

Introduction

Taking Hollywood Seriously

The purpose of this study is to connect the historical development of Hollywood's cinematic style with the social and political history of the Hollywood community. Substantial elements of Hollywood classical cinema are the result of a political and esthetic negotiation engaging European anti-fascist refugees, radical urban American intellectuals, and studio executives from the early 1930s to the late 1940s. This negotiation was an integral part of the intellectual and political debates of the New Deal era, and it left a profound mark on some of the films Hollywood made in this period.

An effort to contextualize Hollywood and its films plays a crucial role in this work. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood was not a "Baghdad by the sea"¹ separated from the rest of the United States. Nor were its films a simple reflection of the commercial nature of the studio system. Rather, the Hollywood community was animated by many of the same debates that were the center of the political and intellectual discourse in New York. Like their colleagues back East, in fact, intellectuals in Hollywood were part of the leftist political culture of the 1930s, and they discussed the democratization of modernism, its politicization, and the formulation of a mass-marketed progressive culture capable of dealing with the political issues of the day.

This study identifies, chronicles, and interprets the social, intellectual, and esthetic history of what I call Hollywood

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democratic modernism. It examines its emergence, the transformations brought about by World War II, and its demise in the aftermath of the conflict. Hollywood democratic modernism often, though not always, took the form of social realism, and much of the present work deals with the articulation of social and political realism in the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. I want to give the term a broad connotation, both esthetic and political. In some sense, Hollywood films always had to communicate to their audiences a sense of “reality.” The movies had to be transparent, to unravel smoothly from the beginning to the end, fostering identification with the characters on screen. Certainly, this aspect of the Hollywood norm remained central to the films produced by the studios in the 1930s. Hollywood’s realism, however, deepened and expanded in the New Deal era, when the artists gathering in Southern California carried with them a concern for radical politics coupled with an interest in the reality of life in America, as well as the “documentary techniques” that could express it.² As the decade wore on, the “Hollywood New Yorkers”—that is, the urban American intellectuals who trekked to Southern California at the beginning of the 1930s—found ground for alliance with the “Hollywood Europeans,” those European filmmakers who arrived in Hollywood from Nazi Germany and were keenly aware of the importance of films in the international struggle against Nazi fascism. The convergence in Hollywood of radical American artists, and of refugees from European fascist dictatorships, provided Southern California with a new generation of filmmakers, inclined to attune the Hollywood screen to the political reality of the day. Ultimately, Hollywood democratic modernism of the 1930s had an historical connotation as the result of a compromise between Hollywood Europeans, Hollywood New Yorkers, and studio executives within the national context of the New Deal. These forces congregated in Hollywood at the beginning of the 1930s and disbanded at the end of the 1940s, when the classicism of the Hollywood films underwent a profound redefinition and the era of “New Deal liberalism” came to an end.³

The fact that many Hollywood filmmakers came to embrace the slogan of realism should not, however, prevent us from appreciating the looseness of the term. Realism was a word often used with a variety of meanings. In 1939, Mordecai Gorelik, Pare Lorentz, Fritz Lang, and Ernst Lubitsch all advocated a realist cinema although, as we shall see, with different degrees of conviction and a vast array of meanings. They often disagreed on what reality and the techniques for its reproduction meant, and on the reasons for pursuing a popular audience. Loose as it was, however, cinematic

realism was a concept appealing enough to gather a new generation of filmmakers, and a political slogan strong enough to give life to several organizations that radically changed the face of Hollywood politics. Yet the “middle ground” constituted by the slogan of realism was, at least in part, based on a misunderstanding. It also created an atmosphere that was fragile and contingent. Constant negotiations during the making of a film were commonplace, and, in time, the unstable compound that was the Hollywood community came apart.⁴

I am consciously situating my work within contemporary debates about 1930s art and esthetics. I contend that the dichotomy between modernism and realism, escapist and political art, the 1920s and 1930s, or avant-garde and Hollywood does not help us understand the type of culture that was forged in the 1930s, and of which the Hollywood community was an important segment.⁵ Oftentimes, in fact, realism has been employed to establish a discontinuity between the intellectual practices of the 1920s that are characterized as modernist, escapist, and nonrealist, and those of the 1930s that are usually associated with the political and social realism of the Cultural Front.

To a large extent, this critical paradigm rests on a narrow definition of 1920s art and, more generally, of modernism. Chip Rhodes has recently questioned the supposed escapism of the 1920s, highlighting instead how “twenties literature draws its strength and vitality not from its flight from history, but from its complex, multi-leveled engagement with history.”⁶ In the late 1970s, Peter Gay also highlighted the inadequacy of contemporary definitions of modernism based on “a confluence of anti-rationalism, experimentalism, and alienation.”⁷ “The historian of Modernist culture,” Gay suggested, “may best begin his revision of current, clearly inadequate interpretations by enlarging the territory of modernism.”⁸ Modernism was not only the adversarial, antirealist tradition that, sponsored by Lionel Trilling and Clement Greenberg among others, became dominant during the Cold War. As Thomas Bender suggests in his *New York Intellect* in reference to Randolph Bourne, “There are other equally legitimate versions of modernism that are moderate, positive, and affirming, even reformist.”⁹

It is worth stressing, in fact, that at least in the United States, the dominant interpretation of the term “modernism” is almost entirely the result of the critical intervention of the so-called “New York Intellectuals” in the decades following World War II. Astradur Eysteinnsson touches upon a crucial issue when he remarks that the real question is “what

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modernism has been made to signify, and how.”¹⁰ It becomes, therefore, quite relevant to note that many of today’s critics continue to read modernism through the spectacles provided by Trilling, Greenberg, and the New Criticism.¹¹ But the seminal essays by Trilling and Greenberg were also—implicitly or not—an eminently *political* definition of modernism, aimed at constructing a “club” from which the dominant segment of the American Left of the 1930s was excluded.

The dominance of this particular interpretation of modernism is not surprising. Putting some distance between oneself and the leftist culture of the 1930s was a plausible choice for American intellectuals of the late 1940s and the 1950s. While it is not my task to explore the relative role of conviction and opportunism in motivating one’s choice, it is undeniable that previous, and alternative, definitions of the relationship between the 1920s and the 1930s, as well as of the modernism/mass-culture dyad, existed and were less dramatic than those dominant from the Cold War onward—increasingly sculpted by an “anxiety of contamination” between high and low, mass culture and intellectual activities.¹²

In 1934, Malcolm Cowley presented in *The Exile’s Return* a very smooth, continuous transition from the culture of the 1920s to the literary scene of the 1930s. The central chapter of the memoir, “Readings from the Lives of the Saints,” dedicated to T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Paul Valéry, highlights how American intellectuals had long been at odds with these “saints” of the high modernist tradition. American modernists, it is important to note, were fully aware of the genius of these “icons” yet found their work incomplete. Cowley’s portraits of Marcel Proust, writing alone in a room padded with cork to shut out the sounds of the street, and of James Joyce, unwilling to venture outside for fear of physical and bacteriological contamination, stand as symbols of a modernism that, like T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*, has consciously “robbed [the present] of vitality.”¹³ On the contrary, Cowley and his generation are “excited by the adventure of living the present,” even though they continue to acknowledge the “saints” as part of their esthetic and intellectual baggage.¹⁴

Michael Denning makes an eloquent case for the continuity between the culture of the 1920s and that of the “red decade” in his recent *The Cultural Front*, arguing that the “thirties” do not “fall outside those larger stories of modernism and postmodernism.” On the contrary, the culture of the decade and in particular of its second half—which Denning names the “Age of the CIO”—was characterized by “a new social modernism”

that “was built by the children of the modernist arts, struggling to assimilate and transcend its legacy of formalist experiment.”¹⁵ Likewise, James Bloom, in his intellectual biography of *New Masses* editor Mike Gold, has persuasively argued that Gold was not the “intellectual hack” that later critics accused him of being.¹⁶ On the contrary, in his efforts to hybridize the “Prospero” of modernism with the “Caliban” of intelligibility and political engagement, Gold showed a “subversive mastery of the culture he challenged” and ultimately, Bloom concludes, attempted to reconcile “left politics and modernist poetics.”¹⁷

A revised, more inclusive, version of modernism has important consequences for the history of the presence of radical intellectuals in Hollywood.¹⁸ Gold was in close contact with many of the protagonists of my story, and he often referred to cinema as a way to clarify his own project. By 1930, he had already characterized the new literature he advocated as a “cinema in words,”¹⁹ and in 1937 he saluted the “proletarian pioneers” who had traveled to Hollywood to make politically inspiring films.²⁰

Ultimately, these contributions all point to the necessity of recasting the history of the Hollywood community and its cinema from the 1930s to the end of World War II within the cultural context of an increasingly politicized modernism. A modernism, I would add, that was concerned with the necessity to open up its message to the masses insofar as it was increasingly aware that the work of the previous generation of modernists had been hampered by the narrowness, elitism, and overall fragmentation of its audience.²¹ Like Cowley, Gold, or German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, Hollywood modernists recognized that much of the 1920s modernist culture had been unable to oppose—and even comment upon—the disastrous rise of fascist political movements.

The American and European intellectuals who “went Hollywood” in the 1930s were reacting to these experiences and to this partial failure. They attempted to mold a modernism that was both accessible to mass audiences and open to “political intention.”²² In this context, “going Hollywood” and lobbying for a more realistic cinema hardly meant abandoning the modernist project. Hollywood’s cinema promised the construction of a democratic modernism, a common language, able to promote modernity while maintaining a commitment to democracy as well as the political and intellectual engagement of the masses.

In looking at the interaction between artists and producers, democratic modernism and Hollywood filmmaking style, I have deployed, somewhat

loosely, what Theodor Adorno termed “forcefield.” Members of the Frankfurt School, and in particular Adorno and Walter Benjamin, used the concept of the forcefield, or *Kraftfeld*, to describe a relationship between different cultural and social phenomena in a way that allows for interaction without ever arriving at any “extorted reconciliation.” As applied to the history of Hollywood, the notion of forcefield allows us to grant a degree of agency to the artists working within the Hollywood studios without losing sight of the fundamental limits of this cultural negotiation.²³

Too often we forget that living, working, and struggling inside and outside of the Hollywood studios was a thriving Hollywood community whose political development and intellectual debates had an effect on the ultimate product of the studios. According to many, Hollywood is and always has been a “commercial institution, engaged in manufacturing and selling a specific product in a capitalist market place.”²⁴ For the agency and the politics of the actual filmmakers, there is hardly any room. To be sure, Hollywood filmmakers’ agency was constrained. The dialogue between intellectuals and Hollywood cinema had to build on an esthetic norm—the Hollywood classical style—that had taken a definite, but not immutable, shape in the course of Hollywood history.²⁵ Nor was this a dialogue among equals, since power relations, though complex and ever shifting, dominated the terms of the negotiation. But the evidence increasingly emerging from the archives of the studios suggests that Hollywood filmmakers did not passively execute the will of the masters of the studios, with no control or personal interest in their work. Indeed, in the 1930s the tradition of Hollywood narrative was both fortified and redefined within a forcefield that incorporated a number of social and intellectual networks operating in the Hollywood community.

The concept of network is particularly useful for my project as well because it provides a way of analyzing how different groups in Hollywood participated in the production of films. These cultural workers were operating not only on an individual basis, but also as representatives of specific networks with a national—and at times even transnational—base.²⁶ In this perspective, it is useful to keep in mind that Fritz Lang was not just a Hollywood director; he was also a member of the refugee network. His actions were scrutinized not only in the Hollywood studios, but also in the pages of refugee magazines like *Aufbau*. As a refugee, Lang had to help fellow refugees while striving to make anti-Nazi films.

Likewise, John Howard Lawson was not merely a Hollywood New Yorker but also a member of the Communist Party apparatus, whose line he generally followed in the Hollywood studios.

Conceiving of Hollywood as “a city of networks” that extended beyond the horizon of Hollywood and Vine might suggest a new, less bounded way to address the cultural history of the community. Furthermore, each Hollywood participant was touched by more than one of these networks, and they were, therefore, responsive to the demands of various networks at the same time. From 1936 on, for instance, Fritz Lang and other anti-Nazi refugees identified with both the refugee network and that of the American Left.

As the Hollywood community matured, members attempted to reconcile their loyalty to translocal networks, with allegiances to the local, political culture that had given a new vitality to Hollywood and Los Angeles. Crises erupted whenever local and translocal loyalties were in conflict. This occurred, for instance, during the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact when the Communist Party line conflicted with the anti-fascist culture of the Hollywood community. For someone like John Howard Lawson, loyalty to the party line was the main priority. But for other Hollywood communists and fellow travelers, the choice was not easy, straining the relationship between them and Lawson, and, more generally, between the Hollywood communists and the party’s New York-based central committee.²⁷

The main assumption behind this work is that we ought to take Hollywood seriously, something seldom done by American or European historians. Even acute scholars, openly intrigued by the historical relevance of American popular culture, often deal with Hollywood’s history with a telling nonchalance rather than probing analysis.²⁸

Historians often seem to take movies and their creators for granted. While there are many examples from which to choose, the following illustrate the point. In *Cheap Amusements*, Kathy Peiss’s brilliant analysis of how immigrant working-class women interacted with commercialized leisure in turn-of-the-century New York City, the author candidly confesses that she has contented herself with the synopses of the films she discusses, even though these films are available to scholars in the Library of Congress and part of her argument relies substantially on the analysis of these films.²⁹ Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund openly claimed to have been “neither systematic nor subtle in our approach to the question

of political content or the nature of politicization of movies” because of their disinterest in any “esthetic sophistication in the area of form and style.”³⁰ In her path-breaking analysis of the effect of mass culture on Chicago’s ethnically diverse working class, Lizabeth Cohen evokes the subjectivity of the receivers, depicting the way in which Chicago workers participated in mass culture forms while maintaining their ethnic and class-conscious identities. Cohen’s work is a powerful historical revision of Critical Theory’s assumptions about mass culture and its effects on ordinary Americans, yet she takes into account only one side of the question, never probing the subjectivity of the producers of mass-marketed cultural products.³¹ In other words, one wonders how far the Chicago working class had to go in order to lend an oppositional meaning to the words uttered by Henry Fonda in his famous speech in John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath*, simultaneously endorsing the killing of a strike-breaker and hoping to be “wherever there is a fight so hungry people can eat . . . wherever there is a cop beating up a guy.”

At the *akmè* of the Hollywood community in the late 1930s, Hollywood and its films were on their way to becoming a legitimate pursuit for American historians and intellectuals. Writing in 1939, Lewis Jacobs, a New Deal liberal and a filmmaker, meant his work to be a “scientific” analysis of the development of the American film industry. Jacobs saw movies as the art of the people *in potentia* and, as its Beardian title makes obvious, *The Rise of the American Film* was meant to situate American cinema within American civilization, or, as Martin Dworkin noted in his preface to the 1967 reprint of the volume, to show that Hollywood cinema “grow[s] out of immersion in its own time and place.”³²

But few followed Jacobs’s mode. At the same time that New Critics made their rather narrow definition of modernism into the dominant one, popularizers of Critical Theory, such as David Riesman and Dwight Macdonald, more attuned with the reading of the *Dialektik* than with Walter Benjamin’s more open-ended insights, saw movies as part of mass society’s attack on the individual character of art, something to be treated at best with sympathetic condescension as “low brow,” or with open contempt as “midcult.”³³ In *Movie-Made America*, Robert Sklar balanced this approach, persuasively arguing that film is neither the people’s art nor the simple epiphany of the will of the master, but instead one of the terrains where cultural negotiation takes place, and class and ethnic struggles are fought. “What is remarkable,” Sklar argues in his conclusion, “is the way that American movies, through much of their span, have

altered or challenged many of the values and doctrines of powerful social and cultural forces in American society, providing alternative ways of understanding the world.”³⁴ Yet, few film scholars and cultural historians have taken up the most intriguing ideas put forward in Sklar’s synthesis, in particular the possibility of linking Hollywood esthetics to American cultural history. In this regard, historians seem to have accepted one of the aspects of the popular version of Critical Theory that reduces actual films to a sort of undifferentiated “megatext,” where each film is the same as the other.³⁵

On the other hand, film scholars saw with increasing suspicion any attempt to establish a sense of causality between films and their social and cultural context, ultimately performing what Richard Maltby has aptly termed a “slide into the text.”³⁶ As a result, the possibility—to use Dana Polan’s words—of understanding cinematic narratives of a particular period as “a way open to a social moment to write a version of its own history and of its present”³⁷ has been rarely tested, though traces of a potentially productive contamination are visible in works by Lary May, Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, and Dana Polan.³⁸

My study gives a chronological account of the history of the Hollywood community and its filmmaking style, underlining the continuities between the different periods without downplaying historical change. The first chapter describes the arrival in Hollywood of the anti-fascist European filmmakers and the radical intellectuals from New York. These two groups, “Hollywood Europeans” and “Hollywood New Yorkers,” saw in the Hollywood of the early 1930s the possibility of molding a popular, audience-oriented, and more democratic version of modernism. The rebirth of the Hollywood community after the introduction of sound at the end of the 1920s coincides with a transnational migration that brought hundreds of intellectuals to the West Coast from the salons of New York and Europe. This migration was partly determined by technological changes, by economic choices, and by political events occurring far from the crossroads of Hollywood and Vine. But I argue that “going Hollywood” was also a chapter of the international history of modernism, one that meant to democratize and politicize it.

The starting point of the second chapter is Robert Sklar’s definition of Hollywood in the early 1930s as the “golden age of turbulence.” American cinema was marked by the diversity and contradictory nature of Hollywood’s products.³⁹ An archipelago of “little islands”—to use the definition

of refugee director Max Ophüls⁴⁰—Hollywood had a fragmented social and intellectual life that largely remained within the confines of private salons, and Hollywood filmmaking echoed that centerlessness during those years.

The third chapter deals with Hollywood in the second half of the 1930s, when the number of refugees and anti-Nazi immigrants in Hollywood increased as a result of the European crisis. This chapter examines the strengthening of the alliance between Hollywood New Yorkers and Hollywood Europeans. Hollywood's social and intellectual life found a center in organizations such as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL) and the Hollywood Democratic Committee. Politically, the focus of such an alliance was on anti-fascist mobilization and support for the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Esthetically, New Yorkers and Europeans agreed on a loose notion of political realism, a cinema able to tackle contemporary issues in terms accessible to the masses. This chapter examines the linkage between these debates and several trends in American cinema. In particular, I examine William Dieterle's Warner Bros. biopics (*Pasteur*, *The Life of Emile Zola*, *Juarez*) as films that celebrate the progressive Hollywood community of modern intellectuals able to use the mass media to engage the audience in the democratic struggle for change. I also examine the production of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (WB, 1939), the first major anti-Nazi Hollywood production. The production of *Confessions* fully involved Hollywood Europeans and Hollywood New Yorkers and served as the model for Hollywood progressive filmmaking throughout the war.

Centering on the crisis of 1939-1941, the fourth chapter shows how the Nazi-Soviet pact and the question of intervention divided the Hollywood community. The beginning of World War II and the turn of Soviet politics caused the demise of HANL, the "politicization" of ethnic identities (in particular the rise of exclusively refugee organizations such as the European Film Fund), and the "ethnicization" of political ones (e.g., Hollywood communists as a group defined by a precise notion of cultural and political difference) at the expense of the political and cultural cohesiveness of the Hollywood community. As a result of this crisis, alternative forms of democratic modernism emerged; while they retained emphasis on the politicization and democratization of modernism, they contested realism as its only possible incarnation.

The fifth chapter deals with the tight wartime collaboration between Hollywood New Yorkers and Hollywood Europeans in the context of

the war effort. Hollywood's emergence as the center of the Los Angeles intelligentsia reached its apogee in the 1943 Writers' Congress at UCLA, where Hollywood writers, refugees, studio executives, and university professors congregated to discuss the democratic possibilities of American cinema. The enlistment of Hollywood cinema in the war effort enhanced its civic role as both entertainment and a means of political communication. In its relationship with the Hollywood studios, the Office of War Information—staffed with many members of the progressive Hollywood community—endorsed a film style that included many of the techniques discussed in the Hollywood salons and political organizations in the 1930s: the softening of the protagonist-driven narrative, the crossbreeding of entertainment and propaganda, and the insertion of newsreel footage into feature films.

The final two chapters examine the aftermath of World War II, the erosion of the Hollywood community as a cultural center, and the effect of this crisis on Hollywood progressive filmmaking. As these chapters will show, the causes of Hollywood's collapse were internal as well as external, esthetic as well as political. The crisis within the Hollywood community largely predates McCarthyism, and this may help explain why the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) were so successful and far-reaching in the film industry. Even before McCarthyism, organizations such as the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization had ceased to supply a cohesion to Hollywood intellectual and political life. United in support of Roosevelt's administration and against the common enemy of fascism during the war, New Yorkers and Europeans were increasingly divided about the issues ahead, such as the American domestic situation and the future of Germany. A revisionist attitude toward the war and its aims was visible in many of the film of the period, from *Crossfire* (1946) to *A Foreign Affair* (1948), and in magazines such as *The Screen Writer* and *Hollywood Quarterly*. Such revisionism informed the debates about the democratic possibilities of Hollywood film. Negotiated within the Hollywood forcefield by producers, Hollywood progressives, and government officials, the Hollywood war film had fallen short of the expectations harbored by some of the New Yorkers and Europeans. In fact, the re-emigration of Hollywood filmmakers to Europe and New York began immediately after the war, and an anti-realist and anti-Hollywood film avant-garde emerged in New York soon after the war. Both factors weakened the centripetal power of Hollywood and its political realism. Ultimately, the crisis also affected the language of

film. The linkage between American cinema and the issues debated in the public arena became increasingly indirect, Aesopian, and metaphorical. Political realism in film survived at the margins, in works such as *Salt of the Earth* (Independent Productions Corporation, 1953), and even in the anticommunist films of the Cold War that—perversely enough—attempted to build on such tradition.