

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient. Scattered across this background are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top left towards the bottom right.

THE HIDDEN ART OF HOLLYWOOD

In Defense of the Studio Era Film

John Fawell

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PUBLISHING GROUP

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To Yvette, Ted, and Charlie

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explain why films as seemingly light in content and as commercial in orientation as those of the classic Hollywood era have been, and should continue to be, taken so seriously by film scholars. This may seem like an unnecessary task, seeing how much ink has been spilled on Hollywood by film scholars already. The number of books on Hitchcock alone has to supersede that of many a venerated writer. But despite all that has been written on Hollywood, I still see a general disconnect between the film scholar's attitude—and that of the general public—toward classic Hollywood.

For example, I teach a core curriculum program of art and literature into which we slip a small adjunct survey of film history. I have been struck by how difficult it is for the average college freshman or sophomore to easily see the merit of the classic Hollywood studio films we show them in this program. Ironically, classes on these films, which are introduced in many ways as a lively respite from drudgery of core humanities, are often the most difficult classes to teach. It's easy to sell a college freshman on the necessity of studying Marcus Aurelius, less so John Ford's *Stagecoach*, which the majority of them find, on first viewing, laughably antique.

Ford is actually easier to teach than some of the other Hollywood filmmakers. Once you freeze-frame a shot from *Stagecoach* the visual care of the film is apparent. Teaching a director who is not so obviously visually striking, a Preston Sturges or an Ernst Lubitsch, is much more of an exercise in frustration. The virtues of these films are subtler, having to do with rhythm, pacing, allusive and sophisticated dialogue, and charm—never easy virtues to translate in core curriculum. Even students who tend to like this kind of filmmaking still often find it dated, quaint, more of an historical curiosity than something relevant to them. As one student asked me, in an earnest desire to understand, “Are these films good in themselves or just good for their time?” (It was clear he was tending toward the

latter alternative.) It's this question that this book seeks to answer. And the answer it offers is unequivocal: these films were good then, and they are good now. The best of classical Hollywood filmmaking represents a high point in film history, a model of good filmmaking.

That said, I am utterly sympathetic to the students' confusion as to why they should take these films seriously. The classic Hollywood film lacks much that typically marks art as serious. These films are, for example, rarely socially relevant. Sam Goldwyn's famous quip, "If I wanted a message I'd call Western Union," is an accurate epigram for the era. This is devoutly unserious art. Students studying Hollywood for the first time experience an almost palpable sense of relief when they are shown a film from the latter part of the classical era, when Hollywood began vying with Europe in "high seriousness," something with social or historical relevance, like Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, even though the professor may be feeling, at the same time, that much of what represents the glory of Hollywood has been drained out of such didactic exercises.

Moreover, the classic Hollywood film lacks many of the virtues students have come to identify with successful cinema. After the airing out of cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood studio films seem hopelessly unrealistic and hemmed in by stagy, artificial sets. And the naturalism in acting that seemed to breeze into film with exterior landscapes, makes the classic Hollywood actor seem stiff, wooden, and also a product of the stage. Schooled, as the modern audience is, in the clever hijinks of the European art film and the overpowering stimuli of the modern Hollywood special effect, the old Hollywood film can seem primitive in technique, slow and static, too much like filmed theater. And viewed 50 years past the breakdown of the code, these films seem childishly naive, oppressive in their optimism and idealism, well-nigh fascist, or at least laughable in their squeaky-clean approach to life.

Moreover, it's not only students who see classic Hollywood this way. Many an educated adult has grilled me with the same questions my students do, only with a more jaundiced eye. They no longer suffer from any delusions about the authority of professors, and they have heard about the French lionizing Jerry Lewis. They're not going to stand for any nonsense, and they ask me to defend myself in taking these films seriously. Their suspicions, frustrations, and confusions are the same as the students. Yes, they concede, there is a charming simplicity to these films, and yes, they do bring back a certain lovely, hazy waft of optimism and elegance from the pleasant years gone by, but don't ask them to take these films seriously as works of art.

The attitude that these films are interesting as cultural by-products rather than artful in themselves is shared by academia itself, even the academic film world, if I am to judge from the number of papers and articles I've read that find their only interest in Hollywood to be an archeological one, in the way a film reflects this or that era or social trend. Whether it's a traditional study of screwball comedy as reflective of Depression-era poverty or a more contemporary piece by a queer

theorist on the sublimated homoeroticism of Hitchcock's films, the idea remains the same: Hollywood films are more interesting as sociological artifacts than as works of art.

Theoretical trends change, but what has remained the same, over the years, is the large number of papers and publications that concern themselves with the Hollywood film only as a cultural stepping-stone to larger, more significant phenomena. Nearly 60 years after the French critics excoriated us for treating film like an inferior form of literature, many a professor is still drawn by the siren call of the literary adaptation film, even if these films have traditionally represented the worst of Hollywood and even if the professor's purpose in studying these films is, inevitably, to point out how far the film falls short of its original source. Apparently, many a professor shares the same puzzlement the students do when looking at the classic Hollywood film on its own, finding it a poor, denuded thing when shorn of its historical or sociological context. Many a film scholar seems to be able to look at a Hollywood film for itself, for its own virtues, for about the same amount of time that they can stare into the sun.

Even in the heart of the world of film aficionados there is evidence of a certain indifference toward the classic Hollywood film. The 2002 Sight and Sound poll of greatest films ever represents the opinions of a pretty impressive collection of film critics and filmmakers, but even there one is struck by the meager representation of classic Hollywood. Of the fifty top films chosen only eleven are from classic Hollywood. That may seem to some a fair representation. But there are a couple of things notable about the films that were chosen. First, ten of the eleven chosen films are postwar representations of Hollywood. Modern film audiences tend to warm up to later Hollywood more easily. Just a few years short of the breakdown of the code, these films have an edginess and cynicism that is compatible to modern tastes. And they tend to have a more baroque styling. Three directors are responsible for seven of the eleven choices—Ford, Hitchcock, Welles—all great visual stylists. Welles's films are so avant-garde that they probably more accurately represent the demise, rather than the fulfillment, of the Hollywood tradition. (F. Scott Fitzgerald recognized this when he wrote, "Orson Welles is the biggest menace to come to Hollywood in years.") The gravitation toward these high style films reflects the common conception, and one contrary to the basic ethos of the classic Hollywood, that the more obvious the art, the more serious or artful the film. I've noticed, for example, that while much of traditional Hollywood is a tough sell for students, they gobble up film noir with its existential bleakness and Expressionist angles and shadows. "OK," they seem to say, "this I can buy as art."

Those Hollywood filmmakers who are missing from the Sight and Sound list are the practitioners of the quiet art of the well-crafted film, filmmakers like George Cukor, William Wyler, William Wellman, and Mervyn LeRoy, whose films are well crafted but in such a way as to fly under the radar of modern audiences and their taste for visual élan. Other directors, like Sturges and Lubitsch, have more style (though not necessarily a striking visual style) but still go missing

from contemporary favorites list because their charms are so quiet and subtle and because their light and elegant comic touch is read as superficial and frothy by modern audiences who seem wed to the social sciences and demand films with didactic lessons, messages, and portentous themes.

And of course film scholars and filmmakers seem curiously unimpressed with Hollywood before the war, despite the vaunted reputation 1939 has as the apex of the Hollywood studio era. Charlie Chaplin nearly stands alone as the representative of Hollywood's prewar heyday on this list. What's particularly curious in its omission is the period between the silents and the war, from 1929 to 1939, the period that has often been found to represent the core of the golden age of Hollywood.

Curiously, while critics like me might find the Hollywood studio underrepresented in a list like this, others find the list still too stodgy, too wed to the past. One critic, Ty Burr, has put some effort into polling filmmaking students as to their personal canon and reports in an essay, "Once Upon a Classic," that these students' canon overlaps little with the Sight and Sound one. "*Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane* don't matter much anymore, even if you think they should," he concludes. Burr quotes David Fincher, director of *Fight Club* (one of the current films that, according to his polls, form for young filmmakers a new canon) as saying, "*Casablanca* now feels like a stage play. It's beautifully, classically made, but in terms of the language of cinema, it's almost irrelevant." In the same article, a professor of filmmaking at the University of Southern California notes that his students are "wired to take things much faster and more easily than older audiences, and they get impatient with very traditional storytelling. They want to break frames and skip around in time; they're used to doing that."¹

The essay suggests an indifference to classical Hollywood within the world of burgeoning American filmmakers, a divestiture from a rich tradition one might think they would be building on rather than abandoning. And indeed a cursory look at the films referred to as "independents" reveals a cinema almost diametrically opposed to the Hollywood tradition. Where Hollywood studiously avoided the topical, these films search for political relevance. Where Hollywood sought to hide its technique, these films continue the French New Wave tradition of making technique apparent and often favor a jumpy, fragmented style. Whereas Hollywood worshipped the narrative arc and sought crisp, musical pacing, these films, again following the European art films they seem to prefer, favor languorous storylines and ponderous pacing. The essence of the classical aesthetic is to create films with technique so quiet and hidden that it easily goes unnoticed, a technique that does not call attention to itself or interfere with the drive and rhythm of the story. We are not, perhaps, in an era that celebrates this kind of quiet aesthetic or even understands it.

This book then, first and foremost, aims to address itself to those who sit somewhat outside of the world of film criticism and who are perplexed as to why the classical Hollywood film is treated with the high-mindedness with which it is, to those who want to clearly understand why we take these films, intended as

light entertainments, as seriously as we do. But it is also addressed to those closer to the world of film studies, who tend to underrate this cinema either because it is not obvious in its style or because it steadfastly refuses to justify itself in terms of social relevance or didactic content. To defend classic Hollywood is, in many ways, to defend a cinema of pure form, the ideals of which are rhythm and structure, not literary ideas or social content. Hollywood is underrated in the same way a practitioner of naturalism like Guy de Maupassant is, because it keeps its meanings close to the vest and when it has something of significance to say builds it into the plastics of its story rather than spits it out like message on ticker tape.

I want to emphasize that my goal in this book is to synthesize certain essential aspects of the classic Hollywood film, not to delineate all the different features of the Hollywood system. Ever since the reaction against “auteurism” (the notion that the director is the overriding author of the film) in the 1960s, it has been de rigueur to bow to the collaborative nature of film and to emphasize that it is nearly impossible, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, to gather together the “whole equation” of the Hollywood studio film. Consequently, there are a good many textbooks out there already on the multitudinous of the Hollywood film—the different studios, genres, the wide array of personnel that go into the collaborative effort of making a studio film, each one with their special claims of authorship. Perhaps film criticism has been so respectful of the multifariousness of the Hollywood film that it has lost sight a little that there is a core group of films by a core group of filmmakers that represent the cream of Hollywood’s crop and that there are essential virtues in these films that represent the core of Hollywood’s art. My goal in this book is to generalize, to isolate, and to gather those virtues that run throughout the very best classic Hollywood films, despite the time the films were made in or the studio they came from. Of course there are vast differences between Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921), coming out of the silent era, and Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment* (1960), coming at the tail end of the Hollywood tradition, when the studios were more or less defunct and the code on the verge of being entirely broken down. And yet Wilder, in his interviews, often refers to Chaplin as one of his models of good filmmaking, and both *The Kid* and *The Apartment* represent excellent examples of the classical Hollywood aesthetic. What they have in common is the object of study in this book.

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When Is Classic Hollywood?

Most critics agree that the studio era had reached a point of consolidation around 1917, both in terms of the machinery of production and the classical aesthetic that had been slowly hammered out during cinema's evolution as a form of storytelling and entertainment in America. David Bordwell points out that by 1917, Hollywood had more or less arrived at the essentials of the way it would tell a story, the way it defined time and space in a narrative film, and its laws of editing, lighting and storytelling. "By 1917," he asserts, "the system was complete in its basic narrative and stylistic premises."¹ The shock that the advent of sound, in the late 1920s, caused in Hollywood is sometimes overstated. Cumbersome sound equipment certainly led to a good number of static films with leaden acting, but there were bad movies before sound as well. The best directors, like King Vidor and Raoul Walsh, continued to innovate visually, and in the hands of pros like these, the classical Hollywood style continued to evolve. Robert Sklar notes that the turnover in Hollywood personnel was minimal during the transition from silent to sound film, which points to "an important but neglected fact—the visual aesthetics of Hollywood movies, the way shots were taken and assembled into a whole, changed little if at all from silents to sound."²

Hollywood scholars debate more on the causes and dates of Hollywood's demise but generally agree it began shortly after the war with the advent of television and the breakup of the studio monopoly by the forced divestiture of their theater holdings and finished somewhere in the early 1960s, where we see the last vestiges of a product that comes from the hands of studio-trained filmmakers and represents the principles of studio filmmaking.

POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD

World War II seemed to have changed things in Hollywood. There was a discernible change in worldview in many of the Hollywood films after the war. They seemed to insist on a darker understanding of the world and more realistic estimation of evil than Hollywood was willing to accord before the war. Perhaps this was most apparent with the advent of film noir, which, though building on the genre of the gangster film, offered a much bleaker and more menacing universe and a darker photographic technique to match that universe. Film noir was characterized by an Expressionist aesthetic that Hollywood had kept at bay for 20 years or so, an aesthetic at once gloomier and artier than Hollywood had previously advanced. It is a little ironic that so much of the nostalgia that modern audiences feel for old Hollywood focuses on this genre that is, in many ways, antithetical to the spirit of Hollywood and, in the long run, signaled its demise. Hollywood's prewar package of charm and innocence is far less in vogue and the subject of far fewer homages.

Hollywood felt the impact of the foreign films that had appeared in the wake of the war. The neorealist aesthetic of Rossellini and DeSica, which had grown organically out of the rubble of postwar Italy, put Hollywood's glossy charm in a bad light. In the early days of the Hollywood studios, Hollywood had proved its strength by absorbing European art technique. Montage became a preferred way of showing the passage of time in compressed form. Expressionism's oblique angles became a means of communicating psychological confusion. The classical aesthetic of Hollywood was a hardy creature, able to conquer more expressive, less classical styles by absorbing them, using them in a measured way, making them subordinate to its larger, more conservative system. But Hollywood did not seem to have that same resilience when it came to the new realism issuing out of postwar Europe. This aesthetic rode the reality of America's experience in World War II and seemed to spell the end of Hollywood insistence on a charming and stylized idealism.

Italian neo-realism found its parallel, in America, in the urban aesthetic of film noir and "New York" filmmaking, both of which thrived on gritty photography of actual urban locales. And the new emphasis on realism found expression in the 1950s in a new emphasis on realistic content in films as well as realistic photography. There was an appetite after the war for serious social drama, quite antithetical to Hollywood's prewar determination to avoid, at all costs, a cinema of messages. There was a vogue for the adult, realistic drama of the New York theater and social dramas by authors like Clifford Odets and Tennessee Williams. Films like those of Stanley Kramer and Elia Kazan abounded, films that were more topical and justified themselves, not by the old Hollywood criteria of charm and formal balance, but by their social heft. These "serious" works precipitated a war on the production code, which took place in a series of court battles from 1953 to 1968, when the code was replaced by a less oppressive rating system. And so the films became more explicit in their sexuality and violence as they became

more ponderous in their themes. Even the Western grew up, bearing a new social weight that would have astounded the genre's forefathers. Westerns now might be political or social parables (*High Noon*, *Bad Day at Hanging Rock*), studies of darker cowboy heroes (Anthony Mann's Westerns), or exercises in baroque style and offbeat sexuality (Nicolas Ray's *Johnny Guitar*, Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious*), but they were no longer allowed to be simple oaters.

This more serious drama brought with it a more serious approach to acting. Films based on wrenching dramas encouraged the wrenching approach of method actors, extremely frustrating to many of the old Hollywood directors, like Hitchcock, Cukor, and Hawks, for whom acting was still an art that Gary Cooper epitomized, not a fierce expression but a calm letting go of technique, an easy presentation of one's self from film to film.

Put it all together, and you have much in the years just after the war that was contrary to the nature of Hollywood before the war: morbidity and pessimism instead of Hollywood's relentless buoyancy; gritty realism instead of Hollywood's carefully rendered ideal world; high seriousness instead of Hollywood's charming insouciance; messages, whereas Hollywood had prized above all showing rather than saying; mannered acting, where Hollywood had once favored the simple unforced presentation of the self; increasing "stylism," where Hollywood had favored invisible technique; an explicitness in depiction of sex and violence, where once filmmakers had sought, in the tradition of silent film, to express themselves suggestively or elliptically.

THE BREAKUP OF THE STUDIO; FREEDOM RUN AMOK

The causes most often cited for Hollywood's decline are the advent of television, which offered an alternative to Hollywood entertainment and precipitously drained Hollywood of much of its talent and clientele (particularly from the low-budget end of the Hollywood studios), and the suits, lodged by those in Hollywood who longed for more independent means of production and which brought about Hollywood's divestiture of its theater holdings, robbing the studios of a guaranteed venue for their releases.

The group of independent producers, directors, and actors who forced the studios to rid themselves of their theaters had as their goal a more independent cinema, not burdened by the capitalist machinery of the studio system. As Charlie Chaplin, one of these independents, famously said, "masterpieces cannot be mass-produced in the cinema like tractors in a factory."

Ironically, the move to a more independent cinema that was an immediate consequence of the breakup of the studios led, in many ways, to an exacerbation of rather than an escape from the squeeze of capitalism on film. When the studio controlled its theaters and could block book (sell packages of films that included not only A films but also B films, shorts, cartoons, and the like) they had the freedom to take a loss on a film here or there. After divestiture and the dismantling of the Hollywood studio, Hollywood had to make fewer films. Frank Capra decried the

loss of the smaller film when Hollywood broke up its studio system. Eighty percent of MGM's product, Capra noted, was lower grade fare—medium-budget pictures with a single star or low-budget B pictures: "Into those very low-budget films they would put the beginners—the young starlets, writers, directors, producers—and turn them loose. Here was the trial, and it would be practically unsupervised. You could really experiment. They never threw a picture away." As Capra notes, this energy and experimentation were fostered by the very monster independent artists who were trying to do away with block booking: "They never could lose money, because no matter how bad a picture they made, MGM could always put it in as a second feature to one of their big pictures, because they owned the theaters."³ Veteran B film director Budd Boetticher made the same point: "Directing is like any art form or any athletic form: the more you're allowed to do, the better you get. The studio let us make \$100,000 pictures and make terrible mistakes because they knew these pictures would be the second feature on a double bill. So we had an opportunity that young film directors don't have today."⁴ Without block booking and without B films the studios lost their source of energy and experimentation, the spirit of innovation and sense of fun that goes a long way toward explaining the allure of classic Hollywood. Most of the B film personnel were the first to flock to television. Many a second-tier director's filmography shifts dramatically to television in the 1950s.

As the studios dismantled, many directors and cinematographers came to the slow realization that life in the studios had been better than they realized at the time. Director George Sydney, speaking of MGM, said, "[T]here was great backing by the studio, more than we realized," adding, "[T]hey were putting all the ammunition in our hands."⁵ Cinematographer George Folsey longed for the MGM photographic laboratory and cinematographer James Wong Howe for the rich variety of experience at MGM and Warner Bros.: "If I wasn't shooting a film, I had to go shoot second unit. I had to shoot inserts. But that was all wonderful because I learned a lot. I could afford to make mistakes on those inserts because it didn't cost much to make them over. I feel sorry for a lot of photographers today."⁶ Howard Hawks felt that his 1965 film *Red Line 7000* had been a failure because he "didn't have the right technical equipment" to do the driving stunts: "It's difficult to make a picture like that today because you're not getting the same help you used to get from studio departments. They're all afraid that maybe they're spending too much money and the organization's gone."⁷ George Cukor still found himself asking, "Oh God where is the stage department," when he'd begin a film in the 1970s. The studios, he emphasized, were far from the "big, horrible factories" they were reputed to be: "You got the best stories, the best scripts, the best actors, the best cameramen. They had all that, and I only realized it after it was gone."⁸

Over and over, veteran Hollywood directors paint the same portrait of studio bigwigs: they were certainly not intellectuals, but they had a nose for talent. Sam Goldwyn was "a great man, if only for the simple reason he always hired the best people he could possibly get," said Henry Koster. MGM musical producer Arthur Freed's "greatest talent," according to Charles Walters, "was to surround

himself with talent.” Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox “never hired bums,” said Henry Hathaway. “He had great respect for talent and he always got top people.” Harry Cohn at Columbia, according to George Sydney, “was really out for quality.”⁹ The old Hollywood moguls may have been “brutal and ignorant,” writes Ethan Mordden, “but they did establish mediums of creativity and keep them operating. What more could you ask of a Capitalist?”¹⁰

After studio divestiture and the demise of block booking studios, Hollywood lost its safety net and became much warier of experimentation and the prospect of an unsuccessful film. Producers were more frightened about profit. Directors lost the feeling that producers were behind them providing them with ammunition. As one study on the subject put it, “without block booking the modern Hollywood distributors have had to count on each film carrying its own box office weight. Figuratively speaking, the new studios tried to score more home runs than ever before, even though they were at bat fewer times.”¹¹ Looking for a home run every time they stepped up to the plate meant that Hollywood producers lost their interest in the small gem, the art project that lent their company a certain dignity. “What I used to do was try and make a big picture, a smash,” John Ford told Peter Bogdanovich in the early 1960s, “and then I could palm off a little one on them. You can’t do that anymore.”¹² This new fear about profitability poisoned filmmaking for Billy Wilder. “Now,” Wilder said in an interview in 1978, “they make you feel its life or death for a studio. ‘If you don’t hit with this picture we have to dismiss all the secretaries, all the policemen. Everything is going.’”¹³ This kind of fearful atmosphere fosters homogenization, not variety or eccentricity.

Hollywood had long ago started screening its films before trial audiences, a practice that drove independent filmmakers like Chaplin and Orson Welles nuts, but now the desire to understand what an audience wanted, to consult the marketplace before making a film intensified even further. “When the studios broke up,” said Vidor, “and the conglomerates took over there was nobody you could go to and say, ‘This is an idea I have to make into a film.’ They’ll say, ‘What stars have you got?’ Immediately they start to think about bankability and financial insurance, and you’ll have to say, ‘This is a best-seller,’ or ‘Two stars have seen it and they’re going to go for it.’”¹⁴ The process was set in motion that would lead, first, to the cult of the hugely profitable blockbuster film and, then finally, to the phenomenon of green-lighting films for their “franchise” value alone, the absurdo ad reductum being a film, the idea of which generates, not with an artist, not even with a producer, but with a marketing department and a plan to sell subsidiary products through the film.

The independent filmmakers who forced divestiture aimed not only for a less commercial cinema in Hollywood but also for one of greater quality. Whether they got this is still a question. With the studios dissolved, independent producers found that they had to create the studio anew with each film. Independents had longed to escape the dictatorial head of the studio, but it was not long before they came to pine for that dictator, who, in hindsight, they realized had been fairly

benevolent. It was not unusual to hear even the most rebellious directors longing, in the poststudio era, for the world where they simply went to one person to green-light a film. "In that period they didn't interfere," King Vidor said of the producers. "They were making too many pictures to interfere . . . I could tell the head guy an idea and he could say, 'Yes, go ahead,' that doesn't happen today."¹⁵ Here again, Hollywood directors tend to be uniform in their admiration for the ability of Hollywood producers to make snap decisions and green-light a project just like that. Fritz Lang praised Richard Zanuck for the "free hand" he gave Lang.¹⁶ Capra noted, "I would never have reached where I got to if I didn't have the liberty I had at Columbia to make the films I wanted to make."¹⁷ Hawks praised "people like Jack Warner and Harry Cohn and Irving Thalberg and Zanuck" because they "started you out and let you go."¹⁸ Journeyman director Michael Gordon said that "in Old Hollywood if somebody said, 'that's a deal', it was a deal. You didn't have to have the agreement on paper, you didn't have to have payment in advance."¹⁹ All of these directors praising all of these producers exhale the same word nostalgically: freedom. "Joe Mankiewicz had a completely free hand, I had a free hand, Henry King had a free hand. Zanuck never bothered people he had faith in," said Henry Hathaway.²⁰ Howard Hawks concurs, "Back then, we had more freedom and I think the pictures showed it."²¹

Now, directors launching a film had to cobble the finances together for themselves.

The concern with finding money at the outset of production, coupled with the heightened worries about profit, meant independent directors spent a great deal more time thinking about money than in the past. Whereas earlier they spoke to one person about the financing of the film and then got to work, now, they complained, they were lining up dozens of financiers and spending much more time getting a project off the ground rather than actually working on the project. "You've got to go through a series of commands now," complained John Ford, "and you never know who the Hell reads the scripts any more. You can't get an O.K. here in Hollywood for a script—it's got to go back to New York, and through a president and a board of directors and bankers and everyone else."²² Up till now Hollywood directors had always been notable for their humility when talking about film as art. They resisted the intellectualization of film by the new aficionados of the 1960s, and they were always more comfortable talking about film as craft than art. But they were not such anti-intellectuals that they were ready for their new roles as businessmen. "I stopped making pictures long before I wanted to," says Vidor. "The number one reason was that I didn't feel like being a promoter, a businessman."²³

Moreover, as Gerald Mast has pointed out, as the studios declined "the large pool of expert studio craftsmen and technicians began to dry up—with fewer films to make and fewer challenges to their artisanry."²⁴ The voracious beast that was the Hollywood studio had the beneficent result of honing filmmakers' skills, and a great many film scholars have detected a decline in the fundamentals of the classical filmmaking style that Hollywood created since the end of the studio era.

In the later Hollywood films, then, the art of financing films was reaching new heights at the same time that the art of making films was dwindling.

One of the most obvious manifestations of this drying up of talent was the approach to scripts in Hollywood's films after studio divestiture. Both because they no longer had the immense stable of writers that they had in the heyday of Hollywood and because they no longer had the safety net of their own theaters in which to release their product, Hollywood studios increasingly turned to preexistent plays and novels for their films. It was easier for a producer to raise money for a film that had already been a literary or dramatic success. Gerald Mast described the period preceding World War II in Hollywood as "the age of the Original Scenario" and the years after the war "the age of the Adaptation."²⁵

Of course Hollywood had always adapted preexistent literary works but never to this degree. And this was not a good thing for Hollywood because adaptations of literature, particularly serious literature, had never been Hollywood's forte. Hollywood had, and still has, a tendency to embarrass itself in proportion to how seriously it takes itself and shows itself particularly superficial when it tries to squeeze beloved novels into the 2 hours of sound and image that comprise a film or when it tries to translate the gravity of serious theater into the light rhythms of the classic Hollywood style. In these instances Hollywood has tended to create works that are antithetical to what it does well, films that are talky rather than visual, ham-handed in imparting their messages rather than suggestive or light in touch, films that are characterized by high seriousness rather than Hollywood's great ability to be wise and lighthearted at the same time.

This propensity for literary adaptation only deepened the propensity for more "serious" films in the era after the war. What had lessened was our opportunity to enjoy the kind of crackling dialogue that had evolved in Hollywood before the war, dialogue developed by the in-house scenarists. These scenarists were trained in a kind of language that had evolved with, and built itself around, film, a language that ceded ground to visual communication, that was spare and elusive rather than preachy, slangy and democratic rather than pronounced from a height.

The era that marks Hollywood's decline, from the late 1940s through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, then, was marked by a film system that produced fewer films. And those films were increasingly market-driven, which accounts for what Ethan Mordenn describes as "the bizarrely unambitious character of Hollywood in the 1950s." Boom times, Mordenn writes, "tolerate experimentation. The 1950s was a time of bust."²⁶ Those films that strived to be serious were often characterized by virtues that were antithetical to those Hollywood trumpeted before the war. They were sophomoric reflections of the European art cinema—lumbering, didactic self-serious works, as leaden in content as they were short in craft, misshapen offspring of the literary world, tailor-made to embarrass Hollywood and offering excellent fodder for anyone who wanted to argue that Hollywood and serious art should never be mentioned in the same breath.

The irony is that the independent artists who forced the dismantling of the studio system did so in the name of a cinema that would be less market-driven

and of higher quality but might have created a cinema that was the opposite. The Hollywood studio, with its factory process and division of labor, had seemed like the essence of capitalistic repression of art. But it paled in comparison to the market-driven frenzy that succeeded it. It turns out that freedom is a tricky thing to define. The irony of Chaplin's assertion that "masterpieces cannot be mass-produced in a factory" is that his greatest films came from his, and Hollywood's, era of greatest mass production. Director Joseph Newman even used Chaplin's factory metaphor to describe the environment in Hollywood after the demise of block booking. Newman found that "picturemaking" had "become more of an assembly line operation instead of the individual effort that had gone into pictures by men such as Irving Thalberg, David Selznick and Hunt Stromberg. Picturemaking had developed into a committee process."²⁷ Newman turns Chaplin's logic on its head. It was filmmaking accomplished under the old studio system that had really been characterized by freedom and independence. Once Hollywood artists escaped from the repression of the studio into the freedom of the marketplace they found they were more constrained than ever. As Hawks said, referring to the actors who were behind the drive for greater independence from the studios, "Then came the day when the stars decided what they were going to do and, holy smoke, what a mess they made."²⁸ French critic and director Francois Truffaut came to the same realization after he and his fellow French intellectuals had tried to foster an environment in which their favorite American "auteur" heroes could film with greater freedom: "We said that the American cinema pleases us, and its filmmakers are slaves; what if they were freed? And from the moment they were freed, they made shitty films."²⁹

LATE SUCCESSES

This is not to say that all of Hollywood suffered a decline in the years succeeding the war. Needless to say, Hollywood directors had struggled under a code that often made nonsensical demands upon them, and their work was invigorated, to a certain degree, by the new climate in Hollywood that ceded a little more territory to realism and pessimism and allowed a little more frankness in the discussion of sex. Ford, Hitchcock, and Wilder are all directors who saved much of their most memorable work for this period. Wilder in particular seems to have had the right personality for the era. He was a Hollywood pro who built a religion around story construction and cultivated a Lubitsch-like habit of expressing his ideas through physical business. He was too much of a Hollywood filmmaker to cave into morbid or self-serious realism. But he was also a cynic who seemed to welcome the opportunity to lace his films with a little more venom than he might have before the war. *The Apartment* is an example of a film that is classic Hollywood in its clever but conservative story construction, its charming detail, and its triumphant romance. At the same time it is very accessible to a modern audience because it is so adult in its tone and so frank in its depiction of a corrupt world.

Certain genres seemed to wake up a little in 1950s. The Western had enough moral rectitude in its nature to absorb a little realism and moral ambiguity nicely. Andrew Sarris has written that were he to have to choose between preserving every Western after *Duel in the Sun* (1946) or every Western before, he would reluctantly choose the latter. "The Western," Sarris writes, "is the one genre that has become richer in feeling and more profound in form as it rode ever closer to utter extinction."³⁰

Similarly, film noir brought a stylistic quality to the gangster and police dramas that they did not have before the war. Film noir is a kind of mixed beast in Hollywood. On the one hand, in its deep pessimism and excesses in style, it seems antithetical to Hollywood and signals the end of an era; on the other hand, its elegant style seems to build on the rich atmospherics of Hollywood before the war. On the one hand, it brings in a vicious and gritty realism that seems to mark the end of Hollywood's idealized atmosphere; on the other hand, it is so elegantly stylish, both in its highly artificial script and its stylized images, that it seems to mark the greatest expression of Hollywood's dedication to style and atmosphere, to intensely realized artificial paradises.

Even certain actors seemed to find greater depth after the war. Critics have often commented on the changes in Jimmy Stewart's persona after the war. Stewart came back a decorated veteran, and both Alfred Hitchcock, in his suspense films starring Stewart, and Anthony Mann, in his Westerns with Stewart, seem to have spotted the difference. No longer a simple icon of American likeability, Stewart's persona in these films flirts more with emotional imbalance and moral ambiguity.

Some of the shadows that crossed Hollywood's vista after the war, then, gave it more depth and resonance. The fact that so many of Hollywood's greatest works came at this time, its period of decline, cautions us against thinking of Hollywood too much as a glorious linear arc, beginning in the silent era, cresting in the 1930s, and declining after the war. The greatest Hollywood films appear a little more arbitrarily along the line of Hollywood's history than we often acknowledge, because it is so tempting to contain Hollywood's history under the notion of a rise and fall. There are a good number of Hollywood classics that exist in its period of decline, many of them definitive statements on the Hollywood technique, summings-up that could hardly have existed but at the end of the long evolution of Hollywood. And there are scores of mediocre films resting cozily in the middle of its heyday. The fact that the Andy Hardy pictures exist in the "golden age" of Hollywood certainly does not make them better than Wilder's or Hitchcock's work in the 1950s. They have a certain studio burnish that makes them a part and parcel of the age, but that's about it. Great Hollywood films exist where talent found the right circumstances in which to assert itself.

Even these late masters, though, who seemed to thrive in the late era of Hollywood, found their creativity drying up by the early 1960s. There was a great flurry of accomplishment in the late 1950s and very early 1960s. Hitchcock made *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960). Ford made *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Wilder