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CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD, 1928–1946

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American cinema came of age in the 1920s, and despite a severe economic contraction during the Great Depression, the film industry only increased in both size and scope in the 1930s. The consequent demand for stories—whether in the form of original screenplays or adaptations of novels, plays, short stories, and other sources—meant that screenwriters played a significant role in the growing film industry. The increasing number of movies being made in any given year, as well as longer average running times for those movies, made the demand for material that much greater. A search for talented writers ensued, motivated not just by increased demand but also by a shared commitment to elevating the quality and respectability of Hollywood films.¹ From the late 1920s to the late 1940s, screenwriters contributed much to a vertically integrated film industry that controlled the entire filmmaking process—from the page to the silver screen.

The very content and form of what got written down on the page before shooting began were also changing. Whereas dialogue had a limited role in silent films, appearing as intertitles between shots, as Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White write, “the introduction of sound technology in the late 1920s proved to be one of the most significant advancements in the history of film narrative,” since it “enabled film narratives to create and develop more intricate characters whose dialogue and vocal intonations added new psychological and social dimensions

to film.”² Dialogue quickly became a standard feature of screenplays, requiring writers who could come up with entertaining, funny, or intelligent speech. A number of conventions also developed around the screenplay, which became more and more standardized not just in terms of various genres—gangster films, historical epics, horror films, musicals, screwball and other types of comedies, westerns, and so on—but also in terms of what film critics call classical Hollywood narrative. The 1930s and 1940s saw a consolidation of the basic conventions governing classical narrative, which include (1) focusing on one or two central characters; (2) constructing plots with more or less linear chronologies (even when flashbacks are used); and (3) implementing a realistic cause-and-effect logic according to which the central characters propel the plot forward by striving to overcome antagonists, internal conflicts, and other obstacles in order to achieve certain goals or perhaps some kind of self-transformation. In addition, classical film narrative tended to employ a three-part structure, following the ancient Aristotelian schema of beginning, middle, and ending. Although there were many variations to classical film narrative, not to mention alternative traditions that challenged notions of realism, linear chronology, and the omniscient point of view upon which classical narrative depended, classical Hollywood cinema nonetheless proved to be an immensely productive formula with enough flexibility to create a virtually unlimited number of stories of great depth and power.

Writing for a Sound Film Audience

Audiences were clearly responsive to this new form of commercial entertainment, which along with automobiles and comparatively shorter work weeks transformed leisure time itself. Attracting roughly 50 million weekly viewers in 1920, Hollywood nearly doubled its average weekly attendance to about 95 million viewers per week by the end of the decade (some estimates put the figure as high as 100 million), around the time that the first Academy Awards ceremony was held in Los Angeles in 1929. This meant that average weekly attendance at some 20,000 theaters throughout the country was close to 80 percent of the United States population at the time, which was about 122 million.³ Economically and culturally, the film industry expanded its reach throughout the 1920s in spite of several scandals that had tarnished its image earlier in the decade. At the start of the period covered in this chapter, Hollywood was enjoying what can only be considered its boom years. Moving pictures were America’s dominant form of entertainment.

The stock market crash of October 1929 sent the film industry reeling—along with the rest of the nation’s economy. During the Great Depression, movie theater attendance dropped from some 80 million patrons per week in 1930 to 70 million in 1931, then 55 million in 1932, while ticket prices also fell from thirty cents to twenty cents on average, even as the number of lower-priced ten-cent

theaters increased to some 2,000 by the end of 1931.⁴ After the boom years of the late 1920s, it must have seemed as if the film industry was regressing to the nickelodeon era. Moreover, things got worse before they got better. As the film historian Tino Balio writes, “The bottom fell out of the market in 1933.”⁵ Fox, Paramount, and RKO Pictures all declared bankruptcy; Universal went into receivership and was forced to sell its chain of more than 300 theaters; Warner Bros. and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer battled to stay in business.

As it turned out, however, the film industry survived the Depression more or less intact. Attendance at movie theaters across the country rebounded to an estimated 60 million weekly viewers in 1934, and it continued to climb steadily upward in subsequent years, from 70 million in 1934 to 80 million in 1935 to 88 million in 1936. A decade later, movie attendance was still holding steady at about 90 million weekly viewers, just below its peak of 95 million from 1929 (although the U.S. population had grown by some 20 million people to more than 140 million).

Writing in Hollywood’s Golden Age

Starting around 1928, Hollywood entered a golden age in which a relatively small number of studios—the “Big Five” (Fox, MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., and RKO) along with the “Little Three” studios (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists)—benefitted from a vertically integrated film industry that allowed them to control film production from start to finish.

In 1938, the U.S. Department of Justice brought a lawsuit against the eight major studios (no longer separated as “Big Five” and “Little Three,” and Fox now reorganized and renamed Twentieth Century–Fox) for monopolistic practices. After Franklin Roosevelt’s reelection to an unprecedented third term in November 1940, the studios signed a consent decree with the U.S. government, agreeing to produce “fewer and better” films starting the following year.⁶ Hollywood enjoyed relatively little government interference until 1948, when the Supreme Court finally forced the film studios to divest from the theater chains they controlled. That same year, the number of television sets in American households reached one million, and over the next ten years the major studios saw their overall box office profits decline by some 50 percent from a peak of \$1.7 billion in 1946. Attendance dropped by one-third to roughly 60 million weekly viewers by 1950 and then by another third to 40 million weekly viewers a decade later, in 1960. Weekly attendance would never again reach the levels of the classical period.⁷ As a percentage of the U.S. population this decline seems more dramatic still: whereas nearly 65 percent of Americans went to the movies every week in 1946, by the end of the twentieth century less than 10 percent of Americans did so on average. In short, the “magical year” of 1946, as the film historian Richard Jewell

calls it, “would mark the end of the boom era; soon, most Americans would rely on television for their visual entertainment and movies would become an occasional pastime, rather than a regular habit.”⁸

Raymond Chandler had predicted in 1945 that the “cold dynasty” of the studio system “will not last forever,” and indeed it did not last.⁹ But there can be no doubt that a large number of the films made during this classical period have lasted, or stood the test of time, as it were: a remarkable tribute not only to the studio system but also to the many talented men and women who wrote scripts for every last one of the films that viewers all over the world still enjoy today.

Writers were crucial to the expanding cultural influence of cinema in the classical Hollywood period. Notwithstanding complaints about being mere cogs in the studio machine, screenwriters contributed to the making of any number of indelible film masterpieces during this period, from slapstick comedies such as *Duck Soup* (1933); to sophisticated romantic comedies like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *The Lady Eve* (1941); to classic film noirs such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *The Big Sleep* (1946); to the remarkable cornucopia of fantasies, historical epics, and westerns all released in what is widely considered Hollywood’s greatest single year, 1939, which featured, among many other gems, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Stagecoach*.¹⁰ Writers were indispensable to this “golden age” of Hollywood between 1928 and 1946, even if they had legitimate reasons to gripe about their relatively low status and all-too-often exploitive treatment within the studio system.¹¹ Familiar as writers’ complaints are, we must question whether such conditions were necessarily inimical to producing great films.

Indeed, the sheer number and variety of great films made during the classical Hollywood period challenges us to reconsider longstanding pejorative constructions of the studio era from some film critics. The Production Code, for instance, has been viewed typically as a deplorable if not insidious form of censorship (always bad) that curtailed artistic freedom (always good). Echoing Virginia Woolf’s famous dictum about modern life, Thomas Doherty begins his book *Pre-Code Hollywood* (1999) by describing Hollywood’s self-imposed system of censorship in rather sinister terms:

On or about July 1934, American cinema changed. During that month, the Production Code Administration, popularly known as the Hays Office, began to regulate, systematically and scrupulously, the content of Hollywood motion pictures. For the next thirty years, cinematic space was a patrolled landscape with secure perimeters and well-defined borders. Adopted under duress at the urging of priests and politicians, Hollywood’s in-house policy of self-censorship set the boundaries for what could be seen, heard, even implied on screen.¹²

The Production Code had been drafted as early as 1930 but was not fully enforced until 1934, when the Production Code Administration (PCA) was established under director Joseph I. Breen. The code consisted of three General Principles meant to establish guidelines for “appropriate content” in the cinema, followed by more specific “Particular Applications” elaborated under a section somewhat comically entitled “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” While this section included a number of patently prudish rules against representing “the use of liquor” or “adultery and illicit sex” unless strongly condemned by the end, the basic moralistic thrust of the Production Code is best summed up in General Principal number 1: “No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.” By invoking the “dictates of good taste and civilized usage” the code sought to limit obscenity, or indeed any “treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant subjects which decent society considers outlawed from normal conversation.”¹³

In spite of the PCA’s restrictions, filmmakers managed to produce an extraordinary number of great films, as Doherty acknowledges: “Hollywood’s vaunted ‘golden age’ began with the Code and ended with its demise.” Arguably, the restrictions on content enforced by the Production Code, along with requirements to conform to genre conventions and contractual agreements that kept writers working for only one studio, had the effect of spurring creativity rather than stifling it, producing what Doherty aptly calls an “artistic flowering of incalculable cultural impact.”¹⁴

For all its faults, then, the studio system worked. In his book *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (1996), the historian Thomas Schatz agrees: “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, or star . . . fused with the studio’s production operations and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy.”¹⁵ Chronically underappreciated (and at times uncredited) writers who worked behind the scenes to help make the studio system work were less sanguine about what they regarded as a highly commercialized, industrial model of filmmaking. In his essay “Writers in Hollywood” (1945), Chandler bemoaned the fact that “the basic art of the motion picture is the screenplay; it is fundamental, without it there is nothing. . . . But in Hollywood the screenplay is written by a salaried writer under the supervision of a producer—that is to say, by an employee without power or decision over the uses of his own craft, without ownership of it, and, however extravagantly paid, almost without honor for it.”¹⁶

The top screenwriters were indeed extravagantly paid. Twentieth Century-Fox’s two highest paid employees in 1938 were Shirley Temple and the screenwriter-turned-producer Nunnally Johnson. The highest paid writers in

1938 included Ben Hecht and Preston Sturges, who made more than \$140,000 that year. Anita Loos made \$87,500, according to Leo Rosten.¹⁷ Whatever their salaries or relative status compared to the producers and directors, many writers did exercise considerable control and influence over their particular domain, the script, which in turn influenced the quality of what made it to the screen. “Screenwriters have traditionally been seen as the least powerful contingent in Hollywood,” writes the film critic J. E. Smyth, “but even before the Screen Writers’ Guild was certified by the National Labor Relations Board in August 1938, individual writers at several studios had an unusual independence and autonomy over their work. Often their story sense overpowered their producers.”¹⁸ The screenwriter Dudley Nichols, best known for collaborating with director John Ford on a number of film masterpieces including *Stagecoach*, declared in 1942, “I devoutly believe it is the writer who has matured the film medium more than anyone else in Hollywood.”¹⁹

By the standards of how it developed after the advent of synchronized sound in 1927, screenwriting in the silent era was somewhat limited in scope. Characters and storylines still had to be fleshed out and written down, of course, yet dialogue was limited to intertitles. Whereas silent films had emphasized a universally accessible and predominantly visual aesthetic of sight gags and the like, sound films replaced nonverbal communication with more elaborate dialogue, no longer delimited by intertitles, as the principal aspect of what film critics call diegetic sound, that is, sound emitted from people, animals, machines, musical instruments, or objects onscreen. The world onscreen was still black and white, of course, but it suddenly had an aural dimension. “Nonverbal communication in the cinema was never totally lost,” Frank Scheide has observed, “but the new technology fundamentally changed both the evolution and content of cinematic expression.”²⁰ Synchronized sound caused a sensation when it was first introduced in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) with the unforgettable lines, “Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” Before long, moving pictures became, in effect, *talkies*. If film production was still more or less split between silent, sound, and hybrid movies in 1928, sound films would quickly dominate the industry, and the studios virtually stopped making silent films by 1930. Charlie Chaplin is the exception, of course, as he defiantly continued to make silent films into the 1930s, including two of his most successful comedies, *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936).

This development was good news for screenwriters. In April 1929, film critic and playwright Robert E. Sherwood predicted a “Renaissance in Hollywood,” the title of an essay published in H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury* in which he argued that the talkies would have “a profoundly salutary influence upon the movie industry” and that “the writer will now be boosted into a position of importance that is equivalent, at least, to that of the director.”²¹ A founding member of the Algonquin Circle, Sherwood became friends with Robert Benchley, Edna

Ferber, and Dorothy Parker—all of whom would go on to write for the movies, as did Sherwood himself, who won a Best Screenplay Oscar for *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Directed by William Wyler, *The Best Years of Our Lives* deals frankly with alcoholism and depression among three returning World War II veterans who must cope with the difficulties of transitioning to civilian life in a changing postwar American society.

While Sherwood's bold claim that screenwriters would soon acquire as much or more power as directors didn't quite pan out, as we shall see, it is true that movies subsequently relied more heavily on dialogue, and furthermore that dialogue was increasingly marked by verbal sparring and word play, as evidenced by Mae West's witty double-entendres in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) and *I'm No Angel* (1933)—“When I'm good I'm very good. But when I'm bad I'm better”—or later, by the repartee of fast-talking dames such as those played by Rosalind Russell and Barbara Stanwyck in *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *The Lady Eve* (1941), respectively.

The role of women performers and screenwriters in fomenting this revolution in dialogue writing should not be underestimated. “Story, screenplay, and all dialogue by Mae West,” the credit sequence for *I'm No Angel* proclaimed. As West herself declared, “I wrote the story of *I'm No Angel* myself. It's all about a girl who lost her reputation and never missed it.” Recall that Hollywood was in the midst of an economic decline in 1933 when her two classic films *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel* came out. As one grateful exhibitor apparently exclaimed: “Mae West was a life saver for an anemic box office.”²²



Mae West and Cary Grant in *I'm No Angel* (1933), the top-grossing film of 1933. Screenplay by Mae West.

Billy Wilder's masterful film *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), with a brilliant Academy Award-winning screenplay by Wilder along with Charles Brackett and D. M. Marshman Jr., offers a wry commentary on the sound era in the following exchange between Joe Gillis (William Holden), a struggling screenwriter, and Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), a washed-up silent film star:

GILLIS: I know your face. You're Norma Desmond. You used to be in pictures. You used to be big.

NORMA: I am big. It's the pictures that got small. . . . There was a time when this business had the eyes of the whole wide world. But that wasn't good enough. Oh, no! They wanted the ears of the world, too. So they opened their big mouths, and out came talk, talk, talk!

GILLIS: That's where the popcorn business comes in. You buy yourself a bag and plug up your ears.

NORMA: Look at them in the front offices—the masterminds! They took the idols and smashed them. The Fairbankses and the Chaplins and the Gilberts and the Valentinos. And who have they got now? Some nobodies—a lot of pale little frogs croaking pish-posh!

GILLIS: Don't get sore at me. I'm not an executive. I'm just a writer.

NORMA: You are! Writing words, words! You've made a rope of words and strangled this business!

Unlike purported silent film actors for whom the transition to sound films was damaging to their careers, many well-known writers from the silent era made the transition to sound rather easily. Anita Loos and Frances Marion were equally successful in both the silent and sound eras, for instance. Robert E. Sherwood, in another bold claim, argued that in nearly thirty years of existence, Hollywood had produced not “one writer who is worthy of mention; the lone exception is the gifted Miss Anita Loos.” The most prominent female screenwriter of the period, though, was Frances Marion, who won Academy Awards for Best Adapted Screenplay in 1930 and again for Best Story in 1932, both for pictures featuring Wallace Beery.²³ Screenwriting was notably one of the few professions in the film industry that remained relatively open to women.

The transition from silent to sound films created a demand for new screenwriting talent. “Novelists and playwrights of acute sensibility and talent,” observes Richard Fine, “were lured to Hollywood by offers of huge amounts of money and the promise of challenging assignments.”²⁴ The Coen brothers' film *Barton Fink*

(1991) describes how Hollywood studios lured East Coast writers when the aptly named Capital Pictures recruits the film's eponymous playwright Barton Fink, who is still basking in the success of his recent play. Overcoming his ambivalence about giving up the stage, Barton decides to cash in on his Broadway success by accepting the offer of a lucrative screenwriting contract, and the Coen brothers signal his fateful decision with a telling cut—from a golden cash register in the background to the crashing of a wave against the rocks—which serves as a sort of brilliant shorthand for the exotic allure of going out to “the coast” for New York writers. Of course, *Barton Fink* goes on to show, as John T. Matthews contends, writing about William Faulkner's stint in Los Angeles, “the destructive force of Hollywood on serious writers who sought to make fortunes there while preserving their artistic integrity.”²⁵ Certainly many writers felt underappreciated if not downright disrespected in the studio system. Ben Hecht once complained that producers “outrank you in salary two to one. It's like giving the printer \$2000 a week for setting the type for the Great American Novel.” Producers dished out insults in return; Jack Warner famously dubbed screenwriters “schmucks with Underwoods.”²⁶ Yet some writers embraced screenwriting as an opportunity to create a new form of literary art.

The Profession of Screenwriting

The profession of screenwriting, like the film industry as a whole, was rapidly changing. No doubt the single biggest change in the craft was a newfound need for dialogue in the movies. As Balio points out, “Talking pictures added a new dimension to the craft of screenwriting—the ability to write realistic dialogue.”²⁷ Not only was dialogue becoming much more realistic, but dialogue also made possible a different type of comedy than the kind pioneered by the comic geniuses Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Embarking on the production of his first sound film *The Lion's Roar* (1928), for example, the director Mack Sennett observed, “Dialogue opens to the producer of the heretofore ‘silent’ pictures, the immense field of verbal humor,” not to mention “proper sound effects, such as the roar of lions, the rumble of an approaching train or the crash of breaking dishes.”²⁸ Witty dialogue and sound effects played for laughs were not improvised during production, of course; they were dreamed up and written down by writers.

Consider the unique case of the Marx Brothers comedies of the early 1930s. Although films like *Monkey Business* (1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *Duck Soup* (1933) retained elements of slapstick from silent comedy, the Marx Brothers introduced comic forms of wordplay such as double entendres, wacky monologues, and sardonic asides. Self-consciously subverting emerging conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, the Marx Brothers created a number of brilliantly



Groucho Marx in *Duck Soup* (1933), which brought a new comic sensibility with its funny, smart dialogue. Story by Bert Kalmer and Harry Ruby, additional dialogue by Arthur Sheekman and Nat Perrin.

“anarchistic comedies” in collaboration with a team of writers including Bert Kalmar, Harry Ruby, and S. J. Perelman, among others.²⁹

Other changes in the craft of screenwriting included greater attention to characterization as well as a growing emphasis on genre conventions. Gangster films like *Little Caesar* (1931), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) were enormously popular in the early 1930s, as were horror films like *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *King Kong* (1933). The best writers also knew that if their characters’ actions were *motivated*, they would be plausible and realistic. “In order that the motion picture may convey the illusion of reality that audiences demand,” Frances Marion, author of *How to Write and Sell Film Stories* (1937), notes in a piece entitled “Scenario Writing,” “the scenario writer stresses motivation—that is, he makes clear a character’s reason for doing whatever he does that is important.”³⁰ Her book also stressed the need for character arc and narrative closure. According to Marion, films must end shortly after the action gets resolved, “but not before the expected rewards and punishments are meted out. . . . The final sequence should show the reaction of the protagonist when he has achieved his desires. Let the audience be satisfied that the future of the principles is settled.”³¹ These authors articulate the now familiar narrative conventions of classical Hollywood cinema.

The second phase of classical Hollywood cinema—the sound era—thus brought about two important stylistic changes in particular that had a major

impact on screenwriting: (1) the elaboration of movie dialogue and characterization in films; and (2) the prominence of generic formulas in constructing film narratives. According to Corrigan and White: “The sensational arrival of sound technology opened a whole new dimension to film form that allowed movies to expand their dramatic capacity. Accomplished writers flocked to Hollywood, literary adaptations flourished, and outspoken characters became more verbally, psychologically, and socially complex.”³² For the next thirty years, writers helped develop an astonishing variety of characters, the conventions associated with various genres, and patterns of narrative conflict, coherence, and resolution that, along with the nascent visual language of continuity editing, combined to create a classical Hollywood cinema of unprecedented cultural power. The visual language and narrative principles of the classical style were actually more pliable and less restrictive than we might assume, yet together they functioned to convey information in a dramatically compelling fashion. The goal was to completely immerse the viewer in the story so, as Jewell writes, “that they would never think about the totally constructed and artificial nature of the experience.”³³

Screenwriting during the Great Depression

A mass exodus of writers to “the mecca of the movies,” as French writer Blaise Cendrars called Hollywood in 1936, was spurred on not just by the conversion to talking pictures, but also by the Great Depression.³⁴ During the early 1930s, many New York publishing houses filed for bankruptcy, and by some estimates roughly half of all Broadway theaters were forced to close.³⁵ With the doors of assorted publishing houses and theaters shuttered, many writers migrated west. As Ian Hamilton points out in his history of writers in Hollywood, “By the end of 1931, there were 354 full-time writers in Hollywood and another 435 working part-time.”³⁶ Those numbers continued to climb: a decade later there were more than 1,000 members of the Screen Writers Guild. Even a highly selective listing of the writers who went to Hollywood includes many influential members of the literary establishment: Maxwell Anderson, Robert Benchley, Charles Brackett, W. R. Burnett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dashiell Hammett, Ben Hecht, Lillian Hellman, Sidney Howard, Nunnally Johnson, George S. Kaufman, Dudley Nichols, Clifford Odets, Frank O’Hara, Dorothy Parker, Robert E. Sherwood, Donald Ogden Stewart, Preston Sturges, Thornton Wilder, as well as some well-known British writers like Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Evelyn Waugh. As early as 1932, one *Fortune* magazine writer could joke, “More members of the literati work under [Irving] Thalberg than it took to produce the King James Bible.”³⁷

The longstanding myth of writers “selling out in Hollywood” has been dispelled in a number of ways, not least by pointing out that for all their complaints, many writers had little choice but to write for the studios.³⁸ Consider Nathanael West, whose first three novels earned less than \$800 in combined royalties. After *The Day of the Locust* (1939) brought him a paltry \$300 in royalties, West jumped at the chance of a studio contract. Still, the influential critic Edmund Wilson condemned West’s move to Hollywood: “Why don’t you get out of that ghastly place? You’re an artist and really have no business there.”³⁹ In fact, business is precisely what West did have there, as the author himself admitted: “Thank God for the movies. I once tried to work seriously at my craft but was absolutely unable to make even the beginning of a living. So it wasn’t a matter of making a sacrifice, but just a clear cut impossibility.”⁴⁰

When Harold Ross of the *New Yorker* chastised another novelist-turned-screenwriter, Nunnally Johnson, for what he called “sucking around the diamond merchants of Hollywood,” he was merely expressing a view that was considered axiomatic. F. Scott Fitzgerald voices much the same concern when he warned his friend: “Listen, Nunnally, get out of Hollywood. It will ruin you. You have a talent—you’ll kill it there.”⁴¹ Neither Johnson nor Fitzgerald heeded this advice. Long viewed as the quintessential example of a promising writer who squandered his talent in Hollywood, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in California the very same day as Nathanael West in December 1940—two casualties of what Chandler called “the graveyard of talent.”⁴² In his essay “The Boys in the Back Room” (1941), Edmund Wilson observed that the deaths of both Fitzgerald and West on the same day was firstly an extraordinary coincidence of literary history, but secondly, echoing the largely negative view of Hollywood among the New York intellectuals, it was a tragic consequence of the “great anti-cultural amusement-producing center” that had grown up, “gigantic and vulgar, like one of those synthetic California flowers, and tended to drain the soil of the imaginative life of the State.”⁴³

Faced with a choice between becoming fettered to the studios or finding something else to do for a living, many writers were willing to make that Faustian bargain. “If I do sell my soul to the cinema,” Robert E. Sherwood assured his mother, “it will be for a tidy sum.”⁴⁴ James M. Cain was similarly candid, if also defensive, about the economic realities of his situation: “I work a few weeks a year, and collect the main part of my living expenses, which leaves me free to do my other work without having to worry about the rent.”⁴⁵ William Faulkner was no less determined to keep his wits about him by segregating his commercial work, which he often likened to prostitution or slavery, from serious literary fiction:

There’s some people who are writers who believed they had talent, they believed in the dream of perfection, they get offers to go to Hollywood where they can make a lot of money, and they can’t quit their jobs because

they have got to continue to own that swimming pool and the imported cars. There are others with the same dream of perfection, the same belief that they can match it that go there and resist the money without becoming a slave to it.

Before signing his first studio contract from MGM at \$500 per week in April 1932, he wrote to his wife, Estelle: "I have the assurance of a movie agent that I can go to Hollywood and make 500.00 or 750.00 a week in the movies. Hal Smith will not want me to do it, but if all that money is out there, I might as well hack a little on the side and put the novel off."⁴⁶

Though fraught at times, Faulkner's relationship to the studios proved to be lucrative. Faulkner sold his war story "Turnabout" (1932), which had appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, to MGM for \$2,250, and when director Howard Hawks persuaded Irving Thalberg to allow Faulkner to adapt his own story, the author returned a completed script five days later. The studio then asked him to create a romantic lead for Joan Crawford in the script. Faulkner quipped, "I don't seem to remember a girl in the story," but he accommodated the studio's wishes anyway, and the film was retitled and released by MGM in 1933 as *Today We Live*.⁴⁷

Yet Faulkner soon found himself embroiled in controversy surrounding Paramount's adaptation of his novel *Sanctuary* (1931). Retitled *The Story of Temple Drake* (Stephen Roberts, 1933), the project was "held up for extensive revisions" in early 1933 due to concerns about its "salacious" content. Will Hays, the



Today We Live (1933). Joan Crawford in a role William Faulkner created for her at the studio's behest. Screenplay by Edith Fitzgerald and Dwight Taylor, with dialogue by William Faulkner.

principal enforcer of the Production Code at the time, openly complained that “bad source material” (read, Faulkner’s novel) had resulted in problems adhering to the code.⁴⁸

Faulkner’s close relationship with Howard Hawks helped him immeasurably throughout his “sojourn downriver,” as he once facetiously referred to the time he spent in Hollywood.⁴⁹ On a hunting expedition with Hawks and Clark Gable, then at the height of his fame, Gable apparently asked Faulkner, “Do you write?” “Yes, Mr. Gable,” Faulkner replied. “What do you do?” But by the late 1930s Hollywood provided Faulkner with a reliable source of income. In 1937, for instance, he made \$21,650 from Twentieth Century–Fox. And during the 1940s, Faulkner frequently worked as a “junior writer” at Warner Bros. in a corner office on the first floor of the Writers’ Building, cynically referred to as “the Ward” by the contract screenwriters.⁵⁰

Serious writers were expected to complain about Hollywood, and so they did, often assiduously. Far from “producing literature,” Leo C. Rosten complained in 1941, writers were “feeding an enormous machine that converts words, faces, sounds, and images into some nine thousand feet of celluloid,” for the “system under which writers work would sap the vitality of a Shakespeare.”⁵¹ Whether their open contempt for the studios was a symptom of disillusionment or somewhat disingenuous is open to debate. “Like every writer, or almost every writer, who goes to Hollywood,” Chandler once remarked, “I was convinced at the beginning that there must be some discoverable method of working in pictures which would not be completely stultifying to whatever creative talent one might happen to possess. But like others before me I discovered that this was a dream. It’s nobody’s fault; it’s part of the structure of the industry.”⁵² Chandler worked steadily in Hollywood from the moment Paramount offered him a contract at \$750 per week to work on an adaption of James M. Cain’s hard-boiled novel *Double Indemnity* (1944) with director Billy Wilder. Their collaboration was hardly free of conflict—“an agonizing experience,” Chandler once remarked, “[that] has probably shortened my life”—but the end result was a terrific film noir, which quickly raised Chandler’s salary to \$1,000 per week, and, as he later recalled, “I learned from it as much about screen writing as I am capable of learning.”⁵³

Another highly successful collaboration was the one that produced *Citizen Kane* (1941), though it has since generated much critical controversy about whether Orson Welles or Herman Mankiewicz was most responsible for the screenplay. Mankiewicz was a screenwriting veteran who, in the late 1920s, had helped convince the New York writers Ben Hecht, Nunnally Johnson, and his own younger brother Joseph to make the move to Hollywood. According to the film historian J. E. Smyth, “Mankiewicz had been one of the first to realize the potential power of screenwriters in sound cinema.” When an inexperienced but supremely confident Welles embarked on the ambitious project of adapting Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to the screen, he faced considerable resistance

among producers concerned about both budget and box office appeal. “Realizing that he was in trouble,” writes Smyth, “Welles asked the studio to hire screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz to show him the mechanics of good screenwriting.”⁵⁴ The result of their collaboration was a compelling and stunningly complex, multilayered screenplay, originally titled “The American,” based in part on the life of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst.

Other screenwriters also acquired greater creative control by aligning themselves with established directors. Dudley Nichols had an extremely successful career working with John Ford on a number of classic westerns, for example, including *Stagecoach*. Similarly, Robert Riskin wrote a number of successful films for Frank Capra, including *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937), and *You Can’t Take It with You* (1938). Still others brokered their success as screenwriters into directing or producing roles, such as Sidney Buchman at Columbia and Nunnally Johnson at Twentieth Century–Fox.

The Screen Writers Guild

Perhaps the most significant issue screenwriters faced throughout the 1930s, however, was the studios’ resistance to their unionization. The studios employed a number of nefarious tactics, including pitting conservative screenwriters against the more liberal ones, threatening to blacklist screenwriters who supported unionizing, and simply stonewalling their demands for greater creative authority over the production of their scripts. “Led by writers who had made names for themselves as members of the eastern literary establishment,” writes Balio, “screenwriters bitterly complained about their low status in the studio system, the speed at which they were forced to work, compulsory collaboration, and the unfair assigning of screen credits, among other things.” The Screen Writers Guild (SWG) came into existence as early as April 1933, but it won recognition by the studios “only after a protracted and acrimonious battle.” While the National Labor Relations Board certified the SWG in 1938 as an official labor union, studios still resisted full recognition of the guild, and it was not until May 1941 that the studios finally signed an agreement with SWG, establishing among other things a minimum wage of \$125 per week for writers; a minimum period of two weeks for writers receiving \$250 or less per week; and a minimum period of one week for writers receiving between \$250 to \$500 per week. Significantly, the SWG also insisted on the right to arbitrate disputes arising over screen credits. Since the contract agreement applied mostly to the lowest paid writers, though, it was a Pyrrhic victory at best. Although the writers “won a few minor concessions,” Balio tells us, “the creative status of the writer remained as is.”⁵⁵

Writers' complaints about the studio system tended to coalesce around three key issues: intermittent and temporary rather than full-time contracts; compulsory collaboration with other writers; and unfair assigning of screen credits. While salaries could be as high as \$1,000 per week or more, "writers seldom worked the full year."⁵⁶ The median salary for writers under contract at the four largest studios in 1938 was \$25,000 a year, roughly half of what they would have made if they were working the full year at \$1,000 per week.⁵⁷ Short-term contracts lasting between one and three weeks were typical; less often, writers might be hired on longer-term contracts of six months or longer. In between, they often found themselves unemployed for periods ranging from weeks to months to years. Moreover, even while under contract they might spend weeks waiting to get an assignment (albeit while still getting paid), and once the assignment came, producers sometimes expected a treatment or even a completed screenplay within a matter of days. No wonder writers chafed against the process and mercilessly ridiculed it. "When I get a summons from the studio," the British comedic writer P. G. Wodehouse recalls in his trademark droll style, "I motor over there, stay for a couple of hours and come back. . . . The actual work is negligible. I altered all the characters to earls and butlers with such success that they called a conference and changed the entire plot, starring the earl and the butler. So I'm still working on it. . . . I could have done all my part of it in a morning but they took it for granted that I should need six weeks."

Wodehouse was equally cynical about compulsory collaboration within the studio system: "So far I've had eight collaborators. The system is that A gets the original idea, B comes into work with him on it, C makes the scenario, D does preliminary dialogue, and then they send for me to insert class and whatnot, then E and F, scenario writers, alter the plot and off we go again."⁵⁸

More often than not, many different writers contributed dialogue or scenes to the same screenplay. At least six writers variously worked on the screenplay for *What Price Hollywood* (1932), based on a short story by Adela Rogers St. Johns; they included Marjorie Dudley, Robert Pressnel, Gene Fowler, Roland Brown, Jane Murfin, and Ben Markson. In her book *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* (1951), Hortense Powdermaker wryly observes, "The idea seems to be that if one writer is good, five are better. . . . To receive major credit for a screenplay an individual writer must have contributed at least 33 and 1/3 percent."⁵⁹ Determining which writers got credit for their contributions to a script depended almost entirely on the producers' whims, and assigning credit often had to be worked out through arbitration. As Fine points out, "The system of granting credits was corrupt and counterproductive" in that it "invidiously pitted writer against writer."⁶⁰ While the screenplay for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) was officially credited to Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf, no fewer than seventeen writers actually worked on the script, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, prompting the novelist Salman Rushdie to argue somewhat counterintuitively

that the film is in some sense an “authorless text,” written not by one person but by committee.⁶¹

The Screenwriter as Auteur

The most celebrated screenwriters of the period, however, enjoyed relative independence and creative control over their work. Preston Sturges refused to collaborate with other writers. After penning more than a dozen hits for three different studios, Paramount finally allowed him to direct his own screenplay, *The Great McGinty* (1940). Sturges was not only the first to get a combined writer-director credit but also the one most responsible for reviving screwball comedy. In *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), Sturges brings his incisive wit to bear upon the film industry itself. The opening scene features the successful director of film comedies, John R. Sullivan, trying to convince skeptical studio bosses to allow him to make a more political, socially responsible film, like the one they have just watched in the screening room:

SULLIVAN: You see? You see the symbolism of it? Capital and Labor destroy each other! It teaches a lesson—a moral lesson—it has social significance.

HADRIAN: Who wants to see *that* kind of stuff? It gives me the creeps!

SULLIVAN: Tell him how long it played at the Music Hall.

LEBRAND: It was held over a fifth week.

HADRIAN: Who goes to the Music Hall? Communists!

SULLIVAN: *Communists!* This picture’s an *answer* to communists! . . . It shows we’re awake and not dunking our heads in the sand like a bunch of ostriches! I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism! The problems that confront the average man!

LEBRAND: But with a little sex in it.

This exchange nicely evokes the inherent tensions between artistic aspirations and commercial interests. For writer-directors like the fictional character Sullivan, films can be used to advance humane social causes, especially in troubled times. For the producers, in contrast, the only movies worth making are those that will give them a return on their investment. Conceding the point that “a



Joel McCrea (right) in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941): "With a little sex in it."

little sex" can help boost the film's box office appeal, Sullivan insists that he wants to make an important film:

SULLIVAN: A little, but I don't want to stress it. I want this picture to be a document! I want to hold a mirror up to life! I want this to be a picture of dignity! A true canvas of the suffering of humanity!

LEBRAND: But with a little sex in it.

SULLIVAN: With a little sex in it.

HADRIAN: How about a nice musical?

SULLIVAN: How can you talk about musicals at a time like this, with the world committing suicide? With corpses piling up in the street! With grim death gargling at you from every corner! With people slaughtered like sheep!

HADRIAN: Maybe they'd like to forget that!

SULLIVAN: Then why did they hold this over for a fifth week at the Music Hall? For the ushers?

LEBRAND: It died in Pittsburgh!

HADRIAN: Like a dog!

SULLIVAN: What do they know in Pittsburgh?

LEBRAND: They know what they like!

SULLIVAN: If they knew what they *liked*, they wouldn't live in Pittsburgh! *That's* no argument! If you pander to the public, you'd still be in the horse age. . . . I wanted to make you something outstanding—something you could be proud of. Something that would realize the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is.

Sturges's pungent satire undermines both Sullivan's naïve idealism and the producers' cynicism. Whereas the producers trust viewers to know what they like—to vote with their pocketbooks, as it were—the ostensibly socially responsible director is the one who is condescending and elitist.

The mere mention of “communists” in *Sullivan's Travels* seems, in hindsight, more than a little ominous. Toward the end of the period covered in this chapter, the film industry found itself once again subject to government scrutiny, an irresistible target of rabid anticommunism. In October 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began nine days of hearings into alleged communist influence in Hollywood. Committee chairman J. Parnell Thomas singled out screenwriters for the most intense scrutiny, having earlier gone on record asserting, “90% of communist infiltration in Hollywood is to be found among screenwriters.”⁶² Nineteen suspected communists, labeled “unfriendly witnesses,” were subpoenaed to testify before the committee. Among them were screenwriters Alvah Bessie, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner Jr., and Herbert Biberman (who also produced and directed films), along with the director Edward Dmytryk and the producer Adrian Scott.

The fallout from the HUAC hearings was a blacklist containing the names of nearly 300 individuals who were denied work in the film industry for many years to come. The 1947 HUAC hearings and the 1948 Supreme Court ruling against monopolistic practices in Hollywood sounded the death knell of the studio system, even as they inadvertently heralded a new era for writers in the film industry. Despite the lingering pall cast over the film industry by the blacklist, writers were no longer part of a vertically integrated studio system controlling the filmmaking process from start to finish, but rather freelance writers hired on a per film basis. Chandler once expressed the hope that if the studio system should ever come to an end, “somehow the flatulent moguls will learn that only writers can write

screenplays and only proud and independent writers can write good screenplays, and that present methods of dealing with such men are destructive of the very force by which pictures must live.”⁶³ Whether the new freelance system actually contributed to making better films is debatable, but one thing is clear: no longer under contract to a single studio unless the studio agreed to release them, writers could now ply their trade to any mogul—however flatulent—willing to take a chance on their scripts.

The studio system was an economic behemoth that proved to be vulnerable on two fronts: first, to government intervention as a safeguard against monopolistic business practices; and second, to changing patterns in how many Americans would choose to spend their leisure time. While it lasted, though, the studio system was a remarkably successful method of moviemaking. Screenwriters were central to that enterprise, as crass and even philistine as it often seemed to be. However marginalized, underappreciated, and undercompensated screenwriters may have been, they still deserve credit—whether or not they received actual screen credits—for glorious work. Time and again screenwriters provided characters, dialogue, and stories for many indelible films. Behind the scenes, writers furnished words that, when typed in the newly established screenplay format, would then serve as blueprints for actors, directors, cinematographers, gaffers, producers, set designers, and others who brought their words to life through the alchemy of collaborative art. Without screenwriters, the brilliant films of Hollywood’s golden age could not have been made.