, in his 1998 work *Girl Reporter: Gender Journalism and the Movies*, believes that this was due partly to the Production Code and partly to the economic conditions of the time. Good states, by quoting Molly Haskell, that "Women were no longer able to languish in satin on a chaise lounge and subsist on passion; they were forced to do something, and a whole generation of working women came into being."<sup>23</sup> By showing working women on the screen, a generation of viewers were empowered, in a strange way. They were able to see these women in glamorous and not-so-glamorous jobs and think that they too could have the same. If these women could succeed, so could anyone - "though, of course, it never hurt to be well built and blonde."<sup>24</sup>

These working women also gave audiences valuable information. Because women on the screen were expanding into roles beyond the chorus line and the bar rooms, audiences were able to gain insight about what it was like to work in a office as a secretary, or in the news room as a reporter.<sup>25</sup> Women were given glimpses of what heretofore was a man's domain. In increasing

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<sup>22</sup>Good. p.6.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.26.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.49.

numbers, these male dominated positions, in political offices and newsrooms, were being obtained by high profile women in the real world. Led by the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, women were getting more and more influential positions in the New Deal government. Although the New Deal discriminated against them in many ways, a few women were afforded opportunities to increase their profile in the public eye. Florence Allen, the first woman to be appointed to the federal circuit court of appeals, was given the position in 1934, Hallie Flanagan headed the Federal Theatre for four years in the Thirties, and Daisy Harriman was named minister to Norway in 1937, another first for women.<sup>26</sup>

Working women may have been the new fad in Hollywood, but they did not dominate the screen, as Good appears to believe. There were still plenty of lounging women, just as there had been before the Depression and the Production Code. *It Happened One Night* (1933), *The Thin Man* (1934), *Anna Karenin* (1935), and *The Women* (1939), are just a few examples where women appear to have no means of support other than the men that they attach themselves to. Only single women were allowed to work. To do otherwise would give Hollywood the image of backing those 'unfortunate' women who were forced to support their families.

The working woman was also not the most important role given to film women during the Depression. The mother figure was the most essential female character in Hollywood.<sup>27</sup> She was the backbone of the family, holding them together through her wisdom and "moral strength."<sup>28</sup> In *Gone*

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<sup>26</sup>Parrish, p.402.

<sup>27</sup>Mother figure is used because the mother is not always the character referred to. At times it is the grandmother, or an aunt. However, the characteristics are always the same.

<sup>28</sup>Baritz, p.142.



*With the Wind* (1939), Scarlett's mother was the force which brought her back to Tara; in *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Ma was responsible for holding the family together. Mothers were not only important because of their ability to hold families together though. The mother figure in film was also an important symbol for films. This was the real link to the past and the future. Mothers were the characters who could spout wisdom about how to hold onto the past while offering some hope for the future, something which Depression audiences seemed to need. These characters were tough because they had to be, there was no other option. In the final scene from *Grapes of Wrath*, Ma conveys her strength to the family through an inspirational speech about how women were better able to adapt to change and how the "Okies" and those like them were "the people that live."<sup>29</sup>

This idea of the strong mother was based in the popular symbols of the era. Loren Baritz, in his 1989 work, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* states that:

Cheap sentimentality aside, some mothers did hold their families together, economically and psychologically. Their heroic struggles redefined ideal womanhood as a particular kind of moral strength. Throughout the culture of the depression, this rediscovered symbol of strong woman, also a feature of earlier pioneers as well as immigrants, helped people to think about the depression, find an emotional anchor and grounds for hope. Her radiance would warm the cold, protect the weak, and guard the only sphere that now truly mattered—the home.<sup>30</sup>

This quote comes to the screen through hundreds of characters. Mother figures like the grandmother in *A Star is Born* (1937), who gives a lecture on how "today's kids" have no ideas of what real hardships are, give credence to the power of the mother figure.<sup>31</sup> She also provides a Depression audience with the belief that things in the past were tougher and people survived, and survived not

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<sup>29</sup>Darrel F. Zanuck. *Grapes of Wrath*. ti., 2:07:32. See clip, *Grapes of Wrath* 2.

<sup>30</sup>Baritz, p.41-2.

<sup>31</sup>See clip, *A Star is Born* 1.

on government handouts, but on the land, and through hard work (“Don’t you think for one minute that it was easy”).<sup>32</sup> Mothers were also the dispensers of homespun wisdom. A mother was able to tell the hero/heroine that what they were doing was not going to please any of the average people. In a scene from *Meet John Doe* (1941)<sup>33</sup>, the mother of Ann Mitchell, the reporter/speech writer for John Doe, tells her that her speeches will not reach her perspective audience, the middle class, because they are too depressing. What the world needs, according to Mrs. Mitchell, is to become more hopeful, like her long departed husband, who would know what to say to make everything better.

Employment and motherhood were two minor roles held by women in Hollywood in relation to that of love interest. Nearly every film which came from Southern California had romance as either the main plot focus or as a secondary plot device. In *King Kong* (1933), the focus of the director/adventurer, Carl Denham is to find and film the great ape. However, in an important scene from early in the movie, he explained that this was not what the audience wants, what they want is a love interest.<sup>34</sup> This scene could be interpreted as an explanation as to the purpose of the love interest in the film. Denham could be giving these lines to explain why this monster picture needed a woman at all, or the scene could be an explanation as to the use of these plots in any film. Women were what sold a picture, according to Denham. The love story was what made the money, and this was because people wanted the romance in their films, even when it appeared to be tacked on.

The love themes were essential to many film’s popularity. What brought people to see *It*

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<sup>32</sup>David O. Selznick, *A Star is Born*, ti. 00:05:28.

<sup>33</sup>See clip *Meet John Doe* 1

<sup>34</sup>See clip *King Kong* 1

*Happened One Night* (1934) was not so much the comedy, as it was the love story, the tale of two opposites attracting. This was the pull of many of Frank Capra's films. Audiences did not so much react to the populist plots as they did to the romantic stories. *Gone With the Wind* will not be remembered as one of the greatest films of all time because of its ability to display the reality of the pre and post Civil War South; it will be remembered because of the tempestuous romance between Rhett and Scarlett. Romance was an essential part of any film, and women were the reason for this. It was the beautiful women on the screens who were the object of the romance and it was the ordinary women in the audience who were the targets of the romance.

The romance of these films did not simply mean love interests though. A film was much more than its plots and lines. Actresses were role models for millions of American women and ideals for millions of American men. Audiences were encouraged to imitate their every action, every word, and every style. Hollywood's romance embraced the entire spectrum of American ideals. Middle-class women were not only asked to watch and believe in these films, they were also encouraged to copy them.<sup>35</sup> Instead of offering these women real and obtainable goals, both in romance and beauty, Hollywood gave them a fantasy ideal that was always just out of reach. This was not only in films, but also in the lives of the stars. In a 1936 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, an article suggests that women should attempt to copy the hairstyles of film stars.

"For example, Ginger Rogers sometimes arranges her red-gold locks in a fluffy long bob that almost touches her shoulders, a style which is not practical for you or me. . . . But you might start with the basic idea of this arrangement. . . . If your face is thin, try the center part so attractive in the natural, unstudied coiffures of Eleanor Powell and Gladys Swarthout."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Good, p.22.

<sup>36</sup>As quoted in Good, p.22-3.

By offering ordinary women the opportunity to look like the stars, *Good Housekeeping* was allowing them the ability to enter the world of glamour and romance that was Hollywood.

Romance was a commodity in Hollywood. It was sold, along with the glamour of the stars, in soap, make-up, clothing, electrical appliances and automobiles. Every item which the consumer society wanted was for sale in Hollywood, and the romance of Hollywood was what sold it. American women purchased Max Factor make-up in part, because it was endorsed by Ginger Rogers.<sup>37</sup> If she could look good in their Pan-Cake make-up and attract the romantic attention of a charming man like Fred Astaire, then so too could the average women. By fostering the belief that women could, with the right help, attain the same result as those stars on the screen, Hollywood was able to promote the idea that their films were reflections of society. Women who attempted to look like movie stars were identifying with these stars and believed, in some small way, that what they saw on the screen could occur in their own life.

It was not just the screen personae that Hollywood was selling either. Were this true, then perhaps Hollywood romance would not have been as influential as it was (and is). It was also the personal lives of the stars. Following the debacle of the early twenties and the Fatty Arbuckle affair, the studios learned that the movies were not simply a form of mass entertainment that ended with the fall of the curtain.<sup>38</sup> Publicists began to spring up all over Hollywood to guide stars on what was “proper” behaviour. Though stars were not given specific rules to live by as films were given in the

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.22.

<sup>38</sup>Fatty Arbuckle was a comedian who was charged with the murder of model Virginia Rappe (though latter acquitted) at a party in San Francisco in 1921. This case captured the nation’s attention both because Arbuckle was a star and because of the sensational subject matter (kinky sex and drugs). Following closely on the heels of this story was the sensational (and unsolved) murder of director William Desmond Taylor. Microsoft, Arbuckle, “Fatty” and Taylor. William Desmond biographies.

Production Code, from the stories in the trade papers and fan magazines it appeared that stars adhered to a similar code. In these articles, stars, especially female stars, were given a splendour which was impossible to duplicate in real life. If they played a tough character on the screen they were given the appearance of being soft and quiet at home. Their lives were filled with parties and galas. However, when interviewed they appeared to enjoy the quiet life much more.<sup>39</sup> Hollywood understood that stars had to appear wholesome and approachable, while at the same time appearing glamorous. This was what the romance of the movies was built on.

Women were the basis for the Hollywood film industry. They sold pictures better than any other advertising technique. However, women's roles rarely signified their importance to the industry, nor did the role reflect their importance in society. What was reflected in many films was that women needed men to survive. Feminists would argue that this was because filmmakers were prejudiced about women, believing what they put on the screens.<sup>40</sup> This, however, is not in keeping with the Hollywood style. Filmmakers were often not able to let their own political feelings enter films, both because of the Production Code and because of the studio system. Instead they followed the crowd, believing that if they swayed to far from the political centre line that they would incur the wrath of that largest minority, the middle class. To argue that filmmakers were holding women back would ignore the history of Hollywood. Hollywood did not set trends, it only selected what its core the audience wanted to see.

Women who were independent in films, who worked as the reporters or secretaries were only

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<sup>39</sup>Good, p.23-4.

<sup>40</sup>Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973), p.144-5.

doing so to achieve the ultimate goal, marriage. To Depression America, this was in keeping with society. It is true that women were making some advances in the realm of women's rights during the Depression, but these women were not the norm; they were the exception.<sup>41</sup> Were this otherwise, films would have reflected it, not because films were the greatest barometer of public sentiment, but because films like *King Kong* (1933) and *The Women* (1939) would have received some form of public protest. Both these films contain disparaging views of women. In *The Women*, women are viewed as catty, devious and obsessed with men. Though the film contained not a single man, male animal or picture of a male, the characters did nothing but talk about men. In fact, the full title of the film is *The Women (And All They Talk About is Men)*, which sets the tone of the film. In this scene (clip, *The Women* 1) the supporting cast is discussing the fact that Mary, the lead character, is happy in her marriage, which makes her a woman, the rest are labelled *females*, as if it were a dirty word. Perth labels herself as "an old maid, a frozen asset" because she is the only woman in the group who is unmarried. In *King Kong*, the male lead goes so far as to say that women were little more than bothers to begin with, and had no place on such a dangerous mission or even aboard the ship.<sup>42</sup> These attitudes could be dismissed if the films were unpopular, or even if they were only marginally popular. However, these films were top grossing films, 1933 for *King Kong* and 1939 for *The Women*.

Women were wishing to gain more freedoms and equality, this was true, but it is not possible to hope to see these ideas in film. To assert that Hollywood was negligent in not profiling some aspect of feminism is to project too much modern thought into a historical situation. Too many women in the thirties were too busy attempting to hold their families together to spend energy on

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.172-3.

<sup>42</sup>Clip *King Kong* 3

women's rights. Although feminism was still an active issue during the thirties, the Depression, as many feminists have noted, was a setback to their cause.<sup>43</sup> These groups appeared to lack the economic and political clout because of the conditions of the Depression. Unattached women, that is women without a husband, were frowned upon by society, especially by those in charge of the income relief programs.<sup>44</sup> Middle-class married women who chose to gain employment were considered social outcasts by many, accused of taking jobs from the nation's men. For the nation's minority groups, especially the Hispanics and Blacks, many of these "non-traditional" jobs were not even available.

Hollywood was merely giving the public what it appeared to want: the affirmation that a stable family life was still desirable. Mothers were the most powerful figures in most families. They were also the most admired in many families.<sup>45</sup> With unemployment and female employment placing enormous stress on families, male self-esteem at an all time low, and with the divorce rate inching upward, is it any wonder that Hollywood and the investors wanted to display happy families?<sup>46</sup> It was to the advertisers' advantage to offer these scenes in motion pictures. Not only did they promote the escapism which was so profitable, they also offered better opportunities to sell goods to the buying public.

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<sup>43</sup>Rosen, p.173.

<sup>44</sup>Baritz, p.144.

<sup>45</sup>Parrish., p.415-6.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.415.

## Chapter V

### Masculinity, Movies, and the Depression

It goes without saying that men were essential to the operation of the movie town that was Hollywood. Like all industries in America, Hollywood was male dominated. Though there was a huge presence of women in Hollywood, and though they carried a lot of power, men still controlled the images that were presented to the nation. The effect this had on the portrayal of women has already been noted above. This chapter will investigate the effect it had on men in films. The Depression has been seen by many as an attack on the middle-class ideal of masculinity in America, not so much because of the slight advances made by some women in the field of women's rights, but because of the huge amounts of male unemployment. Though Hollywood did not often display the plight of these unfortunate unemployed men in film, filmmakers were acutely aware of the problems regarding the nation's masculinity. Just as the mother figure was essential to American cinema and the American psyche, so too was the father figure. The mothers reflected warmth and comfort, they were the links to the past while offering hope for the future. Since this was the role offered to the mothers in film, this chapter will investigate what roles were offered to the fathers. As well, it will attempt to discover what shape masculinity took in the Hollywood films of the Depression.

Men in the Depression were under attack. Those who were unemployed felt this most acutely, but all men believed that this was true. For an American male to be useful in society, it was essential for him to be employed. This was the standard by which a man was measured. Without



employment, many men felt that they were no longer of any use to the family, particularly those of the middle-class. Most unemployed men entered into a depression, sometimes leading to suicide, so great was the pressure placed on them by society.<sup>1</sup> Men who were unfortunate enough to find themselves in the ranks of the unemployed were pitied by society, yet the pressure was greater for those with families. Middle-class men who were married with children were meant by society to be the main breadwinners in their families.<sup>2</sup> He was brought up believing that his "major obligation . . . was to earn money to support his dependent loved ones, who would respond with respect and, if he had secondary virtues, love."<sup>3</sup> If a man was unable to bring home a paycheck, if he could not provide for his loved ones, he ran the danger of losing their respect, and perhaps, their love.

These were the beliefs which haunted many American males as they entered into the Depression. The prospect that they could be laid off, which could in turn lead them to losing the love and respect of their families, was one possible fear which the men of the Depression felt. However, more pressing to about 75 percent of unemployed American men was what to do with all those hours that he used to spend at work. A study of unemployed men performed in 1940 found that "drastically altered" personalities were found in only about 25 percent of the unemployed population.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these men were not frightened that their authority in the home would be affected. This may have been due, in some small part, to Hollywood.

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<sup>1</sup>Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>The situation was different for the working poor and for farming families. As seen in *The Grapes of Wrath* (the book, not the motion picture), Ma, along with the other women in the family worked along side the men in the fields on many occasions. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (Penguin, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

As noted above, the American film industry was always male dominated, both in front of and behind the cameras. Although Hollywood understood that the target viewer for many of the films was female and that this was where the majority of the money came from, films remained in many ways, masculine. Even stars like Mae West and Katherine Hepburn, with their feminist attitudes and incredible power in the studios, were reliant on the men in Hollywood to provide the means for film production.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the Production Code and the fall in American box-office returns, films were displaying to Americans a series of raw masculine images. It is obvious that Mae West and the gangster films were not designed to appeal to the female sector of the audience. Though Hollywood did make films that were geared towards a female audience, they were still making films for men, and these films, like those for women, were enormously popular.

This is not to assert that American films can be divided along a line between the “women’s pictures” and “men’s pictures.” In fact, many films, like *Gone With the Wind* (1939), considered by many to be a women’s picture and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), a ‘man’s’ film, appealed to both sexes. Most films were written so that men and women would both enjoy them. To do otherwise would alienate a segment of the population, bringing profits down. Even *The Women* (1939), a film obviously designed for female consumers, drew men in for the glimpse of how women acted without men around. It offered men the ability to be a “fly on the wall” for those private moments of women.

There was a male lead in every picture which came out of Hollywood in the thirties, with the only exception possibly being *The Women*. However, even in this film, with its entirely female cast,

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<sup>5</sup>Mae West was able to gain artistic freedom in Hollywood at a time when such acts were almost unheard of for women. From her beginnings as a star in Hollywood, West wrote her own films. One of the top films of 1933, and the film which saved Paramount Pictures, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), was written by West, and was based on her extremely popular Broadway play, *Diamond Lil*. Microsoft, *Microsoft's Cinemania '95*, (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), Mae West Biography.

the main focus of the plot was the relationship between men and women. This is not surprising, however, because films were generally about human relations, and it was almost impossible to speak of these without mentioning men. Nevertheless, as with the women discussed in the pervious chapter, what is important about the representation of men in films, especially those men in lead roles, is how these men were portrayed in relation to the men in the audience. And, as with women, the audience for films was believed by many to be mainly the working middle class American.<sup>6</sup> What is essential to note here, is that the audience for male representations in films was not only men. Women were also influenced by the male characters on the screens. Just like male members of the audience, women also gained important insights into what it was to be male.

Masculinity was essential to the Hollywood image. As the title of Joe Fisher's article in the 1993 collection *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* asserts, "Clarke Gable's Balls: Real men never lose their teeth."<sup>7</sup> The reference here is to when Gable's teeth began to rot in 1933 and he had to have them repaired, the publicists reported that the operation was an appendectomy.<sup>8</sup> Men fought, they battled, they were strong, but they never lost their teeth. Clarke Gable makes a great starting point for a discussion of masculinity in thirties films. Dubbed the King of Hollywood by friends, he was consistently among the most popular male actors. According to Quigley Publications, his popularity never dipped out of the top ten until he left Hollywood for the United States Air Force in

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<sup>6</sup>Margaret Farrand Thorp. *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1939), p.4-5.

<sup>7</sup>Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim. eds., *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1993), p.35.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p.44

1942.<sup>9</sup> Victor Flemming, Gable's director in *Red Dust* (1932), *Test Pilot* (1937) and much of *Gone With the Wind* said of Gable in 1942: "when this present era becomes as remote as the stone age is now, they'll still be talking about Gable . . . He's the representative man of our time. No-one will forget him."<sup>10</sup> When Hollywood announced plans to turn Margaret Mitchell's immensely popular Civil War novel, *Gone With the Wind*, into a motion picture, there was little debate over who would play the male lead, Rhett Butler.<sup>11</sup> Gable had all of the qualities needed to play the suave, strong, dashing and masculine Butler. It was even hinted by some that Mitchell had Gable in mind when she wrote the book, even though it was written in 1925, long before Gable came to Hollywood.<sup>12</sup> So many believed that Gable fulfilled this role perfectly because Brett was the ultimate Southern man. He was a fighter, though not boastful nor combative; he was a lover of many, though he desired and loved only one; he was a devoted father; and he was wealthy, though he did not appear to work. These were the qualities which the book-buying (and also movie ticket buying) middle-class American women appeared to be looking for in men.

Hollywood was happy to offer the public films in which the male leads were at the very least part Rhett Butler characters. Even though Butler did not appear in film until 1939, his qualities can be seen in many of the films which proceeded *Gone With the Wind*. This was not because filmmakers were copying Mitchell, but because Butler was the personification of an ideal male. His qualities

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<sup>9</sup>See Appendix II, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted from Lyn Tornabene's *Long Live the King: A Biography of Clarke Gable*, in Kirkham and Thumim, p.38.

<sup>11</sup>Microsoft, *Cinemania '95* (United States of America: Microsoft Corporation, 1994), *Gone With the Wind*, Cinebooks review.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

were in no way unique; indeed, he could be seen as an amalgam of male characters from the beginning of the cinema and beyond. The male leads, like Count Vronsky in *Anna Karenin* (1935) were fighters at heart. Vronsky leaves his love, Anna Karenin, when the Crimean War erupts, in order to take the opportunity to fight with his comrades. He volunteers to fight because of adventure; he has become bored living the romantic life with Anna. This is what real men do, according to Hollywood. Just as they would assert in 1941, real men fought wars. The wars were not always bloody, nor were they always violent. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), Mr. Smith's war was against corrupt forces in the American government. In *Modern Times* (1936), Charlie Chaplin fights the factory system and modern industrialised society. When, in *Gone With the Wind*, Rhett Butler questions the South's decision to enter into a civil war with the North, his masculinity is called into question. Any man who refuses to fight for his country, his love, or his ideals, was, obviously, a coward, and hence, unmasculine.

The Depression brought about a new type of hero for American film goers. The Crash of 1929 and the subsequent economic conditions were blamed on bankers, Wall Street and cities, people who had lost touch with the land. Rural America was considered to be where the salvation of the nation was to come from. Those blamed for the Depression were considered effete, the antithesis to classical American masculinity. For Americans to exit the Depression they needed to return to the land. This is why, according to Joe Fisher, Clarke Gable was so popular. "Gable was arguably the first leading man to bring 'real' masculine power - the power to tame and control women and land (and less masculine men) - into pictures which dealt with issues related to audiences' daily lives. He

wore suits, but he still looked like an ape.”<sup>13</sup> America needed heroes that were not strictly of the land, but had that rough quality. These men were not polished, not upperclassmen, they possessed a quality of simplicity, both in action and in words. There were exceptions to this, of course, Fred Astaire and Charlie Chaplin being the most prominent. However, as a general rule, most American heroes were now considered to be middle class.

*The Good Earth* (1938) provides a good example of this need for Hollywood to create a hero who was from the land. This MGM film outlines the rise of the Chinese peasant land owner Wang Lung and his family. In the beginning of the film, Wang is seen as a simple peasant, purchasing his wife O-Lan, a kitchen slave, from the provincial capital. The film progresses through their life together, working the land and building a family (two sons). Eventually, Wang built enough income to purchase extra land, making himself powerful and moderately wealthy. However, a drought comes and Wang is forced to abandon his land and migrate with thousands of others into the city to look for work. These opening scenes rang very familiar to Depression audiences. Wang’s troubles are quite similar to those being heard from farmers in the Mid-west and other areas. Many American farmers faced similar fates throughout the Depression.<sup>14</sup>

When the family enters the city, they find themselves hungry and unemployable. However, fortune shines on them when the family gets caught in a revolt. During the mayhem, O-Lan is stomped unconscious, awakening to find a sack of jewels in her hand, although she is seriously

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<sup>13</sup>Kirkham and Thumim, p.38.

<sup>14</sup>Parrish, p.427.

injured.<sup>15</sup> With new riches and news that the drought is over, Wang moves his family back to the country to return to their farm. With the jewels and few good crop years, he purchases more land, eventually becoming the most powerful farmer/landowner in the province, and moves again to the city, away from his land. At this point, Wang's masculinity comes under attack. As he leaves the country to lord over it from the city, he not only loses touch with his land, he also becomes corrupt with the family's new found riches. Ignoring his faithful wife, Wang takes on a mistress, a tea dancer he met in the city. He begins to lose the respect of his friends and family, even to the point that his youngest son begins to see his mistress behind his back. Upon discovering this, Wang mercilessly beats his son, in an apparent attempt to reestablish his manhood. The beating only makes him appear weaker in the eyes of his family however, and in true Hollywood fashion, Wang must return back to the land to save his fields from a locust attack in order to regain his masculinity. Also, by returning to the land, Wang is reunited with his sons, one of whom has gone to college to earn a degree in agriculture. It is he who teaches his father to combat the locusts. The other son is married shortly after the attack. Following the ceremony O-Lan dies, allowing Wang to finally understand how important she was to him. Standing next to the peach tree he planted on the day of their wedding, he cries out: "O-Lan, you are the earth."<sup>16</sup>

Many critics of this film focus on the relation between the husband, Wang, and his wife.<sup>17</sup> This is an accurate way to interpret this film, and is most likely how the filmmakers intended it to be

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<sup>15</sup>Again, like in many Depression films, it is the wealthy stranger, this time being pure luck, which saves the family from poverty.

<sup>16</sup>Microsoft, *Good Earth, the*, Cinebooks review.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, *Good Earth, the*.

seen. However, another, less talked about focus of this film is the power the land has in creating a man. It is when Wang enters the city, losing his connection to the land, that he becomes lazy and disrespected by his family. It was the rural Wang who tames the land and provided for his family. In the city, other men work the land, while Wang, a landlord, got fat off of their work. This is a powerful assertion about manhood in America. It is only when Wang returns to the land that he regains the respect of his sons and wife. The message here is that it is by working the land personally that a man becomes a man. Those living in the cities, off of the fruits of other's labour, are less masculine.

The farmer was not the only symbol of masculinity to the American movie audiences. In many Hollywood films, Abraham Lincoln was the ideal man. He was honest, with the ability to know the truth and to fight for the moral right. According to Hollywood, he was also of the middle class, or at least was a hero of this class. This was especially true of Frank Capra's films. As John Belton notes in his introduction to the collection *Movies and Mass Culture*, "Capra's heroes, such as Peter Warne (Clark Gable) in *It Happened One Night* (1934), and Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), invoke Lincoln as the ideal figure and attempt to model their own behaviour on his."<sup>18</sup> Lincoln was envisioned as a great father figure. Because he was imagined by Hollywood to be a humble man, who built himself up to become President of the United States, he was a great hero for the Depression. Middle-class Americans need to be reminded that the little guy could still triumph.

As was mentioned above in Chapter Three, middle-class Americans felt frightened because

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<sup>18</sup>John Belton, *Movies and Mass Culture*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 11.



it no longer appeared that hard work would lead to advancement. Hollywood appeared to be taking position to reaffirm confidence in America, and the way they were doing this was to display strong men alongside perfect women. Though men were not used to sell cosmetics, nor was the men's apparel industry as lucrative as the women's apparel industry, men were still considered objects to be imitated by the general public. When Clarke Gable removed his shirt in *It Happened One Night* (1934) to reveal only his bare chest, the undershirt industry took a dive in sales. The effect was so devastating that the industry sent representatives to Hollywood to negotiate with Columbia Pictures to remove the scene, or at least re-shoot it.<sup>19</sup> This is only one example of the power which male actors had on the population in regards to the masculine image. The movie men were believed to be the images of what an American man was meant to be. Unlike other subjects regarding films, masculinity does not need to be subdivided into genres. The majority of men contained the same basic elements, no matter what type of film they acted in. Hollywood led a consensus on what masculinity meant to be for movie going Americans.

Hollywood needed their cinema men to remind people that America still worked. This was important not only because it prevented protest, but also because studios assumed that people were not, for the most part, looking for unemployed heroes in the movies. However, just as with women, the jobs these men worked were rarely accurate depictions of real employment. Even Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), with its famous attacks on American industry and the monotony of factory work, never had any dirt on the factory floor. Even the jail cells were sparkling clean. The middle class male was the hero in many Hollywood films, however he did not live in a working class

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<sup>19</sup>Tino Balio. *Grand design: Hollywood as a modern business enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), p.2.

world. Indeed, Hollywood rarely showed a man actually working. Hollywood was unable to display this world accurately, for if it had it would have produced unknown reactions from the audience.

Joan Mellon, in her work *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in American Films* offers another explanation for Hollywood's inability to portray men accurately.

Almost never was a male portrayed on the assembly line—let alone selling apples on the street corners, panhandling on Park Avenue, or languishing in a Hooverville. Had the screen hero been of the working class, he would have had to partake of the pain and suffering of the Depression; and given Hollywood's criteria for male sufficiency, manifesting such personal weakness would have cast doubt on his masculinity. Work itself was a forbidden subject, and neither daily life on the factory assembly line nor the routines of office drudgery were accurately depicted on film.<sup>20</sup>

Weakness was an important enemy to the American cinema. Weakness caused the Depression, according to popular sentiment. It was the opulence of the twenties which caused the problems of the thirties. To many Americans, this opulence was caused by failing morals and a loss of connection with the land. To others, the Depression was caused by the business men and faceless corporations of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) (who, coincidentally, were backing Hollywood). However, it was never America that was broken, nor was it capitalism.<sup>21</sup> These Americans did not blame the nation for their problems, nor did Hollywood.

Hollywood's heroes did not lose their confidence in America. Those who were required by plots to think about America critically, ended the film with their belief in the political and economic system of America intact. Violent uprisings or challenges to the established order were not permitted in films. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), Mr. Smith reaffirms his patriotism in the "nick

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<sup>20</sup>Joan Mellon, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1977), p.97.

<sup>21</sup>Baritz, p.116-118.

of time”<sup>22</sup> in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Okies did not blame capitalism for the loss of their farms, they blamed capitalists. They were not violent towards the idea of America, they only fought to continue to work their farms.

This non-violent attitude was not a betrayal of the middle-class American public or of the ideas of these Americans. The anger which many predicted would follow the collapse of the American economy did not happen. Violence occurred, and some Americans did take up arms, however, this was mostly in the small towns and on the country side. They did not battle the government, they attacked the individuals who were perpetrating the assaults on their ways of life. Evictions did spark some violence, but the targets were not government officials. They were the sheriffs and the bankers. Most Americans were not angry at the nation. They may have been angry at the government, or the businesses, but they did not lose their faith in the American ideals.<sup>23</sup> Hollywood’s heroes, especially the populist heroes, appeared to reflect these feelings. Box-office returns proved that Americans believed in these heroes. Few directors could sell a picture with only their name like Frank Capra, the originator of the populist hero.

Moral lessons were also learned from the masculine heroes of American film. In *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), the gangster, played by James Cagney, becomes an idol to the Dead End Kids. He was suave, rich, handsome, violent and a ladies man, all the attributes that make a great man in Hollywood. However, when convicted of murder and sent to the electric chair, his priest friend pleads with him to make his final act a positive one for the children. The manly gangster submits at the last moment to allow his masculinity to die with him. His cowardly screams as he is led to the

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<sup>22</sup>Mellen, p.97.

<sup>23</sup>Baritz, p.119.

executioner's chair are designed to prove to the Dead End Kids that the gangster life was not to be emulated. The attack on this heroes masculinity was allowed by Hollywood because it served a greater purpose. The Production Code forced filmmakers to make films with such morals. Prior to the Code, the gangster might have gone to the chair with his masculinity intact. However, masculinity and the male image were reigned in to prevent attacks on the morals of Hollywood films. The criminal element was not allowed to appear sympathetic, according to the Code. This is why, in every film produced after 1933/34, the criminals and enemies of the state were brought to justice. This is also why the gangster films of the early part of the decade, turned into G-men pictures. However, the Code did not effect the portraits of masculinity. Law abiding or not, men were still men.

Crime and crime fighting was one way to display masculinity. However, in Hollywood, there were few better ways for portraying manhood than the ability to hold a drink. Alcohol was not forbidden in films by the Code, and movie makers made the most of this. In *The Thin Man* (1934) and its sequels (five films, from 1936 to 1947), detective Nick Charles takes drink after drink, without any affect. In the Southern drama *Jezabel* (1938), the men "took pride in their drinking ability," just as the men in *Anna Karenin* did.<sup>24</sup> In an important scene in *Anna Karenin*, the male hero defeats his comrades in a drinking game, displaying his manhood to the audience. The same type of scene occurred in *Gunga Din* (1938), where the men displayed their masculinity through drinking.

Clarke Gable was the example given earlier as the ultimate male figure in the Depression. This was both due to his on screen presence and his off screen legend. Like many of Hollywood's stars, Gable was not so much an actor as he was a commodity. His image was sculpted from a

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<sup>24</sup>Edward Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), p. 111

middle-class mould by MGM, the studio which owned him, in more than just a figurative sense. Just as the Frankenstein monster was given life by Dr. Frankenstein in James Whale's famous 1931 film (or Mary Shelley's famous book), Gable's masculinity was created by the studio which gave him life.<sup>25</sup> Hollywood men, just like Hollywood women, were created personae, both on and off the screen. Gable was displayed as a *real* man because Hollywood needed *real* men to sell their films. His masculinity was not unique in Hollywood. Indeed, although he was the King, he had princes who were eager to take his place. Hollywood was filled with them.

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<sup>25</sup>Kirkham and Thumim, p.42.

## Conclusion

Critics have accused Hollywood of not showing the film audience the pain of the Depression during the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> They have also claimed that an accurate depiction of life in America was not offered to the audience. That Hollywood's films were, for the most part, escapist, is an undeniable fact. Those in command of the movies argued that this was because the audience wanted to escape life. Hollywood films were, however, usually the only films available to the public at this time. Audiences were unable to choose whether or not they wanted to see "an accurate depiction of their lives" in film, because they were given only the Hollywood version of life. Had they seen an alternative view on life, perhaps audiences would have chosen this view. Instead, Hollywood fed Americans a barrage of middle-class, commercially driven films that strove never to challenge or offend.

Hollywood film producers were not consciously attempting to deceive the American public into believing that their version of life was accurate. Filmmakers understood that they were in the business of making middle class dreams appear real. They also understood that this was a business. They also were well aware of their audience, the middle class with the purchasing power. The majority of film producers made what was popular, with only a very small minority attempting to uphold certain philosophical ideals through their films. By making only those films which would appeal to the majority of the movie going public, Hollywood producers appeared to be purposefully

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<sup>1</sup>These critics include Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression American and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1977, p xii; Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.64-5) and Andrew Sarris, "You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet": *American Talking Film History and Memory, 1927-1949* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.15.

denying their audience an accurate depiction life in the Depression.

This was not true. Hollywood was not in the business of denying reality, it was simply in the business to make money. The movie business was not willingly denying reality, it was attempting to build profits through the path of least resistance. Motion pictures which had messages or offered “accurate depictions” of life were viewed with fear from the majority of the film community, because filmmakers believed that these types of films were bound to be box-office failures. These films were also not made because filmmakers feared the protest such films would bring. Escapist films were chosen as an option because they offered the greatest profit for the least risk. Hollywood did not have to worry if these films would create a nationwide protest. As long as they adhered to the Production Code and avoided direct contact with unsavoury topics, such as race relations or politics, filmmakers could avoid conflict and virtually guarantee a profit.

Avoiding conflict was a major occupation of Hollywood filmmakers. Protests had once crippled filmmakers, and they would not allow it to happen again. This is why Hollywood of the Depression appears to many observers today as escapist.<sup>2</sup> It is also why some have accused the audiences of being unable to deal with real life. The audiences who watched Hollywood films appeared to be ignoring the plight of the nation, hiding in the pretend world of the silver screen. However, it was not because the audience was unwilling to watch anything else, it was because there was nothing else to watch. Hollywood was so intent on making profits and avoiding conflicts, that many of the films produced avoided challenging topics. This was not because Hollywood believed that the audience did not want to see challenging films, it was because Hollywood did not want to

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<sup>2</sup>See note 1 above.

make them.

The relationship between the film producers and the audiences was complicated. Filmmakers were not able to judge immediately how the audience would react to a film. It could be months or possibly years before an idea becomes reality on the screen. Filmmakers had to almost predict what would be in fashion when their films were to be released, meaning that in order to assure a popular film, it had to be almost timeless. Films that were topical were risky not only because they could be controversial, but because the subject may also be out of favour when the film was released.

Film proved to be one of the most powerful mediums of the American Depression, even though it was escapist. Those who worked in films were among the richest in America, stars were treated like royalty, and many Americans studied every published facet of their lives. Though it is undeniable that film was a powerful medium, it was not a chronicle of American life in the Depression. Unlike a newspaper or a radio news report, the audience was aware that what they were seeing was unreal. What these films of the Depression did display, however, is unexpected. These films offer evidence of the power of both the white middle class and of American business.

The white middle class were the main audience for films during the depression. These women and men (there is evidence that it was mainly women<sup>3</sup>) were the focus of many films. They were the intended audience for the advertisements imbedded in the text of the films. As well, these middle class women and men were the audience listened to when Hollywood was assailed with complaints in the early part of the decade. In a real sense, the white middle class was *the audience* to Hollywood.

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<sup>3</sup>See pages 49-50, above.



If the middle class was the main audience to Hollywood, business was the major influence. The banks of New York, the stock market, the industrial heads of American corporations, and, of course, the American government, were all essential to film production in Hollywood. Their opinions could sink a film long before it was released to the middle class. Even while all the above sectors of America were suffering from the effects of the Depression, they were able to exert their significant influence on Hollywood. Because most of the studios were forced to relinquish some, if not all control of their films to New York investors, the input of these investors became essential. Although there is no evidence that these men ever directly prevented a film from being released, they were able to direct their influence in other ways. The Production Code was one of the more obvious modes of control placed on Hollywood. This document was meant to be about the films, however it was in fact about the money. It was because the box office receipts were falling that the Code was enforced, prior to this, it sat on a shelf in the MMPDA's office. Those who controlled the money in New York caused the Code to be enforced because they wanted to make the most money from their investments.

These two groups narrowed Hollywood's view of what America was. Hollywood's films reflected an America where the minorities kept to the background, where the sexes were restricted to their conventional roles and where the nation was whole. The filmed version of America which Hollywood offered was a middle class America with happy endings. American films portrayed white middle class America as the nation. Since there was no other voice competing with Hollywood, it is possible that these films constituted a form of propaganda. Hollywood was offering a view of the nation through the eyes of a distinct portion of the nation, while blocking alternative views.

The image of Hollywood in the thirties that emerges from this thesis is one of industrial capitalists for whom money was the most important issue, and of entertainers, who wished only to

make products that diverted the audience. This image failed to persist because the moguls and filmmakers were not happy with the two stereotypes and actively promoted themselves as artists. The production of prestige films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *Anna Karenin* (1935), as well as the promotion of the Academy Awards display the Hollywood desire to be perceived as more than simple entertainers or grasping entrepreneurs. The Academy Awards, founded in 1927, was created by Hollywood to provide evidence that they were artists. Their films were not meant to be seen as mere entertainment; they were art. The fact that the Academy Awards has become a central part of contemporary popular culture, is a testimony to the success of the moguls' self-promotion. This should not, however, deflect us from the realization that in the 1930s it was the business of motion picture entertainment, with its imperative to sell to the widest audience possible, that was largely responsible for the shape of the films of that era.

## Appendix I

# The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (The Hays Code)

*A Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures.  
Formulated and formally adopted by The Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. and The  
Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. in March 1930.*

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them by the people of the world and which have made motion pictures a universal form of entertainment.

They recognize their responsibility to the public because of this trust and because entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation.

Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.

During the rapid transition from silent to talking pictures they have realized the necessity and the opportunity of subscribing to a Code to govern the production of talking pictures and of re-acknowledging this responsibility.

On their part, they ask from the public and from public leaders a sympathetic understanding of their purposes and problems and a spirit of cooperation that will allow them the freedom and opportunity necessary to bring the motion picture to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people.

### *General Principles*

- II. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
- III. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall

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be presented.

IV. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

*Particular Applications*

I. *Crimes Against the Law*

These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.

A. *Murder*

1. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
2. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.
3. Revenge in modern times shall not be justified.

B. *Methods of Crime* should not be explicitly presented.

1. Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.
2. Arson must subject to the same safeguards.
3. The use of firearms should be restricted to the essentials.
4. Methods of smuggling should not be presented.

C. *Illegal drug traffic* must never be presented.

D. *The use of liquor in American life*, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization, will not be shown.

II. *Sex*

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

A. *Adultery*, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.

B. *Scenes of Passion*

1. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.
2. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.

3. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element.

C. *Seduction or Rape*

1. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
2. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

D. *Sex perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden.

E. *White slavery* shall not be treated.

F. *Miscegenation* (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.

G. *Sex hygiene* and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.

H. Scenes of *actual child birth*, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.

I. *Children's sex organs* are never to be exposed.

### III. *Vulgarity*

The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should always be subject to the dictates of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience.

### IV. *Obscenity*

Obscenity in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion (even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience) is forbidden.

### V. *Profanity*

Pointed profanity (this includes the words, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ - unless used reverently - Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden.

### VI. *Costume*

- A. Dancing or costumes intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.
- B. *Complete nudity* is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture.
- C. Undressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot.

- D. Indecent or undue exposure is forbidden.

## VII. *Dances*

- A. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passions are forbidden.
- B. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

## VIII. *Religion*

- A. No film or episode may throw *ridicule* on any religious faith.
- B. *Ministers of religion* in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
- C. *Ceremonies* of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

## IX. *Locations*

The treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy.

## X. *National Feelings*

- A. *The use of the Flag* shall be consistently respectful.
- B. The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.

## XI. *Titles*

Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used.

## XII. *Repellent Subjects*

The following subjects must be treated within the careful limits of good taste:

- A. *Actual hangings* or electrocutions as legal punishments for crime.
- B. *Third degree* methods.
- C. Brutality and possible gruesomeness.
- D. *Branding* of people or animals.
- E. *Apparent cruelty* to children or animals.
- F. *The sale of women*, or a woman selling her virtue.

G. *Surgical operations.*

*Reasons Supporting the Preamble of the Code*

- I. Theatrical motion pictures, that is, pictures intended for the theatre as distinct from pictures intended for churches, schools, lecture halls, educational movements, social reform movements, etc., are primarily to be regarded as ENTERTAINMENT.

Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings. But it has always recognized that entertainment can be a character either HELPFUL or HARMFUL to the human race, and in consequence has clearly distinguished between:

- A. Entertainment which tends to improve the race, or at least to re-create and rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life; and
- B. Entertainment which tends to degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living.

Hence the MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.

*So correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation.*

*Wrong entertainment lowers the whole living conditions and moral ideals of a race.*

*Note, for example, the healthy reactions to healthful sports, like baseball, golf; the unhealthy reactions to sports like cockfighting, bullfighting, bear baiting, etc.*

*Note, too, the effect on ancient nations of gladiatorial combats, the obscene plays of Roman times, etc.*

- II. Motion pictures are very important as ART.

Though a new art, possibly a combination art, it has the same object as the other arts, the presentation of human thought, emotion, and experience, in terms of an appeal to the soul through the senses.

Here, as in entertainment:

*Art enters intimately into the lives of human beings.*

Art can be *morally good*, lifting men to higher levels. This has been done through good

music, great painting, authentic fiction, poetry, drama.

Art can be *morally evil* in its effects. This is the case clearly enough with unclean art, indecent books, suggestive drama. The effect on the lives of men and women are obvious.

Note: It has often been argued that art itself is unmoral, neither good nor bad. This is true of the **THING** which is music, painting, poetry, etc. But the **THING** is the **PRODUCT** of some person's mind, and the intention of that mind was either good or bad morally when it produced the thing. Besides, the thing has its **EFFECT** upon those who come into contact with it. In both these ways, that is, as a product of a mind and as the cause of definite effects, it has a deep moral significance and unmistakable moral quality.

Hence: The motion pictures, which are the most popular of modern arts for the masses, have their moral quality from the intention of the minds which produce them and from their effects on the moral lives and reactions of their audiences. This gives them a most important morality.

- A. They *reproduce* the morality of the men who use the pictures as a medium for the expression of their ideas and ideals.
- B. They *affect* the moral standards of those who, through the screen, take in these ideas and ideals.

In the case of motion pictures, the effect may be particularly emphasized because no art has so quick and so widespread an appeal to the masses. It has become in an incredibly short period the *art of the multitudes*.

III. The motion picture, because of its importance as entertainment and because of the trust placed in it by the peoples of the world, has special **MORAL OBLIGATIONS**:

- A. Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to *every class*, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a *picture* and *listening to a story*, at once reaches every class of society.
- B. By reason of the mobility of film and the ease of picture distribution, and because the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantities, this art *reaches places* unpenetrated by other forms of art.
- C. Because of these two facts, it is difficult to produce films intended for only certain classes of people. The exhibitors' theatres are built for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, the mature and the immature, the self-respecting and the criminal.



Films, unlike books and music, can with difficulty be confined to certain selected groups.

- D. The latitude given to film material cannot, in consequence, be as wide as the latitude given to *book material*. In addition:
1. A book describes; a film vividly presents. One presents on a cold page; the other by apparently living people.
  2. A book reaches the mind through words merely; a film reaches the eyes and ears through the reproduction of actual events.
  3. The reaction of a reader to a book depends largely on the keenness of the reader's imagination; the reaction to a film depends on the vividness of presentation.  
Hence many things which might be described or suggested in a book could not possibly be presented in a film.
- E. This is also true when comparing the film with the newspaper.
1. Newspapers present by description, films by actual presentation.
  2. Newspapers are after the fact and present things as having taken place; the film gives the events in the process of enactment and with apparent reality of life.
- F. Everything possible in a *play* is not possible in a film:
1. Because of the *larger audience of the film*, and its consequential mixed character. Psychologically, the larger the audience, the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.
  2. Because through light, enlargement of character, presentation, scenic emphasis, etc., the screen story is *brought closer* to the audience than the play.
  3. The enthusiasm for and interest in the film actors and actresses, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience largely sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence the audience is more ready to confuse actor and actress and the characters they portray, and it is most receptive of the emotions and ideals presented by the favorite stars.
- G. *Small communities*, remote from sophistication and from the hardening process which often takes place in the ethical and moral standards of larger cities, are easily and readily reached by any sort of film.
- H. The grandeur of mass settings, large action, spectacular features, etc., affects and arouses more intensely the emotional side of the audience.

In general, the mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straightforward presentation of fact in the film make for more intimate contact with a larger audience and for greater emotional appeal.

Hence the larger moral responsibilities of the motion pictures.

### *Reasons Underlying the General Principles*

- I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

This is done:

- A. When *evil* is made to appear *attractive* and *alluring*, and good is made to appear *unattractive*.
- B. When the *sympathy* of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, sin. The same is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.

Note: Sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime: we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done.

The *presentation of evil* is often essential for art or fiction or drama.

This in itself is not wrong provided:

- 1. That evil is *not presented alluringly*. Even if later in the film the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of sin is remembered.
- 2. That throughout, the audience feels sure that *evil is wrong* and *good is right*.

- II. Correct standards of life shall, as far as possible, be presented.

A *wide knowledge of life and of living* is made possible through the film. When right standards are consistently presented, the motion picture exercises the most powerful influences. It builds character, develops right ideals, inculcates correct principles, and all this in attractive story form.

If motion pictures consistently *hold up for admiration high types of characters* and present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind.

- III. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

By *natural law* is understood the law which is written in the hearts of all mankind, the greater underlying principles of right and justice dictated by conscience.

By *human law* is understood the law written by civilized nations.

- A. *The presentation of crimes* against the law is *often necessary* for the carrying out of

the plot. But the presentation must not throw sympathy with the crime as against the law nor with the criminal as against those who punish him.

- B. *The courts of the land* should not be presented as unjust. This does not mean that a single court may not be presented as unjust, much less that a single court official must not be presented this way. But the court system of the country must not suffer as a result of this presentation.

### *Reasons Underlying the Particular Applications*

#### *Preliminary:*

- I. *Sin and evil* enter into the story of human beings and hence in themselves *are valid dramatic material*.
- II. In the use of this material, it must be distinguished between sin which *repels* by its very nature, and *sins which often attract*.
  1. In the first class come murder, most theft, many legal crimes, lying, hypocrisy, cruelty, etc.
  2. In the second class come sex sins, sins and crimes of apparent heroism, such as banditry, daring thefts, leadership in evil, organized crime, revenge, etc.

The first class needs less care in treatment, as sins and crimes of this class are naturally unattractive. The audience instinctively condemns all such and is repelled.

Hence the important objective must be to avoid the hardening of the audience, especially of those who are young and impressionable, to the thought and fact of crime. People can become accustomed even to murder, cruelty, brutality, and repellent crimes, if these are too frequently repeated. The second class needs great care in handling, as the response of human nature to their appeal is obvious. This is treated more fully below.

- III. A careful distinction can be made between films intended for *general distribution*, and films intended for use in theatres restricted to a *limited audience*. Themes and plots quite appropriate for the latter would be altogether out of place and dangerous in the former.

Note: The practice of using a general theatre and limiting its patronage to "Adults Only" is not completely satisfactory and is only partially effective.

However, maturer minds may easily understand and accept without harm subject matter in plots which do younger people positive harm.

Hence: If there should be created a special type of theatre, catering exclusively to an adult audience, for plays of this character (plays with problem themes, difficult discussions and maturer treatment) it would seem to afford an outlet, which does not

now exist, for pictures unsuitable for general distribution but permissible for exhibitions to a restricted audience.

## I. CRIMES AGAINST THE LAW

The treatment of crimes against the law must not:

- A. *Teach methods of crime.*
- B. *Inspire potential criminals with a desire for imitation.*
- C. *Make criminals seem heroic and justified.*

*Revenge* in modern times shall not be justified. In lands and ages of less developed civilization and moral principles, revenge may sometimes be presented. This would be the case especially in places where no law exists to cover the crime because of which revenge is committed.

Because of its evil consequences, the drug traffic should not be presented in any form. The existence of the trade should not be brought to the attention of audiences.

*The use of liquor* should never be excessively presented. In scenes from American life, the necessities of plot and proper characterization alone justify its use. And in this case, it should be shown with moderation.

## II. SEX

Out of a regard for the sanctity of marriage and the home, the *triangle*, that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. The treatment should not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution. *Scenes of passion* must be treated with an honest acknowledgement of human nature and its normal reactions. Many scenes cannot be presented without arousing dangerous emotions on the part of the immature, the young or the *criminal classes*.

Even within the limits of *pure love*, certain facts have been universally regarded by lawmakers as outside the limits of safe presentation.

In the case of *impure love*, the love which society has always regarded as wrong and which has been banned by divine law, the following are important:

- A. Impure love must not be presented as *attractive and beautiful*.
- B. It must not be the subject of *comedy or farce*, or treated as material for *laughter*.
- C. It must not be presented in such a way to arouse passion or morbid curiosity on the part of the audience.
- D. It must *not* be made to seem *right and permissible*.
- E. In general, it must *not* be *detailed* in method and manner.

- III. VULGARITY;
- IV. OBSCENITY;
- V. PROFANITY; hardly need further explanation than is contained in the Code.
- VI. COSTUME

*General Principles:*

- A. The effect of nudity or semi-nudity upon the normal man or woman, and much more upon the young and upon immature persons, has been honestly recognized by all lawmakers and moralists.
- B. Hence the fact that the nude or semi-nude body may be *beautiful* does not make its use in the films moral. For, in addition to its beauty, the effect of the nude or semi-nude body on the normal individual must be taken into consideration.
- C. Nudity or semi-nudity used simply to put a "*punch*" into a picture comes under the head of immoral actions. It is immoral in its effect on the average audience.
- D. Nudity can never be permitted as being *necessary for the plot*. Semi-nudity must not result in undue or indecent exposures.
- E. *Transparent or translucent materials* and silhouette are frequently more suggestive than actual exposure.

VII. DANCES

Dancing in general is recognized as an *art* and as a *beautiful* form of expressing human emotions.

But dances which suggest or represent sexual actions, whether performed solo or with two or more; dances intended to excite the emotional reaction of an audience; dances with movement of the breasts, excessive body movements while the feet are stationary, violate decency and are wrong.

VIII. RELIGION

The reason why ministers of religion may not be comic characters or villains is simply because the attitude taken toward them may easily become the attitude taken toward religion in general. Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because of the lowering of the audience's respect for a minister.

IX. LOCATIONS

Certain places are so closely and thoroughly associated with sexual life or with sexual sin that their use must be carefully limited.

**X. NATIONAL FEELINGS**

The just rights, history, and feelings of any nation are entitled to most careful consideration and respectful treatment.

**XI. TITLES**

As the title of a picture is the brand on that particular type of goods, it must conform to the ethical practices of all such honest business.

**XII. REPELLENT SUBJECTS**

Such subjects are occasionally necessary for the plot. Their treatment must never offend good taste nor injure the sensibilities of an audience.

## Appendix II

The top grossing movie list below is given alphabetically by year and was compiled from the records of *The Motion Picture Herald*, *Motion Picture Daily* and *Film Daily*. The list is found in *The American Movies Reference Book: The Sound Era* (Paul Michael, editor-in-chief). Beginning in 1935-36 the years are grouped into Academy Award years, meaning that the film year 1935 begins in mid January 1935 and ends in mid January 1936. The list is given because of the influence these papers had on the New York end of the movie business. *Variety's* top grossing films list follows the *Motion Picture Herald*, *Motion Picture Daily* and *Film Daily* list. This has been taken from *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Tino Balio) and is included because of *Variety's* influence in Hollywood itself. Unfortunately, the list ends in 1939 and does not include the years 1940 to 1941. The Academy Award winners for 1933 through 1941 are also listed below. These have also been taken from *The American Movies Reference Book*. The only awards listed are for best picture, actor, actress and director. These are widely acknowledged to be the most important and influential Academy Awards given out. The Academy Awards themselves are important to note because they indicate what the popular tastes were during that year. Though the awards were given by Hollywood to their stars, rarely did a popular film not make it into the Academy's lists of the best picture of the year. Even in the thirties, the Oscars were one of the most influential awards given to films and in many cases could create increased revenue for a film. The Annual Top Ten Box-Office Stars, which comes from *Film Facts* (Cobbett S. Steinberg) and was compiled yearly by

Quigley Publications is listed at last below. Steinberg warns readers that these lists are only approximations of public tastes, as there is no real way to ascertain which star was more popular. This list has been achieved through surveys given by Quigley Publications to American exhibitors which asked them to name the top film stars.

**List of Abbreviations**

Col. - Columbia Pictures

Fox - 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox

MGM - Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Par. - Paramount Pictures

RKO - Radio-Keith-Orpheum

UA - United Artists

Univ. - Universal Pictures

WB - Warner Brothers



## Top-Grossing Films, 1933 - 1941

### 1933

*Animal Kingdom* (RKO)  
*Be Mine Tonight* (Universal)  
*Cavalcade* (Fox)  
*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (WB)  
*Gold Diggers of 1933* (WB)  
*I'm no Angel* (Par.)  
*The Kid From Spain* (UA)  
*Little Women* (RKO)  
*Rasputin and the Empress* (MGM)  
*State Fair* (Fox)  
*Tugboat Annie* (MGM)

### 1934

*Barretts of Wimpole Street* (MGM)  
*Belle of the Nineties* (Par.)  
*Chained* (MGM)  
*It Happened One Night* (Col.)  
*Judge Priest* (Fox)  
*Kentucky Kernels* (RKO)  
*The Lost Patrol* (RKO)  
*One Night of Love* (Col.)  
*Queen Christina* (MGM)  
*Riptide* (MGM)  
*Roman Scandals* (UA)  
*She Loves Me Not* (Par.)  
*Son of Kong* (RKO)  
*Sons of the Desert* (MGM)  
*Wonder Bar* (WB)

### 1935

*China Seas* (MGM)  
*David Copperfield* (MGM)  
*Forsaking All Others* (MGM)  
*Goin' To Town* (Par.)  
*Les Miserables* (UA)  
*Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Par.)  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (WB)

*Mutiny on the Bounty* (MGM)  
*Roberta* (RKO)  
*She Married Her Boss* (Col.)  
*Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (20<sup>th</sup>)  
*Top Hat* (RKO)

### 1935-36

*Anna Karenin* (MGM)  
*The Bride Comes Home* (Par.)  
*Broadway Melody of 1936* (MGM)  
*Bullets or Ballots* (WB)  
*Captain Blood* (WB)  
*The Country Doctor* (Fox)  
*The Crusades* (Par.)  
*Follow the Fleet* (RKO)  
*The Great Ziegfeld* (WB)  
*Green Pastures* (WB)  
*In Old Kentucky* (Fox)  
*The King Steps Out* (Col.)  
*The Littlest Rebel* (Fox)  
*Magnificent Obsession* (Univ.)  
*Modern Times* (UA)  
*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Col.)  
*A Night at the Opera* (MGM)  
*Rhythm on the Range* (Par.)  
*Rose Marie* (MGM)  
*San Francisco* (MGM)  
*Show Boat* (Univ.)  
*The Story of Louis Pasteur* (WB)  
*A Tale of Two Cities* (MGM)  
*Thanks a Million* (Fox)  
*These Three* (UA)

### 1936-37

*After the Thin Man* (MGM)  
*Anthony Adverse* (WB)  
*Artists and Models* (Par.)  
*The Big Broadcast of 1937* (Par.)

*Born to Dance* (MGM)  
*The Charge of the Light Brigade* (WB)  
*College Holiday* (Par.)  
*Come and Get It* (UA)  
*Dodsworth* (UA)  
*The Good Earth* (MGM)  
*The Gorgeous Hussy* (MGM)  
*Green Light* (WB)  
*I Met Him in Paris* (Par.)  
*The Last of Mr. Cheyney* (MGM)  
*Libelled Lady* (MGM)  
*Lloyds of London* (Fox)  
*Lost Horizon* (Col.)  
*Maytime* (MGM)  
*Mountain Music* (Par.)  
*My Man Godfrey* (Univ.)  
*One in A Million* (Fox)  
*On the Avenue* (Fox)  
*Pigskin Parade* (Fox)  
*The Plainsman* (Par.)  
*Rainbow on the River* (RKO)  
*The Road Black* (Univ.)  
*Romeo and Juliet* (MGM)  
*Shall We Dance* (RKO)  
*Slave Ship* (Fox)  
*A Star is Born* (UA)  
*Swing High, Swing Low* (Par.)  
*Swing Time* (RKO)  
*Wake up and Live* (Fox)  
*Waikiki Wedding* (Par.)  
*Wee Willie Winkie* (Fox)  
*You Can't Have Everything* (Fox)

#### 1937-38

*The Adventures of Robin Hood* (WB)  
*Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (UA)  
*Alexander's Ragtime Band* (Fox)  
*The Buccaneer* (Par.)  
*The Firefly* (MGM)  
*Girl of the Golden West* (MGM)  
*The Goldwyn Follies* (UA)  
*Happy Landing* (Fox)  
*Holiday* (Col.)

*The Hurricane* (UA)  
*In Old Chicago* (Fox)  
*Rosalie* (MGM)  
*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (RKO)  
*Test Piolet* (MGM)  
*Wells Fargo* (Par.)

#### 1938-39

*Angels With Dirty Faces* (WB)  
*Boys Town* (MGM)  
*Dodge City* (WB)  
*Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (MGM)  
*Gunga Din* (RKO)  
*Hardys Ride High* (MGM)  
*Jesse James* (Fox)  
*Juarez* (WB)  
*Out West With the Hardys* (MGM)  
*Pygmalion* (MGM)  
*Stagecoach* (UA)  
*Sweethearts* (MGM)  
*That Certain Age* (Univ.)  
*Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (Univ.)  
*Union Pacific* (Par.)  
*You Can't Take It With You* (Col.)

#### 1939-40

*All This and Heaven Too* (WB)  
*Another Thin Man* (MGM)  
*Babes in Arms* (MGM)  
*Destry Rides Again* (Univ.)  
*Drums Along the Mohawk* (Fox)  
*The Fighting 69th* (WB)  
*Gone With the Wind* (MGM)  
*Grapes of Wrath* (Fox)  
*Gulliver's Travels* (Par.)  
*Hollywood Cavalcade* (Fox)  
*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (RKO)  
*Lillian Russell* (Fox)  
*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Col.)  
*My Favorite Wife* (RKO)  
*Ninotchka* (MGM)  
*Northwest Passage* (MGM)

*The Old Maid* (WB)  
*The Rain Came* (Fox)  
*Rebecca* (UA)  
*Road to Singapore* (Par.)  
*The Women* (MGM)

1940-41

*Aloma of the South Seas* (Par.)  
*Blood and Sand* (Fox)  
*Boom Town* (MGM)  
*The Bride Came C.O.D.* (WB)  
*Caught in the Draft* (Par.)  
*Charley's Aunt* (Fox)  
*Dive Bomber* (WB)  
*The Great Dictator* (UA)  
*Hold That Ghost* (Univ.)  
*I Wanted Wings* (Par.)  
*The Lady Eve* (Par.)  
*Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (MGM)  
*Meet John Doe* (WB)  
*North West Mounted Police* (Par.)  
*The Philadelphia Story* (MGM)  
*The Road to Zanzibar* (Par.)  
*The Sea Wolf* (WB)  
*Strawberry Blonde* (WB)  
*That Hamilton Woman* (UA)  
*This Thing Called Love* (Col.)  
*The Ziegfeld Girl* (MGM)

## Variety's Top-Grossing Films

### 1933

*She Done Him Wrong* (Par.)  
*Tugboat Annie* (MGM)  
*Back Street* (Univ.)  
*Gold Diggers of 1933* (WB)  
*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (WB)  
*Little Women* (RKO)  
*State Fair* (Fox)

### 1934

*I'm No Angel* (Par.)  
*Judge Priest* (Fox)  
*Dinner at Eight* (MGM)  
*It Happened One Night* (Col.)  
*The Bowery* (UA)

### 1935

*Mutiny on the Bounty* (MGM)  
*Top Hat* (RKO)  
*Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Par.)  
*China Seas* (MGM)  
*Curly Top* (Fox)  
*G-Men* (WB)  
*David Copperfield* (UA)

### 1936

*Modern Times* (UA)  
*San Francisco* (MGM)  
*Swing Time* (RKO)  
*The Great Ziegfeld* (MGM)  
*The Littlest Rebel* (Fox)  
*Rose Marie* (MGM)  
*Under Two Flags* (Fox)

### 1937

*Maytime* (MGM)  
*The Good Earth* (MGM)  
*Waikiki Wedding* (Par.)  
*Lost Horizon* (Col.)

*The Prisoner of Zenda* (UA)  
*After the Thin Man* (MGM)  
*The Plainsman* (Par.)  
*A Star is Born* (UA)

### 1938

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (RKO)  
*Alexander's Ragtime Band* (Fox)  
*Test Pilot* (MGM)  
*In Old Chicago* (Fox)  
*The Hurricane* (UA)  
*The Adventures of Robin Hood* (WB)  
*Marie Antoinette* (MGM)  
*Love Finds Andy Hardy* (MGM)

### 1939

*Wizard of Oz* (MGM)  
*Goodbye Mr. Chips* (MGM)  
*Pygmalion* (MGM)  
*Boys Town* (MGM)  
*The Old Maid* (WB)  
*Dark Victory* (WB)

## Academy Award Winners 1932-33 to 1941

1932-33

Picture *Cavalcade* (Fox), Winfield Sheehan, studio head  
 Actor Charles Laughton in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (London Films, UA)  
 Actress Katharine Hepburn in *Morning Glory*  
 Director Frank Lloyd for *Cavalcade*

1934

Picture *It Happened One Night* (Col.), produced by Harry Cohn  
 Actor Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night* (Col.)  
 Actress Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night* (Col.)  
 Director Frank Capra for *It Happened One Night* (Col.)

1935

Picture *Mutiny on the Bounty* (MGM), produced by Irving Thalberg, with Albert Lewin  
 Actor Victor McLaglen in *The Informer* (RKO)  
 Actress Bette Davis in *Dangerous* (WB)  
 Director John Ford for *The Informer* (RKO)

1936

Picture *The Great Ziegfeld* (MGM), produced by Hunt Stromberg  
 Actor Paul Muni in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (WB)  
 Actress Luise Rainer in *The Great Ziegfeld* (MGM)  
 Director Frank Capra for *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Col.)

1937

Picture *The Life of Emile Zola* (WB), produced by Henry Blanke  
 Actor Spencer Tracy in *Captain Courageous* (MGM)  
 Actress Luise Rainer in *The Good Earth* (MGM)  
 Director Leo McCarey for *The Awful Truth* (Col.)

1938

Picture *You Can't Take It With You* (Col.), produced by Frank Capra  
 Actor Spencer Tracy in *Boys Town* (MGM)  
 Actress Bette Davis in *Jezebel* (WB)  
 Director Frank Capra for *You Can't Take It With You* (Col.)

1939

Picture *Gone With The Wind* (Selznick, MGM), produced by David O. Selznick  
 Actor Robert Donat in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (MGM)  
 Actress Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind* (Selznick, MGM)  
 Director Victor Fleming for *Gone With The Wind* (Selznick, MGM)

1940

Picture *Rebecca* (Selznick International, United Artists), produced by David O. Selznick.  
 Actor James Steward in *The Philadelphia Story* (MGM)  
 Actress Ginger Rogers in *Kitty Foyle* (RKO)  
 Director John Ford for *The Grapes of Wrath* (Fox)

1941

Picture *How Green Was My Valley* (Fox), produced by Darryl F. Zanuck  
 Actor Garry Cooper in *Sergeant York* (WB)  
 Actress Joan Fontain in *Suspicion* (RKO)  
 Director John Ford for *How Green Was My Valley* (Fox)

# Annual Top Ten Box-Office Stars

1933

Marie Dressler  
Will Rogers  
Janet Gaynor  
Eddie Cantor  
Wallace Beery  
Jean Harlow  
Clark Gable  
Mae West  
Norma Shearer  
Joan Crawford

1934

Will Rogers  
Clark Gable  
Janet Gaynor  
Wallace Beery  
Mae West  
Joan Crawford  
Bing Crosby  
Shirley Temple  
Marie Dressler  
Norma Shearer

1935

Shirley Temple  
Will Rogers  
Clark Gable  
Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers  
Joan Crawford  
Claudette Colbert  
Dick Powell  
Wallace Beery  
Joe E. Brown  
James Cagney

1936

Shirley Temple  
Clark Gable  
Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers  
Robert Taylor  
Joe E. Brown  
Dick Powell  
Joan Crawford  
Claudette Colbert  
Jeanette MacDonald  
Gary Cooper

1937

Shirley Temple  
Clark Gable  
Robert Taylor  
Bing Crosby  
William Powell  
Jane Withers  
Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers  
Sonja Henie  
Gary Cooper  
Myrna Loy

1938

Shirley Temple  
Clark Gable  
Sonja Henie  
Mickey Rooney  
Spencer Tracy  
Robert Taylor  
Myrna Loy  
Jane Withers  
Alice Faye  
Tyrone Power

1939

Mickey Rooney  
Tyrone Power  
Spencer Tracy  
Clark Gable  
Shirley Temple  
Bette Davis  
Alice Faye  
Errol Flynn  
James Cagney  
Sonja Henie

1940

Mickey Rooney  
Spencer Tracy  
Clark Gable  
Gene Autry  
Tyrone Power  
James Cagney  
Bing Crosby  
Wallace Beery  
Bette Davis  
Judy Garland

1941

Mickey Rooney  
Clark Gable  
Abbott & Costello  
Bob Hope  
Spencer Tracy  
Gene Autry  
Gary Cooper  
Bette Davis  
James Cagney  
Judy Garland

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<sup>1</sup>For the items contained on the CD-ROM



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