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Hollywood, 1939

In the movie colony, as in the content of the movies themselves, romantic individualism, the most compelling idea in American history, has reached the apogee of its glory.

—Leo Rosten, *Hollywood:
The Movie Colony,
The Movie Makers*, 1941

Hollywood, 1939: This was the mythic Hollywood of the golden age of American film. It was the legendary world of stars like Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh alighting from silvery limousines, bathed in the luminescence of sky-sweeping searchlights and a thousand flashbulbs, to attend the première of Selznick's *Gone With the Wind*, the movie probably seen by more people than any other in American history. It was an age when movie stars were a kind of American royalty; when the movie capital lured the best talent in all fields; when moguls like Mayer, Zanuck, Harry Cohn, the Schencks, and the Warners ruled their domains like private fiefdoms, when Hollywood was the end of the rainbow for legions of star-struck fans. Each week eighty million Americans—two-thirds of the country's population—lived the Hollywood experience vicariously as they trooped to their neighborhood movie houses for the combination of a newsreel, a short, perhaps a cartoon, and then the feature, which more often than not unveiled a fantasy world of adventure, romance, luxury, and success that relieved some of the depression-era grimness of Flatbush Avenue and Grocers Corners. But Hollywood was more than an American craze—it was an interna-

tional obsession. The movie capital's pictures occupied 80 percent of the world's screen time in the 1930s, and tabloids and photomagazines from Paris to Peking, from Rome to Rio, lavished attention on tinsel town.

Hollywood—the very name was a symbol, a term of art. Ironically the movie industry became known by that shorthand term just as Hollywood proper itself ceased to exist. The crossroads of the movie colony was formed in a sense by the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street, on the escarpment rising from the flat expanse of downtown Los Angeles to the Hollywood Hills. Grauman's Chinese Theater, one of the classic movie palaces which in the 1920s created a foreign fantasy-setting for its patrons, stood just to the west. Around the corner were the famous film trade restaurants—the Brown Derby and Musso and Frank's. Several companies made pictures in the Hollywood district. But the movie colony was more amorphous than this crossroads would suggest. The dominant studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, was located ten miles or so to the southwest in the nondescript suburb of Culver City; Universal clung to the flank of Cahuenga Pass, on the opposite side of the Hollywood Hills; Warner Brothers' facilities rambled across the declass  San Fernando Valley, long before Laugh-In made "beautiful downtown Burbank" a national joke or Moon Zappa's "Valley Girls" immortalized that expanse of suburban sprawl. The stars and moguls hid their homes in the canyons of Bel Air and Beverly Hills or sought sea solace in Santa Monica and Malibu. Hollywood, scarcely even a geographical expression, was, as countless observers put it, a state of mind.

The movie colony lent itself to hyperbole, but still more to the language of paradox. The central paradox, said the leading film critic Manny Farber, was that the American movie industry represented a unique combination of art and business. At its best the American movie industry produced masterpieces of popular culture as well as some unqualified artistic triumphs. But among the 500 or so pictures released annually in the 1930s and 40s there were many "dogs"—unbearable B features that paid the overhead and little more. Movies reflected American society in a way, but the mirror that the movies held up to America displayed an image that was distorted and refracted by myr-

ial forces, not least of them the profit motive. “You’re only as good as your last picture” went the old Hollywood axiom—and “good” meant how well your picture did at the box office.

This tension stemmed from the very origins of the industry in America. Many of the other art forms developed among the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie and then either remained the province of an elite or were also adopted by the masses. By contrast, movies are “the democratic art,” said film historian Garth Jowett. They were born among the working class, especially the waves of immigrants who flooded America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Appealing to a wide spectrum of non-affluent patrons, the early films borrowed heavily from the techniques of the music hall and vaudeville—they had simple, stereotyped, often melodramatic plots, slapstick, and broad humor. They were adept at the “visceral cliché.” They relied on the medium’s inherent propensity to show action: speeding trains, automobile chases, and feats of derring-do were the stock in trade of the early movies. It was movement that excited poet Vachel Lindsay in his pioneering analysis of the motion picture.¹

European film makers retained some of the distinctions between high and low culture. Hollywood admired the art films of European directors, for they advanced the medium. German director Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) earned accolades in the movie capital, and he was lured to Hollywood. But Irving Thalberg, MGM’s boy genius, said the studio would not have allowed Lang to make *M*. Although studios for reasons of prestige sometimes made films they did not expect to turn a profit, there was a persistent tension between the demands of art and the bottom line. American film makers kept at least three audiences in mind as they made their pictures: a fickle mass audience, the box office, and their own peers, whose approbation they sought. Government propaganda officials represented yet another audience, whose goals potentially were at odds with those of the other audiences.

Even as American producers broadened their appeal to tap a middle-class clientele, they kept a mass audience in mind. Indeed, the fantasyland movie palaces of the 1920s and 30s assembled audiences that were perhaps as diverse in class and status as any type of gathering. The very diversity of the movies’

audience reinforced the studios' tendency to produce homogeneous products; they strove to avoid giving offense to any powerful group.

Most of the early film makers were American Protestants, and their production facilities were located in the East and Midwest. From the early 1910s to early 1920s a geographic, economic, and ethnic shift was underway that created the Hollywood of the golden age. Within a few years the industry expanded and reorganized, and the "Big Eight" companies came to dominate the industry, these dominant corporations created a vertically-integrated industry—in this case, they controlled the entire process from casting and production through distribution (wholesaling) and exhibition (retailing). The Big Eight reaped 95 percent of all motion picture rentals in the U.S. in the late 1930s. Their control over theater chains, particularly the all-important first-run urban houses which determined a picture's future, was critical. Although the Big Eight owned only 2,800 of the 17,000 theaters in the country, that figure included 80 percent of the metropolitan first-run houses, and all exhibition in cities of more than 1,000,000 population. The eight firms' investment in theater real estate far exceeded their investment in film production. Indeed, what drove the industry was the need to turn out a large number of pictures to meet the nearly insatiable demands of their theaters. Independent exhibitors had to book the majors' pictures on a virtual take-it-or-leave-it basis, and independent producers could be frozen out if they did not cooperate with the majors. The movies, once a marginal activity, had become big business. The "democratic art" issued from a corporate structure.²

The men who guided the industry in its transition to big business were mostly Jewish theater owners, who were uniquely suited to the task. The playwright and screenwriter Ben Hecht once observed that Hollywood constituted "a Semitic renaissance sans rabbis and Talmud." As landless tradesmen in eastern and central Europe, Jews developed extraordinary skill at satisfying the dominant society's consumer tastes. In immigrant America they perfected these talents in such activities as ready-to-wear and entertainment. The young Adolph Zukor, who built Paramount, sold furs. Samuel Goldwyn, of MGM and later an independent producer, made gloves. Carl Laemmle, the man

behind Universal, got the stake for his first nickelodeon by selling clothing in Oshkosh. Louis B. Mayer, who reigned as the most powerful man in the movies in the 1930s and 40s, ran a burlesque house. "Critically important in all these skills," historian Lary May has pointed out, "was the ability to suspend one's own tastes and calculate the desires of others." Laemmle compared merchandising pictures to his experience as a haberdasher. "The public is never wrong," said Goldwyn in an oft-quoted statement. To hone his sense of what the public wanted, he would sit with his back to the screen, watching the audience's reaction to the show.³

As the industry was reorganized, its new captains shifted most of its production from the East and Midwest to greater Los Angeles. The region's juxtaposition of sea, mountains, and deserts, bathed in perpetual sunshine, afforded an ideal location for movie making. A less savory reason for the transcontinental trek was the city's strongly anti-union posture. Wage costs were perhaps only half those of New York, and the absence of unions gave the moguls a free hand until some bitter disputes in the 1930s culminated in union recognition in Hollywood.

Moreover, Los Angeles embodied the very symbolic life that the movies came to project. The area combined two powerful romantic elements—the frontier West and the Spanish borderlands. Whatever the facts of the matter, the frontier had long symbolized freedom, a chance to escape the grip of society and hierarchy and to create a new individualistic future. Is it any wonder that outsiders such as the movie moguls saw Southern California as a land of promise for them and their new industry? Numerous studio executives testified that in making the journey across the country they felt as if they were reliving the national epic. In Southern California they appropriated the Spanish hacienda tradition, which gave these nouveaux riche a patina of Old World culture and graciousness. Spanish motifs became a signature for Hollywood. Universal created its studio in the Spanish revival style; one entered Paramount's lot through a gigantic Spanish gate; and the movies themselves frequently invoked Iberian-cum-California motifs. The liberation from the drab, factory-like studios of Biograph in the Bronx or Vitagraph in Brooklyn was complete.⁴

Los Angeles was itself a colossal improvisation—the most

improbable metropolis in the United States, according to its early historian Carey McWilliams.⁵ Much as one created an artificial environment for a movie, Los Angeles boosters fashioned a new form of urban space through the technological manipulation of nature. The parched city lacked the very basis of life: water. Its lifeline was a 233-mile aqueduct that poured water that had been almost literally stolen from a ranching community behind the Sierras. (That water heist figured, appropriately enough, in a Hollywood picture: Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* [1974]). With imported water and alien shrubbery Los Angeles created an artificial humid environment in the desert, much as the movies conjured up their own worlds of illusion. As in most boom towns, life was fluid. Los Angeles was a city of infinite beginnings. The area thrived on the promise of the future, whether it was new technologies, such as aircraft, new patterns of consumption, or the ubiquitous speculation in real estate. As harbingers of the mass leisure industry of the twentieth century, the movies fit in Los Angeles, both creating and legitimating a blend of conspicuous consumption, new morals, and personal gratification that helped undermine the Eastern-dominated, WASP Victorian culture.

Yet the movie makers paid a price for being ensconced in lotus land. Los Angeles was the most isolated of America's major metropolises. America was not yet a bicoastal country. In 1939 New York was a costly, two-and-a-half days away on the crack streamliners of the stars, the *Super Chief* and *Twentieth Century Limited*. The fastest letter—air mail special delivery—took two days from coast to coast. The intellectual and political life of the country was still disproportionately centered in the East and Midwest; Hollywood's ties to that life were accordingly attenuated. Geographical isolation compounded the movie industry's self-absorption. In the relative absence of the cultural attractions of other major cities, movies became the focus of aesthetic life. After a day on the set, an evening's entertainment at home or on the town would probably be a movie. The allure of Southern California for European émigrés—they numbered such eminences as Thomas Mann, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg—increased the area's cosmopolitan flavor in the late 1930s. Nonetheless contemporary observers often remarked on the insularity of movie personnel. When the world

tensely watched the Ethiopian crisis of 1935, a studio mogul was asked if he had heard any late news. He responded with agitation: "Italy just banned *Marie Antoinette*!"⁶

As local geography was transformed, so too did Hollywood effect magical personal transfigurations. Movie stars were demi-gods, but they were at the same time just like you and me, only luckier. Clark Gable had knocked about as an oil field worker; Ronald Reagan had been "Dutch" Reagan, Iowa sportscaster and lifeguard; Walt Disney had been just another Kansas City kid who liked to draw. All anyone needed to be discovered was a little luck. Hadn't unknowns been plucked from a fountain stool at Schwab's, the Hollywood drug store, and turned into stars? Personal deficiencies were no obstacle. Too short? You could be shot standing on a box, like Alan Ladd. Too tall? You could stand in a trench. Teeth crooked? They could be straightened and capped. No acting experience? You could be trained, even if, like postwar star Rock Hudson, a former truck driver, you needed thirty-eight takes to get through your first line. Even your name could be changed to fit your new identity. Not Constance Frances Marie Ockelman of Brooklyn but Veronica Lake ... ah!

Yet for the vast majority of those who acted on their urges to be in pictures, Hollywood was not the end of the rainbow but the end of the road. The town was littered with disappointed actors and actresses who lived hand-to-mouth existences as extras, grips, or fry cooks. Despite this the myth died hard, particularly in Depression America, when ability and hard work—the traditional Protestant virtues—seemed to count for so little.

Youth was at a premium, not only among the stars but in all sectors of the industry. The executives came to power at an early age. Irving Thalberg was recognized as one of the most creative figures in Hollywood before he was 30, and when he died at age 37 in 1936 the streamlined sleek office building at MGM was named in his honor. Fresh from Wahoo, Nebraska, Darryl F. Zanuck at 22 was writing scenarios for Rin Tin Tin (sometimes known as the dog who saved Warner Brothers); at 26 he was Warners' head producer; and at 30 he was running production at Twentieth Century-Fox. David O. Selznick was vice president in charge of production at RKO at 29; two years

later he became an MGM vice president and producer, and soon formed his own independent company. Hal B. Wallis became chief executive producer at Warners at 32. Hollywood began to age a bit in the 1930s as the heady growth years gave way to a depression-induced cautiousness. Men like Selznick, Wallis, and Zanuck remained towering figures in 1939. Though they were only in their 40s, they were veterans. When in 1941 Leo Rosten compiled his important sociological profile, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*, youth still dominated. Half the producers were under 45, as were two-thirds of the directors; 70 percent of the writers had yet to celebrate that birthday, and nearly a third were under 35. “The movie people—famous, pampered, rich—are very young to be so famous, so pampered, and so rich,” Rosten concluded.⁷

The youthfulness of the industry and its people reinforced anxieties about their acceptability in American society. In part this was the perennial fear of the nouveaux riche. But in the case of Hollywood it was exacerbated by the knowledge that anti-Semitism still thrived, and by the recurrent dread that the movies, for all their popularity, were somehow not quite respectable. In casting a Jewish officer in the World War II picture *Objective Burma*, Jack Warner demanded: “See that you get a good clean-cut American type for Jacobs.” The exaggerated salesmanship, the celebration of America, the insatiable need for ego reinforcement all betrayed a continuing quest for acceptance. As the industry aged, its titans sought reassurance in the trappings of aristocracy and old money that belied their real metier: American market culture. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of Monroe Stahr, the main character based on Thalberg in *The Last Tycoon*, “he cherished the parvenu’s passionate loyalty to an imaginary past.” In Selznick’s *A Star Is Born* (1937) the producer is a suave, aristocratic gentleman, played by Adolphe Menjou, clad in a dark three-piece suit with a gold watch chain draped across his vest. Always hearing footsteps behind them and worrying about adverse publicity, the industry executives of the 1930s tried to make their products as noncontroversial as possible.⁸

But whatever the lingering doubts about their position in American society, the movie makers had completed one of the classic transitions of the American dream. They embodied in a

particular temporal form the triumph of the Horatio Alger myth. As Leo Rosten put it: "In the movie colony, as in the content of the movies themselves, romantic individualism, the most compelling idea in American history, has reached the apogee of its glory." The movie makers celebrated their success in their pictures. The dominant theme of American movies in the golden age, said the critic Parker Tyler, was the "success story." The movie makers projected their success on the screen to a public that wanted to believe.⁹

Though Hollywood was still relatively young in 1939, it increasingly bore the marks of a mature industry. The studios were already heavily bureaucratized. The earlier free-wheeling, less structured organizations had disappeared. This phenomenon could be traced in part to the sheer growth of the industry. Most of the major firms were locked into a complex corporate structure of multiple subsidiaries that almost defied analysis. The king of the hill, Loew's Incorporated, controlled approximately 123 subsidiaries, among them its chief producing company, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The depression had hastened the trend to bureaucracy. Strapped for cash as box office receipts plummeted in the early 1930s—several firms went bankrupt or were reorganized—the motion picture companies became critically dependent on big banks for financing. That dependence reinforced bureaucratic caution.

Though its products were infinitely more glamorous, the movie industry was as tightly controlled and as rigidly hierarchical as coal, steel, or widget manufacturing. At the top were the all-powerful studio heads; and the arbitrary, almost despotic control they and their circles of sycophants exercised became a central theme of Hollywood memoirs and fiction. In her landmark study, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, the prominent anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker in 1950 compared the studios to plantation fiefdoms or feudal baronies, but with more waste and inefficiency. The moguls' personal tastes exerted a strong influence on the style of each studio. Zanuck liked blonde ingenues opposite dark-haired leading men. The brothers Warner favored sassy underdogs in slightly suspect settings. Most of the bosses had a good sense of what would play at the box office. Columbia's Harry Cohn judged a picture by whether he could sit comfortably or began to shift in his seat. "Just imagine," said

screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, “the whole world wired to Harry Cohn’s ass!” That very intuition about what the public would and would not sit through tended to ensure the repetition of proven formulas and to discourage innovation. Like chief executive officers in coal, steel, and widgets, movie moguls liked a business that was predictable.¹⁰

Movie executives were lavishly paid for their hunches. In 1940 five of the fifteen highest salaries in the country went to movie people. Atop the greasy pole was the quintessential mogul, Louis B. Mayer, whose princely \$1.3 million in salary and bonuses in 1937 probably surpassed the compensation paid to any other American executive. Hollywood paid out more in salaries than any other major industry, and the number of executives swelled through the 1930s, even though there was no increase in production.¹¹

This bloated hierarchy presided over a rigid production system. Movies were produced on exacting schedules, and woe be-tide the director who fell behind or came in over budget. When a movie was being shot the work day often stretched to ten or twelve hours. “Hollywood is the world’s first squirrel cage,” said Otis Ferguson, film critic for *The New Republic* in the 1930s. “To keep your nose above water, i.e., in the leisure class, you work like hell.” Producers viewed the daily “rushes”—the day’s finished footage—and peppered the director with suggestions for changes and with reprimands for lagging production. In this closely monitored system only approved ideas were disseminated.¹²

The studio system commanded an awesome array of talent. Even a partial listing of the stars would take pages, but consider the Oscar winners for best actor and best actress, 1930–40: Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Frederic March, Charles Laughton, Clark Gable, Victor McLaglen, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy (twice), Robert Donat, and James Stewart; Marie Dressler, Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, Bette Davis (twice), Luise Rainer (twice), Vivien Leigh, and Ginger Rogers. Directors like Frank Capra, John Ford, Orson Welles, William Wyler, Leo McCarey, Lewis Milestone, Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Curtiz, and Preston Sturges merely suggest the extent of talent. Master screenwriters such as Ben Hecht, Robert Riskin, Dudley Nichols, Dalton Trumbo, and Anita Loos were aug-

mented—not always with happy results—by such luminaries of serious literature as William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Sherwood, and Clifford Odets.

The writers, and to a perhaps lesser extent the directors, found themselves trapped in the conflicting demands of art and business. “A writer out here is a factory worker,” lamented John Balderston, one of the highest paid writers in Hollywood.¹³ The writer’s ideal of unfettered self-expression had to be laid aside in the movie colony. Writers had little control over their assignments or over what happened to their products. Screenplays were often the product of several writers; changes were often made by other writers or by higher-ups for commercial rather than artistic reasons; directors might shoot or cut a picture in ways that, from the author’s point of view, ruined it. Though the writers played a key role in the genesis of films, they had to rely on others to breathe life into their creations.

Screenwriters often chafed under these constraints. They sometimes felt that they had sold out their art, but found the sunshine, swimming pools, and high salaries irresistible (seventeen writers made more than \$75,000 each in 1938). The writers’ discomfiture was sometimes heightened by their politics. They were the most political, and most leftist, group in the movie capital. A small number of Hollywood figures were members of the Communist Party, and they were chiefly writers. Only a few of them were genuinely prominent craftsmen, however, and none fell into the charmed circle of those earning \$75,000 per year. Their politics remained a subject mostly for small study groups. During the war, however, the Office of War Information found these screenwriters receptive to its propaganda impulse, which helped nurture the controversy between OWI and the studio executives.¹⁴

These vast resources gave Hollywood a legendary power. Movie stars, in a consumerist democracy, had their comings-and-goings, manners, and mores charted like those of the French court pre-1789. The marriage in 1920 of “America’s sweetheart,” Mary Pickford, to the handsome, dashing Douglas Fairbanks, and their ensconcement in their fabled mansion Pickfair, seemed to star-struck millions a modern fulfillment of the Cinderella legend. Some 400 correspondents, including one for the Vatican, were posted in Hollywood in the late 1930s; only

New York and Washington, D.C., had more. A wink, a smile, a gesture from a Hollywood legend could be big news. When Clark Gable stripped off his shirt in *It Happened One Night* (1934) and revealed that he didn't wear an undershirt, sales of that intimate garment for men plummeted. Even in the midst of war, fans thirsted for news of their favorites; during the bombing of London the *London Mirror* wired its movie correspondent for two hundred words on Ann Sheridan's contract dispute with Warner Brothers. Veronica Lake's peek-a-boo hairdo had so many imitators among American women during the war that the government prevailed on her to change it because too many "riveting Rosies" were getting their dangling tresses caught in machinery.

Worry about the effect movies might have on public morals, particularly those of children, began even earlier, and was a recurrent concern. Social scientists made repeated attempts to measure the movies' influence. The extent of the concern triggered a multi-volume study underwritten by the Payne Fund in the early 1930s; its judicious findings were promptly used in an irresponsible potboiler as *Our Movie Made Children*. Later, historian Robert Sklar posited a *Movie-Made America* for the era of the 1920s to the 1950s. In 1965 the critic John Clellon Holmes argued that "the movies of the 1930s constitute, for my generation, nothing less than a kind of Jungian collective unconsciousness, a decade of coming attractions out of which some of the truths of our maturity have been formed."¹⁵

But however potent an influence Gable's bare chest or Lake's tresses might have on an imitative public, the more general effect of Hollywood on morals—or, in a still more problematic area, on the formation of political attitudes—was extremely difficult to gauge. A host of other influences, including home environment, the schools, and other media, needed to be weighed as well. As Robert Coles has demonstrated more recently, people of varying backgrounds find diverse messages in films, sometimes even reading them in ways quite contrary to the film makers' clear intentions.¹⁶ The safest conclusion seems to be that movies during Hollywood's golden age had a profound but hard to measure effect on assumptions about personal life and expectations from society; in specific areas such

as political attitudes and the like, however, the effects were murky indeed.

Nonetheless the presumed power of the movies made their content a hot issue from the earliest days of the nickelodeon. In an effort to control this medium, scores of cities and many states set up censorship boards early in this century to snip and chop scenes that might offend conservative ideas of morality, or that might threaten public order. The United States Supreme Court unanimously upheld state and municipal censorship of movies in 1915. The justices justified their opinion by citing films' possible danger to morals. The movies were declared to be a business "pure and simple" and hence not included under the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of expression.¹⁷

By all odds the most important censorship, however, was that which Hollywood itself undertook in 1934. Hard pressed by the depression, the studios released increasingly daring pictures. Claudette Colbert took a suggestive milk bath in *Cleopatra*; Hedy Lamar swam nude in a European import, *Ecstasy*; starlets in *Murder at the Vanities* extolled the virtues of "sweet marijuana." Equally disturbing to some people was the industry's perceived preference for themes dealing with social problems. In *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) Paul Muni graphically portrayed the evils of forced labor in Southern prisons. *Gabriel over the White House* (1933) flirted with a quasi-fascist dictatorship as a way of solving the depression. Gangster pictures brought the depiction of a breakdown of law and order to every neighborhood theater. From a later perspective, the exploits of Hedy Lamar and Paul Muni seem tepid to a generation reared on batteries of R and X-rated movies and accustomed to movies such as *The Killing Fields* which invade political territory. The violence that shocked viewers in the original version of *Scarface* pales before the self-indulgent violence of Al Pacino's remake of the movie. Nonetheless these trends in the movies generated increasingly vociferous protests.

These trends also alarmed some industry insiders, notably William Harrison (Will) Hays, who headed the key industry trade group, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, better known as the Hays Office. As a cautious Hoosier Republican politician who had engineered Warren Hard-

ing's "back to normalcy" campaign, Hays preached that Hollywood purveyed only "pure entertainment." In other words, films were wholesome and avoided social and political issues. Hays and some alarmed movie executives feared that, unless the trend in pictures was curbed, the federal government would step in to censor the movies or break up the industry. In short, Hollywood had to clean up its own act or risk having the politicians do it, with perhaps disastrous consequences.¹⁸

Matters came to a head in 1934. An aroused Roman Catholic hierarchy launched a national movement to purify the polluted springs of Hollywood. The apostolic delegate to the United States, Cardinal Amletto Cicognani, charged the movies with conducting a daily "massacre of innocents." American bishops threatened a nationwide boycott by the faithful. Will Hays realized this was the most serious threat Hollywood had yet seen. It also presented him with an opportunity to curb the excesses that offended him personally and undermined the foundations of the industry.¹⁹

The solution was simple but far-reaching. In 1930 Hollywood had agreed to abide by a production code written by Daniel Lord, S.J., in consultation with Martin Quigley, a prominent Catholic layman who ran the trade paper *Motion Picture Herald*. But the studios had ignored the code. In mid-1934 the Catholic bishops made Hollywood a simple proposition: live up to the code and we will call off the boycott. Hays agreed and sold the idea to the industry executives. He upgraded the enforcement mechanism, the Production Code Administration (PCA), and at its head he placed a conservative Catholic journalist, Joseph Ignatius Breen. Films had to conform to his interpretation of the code to receive the PCA seal. Without that seal none of the Big Eight companies would handle a picture, effectively killing its market. From mid-1934 into the 1950s Breen's tough, narrow administration of the code sharply limited the subject matter Hollywood might undertake. After an early encounter with Breen, Warner's anguished Hal Wallis cried: "Hollywood might as well go into the milk business!"²⁰

Once the movies had gone through Breen's purification process, much of the froth and some of the cream had been removed. Despite Wallis's outburst, protests from inside Hollywood were rare. Breen's PCA brought order to the threatened

chaos of subject matter, much as trade associations in other industries made operations rational and predictable. The producers understood they needed an organization to keep them in line. As one put it in 1938: “Mr. Hays and Mr. Breen are efficient zoo attendants, in charge of the monkey house, and fully realize that upon the slightest provocation their charges are ready to make indecent gestures for any who offer more abundant peanuts.”²¹

The code, a blend of conservative Roman Catholic morality and bourgeois propriety, imposed sharp restrictions on the movies’ treatment of a wide range of subjects. Central to the code was its insistence that wrongdoing—admittedly a dramatic necessity—was to be shown as always being punished in the end, and that the sympathy of the audience should never lie with the wrongdoer. Exposure of flesh was sharply curtailed, as was the discussion of sexual matters. Men and women could not be shown in bed together, even if married. Abortion, homosexuality, and even birth control (which Breen considered “a paganistic-Protestant viewpoint”) could not be mentioned. Profanity was forbidden, as was a long list of popular slang terms. Religion always was to be treated respectfully. The code also had a conservative political effect, though this fact is less well known: it admonished movie makers to uphold established political and judicial institutions. Crime or corruption were shown as individual aberrations, not systemic problems. From time to time pictures were proposed that did not violate specific provisions of the code but which Breen and Hays considered risky for the industry. In such cases they invoked “industry policy” and pressured the studios to drop these projects. “Industry policy” was especially sensitive about films dealing with foreign countries, and proved to be a major hurdle as Hollywood was tempted to make pictures about the European crisis in the late 1930s.²²

The code in fact cut the industry off from a wide range of social and political issues that were freely debated nationally in all other media. Films dealing with social issues, though never eliminated entirely, dropped sharply after the PCA was given new teeth in mid-1934. Indeed, Breen locked up many of the films made in the early 1930s, and they were not seen again publicly until the 1960s. The studios tried now and then to cir-

cumvent the code, and Breen countenanced certain compromises and evasions. Despite the crackdown, there was no mistaking the continuing sexual allure in the movies. The code had its defenders, not only from among conservative moralists, but also from such liberals as writer-director Philip Dunne, who contended that the code encouraged subtlety instead of today's coarseness. In most literary and intellectual circles, however, the code was regularly denounced as the worst kind of censorship—that of “private bigots.” They especially condemned the Hays Office's restrictions concerning social and political subjects.²³

Always controversial, the messages in American movies took on new urgency as the world careened into war in 1939. The war was an irresistible subject for Hollywood, but it also threatened the comfortable and profitable assumptions of the code and the doctrine of “pure entertainment.” This was “total war,” as politicians and pundits endlessly intoned. As the nation geared for battle down to the most intimate details of daily life—how much cloth you could wear in your pants, how much gasoline you could burn on your Sunday drive, and how much bacon you could eat for breakfast—the movies became a prime instrument for public persuasion. The war brought the most sustained and intimate involvement yet seen in America between the government and a medium of mass culture as the Roosevelt administration applied pressure on Hollywood to make feature films that were propaganda vehicles. The conflict between the studios and the government, and the eventual cooperation between them, helped shape public opinion during and after the war. The relationship between government propagandists and a medium of mass culture brought into sharp focus crucial questions about how the public is mobilized for war and the control of a popular but corporate entertainment medium. Hollywood, 1939: the stage was set for a struggle in the world's dominant medium of popular culture over the conflicting demands of politics, profits, and propaganda.