

WHEN THE MOVIES REALLY COUNTED (1963), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

The distinguished American historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., also served briefly as film critic for *Vogue* and the short-lived *Show* magazine. In this essay for the first issue of *Show* (April 1963), Schlesinger compares the importance of movies to their audiences in the 1930s with their dwindling importance and audiences in the 1960s, tracing the connections between American film history and American social history.

One of the melancholy casualties of progress has been the American motion picture. Oh, I know that the industry still exists and that it occasionally turns out some quite good films. But the old enchantment has faded away. A quarter of a century ago, Hollywood possessed the nation. It formed our images and shaped our dreams. It was a magical com-

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munity, fixed in the national mind as mingling the more celebrated features of Elizabethan London, the Riviera, Greenwich Village, Broadway, Red Square and Mecca. Today it is in comparison a ghost town, a place of pilgrimage for aging and desolate tourists, a sad city where sad men grind out television shows. There was a moment of miracle, but the miracle is over.

During that moment, films mattered in American life. The announcement of new movies created anticipation and suspense. The art was bursting with ideas and vitality and poign. Young men sauntered down the street like James Cagney, wisecracked like William Powell, cursed like Humphrey Bogart and wooed like Clark Gable; young women laughed like Lombard and sighed like Garbo and looked (or tried to look) like Hedy Lamarr. Hollywood today has its valiant writers and directors and actors; but mostly it seems filled with indistinguishable young men named Rock or Tab or Rory and indistinguishable young women named Debbie.

I am not talking about the decline of fan clubs or of fan magazines; I am talking about the decline of fans. A great popular art requires a committed popular audience. That is what existed in the United States in the Thirties. In 1937, 61 percent of the population went to the movies each week (today it is about 23 percent). The film had for a moment a vital connection with American emotions—more, I think, than it ever had before; more certainly than it has had since. The movies were near the operative center of the nation's consciousness. They played an indispensable role in sustaining and stimulating the national imagination. That is why those who went to the movies in the Thirties remember the movies they saw with so much greater vividness than those who went earlier and those who went later—why scenes and faces and lines and credits still linger in our minds with a peculiar exactness and intensity—why, as Roger Angel put it in a brilliant paragraph in a recent *New Yorker*, those who went to the movies in the Thirties are forever and uniquely members of the Movie Generation.

It is not that Hollywood necessarily made its best pictures in the Thirties. A strong argument can be made that great silent films have never been surpassed; and no one can deny that distinguished and powerful films have been made in the Forties and Fifties and Sixties. But the link between the films and the nation was far more intimate in the Thirties, the experience of film-going more crucial, the impact more piercing.

The Thirties represented America's first great crisis of confidence. For nearly a century and a half, the Republic had lived and grown without serious doubts about its future. "All the conditions of American life," as Herbert Croly wrote in 1909, "have tended to encourage an easy, generous, and irresponsible optimism." The rivers could always be forded,

the mountains climbed, the wilderness domesticated, the Indians subdued. The national belief was in the omnipotence of the happy ending.

The First World War disturbed this confidence for a moment, but only for a moment. Then came the crash of 1929, and suddenly the party was unmistakably over. Instead came the collapse of a supposedly infallible system, unemployment and misery, an unprecedented series of blows to the national morale, dwindling belief in the national capacity to deal with the future. The birth rate precisely registered the decay of national faith; the country's population increase in the Thirties was only half of what it had been in the Twenties.

Doubt, discouragement, despair generated the psychological imperatives which gave the movies a new role in the nation's emotional economy. It was not just a need for distraction and entertainment. It was a need for reassurance and hope. With the American dream in apparent ruins, with the American people struck down by circumstances beyond their individual control, with the very idea of the individual threatened by anonymous and impenetrable economic forces, people longed to hear again an affirmation of individual identity, to see again a chance for individual possibility, to feel again a sense of individual potency.

The movies were by no means the only method of therapy. The deeds which began to restore the national confidence took place, first of all, in Washington, where a strong President showed that the nation did not have to lie down and take it, the impotent victim of inexorable economic fatality. The combination of the Depression and the New Deal gave the Hollywood of the Thirties its particular audience—an audience which was at once demoralized by the downfall of the system, exhilarated by the promise of action and deeply responsive to images of purpose and freedom.

Nothing expressed the change from the Twenties to the Thirties more vividly than comedy. In the confident optimism of the Twenties, comedy sprang from frustration, defeat, passivity. The characteristic figures were Little Men pushed around by Big Men—Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, forever buffeted, forever beset; retaining shreds of dignity in the face of overwhelming tribulation. The Depression saw a critical shift from the comedy of pathos to the comedy of aggression. The great comedians of the Thirties were impatient, dominating figures, free and fearless, openly derisive of the folkways to which Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton had tried so unavailingly to conform.

No one could ever call Groucho Marx a Little Man. The Marx Brothers, in their classic period at Paramount in the early Thirties, represented the polar opposite of the film comedy of the Twenties. The world was their oyster, to be swallowed and regurgitated with total indifference

to the pities and the verities. The Brothers had the imagination of anarchy; whatever existed was there not for defence but for destruction. Society matrons were to be assaulted, blondes to be chased, social conventions to be punned and pummeled out of existence. The first two Marx Brothers films, "The Cocoanuts" and "Animal Crackers," were adapted from the stage and, though diabolical, suffered from certain constraints of format. With "Horse Feathers" and "Monkey Business," the Brothers came into their own in the movies. No aspect of the Establishment escaped unscathed, whether the tycoon, the judge, the college president or even the gangster. Groucho's contemptuous passion for the glorious Margaret Dumont summed up the relation between the Marxes and respectability. In "Duck Soup," they turned to international affairs and Surrealism, carrying their precarious logic almost beyond the point of no return. This drastic experiment must have exhausted the vein. The Brothers passed on to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, executed the glossier and more conventional "A Night at the Opera" and "A Day at the Races" and eventually, defeated by the revival of national confidence, made their peace with the new America as quizmasters, bandleaders and friends of Alexander Woollcott.

W. C. Fields, though more of a transition figure than the Marx Brothers, immersed himself equally in the destructive element. Like his colleagues of the Twenties, he bore with fortitude the persecution of wives, children, bill collectors, bank investigators and the law. But what created the delicious tensions in the Fields films was the sense of violence lurking underneath—the anticipated joy of the moment when he would kick Baby LeRoy or, as in "If I Had a Million," use his new-found fortune to bash in the automobiles of the reckless drivers who had denied his own cherished jealousy. In time, the full-fledged Fields arose—a cunning, swaggering figure, capable of exploiting every opening and mastering every crisis. "Never Give a Sucker an Even Break" was the title of one of his films; it crystallized the new mood in movie comedy. Fields's pictures were scratchy and patchy, but I do not think anyone has been so funny since.

An associated phenomenon was the satiric woman. In part, this was nothing new; the wisecracking female had often been seen before, but typically as a second lead. Hollywood in the Thirties now brought about a spectacular merger between humor and sex. The new heroine was not only seductive but funny. Thus Jean Harlow, who began in "Hell's Angels" as the incarnation of solemn sexuality, rapidly developed into an astute and fetching comedienne. Her ripened talent can be seen in Victor Fleming's "Blonde Bombshell," one of the best of the Hollywood self-satires, in which she performed superbly with the support of

an unbeatable troupe of pros—Lee Tracy, Pat O'Brien, Franchot Tone, Frank Morgan and Ted Healy.

Miss Harlow died in 1937, but the type she played so well was already acquiring new charm and finesse in the hands of Carole Lombard. Miss Lombard was beautiful, deft, alert, ready for love but with her capacity for romance always tripped up by her unquenchable instinct for reality. She played against some of the best male comedians of the time—William Powell, John Barrymore, Fred MacMurray—and brilliantly dominated a remarkable series of films—Howard Hawks's "Twentieth Century," Gregory La Cava's "My Man Godfrey," William Wellman's "Nothing Sacred," Wesley Ruggles' "True Confession." She also died prematurely. In our own time, the tradition was wonderfully sustained by Marilyn Monroe. Why is it that so many of these satiric women, from Harlow and Thelma Todd, who was a great foil for Groucho Marx, through Lombard and Carole Landis, to Monroe and Kay Kendall, have died suddenly at the top of their careers?

The satiric woman cheered everybody with her affirmation both of identity and of competence. In Mae West, the type satirized itself. In Myrna Loy and Jean Arthur, it was transmuted from farce to drama and furthered the impression that the liberated female could cope with anything. But the main burden of renewing a sense of the potency of the individual fell to the male movie stars. At the very least, one could face catastrophe with the gleeful urbanity of William Powell, whose unlimited resourcefulness could discover a way out of any dilemma. And Hollywood was prepared to go further than this. To console an age in which the individual felt himself helpless in an inaccessible world, the film now turned out a gallery of bold and strong men who, when they could not order their environment, could at least take revenge upon it.

The gangster film became the protracted parable of man's relationship to a hostile society. In the early Thirties, the gangster was the man who rejected the social order—who, almost alone in the stricken country, seemed able to live in luxury, drive in swift and silent motorcars, ignore the employment agency and bread line and be the master of his destiny. He was the free man who, by carrying freedom to excess, invited destruction; but the symbolism remained compelling. Who in the Movie Generation can ever forget Paul Muni in "Scarface," with George Raft flipping his coin in the corner, or Edward G. Robinson in "Little Caesar" or James Cagney in "The Public Enemy"? Richard Schickel, in his admirable new book "The Stars," describes Cagney's crook as "the first existential anthero of the American films. Totally lacking in ideals, supremely contemptuous of conventional morality, he was interested only in the destruction of the world he never made. In every sense, he was the man

alone, responding to the world's absurdity with a deadly and magnificent display of chillingly humorous destructiveness."

The gangster film was the culmination of a style of brisk journalistic notation deriving from such plays of the Twenties as the Abbott-Dunning "Broadway" and the Hecht-MacArthur "The Front Page." Lewis Milestone's remarkable film of "The Front Page" in 1931 pointed the way, with the unsurpassed fluidity and audacity of the camera, the staccato bursts of dialogue and the highly charged performances of Pat O'Brien and Adolphe Menjou. The gangster film extended these conventions to studies of brutality, greed and murder. The new genre was swift and cold; the dialogue went off like Chinese firecrackers; the settings were realistic and unadorned; the photography stark and ruthless. The influence of the gangster film spread in many directions. Warner Brothers specialized in all the variations; and the so-called Warner Brothers stock company of the Thirties—including two splendid satiric women, Joan Blondell and Ann Sheridan, and a notable collection of character actors and comics, such as Allen Jenkins, Frank McHugh, Glenda Farrell, Ned Sparks and Hugh Herbert—made a long series of pictures putting a comic or melodramatic shinc on the familiar surfaces of American life.

The classic gangster film was the product of the early Thirties. As the national mood improved, the gangster genre lost its original necessity and bite. In time, even the gangster heroes began to go legitimate. Paul Muni, after impressive performances in "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" and "Black Fury," turned into Mr. Paul Muni, the eminent impersonator of historical figures. Cagney went on to comedy and detringido; Edward G. Robinson first parodied himself marvelously in "A Slight Case of Murder" and then joined the opposition. By 1939, when Robinson appeared about a third of the way along as an FBI man in "Confessions of a Nazi Spy," the audience was able to breathe a huge sigh of relief, knowing that the hitherto invincible Nazi agents would at last be brought to justice.

Yet the symbolism persisted and found a new embodiment in the private detective. This shift from the gangster to the private eye was conducted by the most penetrating and evocative of all the actors of the Thirties, Humphrey Bogart. Bogart began as a gangster in "The Perished Forest," and in the Raoul Walsh-John Huston "High Sierra," one of the last and best of the gangster films, he supplied the definitive rendition of the gangster stance of desperation and contempt. But, as social stresses relaxed, it was increasingly possible and even desirable to be at once alienated from society and on the side of order. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler had already created the hero to replace the anthero. Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe had the loneliness, the toughness and

the disdain of the gangster; but they had too an absurd sense of honor which kept them honest in a squalid world. Above all, unlike the gangster, they were supremely realistic, without hope and without illusion. "If being in revolt against a corrupt society constitutes being immature," Chandler once wrote, "then Philip Marlowe is extremely immature. If seeing dirt where there is dirt constitutes an inadequate social adjustment, then Philip Marlowe has inadequate social adjustment. Of course, Marlowe is a failure and he knows it." For the private eye, success lay in the fulfillment of his own harsh standards.

William Powell's Nick Charles in the W. S. Van Dyke series of "The Thin Man" films provided an amiable foretaste, as did Warren William's Perry Mason for Warner Brothers; but the classic definition of the new pattern came in 1941 with John Huston's version of Hammett's "The Maltese Falcon." In this orgy of double-dealing, only Bogart, the private eye, remained lucid and dispassionate, even to the point of turning in the girl he loved. More and more, Bogart became a mythic figure, with his harrowed face, sharp, expressionless eyes, twisted mouth, weary walk; a figure mingling cynicism and duty as the moral man in an immoral society and soon finding, in the films and in life, a perfect companion in Lauren Bacall, raucous and lovely, one of the best of the satiric women. The spell continues; the French gangster film of a year or two back, "Breathless," showed its hero pausing as if in a moment of rededication before a photograph of Bogart outside a Paris movie theater.

This was a decade where America recovered in fantasy the sense of individual identity and purpose it feared it was losing in actuality. They were all *men* then—Gary Cooper, the Barrymores, Lee Tracy, Walter Huston, Chester Morris, Victor McLaglen, Fredric March, John Garfield, Henry Fonda, Cary Grant, Spencer Tracy—sharply defined individuals rather than interchangeable parts. And the women too—Bette Davis, the queen of jangled nerves, Margaret Sullavan, Katharine Hepburn, Miriam Hopkins, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Fontaine. And, because I have been writing about American images and American performers, I have not mentioned the great Hollywood films in the Continental manner, especially, the stylish and bewitching comedies of Ernst Lubitsch, or the great Continental players—Dietrich, Boyer and, above all, the greatest actress and the most magical personality known to the Thirties or to any other decade of the movies, Garbo.

It is hard to know how much nostalgia falsifies the past. One can say with more confidence that movies counted to Americans in the Thirties than one can say that the movies which counted were better than the movies of today. Yet, as I observed the struggle of American critics to name the ten best films of 1961, and noted that they so often ended up

with more French, Italian and English than American films on their lists, I thought how much easier things were in years like 1934. In that year the American film industry turned out "Twentieth Century"; "The Thin Man"; Capra's "It Happened One Night"; Bette Davis and Leslie Howard in "Of Human Bondage"; John Ford's strong suspense film "The Lost Patrol"; the Hecht-MacArthur shocker "Crime Without Passion"; the incomparable Fred Astaire in "The Gay Divorcee"; King Vidor's Depression film "Our Daily Bread." When one reflects further that "Duck Soup," "Blonde Bombshell," Rouben Mamoulian's "Queen Christina" with Garbo, Lowell Sherman's "She Done Him Wrong" with Mae West, "42nd Street," "King Kong," Frank Lloyd's "Cavalcade" and Lubitsch's "Design for Living" came out the year before, and Ford's "The Informer," Astaire's "Top Hat" and "Roberta," Lloyd's "Mutiny on the Bounty" with Laughton, Gable and Tone, "A Night at the Opera," "Black Fury," Leo McCarey's "Ruggles of Red Gap," Cagney's "The G-Men," Henry Hathaway's "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" and the Hecht-MacArthur "The Scoundrel," with Noel Coward, came out the year after, one can understand the zest, creativity and excitement of Hollywood 30 years ago.

What happened? What severed the link between the American audience and the American film? The first blow came with the rise of self-censorship in the middle Thirties. The Motion Picture Code imposed on film-making a set of rigid requirements and taboos which would have destroyed Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw and which the lesser talents of Hollywood could not overcome. However satisfying the Code might have been to the guardians of public morality, it began the process of cutting the films off from the realities of American experience.

Then, as political action and economic improvement began to replenish the sense of national confidence in the course of the decade, the need for cinematic reassurance became less intense. The Second World War speeded the process by which the movies were reduced from a necessity to a diversion. War not only monopolized the national attention; it also compelled the individual to test out his own identity in direct rather than vicarious experience. After the war, the country went into a period of comparative prosperity. The emotional imperatives which had given films their role in the psychological equilibrium of the Thirties subsided. The great postwar films were exercises in recapitulation rather than discovery, like Fred Zinneman's "High Noon" and George Stevens' "Shane," which distilled out of the Western (a neglected genre in the Thirties) the quality of existential or historical myth. When television came along in the Fifties, it did not kill the American movie; it only administered the *coup de grâce* to an industry and art which had lost its roots and nourishment in its own audience. . . .