

Introduction

The American cinema in the 1940s was an industry at war, fighting monumental battles at home and overseas, both on-screen and off. Chief among those battles, of course, was World War II, the defining event of the decade for the movie industry and for the nation at large. Never before had the interests of the nation and the industry been so closely aligned, and never had its status as a national cinema been so vital. The industry's "conversion to war production" from 1942 to 1945 was eminently successful, as Hollywood enjoyed what may have been its finest hour as a social institution and a cultural force. The war also ignited a five-year economic boom, pushing box-office revenues and film studio profits to record levels.

While World War II was the signal event of the decade, however, Hollywood's fiercest and most significant battles were waged on the domestic front—battles with the Justice Department over antitrust violations, battles with Congress over "un-American activities" in Hollywood, battles with labor unions for control of the Hollywood workforce, battles with the growing ranks of freelance talent and independent producers for control of the filmmaking process, battles with theater owners for control of the movie marketplace, battles with censors over subject matter. These and other crises reached their flashpoints in the late forties as the war boom was followed by a disastrous postwar bust.

Although the bust was very much a postwar phenomenon, the industry's decline actually began in the early 1940s during the odd, intense interval between the Great Depression and World War II. The sociologist (and sometime screenwriter) Leo Rosten provided a prophetic assessment of that decline in his acclaimed study, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony*, published in November 1941. Rosten had begun the book in the late 1930s, at the height of Hollywood's golden age, but he soon found himself charting what he termed the "end of Hollywood's lush and profligate period." By 1941, observed Rosten, the movie industry was in serious straits:

Other businesses have experienced onslaughts against their profits and hegemony; but the drive against Hollywood is just beginning. No moving picture leader can be sanguine before the steady challenge of unionism, collective bargaining, the consent decree (which brought the Justice Department suit to a temporary armistice), the revolt of the independent theater owners, the trend toward increased taxation, the strangulation of the foreign market, and a score of frontal attacks on the citadels of the screen. (Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941], p. 78)

Rosten's assessment is notable for two principal reasons: first, its accurate inventory of the crises facing the industry in the early 1940s; and second, how completely those crises would dissolve within weeks of the book's publication, following Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into the war. That wartime reversal did not invalidate Rosten's appraisal, however; in fact, the crises he described would return with a vengeance immediately after the war. And thus the governing paradox of the era: the closer one looks at the film industry during the 1940s, the more evident it becomes that World War II marked an extended, dramatic, and most welcome interval in a decade-long period of industry decline.

The Prewar, Wartime, and Postwar Motion Picture Industry

The 1940s, then, was a decade of momentous reversals for the American cinema. The most significant and striking reversals came immediately after Pearl Harbor, particularly in terms of the industry's relationship with the U.S. government. In 1940–1941, Hollywood had been mired in federal lawsuits and congressional hearings over various issues, from antitrust violations and racketeering to allegations of Communist ties and on-screen warmongering. But with the nation suddenly plunged into a global war, Washington saw the movie industry in a very different light. Hollywood's control over every phase of the industry was now deemed a key asset, and the movies an ideal source of diversion, information, and propaganda for citizens and soldiers alike. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a longtime supporter and canny manipulator of the movie industry, allowed Hollywood to continue commercial operations so long as it cooperated with Washington in actively supporting the war effort.

The industry readily complied, although wartime filmmaking and exhibition were scarcely business as usual. The studios and the nation's theater owners cooperated with the government and the military in selling war bonds, providing live entertainment for the troops all over the globe, promoting charity and relief efforts, and cranking out hundreds of war-related features, documentaries, newsreels, and even military training films. Meanwhile, the surging war economy and myriad war-related restrictions created a public with the war on its mind and money in its pockets—and with little to spend it on other than the movies. Moviegoing became an essential wartime ritual for Americans, as weekly attendance and industry revenues soared. It was an essential ritual for the military as well, a “two-hour furlough” in makeshift theaters and “beachhead bijous” around the globe, with films supplied through a worldwide distribution system created by Hollywood and the War Department.

Another significant wartime reversal involved Hollywood's aggressive on-screen support of the war effort. In 1940–1941, as war raged overseas and as Roosevelt actively supplied England with arms and initiated a “defense buildup” at home, Hollywood's treatment of the war had been remarkably tentative, especially in feature films. That changed dramatically after Pearl Harbor, and by late 1942 nearly one-third of the features produced dealt directly with the war effort. The war claimed a number of top stars—primarily leading men like Clark Gable, Tyrone Power, and James Stewart, who joined the service, but also a few top female stars like Carole Lombard, who died in a plane crash during a war-bond drive, and Myrna Loy, who went to work for the Red Cross. Meanwhile a new generation of wartime stars like Betty Grable, Greer Garson,

and Abbott and Costello emerged, and a number of established stars like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Humphrey Bogart saw their careers surge during the war.

Familiar film genres, from musicals and crime films to women's pictures and historical epics, were reworked to invoke "war themes." Hollywood also developed a cycle of combat films like *WAKE ISLAND* (1942), *BATAAN* (1943), *THIRTY SECONDS OVER TOKYO* (1944), and *THE STORY OF GI JOE* (1945), providing fictional accounts of actual Allied battles. These combat films, along with the massive output of war-related documentaries and newsreels, effectively serialized the Allied war effort while bringing a new level of realism to American movie screens. Indeed, wartime Hollywood was more focused than ever before on real-world events as the lines between factual and fictional films steadily blurred.

A significant counter to Hollywood's war-related output emerged in *film noir*, a cinematic style which first took shape before the war in dark, expressive dramas like *REBECCA* (1940), *CITIZEN KANE* (1941), and *THE MALTESE FALCON* (1941). During the war, *film noir* coalesced into a distinctive period style in two distinctive cycles: "hard-boiled" crime thrillers like *MURDER, MY SWEET* and *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (both 1944), and "female Gothics" like *SUSPICION* (1941), *SHADOW OF A DOUBT* (1943), and *GASLIGHT* (1944). Far afield from the heroic posturing and documentary realism of the combat films and home-front dramas, these *noir* films evinced the "dark side" of the wartime experience, coexisting in dynamic tension with Hollywood's onslaught of war-related films.

As the emergence of *film noir* suggests, the movie industry's wartime worldview was neither unified nor one-dimensional, and this applied to off-screen industry conditions as well. Despite the war-induced prosperity and the overall effort to present a united front, the film industry underwent its share of internal conflicts and contradictory developments during the war. There was intense debate about the "entertainment value" of war films, with the nation's theater owners continually lobbying for more escapist fare or at least for more upbeat war-related efforts—military musicals like *THIS IS THE ARMY* (1943) or home-front romances like *SINCE YOU WENT AWAY* (1944). Meanwhile, advisers from the Office of War Information (OWI) bickered constantly with Hollywood's own Production Code Administration (PCA) about the on-screen depiction of various war-related issues and events.

Conflicts arose in the filmmaking ranks as well, as studio control was challenged and steadily undermined by the shift of top talent to freelance status, and also by the surge in independent production. These trends had been evident earlier but accelerated dramatically during the war due to various factors—war-related income tax hikes which induced Hollywood's high-paid talent to "go freelance," for instance, and the growing demand for A-class pictures in the overheated wartime marketplace that forced the studios to rely on independent producers for additional high-end product.

As the war came to a close, any semblance of a united industry front quickly faded, and the postwar era soon proved to be the most turbulent and crisis-ridden period in industry history. Indeed, the "drive against Hollywood" described by Rosten in 1941 resumed with even greater force after the war. The studios were hit by a major strike in early 1945 even before the fighting stopped overseas, and in October, within weeks of the Japanese surrender, the Justice Department renewed its antitrust case against the studios in federal court. Hollywood's economic boom continued into 1946, but by 1947 the film industry had begun a steady, seemingly inexorable slide.

The industry's box-office decline in the late 1940s was spurred by various developments both at home and overseas. On the home front, the millions of returning ser-

vicemen who had fueled record box-office revenues in 1946 soon began marrying and starting families in the suburbs, far from the industry's vital downtown theaters. With "suburban migration" and the "baby boom" came commercial television and other shifts in patterns of media consumption, as moviegoing ceased to be a ritual necessity for most Americans. And while the nation at large enjoyed a huge economic surge in the postwar era, this only meant rising costs for the film industry. Hollywood faced serious problems overseas with the outbreak of the cold war in 1946, which disrupted trade behind the "Iron Curtain." Equally troublesome was the growing protectionist trend in key European markets like England, Italy, and France, which were trying to promote their own film industries and limit Hollywood's domination.

As economic conditions rapidly deteriorated in 1947–1948, the film industry suffered three crucial setbacks: a motion picture trade war with Britain severely undercut Hollywood's most important overseas market; a congressional investigation of Communist infiltration of the movie industry led to the infamous Hollywood blacklist; and the Supreme Court handed down the momentous *Paramount* decree, an antitrust ruling which forced the major studios to divorce their all-important theater chains.

Despite these deepening crises, however, filmmaking in the late forties held up remarkably well. Indeed, Hollywood seemed to be energized by the internal discord and external threats of that turbulent era, and also by a remarkable influx of talent during and just after the war. The atmosphere in Hollywood and the tenor of its films changed in the late 1940s, as critics noted a new maturity and heightened realism in the American cinema. The war film was a tremendous influence here, of course, although interestingly enough, Hollywood's output of war-related features and documentaries simply stopped soon after the war. By 1946, the war itself and its social impact—including the plight of returning veterans and the postwar "return to normalcy"—were deemed box-office poison by filmmakers and exhibitors alike. But equally remarkable is the fact that, after a three-year moratorium, the war film staged an unexpected comeback in late 1949, fueled by the critical and commercial success of *BATTLEGROUND*, *SANDS OF IWO JIMA*, and *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*.

With the war film on hiatus in the late 1940s, the realism and propaganda function of that recent cycle emerged in the "social problem dramas" and so-called message pictures—perhaps the single most significant on-screen development during the postwar era. The trend began immediately after the war with the December 1945 release of *THE LOST WEEKEND*, a powerful drama of an alcoholic binge that was a solid box-office hit and won the Academy Award for best picture. Despite the rising tide of cold war conservatism, Hollywood's output of message pictures intensified, most notably perhaps in a succession of prestige-level dramas from 20th Century–Fox that were huge commercial and critical hits: *GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT*, a 1947 drama involving anti-Semitism that won the Oscar for best picture; *THE SNAKE PIT*, a 1948 study of mental illness; and *PINKY* (1949), a "race film" set in the Deep South that confronted a social problem that the industry had systematically avoided for decades.

Hollywood's newfound maturity also was evident even in more traditional genres—in Westerns like *DUEL IN THE SUN* (1946) and *RED RIVER* (1948), which addressed more "adult" themes, for instance, and in musicals like *THE PIRATE* (1948) and *ON THE TOWN* (1949), which integrated modern dance and ballet. The postwar penchant for realism and social critique had a significant impact on the crime drama and *film noir* as well. *Noir* thrillers like *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE* (1946), *OUT OF THE PAST* (1947), *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI* (1948), and *KEY LARGO* (1948) featured maladjusted males

whose alienation and anxiety clearly invoked the general postwar climate. And in crime films like *CROSSFIRE* and *BOOMERANG* (both 1947), two “police procedurals” centering on ex-servicemen accused of murder, the dark expressionism of *film noir* effectively merged with the realism and social impulse of the message picture.

Hollywood’s progressive postwar impulse reached a peak of sorts in 1949 with *PINKY* and several other race-related dramas, notably *INTRUDER IN THE DUST*, *LOST BOUNDARIES*, and *THE HOME OF THE BRAVE*, and also a fictionalized biography of Huey Long, *ALL THE KING’S MEN*, which was perhaps the best of the postwar message pictures. Shot entirely on location in the Deep South, *ALL THE KING’S MEN* took on a range of social issues, from alcoholism and adultery to political corruption and the role of media in modern politics; it also was the third postwar social drama to win the Academy Award for best picture. But remarkably enough, these films marked not only the culmination but the abrupt end of Hollywood’s postwar progressivism. Message pictures, political dramas, and even the antiheroic and vaguely antisocial *noir* thrillers all but disappeared after 1949, as the industry took a decidedly conservative turn both on-screen and off.

Hollywood’s conservative turn reflected the rapid escalation of the cold war in 1949—the year of the Alger Hiss trial, the Soviet A-bomb, and the fall of China to the Communists—as America drifted into what W. H. Auden had so aptly termed “the age of anxiety.”¹ While that anxiety was soothed somewhat by the tremendous economic boom, the movie industry found no such solace. As television swept across the newly suburbanized American landscape in 1949, the movie industry’s slide worsened. Box-office revenues and theater admissions plunged, movie budgets and studio payrolls were slashed, and thousands of personnel were laid off. As the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker noted at the time, the operative term was not “anxiety” but “panic”:

In Hollywood there is far more confusion and anxiety than in the society which surrounds it. Even in its most prosperous periods when net profits were enormous, far surpassing those of other businesses, everyone was scared. Now, when diminishing foreign markets, increasing costs of production, competitions with European pictures, and changing box-office tastes threaten the swollen profits of past prosperity, fear rises to panic. (Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* [New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1950], pp. 308–9)

The decade ended on an appropriately climactic note with the “dis-integration” of Paramount, Hollywood’s most powerful studio. As the company with the largest theater chain, Paramount had been the main target of the government’s decade-long antitrust suit, and in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 1948 *Paramount* decree, the studio also became the first of the Hollywood powers to divorce its theater chain. At the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1949, Paramount formally split into two separate entities: Paramount Pictures and United Paramount Theaters.

The American Cinema in the 1940s

The Paramount divorce capped the government’s ten-year antitrust campaign and the drive against Hollywood as well. The war boom had suspended that drive—had seemed, in fact, to stifle it altogether—but it had only postponed the inevitable. The

resumption of the drive against Hollywood and Hollywood's rapid decline in the late 1940s well indicate the potency of the prewar threats to the industry, which took on a new intensity after the war. Those postwar developments also underscore the paradoxical status of the 1940s as a distinct period in American film history.

The war era represents far more than simply an interlude in Hollywood's decline, of course, particularly in light of the industry's social status and extraordinary economic prosperity during World War II. But like the war itself, the wartime movie industry can be understood only in terms of the conditions and events which both preceded and precipitated it. And the postwar era, in turn, can be understood only in relation to the tremendous impact of the war, not merely on the film industry but on the nation and the world at large.

This study therefore treats the 1940s as a distinct, coherent period in American film history, but one which necessarily must be examined in three phases: the prewar (1940–1941), wartime (1942–1945), and postwar (1946–1949) eras. The first three parts of the book are organized around these three subsequent phases, examining the “larger” social and industrial forces as well as the films and filmmaking during the prewar, wartime, and postwar eras. The opening chapter in each of the three sections surveys the general industry context—the prevailing social and economic conditions, the movie marketplace at home and abroad, incursions by powerful outside forces like organized labor, the federal government, and so on. The second chapter of each section examines Hollywood's studio-based production system, which changed dramatically in the course of the decade as the factory-oriented filmmaking procedures steadily gave way to a more “independent” and unit-based approach. The third chapter in each section examines the stars, genres, and production trends of the period, which are covered via general surveys and detailed case studies. The wartime section also includes a specialized chapter by Clayton R. Koppes on the Office of War Information, which played a crucial role in regulating movie content. Additionally, chapter sections on specialized topics have been contributed by Janet Staiger (on B movies and their audiences), Mary Beth Haralovich (on studio marketing practices), and Gorham Kindem (on the Screen Actors Guild and the blacklist).

A fourth section examines various decade-long developments which were of “ancillary” concern to Hollywood and mainstream commercial cinema and yet were of crucial importance to the general history of American film. This section includes chapters on documentary and newsreel production (by Thomas Doherty), on the emergence of experimental and avant-garde cinema (by Lauren Rabinovitz), and on the development of the television industry during the 1940s (by Christopher Anderson).

The research for this book emphasizes primary sources and materials, particularly industry trade paper accounts and studio archives. Of particular interest among the archival materials are production records, interoffice memoranda, contracts and legal documents, financial reports, and correspondence between the studio and the home office in New York. The principal news sources are *Variety* and the *Motion Picture Herald*, along with the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Two film critics also figure heavily in this study: Bosley Crowther, the dean of American newspaper critics in the 1940s and the lead reviewer for the *New York Times* (and the only critic there to receive a byline during the entire decade); and James Agee, an astute magazine critic who wrote during much of the decade for both *Time* (1941–1948) and *The Nation* (1942–1948). Industry biographies, insider accounts, interviews, and oral histories also are utilized, principally to supplement the more reliable archival material and news

accounts. Previous historical accounts are considered as well—although, incredibly, no in-depth, comprehensive history of Hollywood in the forties has yet been attempted.

A final word about the case studies: while it is crucial to examine the American cinema as a commercial industry and a social institution, it is equally important to maintain focus on actual films and filmmaking. Close study of specific cases reveals the complex interplay of historical forces which affect the making of movies and which ultimately shape individual films. And it is at this level of analysis, finally, that one is most keenly aware of the stakes involved in the practice of film history—that is, an understanding and appreciation of the social impact, cultural value, and lasting appeal of the movies themselves.