

Ronald Reagan, the Movie

"The neatest Christmas gift of all!" says Ronald Reagan.

You can twist it. . . . You can twirl it. . . . You can bend it. . . . You can curl it. . . . The new revolutionary collar on Van Heusen Century shirts won't wrinkle . . . ever!

Caption accompanying a picture of "Ronald Reagan starring in Universal International's Law and Order, Color by Technicolor"

The year is 1940, Stalin and Hitler have signed their pact, and Europe is at war. Saboteurs are operating inside America as well, blowing up bridges and trains. The House Un-American Activities Committee, investigating sabotage and sedition, subpoenas Joe Garvey, the chairman of the Society of Loyal Naturalized Americans. Garvey speaks with a foreign accent; he insists that the purpose of his organization is simply to preserve American neutrality and keep the country out of war. When asked by HUAC's chairman if his organization's labor racketeering, unlawful assembly, and sabotage are the activities of loyal Americans, Garvey responds that such accusations are "capitalistic" lies. In truth, however, Garvey heads a ring of foreign spies.

One of Garvey's saboteurs has been killed in a train wreck; the Secret Service sends an agent to impersonate him. To test the agent's identity, Garvey's toughs masquerade as policemen and knock him around; they accuse him of being a Wobbly and a Red. When they are satisfied that he is what they have charged him with being, an anti-American subversive, Garvey's men take him to their boss.

America has invented a miraculous defensive weapon that paralyzes electric currents at their source. The inertia projector, as it is called, stops and destroys anything that moves. According to an American admiral, it will "make America invincible in war and therefore be the greatest force for peace ever invented." When Garvey and another foreign spy fly off with the plans for the weapon, the secret agent follows.

He turns the inertia projector on the spy plane; the plane stops in mid-air, catches fire, and plummets to the ground.

The American agent has an assistant, Gabby Waters. While the fate of the country hangs in the balance, Gabby's girlfriend has been nagging him to marry her. Where the spies have failed, she is about to succeed in capturing her man when the secret agent and his boss turn the inertia projector on the car taking the couple to the altar. The secret weapon stops the car. As his girlfriend fumes helplessly, Gabby is rescued from female entrapment and "save[d] for the service."

Murder in the Air (1940), the movie I have been describing, is a minor piece in the 1940s politicization of Hollywood. It illustrates several tendencies that emerge in the course of that decade. *Murder in the Air* begins as if its theme is counterfeit money; the movie then shifts to spying and counterfeit identity, initiating the move from crime to countersubversion that characterizes 1940s Hollywood. Collapsing Communists into Fascists, *Murder in the Air* presages the turn from the anti-Nazi films of World War II to the anti-Communist films of the cold war. Male freedom in this movie is threatened by both a nagging woman and a foreign power; merging those dangers and then zapping the woman and the subversives, *Murder in the Air* also looks forward to the sexual politics of cold war movies.

But *Murder in the Air* would remain forgotten, as it has until now, if the man who played the secret agent, Brass Bancroft, were not Ronald Reagan (see Fig. 1.1). The attack on subversion; the merging of Communism and Fascism; the flippancy about matters of life and death, peace and war; the obsession with intelligence agents as the means to national security; and, most striking, the existence of an airborne defensive superweapon that will make America invulnerable—all these look forward beyond World War II to the Star Wars militarization of space and the Reagan presidency. Reagan's explanation for the unfinished security arrangements that allowed terrorists to kill American troops in Beirut—"Anyone that's ever had their kitchen done over knows that it's never done as soon as you wish it would"—could be a quip from the movie. Reagan explained the terrorist success by the "near destruction of our intelligence capacity . . . before we came here," thereby distinguishing the CIA under Carter from the wartime Secret Service. Believing there has never been a time in history "when there wasn't a defense against some kind of threat," President Reagan intervened against his own scientific consultants and normal bureaucratic processes to write out in longhand the paragraphs of his March 1983

speech advocating a ballistic missile defense system that “holds the promise of changing the course of history.” “The Strategic Defense Initiative has been labelled Star Wars,” the president said two years later. “But it isn’t about war. It is about peace. . . . If you will pardon my stealing a film line—the force is with us.” In quoting a contemporary movie, was Reagan paying homage to its predecessor? Are we now being ruled by the fantasies of a 1940s countersubversive B movie?¹

This chapter investigates the making of Ronald Reagan in 1940s Hollywood. The presidential character, I shall argue, was produced from the convergence of two substitutions that generated cold war countersubversion in the 1940s and underlie its 1980s revival—the political replacement of Nazism by Communism, from which the national-security state was born, and the psychological shift from an embodied self to its simulacrum on film. Reagan, I shall suggest, found out who he was through the roles he played on film. By responding to typecasting that either attracted or repelled him, by making active efforts to obtain certain roles and to escape others, Reagan merged his on- and offscreen identities. The confusion between life and film produced *Ronald Reagan*, the image that has fixed our gaze. In a deliberate imitation of the Reagan process, this chapter explores that confusion between life and film to bring the making of this president into view.

I

“Movies are forever” was the theme of the 1981 Academy Awards. President Ronald Reagan, the first Hollywood actor elevated to the presidency, was scheduled to welcome the academy from the White House. “Film is forever,” the president was to tell the academy. “It is the motion picture that shows all of us not only how we look and sound but—more important—how we feel.” Hollywood movies, Reagan was suggesting, mirror back to us the feelings on the screen as if they were our own, as if we were not given those feelings by the movies themselves. As confirming evidence of the power of film, John W. Hinckley, Jr., imitating the plot of the movie *Taxi Driver*, deliberately shot the president on the day of the Academy Awards. Obsessed with *Taxi Driver*, Hinckley had seen it again and again and had cast himself in the role of its isolated, deranged, and violent protagonist. Like the character played by Robert De Niro, Hinckley became a gun freak. Like him, he determined to win the woman he loved—Jody Foster in Hinckley’s fantasy, the character she played in the movie—by assassinating a political leader. Hinckley,

like the De Niro character, failed as a political assassin. But he preempted the Academy Awards and postponed them for an evening. De Niro, nominated for an Oscar in 1976 for his performance in *Taxi Driver*, had been nominated again five years later. He had planned to absent himself from the 1981 ceremonies, but he appeared the night following the attempted assassination, accepted an award for his performance in *Raging Bull*, and told the audience that *he* loved everybody. De Niro was testifying that he was not really the character he and Hinckley had played.²

In spite of De Niro's attempt to distance himself from his *Taxi Driver* role, Hinckley's act reinforced the president's interpretation of the power of film. Millions of Americans experienced the assassination attempt by watching it over and over again on television. The power of the film image confirmed the shooting; it also allowed Reagan to speak to the academy the next night as if the shooting had never happened. The television audience watching a screen saw a Hollywood audience watch another screen. One audience saw the other applaud a taped image of a healthy Reagan, while the real president lay in a hospital bed. Reagan was president because of film, hospitalized because of film, and present as an undamaged image because of film. The shooting climaxed film's ingestion of reality. In so doing, it climaxed, in an uncanny way, Reagan's personal project: the creation of a disembodied self that, by rising above real inner conflicts, would reflect back to the president and all the rest of us not only how he looked and sounded but—more important—how he felt and who he was.

At the same time that the assassination attempt dissolved the boundaries between film and real life, it allowed Reagan to exploit another boundary confusion. "I have come to speak to you tonight about our economic recovery program," the president told a joint session of Congress several weeks after he was shot. But first he digressed "for a moment" to thank the millions of Americans who had offered him their "expression of friendship and, yes, love" after the assassination attempt. "Now let's talk about getting spending and inflation under control and cutting your tax rates," Reagan continued. "Thanks to some very fine people, my health is much improved. I'd like to be able to say that with regard to the health of the economy." The president was identifying the recovery of his mortal body with the health of the body politic, his own convalescence with his program to restore health to the nation. Reagan was presenting himself as the healer, laying his hands on the sick social

body. He was employing a very old symbolism, one that merges the body of a political leader and the body of his realm.³

The doctrine of the king's two bodies, as we shall see in chapter 3, developed in the sixteenth century to address the relationship between a ruler's mortal body and his body politic. That doctrine, which marked a shift in the locus of sacred power from the church to the state, derived from the two bodies of Christ. Theologically, the death of Christ's mortal body created a mystic body, the regenerate Christian community. Sixteenth-century political leaders sought, like divine kings, to reabsorb that mystic community into their own personal bodies. American presidents and their publics have also identified the president's welfare with the health of the body politic and have attributed magical, healing power to the presidential touch.⁴ But during Reagan's lifetime the locus of sacred value shifted from the church not to the state but to Hollywood. Reagan was born again to embody America through his sacrifice and rebirth on the screen.

It was D. W. Griffith who made Reagan possible as a presence who feels real to himself and his audience because he is seen. As I shall argue in chapter 7, Griffith wanted to collapse the world into film. He—and the mass culture he founded—shifted the locus of the real in America from mythicized history to image by crystallizing demonological images and placing them on film. But Griffith's project was the inverse of the one in Reagan's Hollywood. Griffith saw film as a visionary alternative to the mundane. He was possessed by the newness of film technique, by his own inventive power, and then, in the 1920s, by the artificiality of his movies. Griffith called attention to the filmmaker and his instruments, to the camera eye and the film cut. By contrast, in Kevin Brownlow's words, "the Hollywood aim was to perfect technique and thus render it imperceptible." The Hollywood movie in its classic years—the late 1930s through the 1950s, the years of Reagan's Hollywood career—blended the storyteller with the narrative and disguised the artfulness of film cuts. Dialogue and the moving camera made movies seem mimetic of quotidian reality. Hiding technique naturalized the fantasy nature of film content. For both filmgoers and participants in the making of films, reality lay neither in the process by which the movie was constructed nor in the outtakes on the cutting room floor, but rather in the final cut that eliminated all those shots, scenes, and versions of the plot where something had gone wrong.⁵

Early cinema, whether in Eisenstein's social or in German expres-

sionism's psychological mode (Griffith fathered them both), opened up an interiorized world. Hollywood naturalism, in which depth of focus gave the illusion of ordinary three-dimensionality, kept viewers on the surface of the image. The audience knew it was at a motion picture theater but was not led to ask whether what it was seeing was real.

The classic Hollywood movie was overdone and improbable and, at the same time, continuous with ordinary life. Michael Wood has suggested that such films, with their overblown lines of dialogue and their references to one another, constituted a larger-than-life world of their own. Hollywood did not relax mundane constraints to obliterate daily life, however, but to allow its daydreams to take over. The stories and the methods of these movies broke down the barriers between fantasy and reality, heroes and ordinary people. Classic Hollywood films put realism in the service of fantasy, as if movies were mirroring the mundane. They encouraged confusion between "day-dreams," as Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites call these films, and daily life. For many people, movies functioned as arenas for role playing, and they were the place where the role player who was to become president of the United States discovered his identity.⁶

Griffith had contrasted the masses who worshiped stars to the thinking classes who preferred the artistic standard imposed by a great director. He prophesied the director-artist as the hero of the future, but he was wrong.⁷ The mass viewer would take as hero his or her ideal self, bigger than life, reflected in the star. And an actor who never reached the pinnacle of Hollywood stardom would use his confusion between "day-dreams" and reality to mediate between the mass public and the image of the ideal.

"It has taken me many years to get used to seeing myself as others see me," Reagan writes in his autobiography. "Very few of us ever see ourselves except as we look directly at ourselves in a mirror. Thus we don't know how we look from behind, from the side, walking, standing, moving normally through a room. It's quite a jolt." But the actor, says Reagan, learns to see himself from the outside in as others see him, not from the inside out. He gives up the "mental picture" of the character he plays as separate from himself and becomes at once the viewer of the object and the object seen.⁸

A mirror requires both a referent and its reflection; it is dependent on outside standards to supply a reality check. Movies have frequently used a mirror image to create a double of the self, a split of the ideal self from its dark reflection. But the screen also takes the place of a

mirror. It obliterates the referent: a self who sees himself from all angles fragments and disappears into his image. Self-sufficient, the screen dispenses both with external history and with the historically formed human interior (for which the mirror reflection was often a symbol). When the camera brought Reagan's self inside the screen, to exist as an observed outside, it shattered the distinction between inside and outside to produce "quite a jolt."

"There are not two Ronald Reagans," Nancy Reagan assures us. In her words, "There is a certain cynicism in politics. You look in back of a statement for what the man really means. But it takes people a while to realize that with Ronnie you don't have to look in back of anything." She is describing a man whose most spontaneous moments—"Where do we find such men?" about the American D-day dead; "I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green," during the 1980 New Hampshire primary debate—are not only preserved and projected on film but also turn out to be lines from old movies. The president knows, in the words of a member of his staff, that "all of us are deeply affected by a uniquely American art form: the movies." Responding to the charge that Reagan confuses the world depicted in movies with the world outside it, the presidential aide explained that cinema heightens reality instead of lessening it. Unwilling to acknowledge the conflation of movies and reality as a uniquely American contribution, the aide insisted that the president knew the difference between cinema and reality because he normally credited the lines he used.¹⁰

Reagan has, to be sure, deliberately quoted movie lines to make himself the hero of American cultural myths. "Go ahead. Make my day," the president told Congress, promising to veto a tax increase. He was repeating Clint Eastwood's dare in *Sudden Impact* that a hoodlum murder a woman hostage to free Eastwood to shoot the criminal. "Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night," the president said in July 1985 after the thirty-nine hostages held in Lebanon had been released. "Now I know what to do the next time this happens." At other times, however, Reagan has not only hidden from his audience the filmic origins of his words to create the appearance of spontaneity but concealed those origins from himself as well. CBS's "Sixty Minutes" has traced the process by which Reagan first credited the line "Where do we find such men?" to the movie admiral in *Bridges at Toko-Ri*, then assigned that line to a real admiral, and finally quoted it as if he had thought of it himself. The president has inadvertently called his dog "Lassie" in front of reporters. He has told a mass audience about the captain of a bomber who chose

to go down with his plane rather than abandon a wounded crew member—"Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumous," concluded Reagan with tears in his eyes—only to have it revealed by a sailor who had seen the film aboard a World War II aircraft carrier that the episode was taken from Dana Andrews's *A Wing and a Prayer*. Reagan knew the Holocaust had happened, he told a gathering of survivors, because he had seen films of the camps. If there are not two Ronald Reagans, we owe his integration to film.¹¹

Like earlier countersubversives, Reagan has divided the world between the forces of good and an empire of evil and traced all troubles at home and abroad to a conspiratorial center. Unlike them, however, he seems neither internally driven nor possessed. As many commentators have noted, he combines political punitiveness with personal charm, right-wing principle, and political salesmanship. Speaking like a radio announcer or talk show host (Reagan has been both), he presents political events of his own making as if he were somehow not responsible for them. He represents valued qualities rather than acting on them. Reagan suggests not the producer self who makes things happen but the celebrity who shows them off.¹²

Robert Dallek has explained the disjunction between the form and content of Reagan's politics by invoking the shift in the course of the twentieth century from idols of production to idols of consumption. The hero of production was a hard-working figure, admired for his achievements. The idol of consumption is a celebrity; his (or her) appeal comes from looks, not action. The idol of production made durable goods. The idol of consumption is a salesman or the object he sells. The former idol, like Reagan's rhetoric, acted on the supply side. The latter, like Reagan's tax cut, stimulates demand. The one flourishes in a manufacturing economy, the other in an economy based on service and information. Ordinary Americans can identify with the idol of consumption because he does not exercise authority over them or (like the traditional captain of industry) over employees at the workplace.¹³

The idol of production rose on his merits; the idol of consumption rises through good fortune, from being in the right place at the right time. "A miracle happened," Reagan has said of his first success in broadcasting; it could have happened to anyone. The idol of consumption is the chosen not the chooser, the product not the producer. He inhabits "a world of dependency," writes Leo Lowenthal in his classic study of the heroes of popular biography, "in which the average man is never alone and never wants to be alone." The president who urges a

return to a time before Americans were “robbed of their independence” plays on the values of production but does not live them, for he was formed as an idol of consumption.¹⁴

The idol of production was inner-directed, aggressive, and driven. He valued character, possessing a self-controlled ego that was divided between duty and desire, a superego, and an id. The celebrity displays personality. He pleases others; intimate before the mass audience, he plays at privacy in public. Neither a repressed interior nor an intractable reality exercise claims over the celebrity, for he exists in the eye of the beholder. Since he replaces reality by fantasy, his pleasure and reality principles do not collide. Freed from the reproaches of either the conscience or the unconscious, he gains a reassuring serenity.

But the model of production and consumption is ambiguous. On the one hand, it contrasts superficial appearance with deeper source, a procedure endorsed by my concern with the production of *Ronald Reagan*. From that perspective the consumption idol is a fetish that can be demystified when we examine the process that produced it. On the other hand, the opposition of production to consumption implies a historical displacement of the former by the latter, so that distinctions between the way something looks and the way it really is are increasingly difficult to draw. From that perspective value is created not by work in production but by desire in exchange. The oppositions that traditionally organized both social life and social critique—oppositions between surface and depth, the authentic and the inauthentic, the imaginary and the real, signifier and signified—seem to have broken down. The dispersal of the subject in space, as Fredric Jameson has put it, replaces the alienation of the subject in time, and nostalgia for imitating historical surfaces replaces concern with the actual character of private and public history. From this point of view, Reagan’s easy slippage between movies and reality is synecdochic for a political culture increasingly impervious to distinctions between fiction and history.¹⁵

Ronald Reagan has a synchronic presence whose power is not reducible to its origins, but it has a history as well. Since people are not images, neither Reagan nor any other human being comes into the world as a pure idol of consumption. The category represents an ideal type, an aspiration. Consumption idols respond in part to economic and social imperatives. But they also mark the convergence of the personal and the political, which came together for this president on the movie screen.

The desire to have one’s identity scripted on film is not unmotivated.

In this instance, movies allowed Reagan to disown aggression and to enact it at the same time. Called to violence in his films, Reagan acted out movie violence in offhand and derealized forms. His roles taught the actor how to insulate himself from experiencing aggression as his own. He played characters who buried anger in wisecracks, suffered from external attack, and employed violence in self-defense. The actor was directed to show the emotional effects of violence only when he was its victim. Otherwise, watching himself play one of the boys on-screen, Reagan observed a figure with no distinctive, individuating, inward-pointing signs. Buried, disturbing feelings—if there were any—dissolved in the reassurance that *Ronald Reagan* was like everyone else.

Reagan's detachment marks an important departure in the history of American countersubversion. Puritans deliberately twinned themselves with their Indian enemies, for savages were signs of their own fallen natures. War not only punished Indians; it also exorcised the devils within.¹⁶ Subsequent countersubversives—*The Birth of a Nation* and cold war movies will be among our texts—denied the identity between themselves and their shadow sides. Nevertheless, the frenzied doubling in such documents revealed the connections that ideology tried to hide. The monster-hunter repressed his attachment to his prey. The repressed bond resurfaced in countersubversive hysteria. Repressive politics in these classic forms of countersubversion invited the analyst to psychoanalyze repression.

But Reagan's affability, by insulating him from the subversive, seems to exclude the investigator as well. He seems not to register, even in a return of the repressed, the consequences of his wishes and politics. When Governor Reagan refused to visit a mental hospital to see the effects of his cuts in state aid, a psychiatrist suggested that he was under strain. "If I get on that couch, it will be to take a nap," Reagan responded.¹⁷ He seems to have fulfilled Freud's lament (a lament that *The Birth of a Nation* should have dispelled until now) that Americans have no unconscious.

When *The Birth of a Nation* was shown during the 1920s Klan revival, Reagan's father would not let him see it. As a Catholic Jack Reagan was a target of the revived Klan, and he also condemned the racism shown on the screen. Reagan recalled, "In our household my father simply announced that no member of our family could see that picture because it was based on the Ku Klux Klan. And to this day I have never seen that great motion picture classic."¹⁸ The reminiscence praises both

his father's humanitarianism and the racist film Reagan has not had to see.

The difference between making *The Birth of a Nation* and shutting it out marks the shift from racial domination to avoidance. As Joel Kovel has written, "The dominative racist, when threatened by the black, resorts to direct violence; the aversive racist, in the same situation turns away and walls himself off." Asked at the Great Wall of China if he would like a great wall of his own, President Reagan responded, "Around the White House." The joke (and the wall it portended, with antitank barricades, ground-to-air missiles, and American flags) points beyond the president's desire for physical safety to his wish for insulation. Traditional countersubversives consciously or unconsciously doubled their political demons. Reagan aspires to a self in which, to recall Nancy Reagan's words, there would not be two Ronald Reagans, since the disowned, subversive part would have been lopped off. That wish for an amputated self was granted in Hollywood.¹⁹

II

An uncanny slippage between life and film marked Ronald Reagan's entry into the movies. Other aspiring stars were rebaptized in Hollywood, receiving stage names to replace their own. Reagan had been baptized Ronald, his mother's choice, but he was always called by the nickname his father gave him, Dutch. Dutch Reagan came to Hollywood and proposed Ronald Reagan as his stage name. "Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan," repeated the head man, and the others around the table said it after him. "I like it," the boss decided, and gave Ronald Reagan back his own name. That Hollywood ceremony freed Reagan from the name of his father and restored his mother's desire. "That's my boy," Reagan's mother cried when she saw him in his first movie, *Love Is on the Air* (1937). "That's the way he is at home. He's no Robert Taylor. He's just himself." Reagan was playing the role he had left behind to come to Hollywood, that of a popular sports announcer (cf. Figs. 1.2 and 1.3). His real radio station had fired him under sponsor pressure and then rehired him; his movie station followed suit. In life, the sports reporter Reagan invented play-by-play baseball games from minimal, ticker-tape reports. He made up the sports events for his listeners. Movie audiences could confirm Reagan's filmed on-the-spot reporting because they watched the staged sports events along with him.²⁰

Reagan met Jane Wyman on the set of another of his early movies, *Brother Rat* (1938). He dated her in the movie, married her in life, the studio cast them as husband and wife in *An Angel from Texas* (1940), and Warner Brothers and Louella Parsons publicized their romance and happy marriage (cf. Figs. 1.4 and 1.5). "The Reagans' home life is probably just like yours, or yours, or yours," the studio quoted Reagan as saying. "Mr. Norm is my alias," the actor wrote in a 1940s movie magazine, presenting himself as the average American. On camera even when he was offscreen, Reagan seemed to have nothing to hide, no self tucked away from public inspection. Asked what the electorate saw in him on the eve of his 1980 victory, Reagan replied, "I think maybe they see themselves and that I'm one of them."²¹

But, as he hinted in his allusion to "Mr. Norm" as his "alias," Reagan's seamless merging of life and the movies in his first Hollywood years shut out an unacknowledged part of his past. The easy slippage between life and his early films meant, in William James's terminology, that in Hollywood Reagan was only once-born. James's once-born, healthy-minded individual has a happy consciousness. He turns into a divided self, torn between an ideal image and a dark, aggressive side, when he uncovers the loathsomeness within him and the destruction in the world. Reagan suffered death and violence, as we shall see, in his crucial, transformative movies; his film experience paralleled but did not duplicate the Jamesian evolution from a once-born character to a divided self. By keeping his sense of evil doubly removed from his sense of self—removed to the screen and removed from his roles on the screen—Reagan acquired an amputated self rather than a divided one. James's divided, sick soul is born again by recognizing that evil is not paralyzing and all-pervasive and by struggling against sin in the world.²² Reagan parodied that rebirth by imposing screen fantasies on the world in his battle with Hollywood Communism. We turn now where the president has invited us and trace his self-division and reunification through his roles on the screen.

Murder in the Air anticipates the persona and worldview of the president. It is a long way, nonetheless, from the 1940s to the 1980s, from a B movie actor to the president of the United States. Even as *Murder in the Air* seems to collapse that distance, it exposes it. Ronald Reagan as Brass Bancroft is too brash, too aggressive, too hard-edged. He does not convey reassurance, and he is not a convincing actor. Distorted facial expressions and wooden gestures mar Reagan's performance in *Love Is on the Air*. He is less awkward in *Murder in the Air*, but even

though he approaches a naturalistic performance, his cockiness is still exaggerated. Nothing seems to touch him. The shift from the air of radio to that of planes, the shift from love to war, was not sufficient to turn the actor into commander-in-chief. To acquire presidential stature, Reagan had to combine independence and dependence, power and loss, aggression and receptivity. He could not simply do damage to others; he had to appear to have damage done to him. As the hero he played opposite in *The Hasty Heart* (1950) would put it, he "had to be hurt to learn." He had to learn to be seen not simply as the man who sent American boys to die in Lebanon but, like the image in the film clip shown at the 1984 Republican convention, as the mourner identified with those boys, who stands beside their coffins.

Reagan's persona as a B movie crime fighter climaxed in a World War II film, *Desperate Journey* (1942). The movie perfectly exemplifies Béla Balázs's characterization of American World War II films "in which the bloodiest catastrophe in world history is portrayed like an amusing raw-humored manly adventure."²³ Although Reagan, as Johnny Hammond, is trapped behind enemy lines for most of the movie, the war has no internal impact on him. Reagan and the other members of his bombing crew, shot down over eastern Germany, perform miraculous acts of sabotage and escape as they work their way west. Although some crew members are killed, the characters portrayed by Reagan, Erroll Flynn, and Arthur Kennedy remain unharmed. In the climactic scene of mass destruction they steal a German plane, and Reagan, swiveling a machine gun in the bubble of the nose, mows down row after row of Germans as they rush to stop the aircraft from taking off. The slaughter is at once horrifying and painless, because the Germans have been portrayed as buffoons throughout the film. No one really gets hurt in *Desperate Journey*, since by not taking war seriously, the film turns war into a movie.

But even when the rugged individualists that Reagan played in such films were organization men, they were not protective, reassuring figures. Although Brass Bancroft is knocked out and left to drown during his adventures, both he and Johnny Hammond remain emotionally untouched by what they have been through. Since they communicate so little feeling, the viewer does not feel cared for by them. For Reagan to gain presidential stature, he had to acquire a falsely vulnerable objectified self to stand in for the self missing in action. To become a successful idol of consumption, he had to move beyond the rugged individualist American past with which he wished to be identified. He did so by reconnecting through his film roles to the dependence in his personal

history in order, finally, to find a substitute for that dependence and play at freedom.

Warner Brothers was quick to spot the dependent side of Ronald Reagan. The studio allowed him to win in B movies, but it made him lose in the feature. Reagan was Bette Davis's playboy boyfriend in *Dark Victory* (1939) (Fig. 1.6). He is mostly drunk on-screen and is never seen without a glass in his hand. Davis is aggressive, Reagan is passive. She begins the movie as his girl and turns to him again in her refusal to face both her imminent death and her love for the fatherly doctor who operated (unsuccessfully) on her. Davis is a wired, cigarette-smoking projectile, a spoiled, independent young woman. Her destiny is to turn into a good girl-wife and to die. Although the film is all too clear about what it wants from women, Reagan is not the beneficiary. Glass in hand, he relinquishes Davis to George Brent (Dr. Steele). Reagan hated playing that scene and refused to do so in the effeminate manner called for by the director.²⁴ But although his performance is stilted, Reagan's character is not unsympathetic. *Dark Victory* foreshadowed a future in which Reagan could acquire heroic stature not simply by playing a tough guy but by first enacting and then shedding his playboy persona.

Worried that he would be stuck in B movies, Reagan introduced Warner Brothers to the idea of a film about Knute Rockne. Reagan had played football all through his youth; he got his first radio job, he reports, by simulating the end of a game his college had won in the last twenty seconds by using "the old Rockne special." Reagan missed his block in the actual game, as he tells the story, and made it in the radio reconstruction. By pointing to the difference between real game failure and fictional success, the movie actor invoked the daydream in which the ordinary man replays events in his own life to turn failure into success. Reagan was a hero not on the real football field, but first in the radio and then in the Hollywood reenactments.²⁵

Reagan had been a real football player, to be sure, but for the movie of Knute Rockne he aspired higher than his college position on the line. He suggested Pat O'Brien for Rockne and himself for the legendary Notre Dame halfback, George Gipp. The studio cast O'Brien willingly but did not think Reagan looked like a football player. He only got the part, with O'Brien's help, after ten other actors failed screen tests and after he showed the studio pictures of himself in his college football uniform. A journeyman actor like Reagan normally had little to say

about his parts, but Reagan initiated *Knute Rockne* because he wanted to play the Gipper. It is his favorite role, and the president invokes it again and again.²⁶

The part of the Gipper is a small one; Reagan is on-screen for barely fifteen minutes. "I would give my right arm for a halfback who could run, pass, and kick," says Rockne, and he trips over the Gipper's feet. Reagan plays a rangy, good-looking, wisecracking young man who scores a touchdown on his first run from scrimmage and makes long gains rushing or passing in game after game. But the football star is an enigma. "I don't like people to get too close to me" on the field or off, he tells Rockne's wife. That admission comes in a moment of self-revelation when, in Rockne's absence and with his wife as mediator, the father-son love between the coach and his star is declared. As if the insulated, male, American hero cannot survive that self-revelation, the Gipper immediately gets a sore throat, Rockne sends him to the hospital, and he dies of viral pneumonia.

But the Gipper lives on—as every American now knows—an inspiration for Notre Dame and the country. Stricken by phlebitis years after Gipp's death, Rockne also faces defeatism on his team. He is wheeled to the annual Army–Notre Dame game in a wheelchair; at halftime, with his players beaten and behind, Rockne repeats the Gipper's dying words. "Someday when the team is in trouble," Gipp had told Rockne, "tell them to win one for the Gipper." The inspired team members leap up and rush onto the field. "That's for you, Gipp!" says the player who scores the first of the many touchdowns that bring victory to Notre Dame.

At the 1981 Notre Dame commencement, in his first public appearance after he was shot, President Reagan insisted that the movie line "Win one for the Gipper!" not be spoken "in a humorous vein." "Do it for the Gipper," Reagan told the U.S. Olympic athletes in the summer of 1984. "Win those races for the Gipper!" was how Reagan urged crowds to vote the straight Republican ticket during the fall campaign. But the Gipper (as played by Reagan) was dead when those words were spoken in the movie. If you elect Republicans, Reagan told the crowds, "Wherever I am, I'll know about it, and it'll make me happy." The president spoke as if, playing the Gipper, he was witness to his own death and ascension.²⁷

After his defeat at the 1976 Republican convention, Reagan quoted lines he'd memorized as a child: "Lay me down and bleed a while.