

A “Natural” Environment: Hollywood

Dennis Barone

“The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city.”

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

Hollywood represented itself to itself and others during the 1930s in many self-reflexive films.¹ An article in *The New York Times* on July 25, 1937, noted that a cycle of fifteen such films about the American film industry was soon to be released and that the Walter Wanger, United Artist production *Stand-In* was “the most ambitious of the cycle.”² This forgotten film well illustrates the hypothesis that Hollywood producers created an image of filmmaking as a unique business different from all others in order to gain autonomy from East Coast overseers.³ This image can also be seen in thirties novels about Hollywood and in some films self-consciously about the industry from subsequent decades. Indeed, it can be suggested that due to the prevalence of this vision of uniqueness, the American film industry successfully constructed a dominant ideology of itself as natural and unalterable rather than human made and hence changeable.

Representation creates a culture’s vision of itself, and thus often legitimizes a culture’s dominant ideology. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written that “subjectivity does not properly exist until it

is . . . organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility."⁴ Representation, therefore, is inevitably and invariably politically motivated. Yet, that motivation is often forgotten. As Berger and Luckmann have stated, while "social order exists *only* as a product of human activity," "reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products . . ."⁵ This essay offers an explanation of the motivation for the film industry's self-reification.

Richard Maltby has argued that Hollywood executives in the 1930s "more or less deliberately set out to create in Hollywood a separate, enclosed world, whose image to the rest of America was as important an ingredient in the product they sold as were the stars or plots of individual films." "More than anything else," according to Maltby, "it was this construction of 'Hollywood' that constituted the key to their autonomy from East Coast control."⁶ Maltby has suggested that the development of this construction began in the economic events of the previous decade. Companies underwent vertical integration, audiences grew, and studios and theaters converted to sound. Vertical integration and the conversion to sound required an influx of capital, but since audience growth had been phenomenal, financing seemed relatively risk free. Then the Depression struck and box office receipts plummeted. In addition, the average cost of feature productions had substantially increased. By 1935, so the argument goes, the ultimate ownership of the companies had changed. New York financial institutions or parent companies based in New York owned and to a large extent controlled West Coast production facilities. As Douglas Gomery has put it: "In the end, all final decisions rested with the chief operating officer of the corporation based in New York, not Hollywood."⁷

New York executives, according to Maltby, established the total amount to be spent each year on production based on their conception of theater needs. Studios, therefore, serviced the more profitable areas of distribution and exhibition. Although production was the center of all the glamour, it was in a subordinate position to distribution and exhibition. Indeed, Gomery has argued that the business practices of the film industry in the 1930s can be compared to those of chain stores such as the A & P.⁸ Surely, that does not sound like movie magic.

Studio heads, according to Maltby, exploited certain beliefs about film production in order "to develop a defensive ideology which sought to protect their sphere of activity from external interference."⁹ They insisted that filmmaking is a unique economic activity not susceptible to usual modes of economic behavior, that extravagance proved their theory regarding its uniqueness, and that filmmaking—especially in its studio executives—"required the elusive skills of 'showmanship'."¹⁰ This fiction of their own making, this representation sometimes became the subject of other's fiction and sometimes of their own.

For example, Cecilia Brady tells us in F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, that her father, a studio executive, "talked the double talk to Wall Street about how mysterious it was to make a picture . . ." Cecilia continues, however, by also noting that in actuality her father "didn't know the ABC's of dubbing or even cutting. Nor had he learned much about the feel of America as a bar boy in Ballyhegan, nor did he have any more than a drummer's sense of a story."¹¹ From his notes it is clear that had Fitzgerald lived to complete this novel Brady would have been the villain. Fitzgerald did not, therefore, reveal, criticize, or alter the 1930s "construction" of Hollywood for in opposition to Brady is Stahr, the novel's protagonist who knows all that Brady does not and knows it better than anyone else.

Probably the most famous passage in *The Last Tycoon* occurs on the first page of the novel. In one single paragraph Fitzgerald both demythologizes and remythologizes the 1930s construction of the Hollywood genius.¹² "You can take Hollywood for granted like I did," Cecilia tells us,

or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. *It can be understood too, but* [my emphasis] only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads and perhaps the closest a woman can come to the set-up is to try and understand one of those men.¹³

Monroe Stahr, we learn, is one of those men. So, too, is Atterbury Dodd, the protagonist of *Stand-In*. So, too, as an article published in *Fortune* in 1932 tells us, is Irving Thalberg.

It has often been stated that Fitzgerald based his character Monroe Stahr on Irving Thalberg, but it is interesting to note the way in which the magazine reportage of *Fortune* reifies Thalberg as much as and in a manner similar to Fitzgerald's novel and the film *Stand-In*. The article makes Thalberg and Hollywood appear super human in several ways. One way it does so is quite simple: it uses the word "naturally" when describing human-made things. For example, "There is *naturally* no chance that Mr. Thalberg's activities will fall into routine" (emphasis mine).¹⁴ The mythologizing here works by way of tautology. Since Thalberg is a genius, he exists free from the routines that the rest of Hollywood must follow and because he exists free from routine proves that he is indeed a genius. Furthermore, he is a genius ideally suited to this industry for his brain is both a "camera" and a "recording apparatus," and although "he is five and one-half feet tall, and weighs 122 pounds," he is also "changeable as the chameleon industry in which he labors."¹⁵ Thalberg, we are told, "is what Hollywood means by MGM."¹⁶ Another way that this article reifies Hollywood is by obscuring the boundary between on the set and off the set. Thalberg, we learn, lives in a house designed by MGM art director Cedric Gibbons. In other



***Stand-In's* Atterbury Dodd (Leslie Howard) as the prince to Lester Plum's (Joan Blondell) Cinderella. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.**

words, certain things in Hollywood operate by natural law, not by human endeavor, and the only frame of reference for the film industry is other films. "Hollywood succeeds," as David Karnes has written in an article on movie premieres, "not by obscuring the real by way of the make believe, but by inextricably joining the two."¹⁷ We are told that no one knows the secret of MGM's success, but if anyone does know it, that one is Thalberg. Thalberg's "extravagance" justifies itself because he has a mysterious "artistic instinct which tells him when the extra fifty or one hundred thousand will broaden, like the beam of a projection machine, into an enormous profit."¹⁸ This power may be something more than just instinct, however. For shortly before this point in the essay we learn that Thalberg has more power and authority over his subordinates than Jesus had over his disciples. "Chattering at lunch, Mr. Thalberg and his underlings resemble in their gloomy refectory the personnel of an agitated Last Supper, with Mr. Thalberg as a nervous Nazarene, free, however, from the presentiment that any of his disciples will deny or even contradict him."¹⁹ Unlike the disciples of Jesus, none of Thalberg's "underlings" challenge his near divine will.

Atterbury Dodd doesn't have the super human abilities and power of *Fortune's* Thalberg, but he is pitted in a battle similar to Fitzgerald's Monroe Stahr. In this 1937 United Artist film produced by Walter Wanger, directed by

Tay Garnett, and based on the serialized fiction by Clarence Budington Kelland that ran for six installments in the *Saturday Evening Post* beginning on February 13, 1937, a young Wall Street whiz, Atterbury Dodd (Leslie Howard), ventures to Hollywood to save Colossal Studios for its parent company, Pennypacker (an old-line Philadelphia name that in the 1930s might have been associated with old money). Ivor Nassau (C. Henry Gordon), a Hollywood based corporate raider, wants to buy Colossal Studios and then sell off the assets for a quick profit. In the struggle between Dodd and Nassau, then, we see what Maltby has called “the enduring effect of monopoly capital ownership” in the 1930s; that is, “a pressure which stressed the industry’s broad long-term interest and external stability, rather than the short-term interest of individual companies in immediate maximum profits.”²⁰ Nassau has several collaborators within Colossal Studios: director Koslofski (Alan Mowbray),²¹ publicist Potts (Jack Carson), and studio-star Thelma Cheri (Marla Shelton). Douglas Quintain (Humphrey Bogart), a producer, and Lester Plum (Joan Blondell), a stand-in for Cheri, come to Dodd’s assistance in the last minute rescue of Colossal Studios.

The film opens on the East Coast. Atterbury Dodd, a mathematical genius, argues to the Board of Pennypacker and Sons that it may be more profitable to save Colossal films than to sell it. He goes to Hollywood with the assumption that filmmaking is the same as any other business and that sound business principles can be applied to the management of a film studio. However, his first car ride through the Hollywood landscape leaves him somewhat bewildered. From the back seat of the company car Dodd looks in amazement at the false fronts of a seemingly giant miniature golf course. For example, he sees a huge sign high in the sky that says “The Hat” and below it he sees a small restaurant in the shape of a hat. Somehow the unreal—a hat large enough to eat in—is made real by naming it so. Dodd, like Tod Hackett in West’s *The Day of the Locust*, is a young man from the East adrift in a new and strange world. Unlike Hackett, Dodd is somewhat more secure because of his traditional beliefs which he maintains throughout all crises. For example, after the initial car ride Potts immediately tries to side-track Dodd by way of various Hollywood vices: offers of drink, sex, and gambling. Dodd resists. A stage mother has her daughter do a routine for the new studio-head. Dodd finds it repulsive and scolds the mother for exploiting her daughter. Dodd may be a mathematical genius whose banking experience is irrelevant in Hollywood, but at his core is a solid moral sense.

He decides to live at a boarding house in order to get away from Potts and to get a better understanding of the picture business from the ordinary people of the industry. Lester Plum lives at this boarding house and she informs him about the making of motion pictures. Yet, only up to a certain point. Eventually, all questioning ends with a simple statement: “That’s the picture business.” This line is like a chorus throughout the film. Dodd tours the studio and describes employees as “cogs in a machine” or “units,” but various employees respond to him with the choral line: “That’s the picture business.” In other words, Dodd, the

representative of the East Coast, thinks in mechanized terms like a Taylor efficiency expert, but the employees in this particular industry mystify it. Even Douglas Quintain, the studio's most knowledgeable employee, tells Dodd that although he's been making movies for over twenty years there are several "peculiarities" he hasn't yet been able to figure out.

Dodd continues to attempt to make Hollywood conform to sound business practices. This only makes him look like a buffoon. Potts, in particular, makes repeated fun of Dodd. By the end of the film, however, Dodd forsakes his conformism and improvises in order to save the studio.

Sex and Satan is Colossal Studios' last best chance to have a hit. Director Koslofski and star Cheri, however, are doing everything possible to make sure it goes way over budget and beyond schedule. After a preview screening Dodd realizes they have a flop on their hands. When Koslofski and Cheri tell him that Quintain was drunk all through the shooting, Dodd fires him. Plum tells Dodd that he has just fired the only man who might be able to rescue the picture and hence the studio. Dodd thinks up a new plan, one that is well-outside the bounds of standard business practices. He woos Quintain back to work. Quintain will cut Cheri almost completely out of the picture and make a gorilla the star. Cheri, however, as the studio's star has a certain control over her films. Quintain points this out, but Dodd is ready with some more magic of his own. He will involve the corrupt and corruptible Cheri in a scandal and then, according to the morality clause of her contract, terminate her employment with Colossal.

In other words, Dodd has now become a showman, too. Dodd, who was so concerned with moral rectitude when he first arrived in Hollywood, has learned to bend absolute rules, especially when the industry's ends justify the questionable means. Furthermore, not only has he learned that movie-making is different from other businesses, but he has also learned that the 3,000 employees of Colossal are something more than "units." Like Monroe Stahr, Dodd now cares deeply about the people who work for him. He is a paternalistic capitalist, a man of good feeling, and so when by the end of the film the abstraction filmmaking as unique activity becomes the thing made real, we not only see this order as natural, but as good. If this narrative trajectory is one that the industry adapted from other genres, it is, nonetheless, one that served the industry's own needs quite well. If Dodd's character parallels that characterization apparent in 1930s films of benevolent businessmen molded in the image of FDR (such as the hotel executive who puts everyone back to work in *The Golddiggers of 1935*), then the careful development of Dodd's conversion from uncaring superhuman genius to compassionate benevolent executive and the appropriation of this development for Hollywood's own narrative merits close attention. Yet, Hollywood did not have to model such characters as Dodd on FDR because it could use the idolized Thalberg for such a model as F. Scott Fitzgerald would do in his novel *The Last Tycoon*.

The forces of evil in the meantime have convinced Mr. Pennypacker (William V. Mong) to sell. Nassau goes to Dodd's office to gloat, to claim his

prize, and to offer Dodd a bribe. Nassau, who as we see is not only a speculator in real estate but also a gambler addicted to horse racing, turns on the radio in Dodd's office to hear the latest race results. Before the racing results there is a news flash about a steel strike in Pittsburgh. While hearing this news flash, Dodd's eyes light up. Dodd gets yet another idea that is well outside the bounds of pure mathematical reasoning.

Dodd convinces the employees who have now been fired by Nassau to stay on the lot and help Quintain with his reediting and the filming of the few additional scenes he will need. They throw Nassau out and for 48 hours have control of the studio.²² Quintain "pulls a rabbit out of a hat" (though we do not see how he does so), they have a hit, and *Colossal* is saved.

The film ends with several shots that at first glance would seem to indicate that not only has Dodd converted to the natural system of the Hollywood studio, but that in this very process Hollywood and New York have grown closer together. Maltby has written that "the forces exerted on them [studio-heads] by the other sectors [of the film industry] were explicitly financial; their response was to change the terms of reference by transferring their claim to power from the specifically economic sphere to one constructed around their ability to manage the irrational and unpredictable."²³ Dodd accomplishes this transfer not only by controlling an unpredictable star and the desires of a large mass movie-going audience, but also by controlling the anger of 3,000 employees of *Colossal Studios*. In order to convince them to stay on the lot Dodd delivers a speech replete with republican virtues. He observes that private and public interest are conjoined and his most effective argument in this regard is to point out that *Colossal* is not simply Nassau or Pennypacker but, like the sort of argument a Capra character would use, that rank and file employees of *Colossal* and other companies in America are among the 30,000 stock holders of *Colossal*.

We quite literally see that New York and Hollywood have grown closer together when Dodd proposes to Plum in the final scene of the film. He does so rather matter of factly, and Plum says, "What, no build-up?" To which Dodd replies, "That's the picture business." It is the first time in the film that he has used this commonplace. If Plum, the stand-in of the film's title, represents the "everywoman"/"everyman" of Hollywood, then Dodd is the analogue for the East. After Plum empties out an ashtray for Dodd, something Dodd has done compulsively throughout the film, he says that he can see that they will be very happy together. Both Plum and Dodd have converted a bit. Dodd has learned something about movie magic and Plum has learned something about Wall Street stability and order. *Stand-In* functions ideologically to solidify the stability achieved in the film industry during the mid-Depression years.

Yet, there are several signs of ambivalence at the film's end. After Dodd has become the benevolent capitalist studio-head concerned with the welfare of all 3,000 employees, he asks one employee for a tomato to throw at Koslofski. As the song goes, the worker says tomato, but Dodd says tomato. There's still a gap

between labor and capital—at least in their pronunciation of words. There are several other such gaps within the united front against Nassau’s capitalistic liberalism. Most telling of all such examples are those in the final scene between Dodd and Plum.

After he proposes, Dodd kisses Plum. It is hardly a passionate kiss. One may argue the influence of the Production Code here, but when Quintain kisses Cheri a little earlier in the film his is a very different sort of kiss. One may argue that Dodd’s peck befits his character as developed in the film. Precisely. Perhaps he hasn’t changed as much as it might appear. Finally, after Dodd comments about his belief regarding their ensuing future happiness, their hands tentatively reach out to one another but do not touch. This is the film’s last image. It might be argued that the conclusion suggests that a disciplined partnership will develop between Dodd and Plum, East and West. Such an argument cannot be stated with certainty because of the ambiguity of the ending. Furthermore, while the Dodd-Plum kiss can be contrasted with the Quintain-Cheri kiss, there is no parallel scene to contrast with the hands that do not touch. In other words, if the Quintain-Cheri kiss represents in some way undisciplined filmmaking (though Quintain does indicate that he will now tame the shrewish Cheri) and if the Dodd-Plum peck



The famous musical-comedy director John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), with coffee cup in hand, tries to leave Hollywood so that he can learn about real life in *Sullivan’s Travels*. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art.

signifies a kind of highly disciplined enterprise, then the fact that there is nothing to contrast with the hands that do not touch would indicate a certain ambivalence regarding the ensuing fruition of the partnership.

Despite these gaps or ambivalences, the construction of Hollywood as a natural environment was nearly impossible to escape. Remember how difficult it is for movie director Sullivan to leave town in Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (Paramount, 1941). Sullivan (Joel McCrea) is the director of the successful *Ants in Your Pants* films. He decides to make a socially relevant film rather than another escapist musical comedy and that to do so he must first leave Hollywood to see how others live. This film chronicles Sullivan's attempts to get beyond Hollywood's limits, geographically as well as artistically. Only after he gets amnesia does he get very far beyond the only world (and genre) that he knows. What he does at this point is fascinating and is similar to the narrative development of other films made in Hollywood about the American film industry. He recreates himself in his own image. He eventually get his identity back but it is the same identity that he had at the start. Crisis brings no change, only a restored confidence in the existing system. For Sullivan this means a restored confidence in the *Ants in Your Pants* films.²⁴

The social concern of *Sullivan's Travels* is not 1930s poverty, but film itself, and the conclusion it reaches is not escapist but imprisoning. Just as the film refers to musicals, Keystone and Chaplin comedies, crime movies (especially *I Am a Fugitive From the Chain Gang*), Walt Disney, Ernest Lubitsch, Frank Capra, and Pluto; so, the film says, we should have our whole existence defined by these signs—we should be happy residents in the prison house of cinema.

Sullivan learns that social criticism is not only unnecessary, it is also dangerous. He decides to give away five dollar bills to some of the poor he has seen in his travels. One hobo decides that five dollars is not enough, clubs Sullivan over the head, and robs him. An oncoming train runs over the hobo. Sullivan awakes the next morning with amnesia, fights a train yard guard, and, consequentially, is sent to do hard labor on the chain gang. As a result of attempted social benevolence, then, a hobo dies and Sullivan goes to prison.

While in prison Sullivan sees the proof of his producer's comment that at the movies people would rather forget social ills than be reminded of them. The standard product that Hollywood offers, the film indicates, is the only reality people desire. The prisoners, including Sullivan, go to a nearby African-American church to join the congregation in their evening's entertainment. A preacher welcomes the prisoners. Once Pluto's antics begin we see the preacher laughing heartily. Everyone laughs. Sullivan turns to the prisoner next to him and asks, "Hey, am I laughing?" Earlier in the film a preacher at a soup kitchen gets no reaction from his audience. Here in this church everyone laughs at Pluto, even the preacher and even the audience watching the audience watch Pluto. Hollywood: our new religion.

Indeed, at the end of the film Sullivan, memory now restored, says his final words while flying in an airplane high above the huddled masses of movie-land.

The film's Wagnerian conclusion circumscribes the viewer in the prison house of cinema. Sullivan concludes from on high, "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan." There will be no change, only more musical comedy. Just as Sullivan has recreated himself in his own image, Hollywood has recreated itself in its own image. The whole world is a "cockeyed caravan," all the world's a stage and on with the show as produced by Hollywood, U.S.A.

In Vincente Minnelli's 1953 MGM musical *The Band Wagon*, Hollywood synecdochically moves east to establish its control and dominance. *The Band Wagon* leaves no question about the relationship between East Coast and West Coast as in *Stand-In*. The reason for this certainty in the 1953 film may be that it served as a very optimistic reaction to Hollywood's many problems at that time: HUAC, TV, the Paramount Decrees, frozen assets overseas, labor struggles at home, suburbanization, and corporate conglomeration.²⁵ On the other hand, the film's optimism may be a rhetorical sign of the industry's desperation.

The film opens with a metaphoric depiction of Hollywood's dilemma. Tony Hunter's (Fred Astaire) top hat and cane are on the auction block. To add insult to injury, there are no bidders even at absurdly low prices. In this play of on-screen and off-screen image—Hunter/Astaire—what the film accomplishes is to restore Hunter/Astaire to his top hat and cane, in other words, to his power. Hunter/Astaire as washed up thirties star represents the entire film industry in the troubling times of the early 1950s. After the opening auction sequence we see the out-of-work performer Tony Hunter on a train going from Los Angeles to New York. Eventually, Hunter turns the East into the West, spreads Hollywood's authority to the very site of its ultimate economic control. Even at this early point in the film Hunter (and hence Hollywood) regains some authority. Two stocky men in drab brown suits, one at the lower left and one at the lower right portion of the screen, talk about a has-been film star, Tony Hunter. Between them (and pictorially above them) is the slim and trim Tony Hunter in a flashy blue suit. Hunter has a wide open newspaper in his hands and therefore the two men do not realize that Hunter is right there. He moves the newspaper, speaks to them, embarrasses them, and by this action, asserts his authority over these disloyal fans.

Jane Feuer has claimed that "at a time when the studio could no longer be certain of the allegiance of its traditional mass audience, *The Band Wagon*, in ritual fashion, served to reaffirm the traditional relationship."²⁶ Until Hunter's final assertion of authority, however, the reaffirmation is very tentative. For example, when Hunter first walks the streets of New York his friends tell him how things have changed, and Hunter sees for himself that indeed the world has changed. He feels that perhaps this new world has no place for him in it. He steps into an arcade and nothing works for him. But then he breaks into song and dance and miraculously all the games go his way. The pyramid of milk bottles falls even



The entire cast of the show within *The Band Wagon* gather around their new leader, the great Hollywood entertainer Tony Hunter (Fred Astaire). Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art.

before he throws the ball. This musical number affirms that Hollywood will succeed if it does what it does best—entertain, follow those natural and immutable laws (understood by only a few) that have always guided the industry. The song and dance of Tony Hunter is a magic that like Sullivan’s comedies gives the audience all it wants, needs, and is going to get. *The Band Wagon* affirms Hollywood’s magical authority even in a time of very harsh business realities.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the party scene. Hunter has come east to perform in a new Broadway show directed by the “genius” of entertainment in this changed East Coast world, Jeffery Cordova (Jack Buchanan). Rehearsals, however, are chaotic and the New Haven advance performance is a flop. Indeed, everything that Cordova attempts is a laughable failure and Buchanan plays Cordova as a pompous windbag. At the cast party that night Cordova passes the reins to Hunter. Hence, analogically, the East has relinquished control to the West. Visually, Hunter is in the center of the frame throughout this sequence and at its close all gather about their new leader. Hunter is the kind capitalist patriarch with his business family circled about him. Hunter is both humble and kind whereas Cordova is all ego and calculation. Hence, when Hunter takes control we are glad that he has done so, for we see his control as morally correct and Cordova’s as morally corrupt. In addition, whereas Hunter is always entertaining,

Cordova is always annoying. Entertainment and authority are tied together. Hunter is one of those few who understands what Quintain calls the “peculiarities” of entertainment. Now that he has authority the show can only succeed.

In the meantime, however, the New York backers for the show have withdrawn their support. Hunter becomes producer as well as star and director when he sells his art collection to finance the new, revised show. Like Sullivan and Dodd, Tony Hunter has been returned to authority, and in this instance not only does the Hollywood genius have knowledge that East Coast financiers and directors lack, he also has all the money he needs.

Immediately and miraculously we see polished performances which illustrate beyond any doubt that Hunter has that necessary magical showmanship. Cordova’s chaotic and pedantic drama has metamorphosed into lively song and dance. As Quintain says in *Stand-In*, a rabbit has been pulled from a hat. It’s that easy—if the right person is in control: Hunter, not Cordova; Dodd, not Nassau or Pennypacker; Stahr, not Brady. At this penultimate moment in the film we see for the first time an audience watching the performance on stage and they applaud enthusiastically, guiding our own response to the wonders of Hollywood’s restored power. Furthermore, these final performances are ones that could never be staged. For example, in the long “‘Girl Hunt’ A Murder Mystery in Jazz” sequence there is a medium shot from inside a window of Hunter’s chest, shoulders, and face. In other words, this is a shot that only a film audience could see, not an audience in a theater, for Hunter’s back faces the theater audience. Right after this Hunter runs up a disembodied, brilliant red fire escape unattached to any building and then enters a large, exotic-looking bathroom. The camera draws our attention to a huge ring on the finger of a masked woman in the bathtub. The camera overwhelms the stage, the camera takes us anywhere rather than confines us within a theater’s bounds. Quick cuts and strange angles show us something that a stage production cannot show.

At the reprise of “That’s Entertainment” Gabby (Cyd Charisse) tells Tony that they have a hit and she hopes the show will run forever. They sing: “No death like you get in *Macbeth*. No more deals like the end of *Camille*.” In other words, just as Tony sold his Degas paintings to finance the show and Gabby switched from classical ballet to modern jazz dance, the song says that all past art is subservient to this new one—film. But the song doesn’t stop there, it ends: “The world is a stage; the stage is a world of entertainment.” The whole world is a technicolor production brought to you and controlled by those wise movie moguls of Hollywood. At a time of crisis within the industry, *The Band Wagon* proposes that if Hollywood gives people what they want (which is what it provides) then the industry will not only survive, but it will prosper as well. The film returns Tony Hunter to his top hat and cane and metaphorically returns Hollywood to its earlier power and prominence.

Even in a more recent representation of Hollywood such as John Gregory Dunne’s *The Studio*, one will read basically the same story: different characters, same fiction. Dunne writes about Richard D. Zanuck, begins and ends with a

premiere, says that “it is impossible for anyone who ha[s] never worked in the movie business to understand the dynamics of any given picture,” and that filmmaking is a “crapshoot.”²⁷ Almost every representation of Hollywood includes a studio tour, a screening room scene, a preview night or a premiere, a serious film recut as a comedy—a recutting that recreates the world in Hollywood’s own image. These are *de rigueur* in representations of Hollywood; any mention of distribution, exhibition, financing, or carpenters, make-up artists, and electricians is not.

In Hollywood’s reification, in the image Hollywood projects of itself in order to perpetuate itself, the how and why of the industry becomes obscure. Dodd says that *Colossal* has “no problem that a good picture can’t cure.”²⁸ The answer to business problems in Hollywood cannot be found in business procedures, but rather only in movie magic. Nathanael West was aware of such obfuscation when he wrote in *The Day of the Locust* that Faye Greener’s plan for success was “very vague until she came to what she considered would be its results, then she went into concrete details.”²⁹ She knew that by becoming a star she would have a house in Beverly Hills but she did not know how she would become a star. “It was all nonsense,” West wrote. “She mixed bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers with other bits out of fan magazines and compared these with the legends that surrounded the activities of screen stars and executives. Without any noticeable transition, possibilities became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities.”³⁰ This mystification of work is true for real actresses who were successful as well as fictional ones who were not. Kay Francis kept a daily diary throughout her long career in Hollywood. She very rarely mentioned work, but always wrote about the glamour and rewards of her career.³¹ That’s the picture business.

Hollywood survives by showing that—as an old Bell Telephone ad said—“the system is the solution.” The title of the particular film analyzed in detail here is *Stand-In*, not “the stand-in.” The title may refer to more than just Lester Plum, who is a stand-in for Thelma Cheri. By the absence of the definitive article, the title may signify that all must stand-in the projector’s beam, for “stand-in” may mean to participate, to belong, to be a part of something, to be a part of the process. Perhaps the title is a command. In *Stand-In*, as in some other Hollywood films about Hollywood movie-making, the system is natural and beyond the control of standard business practices. The young banker sent from New York to Los Angeles to save Colossal Studios learns that filmmaking is not a business like any other, that Hollywood will not bend beneath his business acumen, that movie-making operates by a set of peculiar natural and immutable laws. Eventually, he learns to say “that’s the picture business” and Colossal Studio survives. Whether or not this survival also signifies a closer relationship between East Coast and West is ambiguous.

It is clear, however, that it may all be just a fantasy, a fairy tale for the modern age. When Dodd and Plum first meet, she leaves a shoe behind which he later returns. Dodd is the prince to Plum’s Cinderella. Or is it New York money is the

prince to Hollywood's Cinderella? It may all be nonsense, as West said, but if so, what powerful nonsense it is.

Notes

1. Two recent essays on the self-reflexive Hollywood film of the 1950s are Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Grant (Austin, 1986), 329-343 and Lucy Fischer, "Sunset Boulevard: Fading Stars," in *Women and Film*, ed. Janet Todd (New York, 1988), 97-113. In *Metapop: Self-referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Jackson, 1992) Michael Dunne looks at self-referentiality in various forms of mass media to demonstrate that producers and consumers understand that such expression is not the real itself. While it is true that contemporary audiences may understand and participate in these expressions in sophisticated ways and that such audiences are not merely dupes manipulated by distant and unseen forces, Dunne ignores the ideological aspects of such participation. He ignores the ways in which self-referentiality from within a certain frame of knowledge sustains and perpetuates a certain way of living in the world. Continued media use of self-referentiality perpetuates the social conditions that gave rise to its frequent use. Furthermore, while the use of self-referentiality may not tell an audience precisely what to think, it does foster certain ways of thinking that do impact behavior.

2. Douglas W. Churchill, "Hollywood Peers Into Its Magic Looking-Glass," *The New York Times* (July 25, 1937), X, 3. Other films in this cycle used Hollywood as the backdrop to showcase musical performances: *Hollywood Hotel*, for example. Several were comedies that also used Hollywood for background and several apparently were never released. In other words, *Stand-In* is the most thorough look at the film industry in this group of films, the only one which truly foregrounds the business of making films.

3. Thomas Schatz makes no mention of *Stand-In* in his recent study, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, 1990). Schatz's approach is interesting in the context of the current essay for his use of the word "genius" perpetuates the idolization of the "boy wonders" of 1930s production. Certainly, Schatz's study is a useful corrective to the excesses of auteur studies and their emphasis on directorial genius rather than of producers. Schatz, however, goes to a different extreme. The information within his study indicates that not all decisions made by 1930s studio heads were ones of inspired genius. Note, too, that Robert Sklar devotes only four sentences to *Stand-In* in his recent book *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, 1992), 73.

4. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 451.

5. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York, 1967), 52, 89.

6. Richard Maltby, "The Political Economy of Hollywood: The Studio System," in *Cinema, Politics and Society in America*, eds. Philip Davies and Brian Neve (Manchester, England, 1981), 54.

7. Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York, 1986), 15.

8. Douglas Gomery, "Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19 (1984), 89-103.

9. Maltby, "Political Economy of Hollywood," 53.

10. *Ibid.*, 54.

11. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (1941, rpt. New York, 1986), 28.

12. Jane Feuer has described how a similar process occurs in the self-reflexive Hollywood musical. See "The Self-Reflexive Musical," especially 331, 342.

13. Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, 3.

14. "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer," *Fortune*, December, 1932, *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison, 1976), 259.

15. *Ibid.*, 258-259.

16. *Ibid.*, 257.

17. David Karnes, "The Glamorous Crowd: Hollywood Movie Premieres Between the Wars," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986), 553.

18. "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer," *Fortune* (December, 1932), 262.

19. *Ibid.*, 262.

20. Maltby, "Political Economy of Hollywood," 48.

21. The fact that *Stand-In* clearly elevates producers over directors is another reason that would seem to make this film essential for Schatz's study of the studio system.

22. Frank Stricker has observed that "few Hollywood movies of the 1930s suggested that working class people could organize and act on their own to win a measure of democracy and economic justice" (457). In this context *Stand-In* is especially interesting. See "Repressing the Working Class: Individualism and the Masses in Frank Capra's Films," *Labor History* 31 (1990), 454-467. It should also be noted that the most famous sit-down strike began in the winter of 1936-

1937 in Flint, Michigan when GM employees took control of the plant. See Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor, 1969).

23. Maltby, "Political Economy of Hollywood," 55.

24. It is interesting to note that in his well-know revisionist essay "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," Barton J. Bernstein argued that FDR's administrations braced and sustained the existing economic system rather than initiated significant change to meet an ongoing economic crisis. *Twentieth-Century America: Recent Interpretations*, eds. Bernstein and Allen J. Matusow (New York, 1972), 242-262.

25. In 1947 and again from 1951 to 1954, the House Committee on Un-American Activities investigated Communist subversion in the film industry. During these same years the growth in television was astronomical. Furthermore, the federal government's longstanding antitrust suit against the major film studios resulted in the Paramount Decree of 1948, which stipulated that film corporations had to divest their ownership of theater chains. At the same time as divestment of theaters, the purchase of film studios by corporations not directly involved in filmmaking led many in the industry to bemoan the good old days of Selznick, Thalberg, and Zanuck, studio-heads whose lives were bound up in movies, not just bottom line profits—so it was believed. The American film industry had traditionally dominated the international market and had realized enormous export profits. After the war some nations placed restrictions on Hollywood that curtailed these profits. This was also a period of labor unrest in the industry, especially when two unions fought for power during strikes in 1945 and 1946. The latter year, however, was a boom year for the industry, but the soaring profits were short-lived and the above-mentioned problems, as well as others, such as the post-war baby boom and suburbanization (film had counted on dense urban populations and if parents were at home with young children, they couldn't be out at the movies), led to a precipitous decline in movie attendance and profits. In 1946 eighty-two million Americans went to the movies each week; in 1950 thirty-six million Americans went to the movies each week. In his well-known study of the American film industry, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York, 1975), Robert Sklar calls his section on this period "The Decline of Movie Culture" (249-304).

26. Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical," 341.

27. John Gregory Dunne, *The Studio* (1968, rpt. New York, 1985), "Foreword to the New Edition." The "beaverboard" commonplaces continue throughout this "behind-the-scenes" look at Hollywood. For example, near the end of the book Dunne says that "what was crippling this company was the disloyalty, the fighting between money people in the East and the picture people in the West" (244).

28. Dodd's statement is an adaptation of Nicholas M. Schenk's famous adage about movie-making. Schenk was the president and chief executive officer of MGM's parent company, Loew's Incorporated. Loew's headquarters were in New York.

29. Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939, rpt. New York, 1983), 89.

30. *Ibid.*, 164.

31. See Kay Francis Collection, Wesleyan Film Archives, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.