

## *Introduction*

Ending the decade on an upbeat, Hollywood proclaimed 1939 “The Greatest Year in Motion Pictures.” Only vestiges of the Depression remained, and people were flocking to the theaters. To satisfy its fans, Hollywood turned out more “classics” that year than any other in the decade. A partial list of these films arranged in the order of their release includes *JESSE JAMES* (20th-Fox), *GUNGA DIN* (RKO), *MADE FOR EACH OTHER* (Selznick-UA), *STAGECOACH* (Wanger-UA), *DARK VICTORY* (Warners), *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* (Goldwyn-UA), *ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS* (Columbia), *YOUNG MR. LINCOLN* (20th-Fox), *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (MGM), *MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON* (Columbia), *NINOTCHKA* (MGM), *DESTROY RIDES AGAIN* (Universal), and *GONE WITH THE WIND* (Selznick-MGM). The stars of these pictures included Bette Davis, Tyrone Power, Henry Fonda, Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, James Stewart, John Wayne, Merle Oberon, Laurence Olivier, Judy Garland, Jean Arthur, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Clark Gable, and Vivien Leigh. “Taken all together,” said Larry Swindell, “the films of 1939 are the best argument for the studio system.”<sup>1</sup>

*GONE WITH THE WIND*, the last big picture of the decade and the greatest box-office hit of the sound era, “epitomized to a remarkable degree almost every trend and taste of the 1930s.” A prestige picture produced in Technicolor by David O. Selznick, *GONE WITH THE WIND* cost more to make and had a longer running time than any previous American picture. Its marketing made it the first modern “event movie” and created the blockbuster syndrome, which has dominated the industry’s thinking to this day. Based on Margaret Mitchell’s Pulitzer Prize-winning classic, *GONE WITH THE WIND* depicts cataclysmic events of the Civil War from the perspective of a female protagonist, Scarlett O’Hara, “the most familiar fictional character in the history of womanhood.” *GONE WITH THE WIND*, therefore, should be more accurately classified as a prestige “woman’s picture.” That the era’s most successful production was targeted at women and employed a woman’s perspective provides a starting point for an understanding of production trends during the thirties.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Movies as a Social Institution*

The hoopla surrounding Selznick’s two-year talent search for an actress to play Scarlett O’Hara, the epic scope of the production, and the staging of its premiere in Atlanta testify to the social status of motion pictures during the thirties. Just what function did motion pictures serve in American life in the thirties? The

answer is elusive. But Margaret Thorp's *America at the Movies*, which was published in 1939, provides as good an introduction as any to contemporaneous thinking about the subject. Moviegoing had become ingrained during the thirties. Thorp estimated that 85 million people went to the movies every week in seventeen thousand theaters located in more than nine thousand cities, towns, and villages. Breaking down the 85 million figure, Thorp noted that many patrons were repeaters; at most, around 40 million out of the total U.S. population of 130 million had the movie habit. The audience was primarily middle-class whites between the ages of fourteen and forty-five, the most important segment of which was the adult female—the “average citizen's wife” who set the tone of the majority of American movies. According to Thorp, “audiences wanted to be cheered up when they went to the movies; they had no desire to see on the screen the squalor and misery of which there was all too much at home.”<sup>3</sup>

The number of blacks in the United States was estimated at between 12 and 13 million; as a group they “seem to be the only considerable section of the population who cannot go to a movie whenever they have the price,” said Thorp.<sup>4</sup> Around four hundred theaters catered to blacks, about one for every thirty thousand. In the South, some theaters had segregated sections for blacks, but most did not admit them at all.

As a central social institution, Hollywood ranked as the third-largest source of news in the country, surpassed only by Washington and New York. Hollywood satisfied the cravings of its fans by feeding tidbits about its comings and goings to more than three hundred newspaper, magazine, and radio correspondents from around the world permanently assigned to the movie capital. This fascination with the movies revealed itself not only in the public's preoccupation with the life-styles of the stars but also in the presumed power of the movies as a socializing force. Socialization is defined as “the process of transmitting information that assists individuals in becoming socially competent.” Thorp noted that young people learned social skills from the movies, such as how to decline an invitation from a bore, how to accept a gift, how to avoid or accept a kiss, and how to light a friend's cigarette. Hollywood's ability to glamorize fashions persuaded women to think of themselves as certain types, such as a Claudette Colbert type, a Carole Lombard type, or a Norma Shearer type. Said Thorp, “No fashion magazine, however skillfully edited, can compete with [Hollywood] when it comes to making it seem imperative to own a particular hat or frock or necklace. Neither adjectives nor photographs nor drawings can make a woman feel about an evening wrap as she feels when she sees it on the shoulders of Irene Dunne or in the arms of William Powell.” Men, too, were influenced by the movies: “The story has been told so often that it must be true that the fashion of going without undershirts began when Clark Gable undressed in the tourist camp in *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT*. The sale of masculine underwear declined so sharply immediately afterwards that knitwear manufacturers and garment workers unions sent delegations to the producers asking them to take out the scene.”<sup>5</sup>

Even politicians and civic leaders fell under the spell of the movies. When the mayor of Albany, New York, proclaimed a “*SNOW WHITE Week*,” when the Illinois state legislature “passed a resolution calling for the appointment of a committee of seven senators and seven representatives to attend the Springfield premiere of *YOUNG MR. LINCOLN*,” and when Georgia governor E. D. Rivers

designated the day of *GONE WITH THE WIND*'s premiere a state holiday, these officials basked in what Ian Jarvie calls the "charismatic authority" of the movies, which is to say, the ability of the movies to bestow charisma on others.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Movies as a Controlled Institution*

In order for Clark Gable to say the line "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" at the conclusion of *GONE WITH THE WIND*, David O. Selznick had to seek special dispensation from the Hays Office and pay a fine to use the word *damn*. The incident says a lot about the thirties and serves as a reminder that Hollywood was also a controlled institution. Hollywood liked to characterize itself as producing mere "harmless entertainment" that appealed to "the largest possible audience."<sup>7</sup> Pursuing this policy left the industry open to attacks from all sides.

The education establishment charged the movies with poisoning the minds of the nation's youth. In 1933 the Payne Fund, a private foundation, published the results of a five-year scientific study by a group of researchers in psychology, education, and sociology that assessed the influence of motion pictures on children. Collectively titled *Motion Pictures and Youth*, the studies gained some academic respect and were far from universally hostile to the movies, but a popular summary of the investigation by Henry James Forman published in 1933 and alarmingly titled *Our Movie-Made Children* produced a sustained attack on the movies and was widely synopsized, extracted, and reviewed in the popular press. Margaret Thorp summarized the contents of Forman's book as follows:

By a variety of tests and experiments the investigators came to such conclusions as that motion pictures are a cause of delinquency and crime; that the pictures contain too much crime, love, and sex to make a wholesome diet for children; that the exhibition of gangster pictures in slum neighborhoods "amounts to the diffusion of poison"; that the conduct of screen characters is lower than the prevailing standards of morality; that children who go to the movies are likely to be less well behaved in school than non-moviegoers; that moviegoing is highly detrimental to children's sleep; that moviegoing produces "profound mental and psychological effects of an emotional order." (*America at the Movies*, p. 121)

Assessing the relevance of the movies to adults, pundits charged that Hollywood movies were dishonest, stupid, and banal, among other things. For example, Edmund Wilson said,

In what sense does the United States lead the world in moving pictures? We make more of them and are more proficient mechanically, but . . . with the retrenchments imposed by the depression, the whole movie business seemed to harden into something immovably banal. The big producers nailed down their favorite formulas in all their obviousness, falsity and vulgarity, and almost entirely abandoned the attempt to make the old stock situations seem lifelike or to point them up with scenic distinction. The actors who were brought to

Hollywood were handled with extreme stupidity, and invariably, if they stayed there, ruined. A lot of talent has been fed into the studios, and what have our pictures got to show for it? How shall we ever know now whether John Barrymore would ever have amounted to anything? How shall we know whether Katharine Hepburn—or for that matter, Greta Garbo—ever really had anything to her? (“It’s Terrible! It’s Ghastly! It Stinks!” *New Republic*, 21 July 1937, p. 311)

At one time or another, church leaders charged that the movies were immoral; reactionaries charged that the movies advocated Communist causes; diplomats charged that the movies portrayed foreigners as villains and courtesans. To absolve themselves of any responsibility in showing such fare, independent exhibitors claimed that offensive pictures were foisted on them by the big distributors. Reformers took up the cause by petitioning Congress to outlaw the monopolistic trade practices and to impose federal censorship on the industry.

It is no wonder then that American film became the most controlled entertainment in the country. During the thirties, motion pictures were subjected to controls from three sources. The first was state and municipal censorship boards. Because the movies had yet to win First Amendment protection—which is to say, freedom of speech—censorship boards, vested with the simple statutory authority, could deny exhibition permits to any film they disliked. Since this form of censorship attempted to prevent so-called objectionable subject matter from reaching the screen, it was called “prior censorship.”

The second source of control was pressure groups. Women’s organizations and religious groups, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Association of University Women, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Catholic Legion of Decency, had delegates looking over producers’ shoulders to preview films and publish lists recommending or condemning new releases. The threat of a motion picture boycott by the Legion of Decency at the parish level constituted the chief “gun behind the door” and was generally credited with keeping Hollywood in line.<sup>8</sup>

The third form of control, self-regulation, was administered by the Production Code Administration (PCA), an arm of the industry’s trade organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Self-regulation entailed the scrutinizing of motion pictures at various stages of development by industry-appointed censors to ensure that motion-picture content conformed to the tenets of the Production Code. This practice was very different from prior censorship, which resulted in offensive elements being cut from a finished film after it had been placed into release. Self-regulation, said Lea Jacobs, was a defensive practice “operated at the level of the text” that involved two distinct but isolated stages: (1) evaluation, or the identification of films or elements within films likely to offend reform groups or provoke action by government regulatory agencies; and (2) negotiation, or the finding of ways to forestall the anticipated complaints and the minimizing of cuts that would be required by the state censorship boards once a picture had been placed in release.<sup>9</sup> To force producer compliance with the Production Code, the MPPDA promised to levy a \$25,000 fine against any member company that released a

picture without a PCA seal of approval. And to prove they meant business, the majors announced they would exhibit only those pictures approved by the PCA in their affiliated theater chains.

### *The Movies as an Economic Institution*

Adept public relations by the industry kept the censors at bay and the channels of distribution open. An interesting thing about the distribution system was that whenever a major company produced a hit picture, such as *GONE WITH THE WIND*, all the majors made money. This phenomenon was not really understood by the public until the publication of Mae Huettig's *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* in 1944. During the thirties, Hollywood was dominated by the Big Five—Loew's, Inc. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Warner Bros., Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, and RKO. The majors produced practically all the quality pictures; operated worldwide distribution networks; and owned the most important theaters in the country. Observing that the structure of the motion-picture industry was "a large inverted pyramid, top-heavy with real estate and theaters, resting on a narrow base of the intangibles which constitute films," Huettig concluded that the crux of the motion-picture business is not production but exhibition.<sup>10</sup>

If the brick-and-mortar branch of the industry constituted the bulk of the invested capital of a company and generated the most revenue, Huettig asked, "Who decides what films are made?" The headquarters of the major companies were located a continent away from Hollywood—in New York, close to Wall Street, publishing, and Broadway. There, top executives determined crucial issues concerning the quantity and quality of the films Hollywood produced. The men (and they were all men) in charge of exhibition wielded enormous clout. Having served more than likely on the front lines of the business, they knew from experience what the public wanted and called for surefire hits. The heads of distribution also had a say. Since they knew the kinds of pictures that exhibitors wanted, they might announce that such-and-such a star was box-office poison or that overland-bus pictures were hot. And since they knew marketing, they might place a cap on the number of roadshow pictures needed. However, at every studio it was the chief executive officer who made the crucial decisions. It was he who controlled the purse strings and determined how much the company could afford to spend on production. After settling on a figure, he divided the money between the class-A and class-B pictures first and then determined the budgets for the big pictures. Afterward, the front office prepared a tentative release schedule. At that point, the production department in Hollywood took over. To repeat, executives far removed from Hollywood were able to make key policy-making decisions affecting production because they were closest to the principal source of income—theater admissions.

Huettig asked, "What is the relationship between the operations of the majors, the kinds of people who run the companies, and the kinds of films produced?" Motion-picture production was but one of many activities of the majors and not necessarily the most important. Warner Bros., for example, owned more than a hundred subsidiaries, including a film laboratory, a radio manufacturer, music-publishing houses, a lithography company, a recording studio, and a



*"Preview—Major Studio Feature Tonight."*

theater accessory firm, in addition to its theater chain. Diversification affected the makeup of executive personnel, officers, and board members of a company because, as Huettig put it, "if the production of movies is but one aspect of the corporate existence, it follows that representation will be given to the other activities in proportion to their importance."<sup>11</sup> Paramount's board, for example, consisted of investment bankers, manufacturers, and businessmen of various stripes.

The presence of outside bankers and businessmen on boards of directors reflected the fact that the assets of the majors consisted chiefly of theaters. Although this had little significance in itself, the way majors acquired these chains did. The majors raised the capital to acquire their chains during the halcyon days before the 1929 crash through the public sale of stocks and bonds. Incurring long-term debt had an important effect on production, said Huettig: "The production of films, essentially fluid and experimental as a process, is harnessed to a form of organization which can rarely afford to be either experimental or speculative because of the regularity with which heavy fixed charges must be met."<sup>12</sup>

This led her to ask, "What kind of theaters do the majors own?" Affiliated chains ranged in size from two hundred to fifteen hundred theaters. Although these chains consisted only of around 20 percent of the theaters in the country, they contained nearly 80 percent of the first-run houses and the most profitable subsequent-run houses. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of first-run houses. Located in the hubs of major metropolitan areas, these motion-picture palaces generated anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the box office in any market and had the potential as a group of returning more than half the production costs of a given picture.

Affiliated theater chains were situated in different regions of the country. The Loew's chain was located primarily in New England and greater New York, the Warner chain in Pennsylvania, the Paramount chain in the Midwest and the South, and so on. Only in the largest cities at the first-run level did these chains actually compete with one another, not in the hundreds of neighborhood theaters or in the thousands of houses outside these areas. Flagship theaters used in-house productions almost exclusively. In order to distribute pictures nationwide, the majors pooled their product, which is to say, they exhibited one another's pictures in areas where they did not compete and gave one another the right to pick the best pictures on each other's roster. Thus, a hit picture like *GONE WITH THE WIND* redounded "to the benefit of each of the theater-owning majors since each shares in the box office," said Huettig.<sup>13</sup>

Because these chains generated most of the income of a company, Huettig concluded that production and distribution were important only to the extent that they enabled the majors to maintain their favored status in exhibition: "The production of films by the major companies is not really an end in itself, on the success or failure of which the company's existence depends; it is an instrument directed toward the accomplishment of a larger end, i.e., domination of the theater market."<sup>14</sup>

Huettig's final question was "What is the relationship between the Big Five and the Little Three?" No one studio had the capacity to produce a year's supply of pictures for its subsequent-run theaters, especially after the double-feature vogue. A subsequent-run theater typically showed double bills that

changed two or three times a week. Because these theaters required as many as three hundred pictures a year, the majors needed supplemental products, particularly inexpensive class-B pictures to fill the bottom half of the double bill. This gap in film supply explains the existence of the Little Three—Columbia, Universal, and United Artists. The first two companies produced and distributed motion pictures and concentrated mainly on supplying B pictures for the low end of the market. United Artists, the smallest of the eight, functioned solely as a distributor for a small group of elite independent producers.

### *Production in a Era of Oligopoly*

Delineating the institutions that intersected with Hollywood during the thirties suggests the range of forces impinging on the production of motion pictures. Movies had to support the political and social status quo, they had to reflect a certain moralistic worldview, and they had to satisfy audiences, among other things. More than anything else, movies had to keep theaters full.

During the Depression, the majors were nearly dragged down by their theaters, but stability was restored as the economy improved. The history of the industry in the thirties reveals that the majors, acting in concert through the MPPDA, succeeded in getting government sanction for the trade practices they had developed over the years through informal collusion. These trade practices guaranteed that studios operated at full capacity with the knowledge that every film produced would find a theatrical outlet. Moreover, these trade practices ensured that the affiliated theaters would be supplied first and could charge the highest ticket prices. As if that were not enough, these trade practices shut out the competition as well.

The thirties transformed the American film industry into a modern business enterprise. No longer run by their founders as family businesses, motion-picture companies were managed by hierarchies of salaried executives who rationalized operations to ensure long-term stability and profits. For a while during the Depression, investment bankers and industrialists acted as receivers for several stricken companies and proved themselves singularly inept in handling the business. Not until the boards of directors of these firms appointed executives who earned their stripes in motion pictures did the companies revive. Afterward, the relationship of banks to motion pictures changed. Investment bankers continued to serve as board members, but they were isolated from day-to-day operations, including production. Commercial bankers offered financial services, but they did not provide direct production loans or have a say in what Hollywood produced.

An obstacle to the smooth running of the business remained the contentiousness of pressure groups, particularly the Catholic Legion of Decency, and the threat of federal censorship. The public perceived that the Legion of Decency's "crusade for cleaner motion pictures" in 1934 forced Hollywood to clean up its pictures. For example, the *Christian Century* said,

The producers, fearing that the crusade would eventuate in a campaign for legal censorship, acted quickly and set up a censorship of their own within the industry. Thus in 1934 they put into effect and



implemented the code of ethics which they signed so solemnly, ballyhooed so loudly, and ignored so contemptuously in 1930. They gave their hired defender, Mr. Will Hays, the authority to pass upon every picture released by the motion picture trust. ("The Legion of Decency's First Year," 27 March 1935, pp. 392–393)

But, in Chapter 3 Richard Maltby argues that no fundamental shift in policy occurred in 1934. Actually, the industry started enforcing the Production Code from the time of its adoption in 1930 and had been busy developing review procedures based on ad hoc precedents. The apparent changes in the Code after the Legion of Decency crusade were mainly cosmetic and had much more to do with the industry making a public show of atonement. Then why did Hollywood make such a fuss about creating the Production Code Administration in 1934 and appointing a prominent Catholic layman, Joseph Breen, to head it? Maltby demonstrates that Hollywood made a show of atonement in 1934 because a deal had been struck; in return for a public acknowledgment of misfeasance, the Catholic hierarchy agreed to drop its support for federal regulation of the industry. Thereafter, Hollywood distributed its pictures in peace.

Keeping theaters supplied with pictures meant that studios had to regulate every stage of production. During the Depression, the majors acceded to demands of rank-and-file craftsmen for higher wages, since, as a group, they represented a small percentage of production costs. But the majors fought bitterly to prevent talent groups from unionizing, fearing that their demands might throw production schedules out of kilter.

Three talent groups wanted recognition—directors, screenwriters, and actors. The rise in status of the producer came at the expense of the director. Having lost much of their autonomy, directors became cogs in a wheel, relegated essentially to the task of staging the action. The least militant of the talent groups and among the best paid, directors seemed relatively happy with their lot. In its fight for recognition, the Screen Directors Guild presented a modest set of demands; directors wanted more preparation time, a chance to read the script before going into production, and the right to assemble a film in its first rough form. The studios signed an accord with the Screen Directors Guild in 1939, but only a handful of elite directors were given more authority over their pictures.

The Screen Actors Guild won recognition in 1937. Because stars constituted the most important component of production, the majors waged a vicious public relations battle that ridiculed their demands. The majors established minimum wages for rank-and-file actors and made minor concessions to other classes of performers, but the basic employment agreement that tied the star to the studio—known in the business as the option contract—remained intact.

The most militant of the talent groups and the last to win recognition by the studios, the Screenwriters Guild was the group best equipped to express its discontent. Led by writers who had made names for themselves as members of the eastern literary establishment, screenwriters bitterly complained about their low status in the studio system, the speed at which they were forced to work, compulsory collaboration, and the unfair assigning of screen credits, among other things. Going for the jugular, a left-wing group in the guild demanded more creative authority over production and copyright protection that would make writers co-owners of the pictures based on their scripts. The majors responded to

this platform by pitting politically conservative screenwriters against the militants, by threatening a blacklist, and by stonewalling. The Screenwriters Guild signed a pact with the studios in 1941 and won a few minor concessions, but the creative status of the writer remained as is.

Filmmaking in the era of the studio system is typically described as a collaborative process, but it might be more accurate to say that filmmaking was a group effort involving a strict division of labor with a producer at the helm. Curtis Bernhardt, who worked as a director in Germany, England, and France, contrasted working conditions in Europe and those he encountered when he joined Warners in 1940:

My earliest memory of Warner Brothers . . . is of somebody handing me a script and saying: "You start shooting Monday." And I was used to having three, four, or five months' preparation: selecting the story, writing one shooting-script with the writers and then a second shooting-script, and when I was ready I went on the stage and started shooting. . . . When I declined, he took me to see Jack Warner who said: "Well, if you can't do it, take your release." That was my first impression of Hollywood. (Quoted in Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *The Celluloid Muse: Hollywood Directors Speak* [New York: New American Library, 1972], pp. 49–50)

Searching for ways to control production costs, while maintaining an acceptable level of quality, companies switched from the central-producer system to unit production. In the former, one executive oversaw the entire season's output of a studio; in the latter, several executives did. Like modern business enterprises, Hollywood had organized all phases of the production process in a rational manner, from story acquisition to editing. For example, in deciding what to produce in any given year, moguls did not rely on hunches or attempt to foist their personal tastes on the public; rather, studios organized story departments in New York, Hollywood, and London to keep in close contact with Broadway, publishing, and the literary world.

Analyzing the routines of motion-picture production, Chapter 4 focuses on the creation of a picture's visual style. By providing an overview of art direction, costume design, and cinematography, it suggests that powerful department heads, such as MGM's Cedric Gibbons and Paramount's Hans Dreier, and individual artists, such as Anton Grot, William Cameron Menzies, and Gregg Toland, exerted an enormous influence over the look of a picture, which sometimes extended to the way it was shot.

Harnessed to an industrial form of production, the studio system readily absorbed new technologies. Analyzing the aesthetic norms of the classical Hollywood style, Chapter 5 demonstrates that Hollywood adopted innovations in sound recording, camerawork, and cinematography that were made within the studios, service firms, and professional organizations. Adopting new technologies did not alter the structure of the industry the way the talkies did; rather, they enabled Hollywood to operate more efficiently and enhanced the techniques of conventional storytelling.

This brings up the issue of competition. How did the majors compete with one another? Or stated another way, how did companies differentiate their films?

Each studio developed a house style that was an amalgam of fiscal policy, specialty genres, and stars, among other factors. Studios attempted to differentiate their pictures at every level of production, from the humblest B Western to the most colossal epic. As a general rule, differentiation mattered most at the highest level, where a studio stood the chance of gaining (or losing) the most money.

Chapter 6 begins the discussion of product differentiation by focusing on the key ingredient studios used to sell their pictures to the public—the star system. Firmly in place by the thirties, the star system underwent considerable change as a result of the talkies and the Depression. After converting to the talkies, Hollywood scoured Broadway, vaudeville, and radio for fresh talent, a process that lasted the decade. However, signing a personality from a different line of show business was one thing; making him or her palatable to motion-picture audiences was another. The techniques Hollywood devised to accomplish this feat further rationalized the process of star development and made big names even more dependent on the studios.

Expanding its bag of tricks to advertise and promote its stars, Hollywood took advantage of radio. Starting out as potential competitors during the Depression, motion pictures and radio soon settled into a symbiotic relationship. Radio basked in the charismatic power of Hollywood, and Hollywood tapped the advertising potential of the new medium by developing radio programming to showcase its stars, to stimulate moviegoing, and to hype new releases.

Chapter 7 continues the discussion of product differentiation by analyzing feature-film production trends. Since the production strategies of the majors were designed to compete for the box-office dollar, the discussion rests on what was popular, when, and, whenever possible, why. The analysis relied on several barometers of public taste. *Variety's* annual list of top-grossing films revealed people voting with their pocketbooks and gauged the relative drawing power of a star and a production cycle. Although the trade publication identified only six to eight winners a year, the data provided insights into the major trends (see Appendix 1).

Industry professionals expressed their preferences during the annual Academy Awards ceremonies. Although an Oscar did not affect a picture's box-office performance, as most nominated pictures had completed their runs well before the ceremonies, the Academy Awards became a standard against which to compare the critics' and the public's choices (see Appendix 2).

Film critics had their say not only in reviews but also in various "Ten Best" lists. The *New York Times* list, for example, consisted of personal picks of the newspaper's chief film critic and included an occasional foreign art film and documentary, in addition to mainstream Hollywood fare. *Film Daily's* Ten Best, which represented a cross section of the print media, was compiled by polling reviewers and entertainment editors from newspapers, magazines, and the trade around the country. More than 300 critics participated in the nationwide poll in 1931; by 1939, the number had reached nearly 550, about half the daily and Sunday papers, large and small, across the country. Of these newspapers, about sixty conducted local polls to determine the correspondence between the house critics' and readers' tastes (see Appendix 3).

The polls and awards agreed often enough to indicate a consensus among the public and the critics and are therefore used as a basis for structuring the chapter

on production trends. Placing production trends within the context of their times reveals that the public was often at odds with what film scholars today admire about the thirties and reveals more clearly Hollywood's marketing strategies.

The "other half" of Hollywood films, those unheralded class-B pictures relegated to the bottom half of the marquee, played a significant though thankless role in the business. Produced on meager budgets and sold at bargain prices, Bs collected enough as a group to lower studio overhead, which enabled the majors to operate year-round at full capacity. Without the Bs, the studio system would have rested on shaky ground indeed. Chapter 8 analyzes just how extensive this brand of production was. A staple of the majors (except United Artists), B films were also produced by the minor studios associated with the MPPDA, Monogram and Republic, and scores of fly-by-night companies operating on Poverty Row. If mainstream Hollywood targeted the white middle class, Poverty Row set its sights on less prepossessing filmgoers, including rural, black, and immigrant groups. Derided by the trade press and marginalized in film histories, B's are just now being recognized for the role they played in the social lives of what Michael Harrington called "the other America."

Alternative film practices, represented by documentaries and avant-garde films, functioned outside the commercial mainstream. Produced on shoestring budgets by individuals or small groups of collaborators with their own equipment, these films were often experimental in form and found outlets in art theaters, schools, churches, union halls, and civic groups. Chapter 9 analyzes, among other things, the work of politically committed filmmakers to record and render dramatic "the social trauma of unemployment, labor violence, and the erosion of American farmland, and to construct causal explanations for these disturbances and disasters." Hollywood imitated aspects of the documentary style when it produced social-problem pictures, but not the causal analysis, preferring instead to resolve crises within the norms of entertainment. Chapter 10 describes the personal filmmaking of the avant-garde. Without a political agenda of its own and barely noticed outside its own coterie, the avant-garde was kept alive by cineastes. Ever resourceful, Hollywood also absorbed elements of this film practice, but used them only for embellishment.