

du. Sun, as in the case of *Bringing Up Baby*, a studio rarely fired a director or
ted production, even if the film did run over in both time and money.

The last proposal is for an open-minded reevaluation of the system itself and of
h individual studio. There is more scholarly work to be done if we are to move
ond the one-sided generalizations that prevail in the current literature. We need,
t of all, to recognize the complexity of these organizations. It is wrong to lump
iM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, and, oftentimes,
umbria, Universal, and United Artists together and treat them as if they were car-
copies of one another. Each of these companies had its own special character-
s, and each underwent significant changes during the studio system era. Each
a world unto itself with its own ways of making movies and making money. It
iso time that we recognize the intrinsic genius of the system. There were both
nd business sense and artistic advantage in the assembling of a diverse group of
ialists under one umbrella structure. These talented individuals were able to
v and learn and work together in ways that enriched them all, as well as the cap-
stic organizations they served.

. modern systems analyst studying the old Hollywood studios would certainly
them grossly inefficient and honeycombed with flaws. Ironically, these very
knesses enabled the studios' more imaginative employees to make pictures that
still studied and appreciated today. The studios have taken enough punishment;
should give them a second look, recognizing that they may represent the best
m for commercial filmmaking thus far developed in world cinema.

1984

THOMAS SCHATZ FROM THE GENIUS OF THE SYSTEM

“THE WHOLE EQUATION OF PICTURES”

The Genius of the System (1996), excerpted below, takes its title from a phrase
of André Bazin. In it Thomas Schatz argues the central importance of the
producer in the Hollywood studio system. In *Hollywood Genres* (1981),
excerpted in Section VI, Schatz similarly repudiated auteur theory in favor
of an approach to film analysis that considers the broader system of produc-
tion and consumption within which films are made, especially the genre for-
mulas central to movie making as a commercial enterprise. Also the author
of *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (1997) and editor of
the four-volume anthology *Hollywood: Critical Concepts in Media and
Cultural Studies* (2004), Schatz is currently Jones Centennial chair of the
Radio-Television-Film department at the University of Texas at Austin.

Walking at dawn in the deserted Hollywood streets in 1951 with David [Selznick], I
listened to my favorite movie boss topple the town he had helped to build. The movies,
said David, were over and done with. Hollywood was already a ghost town making
foolish efforts to seem alive. . . .

But now that the tumult was gone, what had Hollywood been?

Ben Hecht, 1954

. . . The collapse of the studio system was bound to provoke questions like Ben
Hecht's—"What had Hollywood been?"—and the answers have been plentiful but
less than adequate. Hecht himself answered as so many of his industry colleagues
did, with an anecdotal, self-serving memoir laced with venom for the "system" and
for the "Philistines" who controlled it—and who paid Hecht up to \$5,000 a week for
his services as a screenwriter. Hecht was an essential part of that system, of course,
though he hardly saw things that way, and his reminiscence was less revealing of
Hollywood filmmaking than of the attitudes of eastern-bred writers toward the pri-
orities and the power structure in the movie industry. Hecht's answer did provide yet
another piece of evidence to be factored in, along with countless other interviews
and autobiographies, critical studies, and economic analyses. But the accumulated
evidence scarcely adds up, and our sense of what Hollywood had been remained a
vague impression, fragmented and contradictory, more mythology than history.

Promising to change all that, a cadre of critics and historians in the 1960s and
1970s cultivated a "theory of film history" based on the notion of directorial author-

ship. As the New Hollywood emerged from the ashes of the studio era, proponents of the auteur theory proclaimed that what the Old Hollywood had been was a director's cinema. They proclaimed, too, that the only film directors worthy of canonization as author-artists were those whose personal style emerged from a certain antagonism toward the studio system at large—the dehumanizing, formulaic, profit-hungry machinery of Hollywood's studio-factories. The auteurist's chief proponent was Andrew Sarris, who in his landmark study, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968*, cast the studio boss as the heavy in Hollywood's epic struggle and reduced American film history to the careers of a few dozen heroic directors. Keying on an observation by director George Stevens that as the industry took shape, “the filmmaker became the employee, and the man who had time to attend to the business details became the head of the studio,” Sarris developed a simplistic theory of his own, celebrating the director as the sole purveyor of Film Art in an industry overrun with hacks and profitmongers. The closing words of his introduction said it all: “He [the director] would not be worth bothering with if he were not capable now and then of a sublimity of expression almost miraculously extracted from his money-oriented environment.”

Auteurism itself would not be worth bothering with if it hadn't been so influential, effectively stalling film history and criticism in a prolonged stage of adolescent romanticism. But the closer we look at Hollywood's relations of power and hierarchy of authority during the studio era, at its division of labor and assembly-line production process, the less sense it makes to assess filmmaking or film style in terms of the individual director—or *any* individual, for that matter. The key issues here are style and authority—creative expression and creative control—and there were indeed a number of Hollywood directors who had an unusual degree of authority and a certain style. John Ford, Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, and Alfred Hitchcock are good examples, but it's worth noting that their privileged status—particularly their control over script development, casting, and editing—was more a function of their role as producers than as directors. Such authority came only with commercial success and was won by filmmakers who proved not just that they had talent but that they could work profitably within the system. These filmmakers were often “difficult” for a studio to handle, perhaps, but no more so than its top stars or writers. And ultimately they got along, doing what Ford called “a job of work” and moving on to the next project. In fact, they did their best and most consistent work on calculated star vehicles for one particular studio, invariably in symbiosis with an authoritative studio boss.

Consider Ford's work with Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox on a succession of Henry Fonda pictures: *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Or Alfred Hitchcock doing *Spellbound* and *Notorious*, two psychological dramas scripted by Ben Hecht and prepared by David Selznick for his European discovery, Ingrid Bergman. Or Howard Hawks working for Jack Warner on *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep*, two hard-boiled thrillers with Bogart and Bacall that were steeped in the Warners' style. These were first-rate Hollywood films, but they were no more distinctive than other star-genre formulations turned out by routine contract directors; Universal's horror films with Boris Karloff directed by James Whale, for instance, or the Paul Muni biopics directed by William Dieterle for Warners. Whale and Dieterle are rarely singled out for their style or artistry, and each would have been

lost without the studio's resources and regimented production process. But that doesn't diminish the integrity of films like *Frankenstein*, *The Old Dark House*, and *The Bride of Frankenstein*, or *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *The Life of Émile Zola*.

The quality and artistry of all these films were the product not simply of individual human expression, but of a melding of institutional forces. In each case the “style” of a writer, director, star—or even a cinematographer, art director, or costume designer—fused with the studio's production operations and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy. And ultimately any individual's style was no more than an inflection on an established studio style. Think of Jimmy Cagney in *Public Enemy*, staggering down that dark, rain-drenched street after a climactic shoot-out with rival gangsters, gazing just past the camera and muttering “I ain't so tough,” then falling face-down into the gutter. That was a signature Warner Bros. moment, a narrative-cinematic epiphany when star and genre and technique coalesced into an ideal expression of studio style, vintage 1931. Other studios had equally distinctive styles and signature moments, involving different stars and story types and a different “way of seeing” in both a technical and an ideological sense. On a darkened, rain-drenched street at MGM, for instance, we might expect to find a glossy, upbeat celebration of life and love—Mickey Rooney in another Andy Hardy installment, struggling to get the top up on his old jalopy while his date gets soaked, or Gene Kelly dancing through puddles and singin' in the rain. Over at Universal a late-night storm was likely to signal something more macabre: Count Dracula on the prowl, perhaps, or Dr. Frankenstein harnessing a bolt of lightning for some horrific experiment.

These are isolated glimpses of a larger design, both on screen and off. Each top studio developed a repertoire of contract stars and story formulas that were refined and continually recirculated through the marketplace. Warners in the 1930s, for example, cranked out urban crime films with Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, crusading biopics with Paul Muni, backstage musicals with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler, epic swash-bucklers with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, and in a curious counter to the studio's male ethos, a succession of “women's pictures” starring Bette Davis. These stars and genres were the key markers in Warners' Depression-era style, the organizing principles for its entire operation from the New York office to the studio-factory across the continent. They were a means of stabilizing marketing and sales, of bringing efficiency and economy into the production of some fifty feature films per year, and of distinguishing Warners' collective output from that of its competitors.

The chief architects of a studio's style were its executives, which any number of Hollywood chroniclers observed at the time. Among the more astute chroniclers was Leo Rosten, who put it this way in *Hollywood: The Movie Colony*, an in-depth study published in 1940:

Each studio has a personality; each studio's product shows special emphases and values. And, in the final analysis, the sum total of a studio's personality, the aggregate pattern of its choices and its tastes, may be traced to its producers. For it is the producers who establish the preferences, the prejudices, and the predispositions of the organization and, therefore, of the movies which it turns out.

Rosten was not referring to the “supervisors” and “associated producers” who monitored individual productions, nor to the pioneering “movie moguls” who controlled

economic policy from New York. He was referring to studio production executives like Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg at MGM, Jack Warner and Hal Wallis at Warner Bros., Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox, Harry Cohn at Columbia, and major independent producers like David Selznick and Sam Goldwyn. These men—and they were always men—translated an annual budget handed down by the New York office into a program of specific pictures. They coordinated the operations of the entire plant, conducted contract negotiations, developed stories and scripts, screened “dailies” as pictures were being shot, and supervised editing until a picture was ready for shipment to New York for release. These were the men Frank Capra railed against in an open letter to *The New York Times* in April 1939, complaining that “about six producers today pass on about 90 percent of the scripts and edit 90 percent of the pictures.” And these were the men that F. Scott Fitzgerald described on the opening page of *The Last Tycoon*, the Hollywood novel he was writing at the time of his death, in 1940. “You can take Hollywood for granted like I did,” wrote Fitzgerald, “or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don’t understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not a half dozen men have been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads.”

Fitzgerald was thinking of Irving Thalberg when he wrote that passage, and it would be difficult to find a more apt description of Thalberg’s role at MGM. Nor could we find a clearer and more concise statement of our objective here: to calculate the whole equation of pictures, to get down on paper what Thalberg and Zanuck and Selznick and a very few others carried in their heads. After digging through several tons of archival materials from various studios and production companies, I have developed a strong conviction that these producers and studio executives have been the most misunderstood and undervalued figures in American film history. So in a sense this is an effort to reconsider their contributions to Hollywood filmmaking; but I don’t want to overstate their case or misstate my own. Hollywood’s division of labor extended well into the executive and management ranks, and isolating the producer or anyone else as artist or visionary gets us nowhere. We would do well, in fact, to recall French film critic André Bazin’s admonition to the early auteurs, who were transforming film history into a cult of personality. “The American cinema is a classical art,” wrote Bazin in 1957, “so why not then admire in it what is most admirable—i.e., not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system.”

It’s taken us a quarter-century to appreciate that insight, to consider the “classical Hollywood” as precisely that: a period when various social, industrial, technological, economic, and aesthetic forces struck a delicate balance. That balance was conflicted and ever shifting but stable enough through four decades to provide a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style—a standard way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and thematic. It was the studio system at large that held those various forces in equilibrium; indeed, the “studio era” and the classical Hollywood describe the same industrial and historical phenomenon. The sites of convergence for those forces were the studios themselves, each one a distinct variation on Hollywood’s classical style. . . .

The movies were a “vertical” industry in that the ultimate authority belonged to the owners and top corporate officers in New York. But the New York office

couldn’t make movies, nor could it dictate audience interest and public taste. And whatever the efforts to regulate production and marketing, moviemaking remained a competitive and creative enterprise. In the overall scheme of things, the West Coast management team was the key to studio operations, integrating the company’s economic and creative resources, translating fiscal policy into filmmaking practice. This demanded close contact with New York and a feel for the company’s market skew, but also an acute awareness of the studio’s resources and heavy interaction with the top filmmakers on the lot, particularly the directors, writers, and stars.

Because of the different stakes involved for each of these key players, studio filmmaking was less a process of collaboration than of negotiation and struggle—occasionally approaching armed conflict. But somehow it worked, and it worked well. What’s most remarkable about the classical Hollywood, finally, is that such varied and contradictory forces were held in equilibrium for so long. The New Hollywood and commercial television indicate all too clearly what happens when that balance is lost, reminding us what a productive, efficient, and creative system was lost back in the 1950s. There was a special genius to the studio system, and perhaps when we understand that we will learn, at long last, what Hollywood had been.